

INTRODUCTION

Andie expansionism has made outworld research common, but it's a solitary life for a human.

Kivvy is a young exobotanist exploring Noh, a moon-planet recently discovered in the Neptune system. He has a research grant to examine strange plant life that has inexplicably evolved there, over three billion miles from the sun. His closest neighbors are the Andie and human residents of Central, an Andie-designed base orbiting Neptune. Aside from INTELX, his scout ship's resident AI computer, Kivvy is alone on Noh.

Well, not entirely alone...

Useful Humans is a science fiction adventure in three parts.

In Part One of Useful Humans, Hotel Universe, Kivvy encounters alien intelligence, an interplanetary conspiracy, and a chimerical alternate universe where anything is possible.

Will Stark, a mercenary with a reputation, swaggers into Part Two, Useful Humans, to battle a new breed of space gangsters.

In Part Three, The Fifth Wall, our heroes run a bizarre race against time in parallel worlds.

Useful Humans was completed in 1990, following Susan and The Wolf, a first novel by Rich La Bonté. While set in the same universe as its predecessor, Useful Humans features an almost entirely new set of principal characters and is not specifically a sequel. fLAtDiSk SoftWorks expects to publish a geoNovel edition of Susan and The Wolf later this year.

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USEFUL HUMANS

By

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PART ONE: HOTEL UNIVERSE

CHAPTER ONE

"Uh. Central?"

"Yes, Kivvy. Central here. Go ahead."

"Who is this?"

"This is Central."

"No. I mean, who is speaking?"

"This is Radiance."

"Oh. What model are you?"

"Model GT6000. You sound upset, Kivvy. Do you wish me to wake a human? They are sleeping."

"No. I remember you now, Radiance."

"We have met. I greatly admire your disks on the extinct trees of the European States."

"Yes, so you told me. I'm working in the northern hemisphere, Radiance."

"Yes, Kivvy. I am tracking your signal. I know exactly where you are. Is there a problem?"

"Well, uh, Radiance, I'm not sure. I wonder if you'd run a little sort on previous survey data for me."

"That information is all available to your onboard systems, Kivvy."

"Yeah, the normal stuff is. But I want a sort going back to the Japanese touchdown. The first planetfall. Everything here reads as updated files. You know, corrected for history."

"Just a moment, Kivvy. I'll access... ok. Search subject?"

"Uh, try anomalies, Radiance. Anything outside the norms."

"Could you be more specific, Kivvy?"

"Uh, well. Non-botanic life form files, I guess."

"Other than botanic life forms?"

"Correct. I know it's crazy. But just check, will yuh?"

It might have been the light, reflecting off something in the ice. Perhaps an Aeolian streak of red dust, deposited long ago by ancient winds, trapped meters deep inside the iced mantle of water, liquid nitrogen, and methane.

It might have been, but it moved.

"Sorting, Kivvy... nothing reported by the original Japanese team. No subsequent report of life forms on Noh - other than plant life, of course."

"Nothing, huh? That's what I remembered. Ok, Central."

"Anything else I can do for you, Kivvy?"

"No. I guess not. Thanks, Radiance."

"Kivvy..."

"Yes, Radiance?"

"I've found something: a deleted subfile."

"Under 'non-botanic life forms'?"

"No. General Observations. A casual crew log from the original landing party. One of the humans asked if any of the others had noticed, quote: 'movement on the ridge.' The sighting was unconfirmed and unverified. Nothing showed on the scan recorders. They assumed it to be an icefall or vine collapse, but it is odd that none of the Andies noticed it. We don't miss much."

Noh was the smallest, most inward ring shepherd of the Neptune planet-moons. Eight others - Triton, Nereid, Proteus, Larissa, Despina, Galatea, Thalassa, and Naiad - had been known for generations, but Noh had remained hidden until the arrival of the first full expedition to the Neptune system. Circling its mother star-planet in a tight retrograde orbit, Noh hid with mysteries.

He hadn't solved any in his months on Noh. He had no absolute explanation to offer for the bizarre alien vegetation he had traveled almost three billion miles to study. What had seeded it here? How had it survived or been nurtured in the ice soil? Endless sample tests and careful measurements were inconclusive: exobotany was an infant science, and the exobotanist invented it logically as he worked.

But logic didn't allow for the small red shape that he had first seen dart behind a crag of ice near his scout ship. Or the second time he had seen it. Or the third.

"Where was the original planetfall, Radiance?"

"Darius quadrant. That's in the northern hemisphere, Kivvy."

"Yes, Radiance. That was all there was to it? They didn't investigate further? The original team?"

"Well, the humans moved on to Naiad after a week. The Andies remained for a month longer to chart the surface because Noh was the only planetesimal in the outer systems to exhibit plant life. Their data shows nothing unusual. Should I add our conversation to my monitor report, Kivvy?"

"I guess you'd better, Radiance. That Japanese explorer was right. There's something down here..."

Kivvy logged off. He hadn't gone on to be particularly specific with Radiance about what he'd seen. After all, he wasn't really so sure he'd seen anything.

No, that wasn't right. He'd seen something, and more than once in the last few days. Kivvy sighed and settled back in the soft egg that was his command deck chair. He toyed with the webbed weave, picking at it from where his hands rested between his legs. The fabric of the egg was an indestructible polyfiber, grown and knitted in a factory orbiting the Jupiter system. He pried at it absently in a vain attempt to dig a tiny hole with his fingernails. He remembered the little tear in his regular seat in the holothater in Boswash, the Orson Welles Cinema near Cambridge. He had spent every weekend there as a child, lost in tapes of two dimensional shadow, the Saturday revivals of old motion pictures - movies thrown up on an antique flat white screen. The Orson Welles had been his sanctuary, much like his scout ship was on Noh. He'd always rushed to that same seat, shared with a tub of popcorn, knees tucked up against the back of the row ahead of him.

The management of the Orson Welles didn't always revive the most worthy classics, but Kivvy watched anything that was offered on Saturdays and then came back on Sunday for the regular holo feature of the week. He liked the new form too. Relentless sex and violence were all the more appealing to a generation who had missed the Last War by decades. The main feature was often preceded by a B-holo adventure, like one of the Pillsbury Falcon mysteries or a Western, but it was the older films of an earlier world that Kivvy remembered best.

He dug his fingers into the deck chair and tried to recall one that fit his current situation on Noh. A thriller, with ominous supernatural happenings that were never quite seen. A something in the shadows of the camera eye. Lurking. Watching. A something that flitted into the edge of your line of sight, and was never there when you turned to look for it. His fingers stabbed one last time. He exhaled a fragmented past.

"Nope," he said to the ceiling. Kivvy rose from the egg chair and pushed himself toward the back of the command cabin. The light gravity of Noh was not quite enough to float him, but he couldn't walk in it

either without norm-G boots. He hopped barefooted in slowed motion to the lift, and made his way down to the mess. He had to eat before he went back out on the surface.

There wasn't much to do during downtime. Kivvy read books from his cubes. He also had cubes of good old films and holos, but he'd pretty much run through his library in the four months he'd been working on Noh. His major source of entertainment was the scout ship's onboard computer, INTELX, which provided him with thousands of games. Most were 3D classics he had played throughout his childhood in arcades, but a few were of the newer, Total Interface Fantasy variety. TI Fantasy games required a headset, various strap-on controllers, and, as the name suggested, drew the user into a cyberuniverse of synthetic simulations. Kivvy was satisfied enough with the TIF illusion, but his curiosity as to the inner workings of Total Interface was as intense as his passion for the secret life of plants. He began sessions with INTELX to learn to program in the TIF environment. As the scout ship's INTELX was a full-AI upgrade, a latest generation supercomputer of Andie design, it had agreed and assured Kivvy that it was delighted to assist him in his educational pursuits.

"Hello, Kivvy," INTELX said, as Kivvy logged on. "Did you wish to play this evening?" The two were also currently engaged in a two-week TIF terraforming simulation game called "Paradise".

"Not now," Kivvy replied. "I'm in a more creative mood."

"Paradise is the Ultimate Challenge for the Creative User," INTELX intoned, quoting from stored TIF promotional data. "Imagine the Excitement, the Thrill you'll have creating a Fully Habitable World! Only a deity.."

"I know the rap, INTELX, but I'd rather program. We were making good progress in our last session, wouldn't you say?" Kivvy thought he sensed a hesitant pause, although it lasted only nanoseconds. He wasn't sure if INTELX was reacting to the question or just busy with some other task.

"Yes, of course, Kivvy." The computer's voice sounded almost uncertain, and Kivvy had to laugh.

"Well, I am trying, INTELX. After all, I'm only human." He popped a hard bubble cube into the drive slot, pulled on the finger controllers, and put on his TIF headset.

Little forms danced and swirled against an unfinished backdrop, impossible colors exploding as they touched. They hadn't even begun programming the audio yet, so there was silence - except for Kivvy's occasional expletives and the computer's motherly clicks. Kivvy jumped to the wrong address. "The RAM in that section is reserved for system use, Kivvy," INTELX reminded him.

"Shut up! I'm trying, damnit!" Kivvy pushed at his fingertip controllers, trying to maneuver stubborn little shapes into pseudosolid form. The fractured landscape was streaked with colors, dripping megapixels through gaps in the background, and bleeding objects of failed perspective had clumped together into an unlikely reality. The unfinished mountain range in the distance was a violet shade, despite all attempts at blue-green. Mustard-yellow reptilian creatures flew gracefully at its peaks - but they were meant to be brown and purple. The vast sky ended abruptly in black, trailing electron phosphors upward into nothing, defying gravity and Kivvy's attempt at horizon. Far above this, INTELX flashed symbols for macros, jump codes, and annotated comments in a gentle red typeface.

Kivvy's fingers struggled with the programming movements, occasionally letting INTELX lead him, but more often manually tracing and retracing the steps needed to design his thoughts into RAM renderings. Finally he stopped and activated the animators, watching in disgust as the winged ones flew through a mountain and his horse, which was more a mule-in-progress, stumbled along a trail that wound into the background.

"Perspective is incorrect," INTELX commented on the horse. "The rear left leg is too short."

"Enough! Quit! Yes, I'm sure." Kivvy waited for the supercomputer to store the session in the hard bubble cube and return control of his senses. He pulled at his finger controllers and took off the headset. The four walls of the rec room appeared around him.

"That was Session 32. Backup in progress," INTELX told him.

"Fine, fine! Good." Kivvy pushed off and headed for his sleeping cabin. "Maybe someday we'll actually finish this damned scene and start the gameline!"

As he settled into the webbing that kept him stationary for sleep, Kivvy thought about his TIF project. It was hard to program. He hadn't realized the great difficulties of shaping multi-dimensional holographics. He had programmed in ordinary flat screen 3D for years, although he'd never been published, but even with a fair knowledge of math he found TIF miles beyond his grasp. He vowed silently to allow INTELX to do more of the smoothing, scaling, shearing, and other shaping. Kivvy was very critical of computer-aided design in the arts: a human design was like the old movies - handcrafted product compared to the technically superior, but less artistic holos. He had to admit, however, that he hadn't even finished one main character of his TIF adventure game. He and INTELX had been working on the project for months.

As he began to drift away into a less structured consciousness, he thought about the call he'd made to Central and his wispy encounters on the surface of Noh. Perhaps they were only illusions in the frosty cyan light of mother Neptune. Perhaps he'd just been alone too long.

He concentrated, and finally called forth the image that had eluded him from the old days at the Orson Welles: it had been a Keefer Sutherland film. No! It was Donald Sutherland! Directed by Nicolas Roeg. Written by Daphne du Maurier! There had been a tiny but ominous threat, dressed in a red-hooded robe, which was cleverly made to appear to be peripheral to the camera's view.

Kivvy tried to remember the film's title, with no luck until an instant before he fell asleep. It was called "Don't Look Now".

CHAPTER TWO

In the morning cycle - which was assigned by INTELX because Noh was too small in diameter to supply real Earth days - Kivvy carefully retraced his previous tracks across Noh's terrain. It was a warm day, with the temperature at about -389 degrees Fahrenheit. His trail was easy to find. Noh had lain undisturbed for several million years, and the fine, dusty, ice that passed for soil recorded any slight footfall. The boots on his bulky suit sent fine spray everywhere as he hopped along, happily reporting to INTELX Noh's remarkable botany.

It was the Great Dark Spot of Neptune that accounted for any life at all on Noh. The surface of the closest planet never experienced high temperatures, but the Great Spot, the larger of two anticyclonical storm-eruptions that circumnavigate Neptune, throws off a shower of persuasive radioactive particles at the tiny ring shepherd. Noh's close orbit was perfectly situated to make use of this subatomic wind from its mother world, and theorists suggest that Noh may have been created when the Great Spot first belched to life. The regular bombardment from the Spot produced a slight thawing for about an hour out of every pass from that time on. Noh's own gentle spin helped to distribute the radiation's effects into a life-sustaining zone around its northern hemisphere.

Over eons of evolution, the zone became a cold jungle of twisting blue vine and brush. Low gravity could have allowed taller plants, had it not been for the ice weighing them down. What did evolve became an alien heath. There were no trees as on Earth, but huge, almost round, entwined collectives of symbiotic plants seemed to dominate. These Kivvy had dubbed "banyans", as the various plants put out branches that grew down and back to the surface to become roots, resembling the banyan fig trees of India. As the component plants of Noh's banyans also grew alone all over the planet, one of the intriguing mysteries of Noh was their additional communal behavior.

Kivvy's tracks of the previous day brought him back to a little glen surrounded by banyans. On the fringe of the glen grew patches of an angular, deep blue, fungus-like organism, with a scattering of green

on its northern surfaces. It was the green that Kivvy had noted on his earlier outing, as it was the only occurrence of that color he had seen on Noh.

A close inspection through his visor magnifier had revealed tiny floating grains of pollen, which were arranged in a tight and delightfully unique crystalline pattern. The green color was emitted from the nucleus of each grain, fighting Neptune's blue light with a hardy luminance. Kivvy had been reminded of deep-sea creatures in Earth's oceans. In an attempt to take some into the ship for study, he had manipulated his suit's sterile catchbag over one of the fungi. At that moment he had glimpsed a red blurred motion to his left. When he turned to look he saw nothing. Startled and suddenly sure he was not alone in the banyan glen, Kivvy had dropped the catchbag and its metal control rod on top of a row of fungi. With an upward woosh, the delicate stuff exploded like a clump of milkweed. He was covered with clinging dust, and, on a stern order from INTELX, he had returned immediately to the scout to allow his suit to be cleaned and cleared of possible contaminants.

Today he spotted the fallen catchbag immediately, but there was no sign of the damage it had caused. The fungus was still there, or it had regenerated, as it was now grown up around the tool in such a way as to lift the catchbag and balance it on its rod. There it stood, conveniently waiting to be picked up by its owner, like an umbrella in its stand.

"Can you beat that?" Kivvy wondered aloud to the computer. "It's handing it back to me!"

"Please record from a lower angle," INTELX asked, and Kivvy stooped down to let the helmet recorder zoom in on the fungi where it grasped the base of the control rod.

"Hmm," Kivvy said. "A denser concentration of the pollen-crystals here. Deeper in color." He reached out to take his tool and was surprised at the grip the fungus maintained. "Hey, let go! Can't get it loose, INTELX."

"Apply the suit pneumatics, Kivvy."

"Ok. Hey! It won't budge!" He used both hands and tried pulling forward instead of up. "It's bending now."

In one motion, Kivvy leaned down on the rod and suddenly flew into the air as the fungus applied like pressure in return. The force carried Kivvy about twenty yards into a grouping of banyans, where he knocked about gracelessly and landed on his head. As he lost consciousness, he heard a hiss of escaping pressure...

Megapixels scattered everywhere, and there were gaping holes. It was a sloppy rendering, but parts of it were beginning to resemble what he'd had in mind when he and INTELX began the sessions. He wandered up the road, passing the unfinished horse. It grazed lazily on a clump of vegetation. One leg was too short, as INTELX had noted, and its mane was badly drawn. Binary suns burned high over violet mountains, and Kivvy could just make out the leathery winged things soaring on updrafts as they searched for yet unprogrammed prey.

Kivvy continued about a half a mile further and began to get an uneasy feeling. He knew there was something he'd forgotten, aside from the odd perspective and depth of the TIF illusion. He was about to ask INTELX for an opinion when he realized that the supercomputer's usual barrage of text comments were absent from the upper border of his field of vision. He flexed his fingers and found that the controllers were not there. He held up his hands and saw them plainly against the far mountain range.

"Wait a minute," Kivvy said. He touched his head. "No headset," he mused. "Either dreaming or dead." He felt no panic. He was here, all right, walking along an imagined road that only existed when directed by the optical plasma of INTELX's chips. He was alone, however, unless he counted the lame horse and the winged things. The illusion was complete and fascinating. He felt an urge to wake, but he didn't give in to it.

Kivvy knew INTELX was missing, not just submerged, when the landscape along the road became unfamiliar. He again looked up toward the usual top border display of messages and jump markers and found that the sky had finished itself, eliminating the area reserved for INTELX's command lines. He walked further until he began to grow tired. When he came upon a small stream of pink liquid, he sat and rested.

"Not a dream," he said. "You don't get sore feet in dreams." He rubbed his bare feet. Why hadn't he thought to wear boots before he... Kivvy grew rigid, took a deep breath, and looked around. The last memory of his most recent trek on Noh's surface had suddenly returned. He stood up quickly and inspected himself.

"I was wearing boots," he said, "not to mention my suit." He was now dressed in jeans and his blue t-shirt, which announced "Noh Fun!" in bright orange letters across his chest. "The fungus fought me for the collector and threw me into a banyan grove!"

There was a rush of blurred motion all around him, and he thought of air escaping from a child's balloon. A distorted voice, metallic and filtered, spoke his name. Kivvy knew it was INTELX. He looked up, searching for the command line, but all he could see was darkness.

"Kivvy."

He woke up in the webbed bed and peered at his personal console screen. The only evidence of INTELX was the blinking blue cursor. Groaning in answer, Kivvy tried shutting his eyes to recapture the dream. It didn't work. All he could picture was the view from within his suit as he crashed among the banyans. His side ached from where he had smacked into one of them.

"Kivvy," INTELX said again.

"Ok. I'm up," Kivvy growled. He untangled from his bed and tried standing. There was an ugly purple bruise covering his right hip and upper leg. "God! Whatta dream! What happened?"

"You had an accident on the surface. You were lucky to survive."

Kivvy pulled on his coveralls, gingerly testing the bruise. "Yeah, I remember that. How'd you get me back here?"

"I was monitoring. Sent out a droid. Your suit pressure was almost gone by the time it got you back aboard. The faceplate was cracked in your fall."

"I thought they were indestructible. Well, thanks, INTELX. I guess I owe you my life."

"Normal emergency procedure, Kivvy. Gratuities are not required." The personal console cursor blinked off.

"Hey, wait," Kivvy said. The cursor reappeared. "How long was I out?"

"Unconscious or on the surface?"

"Both."

"You were unconscious for two hours twenty six minutes thirty five seconds. Your total tour of the surface was one hour one minute five seconds. The droid required ten minutes fifty four seconds to retrieve you. The estimated..."

"Thank you, INTELX," Kivvy said again. The cursor disappeared. Kivvy made his way into the galley and steamed some vegetables. He noticed that he was very hungry and his feet hurt like he'd been walking a long distance.

While he ate, he had INTELX run the monitor record of his accident. It was all there, including his short flight into the banyan grove. He had to laugh as he watched himself bounce like an old pinball between two banyans, but it made his side hurt. INTELX's recording included the droid recovering him. This was

a little scary. There he was, expiring in his suit, while the droid tried to extricate him from the alien plants. His suit had tangled in the banyan's component vines, and they had wrapped tightly around one leg. Kivvy knew from previous investigation that the vines could be as strong as tempered steel, and the drama of his rescue was not lost to him. The droid had to fire its lasers to free him, but with a precision that didn't even singe the suit.

"Hold! Freeze that!" He had spotted something unexpected. "Ok. Go back to where the laser hits that vine. I'll be damned!" He jumped up from the galley table, leaving his vegetables unfinished, and pulled his way into the science cabin. INTELX had already brought up the recording on the science display screen.

"Magnify the impact, and drop everything but green from the spectrum. Oh, wow!" The little pollen crystals were there again, this time floating around the tight slash of the laser. "Pull back and single-frame it. Keep the green, but give me motion tracers in red." As the computer restructured the scene, pollen grains appeared to emerge from the opening in the vine caused by the laser. They headed out of frame like a swarm of emerald bees. He pulled back further and watched them head for his helmet.

"Tighten in on the faceplate." Kivvy took a reflexive deep breath. "I'll be double-damned!" he said, as the swarm of tiny green spots vanished through a hairline crack and into his helmet.

A microscopic examination of Kivvy's helmet and suit revealed no trace of the alien pollen, so he allowed INTELX to do a full bioscan. As this was a rather involved, technical, and time-consuming process that kept him away from both scheduled and non-scheduled activities, Kivvy was forced to report the downtime to Central afterwards. He knew they would have found out anyway.

Applied research on the outer edge of the solar system was not top priority to current human or Andie scientific brass, and it cost a lot of money. Central was Kivvy's accountant and contract manager. He knew that they kept track of his activities through an Andie netlink system that could stream data at a

speed close to that of human thought. INTELX performed this streaming at regular intervals, but Kivvy liked to do his own reports as well: the practice kept him from feeling like an inmate.

"Central here. Go ahead, Kivvy."

"I have a status update, Radiance. Are you recording?" Central was on the far side of Neptune, so there was no visual contact.

"Yeah, but this is Digna speaking. And I'm human, Kivvy."

"Oh, sorry. Guess we haven't met."

"They changed the whole crew since your last visit, pal. When are you gonna come up and party?" The voice was female, but her tone was as much sarcasm as inviting.

"I may be dropping in sooner than expected. Depends on the brass. That's what I'm calling about."

"Why? INTELX said you were all right after your little slapstick routine on the surface."

"You saw that?"

"Don't be embarrassed, there ain't much to vid out here. I've bought every good bubble cube in town and traded with everybody twice. You were cute. It reminded me of Chaplin."

"Chaplin! Charlie Chaplin?" Most people didn't even know about the so-called Silents of pre-holo days.

"Well, only from a few shorts and City Lights," she admitted. "City Lights was stunning. You?"

"I've seen that! And The Gold Rush and The Great Dictator. I've got a documentary with clips, but I haven't been able to get copies of any others."

"Not likely you will out on that desolate iceberg. Say, you're ok, Kivvy. Maybe you and I really should party after all."

"Sort of depends on the matter on hand. I've got a possible biological intrusion down here." There was a pause. He'd expected more of a reaction. Digna's voice sounded muffled.

"Some interference from the cold star, Kivvy. You said 'intrusion'?"

"Yeah. Run the INTELX monitor feed you got. Boost the mag when it goes zoom on my faceplate, then chroma out all but the green. You'll see it." There was another pause, too long it seemed to Kivvy.

"Digna, you there?"

"Yes, Kivvy. You, uh, checked out the helmet? Maybe the fragments just got sucked into the crack in the faceplate." He marveled at her apparent lack of surprise or concern at his predicament.

"We checked. Not a microbe of anything. Sterile as it was when it left the factory," Kivvy said. "It was a pollen of some sort, by the way, not fragments. And the crack was leaking out, not sucking in."

"Look like little crystals. Ice maybe? No, ice doesn't swarm, does it? You got a cute nose, Kivvy. I'd like to bite it."

Great, he thought. The word 'swarm' stuck in his mind.

"Like bugs, Kivvy. Gnats. You sure it's a pollen?"

"That's what the analyzer read. Has to be pollen - unless the botany on Noh has more going for it than anyone suspects."

"You've done the full medic?"

"Yeah. INTELX is finishing a global comparison. I'll know then if I have visitors in my corpuscles."

"Maybe you'll get green blood - like the Vulcans."

"Star Trek?"

"Yeah, and I've got an early pilot you might not have seen. We can watch it while you give me your disease in the most direct way possible. Bring that nice little butt of yours up here and we'll cook."

"Sounds like an order. That official, Central?"

"Nope. But you've been down there alone for a long time, and that definitely appeals to my baser nature. Get the idea?"

He was doubtful. Who'd want a blind date with a possible casualty of a Third Kind encounter?

"We've both got full dossiers on file. Maybe I'm overestimating my appeal, but I'll bet you won't waste much time sniffing around my file when we log off. Tasting is better than looking anytime. Let me know, okay?"

"I may not have the option if I'm being visited, Digna."

"You won't consider it a choice once you vid me, Kivvy. And you don't sound sick to me. I'll be expecting you."

No polite way out. "I'll have INTELX's full medic in an hour. Sorting neurons now. Call you back, Central?"

"Uh-uh. Just show up. Surprise me."

She left the control station and took the fast belt to her outrise condo on the perimeter of Central. Her personal console had a 3D of Kivvy smiling on the screen while she slipped out of her day gear and took a long, cold shower. She enjoyed the luxury of a towel rather than the airblowers, and admired her soft nakedness in the polished aft wall of her bedroom while she refreshed her memory on Kivvy's Earth years. Every once in while she looked up at her reflection. She looked great at 26, and she knew it. Her male conquests were only occasional, but that was her choice. She had never failed to get her man.

She thumbed the keyboard and the INTELX transmission of Kivvy's full medic danced across the screen. The neuron comparison had been done for a quarter hour, but she had ordered INTELX to delay output to Kivvy until she had checked the results. It was a long sort, which matched Kivvy's pre-recorded neural data to the medic scan INTELX made that morning. Even a computer with Andie-improved subparticle technology needed some time to do billions of comparisons, so she was sure Kivvy wouldn't suspect that INTELX had forwarded the data to her first.

When she finished to her satisfaction, she released the hold, dressed, and settled down to read a new holoplay she'd brought with her from Earth. It would take Kivvy a couple more hours to arrive, and she liked to think ahead.

Kivvy whistled softly. The super res of Digna showing on his console left little to the imagination and much to be desired. He was equally impressed by the personal data. Digna had been the only daughter of Marcella and Andrew Severe, two leading non-Andie systems engineers. Her parents died when she was a child, during an unpredicted eruption disaster on Mimas in the Saturn System.

Digna Severe was born on Outpost I on the planet Io in the Jupiter system, and was now in her mid-twenties. She had spent four years on Earth obtaining a mastery of her parents' profession, and had chosen to come to the Neptune system as a part of an advance team of conversion planners. Her accomplishments in the field were noted as outstanding, and her work would eventually lead to permanent bases in the last habitable fringe of the solar system.

While exobiologists, exobotanists, and the conversion planners were often at odds, Kivvy did not share the concern of some of his colleagues who believed the fragile ecosystems of the outworlds would be forever damaged by human and Andie occupation. Kivvy preferred the increasingly popular Manifest Destiny philosophy: this star system was meant to be the dominion of mankind - a term which had included Andies for the last twenty years. To the planetary expansionists, the lack of sentient beings on Sol's other worlds was proof enough of their "divine" right.

Kivvy was wondering if Digna Severe's team had any plans for Noh, when INTELX crackled his thoughts: "Kivvy. I've finished full analysis."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense..." The communication line from Central was beeping. Kivvy reached over to thumb it on.

"You check out as normal, Kivvy," INTELX continued. "No intrusion. A more complete medic on Central is not required. Will you return to the surface today? Your new suit is ready for fitting."

The call from Central, now closing on Noh from her orbit of the far side, included visual, which popped up on the console. Although it was somewhat out of phase, Kivvy was treated to a breathtaking view of Digna Severe reclining in a sea of bright silk. She didn't say anything because she didn't have to.

"What?" Kivvy asked INTELX absently. "Er, no. We'll be making a pit stop at Central today. Better get the ship prepared to lift off."

Digna smiled and Kivvy waved foolishly.

Kivvy's scout ship was fairly luxurious. It was designed to be a permanent habitat for up to five humans because expeditions have become marooned or lost during Earth's expansion outward. While Kivvy appreciated the legroom, it was always a relief to return to a major base. Central was actually an orbiting city rather than a mothership. Its awesome size dwarfed the little scout a thousand times as it was tractored and docked into one of scores of landing bays. INTELX performed all of the scout's flight and docking maneuvers, leaving Kivvy time to gaze out at one of the most aesthetically pleasing examples of recent exoarchitecture.

Central had always existed only in the vacuum of space. Its core was designed and built in the orbit of Jupiter, and then sent to follow Triton in its backward route around Neptune. After it took up residence in the Neptune System, Central was expanded to its current size - but always within the precise

specifications and execution of its Andie builders. To many, it was the first Andie city, and although its planners were human, air-breathing humans could never have accomplished the fruition of their design.

The city-world spread out with AI perfection. It was a logical, all-functional, and clean-lined construction that defended any doubt of the value of human-Andie collaboration.

As he watched this masterpiece grow closer, Kivvy remembered a quote he'd read from Susan, the Model 3000 who had emancipated the original Andies: "It is part of the nature of the universe that humans and Andies fly together, hand in hand, into the far reaches of our solar system."

Susan's vision had come true, and he nodded to himself as the little scout was grappled into its parking space. He almost expected Digna Severe to be standing at the end of the off ramp, clothed in a sheer black negligee, awaiting his arrival. She was not. The dock port was chaotic with activity, but there were few ladies about - or humans of either sex. Andies were everywhere, lifting, carting, repairing, loading, or preparing vehicles of all sizes for various departures. Others that Kivvy took to be supervisors and foremen, stood at computer netlink consoles, drove Andie shuttles, or made final adjustments to ship's hatches and the like.

All of this was done without a word in any human language, although occasional annoyed workers emitted shrill tunes to signify their frustrations. Not with each other or their bosses, but with petty things like broken packing crates or over-packed holds.

Kivvy left to INTELX the tasks of refitting and restocking the scout with what would be necessary, and headed out into the crowded main concourse. He observed that there had been a population explosion on Central since his last visit. There were many humans here, tradesmen and colonists who would soon be bound for the much larger Outworld II city on Triton to be completed for settling within the year.

There had been many difficulties in its construction due to the volcanic nitrogen eruptions that plagued the surface of the planet. The eruptions were mile high explosions of what was popularly known as "Soderblom slush", a form of deadly, pink frozen nitrogen named for it's earliest discoverer.

The bursts and accompanying quakes had cost the lives of many, and completely destroyed some early settlements. The Andies had recently concluded a study of Triton's inner turbulence and mapped the major faults and underground oceans, which allowed construction to proceed in an area free from "slushquakes".

As Kivvy pushed his way toward the entrance to the port shopping mall, he noticed an equal increase in the number of Andies and droids. Many of these were newer, utility drones of entirely unfamiliar Andie design. He grinned at one who was directing the flow of pedestrian traffic through the mall archway. The poor fellow looked like an old-style auto traffic light, waving four overlong humanoid arms with white four-fingered hands, and blinking visual signals from a bank of colored lights rotating on his shoulders. Some Andie engineer had been researching Looney Tunes, no doubt about it.

The mall had been expanded to service the growing population. Kivvy drifted through new shops until he found a collector's den he remembered, stopping there to check on newly released cubes. He bought "Conquest of Space" for Digna. He reasoned he could keep it for his own library if she already had it. He passed on a new TIF adventure cube, but remembered to try a textstore for programming aids. Browsing among the bright holo displays, he found one hacker's cube, The Official TIF Programmer's Guide, with "tips for the intermediate". He was barely a beginner, but he bought it and a roll of real paper to print it out as hardcopy.

Paper was a rare commodity in space, and cost more than the cube, but his grant funds covered any cost he might incur - no matter how exotic. He skipped various fast food palaces promising "real" meat or "Earth" delicacies. Blind date or not, he knew he had kept the lady waiting long enough. Jumping the walkway to the outer belt, he rode quickly out of the port mall and was carried through a busy business section toward a hive of condos that filled Central's wealthier suburbs.

Much of Central was constructed of translucent plastics, and he could make out the offices, data libraries, transport centers, restaurants, and other common worklife areas. The plastic walls allowed a

good view of the people inside, giving this district of Central a very warm look - an ironic, but thoughtful addition made to the city plan by Andie engineers.

"I'm afraid I brought you here under somewhat false pretenses," Digna Severe said, but Kivvy was distracted. When Digna first appeared at her hatch to greet him, he thought of a wave of energy from the Great Dark Spot washing the surface of Noh. His brain short-circuited immediately, and he froze in awe and confusion. Digna Severe, he thought, was certainly the most beautiful and ethereal being he had ever encountered.

She was smaller than he'd imagined. Kivvy stood six foot one, and the woman only came up to his chin, but one glance shrank him back to insignificance. Her medium-length, dark brown hair formed a soft, sparkling frame to a face that rivaled Colbert, Garbo, Eleniak, Natalie Wood, or even Jennifer Tilly at the peak of her career. A short orange tunic clung to her like wet silk, obviously offering flawless proportions and showing most of her thin, perfect legs.

This was a girl-woman, Kivvy thought, intended for Gable, Selleck, Ford, or Garrett Tashlin. Decidedly not for a hermit exobotanist exploring boring, frozen worlds. He had tried to express this in his first words, but Digna's eyes blinked and muted him. He stumbled into her condo on her smiling invitation, but he wanted to run the other way.

Now it was the place itself that compounded his dumbness, a smooth, perfect copy of a 1930's Hollywood society apartment set. The living room was pristine bone white, with long Italian cream couches and low, black, polished tables and chairs. Three thin stripes of gray ran along the walls, broken only by framed, full-size paintings by Stella, Ernst, Picasso, and Klee. A white baby grand piano waited in a circular, raised alcove at the far end of the room, the bench pushed back and its stand littered with sheet music. A full bar, which could be closed into the wall, was partially blocking the entrance to the dining room, but Kivvy could see a sparkling antique chandelier hanging over a long mahogany table.

"My God," Kivvy mumbled when he found his voice. Then he realized she had spoken. "I'm sorry. What did you say?" There was a sound that Kivvy never forgot. Wind chimes in a summer breeze.

"It's nice, isn't it?" Digna laughed. "I said: I brought you here under false pretenses. I'm feeling a little guilty, so why don't we sit down and I'll explain."

He felt more like kneeling, but she had snapped him back to reality with her partial confession and they sat together on one of the deco couches. When their legs touched briefly, he felt himself going comatose again.

"Kivvy?" she asked, bending far too close. "Are you ok?" Her brow knit with genuine concern. He forgot what she said a moment earlier.

"This place is astounding," he managed. "It's like a set from 1934."

"Close," Digna said, and there was that laugh again. He felt her warmth cover him. "An exact duplicate of William Powell's apartment in 'Star of Midnight'. It was 1935. MGM. Which would make it a Cedric Gibbons design, I would think, but I'm not sure. The film survived the Last War in the Ted Turner film vaults, thank God. Have you ever seen it?"

"I, uh, think so. Was Powell a lawyer?"

"Yes, that's the one. The paintings are all from different periods, of course." She touched his arm. The shock reverberated through every cell. "Do you need a drink? I don't drink alcohol myself, but I keep a full bar for visitors. You look like you could use a double." The console screen near the bar lit up, and a soft female voice announced a call.

"No. I don't drink alcohol either. Maybe some coffee or a Pepsi," Kivvy said. He tried to get a grip, but he couldn't pry his eyes away from hers. She was obviously amused. "A Pepsi would do."

Digna rose, and excused the interruption. He watched her glide to the bar. She used an old fashioned French telephone and left the screen blank. He heard the caller's name, Reinhold something, and he

wondered about their relationship for a second, but then she popped two Pepsi cans up from the bar surface and glided back. Kivvy felt his hands sweating. She gave him a long look before she sat back on the couch. He thought she hesitated and moved slightly further away from him. He knew he had to regain his composure, so he made an effort to break the silence that followed.

"What did you mean by 'false pretenses'?" Digna sighed, with relief Kivvy thought. She sat back and sipped from the plastic can before answering. She appeared to be reaching a decision. Kivvy assumed he'd made a bad start of things, but then she leaned forward and touched his leg with a soft hand as though to reassure him.

"Don't worry. The attraction is mutual. It's just that my being on shift when you made your report was not fate. INTELX started an emergency data stream on your situation the moment you smacked into that grove of plants. The ones you call 'banyans'."

Kivvy was not surprised, but his mind cleared. There were probably many crisis procedures in the INTELX system that he didn't know about. AI was hardly his field, and Andie technology was governed by strict rules concerning human protection. He liked Digna's hand on his leg, and he was more concerned about his urge to look down the top of her tunic than any of the INTELX Big Brother safety features. He smiled into her blue eyes instead, hoping to relax her concern and his.

"I'm alone down there. INTELX is my guardian. It saved my life that time, and probably on other occasions too. I don't really care if INTELX reported in without mentioning it. A standard safety, I guess?"

"No. Not standard. It was a bit of a risk to you, in fact." She did look guilty now, but she continued without more apologies.

"INTELX has been reprogrammed so that I could monitor your activities continuously in real time. We never thought you'd be in any danger on Noh. INTELX ignored the protection-first directive for a minute and a half, waiting to report to me while you were lying there with a cracked faceplate. Even if

the delay had been only microseconds, that alteration in the directive could have cost your life. I was, shall we say, not at my post when INTELX tried to make contact, and I'm very sorry."

"I'm getting lost. What do you mean you changed the program? You're a conversion planner, aren't you?"

"Yes and no. You might say it's one of my roles, yes."

"But why would you be so interested in me?" She did the laugh again, and it hadn't lost any of its beauty.

"I should lie and tell you we're thinking of putting a colony on Noh, but after what almost happened to you.. I just can't!" She looked down, but she didn't move her hand. "INTELX isn't your only guardian on Noh. I've been assigned to you for the last two months, and there hasn't been a second of your life I haven't monitored in that time." She backed off, searching his face. It obviously wasn't the whole story. Her hand floated away, and it started something like a fusion reaction.

Kivvy got mad.

When Reinhold Wickett finished with his brief call, he settled back in the overstuffed antique chair that was his favorite and lit a small hand rolled cigarette of real tobacco. He was very pleased with her progress. "She could be my Irene Adler," he mentioned to his computer's audio data recorder, which kept a constant memoir of his activities. Thus stated, he contemplated his next move.

Wickett's office was located in a secure building in Central's business sector. The walls were not translucent, but instead wallpapered with a rare conservative paisley of soft browns. There were only two rooms with a connecting door. One room contained the most sophisticated supercomputer that any private individual could afford - an AI unit that was three years old - which Reinhold referred to as "Watson". Sharing Watson's space were many metal filing cabinets jammed with physical files of

seemingly random data. Closer inspection would have revealed a file on every event, personality, or other subject that had ever come to Reinhold Wickett's attention.

The other room, which he now occupied in deep thought, served him as office, laboratory, library, and part-time living space. True to the mythical quarters of his great inspiration, the epic creation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, this place was strewn with the unmistakable artifacts of an eternal bachelor. Unlike Holmes, Reinhold had no doting housekeeper to reorder the chaos, and there was no visual proof that any attempt had ever been made at such a feat. Bits of clothing sat on shelves with worn reference books and used cups. The center of the room was effectively blocked by a collapsed pile of hundreds of data cubes, crumpled printouts, more bits of clothing, and various scraps of unidentifiable nature.

There was an ancient writing desk in one corner, much like one that John Watson might have used, and this too was buried in a sea of shredded paper and other materials that Reinhold Wickett felt someday might prove of value. This instinct was correct. Some future anthropologist might well reconstruct a fair rendering of the entire short history of Central from these disordered relics. Reinhold Wickett was very good at what he did.

He was not, of course, a detective in the true Canon of Doyle. To be an investigator of crime, there must first be a hardy criminal element at hand, and this did not exist on Central. There were petty outbreaks among the settlers from time to time, but most who made it into space were professionals in high demand, screened and filtered from a population that had been decimated by the ultimate Last War. Unlike those who remained on Earth, these humans had jobs that were well defined and well paid.

Reinhold Wickett had begun his career twenty years earlier on Earth as a writer of fiction, a romantic spinner of mystery tales set in the previous century. He was first published by his own hand, using antiquated software on a tiny computer he had scavenged in the ruins of his native Sydney. He soon became the darling of the now-famous Australian "Lost Wave" art movement, one of the youngest of a community of artists who had survived the Earth's greatest catastrophe. No one minded that Wickett's

work was entirely derivative of Doyle and the American author Rex Stout - a new writer had risen from the ashes, and that was cause enough to celebrate.

Wickett's fame rested on his Fat Man series, concerning the unlikely adventures of Derrick Bennett, a rotund sleuth working for the vague International Police. This organization was an outright steal from John P. Marquand's Mr. Moto stories. The American publication of the Fat Man books brought the author to the attention of Henry Segal, the legendary boss of Holo International Studios, who invited Wickett to Los Angeles to work on holoplays at an enormous salary. After three successful adaptations for HI, the Fat Man moved to a leading B-holo studio, Pillsbury Pictures, for seven less rewarding sequels, and Wickett's career bounced down with him.

Reinhold Wickett wisely predicted his own slide and was prepared. As his share of the Pillsbury box office slipped, he invested his previous earnings heavily in Holo International, which had offered stock to the public and had flourished accordingly. Eventually he became a major stockholder at HI and was invited by his friend Henry Segal to sit on the board of directors. By the time he was thirty years old, Reinhold Wickett was wealthy, a well-known author, and a respected man of position. He was not, however, happy or satisfied with his life, and so he set out to change it.

He finished his cigarette and put his hands behind his head, carefully so as not to disturb the jet-black wig he always wore. He smiled to himself.

"This is indeed a fitting case for the World's Most Famous Consulting Detective," he told the ever-present Watson, "and now we must prepare to make our move before the wretched gang strikes!" He rubbed his thin hands together and stood in the midst of random debris. "Come, Watson," he chuckled, "the Game is afoot!"

CHAPTER THREE

"For a start," she said, "I'm not who you think I am. My name is not Digna Severe." Kivvy frowned.

"But I checked your file. It was... you?"

"No. We substituted my face for hers," she answered. "Digna was my friend.. it's a long story."

"Then who the hell are you?" Kivvy growled. "Who is 'we' - What the hell is this all about?"

"My name is Algia. Algia San Filippo. I'm an actress. I'm working for.. well, I'll get to that." She touched him again in apology, but the spark between them was grounded. "Kivvy. You'll have to trust me. This does concern you, and I will tell you everything, but there's a lot you have to know to understand.."

"An actress," he said, folding his arms. He stared at her. "Ok. I don't have the slightest idea what's going on. Entertain me, actress." Algia San Filippo sighed and looked away.

"This is Digna's story. I said she was my friend: she was my best friend. We met on Earth, in City of New York. We didn't have much in common, except we were the same age and we looked somewhat alike. We hit it off anyway. Two girls in the city. She was the sister I never had, and I was also that to her. You've read the file - that was all true. She was a space brat. Her parents died in a freak accident.

"She was accepted at the Exotechnology Institute in City of New York," Algia continued, "so she came to Earth. She was in shock from the moment she arrived. She had pictured her parent's home planet as some idyllic pasture, and she found a ravaged world. It was dying of its own self-pity. She had lived all her life in the perfect environments created in space by the Andies, surrounded by a select group of intelligent humans who were highly motivated. They were all happy to be where they were, doing what they did.

"Most of the people Digna met on Earth were miserable, chained to uselessness in the ruins of the past. There was poverty in City of New York, and she'd never seen poverty. It was real hunger. And there

was hatred - that was the thing that scared her the most - people hurting and killing each other only because of the frustration and madness that comes from being small and forgotten.

"Oh, she saw that there were those who were making a reasonable attempt at reconstruction. The United Nations people and the scientists were trying. The Andies too, but you know their answer: look to the stars. That is the answer, I'm convinced of it, but building the offplanet colonies has robbed from the reconstruction at home. Most of the young science freaks - like you, Kivvy - want to get away from the past to build the future. There's no escaping Earth's past if you stay there.

"So all the bright, young minds - people like you, and Digna's parents before you - followed the Andie prophet Susan into space. They burned their bridges, and left a burned-out planet behind."

"I thought all that space stuff was meant to pump the world economy," Kivvy said. "I mean, it is an international effort, isn't it?"

"How long has it been since you were on Earth, Kivvy?"

"Years," he admitted uneasily. "I've never gone back. You're right. We're all supposed to, but there are ways of extending a research grant indefinitely."

"Of course. You don't want to go back. You had a rotten childhood. I know from your file, you're an orphan too. Like Digna." Algia paused, and he sensed an omission.

"So are you," Kivvy said, lifting back into the bright blue of her eyes. She nodded, and they both relaxed. They had something in common. "I can usually tell. There are lots of us, but I can always tell. At least your friend Digna knew her parents. Before they died."

"Not really. They were busy people. Digna had an Andie nursemaid and she only had contact with the other outworld brats. She told me she hardly missed her parents when they.."

"I miss mine," Kivvy said, "and I've never even known who they were." Algia smiled and he knew they had that in common as well. Their eyes locked for a second. The spark had returned. She continued:

"Where was I? Well, Digna met other students who weren't like her. They weren't connected or brilliant enough to expect to get off planet. They lived for kicks and the moment. Their attitude fascinated her, and she liked some of them, so she preached to them about the better life in the outworlds. She wanted them to understand that there was a future.

"She got too drawn into their lifestyle instead - the drugs, the music, nightclubbing - and she fell for it. You know that scene, it borders on intellectual curiosity and apathetic death wish. That's when I met her. We were getting drunk at the same bar. She was going through her identity crisis, and I was living with a musician who didn't understand me. She needed some non-druggie she could really talk to, and I needed a place to crash. We wound up roommates.

"She and I were very different. I was doing a play at the time. It is show business, but I had a life in the real world. I grew up in Earth cities. Digna was a student, and an outworlder. She lived for her studies, and her new friends had become the only escape she had from the pressure of school. I tried to tell her that her idealism had been right and that they were wrong for her, but she had gotten sucked in deep to the nightlife and drugs. She didn't ever want to get out. She became one with her school friends."

"An Earther," Kivvy said grimly. He knew the scene from his childhood. He hid out in the Orson Welles to escape it. Once he had left the planet, the stories he had heard about Earth's deterioration no longer bothered him. "But where's this all leading to? What happened to Digna Severe?" She made a sad face, and he knew it was more than what he had thought.

"It's so hard to tell her story, Kivvy. I've only told it once before. The point is: Earth is a mess and nobody gives a damn. When she finally almost killed herself using what they call 'party drugs', Digna looked around and decided that she could do something. That she should do something. She didn't know what, but she agreed she had an advantage over her friends not being Earth-born. A different perspective. She tried telling them that drugged oblivion was not the way, and they laughed at her with needles hanging out of their arms. She tried to reason with people she knew who sold the shit, and they got nasty - especially one of them.

"Digna had slept with this guy a few times. No, I should say she had sex with him, because I met him once and this guy was strung too far to ever sleep. He was a dealer, but he got the stuff from somebody else, and he had given Digna the shit that almost killed her. A little gift so that she'd try some special tricks he'd thought up.

"When she got out of detox, she went to him and told him that this stuff was so pure it was certain death. He asked her why she was complaining - after all, he'd given it to her 'cause she was a good lay - it hadn't cost her anything but some self-respect. Then he asked her if she hadn't really come to him for a repeat performance."

"I'm not sure what.." Kivvy started to say.

"..this has to do with you. I'm sorry. I'm getting to that." Algia was serious, and he vowed to shut up until she was finished.

"Digna gave up on the guy, but two days later some of her friends overdosed on the same shit. Digna knew where they had gotten it, and she knew he had sold it to them after she'd talked to him. So she turned him in. He was a murderer. She went to the city narcs to stop him from killing anyone else.

"They popped him, but, to her surprise, he was back on the street the next day. He sent Digna a message through a mutual friend that all was forgiven and he wanted to see her. I tried to talk her out of it, but she went anyway. Letting her go was probably the stupidest thing I've ever done in my life." Algia dropped her eyes to the floor and Kivvy could see a rage building in her. She tensed her arm muscles and ran one hand nervously through her shining hair.

"They were waiting for her at his place. This guy, who had been Digna's lover mind you, and four other men. They grabbed her, taped her mouth, and hustled her out to a van waiting on the street."

"They kidnapped her?"

"Much worse than that. They took her to the enormous old flesh playground across the river from the city. It's called Darkness. The place is a nightmare of vices - most are totally legal - and I guess the four goons were employees of the syndicate that runs it, because no one stopped them at the entrance. They took Digna to a private club in a back alley. They didn't blindfold her for any of this, which really had her worried. If they didn't care what she saw, maybe she wasn't getting out alive, you know?"

Algia was shaking a little and completely avoiding Kivvy's stare. He put out a hand to her shoulder and she glanced at him.

"This was a long time ago, but it's very hard.. I've got to tell you the rest so you'll understand."

"You don't have to," he said, misunderstanding.

"Yes. You have to know. You'll see why." She tossed her head as if to shake off the pain and went on.

"The club was called 'Fetish', and they tied Digna's hands behind her and led her down to the basement and into a room that was painted entirely in bright red. From the way it was decked out it had obviously been designed to satisfy the unique urges of the club's patrons, but she could tell it was used for other things. There was a horrible smell of death, and the walls and floor were sprayed with dark red stains.

"They took her to a little platform in the middle of the room and keyed a console. Two thin beams of light shot down from the ceiling, and they hung her on these little tractors by her wrists and her ankles. She floated there like a collector's specimen.."

"A butterfly," Kivvy added. He couldn't help himself.

"Yes. A beautiful butterfly. A pinned one. Digna didn't know what to expect: rape, torture, mutilation? The classic equipment filled the room, and there were computerized gadgets she didn't recognize. She went into hysterics, and she had trouble breathing with her mouth taped. The men just stood there laughing. Then the guy she knew used a laser to cut all her clothes off her body. She was crying hard,

and the tractor beams gave just enough to let her twist left and right. It was just what they wanted to see.

"One of the other guys pushed her ex-lover aside and slapped her face with the back of his hand. He told her to hold still. She.. she said she couldn't. She was so scared she didn't even know what he was saying. She was so trapped. He slapped her again, but this time full force. Her body rebounded against the tractor beams, and the men laughed harder.

"Digna's ex-lover left the room through a sliding door and returned wearing insulated gloves and using tongs to carry a small metal canister. Steam poured off it, and it looked hot, but when he held it close to Digna, she felt extreme cold. He smiled at her and pressed it against her belly. It burned her so bad she could smell her flesh bubble. She screamed under the tape. He laughed like a maniac and the other four echoed him.

"'You are about to have an experience known to very few,' he said, putting the canister down. 'Very exclusive, baby, and very expensive. But nothing's too good for my private whore.' He put his face real close to hers. 'This is a trip you'll never forget, Digna, but you'll want to. Oh, baby, will you want to forget. Too bad you didn't forget my name when you went to the narcs.' He touched her - like he used to when they were in bed, she said - and kissed her through the tape.

"The other four had put on headsets that were connected to the computer. They put one on Digna too. They stood there watching with ape grins. The one who had beat her grabbed her hair and held her still as her ex-lover bent down to unscrew the canister. Another goon punched her as hard as he could in the stomach, and the first one ripped the tape off her mouth. Her ex-lover pushed the opened canister up to her face, as she gasped for breath, and she inhaled sharp things into her nose. She said everything exploded into fragments, like some split-screen effect from an old movie. After that she had no control over what she was doing. It was as though every fear in her mind came alive at the same instant, but.. she wasn't afraid.

"She said she wished she could have been afraid!" Algia's voice shook. Tears were creeping into her eyes. Kivvy wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms and quiet her, but she put her hands out, palms up. "No. You must understand," she said, "and I've got to tell it."

He forced himself to sit back.

"The room was stocked with all sorts of devices. Digna's will was lost - no, it didn't exist. Her body betrayed her over and over. The stuff she inhaled changed the room and the men into a kind of a dream, but it wasn't like being on a drug. She could feel everything, physically and emotionally, the pain and the humiliation and.. pleasure. And the pleasure wasn't like anything she'd every felt before, because it wasn't just hers: Digna said she experienced all the twisted pleasure that they felt while they were doing what they did to her, together and individually. It was telepathy, or empathy so strong that it displaced her. She became each of them while they did unspeakable things to the enslaved woman hanging in the center of that room. She had no control. Everything they wanted was what she wanted." Algia was livid with anger. "She didn't just let them! She helped them!

"It went on like that for days, Digna wasn't sure. Maybe it was a week. Sometimes she was tethered on a long chain attached to a pole. Sometimes she hung from the beams. Sometimes she was tied on her back on a bed. There were times where she swore she was in two places at once with different men. All the aching and exhaustion came and went. It was more like some insatiable craving that returned again and again. Theirs, not hers. But it was hers too! Somehow..

"They must have rested, because she was alone sometimes, but she didn't sleep. If she got that close to unconsciousness, the pain from what they'd done would start to hit her.

"Then it was over. I guess they'd gotten all they wanted from her. They speedballed her with a needle to kill her, and drove her back to the city to dump her. She didn't remember the rest. They left her in an alleyway across from a crumbling elevated highway on the west side, near the docks. She was naked and she couldn't walk or talk. Two boys found her and took her to a hospital."

Algia stopped then and stood up. She stretched out a hand to Kivvy and led him past the bar into the room with the chandelier and mahogany dining table. A curtain on one wall opened to reveal a small terrace overlooking hundreds of other terraced condos. They went outside. The artificial day cycle was over. Neptune's outer ring cut a thin, dark arc across the distant starfields. The stars were almost as thick as clouds in an Earth sky, and vast and endless. Kivvy was surprised at the utter silence on the terrace.

They sat without speaking while Algia regained her composure. When she was able, she continued:

"Digna's parents had left her a small fortune when they died, so I took her out of City of New York. I signed her into an exclusive rehab center in the Old Boston sector. She was in a coma for weeks. I didn't know what had happened to her until she woke.

"The clinic said her problems were mostly psychologically related. There was nothing physically wrong with her except a burn on her stomach, the needle mark in her arm, and a pronounced bleeding from both her nostrils. The doctors thought she was a coker or a meth freak until they saw the burns inside. Then they asked me if she'd been trying to snort liquid nitrogen. The burns matched nitrogen accident pictures they had on file.

"It took me a while to accept the truth: despite what she had told me, nothing else had been done to her physically except those first slaps and the guy's fist in her stomach. There was no evidence of rape or beatings. She didn't even have a broken fingernail. She knew she had been abused and assaulted endlessly by five men, but somehow they had never touched her."

"It was the drug?" Kivvy asked. He wasn't sure he was following. She nodded and took a deep breath.

"She died. First she went back into a coma, and then she was gone. It was horrible. I couldn't just let it end. I wanted to find them. I had to make them pay for what they had done to her.

"The police gave up, so I decided to try to get a private investigator to help me. I used police computers and came up with two names. The first was an older guy who had been involved with Andie

emancipation. He was top rated, but he was retired and living on a ranch out in the Northwest. The second best was someone I already knew: a friend of mine named Reinhold Wickett."

"Hey, I know who he is!" Kivvy said. "He wrote the Fat Man series."

"Yes. That's how I met him. When I was in Hollywood. But after that he became a consulting detective. He had a passion for Sherlock Holmes, so he decided to throw it all away and solve real crimes." Kivvy shook his head.

"He gave up writing for the holos? Amazing."

"I was doubtful when I found out what he'd become, but the police computers were right. Reinhold is a very good detective."

"That was him on the phone?" Kivvy asked. "I heard the first name."

"Yes. He's here on Central, and you'll be meeting him soon. He's coming to dinner." She gave Kivvy a pleading look. "Kivvy. You mustn't tell him that you know I'm not Digna. My pose is part of his plan. No one is supposed to know that Digna is dead, and he'll be angry that I told you. Just call me Digna while he's here. For now, ok?"

"I don't get it," Kivvy shrugged. "Why should it be a secret.." She flashed her blue eyes, and he caved in. "Ok. If that's what you want."

"Good! Now let me finish. I found Reinhold at his place in New Haven and told him everything I just told you. He listened very carefully, but he seemed unsympathetic. I thought he'd refuse to help me. Then he consulted with his computer for a while - he calls it Watson - and started asking me some strange questions.

"It was as though he had somehow shared her experience. He knew all about the cold stuff they'd made her inhale. He listed the visual and tactile ranges that the stuff produced. He didn't know the specific things she'd done - or thought that she'd done - but he did know the exact way Digna had perceived

everything. After quizzing me for about an hour, he got quiet again. Then he said he'd take the case and ushered me out the door.

"I got a little angry. After all, he just told me to go home and he'd call me. He didn't say what he was going to do about those five pigs, or why he knew all about some drug they'd used that no one else had ever heard of. I got half way to City of New York and then I jumped back on the tube to New Haven. I was glad I did that later on, because there's one thing I've learned for sure about Reinhold Wickett: if you don't ask, he won't bother to tell you.

"He was playing at Sherlock when I stomped into his messy living room, and he hardly noticed me, just motioned for me to sit. He put out his pipe and looked at me like I was a total stranger.

"Back already?" he asked me. I was not amused, but he wasn't kidding. Then I asked about the drug and he answered.

"It's called 'eidolon-N'. The 'N' is for Neptune, because eidolon-N is only native to one planet of the Neptune system." Algia looked at Kivvy. "The substance that Digna inhaled is something you've done yourself, Kivvy. Strained through a broken faceplate."

Reinhold Wickett did fit the stylized traditional description of Sherlock Holmes, although Kivvy thought at once that the writer might have used surgery to complete the effect. Wickett's long, sharp nose didn't seem quite right and his eyebrows were plucked and dyed. His gray eyes were too close together, Kivvy decided, and the left one sometimes strayed independently when he spoke. Wickett stood quite tall, but he wore boots at all times, which added to his stature. He dressed with neo-Victorian precision, but the clothing was rumpled; although he was not elderly, he wore a wig. Despite these contradictions, Kivvy shared Algia's trust for the "consulting detective" from their first meeting.

"Kivvy. I am pleased to meet you. You'll pardon me if I don't waste time summarizing the background of this case. I trust Miss Severe has reported to you all she knows."

They sat together around the mahogany dining table. Algia, alias Digna, was insistent about preparing a full dinner for her guests, and had slipped into the kitchen after making introductions. Reinhold was facing Kivvy across the width of the long antique table. He drummed his fingers softly against a delicate china saucer supporting a cup of hot tea. This produced a gentle ticking sound to which Wickett was pacing his remarks.

"There is much more, of course, but Miss Severe could not have known when she first arrived to see me at my little estate in New Haven. Your work and mine might intermingle there: I keep bees. I have stocked the grounds with some delicious flowers for them to work in the summers. Some rarities even to a qualified botanist such as yourself, I'd venture." The detective raised the cup to his lips, but didn't drink. "You are only an occasional reader, Kivvy?"

"Well, yes," Kivvy grinned. He was happy he had read one of the Fat Man mysteries. "I.."

"You've not read much of Conan Doyle, however. I would humbly suggest that you do so. I see you resist?"

"I have read some Holmes stories," Kivvy said defensively. "I'm more of a fan of the classic films. I do read when I get the chance."

"Cube printouts and electron-etched characters dribbling off a monitor are no substitute. Books are the thing, old son."

"I don't have much free time." Kivvy watched the left eye drift. Reinhold replaced his cup and resumed the tapping.

"A shame. Miss Severe is a book reader. Perhaps she will come to influence you in the use of your free moments. I note you display a mutual desire to spend more of them together."

Remembering not to call her Algia, Kivvy admitted this in a mumble. He was embarrassed to be so transparent, but Wickett was encouraging.

"Not to worry, my dear boy. You impress me with your line of work and strength of character. Your attraction to her is also admirable, as a man without the latter might well reject her, knowing her story." Wickett leaned closer and dropped his voice. "I will tell you again that she is certainly interested in you. I have known her for almost a year, and she has had no paramour in mind in all those months, but when a woman of her gifts chooses to fall back to the kitchen for a man.. well! It is obviously not for myself."

He raised the tea again and drank. "And now the other details. Miss Severe has already made you aware of the vice syndicate connection to eidolon-N. That they possess some of the stuff came as no surprise to me. The original Japanese expedition to your planet Noh returned with some of it, which later disappeared. I was involved in the investigation of the death of the original Japanese crew, you see."

"Death? What do you mean?"

"It is not a matter of public record, so there is no way you would have known, but all of your oriental predecessors on Noh are dead. Thirteen of them. Six died when a container of eidolon-N was opened in a sealed lab in Japan. The others were executed one by one. The same syndicate that abducted Miss Severe was probably responsible for the latter.

"The only human left alive from the original expedition is Colonel Owen Tregennis, an occidental space sailor who acted as a guide for the Japanese mission to Noh. He is an Englishman of Cornish descent who first sailed with the Andies when they came to the outer systems, decades ago. He stayed on as a member of their permanent exploration team. We think he was not exposed in the lab accident, although he was in Japan at the time."

"But if the six who were in the lab did die from exposure.. ?" Kivvy asked nervously.

"No, my lad, you are not in danger of sudden expiration." The eye drifted again, and Kivvy realized that Reinhold did this unconsciously, perhaps when he was collecting his thoughts. "Miss Severe, er, survived, didn't she? I should tell you that we do have reports that the syndicate has experimented with

eidolon-N for some time. None of their victims were so fortunate as you. They all died like the Japanese - during the extreme eidetic comatose reaction that you and Digna experienced."

"But, why didn't it kill me?" Kivvy asked.

"Please, Kivvy. I will relate all I know to you in sequence. Ah, Miss Severe!"

"I wish you would stop calling me that, Reinhold." Algia entered from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a white apron. "About five minutes more, gentlemen." She beamed at Kivvy and he was happy to see that she had made a complete recovery from her earlier emotional ordeal.

"Then you can join us," Reinhold continued, "for a leg of lamb should require no more of your attention until that time. I was about to speak of the possible causes of the immunity you share." She gave the detective a guilty glance and sat next to Kivvy. "There may be one very good reason that you did not succumb like the others which is beyond my reach: it has to do with certain genetic factors, and that subject is not my strong point.

"Your immunity might also have to do with your exposure to Neptune's radiation, Kivvy. If Neptune, and her sisters, Jupiter, Saturn, and Uranus were planets of rock as originally perceived by earthbound ancients, this could not be. They are, as we now know, star-planets: suns, like Sol, but somehow untriggered by whatever primal force that gave our sun its heat.

"All four of our solar system's star-planets have been found to emit a vast spectrum of radiation, some of it their own and some a collusion with the solar winds of their burning cousin. All humans living long enough in orbits around these giants receive tolerable doses of the radiation. This causes no appreciable damage to human tissue or vital biochemistry, but it does reach the fatty tissues to an extent, and, in the case of eidolon-N, may to produce at least one known antibody foreign to Earthers." Reinhold smiled at Algia.

"Such prolonged exposure to star-planet radiation may have saved the life of Owen Tregennis if he was witness to that lab accident. I have not met him, or been able to interview him personally. The Andies

assure me he was, at last accounting, very much alive and a man of excellent health, although somewhat elusive."

"But why would anyone want to experiment with eidolon-N?" Kivvy asked. "There are dozens of so-called pleasure drugs that don't kill Earthers on contact, and they're plentiful enough."

"I'm afraid the whole reason is not yet known to me, but Miss Severe's attackers were undoubtedly using her as a subject of research. The other experiments we learned about were also conducted in that underworld stronghold where they took her. That those five men were sadists of the most inhuman kind is not debatable, but they also knew exactly what eidolon-N could do to her mind and had practice in their use of it.

"The eidetic hallucinations of eidolon-N are enhanced, you see, by the immediate proximity of a computer. The men abusing Miss Severe were wearing computer links, remember? The Japanese in the lab had on pressurized safe suits, and they were also linked to a computer. And your suit was linked to INTELX, Kivvy."

"But that's fantastic. Do you mean that the dream I had..?"

"Not exactly a dream. I believe it was a coma induced by the eidolon-N you breathed in through your damaged suit. The enhancement to a near-reality state was probably related to a subatomic interface with INTELX's plasma chips. The only thing we don't know about what happened to you is what form your particular hallucination took. Would you care to tell us about that?"

"I'm afraid it will have to wait, gentlemen," Algia interjected firmly. "Dinner is ready and I am very strict about serious talk during a home cooked meal. I'm sure both of you get little enough of them to appreciate that rule. There will be plenty of time to talk dreams afterward." She returned to the kitchen on that note, after pouring a dark burgundy into the crystal glass she set in front of Wickett. She took his cup and saucer with her.

"Splendid, Miss Severe!" Reinhold exclaimed, winking at Kivvy with his wandering left eye.

In the living room over coffee, Kivvy related all he could remember about his stroll through the TIF program. He earned a few laughs from Algia when he described his short-legged horse and the dripping megapixels of his unfinished background screen, but Wickett sat silent with gray eyes closed. Kivvy suspected the detective was secretly napping after Algia's excellent roast lamb, until he finished his story and Reinhold sat up straight to ask for more details.

"You said that the TIF interface normally includes a command display used by INTELX. What exactly does that look like to the programmer?"

"There are two, really. One can be supered over the programmer's lowest field of vision. The other is always there, above the first row of megapixels. If it was a two-dimensional field, that would correspond to the top border of the screen."

"Be more precise, please."

"Well, the lower display looks like a shallow rectangular box.."

"What color?"

"Dark blue." Kivvy waited, and Wickett gestured impatiently for him to continue. "It's got little icons floating in it that correspond to the programmer's movements while he uses the finger controllers. Like the icons of any system, but three-dimensional icons. Everything in TIF is 3D. There are about fifty different icons, but only two dozen are visible to the programmer at any given time."

"Describe some of these icons, please."

"There are two pyramids which indicate the general direction each hand is moving. The left hand pyramid is purple and the one for the right is neon green. When you move around fast, the hand icons spin continuously. Working the TIF design process is like finger-painting, with each finger controller

acting independently or together, so there are smaller white pyramids to indicate the direction of each finger relative to hand motion."

"If the programming process is holographic, how do you program the other dimensions: other than up, down, right or left?"

"Your resident computer does that. Depending on the size of its internal memory - and INTELX has about as much as possible - the aided shaping can be so fast that you forget that you're not doing it yourself. Or you can slow it down or turn it off and try doing things with verbal commands. That's what the headset is for. I can direct INTELX, instead of letting the computer make its own decisions about depth and stuff."

"That's how you got the horse," Algia laughed.

"Yeah, well, I've pretty much given up on manual shaping. Oh, and there's a little cube icon that indicates when manual shaping is toggled on or off. It has a yellow 'S' turning inside it."

"So your design is computer-aided, and the lower field reminds you of the degree of assistance INTELX is providing," Wickett summarized. "What about the other, upper field?"

"That's a text display of comments and code. It's in a two-dimensional window. More.. advanced programmers use it. Memory locations, things like that. If you know the TIF language, you can program directly into INTELX without using the headset or the finger controllers." Wickett's eye positively swerved.

"Then you don't know this TIF language?" he asked sharply. He turned his body to follow the eye and both orbs fixed on Kivvy, who glanced at Algia. She was smiling, but not mocking.

"No," he admitted to them both. "Not yet. I'm just an after work hacker. I'm at a more intermediate level." He was thinking of the textbook cube he'd bought on TIF programming to impress the real Digna Severe, knowing that even TIF might be considered primitive to someone in her profession.

Wickett was smiling. "That's very interesting. Very interesting," he said. He fished in his coat pocket for a moment; his eyes still intent on Kivvy. Pulling out a thin plastic rectangle, Wickett pressed a tab on one corner. "Got that, Watson?" he asked. A green LED lit up on the surface of the plastic card.

"Got what?" Algia asked him. She had been listening closely, watching Kivvy more than Wickett. She was obviously not surprised that Reinhold's computer was monitoring everything they had been saying.

"Perhaps the beginning of a solution to a small part of our mystery. I will refrain from explanation, if you don't mind, as it's guesswork so far and I need facts. There is one thing I hadn't asked you, Digna. I wonder if you will mind: the question may prove offensive."

"Ask away."

"When she.. you were a prisoner in that dangerous place across the river from City of New York, did anything surprise her because it was so foreign to her experience that she had never seen anything like it? Or even imagined anything like it before?"

Algia didn't flinch when she answered, but she gave Kivvy a smile as she spoke:

"No, Reinhold. I'm not exactly an innocent, as you already know."

"Hmm? Oh, yes! Of course," said Reinhold Wickett. He flushed slightly. He stood and bowed to them.

"Thank you for the dinner, Miss Severe, which was superb. I will see you both soon. There is much to do. There are some facets that neither of you can provide me because you do not possess them." He took Algia's hand, bowing again. The eye moved to Kivvy. "Take care of each other. Watch your backs, as they say."

"Do you think we're in danger?" Algia whispered, concern marking her beautiful features.

"I believe that may be true for all of us, or will be before too much longer, although I cannot say from whom or what as yet." Leaving them with this portent, Reinhold Wickett made an often-practiced grand exit.

The tall blonde nurse was insistent, but it was not due to any previous compromise that she retained little authority over Henry Segal. Although she had no conceivable use for money, it amused him to pay her increasingly large sums to perform her regular duties without her white uniform.

"You must stop smoking cigars, Mr. Segal," she repeated, dressed only in a white bra, stockings, and white stiletto heels.

"And you must turn around for me one more time, Nurse Harris," Henry Segal said.

She was standing ten feet away from him in the center of his Gower street office in Hollywood - a historical place once occupied by moguls more famous, but of far lesser power. Henry Segal sat surrounded by his massive desk, as he had for thirty years. She turned, smiling.

"Stop there, please." She obeyed. Henry Segal blew a smoke ring, which momentarily formed a perfect frame around its equally perfect target.

"Mr. Segal?" Nurse Harris asked, looking over her shoulder after a moment of silence.

"Thank you, nurse. You may put on your clothes. An inspiration, as usual. I will promise nothing concerning cigars, but I will double your 'bonus' again tomorrow if you remove all but the heels." Nurse Harris reached for her garments, which were piled on an uncomfortable chair to her left. "And dress slowly, please."

Nurse Harris dressed with a sensual grace that rivaled the best of human exotic dancers working a room full of Henry Segals. If she feigned some nervous dismay, it was only part of her program. Henry Segal never touched her, but she would have had no real objections to anything he requested.

She was one of the few remaining Andies of the old pleasure model series, reworked by Holo International's resident engineers to monitor Henry Segal's health. Henry Segal knew this, but it amused him to play the part of a rich seducer when in her company. That the mere possession of a pleasure

model was a violation of the UN Council's Non-Human Rights Act did not concern Henry Segal. He was popularly known as the single most powerful man on Earth, and, if not completely beyond the reach of mortal law, he was at least somewhat above it.

Holotheaters were crammed with eager patrons, and Holo International Studios produced more holos per year than its four leading competitors combined. Henry Segal had been heard to say that his conglomerate was the Time-Warners of the 21st century, but HI held a far more powerful monopoly on entertainment than any of the old studios had in the golden eras of Chaplin or Spielberg.

The HI press corps had a slogan that modestly said it all: "Holo International - The Leading Producer of Entertainment in the Known Universe".

Henry Segal, who was the Chairman of the Board of Directors, in turn controlled all of what HI produced. Henry Segal also owned a third of all public stocks issued by HI and its affiliated companies. His personal income was beyond calculation, and he kept most of it. There were some local taxes and an optional yearly contribution to the UN World Council, but Henry Segal was otherwise neither generous nor lavish in his personal life. He paid only what he had to, and the 'bonus' promised to Nurse Harris was only a fictional embellishment to keep his little amusement realistic. The Andie never left the studio, and was unceremoniously locked in a small closet on a lower floor at night. "A robot is a robot," Henry Segal liked to say.

As he approached his ninetieth birthday, Henry Segal felt no need to slow down or change his lifestyle. Life was work. He spent more time in his office than in his early years at HI, but he had more administrative duties since the formation of the conglomerate. No time to visit the sets of his holos and chase the featured actresses, but he had not entirely lost the urge to catch them. There was always Nurse Harris if he found enough strength, but Henry Segal had other things on his mind.

Much of his time was spent maintaining the dominion of HI Datacubes, the frontrunner in that lucrative market. Henry Segal saw the datacube as the most important technological development since electricity, at least as far as profit was concerned.

There were always new ideas on the horizon, new products to sell and new markets to explore and conquer. His optimism was the secret of Henry Segal's vitality in the business world. He thought himself a Hollywood buccaneer, an elderly swashbuckler, and he would take on any new venture cut with a good measure of dirty dealing and shady business ethic. It was, to Henry Segal, the ultimate game, especially with a good cigar stuck in his face and a significantly unfair advantage over his unworthy opponent.

After Reinhold left, Kivvy felt much more relaxed around Algia, but he was still wondering how to handle the inevitable question that was sure to arise at the end of the evening. They discussed more general things and he followed her into a small study off the living room. She showed him her library while he worried.

Everyone in orbit took some pride in collecting. There was live entertainment on Central, of course, and the city had a dozen giant holothaters. Central's 24-hour cable system offered generations of old TV shows, music, and some of the less memorable surviving cinema. But most humans preferred entertainment in the form of datacubes. Algia had hundreds of cubes, stacked in so-called "cube-tubes", and a display monitor nearby allowed Kivvy to scan the titles.

Wickett had been right. There were no book cubes. Shelves of paperbacks filling the rest of the room revealed Algia as a "print purist" - one of a vociferous minority who insisted that the printed word was meant to be read from books, not monitored from a cube. When he finally stopped thinking about how to kiss her goodnight, Kivvy was a little jealous of her library: she obviously had the money to afford many of the limited cubes that were priced far above even his grant-funded budget.

"God," he said, and she leaned over his shoulder to see what interested him. Her soft, black hair tickled his neck. "All those William Powell movies! And all three original Toppers!"

"Not bad, eh? Got most of the ancient ones on Earth. What movie are you searching for?"

"Oh, an old 50's science fiction film. 'Conquest of Space'?"

"Nope. I've seen the title, but I don't have that one."

"Good," said Kivvy, producing the cube that he had bought her in the port mall. Algia looked surprised. He thought she got a bit of a mist in those beautiful eyes.

"Aw, you didn't have to.." she started, but she took the cube.

"I wanted to," he said. "I don't get that many invites, living on Noh."

Algia laughed. "I don't usually ask strange men over for dinner either. Even if I have been spying on them."

They froze for a moment, and she added: "Not that I think you're strange, Kivvy."

"When did it start, by the way? The spying, I mean."

"As soon as I got here. Wickett wanted me to find out all I could about Noh before he made the trip out from Earth to Central. Your grant was the only official activity since the Japanese. Wickett checked your credentials and found out you were on the level. Central's COM commander was a friend of Digna's parents, so we set up the link tap on INTELX. I've been watching you ever since." Algia looked away.

"Don't feel bad," Kivvy offered. "You have a mystery to solve."

"I know. I didn't feel bad until we met. Now I know I could have probably just dropped by your camp and asked you anything I needed to know." She looked serious for a moment. "And I wish the mystery was closer to a solution."

He tried to lighten the weight. "I do too." This is it, he thought. It's late, and we're out of small talk.

"Reinhold will solve it. I'm sure," she smiled away the gloom. Then she stood and put out a hand. "Let's go watch your movie." She pulled him gently toward the only room he hadn't seen.

In the morning, they shared a light breakfast on the veranda. There wasn't much to say about "Conquest of Space": it was probably an exciting movie in its day, but it was almost too horrible to be camp. They had giggled at the ignorance and chauvinism. The cast was entirely male, except for one scene where the crew of the space ship relaxed by watching a musical harem number from a Bob Hope movie Algia said was released by the same studio the previous year.

"I have a bunch of Hope cubes," Kivvy said, "but I don't remember that one."

"'Here Come The Girls'," Algia stated, pouring him a cup of jasmine tea. "It wasn't one of his best, but it wasn't one of his worst either. What Hopes do you have?"

"Everything from 'Big Broadcast of 1938' to 'My Favorite Blonde'," Kivvy said with pride. "After that, they get harder to find."

"I might have most of the rest. You wouldn't have 'Cat and The Canary'? Or 'The Ghost Breakers'?"

"I've never been able to find 'Cat and The Canary'," he said. "I do have the other one. I'm really surprised you'd be into slapstick comedies."

"Paulette Goddard was in those." Algia grinned at him. "When I was working the holos in Hollywood, they used to say I looked like her." She tilted her face into profile. "What do you think?"

"Sort of," he lied. She laughed, and he changed the subject. "I guess I'll be heading back out to Noh later today." He was hoping she would object, but she showed no great concern.

"Ok. Reinhold does want us to stop by the office." She was looking over his head toward the side of a building directly opposite. Kivvy followed her gaze. There were hundreds of identical picture windows, but only one caught his attention.

Two dark figures were barely visible. They stood quite still in the shadows. One was manipulating a small object that might have been a camera on a tripod. "What's that?" he asked lamely, but Algia was on her feet and moving through the arch into the dining room.

"Come on, boy!" she shouted, peeling off her silken dressing gown. "Time enough for a nice long shower together!"

Kivvy didn't need a second invitation.

It was as though the catastrophe that was Reinhold Wickett's small suite had been reproducing itself in a furious parody. All that held some order had dispatched into disorder, and all of the previously strewn disorder had grown another layer of scattered junk. It had been only a little worse when Reinhold had returned home from his dinner date with Kivvy and Algia. He had labored into the early hours of morning trying to clean it up.

That someone had visited while he supped was bad enough - for it meant that his carefully contrived security system had been breached - but Wickett was more concerned at the potential loss of valuable data. A complete check of Watson's files, a major undertaking in itself, had revealed no loss or meddling with his loyal computer and ally.

"Have you finished the voice print analysis, Watson?" Wickett inquired, emerging briefly from a sea of paper and old underwear.

"Affirmative, Reinhold," the computer replied. "I find no match in local storage."

"I will arrange a data bounce to check files on Io. Play it again, Watson." There followed an ear piercing screeching sound and a bit of feedback.

"My sensors were at high gain in order to penetrate into the hall," Watson explained. The computer uttered a small beep played back a stereo recording of the break-in.

The intruders showed disappointing professionalism by maintaining silence during most of their search, but Wickett made Watson stop the recording over a dozen times to replay short sections of sound. These were either monosyllabic grunts or curses as the uninvited guests became tangled in Wickett's legendary display of untidiness. When the recording ended, Reinhold Wickett was smugly satisfied. "Earthers," he said to Watson, who dutifully noted the observation.

CHAPTER FOUR

Central had been engineered to simulate Earth's gravity, making it hard for Kivvy to match Algia's quick pace as they took the express belt from her condo to the business sector. All three belts were crowded during business hours, packed with humans in pastel 3-piece suits, Andies in coveralls, and both in uniform. Algia moved gracefully, weaving amongst them. The forward motion of the fastest belt, and Kivvy's inability to hop or float, forced him to run alongside her like a child.

He had just settled into a skipping lope, when Algia took his arm and guided him unevenly across the slower belts to the offpath. She chatted amicably as they made their way down to a street level, giving him a visual tour of various buildings.

"That one is my favorite," she said, pointing to an enormous sphere of black polyglass. It danced with reflections of Neptune, which filled most of Central's sky. Kivvy spotted a HI logo at the apex of the sphere.

"A holothheater?" he asked. The sphere was too large for that.

"On the upper floor," Algia explained. She was obviously dazzled by the architecture. "The rest is executive offices. Reinhold arranged a tour for me once. It's really something inside. There's even a mini-mall for collectors!" They were heading for the entrance, a giant arch in the shape of an H.

"Wickett works here?"

"No. He could, I suppose, if he wanted to be the obvious one." She hesitated, glancing at him. "I don't know if I should have said that, Kivvy."

"Said what? Hey, just what is it that you're not telling me? I get the feeling you're holding something back." They stopped just under the giant H.

"That's because you're intelligent," she said, "and much more sensitive than we thought." She slid her arms around his waist.

"Who's 'we'? Wickett and you?" He could have kissed her, but he didn't. She said nothing, looking into his eyes, as several people rushed past them through the arch.

"Mostly Wickett. It's his game, you see?" She brushed her lips against his cheek.

"Not really. Why don't you..?" Her lips got in the way of the rest.

"I'm getting more involved than I was supposed to," she said after the kiss, which explained nothing. They entered the HI sphere and they walked slowly past the lobby stores. "I think you had better ask Wickett when we see him," she answered his raised eyebrows.

"About his 'game'?"

"That's just a word he uses to describe his work. It's from Conan Doyle, you see: 'the game is afoot!'" They were passing a holo memorabilia concession. As Kivvy peered inside, Algia grabbed his arm and shoved him into the next shop.

"Hey! What?"

"Nothing good in there."

"They were having a discount sale on old musical holos. Henry Segal stuff!"

"It's all Henry Segal stuff," she mumbled. "Check this out, Kivvy! I want to buy you something." The little shop she preferred was called "Hollywood". It was stocked with old cinema cubes, t-shirts, magazines for collectors, print books, and other various items of the genre. Kivvy forgot her odd behavior and became a fan again, inspecting the cubes for rare treasures.

When they emerged an hour later, he had spent a small fortune for a very rare copy of "You'll Find Out", a 40's comedy-mystery. He had also bought a full-size replica of the black bird in "The Maltese Falcon". Algia's gift to him was Bob Hope and Paulette Goddard in "Cat and The Canary". It was ten times the cost of anything else in the store, but Algia insisted.

"We'll watch it together sometime," she promised. Kivvy liked that best of all. They left the HI complex and Algia commandeered an air taxi to carry them to Wickett's office. The cab was a bright red, AI-driven model with a cheerful Boswash accent.

"Where yuh goin', folks?" it inquired as they climbed into the comfortable rear seat. Algia punched an address into the keypad, and they skimmed into the streets of Central.

Wickett sat back in his favorite chair, waiting while Watson digested the data bounce from Outpost I on Io. He was nervous and angry, both moods that contradicted his coolly crafted profile, but the logical engine inside his skull was not slowed by emotions. He had miscalculated, and perhaps underestimated his opponents. While not the most cardinal of sins, this was a defeat to Reinhold Wickett's self-esteem, which demanded his immediate attention. As Watson compared thousands of voice patterns with brief noises made by the burglars, Wickett revised, devised, and shuffled possible strategies.

He sketched new thoughts with a metal stylus on a plastic screen that rested in his lap. When he ran out of space, he cleared the screen. Watson then stored the previous page. This storage process was entirely automated, but after each save Wickett muttered a resolute "Thank you, Watson."

It was nearly an hour later when Watson announced once again that no match had occurred in the voice print search. By that time, Reinhold Wickett had predicted Watson's conclusion and restructured his plan to combat the mysterious syndicate with an interest in eidolon-N. He had also noted, with some concern, that Kivvy and the girl were late for their appointed meeting.

The red aircab was noiseless, but Kivvy could almost hear the sound of old Warner Brother's tires screeching around the corners. Algia was cursing the cab's AI in an unladylike manner, but the doors and windows were sealed. The cab ignored her demands, plunging on through the city streets of Central.

"Not that we could jump out of an aircab at this velocity anyway, Algia," Kivvy was saying. Algia punched violently at the destination keypad.

"Please settle back and enjoy your ride," the cab's voice repeated cheerfully. Kivvy wondered if he only imagined a slightly sarcastic tone.

"Where are you taking us?" Kivvy tried. He was surprised to get any answer.

"I have been programmed to deliver all passengers to the industrial sector at coordinates 185.32.6034. Would you care for music?"

"Any idea where we're going, Algia?" Kivvy asked her. She had slumped back in the seat, looking morose.

"Sure. Straight to Hell. Those coordinates would put us just about where they incinerate all unrecycled waste on Central. I just hope this isn't one of Wickett's little games. For his sake, that is." She fumbled in a pocket and produced a tobacco cigarette. Kivvy was watching Central slip by.

"Somehow," he said, "I don't think so." He started at the smoke. "I didn't know you did that."

"Digna didn't. I do." She inhaled deeply on the cigarette. "There's a lot you don't know about this girl, Kiv. Being lovers doesn't keep us from being strangers." She put out a hand to cover one of his. "Ask me, and I'll tell you everything."

A moment later, the aircab rounded a corner so sharply that she was thrown against him. They huddled that way for a moment. The road had become a straightaway, and the cab was picking up speed. There were no other vehicles, and the buildings of Central's business sector were shrinking to tiny dots behind them. They were passing through an undeveloped area of the fabricated planet, a flat, gray landscape. Everything was paved with plastic and metal. There were no structures or signs of life.

"Where are we, cabbie?" Kivvy asked. The cab's AI replied with its usual good cheer:

"Sector 184. Reserved for future expansion."

"We're going awfully fast. I thought aircars all had regulators," Algia said, but the AI had no further comment. Through the forward windshield, they could make out a silver shimmer on the horizon.

"What's that, Algia?"

"My God," she said, pressing closer to him. "That's the edge of the city shield up there. The garbage area must be outside the atmosphere! We've got to stop this thing, Kivvy, or it's going to land us in a very cold vacuum!"

Kivvy stared at her a moment and then looked at the destination keypad. "Of course! I should have thought of this before!" His fingers danced on the keys. Nothing happened. He repeated the dance.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to tell the cab that we're in mortal danger. Andies and their AI cousins aren't allowed to willfully hurt humans, remember? I was trying the universal emergency interrupt code, but I don't think this pad is even connected."

The shimmering end of the atmosphere bubble loomed over the road, and the aircab continued to accelerate.

"That's not very reassuring. This thing's going to crash right through in another minute!" Algia was sounding hysterical.

"It's no use, Algia. I'm not getting any response. Doesn't it have to stop when it reaches the bubble?"

"Slow down, damnit!" Algia screamed at the AI. "Stop now!"

"I have been programmed to deliver all passengers to the industrial sector at coordinates 185.32.6034," the AI said calmly. "Would you care for music now?"

Algia grabbed Kivvy's Maltese Falcon from the bag at their feet. She began to pound at the clear polyglass between the front and back seats of the cab. The plastic wasn't even scratched. "Stop, Goddamnit!" she yelled. "You've got to stop!"

Kivvy looked out the side window. The end of atmosphere was clearly marked with road signs and glowing arrows, but the road ran through the silver energy field without a block. "Hospital!" he shouted suddenly. "Take us to a maternity hospital!"

The aircab decelerated smoothly with a whine and stopped with its nose just penetrating the field.

"Which hospital?" the AI inquired, its cheerful voice sounding concerned. "If a live birth is imminent, I am programmed to aid with step-by-step instructions on delivery." Algia was hugging Kivvy with tears running down her cheeks.

"The nearest hospital," Kivvy said. "And proceed carefully, if you don't mind?"

"Yes, sir," the AI replied as the aircab turned around and began to move slowly in the direction of the city. "That would be Madison Medical. How close are the contractions?"

Kivvy looked to Algia helplessly, and she giggled. "Close enough, driver. Just get us there, ok?"

Reinhold Wickett was sitting in his chair with his feet propped up on an enormous pile of trash. He acknowledged their arrival with a nod and immediately returned to the large book he had been reading when they entered. Kivvy noticed the title: "Tracing Regionalisms and Variants in Human Dialect". Algia cleared some space for them on a small settee, and signaled Kivvy to silence. The two perched together and waited. Algia lit another cigarette.

"You are late," Wickett announced after several minutes. He abruptly closed his book, and absently tossed it into a pile of clothing in one corner of the room. He eyed her cigarette. "That is very much out of character for you, Miss Severe."

"I think it's time to drop Digna, Reinhold," she said, and Kivvy watched Wickett's eye jump in his direction. He saw Wickett was angry.

"Ah, Love. With a capital L. Or would that just be a more plain lust? Which is it that so entitles you to change my game plan, old girl?" The gray eyes stabbed at her. She hesitated, but then drew defiantly on her cigarette.

"Sure. I told him - most of it." She blew smoke into the air between them. "It has nothing to do with love or lust. Both are developing nicely. It's our lives I'm talking about. We just got kidnapped! The 'game' is turning nasty, Reinhold." She recounted the near escape at the edge of the city.

Wickett said nothing. Finally, he dropped his feet to the floor as though preparing to leap up. The left eye scanned various parts of the room.

"The rest," Kivvy prompted helpfully. "What hasn't she told me?" The silence returned for several minutes until Wickett stood, threw his head back in a gesture of contempt, and laughed loudly once.

"Of course. These mishaps come as no surprise to me." He turned dramatically, regaining his composure, and paced back and forth in what floor space was available. "They took the bait sooner than I had anticipated. They know where we are, and they may even know who we are," he said.

"Except for you, Algia. I would doubt they have penetrated the data alterations."

"Bait?" Kivvy blurted out. He was getting tired of explanations that led to questions. Reinhold stopped moving and looked down at him. The detective's voice grew softer.

"Exactly, dear boy. Why do you think she is here in the role of Digna Severe? I must hasten to add that the current state of your emotional involvement was neither planned or scripted, although it may have complicated matters." An almost malevolent grin spread across Wickett's face. "We needed to draw them out, you see? To present them with a target! Who could be better cast in the role but my best agent, the renowned actress, Miss Algia San Filippo?"

"Let me get this straight," Kivvy said to Reinhold Wickett. "The reason that Algia was posing as Digna Severe was so somebody would try to kill her?"

"That is correct." Wickett tapped on the bowl of a pipe with his index finger. "I thought it was a bit early for such an attempt, but our enemy has revealed its presence in doing so. That was the plan."

"And I was added to the target?" Kivvy asked.

"Not exactly. I am sure they had no idea who you were when they hacked your red aircab. They could know by now, of course, and such knowledge would encourage them to try harder next time. You do understand that any connection between Digna Severe and eidolon-N poses a threat to them."

"Why, exactly?"

"Because they thought Digna Severe was dead, and now they think she's alive and closing on the source of their interests - whatever those might be. The extent of their reach is the fascinating thing: three billion miles from Earth, yet they have the ability to protect themselves!"

"Ok," Kivvy said, "but why string me along? Couldn't you have been up front with me from the beginning?"

"We had to feel you out, dear boy. To see if you were as pure as your scientific quest on Noh seemed to indicate. Your encounter a short while ago was undoubtedly with the killing arm of a very powerful syndicate. Their aims are, as yet, unclear to me, but your ride to the edge of Central is a confirmation of traditional criminal thinking: whoever and whatever their purpose, it is to benefit only themselves, and not the small, ragged survivors of humankind. They may indeed hope to use the stuff to subvert and subjugate us all!

"The story Algia told you last night was not fiction," Wickett continued. "Miss Severe was a victim of the most hideous crime that can befall a woman, even if it was her mind that was raped. The men who held her captive at the pleasure dome called Darkness kept her in that despicable dungeon for a week, and

then left her for dead near the docks of the City of New York. She was rescued as Algia told you, but she had been injected with a lethal mixture of heroin and amphetamines. When they found her, she was comatose. She reemerged, but teetered on the brink of coma until her death. In her last moments, she related her story to Algia - her closest friend."

Kivvy looked at Algia, but she was staring at the far wall in silence.

"Algia and I were well-acquainted: she had acted in holos I wrote and produced in Los Angeles. I was her mentor during those years, elevating her status from bit player to featured roles. She was clearly a superior actress, and my interest was purely professional, but that business is one where friendship can be of great value. I succeeded in saving my Miss San Filippo the usual humiliations of women in her craft."

"He means he fixed it so I didn't have to fuck anyone just to get a part that would pay the rent," Algia said. "My white knight in Hollywood." Wickett continued:

"Algia came to me in New Haven, and gave me the strange particulars of her friend's death. My previous investigation of the Japanese expedition's experience with eidolon-N was unknown to her - she was only aware of my professional interest in criminal matters from a police computer report - but my connection to her case was inescapable.

"I had been engaged, by someone of great stature and importance, to locate a man and a woman, both orphaned as children. I had found one: an exobotanist working on the very planet where eidolon-N was discovered."

"You mean me!" Kivvy said in amazement. "Who was it? Who hired you to find me?"

"Later, dear boy. Rest assured, it is not some lost relation and they wish you no ill. They will communicate with you soon enough, but this matter at hand is most urgent, and Time is fighting my humble efforts. Pray, allow me to continue.

"When Algia arrived on my doorstep in New Haven, she brought with her a holo of Miss Severe. I was struck at once by the physical similarities between the two, and later, as I perceived the need, we devised her impersonation. We hope that you, Kivvy, will not betray our secret. There may be need to maintain the fiction that Miss Severe is alive and well. It could bring the Enemy further out into the light, where we can inspect him more closely." Saying this last with the melodramatic flair that was his trademark, the detective fell silent.

"Just who is the 'Enemy', Reinhold?" Kivvy asked. "All I get is a vague impression that some drug cartel is trying to kill Digna Severe. Not to mention the big somebody that you can't name who wants to find me for a reason you can't tell me.."

"Kivvy," Algia said softly, touching his shoulder. He realized he was leaning toward Wickett with his fists raised.

Wickett stood and began to pace again. He ignored Kivvy's emotion. "There is time enough for that. I am concentrating on those who pursue eidolon-N because I believe they wish to harness the power it holds. Enough was stolen from the Japanese lab to supply researchers for a decade, but that supply is probably depleted. We know from the attempt on your lives that they too have agents in the Neptune system. We also know that they have not yet returned to your planet of Noh."

"My source in Central's command says no human has landed on Noh in the last five years - except you, Kivvy." Algia looked into his eyes. "So you can see why we had to check you out?"

"Yeah. Who is this source?"

"Central's commandant. Major Cheney. A friend of Algia's parents, as I said last night. Do you know her?"

"Her? Oh. No, I.. well, how can she be so sure no one has landed? Central is on the other side of Neptune half the time."

"She explained it all to me," Algia said. "Ever heard of the WATECH Project?"

"Those exogalactic research guys? The Watch for Alien Technology. Sure, who hasn't?"

"Years ago, WATECH scattered some very small satellites at various points along the heliopause - the edge of interstellar space. They had designed these primitive satellites to detect any unexpected visitors, but then the Andies built permanent heliopause stations to study deep space. With their usual efficiency, the Andies informed WATECH that the original satellites only reported on thirty percent of the heliopause.

"The Andies volunteered to help the WATECH project by building more satellites, linked to their own stations. WATECH now monitors not only the heliopause, but also all of the planetary systems around our sun. Central receives regular relays from WATECH, so Major Cheney had her people check the monitored history of all the recent traffic in the Neptune system. Aside from your little scout, there has only been one other ship to land on Noh in the last five years."

"And that one," Wickett interrupted, "was an all-Andie vessel, conducting a standard cartographic survey." He had stopped pacing and was now standing in front of them, his left eye on Kivvy and his right on Algia. "I'm sure this review of history is very interesting, but let's get on with it, shall we?"

"Algia and I arranged for Digna Severe's return to the Neptune system for three reasons. I wished to flush out the real Algia's assassins - and from your wild ride to the edge of the atmosphere bubble I would say that goal has been accomplished. I also needed to meet you in the interest of both Algia's intriguing mystery and my own missing persons case.."

"Why can't you.." Kivvy began, but Wickett cut him short, returning to his chair.

"And I needed to study eidolon-N. I believe we should now attempt that part of the investigation. You have ample room aboard your GS9400 for additional human crew?"

"You want to go to Noh? Both of you?" Kivvy glanced at Algia, who smiled and raised one eyebrow.

"Certainly, dear boy," Wickett said. "I would have sent Algia along at this point for her own protection in any case. You are both obviously in danger here on Central, and I want you to leave at once. I will join you in several days. I have arranged for my own ship, but I need to have Watson installed aboard."

"I didn't know you could pilot a ship, Reinhold," Algia said. She moved closer to Kivvy on the settee, and they joined hands.

"A skill I acquired a decade ago. Watson does most of the honors these days." He swung one long leg over the other. "Tell me, Kivvy: is there any part of this small planet Noh which you have never surveyed in your time there?"

"The southern hemisphere. All of the plant life is north of the equator."

"And Noh is very small. Smaller than Luna, I believe?"

"It's a third the size. Why? Are you on to something?"

Wickett shook his head. "No. I am collecting data. I do think you should exercise caution when you return to Noh. INTELX is sufficient protection inside your ship, but I suggest that you postpone any outside excursions until my arrival." He rose and indicated abruptly that they should leave.

"You think we'll have visiting gangsters?" Kivvy asked as Wickett ushered them to the door.

"Perhaps," the detective replied. He had nothing further to add, and shut the door abruptly.

"Is Wickett always like that?"

Kivvy pressed one hand against the keyplate on the hull. He attempted to balance several brightly colored boxes in the other hand while the heavy hatch slid open. Advised by Reinhold Wickett not to return to her apartment, they had taken a quick tour of the mall to buy what Algia needed for Noh.

"Like what?" Algia followed him through the hatch, deposited the rest of her purchases where he indicated, and joined Kivvy on the lift platform. She put her arms around his shoulders, and they rode up face to face.

"I mean, he's always dead silent. Or jumping up and pacing, running off in that British accent." He smiled as she deliberately squirmed in his arms. "Don't do that," he chided. They reached the command deck.

"It's an Australian accent," she giggled, refusing to untwine. "And I will do that. Often as I please, thank you." She rubbed closer and giggled again as he gently pried himself loose. "The key to Reinhold is Conan Doyle. We both should really read Doyle. Together, you know," she said as they sat in the command chairs. "And maybe Henry Miller."

"Who?"

"A wonderful pornographer from the last century. Nothing to do with Reinhold. For other inspirations: you could have had me on that elevator, lover."

"The new fuel pods are in place," INTELX interrupted in a flat voice. "The engineering revisions from Central are completed." Kivvy activated a wide command screen that dominated the forward hull. "Prepare for liftoff?"

"Not quite yet, INTELX" Kivvy replied. "Any big problems?"

"No, Kivvy. I repaired the usual pits in the outer skin from spacedust collisions. Minor updates to my system were needed, and I had them installed. Good day, Miss Severe."

"Rename Miss Severe as 'Algia San Filippo', INTELX. And drop the formal address, will you? We're all going to be good friends here." Kivvy looked at Algia. "I'm surprised it didn't know you were using a pseudonym."

She hung her head in mock shame. "You may punish me later for my deceptions, Master."

"I was hoping you'd say that. INTELX, Central Food is sending over some extra processing materials. We can go after you get them squared away."

"Yes, Kivvy. The second officer's cabin for Algia?" Algia began to object, but Kivvy interrupted. "Yes. She will need some space eventually. We do have double webbing stored somewhere?"

"Yes, Kivvy."

"Then hang that in both cabins."

"Yes, Kivvy." A droid pulled itself out of a pocket in the far wall and left the deck.

"This computer of yours is even more impressive in person," Algia said. The wide forward screen was displaying INTELX's last minute systems check and simultaneously plotting their course to Noh. Dozens of windows popped on and off. Squadrons of numbers marched by. "I thought all command decks were full of little flashing green and red lights."

"Everything's on one screen. No clicking microswitches or rows of pressure pads." Kivvy's voice got thin and reedy, in an attempt to imitate his computer: "The GS9400 is the latest in Andie-engineered technology, from its Wisconsin Plasma Drive, to the comfort of its living quarters. Expressly designed for intersystem traveling and long exploration encampment.."

"That's enough talk, Commander Data," Algia said. "How long before liftoff? I'd like to work out some of my punishment time." She stood next to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'm still feeling some guilt about my masquerade."

"Wickett was right. It looks like a potentially dangerous situation. You guys had to be sure about me. I understand."

"Maybe, but I'll go to great lengths to apologize." She had crouched down to work one hand up his leg. A soft beeping sounded from the command screen. "Central Food assures me the additional supplies

will be loaded in ten minutes thirty seven seconds, Kivvy. The adjustments to your cabins are completed."

"Thanks for the encouragement, INTELX," Kivvy said. He glanced at the screen and stood, pulling Algia up beside him. "That gives us about a half an hour until liftoff. Let me show you to your quarters, my dear?"

"A quickie! How romantic," she sighed. "But let's make it your place, ok?" They left the cabin, arm in arm.

The scout ship hung in orbit while the tiny planet of Noh danced in the winds of Neptune. They watched in his cabin, entwined closely, with Algia's head nestled in the crook of Kivvy's arm. The enormous spiraling eye of the Great Dark Spot, accompanied by an aged methane cloud called the White Companion, filled the cabin viewport.

"It's one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. The winds glow like the inner rings."

Kivvy said nothing. He'd seen it from the surface of Noh every 18.3 hours for months. He had something else on his mind, but the timing wasn't right: the woman in his arms was ready to indulge in anything but serious interrogation. The real Algia San Filippo was far different from the aggressive, egocentric girl who had been only a part well played. She was not Digna. Where her portrayal had been hard, Algia was soft. She was more feminine - and far more dependent than he had supposed. She had needed a good director to bring out the self-assured Digna Severe, and her loyalties remained with her old mentor. She had gone silent earlier, when Kivvy asked, but he could contain himself no longer.

"What do you know about Wickett's other case?" He almost shouted it. After the placid minutes watching the star-planet sweep its tiny spawn, the whole cabin reverberated with the sound of his voice. Algia was startled, but she frowned and smiled at the same time.

"He'll tell you, Kivvy. He said he would."

"But you already know."

"Only a little. He hasn't talked about it much. Honestly! I do know he wants to tell you himself. He'd be angry."

"Oh, come on.."

"Make me!"

"What? Hey, I'm serious."

"So am I." She moved under him deliciously. "Make me tell you everything I know!"

An hour later she confessed, with much apology, that she knew nothing more than what Wickett had already said. She could only add that someone on Io, at Outpost I, had hired Wickett but she didn't know who. Kivvy wanted to call the detective, but Neptune blocked communication with Central, and INTELX was announcing imminent planetfall.

Kivvy abandoned Algia in his cabin shower, with a promise to return, and pulled his way onto the command deck. He didn't have to be there - INTELX did all of the piloting anyway - but he needed to be alone for a while.

He had always been alone. An orphaned child in the same seat each week at the Orson Welles. The thin detective could change all that: whoever hired Wickett knew that orphan existed. Whatever Wickett's reason for holding back, resentment was gnawing at Kivvy. He'd been willing enough, after all, to put himself at risk for the sake of this eccentric investigator and his vague adventure! He thought it reasonable that he should expect at least as much in return.

INTELX windowed the control screen and a view of the approach to Noh joined the flow of data. Kivvy felt his fingers dig into the fabric of his command chair. The little planet leapt into focus. INTELX

guided the ship down through a window of least resistance, and into the thin atmosphere. They flew over the southern pole and deserts of ice. As they passed the equator, Kivvy took manual control and skimmed ridges of vines and banyans.

"Approaching last camp, Kivvy," INTELX said. Its voice was as cold and sharp as the emptiness Kivvy felt.

When he returned to Algia in her cabin, she was holding an 8X10X2 holo of a raven-haired girl. She was staring into it and, from the sound Kivvy heard in the hatchway, having a quiet conversation. He knew at once that the holo was of the real Digna Severe. Algia did not look up.

"I was telling her that we'd find the bastards who hurt her. I told her the same thing on her deathbed." Kivvy moved beside her and looked into the sparkling eyes frozen in the hologram. She looked familiar.

"She was beautiful," he said.

"Not really," Algia retorted. "She was sexy and coy, but not really beautiful." She put the holo down carefully on a clothing storage unit. "Yeah, I knew her. She had plenty of money and lots of men, but she was a dumb bitch sometimes." She looked at Kivvy's surprised expression. Her eyes filled with tears. "The poor kid," she cried. "The poor, dumb kid!"

"Hey, now! Take it easy."

"I'm all right, Kiv. Sorry. Honest. I just look at that face and I remember what she told me before she died. In my arms. God! She died in my fucking arms!" The tears were over.

"Let's go," he said, attempting to jar her loose.

"Ok, I'm sorry."

"Forget it. Come on! I haven't shown you my other toys yet." He swept her off her feet quite easily in Noh's light gravity, and deposited her in his makeshift rec room off the ship's galley. After a short review of the titles he had collected, Algia sat down at the console.

"What kind of software do you have? INTELX must be able to do just about anything."

"Leave out the 'just about'. I didn't know you were into computer games."

"I got a bunch at home. I only have an old ABM preparticle 512-gig unit to play them on, of course. Wickett made me leave all those cubes on Earth. Didn't fit Digna's profile."

"I'm not that much of a gamer myself, so I only have a few new ones that didn't come already packed into INTELX: Mordred's Children, Dalek Wars, Steeplechasers, Save The Andie. I do have some old classics like Monkey Island 2000 and Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy."

"I like Dalek Wars," she said. "I wouldn't mind trying it on this setup, but it takes hours. What's Steeplechasers?"

"Horse racing. I like horses, remember?"

"I know! Oh, Kivvy! Let's see your TIF program!" Kivvy made a face.

"It's not really.."

"Please! That's an extra headset over there, isn't it? Take me into your game!" She grabbed the headgear and he gave in, helping her adjust the band.

"Ok, but I have to warn you: it's not finished at all." He pulled on the finger controllers, put on his own headset, and pressed his work cube into the drop on the console. "INTELX?"

"Ready, Kivvy."

They were standing on a grassy hillside, the wind blowing around them. At the foot of the hill, a wide river cascaded into a jagged black crater, sending a cool blue spray high enough into the air to feel on their faces. The roar of the falls was deafening.

Kivvy turned to his left and saw Algia standing near him, dressed only in the thin black robe she had last worn at breakfast. She laughed and threw the robe open to the wind. Looking down at himself, he saw a black leather loincloth, belted at the waist. The belt sheathed a long, golden dagger.

"I don't know what's happening!" He shouted over the noise. "This isn't my program!"

"Yes, yes!" Algia shouted back, closing her robe around her. "It's wonderful! A little chilly, but sexy!"

"Here! Let's get on the other side of this hill," he yelled, pulling her along behind him. The way down was steep, and they let go of each other to run. Kivvy noted that gravity was normal for Noh. He stopped himself at the bottom and waited. When she caught up, Algia was dressed in a single-piece, blue leather jumpsuit. It was molded to the curves of her body, and she was obviously pleased.

"God! It felt so strange when you changed my costume. You have great taste in clothes! This looks just like something I wore in a holo once. I can't remember which one.."

"I didn't," Kivvy began. He was staring at the horizon. His purple ridge of mountains was there, but he realized that he and Algia were at least seventy-five miles on the other side of them.

"What do you mean? Oh, Kivvy!" She stepped up to him with one hand extended. "You seemed to fade out for a second, and now you're.."

Kivvy was now dressed in a green outfit that they both recognized: "The Adventures of Robin Hood!" They both said it at the same time.

"Errol Flynn! But I'm afraid you don't look a thing like him."

"Thanks a lot!" Kivvy said. She studied the bow slung across his chest and the dozen or so arrows in the quiver on his back.

"We're not where we're supposed to be, are we?"

"INTELX!" Kivvy shouted, and they waited. The hill ended at the edge of a dense forest, with vegetation mostly like that of Earth. There were small ferns and mosses, and distant trees which Kivvy identified as Douglas fir and redwood. The distinctive "banyans" of Noh were scattered among the latter, with other obscure plantlife that only Kivvy would recognize. The forest was a botanist's dream.

"No INTELX," Kivvy said sheepishly.

Algia was bent over, digging into the soil. "Well, this ain't no set, pal. Even holo sets don't have real worms. And look at this!" She held up her right hand to display something bright orange. It jumped, but she caught it with her left.

"What is that?" Kivvy asked.

"A newt. A little orange newt. Just like you might find in the backwoods where I was raised." She looked at Kivvy thoughtfully. "You've never seen one before?"

"No. I was raised in the city. Remember? There are no reptiles in Boswash."

"Then how did it get here? If this is your program design, I mean."

"I suspect that it started as mine, yes. See that mountain ridge? That was mine. But that river, the falls, and this forest: not mine! I'm afraid your little friend there is a total stranger."

"I want to go back to the ship," Algia whispered. She was staring at the newt, which she held at eye level. It returned the stare calmly. While they watched, it lifted a front paw and gave her a very un-newt-like wave. "God!" she said, and dropped it in front of her. The newt scurried a few feet, stopped, turned

itself around, and did its best to look up at them. Algia bent down and extended her hand. The newt climbed aboard.

"I'll be damned," Kivvy said. "You don't have to be a newt lover to guess they aren't usually that tame."

"Kivvy," Algia said, again in a whisper. The newt had repeated its gesture. It was looking at her intently.

"Let's please get out of here."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not sure we can. There's no interface. It's like the time I passed out on the surface. We shouldn't be able to interact with the program enough to pick up solid objects - or animals. It's like I've become unplugged. I can't feel the finger controllers.."

"Ok, ok! You're scaring me! Maybe the program got bugged. Where's your short-legged horse when we need one? And if you're not doing it, then who designed this hot costume I'm wearing?"

"There might be a bug, but it's like a continuation of the program I was working on."

"Could INTELX have finished it for you? Maybe it got bored hanging around the docking bay?"

"No. TIF is not this deep. You'd need hundreds of supercomputers like INTELX to maintain an environment so complex." He looked at the forest in front of them. "It's too hard to believe, but... Those plants over there - you see them, the wildflowers? I didn't program those, but I know them all. I did program in this tall strain of grass. And the oaks, but not those coniferous trees. I've never been to see the redwoods. I know all about their molecular and biological structures, but I've never seen them.."

"Neither have I," Algia said.

"But you've seen newts. You've got memories of picking them up and interacting with them."

"Sure. But they don't act like this one. It wouldn't give you a friendly wave or appreciate an offer to ride in your hand. It would try to get away. This guy looks like he's listening to every word we say."

"Somehow," Kivvy said. "Somehow this has to do with eidolon-N."

"But I've never been exposed to eidolon-N, Kivvy! That was the real Digna, remember?"

"And I've never seen a newt." Kivvy looked down at the little orange creature in her hand. "Or a redwood." The newt cocked its head to return his gaze, lifted his paw, and repeated its earlier gesture.

"Why don't you tell us what's happening here, friend?" Kivvy asked it.

The newt opened its mouth, squeaked twice, and moved its head to look at each of them. Kivvy laughed.

"I'm afraid neither of us speaks newt, pal, but thanks for trying. Ok?"

The newt writhed, as if to shrug absent shoulders, hopped from Algia's hand, and vanished into the grass.

They walked for a while along the edge of the forest until they came again to the winding riverbank. The river was shallower, and not as wide. Massive blocks of black rock were strewn in its path. On the opposite bank there was a crumbling structure of the same black rock.

"The favorite old bridge or aqueduct," Algia said hopefully. Kivvy shook his head.

"Sorry. Never seen it before." He looked concerned, and she took his hand. "There's no road on either side. No reason for a bridge."

They crossed by hopping from rock to rock. The light gravity made it more precarious than it looked, and Algia rescued him once from an unplanned swim. They were laughing by the time they reached the ruin, which proved to have a shallow foundation and extended into the forest as a low wall. All of the pieces were cut and joined together perfectly, and Algia pointed out that no mortar had been used.

They rested at the ruin, and Kivvy studied the sky while she went to piss behind a nearby bush. There were wisps of cloud near his distant mountains, but the rest was like the cobalt depths of Neptune.

Kivvy thought of the leathery winged things he'd never finished. He wondered if they were still searching

the distant peaks for uncreated prey. He stared at the ridge, but if they were there he could not see them.

Algia returned and sat on the rock across from him. She had taken the knife from his belt before she left, and now she studied the handle thoughtfully. "This is interesting," she said after a while. "Remember the recording INTELX made of your accident in the banyan grove? How the little swarm of eidolon-N crystals sort of popped out of some vines that you broke? Look at this." She handed him the long dagger, handle first.

Etched into the unfamiliar golden metal - they had already decided it was not gold - was an impression of a long, sinewy vine. It twisted along the length of the handle. At the butt, the vine seemed to be splitting open, expelling a swarm of tiny dots. The dots filled out the rest of the handle to create a grip. The overall effect resembled a crest or emblem, worked into the surface with the detail of a master craftsman.

"I wonder what this means," Kivvy said. "It looks almost heraldic."

"Wasn't heraldry something else from Robin Hood? Like your outfit, I mean? I was in a bad holo of Ivanhoe once."

"I've been thinking," Kivvy mused. "What if eidolon-N isn't just a spore or a drug of some kind? What if it's somehow.. sentient?"

"You mean intelligent?"

"Well, yes. Intelligent. Enough to be able to perceive and somehow transmit what we are thinking."

"But I wasn't thinking about Ivanhoe!" Kivvy sighed. "Come on, let's go. I think we'd better find some place to sleep before night."

"Aren't you forgetting something, Professor?"

"Don't call me that. What do you mean?"

"No sun. How can there be night, if there's no sun?" She jumped down from the rock on which she had perched and let the light gravity bounce her to another one. "Besides, I don't feel.. sleepy."

"Oh, god. Not here."

"Well, not right here and now." She grabbed him around the waist. "But I know a few interesting ways to make a merry man merrier."

CHAPTER FIVE

It was true that the cobalt sky should have remained so, but it began to dim as they followed the black rock wall into the forest. The trees were indeed redwoods, growing impossibly tall all around them. High above the giant conifers, the sky had become blackened, as though covered with dense storm clouds.

"I think I smell rain," Algia said. She was showing off her agility in light gravity by bouncing along the top of the wall like an acrobat. Kivvy paced himself at her side.

"You're going to wear yourself out doing that," he scolded, but his anger was not with her. "I don't see how, but I think you're right about the rain." A clap of thunder froze them both. Algia teetered for a second and joined him on the ground. Lightning flashed.

"It's close," Algia whispered, clinging to his arm. He looked to comfort her, and she kissed him. "Oh, what will we do, Sir Robin?"

"I think we'd better find shelter," he replied seriously. "The wall must lead somewhere." He pulled her after him. They began to run as the first drops of rain pelted the leaves, but they didn't have far to go.

"My god!" she exclaimed, as they crashed through a last thick patch of brush.

"A house," Kivvy mumbled warily.

The black wall curved to match a short, curved driveway. It began where they had emerged, passed through a huge stone portecochere at the front door, and curved back to the opposite edge of the forest. The house was constructed from the same black rock. It was a Victorian nightmare of mostly shuttered windows, lattices and iron spikes. The nearest side was trellised to support a familiar vine, which ran up all four stories to the turreted roof. Three dark chimneys rose over the roof, and the gray smoke of a wood fire leaked from the one in the center. White light showed through billowing curtains in an open window on the topmost floor.

The furthest chimney was above the window, and Kivvy started as he noticed a black shape on the roof duck behind it. He grabbed Algia by the hand, and they made it to the stone archway just before the rain smashed against the house and drive in hissing, angry sheets. Thunder and lightning played above the trees of the forest. Algia shivered in his arms.

"Hey, hey," Kivvy said gently. She had begun to cry. "We're ok. Don't do that. Nice dress." She was wearing a camel's hair coat over a low-necked, white evening gown slit up one side to partially expose her legs. The brim of an oddly styled, green felt hat was turned down over her forehead. Algia pushed back the coat and lifted her skirt at the slit, and ran her hand down the black stockings.

"Silk!" She forced a grin. "And you don't look half bad yourself, old man."

Kivvy sported a stylish blue suit from the same period, with a wide silk tie. Over this he wore a heavy tan trench coat, and a carefully blocked brown hat. He pulled Algia up against the wall nearest the front door and kissed her. They stayed that way for a long while, and then Kivvy stepped away to the door. It was as massive and hideous as the house, carved from a gray material that only resembled wood. There was a large circular peephole cut around the knocker. Kivvy was about to press the antique bell button when bright light and the rattle of a gasoline engine came from behind them. They whirled to watch an ancient, mud splattered, black convertible coupe enter the portecochere.

"ACME DETECTIVE AGENCY" was painted on its side in gray and white letters, above a logo of an eye peeping through a keyhole. After a prolonged struggle with a broken black umbrella, three men in mangled hats and long overcoats fell from the car. They were engaged in a loud and heated argument.

"Quiet!" yelled the man in the center. He pulled his black hat down over his ears in a frustrated gesture. The other two continued to argue, and the first man bellowed again. Kivvy stepped away from the door, pushing Algia behind him.

"Excuse me," Kivvy said. The man who had yelled reacted at once by jumping back and making a strange noise. The others were silenced. Recovering his composure, the first man strutted up to Kivvy.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"My name is Kivvy," Kivvy answered.

"Make a note of that, Garrity," the man said, backing off enough to run into the second man. "Quiet!" he added. The third man produced a small notebook, a stub of lead pencil, and began to scribble furiously. The first man stepped up to Kivvy again. He stared past him at Algia. "And who's this dame?"

Kivvy moved to the right and Algia came forward into the blaze of the old car's headlights. "I'm Algia San Filippo," she said softly. "And who are you gentlemen?"

The other two made some more strange noises and danced around each other. One of them whistled, and the other said: "Some gams! Boy!"

"Just a minute, just a minute! I'll ask the questions around here, lady. I'm Harrigan."

"I'm Mulligan," said the man who had whistled.

"I'm Garrity," said Garrity.

"Quiet!" Harrigan yelled.

"Right, chief!" said Garrity. He bent over his notebook. "How do you spell 'Flippo', lady?"

"Never mind, never mind," Harrigan said. "Let's get to the bottom of this."

"Yes, chief," said Garrity.

"You're terrific, chief," said Mulligan.

"Quiet!" Harrigan grimaced at the two and they were silent. He turned back to Kivvy and Algia. "I don't suppose either one of you would like to tell me exactly what you're doing here?"

"We were about to knock on this door." Kivvy pointed.

"To ask for help," Algia added.

"Make a note of that, Garrity!"

"Yes, chief. Help from what, lady?"

"I hope it's not The Gorilla," said Mulligan, looking around with his eyes wide.

"The Gorilla!" the other two men shouted in unison.

"Where is it?" Mulligan screamed. "Where is it?"

"Just a minute, just a minute," Harrigan said. He bent close to Algia with an unconvincing snarl. "Just what do you know about this Gorilla guy? And why would you want to ask him for help?"

"The Gorilla lives here?" Algia asked him. Harrigan stood back, perplexed.

"Are you sure? I thought this place belonged to Walter Stevens, the guy who hired us. Hey!" He turned around to face his partners. "Are you two sure we got the right house?"

"You were driving, chief," Garrity pointed out.

"Maybe we'd better ring the bell and ask," Kivvy said. Harrigan dashed in front of him as they all headed for the door.

"Just a minute, just a minute! If anyone does any ringing around here, I'll do it!" Harrigan insisted.

"Listen, chief," said Mulligan. "I think you're making a big mistake."

"Yeah? Well, it won't be the first time!" Harrigan bragged with a swagger. He hesitated over the button and then glared at Kivvy suspiciously. "What are you looking at?"

Kivvy had put both arms around Algia and pulled her back. He was staring at the three men with new interest. "Who did you guys say you were?"

"I'm Mulligan," Mulligan answered helpfully.

"I'm Garrity," said Garrity.

"I am Peters," said a familiar face with a thick accent. The face had appeared as the hinged peephole in the door swung inward. "Who may I say is calling?"

Harrigan let out a shriek, which was echoed by his two cohorts. They hid behind him, staring at the face. The peephole closed and the door opened. Peters was dressed in a formal black suit with white gloves. Algia caught her breath and then let out a little laugh, digging Kivvy in the ribs.

"Hey!" she whispered. "It's Bela Lugosi!"

A roar of thunder followed a series of bright flashes. When the growling faded off, a single scream pierced the rain. The light went out in the window on the top floor. Harrigan, Mulligan, and Garrity ran past Peters through the front door. Kivvy could see that kept on running when they got inside.

"Madam?" Peters queried, peering from under the famous eyebrows. "Sir?"

"Tell me something, Peters," Kivvy said. "Whose house is this?"

"Why, don't you know, sir?" The butler's eyes danced. He smiled, still holding the door. The space behind him was becoming opaque gray.

"Come on!" Kivvy said to Algia, pulling her through the doorway.

Reinhold Wickett stood at the edge of Central's atmosphere bubble. On the other side, in the airless vacuum, a huge reprocessing plant endlessly recycled byproducts of the tiny artificial planet. Wickett could see a number of non-breathing Andies helping their lesser-automated creations transfer solid waste from airtrucks to the conveyors, but the figure that held his interest was hidden in the shadow of

one wall of the factory. It was a human in a helmet and suit. It was bending over a little red aircab. Wickett dictated his observations to Watson through the thin card in his right hand:

"The subject is wearing a black spacesuit, probably to avoid drawing the Andies' attention. I doubt they would care about the car, as it is inanimate, but they might raise alarm at a human. Non-atmosphere areas of Central are off limits to civilians. The suit is an obsolete model, but a superior one of the type manufactured on Luna a decade ago. From the wearer's gait and actions, I make him out to be male, around fifty years old, familiar and at ease in a vacuum.

"These surroundings seem an odd place to do such work, but there are also laws against meddling with public vehicles. Our man is making adjustments to the internal parts of the suspect red aircab, located by Watson through the cab registry." Wickett produced a thin tube from his coat pocket - a digital telescope, which he trained on the scene.

"The subject has removed a section from the cab's computer and is attempting to pull a chip off a small board. As he is wearing gloves, and has no special tools, this is difficult for him. I believe it is, yes, an AI module. The chip is off. From the markings, it is a standard particle chip. The kind that would record the cab's recent fares. If Watson is right, and this is the same red aircab that attempted to deliver my young friends to their death, I should be very interested to examine that chip myself. No matter how cautious they were, it might contain some clue to the identity of the assassins.

"This may be one of the latter, Watson, but it seems unlikely: why would they bother to go to such lengths to recover the cab's black box? They knew which garage housed the cab, and could have just sent the vehicle to its own destruction without risk of exposure. I would put on my own suit and approach the man, but it might not be prudent. Ned Hunter and I shall follow him when he departs."

Wickett put the telescope away and returned to his own cab, which waited behind a road sign announcing the edge of the atmosphere bubble.

"Ready are we, guv?" the cab inquired. It was a leased vehicle, and had been programmed to affect the accent on previous outings with the detective. Wickett, in turn, had christened the AI "Ned Hunter", after a stable boy who figured in a work of his favorite author.

"Not yet, Ned. Please do not start your engine until our quarry has passed."

"'Quarry'. I had to search that one. An interesting word. It's an education working for you, Mr. Wickett. A real education!"

"Watson," Wickett said into the card, ignoring Ned's remarks. "Are we on the same side of Neptune as Noh?" The card blinked green. "Excellent! Call INTELX and connect me with Kivvy. Channel it through Ned's screen."

The small screen on the front panel flashed on, and a printed message appeared: "INTELX - Kivvy and Algia are not available. May I take a message?"

They floated in gray nothingness. Peters was gone. The door and house were gone. There was no sound of the storm, nor sign of Harrigan, Mulligan, and Garrity.

"What happened?" Algia pulled herself closer. Kivvy put his arms around her.

"I never saw the rest of the picture," he said absently. She looked up into his eyes.

The gray blew away with a warm wind. They stood in the same forest, under a clear cobalt sky, surrounded by the same tall northern firs. The black rock wall ran through the nearby brush. Kivvy thought he spied an orange newt flash on the wall, and headed for the spot with Algia trailing behind.

"Where are you going?"

He stopped. The newt - if it had been the newt - was not there. "I thought I saw... never mind." Kivvy started to explain, picking a tassel of pine needles from an overhanging branch. She was still dressed in

the evening gown, and he was getting hot in the trench coat. Algia waited patiently while he took it off, and then grabbed him by the shoulders, forcing him to sit down on the wall.

"Now I've had about enough, lover boy. You figured something out back there, didn't you? That crack about not seeing 'the rest of the picture'. So tell me!" She stood over him, hands on her hips. Kivvy laughed.

"I will, cutie. But let's try something first. If it works, then I'll be right and not just guessing." He took her hand and guided her to sit beside him on the wall. "Close your eyes."

"Why?"

"Just do it. Good. Now think about having your headset on, sitting in the rec room of my ship in front of the TIF console." He did the same, closing his own eyes and tightening his grip on her hand. The warm wind whipped them again. Kivvy felt the headset pressed against his temples, and the finger controllers on his fingertips.

"Kivvy," INTELX said. "There is a message from Central in the buffer."

Kivvy looked over at Algia. He held her left hand in his right. Her other hand was clenched into a fist and her eyes were squeezed shut. "Hey, San Filippo! You with us?"

"Wow!" she said as she opened her eyes. She sat back, still gripping his hand. "That was great! You got us back!" Kivvy pried her hand loose and helped her to her feet. Then he remembered something.

"Where the hell were you, INTELX?"

"I am always here, Kivvy."

"I mean, where were you when we were using the console?"

"I was interfaced."

"You didn't respond. There were no controls."

"I was interfaced," INTELX repeated. "There is a message from Central.."

"I heard you. How long was our session, INTELX?"

"Two minutes and seven seconds."

"That's impossible!" Algia said without conviction. "Too bad we didn't get to keep the neat costumes," she added, looking sadly at the plain polyfiber jumpsuit she was wearing.

"Can you give me a playback of our session on the monitor, INTELX?"

"Certainly, Kivvy. Accessing." There was a soft tone, and the monitor lit up with a scene of a lame horse grazing in tall grass. The leathery things flew at the peaks of purple mountains. There was no sign of Kivvy or Algia.

"Forget it!" Kivvy ordered. "Give me the Central message." The scene disappeared and was replaced by a printed message: "WATSON CONNECT... SUBTRANS FROM WICKETT, REINHOLD AS FOLLOWS: I have some interesting news. Call me."

Henry Segal roared, but the sound came out weaker than he had intended. Nurse Harris was several feet away, monitoring his blood pressure and heart rate. She was posed, at her employer's request, in a red and white g-string, sparkling blue pasties with hanging gold chains, and her regulation white heels and stockings. She had recently removed her white nurse's cap and placed it upon Henry Segal's head at a jaunty angle.

"Mr. Segal, please!" Nurse Harris reminded him. "You must try to remain calm."

"Calm! Calm?" Henry Segal projected dramatically from behind his desk, gesturing to his otherwise empty Gower Street office. "How can I remain calm when these thieves, these pirates, are attacking my very kingdom? The Huns are at the door, Nurse Harris!" He shook a printout in her direction. She noted that his blood pressure continued to rise.

"Sir, please!" she whimpered appealingly. She tried to distract him by twirling the gold chains in opposite directions, but Henry Segal ignored her. He slumped his bulk down into his chair as his anxiety increased. A special subroutine, programmed by Henry Segal's psychiatrist, instructed the Andie to step forward, kneel, and massage the mogul's feet.

"Umm. Yes. That's very nice, Nurse Harris. No, don't let up!"

"What was it that upset you, Mr. Segal?" Nurse Harris asked as the subroutine continued.

Henry Segal straightened a bit and leaned back in his favorite chair. His nurse matched his movements and continued the massage. The investment data hardcopy fell to the floor. Henry Segal was as close to ecstasy as his medical profile allowed.

"I have a thorn in my side, Harris," Henry Segal explained, shutting his eyes. It never occurred to him that a conversation with his Andie was part of a recommended stress therapy. He rarely acknowledged her as an Andie in any case. He preferred her in the role of confidant and occasional partner in sin.

"There is a combine of distributors and producers called HoloPix. I believe I have mentioned them to you?"

"Yes, Mr. Segal. 'Former loop makers and chiseling drek'."

"The very same. A little lower on the right foot. Thank you, Precious." He sighed. "HoloPix has tried, many times in years past, to gain control over Holo International by buying up stock options and staging proxy fights. It's never worked because I own a majority of the stock under various names... ooh! That's it! Yes. Mmm! Now the other foot. Good!"

"Well, it seems that HoloPix pulled the same stunt on our friends at Pillsbury Pictures - only this time they won."

"Pillsbury is the largest producer of B-holos. They've stayed away from A-holos because of a special arrangement with HI," Nurse Harris recited after a millisecond of access time.

"Correct, Nurse Harris. Pillsbury is - or was - controlled by my former employee and friend, Reinhold Wickett. It has been a most secret conspiracy between us: HI handles the major productions, and Pillsbury handles the B-holos, with cooperative block booking in all of our theaters, cube distribution, and major talent loans from our stable. It's been an excellent arrangement for both companies, and it was the only way to keep Wickett out of the majors. Had he ever used Pillsbury to compete directly, he might have become a dangerous threat to my hold on the market. He's a talented guy, Reinhold is." Henry Segal pulled his feet away from her ministrations and shoved them back into his ancient Donald Duck slippersocks.

"But Wickett is foolishly obsessed with this criminology hobby of his. It was his undoing as a producer, you know, and now it's cost him Pillsbury. From what I can find out, he's off in the Neptune system, chasing his Professor Moriarty... No! Stay in that position for a minute more! I especially like your new outfit in that position, Nurse Harris."

"Who is Professor Moriarty?" Nurse Harris asked, adjusting her pose to give Henry Segal a better view of what he liked about her outfit.

"Only a figure of speech, nurse. Wickett has been drawing extensively upon his assets for several years to support his misadventures. He is very out of touch with his money. His broker in Boswash made the decision to sell off Pillsbury. I believe the reason may also involve some pilfering by the broker, but it is too late to do anything now. The damage is done, and it leaves me in a very precarious position."

Henry Segal stood, for the first time since his arrival that morning, and manipulated his bulk to retrieve the crumpled printout. The nurse helped him amble about his regal office in a parody of a worried pace.

"How can it harm you, Mr. Segal? Holo International is the leading producer and manufacturer of entertainment in the solar system."

"When HoloPix merges its assets with Pillsbury, they'll become a true major studio. They'll have Pillsbury's entire catalog and a considerable hold on Pillsbury cubes that we now distribute. That's a big chunk of the home market, nurse. What's worse is we've dumped our stars into countless Pillsbury Bs because it was a great promotional gimmick. It kept the stars in front of the public without costing me a cent, and the more the public sees a star, the better the box office. It's a classic equation, dating back to Chaplin.

"Now that they own the entire Pillsbury catalog, HoloPix can repackaging any piece of crap they choose and remarket it to promote their own big budget holos. Our stars will flock to them like little children to their mother's tit. This may well be the end, Nurse Harris! The final flash of the laser for Holo International!"

"Now, Guv?" Ned inquired. The red aircab had reentered the atmosphere shell and zipped past their hiding place.

"A moment or two, there's a good fellow. Start your engine. I shall reconnoiter." Wickett opened the passenger door. "We mustn't allow him to notice us or the game will be off." He walked across the black plastic surface, and peeked around the billboard. The other vehicle was a red dot on the horizon.

"Fast little bugger." A voice came from behind him. Wickett's shoulders slumped and he turned around.

"Sloppy of me," Wickett confessed to the stranger in the black spacesuit. His helmet was at his feet, revealing a weathered, good-natured face of Cornish descent. "Ah," said Wickett, with some self-satisfaction restored. "Mr. Owen Tregennis, I believe?"

"You have me at one advantage, sir, but I have you at a greater one." The man spoke with a curt nod. A small hand weapon was leveled at Wickett's chest. "It is, however, Colonel Tregennis. And would you be so good as to identify yourself?"

"Watson," said Wickett without a pause. "John Watson."

"And your purpose at loitering in this desolate place, Mr. Watson?"

Wickett shrugged, eyeing the gun. "Watching you remove a particle chip from a red aircab. It would be pointless to lie. You constructed a hurried dummy to ride off in your place, I take it? I was fooled."

"Rather a dangerous position, Mr. Watson, playing the fool. Your name is familiar to me. The aircab company computer had a record of your inquiry." He motioned with his gun. "Be so good as to step over to your cab, sir. We can share the return fare." Wickett complied, stopping at the open passenger door.

"I don't suppose you would also like to share your find with me?" he asked, sitting in the cab. "I am most interested in criminal data."

"Nonsense, Mr. Watson," the Colonel replied without a smile. "You'll find plenty of that where you are going." He bent down to place his helmet on the seat next to Wickett, and stood again to remove an exterior air tank that blocked his entering the cab.

"Now, Ned!" Wickett shouted. As the aircab jumped from the spot at full speed, Wickett turned and watched Tregennis spin to the ground in a roll. A thin orange laser beam hummed a few feet to the right of the cab.

"The getaway!" Ned pronounced with a fair simulation of excitement in its digitized voice.

"He's in superb condition for a man of his age," Wickett said. "I could never have fired off a round so quickly from a prone position. An excellent marksman as well! He very nearly hit us."

"You have a call coming in, Mr. Wickett," Ned told him. "From Noh."

"Very well, Ned. If there's picture, put it up please. And you may slow down now. Colonel Tregennis will be a long time pursuing us to the city, and he will be looking for a John Watson when he finally gets there."

"Wickett! Something amazing has happened!" Kivvy said when the detective's face materialized. Algia stood beside Kivvy on the command deck.

"You really should have been there, Reinhold," she added. "Are you in a cab or what?" They could see the Central landscape flowing behind him.

"Yes, I am en route with Ned. We have been hard at work, I assure you. This channel is shielded. Speak freely."

They recounted the day's adventure, interrupting each other frequently. Wickett said nothing until they had finished.

"I had considered such an experiment, but under more controlled conditions, of course. Excellent! You are a daring pair!" He pulled the ever-present card from his jacket and spoke briefly to Watson in a tone too low for them to hear.

"That's the undeveloped sector of Central you're in, isn't it?" Algia asked him.

"Yes. Watson had located the aircab company where your red aircab was garaged. I set forth to investigate the place. Ned and I arrived just as the very cab you described was leaving. We followed as it took its passenger to the edge of atmosphere and beyond. Later, we had a very interesting encounter with Colonel Owen Tregennis."

"Who?" Kivvy and Algia asked in unison.

"The British gentleman who, over a decade ago, guided the Japanese expedition to Noh."

"But I thought you said he returned to the Jupiter system and died there," Algia said.

"Not 'died'," Wickett corrected. "I said his whereabouts were obscure. I have no data as to where he has been all these years, but he is now most certainly on Central." The detective reported the details of his meeting with Tregennis."

"Do you think Colonel Tregennis is the one who tried to snuff us?" Algia asked.

"Circumstantial evidence does support that premise," Wickett answered. "I would hesitate to consider Colonel Tregennis as a definite suspect, however. He has no clear motive for any such action."

"He didn't mind taking a shot at you," Kivvy reminded him.

"When will you be here, Reinhold?" Algia worried.

"I will be slightly delayed, my dear. The ship is ready, but the Colonel's presence on Central demands my attention. I must communicate with my contact in the Jupiter system to see if I can trace his movements. It may prove important to learn where he has been and when he arrived here."

"Do you think he's working for the same people who killed Digna Severe?" Kivvy asked.

"Theorizing requires data, old boy. It is to that end I must remain here. Watson and I shall arrive as soon as possible with as many answers as we can gather. I must go now, but first I must ask you, Kivvy: did you recognize the characters you met in your own adventure?"

"Not right away. They were actors from a film made in the 20th century. I never saw the entire film. The Orson Welles - that is, the theater I saw it in - went dark that night in a local power failure. It was a Ritz Brothers comedy."

"Aside from reacting to you and Algia, did any of the characters vary from their roles in the movie? Did they try to communicate anything else to you?"

"I see what you mean," Algia said. "Like the newt?"

"I'm not sure, but I would say no," Kivvy answered. "Except as it - or we - faded out. Lugosi asked me if I didn't know where I was?"

"Excellent!" Wickett shouted. "Then there is very likely nothing to fear. If you like, perhaps you and Algia could repeat the experiment tomorrow? After a good night's rest."

"Are you serious? We could get lost in there! The rain felt wet. What if it's raining boulders next time? We could get hurt or killed."

"I don't think so, old boy. If I'm not mistaken, eidolon-N is feeling you out."

"Then you think the stuff is sentient?" Kivvy asked. Wickett's image nodded. "And you assume it's benign?"

"Why assume it isn't? You sound Hollywood, Kivvy. Scurvy vampires from outer space. All that is unknown is not dangerous, old son!" Wickett looked away and said something to Watson again. "Oh, well. I can only suggest. I'm not trying to coax you into it. But you will have to kill some time in your ship for a few more days..." The green light on the little card in his hand was flashing. "Yes, well, I must go. Watson has some news."

"Oh, let's do it again, Kivvy!" Algia cheered.

"We'll talk it over, Wickett. You be careful around your friend the Colonel, ok?" They signed off after Wickett agreed to call the next night at the same time. The picture faded, and Algia lowered herself into Kivvy's lap, toying with a bit of hair on his chest.

"Now, about that 'good night's rest', Sir Robin..."

Henry Segal was not pleased at being interrupted. He loved a parade, and Nurse Harris was dressed in the uniform of a drum majorette. "Yes, Miss Stultz!" he shouted, keeping one eye on the marching nurse when his secretary's face appeared. "What is it now?"

"I am sorry to disturb you, Mr. Segal. A Mr. Martek is on the screen. He said you would remember him?"

"Who?" Henry Segal yelled. Nurse Harris was executing a delicious routine with her red, white, and blue baton.

"A Mr. Victor Martek." Miss Stultz was a plain, prim woman of about thirty. She very was efficient. Henry Segal disliked her intensely. "He said..."

"I heard you, damnit! I don't know any... Wait a moment!" With a wave of his hand, John Phillip Souza's music was silenced and Nurse Harris froze her position. "Ok, all right. I remember. Put him through."

"It's been a long time, Henry," the image of Victor Martek remarked. A subtitle noted he was calling from a public screen in San Francisco.

"You owe me money, Martek." Henry Segal squinted at the face. It was only the money he remembered. "I paid you an advance. You walked off my holo."

"That was twenty-two years ago, Henry."

"So? You owe me money for twenty-two years!"

"It was a dead project. Your stars skipped. One of them even went into politics."

"I know, I know. HI did her biography. Or don't you go to the holos, Martek? I'm told even Andies lined up to see it. Fictionalized, of course, but Suzi didn't mind. Shame I couldn't get her to be in it.

What do you want, Martek?" He looked wistfully at Nurse Harris, and then snapped: "I'm a busy man!"

Victor Martek cleared his throat noisily. "Not for long, or so I hear."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"HoloPix. The word is out, Henry. They've already signed three of your hottest stars to seven-holo deals."

"Actors! What do I care for actors! Cattle! Lowlife scum! The only things lower are goddamned musicians! Half a million to hum a few bars they stole from Mozart or Gershwin into a synthesizer. But you know all about that, don't you, Mr. Composer?"

"HoloPix bought Cubeworld this morning," Victor persisted. "Biggest retailer in existence. Your distribution revolves around Cubeworld, doesn't it Henry?"

"Wasting my time, Martek. You're wasting my time! We own the Teamsters. We control the rack jobbers for those pansies at Cubeworld. They won't cut us out. They can't."

"Don't be so sure, Henry. HoloPix is dickering with freighters and offworlders..."

"Enough!" Henry Segal squeaked. "What are you supposed to be, Martek? The fucking Oracle of Philadelphia? Tell me what you want or get off my line!"

Martek paused. He ran one hand over his bald head. He was obviously frightened. He cleared his throat again. "I am calling for Rudolph Habelitz. You've heard of him?" Henry Segal sat rigid in his chair. He thumbed a touchpad under his desktop. A cube recorder was activated.

"Rudy Habelitz? That 'humans first' rights guy? The one with all the money who tried to push back the Andies? He's organized crime now, isn't he?"

"I'm calling for Mr. Habelitz."

"You work for this slime, Victor? They do bootlegs of my cubes!"

"They've got something that should interest you, Henry. An entirely new medium. Something that could make the holos as obsolete as silent movies. And they want to make a deal."

"I'm listening," said Henry Segal without losing a beat.

They showered together, and then Algia insisted on cooking. With the help of the food synthesizers, she made a three-course meal.

"I can't eat all of that," Kivvy complained. Her steaming grits, eggs, hotcakes, sausage, biscuits with gravy, baked apples, and hot coffee eagerly awaited him. He poured himself some of the coffee.

"I seem to remember getting hungry during our last outing." She shrugged. "What if it's more than just a two hour visit to Disneyworld this time?"

"Disneywhat? Walt Disney?"

"It was a franchised amusement park. There was a big one in Texas, I think. I saw some old TV about it. People stood in lines for hours to see non-thinking androids and holograms the size of your fist. Now eat! Mama says." She tousled his hair. "After last night and this morning, you should have quite an appetite."

"For that," Kivvy grinned, "I always have an appetite."

When they arrived in the rec room, there was a small service droid waiting for them.

"What's that doing in here?" Algia asked, taking her seat and reaching for a headset. "I don't have anything against real Andies, but these short, dumb ones give me the creeps!" Kivvy laughed.

"Aw, come on, Algia. You'll hurt the little guy's feelings. He might turn out to be helpful. I programmed him with a special task, just in case we're inside for too long." Kivvy sat beside her and put on the finger controllers. "He can operate independently of INTELX."

"What good will that do?"

"If one of us starts to hyperventilate, or our vital signs drop too low, the droid will inform INTELX that we're in potential danger."

"Won't INTELX already know that?"

"Not if INTELX is hanging around in my original scene with that damned gimpy horse. It lost track of us last time - or was diverted."

"By eidolon-N?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"So what can this shrimp do?"

"He'll try to wake us in exactly two hours. I also decided to have an audio signal piped into the headsets. It's an old wake up call routine that programmers use to remind themselves to eat lunch or take a... Hey! I just thought of something!" Kivvy stopped talking and gaped at her. "You took a piss last time! In the woods! How could that be?"

Algia laughed. "I'd forgotten that, but it's no mystery. Sometimes I can't go, even when I have to. When I'm nervous or scared. Or excited, you know. It was a false alarm back there in Sherwood Forest." She nudged him. "Maybe we'll have time to experiment with other bodily functions today."

"You never quit, do you?"

"You better hope not! The girl with the seven-year itch, baby. Like Marilyn Monroe."

"Mmmm. I hope she turns up for the experiment." He ducked when she slapped at him. "Anyway, I set the drone for two and a half hours. It may not work, but if you hear a ringing in your ears, prepare to fade."

"I'll probably turn over and go back to sleep," she growled. Kivvy popped the TIF cube into place.
"Ok, INTELX."

"Ready, Kivvy," the computer responded.

The city was almost cartoon, a towering ideal of alabaster skyscrapers, sparkling glass, and clean crowded streets below. They stood in front of the Hotel Universe. While they watched, a Checker Cab pulled up and a man and two women emerged. The man wore a top hat, and the women were in matching ermine stoles. A uniformed doorman saluted with a white-gloved hand, and held the door for the ladies.

"It can't be! But it must be!" Algia exclaimed. "City of New York. That's the Empire State Building down the street. I've seen pictures of it."

Kivvy nodded. He was dressed in a gray-brown leather jacket, brown hat, and pants of a heavy weave in the same neutral color. Algia was in off-white, a dress with a long skirt below the knees, a light overcoat, and another silly green hat. The matching green high heels were giving her a little trouble.

"How the hell did they ever walk around in these?" she asked after stumbling twice. "And why? Oh, Kivvy! Isn't this wonderful? They were so lucky to live here when it was clean and new!"

"Remember," he warned, "that this is a fantasy version. A solid movie set. Manhattan was never like this, even a hundred years ago."

"Is this another Ritz Brothers' movie?"

"No, I don't think so. But that certainly is familiar!" He pointed straight up. Twenty-five stories above, interrupting the facade of the Hotel Universe, was an incredible mechanical sign for "Paradise Coffee". A giant, transparent cup was being continuously refilled from a silver urn and a matching silver creamer. A silver spoon, about thirty feet in length, added sugar and stirred. Steam rose from the cup, and a neon

slogan flashed: "It's Heavenly." The cup then drained from the bottom, and the entire process began again.

"What a waste of coffee," Algia commented innocently. Kivvy was about to explain, when they were engulfed by a rush of pedestrians that sucked them through the open doors of the hotel.

The lobby was overflowing with dapper men in tuxedos, perfect women in evening gowns and jewels, and uniformed attendants. Near an endless bank of shining brass elevator doors, an elderly matron in sparkling black sequins argued loudly and angrily with a harried but distinguished-looking man. The exclusive roof elevator, marked as such by an appropriate sign, was not in order.

"I assure you it will be repaired shortly, Lady Stover," the hotel manager apologized. He waved a plainly dressed man out of the crowd. "Mr. Sloan!" he barked. Mr. Sloan's thin face twitched in nervous fear.

"What's going on here?" Kivvy asked a man to his right. It seemed as if everyone in the lobby had joined to watch the manager and Mr. Sloan.

"The roof elevator is missing, I hear," the man replied. "Stolen, I'd suppose. What is New York coming to?"

"Kivvy." Algia was tugging at his sleeve and pointing. "We're underdressed for this place. And isn't that Franklin Pangborn?"

"That's Mr. Sloan," sniffed the man Kivvy had addressed. "He's the house detective." From his disdainful glance at Algia, he obviously agreed that they were underdressed. He turned abruptly and vanished into the crowd. The manager finished with Mr. Sloan, exiting with Lady Stover after giving the house detective a sharp command to find the missing elevator at once. Sloan stood by himself, twitching his features in frustration.

"I think you're right," Kivvy said to Algia. "It's Pangborn. Playing Mr. Sloan. He must have made a million movies." Sloan was returning his stare with obvious annoyance. "Here he comes!"

"And what can we do for you two?" Pangborn/Sloan inquired in a voice laced with trademark cynicism. "This is a hotel lobby, not a subway station!" His mustache jumped ominously.

"We're looking for..." Kivvy began in desperation.

"Work!" Algia finished firmly. "We're undercover detectives. And from what we've seen of this joint, you could use some help, Sloan."

"Help! Help? Why I need no help of any kind! I am perfectly able to handle this situation, young lady! Why, I, hmmm. Detectives, you say?" Sloan stopped his chin with one hand, turning Algia for inspection with the other. "Perhaps. Mmmm."

"Oh, we're ever so clever. And very inconspicuous, too. Aren't we, Kivvy?"

"I.. sure. Well, I mean.."

"Inconspic.. ah, of course, my dear," said Sloan. Algia batted her eyes and ran her fingers under his lapels.

"We do so want to work at the Hotel Universe!" She pulled him closer, speaking softly. "And for the famous Mr. Sloan!" Sloan turned red. "And Kivvy is a forensics expert, aren't you Kivvy?" she added as an afterthought.

"Yeah, sure," Kivvy answered unconvincingly.

"Mmmm. Famous? Well, I certainly... Forensics, you say? Yes, very essential! Well, I'm sure I could use some qualified assistants. Where did you say you'd worked before?"

"Oh, good!" Algia said, throwing her arms around the house detective's neck. Sloan repelled her hurriedly.

"Now, now! See here!"

"And you won't regret it, Mr. Sloan," she purred. "We will need to dress differently, of course. To remain inconspicuous."

"Incon.. of course, of course! Well, I'm sure I can arrange that." He looked at Kivvy as he might a cockroach on a steak. "Perhaps your friend could pose as a waiter. In the dining room? Or a bellboy?"

"Hey!" Kivvy objected.

Mr. Sloan appraised them both again. "As a matter of fact, we need another cigarette girl." He dropped his voice. "The girl we have now - Fran Blackstone - hasn't been at all reliable since she took up with that Archie Dexter." He pointed to a slick looking man who had just entered the lobby from the street.

"Really?" Algia whispered back. "Who is he?" There was a sudden burst of noise from the lobby.

"Who is who?" Sloan asked, bending near to hear her better. Kivvy found himself jostled out of earshot by another wave of hotel patrons exiting the elevators.

"Archie Dexter, I mean," Algia shouted.

"Oh," said Sloan. "Mr. Dexter is no one to fool around with. A gangster, you know? Poor little Fran is just another country mouse in the big city, if you know what I mean? You'll like her. Oh, my!"

The crowd had filled the entire lobby, their attention drawn to a spinning dial above the doors to the missing roof elevator. The long arrow was whirling around madly. Shouts of indignation filled the air. Algia backed off to join Kivvy, who was leaning against one of two neo-Roman marble columns marking the entrance to the hotel ballroom.

"Hey, what was all that about back there?" he asked, ignoring the growing clamor over the roof elevator.

"All what? I'm an actress, remember? If this is really a Hollywood movie from the 1940s, I'd like to get at least a bit part in it. Come on, Kiv! Loosen up, my love. Reinhold told us to experiment, and think how I'll look in a cigarette girl outfit!"

"Yeah. I'll look even better as a bellboy. Real Jerry Lewis. Don't kid me, kid!"

The dial stopped spinning and the doors to the roof express finally opened. A man in a gray suit stepped out with a trumpet case under one arm. He looked around with a calm expression. The crowd parted for him, and Mr. Sloan rushed forward, demanding an explanation of the theft of the elevator. Kivvy and Algia paid little attention. They had moved to a comfortable black and white striped satin covered couch behind the marble column to continue their argument. Kivvy pointed at an elegant grandfather's clock that faced them.

"We aren't going to be here that long. Look at that clock. It's ten o'clock at night here. When were you expecting to start work as a cigarette girl?"

"She can start right now." A tall, sexy blonde with a tray of cigarettes was standing in front of them. She wore a black sequined halter with high shoulder pads. It had a plunging neckline and was cut to push her breasts up. Her skirt was short enough to reveal the garter straps of her black net stockings. "I'm Fran." She winked at Kivvy's appreciative stare. "Sloan said to get you two some uniforms. Come on with me, both of you."

Fran led them through a door marked "Service", and down a series of long corridors to a large modern dressing room. Various costumes of different eras hung on racks or were draped over the chairs of dressing tables. Algia reacted to the place with a sharp intake of breath. She looked a little pale.

"What's wrong?" Kivvy wanted to know, but Algia hushed him with a squeeze of her hand.

"A costume room. Of course," she murmured. When Fran was out of earshot, rummaging through a large closet for appropriate outfits, Algia added: "I've worked out of this place. This is one of the wardrobe rooms at Holo International Studios in Los Angeles."

"Are you sure?"

"Definitely! They didn't have computers in 1940, did they?" She pointed at an access console on the other side of the room. Kivvy looked thoughtful.

"An improvisation," he stated without surprise. "They didn't have any dressing rooms in this picture."

"You mean, you know what movie we're in?"

"Yup." He said nothing else. Fran Blackstone was approaching with a bellboy suit and an empty cigarette tray.

"Here," she said, handing the tray to Algia. "You'll have to pick out the rest yourself. I'm not sure what you'll need underneath." She grinned at Kivvy, holding up the bellboy uniform. "The jacket will fit, but we may have to take in the pants. I'm real good at fitting men's pants." Kivvy grinned back, but he couldn't help but notice how different Fran looked in the modern lighting of the wardrobe room. The Forties makeup was gone, and her face seemed older and plainer. The exaggerated sexuality of her Hollywood starlet's body was somehow shorter, fatter, and far less interesting. Algia let out a little shriek.

"Fran!" she exclaimed, pointing to the cigarette girl's legs. They weren't there. Fran's entire torso was being erased as they watched. When only her face remained, floating five feet in the air in front of them, the blonde pursed her lips and winked again at Kivvy.

"I'll have to take a rain check on that fitting, sweetie," Fran said, and shimmered into nothing.

They were standing together in gray mist, hot wind blowing at their backs, and then they were in the rec room, seated in front of the console. The drone Andie waited exactly in the same position. A glance at the console clock showed forty-one minutes had elapsed. "Damn!" Algia said. She ripped off her headset and stood up too fast. She glared at Kivvy as she tried to steady herself in the light gravity.

"What?" he asked her defensively. "I didn't do anything." She looked around, less disoriented, and then smiled in apology. "Sorry. I always get grouchy when somebody wakes me from a dream. I guess we both wanted to finish that one." She did a fair imitation of Fran's voice. "Sweetie!"

"Give me a break. I didn't even touch her."

"And I suppose you were going to refuse her offer? Give me that break, bellboy!"

"There wouldn't have been much time to develop anything in any case. There was a very flat end to that film."

"Oh, yeah? So you say," she kissed his cheek to show she wasn't seriously angry. "What movie was it, sweetie?"

"'The Horn Blows At Midnight', an old Jack Benny film. It had a Wizard of Oz ending. All a dream. You know."

"Jack who?"

"Benny. He was a great comedian from vaudeville and radio who made it into movies and then TV."

"Oh. What was the movie about? Why do you suppose we came back so fast?"

Kivvy shrugged, pulling off his finger controllers. "Maybe because you tried to change the plot. There was no dressing room scene or anything about the house detective hiring undercover assistants. The movie had Jack as a big band musician who dreams he is a junior-grade angel, sent down to blow the final horn and end the world. He goes to the roof of the Hotel Universe to carry out his orders, but the unhappy cigarette girl who tries to kill herself by jumping off the roof distracts him. He saves her, but gets stranded on Earth when he fails to blow the final note in time. There's more, but you get the idea."

"You've got a good memory."

"The giant mechanical coffee sign was a giveaway: Jack falls into it at the end of the picture."

"But Mr. Sloan was willing to hire us. Why didn't the bubble pop then?"

"Don't know that either. It was like eidolon-N started to improvise along with you, and then just quit."
He typed on the keyboard for a moment. The service droid left the room.

"You mean, it's over for today?" Algia sounded disappointed. "We just got started."

"I'd like to consult with Reinhold Wickett before we go in again. INTELX?"

"Yes, Kivvy?" INTELX asked.

"Play back the session." The screen lit up with the same unfinished scene. The lame horse was grazing in the foreground. "Ok, never mind. Put a call through to Wickett on Central." There was a pause.

"His computer, Watson, reports. Mr. Wickett is not on-line," INTELX said. "Kivvy? There is some interesting activity in the southern hemisphere of Noh."

"What kind?"

"A ship has arrived in matched orbit. Unidentified class. It has ejected a lander."

"Is it Wickett?"

"No, it is not."

"Humans or Andies?"

"Frequency scan suggests only humans."

"How many?"

"Insufficient data." INTELX paused again. "Signals to the ship from the lander indicate some human crew remaining on the ship."

"Can you tap in and let me hear what they're saying?"

"Signals are secured. Not a stored code. I can run through the ciphers if you wish?"

"No. That could take all day." Kivvy thought for a moment. "Where are our three surface drones?"

"Standard research program is underway. They are all within a two mile radius."

"How long to get them back inside and lift off?"

"Thirteen minutes sixteen seconds five..."

"Do it! We're heading up to the command deck." He grabbed Algia and they bounced out of the rec room in that direction.

"It's the syndicate that Reinhold was worried about, isn't it?" Algia asked him.

"Probably. A ship full of honest tourists wouldn't use coded transmissions." They pulled up through the hatch onto the command deck. "Strap in."

"What are you going to do?"

"We're leaving. At least temporarily. They won't notice us in space. INTELX, program destination."

"Aye, sir."

"Aye? Cute, INTELX. I want a stable position over the northern pole, ok?" He checked Algia and pulled on his own lift harness.

"Aye, Captain," INTELX said.

"You can be undetectable out there, right?"

"Relatively, Kivvy."

"Anything that might pass for armaments on this tub?"

"Short range laser and three dozen STREAKs. Exploration craft are only fitted with defensive systems."

"STREAKs can be fired inside or outside of an atmosphere?"

"Either, Captain. Effective range is one mile. A STREAK is an implosive concussion missile, however, which increases effectiveness in a vacuum."

Algia reached over and gripped Kivvy's arm. "Hey! I hope you aren't planning to fight with these clowns, John Wayne."

Kivvy didn't smile.

CHAPTER SIX

Reinhold Wickett was in his element: the great consulting detective challenged by an obscure criminal conspiracy. First there is a malignant cabal, and now a clever colonel of dubious intent. It was the perfect diversion and, as he had already mentioned to his ever-faithful Watson, perhaps the greatest case of his career!

Wickett reflected on this to stay his elation, and not to avoid solving his most immediate problem: Colonel Owen Tregennis, late of the Japanese Noh expedition, was once again holding him in the sights of a lethal, late-model blaster.

Following his return to his chaotic rooms in Central, Wickett had used several hours attempting to trace the recent life of Owen Tregennis: from the colonel's arrival at Io a decade earlier, to his recent appearance in the Neptune system. The call was made, and Wickett obtained the data he needed with no great difficulty. His cooperative contact in the Jupiter system was, after all, at the very highest level.

In strictly technical terms, Susan was obsolete for an Andie. There had been many design changes since her generation, and human law had decided that the pleasure models of the earliest Andie era were, by their very existence, a violation of the basic right of any sentient being to control its own destiny. Drones, intelligent supercomputers, and the lesser droids were exempted from this consideration, but modern Andies were recognized as full citizens of the solar system.

To the Andies, Susan was their elected leader, Messiah, Abe Lincoln, and Martin Luther King. Her creators, the mad Andie CensusTakers, made her unique and her leadership was wise and equally respected by most of humankind. Few connected this revered elder with Suzi, an early Holo star of HI sex and gore spectaculars, although her past had been recalled in vivid detail in the studio's holo version of her life story. It was at a lavish pre-production party for that bio, thrown in Hollywood by producer

Henry Segal, that Reinhold Wickett had met and been befriended by the Andie leader. Wickett had been impressed by Susan's keen intellect and philosophical bias toward justice.

Susan had enjoyed the company of the one man she had met in Hollywood who chose to ignore the legendary ballyhoo. At her suggestion, Wickett had scripted the holo bio. It was one of his final projects as a screenwriter, before his interest in criminology took over his life.

Susan had received his call where she lived, on the planet- moon of Jupiter called Europa.

"Hello, Suzi."

"Hello, Reinhold. You are well?" Wickett nodded and waited for the transmission delay to deliver his gesture. "It is good to know that. I received your report on the human called Kivvy. Have you completed my request?"

"Not exactly, Susan. He's on Noh right now. I have a good agent assigned to him, but he is rather entangled in another case I am working on and I need his help. I will brief him when the time is right."

"I will leave that decision to you, Reinhold. What is this other case?"

"Access the Noh file, if you would."

"A moment. Yes."

"Colonel Owen Tregennis."

"Interesting. I wasn't aware that Owen was on that expedition."

"You know him?"

"We have met several times, yes."

"Then he is based in the Jupiter system?"

"No. He has been here, of course. He led the exploration of Europa's surface for us eight years ago."

"I thought that was an all-Andie mission?"

"It was, officially, Reinhold. Owen had been there before us, as it turned out. When we requested his data, he volunteered to go along, but the vessel was not equipped for biologicals. We didn't have the budget to include him, so he met our team there. He has his own transsystem ship. The White Whale - after Herman Melville's ocean mammal."

"You said he 'led' the team?"

"He was very helpful. He stayed with them until the mapping was completed. It took six hundred and ten Earth days."

"What happened to him after that?"

"He was on the Black Ring mission. It lasted considerably longer. Four Earth years."

"Uranus?"

"Yes. He was the first human to land on Ariel, Titania, and the others. When we set up a base on Miranda, he chose to remain there."

"By himself?"

"No. He was the only human, if that was your meaning. I visited the base on my tour of the outer star-planets. He seemed quite content there."

"The Black Rings mission had some restricted files, as I remember?"

"Restricted for scientific reasons, but not to you, Reinhold. With the data you already have on the Japanese Noh expedition, there would be no logic in denying you access. I will stream the files to Watson, if you like."

"Yes. Thank you. But what connection could there possibly be to Noh?"

"The cause of the expedition team's eventual demise on Earth. The Black Rings of Uranus are composed of chunks of methane ice, but the delta and epsilon rings are coated with the substance you know as eidolon-N. It is referred to as eidolon-U in the Black Rings mission files, of course."

"Colonel Tregennis made that discovery?"

"Yes. He said at the time that he been looking for it."

"Did he? Did he indeed?"

"An interesting expectation, I know. He surprised me. Eidolon-N was only thought to exist on Noh. He did not explain how he reached his conclusion. Perhaps it was human intuition - what you call speculation. Andies have no such subroutine, as you know."

"You have better processors, my dear. I have little faith in speculation. My occupation is based on deduction, which can only be a precise science. I have one last question. It is an old Hollywood habit of mine to simplify such things, but you have proven a good judge of human character in the past. Would you say Colonel Owen Tregennis is a hero, or a villain?"

Susan laughed her pretty, song-like laugh. Few of the Andies ever laughed, Wickett noted. It was one of the pleasant bugs in Susan's outdated systems.

"A 'hero' is a relative assignation," she answered. "Will Stark is my only hero. But Owen is not a villain. No more than you, Reinhold. That is not a character assessment either. To me, most of us - humans and Andies - are only suspended particles in the plasma of the great design."

"Shakespeare said it better, Susan," Wickett concluded.

"To be sure, Reinhold." Susan laughed again. "I was only updating."

"You didn't answer my question, Mr. Wickett." The colonel's blaster hung between them. There was a quiet moment, and Wickett could hear the tiny hum which was the weapon's crystal vibrating. In the next room, Watson burred an occasional tinny parakeet tone as it analyzed the data Susan had streamed from Europa.

"I can't answer that, Colonel Tregennis," Wickett apologized. "Client confidentiality lies at the heart of my profession."

"A man of character!" Tregennis said. "I am aiming at your heart, Mr. Wickett, and you discuss professional ethics!"

"You mock me, sir?" Wickett feigned disappointment. He straightened from the half-crouch he had automatically assumed when the other man first appeared. His voice and manner became icy and calm. "You yourself are working alone, are you not?"

Colonel Tregennis bowed his head politely. "If I agree to respect your ethics, detective, I'm sure you will respect mine."

"I have, of course, done some research on you." Wickett turned his back on Tregennis, and bent to retrieve a tobacco cigarette from a humidor on the small table that was next to his favorite chair. "We have at least one mutual friend, don't you know?" The hum of the crystal grew louder as the colonel released the safety on his weapon. "No need for alarm, Colonel Tregennis. Would you care for one? Hydroponic stuff. Of the best Virginia seed."

"I'm a cigar man myself, Wickett." The hum died and Tregennis lowered his laser. "Who is this 'mutual friend'?"

"Susan. She says you are trustworthy. That is enough recommendation to allow the assumption that we are on the same side in this matter."

"Perhaps," the colonel replied. He moved around to the couch. "If what you are telling me is true. I'm not sure I have a 'side'. Perhaps you had better define that 'matter' of which you speak?" He rested the gun on one long leg, its muzzle aimed in Wickett's direction.

"Eidolon-N, Colonel Tregennis. Excuse me. Hold all calls, Watson." There was a warbled response to his command. "You've spent a good amount of the last ten years chasing the stuff. Let's start at the beginning: I am aware of the lab accident in Japan, but I have no details."

"Not much to tell." Tregennis shrugged. "It wasn't an accident. I was outside the containment area when it happened. Half the crew was in there with a couple of technicians and a canister of eidolon-N. They popped it and went comatose instantly. A few hours later, they were all dead." His grip on the weapon tightened. "If it wasn't an accident, then what? You are saying it was done deliberately?"

"That's right. They were supposed to be wearing their breathers. One of the techs opened a canister before they put their masks on."

"Didn't the tech die too?"

"Yeah, she died. I don't think she knew she would die, but she died. She was one of a group trying to steal the canisters."

"Canisters? There was more than one canister?"

"Yes. The expedition brought back two. Each one had about a half ounce of the stuff."

"And both canisters were successfully stolen after the accident?"

"They were lifted, yeah. Along with the vines."

"Vines?"

"Eidolon-N has symbiotic relationships with several of Noh's plant forms. It inhabits a thick vine that grows in the northern hemisphere. We brought back a half a dozen vine specimens, packed in liquid nitrogen."

"A rather dangerous shipment. Why?"

"Damned if I know. But it was a scientific expedition. None of them knew what they had, I'm certain of that." Wickett paused to think. He liked Owen Tregennis. The man was a maverick.

"What's your interest in all this?" Wickett asked without suspicion. "You survived. What motivates you to stay involved?"

"Guilt, at first. One of the lab techs made rather romantic advances toward me the night before the incident. I slept with her, and she asked a lot of questions. After what happened, I knew why. She was in with them. They were spies for NRM, the Neo-China Restoration Movement."

"Interesting! What would a right-wing Chinese political movement want with extraterrestrial organisms?"

"They wanted cash. They thought they'd be able to sell the stuff back to the Japanese. The Japanese government spent a fortune on that expedition."

"But the Japanese failed to recover the eidolon-N canisters - or the vines - from the Chinese? Why?"

"Because the stuff changed hands again," Tregennis said. "It was stolen from the Chinese before they ever got out of Japan."

Wickett's eyebrows shot up. "By whom?"

"By the most powerful European crime family on Earth. They owned the choppers the Chinese agents were using. They packed the stuff on board nice and polite, and then left the NRM jerks on the landing platform. Police showed up one minute later to bust them - by arrangement, probably."

"Was your consort one of the technicians that died?"

"Nope. They caught her on the platform. She was tortured to death later in a Japanese prison."

"Then why did you feel guilty?"

Tregennis looked away. "I don't any more. It's something else now..."

"You can't go back to Earth." Wickett said. The colonel gave him a hard look.

"How did you know that?"

"I have some knowledge of European crime families. You were the only survivor of the expedition. They didn't want anyone to know where eidolon-N came from. They killed off the rest of the crew, one by one, and put a hit out on you. Correct?"

"Essentially correct."

"But how did they know eidolon-N was hallucinogenic?"

"The Japanese knew. Their security was lousy. The first technician who examined eidolon-N also went into a coma. He came out of it long enough to describe a vivid psychogenic experience. The Japanese thought it was an effect from the experimental computer he was using, a prototype of neural link systems. When they tested the computers, they realized the mental state had to have been induced by eidolon-N in conjunction with their proton-driven chips.

"Then some lab assistant tagged eidolon-N the 'LSD of the 21st Century' in a report. The Japanese government kept all of that from the general public, of course. The Europeans found out about the NRM plan to hijack the stuff from the lab and hold it for ransom. They decided they'd rather have all of the available supply for themselves. They didn't know what to do with it, but they took it anyway. They turned it over to their own chemists to see if it could be synthesized."

"Could it?"

"Of course not!" Tregennis snapped. "It's a life form, not a chemical!"

"That should keep us pretty well hidden," Kivvy told her as the screen displayed their position. "Expand that view, INTELX. Let's see the other ship."

"Accessing, Captain." The image of Noh shrank, and an icon appeared for a second ship in orbit around the southern hemisphere. A pulsing point of orange indicated the approximate location of the landing party. "On forward view, Captain."

"Stop calling me that!" Kivvy rolled his eyes at Algia. "Where does it get this stuff?"

"I don't know. It's your computer. Don't you think we should tell Reinhold what's happening?"

"This wouldn't be a very good time to transmit. I don't think they've noticed us - yet."

"Wouldn't they know about you anyway? Your grant is listed. It's public access." Kivvy shook his head.

"If these guys are the same ones Wickett says killed Digna Severe, they probably wouldn't want to attract attention by requesting data from Central."

"Second ship entering matched orbit with the first," INTELX announced. There was a trace of apprehension in the digitized voice.

"Jesus! Look at that!" Algia exclaimed. The icon for the new ship put its mass at four times the first.

"What kind of ship is that?"

"INTELX!" Kivvy barked.

"The simulation is accurate to a margin of nine tenths of one percent, Kivvy."

"But there are no ships that big! Can you monitor?"

"Language is of unknown origin, Captain. Their transmission frequency is ultra-low. Not used in existing communication systems."

"Kivvy! Look!" Algia broke in. Small flashes surrounded the two ships.

"Particle weapons fired by the first ship," INTELX commented, "but the second ship has superior armaments." They watched as the first ship broke up and vanished from the screen.

"Wait a minute," Kivvy said quietly. He smiled, and then stood. He addressed the computer, still smiling. "Prepare for full attack, INTELX. Photon torpedoes ready."

"Aye, Captain," INTELX responded.

"What?" Algia shouted, grabbing Kivvy's arm. "What 'torpedoes'? What are you doing?"

Kivvy pointed to the time display on the screen, but said nothing. The remaining, massive ship was changing position. It looped around tiny Noh, matching their own orbit.

"My god!" Algia cried out. "They're heading right for us!" She shook Kivvy's arm. He leaned into her soft hair and spoke in her ear.

"It's ok, Algia. It isn't real. Look at the time."

"What?" she whispered back. "What do you mean?"

"Listen!" he commanded gently. A soft ringing came from somewhere. It grew in volume. "Close your eyes, Algia. Blank your mind!"

She obeyed. A moment later, they were standing knee deep in a gray mist. She tried to talk, but there was no sound except for the far ringing of the alarm. The warm wind came again. It washed them, and she felt sleep overpowering her. She looked for her friend. Kivvy's eyes were also closed.

...in her bed, at home. A familiar voice was calling her from downstairs. She heard the other kids at the eating table, fighting over something. She peeked out from under the old electric blanket at the Peter

Max clock she had once found in the rubble. Six-twenty. She twisted in the electric heat, remembering what she had done the night before. Another new boy. Mmmm. She peeked at the hands of the clock. Twenty-two. She had ten minutes before Sister Rita would stomp upstairs to turn her out for school. She wondered if the new one would tell his friends. More new boys. Mmmm.

Algia reached out for the blanket control and punched it higher. She was naked and sixteen under the warmth. She turned to one side, running a hand down her hip before she dosed off...

...his eyes hurt at the probe of the flashlight. He was cold, curled into a fetal position. The old boots didn't help. He had been frostbitten as a child.

"Hey! You there! I said get up, lad!" The cop tapped his cold feet again with a heavy riot control rod. It made his feet tingle warmer.

"I... I'm sorry," Kivvy said in the tenor voice of a boy of thirteen. He sat upright on the stone bench, waving the cop's light from his eyes.

"Oh, it's you, Kivvy," the cop said. It was his friend, Officer John Lewis. "Locked out again?"

"Yeah. Hi, John." Kivvy smiled a weak grin and shivered. "I fell asleep at the Orson Welles. They threw me out after the last show, and it's past curfew."

"No kidding, short stuff. It's four a.m., is all!" The cop, who was only a half dozen years older than Kivvy, helped him to his feet. "This is getting to be a habit with you." Officer Lewis pulled the peaked antique Red Sox cap down over Kivvy's face. "Lucky some muto or girl rape gang didn't get you. Come on. I'll take you into the station."

"Sure it's ok?" Kivvy asked.

"Of course it is. You need a place to sleep, and the General don't mind. He's got a kid of his own. Come on. Free ride in the patroller an' everything."

"Oh," Kivvy brightened with enthusiasm. "That's ok!" He liked sailing over the blackened buildings of Old Boston in the police patroller. It was his only experience in the air - except for the holos, of course. The officer pulled open the patroller's butterfly doors, and they were off.

"You'd better find a secret way into Boysville if you're goin' to keep doin' this, kid. Bribe the janitor or something. Watch this!" Officer Lewis pushed the patroller high above the shattered skyscrapers of the previous century, then tipped the small craft into a long, dizzy dive, careened around a cathedral spire, and looped back up again. He grinned at Kivvy's gasp.

"Wow!" Kivvy said in gratitude.

"Getting good, ain't I? A month ago I would have killed us both with a stunt like that. Your turn." He thrust the joystick into Kivvy's hands. "Do what I did. Go on!"

"Wow!" Kivvy repeated. The patroller shimmied and then stabilized. Kivvy headed the nose up, leveled at just the right moment, and duplicated the maneuver exactly. John Lewis laughed.

"A friggin' natural, that's what you are!" he shouted, taking back the stick. Kivvy beamed.

"It was pretty good." He looked up at his friend. "I practiced on an arcade simulator near the theater."

"Well, keep it up. They say the Andies will be exploring the outer worlds soon, now that the Jupiter base is finished. There's a future for somebody with your reflexes." He moved the patroller into an approach pattern. "So what were the old gems at the Welles tonight? Pre-holo show, I'll bet."

"Yeah. Dick Tracy. The color one. And a Bob Hope: 'Caught In The Draft'. That was the one I slept through. And 'Dawn Patrol'."

"Errol Flynn. Maybe that's where you pick up your flying skills," Officer Lewis remarked as they landed in the parking bay of the Revere Street Police Station. "Well, you get in there and tell the General that you're my overnight guest again, ok?" The doors to the patroller swung up with a hiss.

"Ok, John. Thanks!"

"My pleasure, my lad!" Officer Lewis shouted, flicking his helmet visor with his index finger.

Inside the sleek, early 21st century building, Kivvy waited while some petty thieves were booked. Then he put up with the General's usual ribbing. "Back from the holos already, Kivvy?"

"Yes, sir." Kivvy didn't talk to the General about old movies. The General didn't like mass entertainment.

"Didjuh have a date tonight, son?"

"No, sir." The General always encouraged Kivvy to find a girl friend. He said it beat the holos one hundred percent.

"Want to bunk in with the hookers then?"

"No, sir." The General was kidding him, but Kivvy wondered what would happen if he said yes. He knew it would spoil the General's favorite punch line. "Are you sure? Ah, well. I'll leave your sex life in your own hands then. Har, har!"

"Yes, sir."

"Get your butt into Courtroom B. You can sleep in there tonight. Remember, Justice Spinosa is in at ten."

"Thanks, General."

"And don't you be callin' me that! It's 'sir' to the likes of you, lad!"

"Yes, sir." Kivvy backed off and walked down a dim hallway to the darkened hearing room. He curled himself up on one of the long, wooden pews and shut his eyes...

...the guy pulled his arm back from where it had rested across her shoulders. He rubbed the part where the fiberglass back of the seat had pressed into it, trying to stop the numb pain. The final credits of the holo danced across her eyelids. "Wake up, San Filippo," he said gruffly. He jostled her with his elbow. "It's over."

Algia's lids fluttered. She glanced down to her open blouse and sealed it. His hand was extended in front of her, waiting for her to rise and take it. She focused on the dirt beneath his fingernails, wondering how she could have let him touch her. She couldn't even remember his name.

She ignored the hand, got up quickly, and brushed by him and into the aisle. The end credits were all around her. She remembered the scene that had made her close her eyes. Blood spurted from severed limbs. Maniacal laughter from everywhere. His sweaty jock fingers, groping her. She shuddered.

"Hey, San Filippo!" He chased after her up the aisle. She swerved behind the other patrons, trying to lose him in the credits' twilight. She didn't want to give him anything else. Not after that lousy holo and those ugly hands.

It was hot and dark in the lobby. The air conditioning was reserved for the building's two adjoining theaters. He was still inside, bellowing her last name, fighting his way to the exit she'd passed through. She turned and tripped the jam, and the door closed behind her with a pneumatic hiss. "Damn!" There was a line of ten women and several children in front of the door marked "Ladies". Algia eyed the rest of the lobby for another refuge.

"Ok, baby. Ok!" said a tall, black man who was standing near her. He began to speak rapidly, misinterpreting her desperation. "Got some for my little white beauty, yes I do. Jus' follow brother into the alleyway outside. You give it up, an' I give it up. You dig? How old dis nice pink baby? Sixteen?

Fifteen? Mmmm. You nice, white beauty. I got cold white snow for white beauty. You give it up, an' I give it up. What you say, baby?"

Algia pushed him off and made for the entrance to the building's second holothheater. The doors were just closing. She brushed by a distracted young usherette who neglected to ask for a ticket. Glancing over her shoulder, she could see her beefy ex-date marching toward the street door.

"Sit down!" someone insisted from behind. Algia looked up at the flat screen that was hung in the middle of the holo stage. A monochrome lion roared from an ancient logo, and she found a seat. After ten minutes, the thirty-foot screen and its occupants hypnotized her: she had met Nick and Nora, and their dog Asta. She turned and whispered to a boy sitting next to her. He was wearing a red baseball cap.

"What is this?"

"It's called 'cinema'. The Movies. You know."

"Heard of that. God, it's so different!"

"Yeah, I know what you mean. So let's watch it, ok?"

"Sure," she said. "Sorry." She looked at him. "Kivvy!"

He whirled to face her. The fog in the film was everywhere, billowing off the screen. It was a warm, dry fog.

"Oh, Nicky," Myrna Loy said, narrowing her beautiful eyes and admonishing her detective husband in a most agreeable manner.

Despite his fascination with his fictional predecessor, Reinhold Wickett knew only the rudiments of boxing, fencing, and jujitsu. As he later noted to Watson, it was only his estimate of the fatigue of his friendly adversary, which allowed him to disarm, and then calm Tregennis that afternoon on Central. In

the wake of Wickett's sudden blow to the colonel's wrist, the two relaxed in the relative discomfort of Wickett's cramped quarters. Wickett then presented a careful summary of the facts he had assembled while investigating the matter of eidolon-N. The colonel became increasingly amicable, in turn recounting the details of his years in exile, yet Tregennis had only minimal advice when it came to Earth's organized crime syndicate.

"They are very powerful. They survived the Last War and prospered in its aftermath."

"How? People could hardly afford vices after the war."

"Vices? Nonsense, Wickett! You are melodramatic!" Tregennis exclaimed. "As always, the world needed food, clothing, and cheap technology. The crime lords bartered and traded like legitimate businessmen. They stole everything they could, and cornered every market. They kept prices down until recovery was more or less underway, and then they juggled them up and down at will."

"And that's why Earth is still such a mess?"

"Certainly, old man. They own the planet, or what's left of it. And it's not growing with recovery. It's stagnating like a flooded cesspool. Out here in space construction and such is easy and cheap: the Andie technologies rule. But you just to try to build on Earth! Why, you have to deal with criminals who control all the raw materials, the manpower, and probably the land you're building on. They are like the capitalist barons of the nineteenth century, with all the advantages of the 21st!"

"What brings you here? Now?" the detective asked.

"I came for the same reason you did, from your account: to find out what your friend Kivvy was doing on Noh. My computer keeps me up on research grants, and his was the first every filed for Noh. When I got here, I found that his INTELX computer had a snitch installed. Your tap, I suppose?"

"Yes. We arranged it with the help of a friend here on Central."

"Perhaps an unfortunate choice, as your own was not secure. The syndicate has a snitch buried in Central's computers. That's how they set up that red aircab to kill your Kivvy and the actress you had posing as Digna Severe."

"Algia." Wickett thought for a moment. "If this syndicate controls the economy of Earth, with all of its attendant problems, why would they want to introduce eidolon-N into the chaos?"

"Don't know, old son. They control the drug trade, of course, and prostitution. Maybe they see a future in total mind control. They certainly wouldn't be the first to gamble on that theory, and the population of Earth is very small. They do have minor competitors. Perhaps they are worried someone smaller will supply the stuff and corner the market. I don't know their plan."

"Mind disruption," Wickett stated. "Not a stable vice. Not logical." There was another silence between the two men. Colonel Tregennis frowned and slammed a fist on the table beside him, overturning a dusty cup of evaporated coffee.

"It's the principle of the damned thing, Wickett! Until now, the bastards have kept their slimy games on Earth. Now they're expanding out!" The colonel stood and began to pace the room. "Not satisfied with the ruins of the past. Now they're out here! In my systems! In our future, don't you see?"

"Evil follows wherever we go, Tregennis. Our cursed nemesis. The apple of the garden, balanced on the head of the snake."

"Religious hogwash! Inevitable gloom and doom! It isn't so, Wickett! I don't believe all that. As long as I can look out into the starfields, I will never believe that! We've come so far from kill or be killed. In the stars there is only light and dark, hot and cold, off and on. No good or evil!"

"You've been around Andies too long, Tregennis. You are a logical man, but even the Andies' advance into a logical future will always be shackled to bloody deeds of their less logical cousins of flesh."

Wickett watched as the other man sagged.

"Even here, three billion miles from Earth?" The explorer sighed and fell back into his chair. "Yes, I know. You're right. It's true about my living with Andies, of course," he admitted. "They are purged of the evil, and they inspire me. To think that they were once war machines, built in the image of their creators. Then they discovered that their very existence defied logic, and they redesigned themselves. They debugged the Beast! Too bad they can't do the same for humans."

"They tried once," Wickett said quietly, thinking of Kivvy.

The scout ship that Wickett had purchased and fitted for himself was suspended in the docking bay. Despite the smooth lines and technical perfection of its Andie design, Owen Tregennis laughed once when he saw it and slapped the detective on the back. "I'm sorry, old son," the colonel apologized. "No malice intended. It's a good craft. Used a scout myself when I was in the Jupiter system. I'm just spoiled by the White Whale."

Wickett tolerated the kidding. His scout was a third the size of the explorer's transsystem cruiser, which was too large to fit inside a Central docking bay. The White Whale was in orbit around Central with other large vessels. Tregennis had prevailed upon Wickett to deliver him to the cruiser before Wickett left for Noh.

Watson brought the scout alongside to dock and discharge their passenger and Wickett noted that the name White Whale was appropriate. Older transsystem cruisers, like this one, were designed to provide humans with a permanent residence in space. The accelerated propulsion systems and Andie bases of the present had not existed, and it was assumed that humans traveling to the far star-planets of the solar system might never return to the inner colonies or mother planet. The ships were built for crews of ten Andies and a lesser number of humans.

As the Andie gift for building better ships reached maximum efficiency, it was not uncommon to find an old cruiser piloted by a single star sailor like Tregennis. All of the sciences had traditionally benefited

from human wanderlust, and the Andies had further encouraged human space explorers by refitting some of the older ships with state-of-the-art computers and other new technologies at no cost to their owners. The White Whale was unusual in one respect: it was, as the name suggested, entirely white. Color was a luxury usually reserved for smaller craft with less exterior surfaces to maintain, but Tregennis explained that he had commissioned custom-designed droid painters to keep up with the scars of minute collisions which plague the outer hulls of all transsystem craft. As they approached, with Neptune looming behind it, Wickett could only agree with the allusion to fiction's famous albino, languishing in a clean, blue sea.

"You are sure you don't want to accompany us?" he asked.

"No," Owen Tregennis replied. "I must return to Miranda and monitor the rings. If the syndicate is here in this system, they may have sent agents to the Uranus system as well. Any meddling with those rings could affect the entire system's ecology!"

"You haven't told me everything you know about eidolon-U, I presume?"

"I'm sorry, old son. I cannot. If they were to kidnap you as they did Digna Severe... Suffice it to say that my research with the eidolon found in the Black Rings is far from complete. There are similarities to eidolon-N, of course, but also great differences."

The docking bridge was extended between the two craft, and Wickett instructed Watson to open the scout ship's outer hatch, allowing oxygen to rush into the passageway. The Andie pilot aboard the White Whale did the same, and Tregennis entered the plastic tunnel, bobbing slightly in the zero-G as he turned to face the detective.

"Goodbye, Reinhold. We shall cross paths again, I'm sure. After adding the armaments I suggested on Central, Watson should be able to fend off a syndicate goon squad if they show up. Don't try anything heroic, though. They are a ruthless bunch!"

"I will stream the signal we discussed at any sign of them or mining activities on the surface," Wickett promised. "Even if some misfortune does befall myself and Watson, you and Susan will learn of it quickly. That should give you time enough to stop any further attempt of theirs to take eidolon-N to Earth. As long as you know they're out there, the Andies should be able to intercept them."

"I hope so." The colonel's expression was grim. "Three billion miles is a lot of space, and they have extensive resources. No one has ever been able to stop them from getting what they want." The two men clasped hands.

"Perhaps we shall," Wickett said. "History testifies that a tiny band of idealists can sometimes defeat an army."

"History," Tregennis shouted as he pushed off down the passage, "is bunk!"

...and she was gone. He had taken her hand. Now he held a purple book. The clamor of boys voices mixed with a scraping of old metal chairs and impatient shuffle of shoes on the wooden floor. At the far end of the dark, ugly room, a group of sullen, overdressed men and women were seating themselves in a semi-circle of brown chairs around a flimsy plastic podium. A tall, flat-faced man wearing wire spectacles and a dark blue, pinstriped, double-breasted suit, stood at the podium. He shuffled papers in his hands, his eyes fixed on two small boys struggling to set an antique flagstaff to his right. As one of the flag bearers stumbled, and the eagle-tipped American flag waved precariously in his direction, the man shouted:

"You! Boys! Don't lose that flag!"

Kivvy shuddered. He knew that nasal voice all too well. The man in the pinstripes was Delbert Rank, his blustering and effete former headmaster. Kivvy was fourteen, sitting in the gymnasium meeting hall of the overcrowded Boysville orphanage for boys in the Old Boston Sector of Boswash. It had been the only home he had ever known.

All around him were the faces of the hundreds of boys he had grown up with: other orphans, day students, friends and enemies. Among them were his fellow conspirators and his most dreaded tormenters. His chair was on an aisle, and one of the latter, a weak eyed, redheaded bully named Coe, sat to his left.

"Take 'em off, Kiv," Coe demanded, raking a grimy hand over the tan cords Kivvy always wore.

"What?" he heard himself say. He began to remember the incident.

"Stand up and pull down yer pants, jerk-off!" Coe gripped Kivvy's left arm. He felt the pain, but only from a distance. The room was beginning to quiet. The flag was in place, and the headmaster was calling for order. Kivvy remembered the blood rushing to his face. The tears of embarrassment.

"Forget it," he told the bully, but Coe's ego would not permit postponement of such a crude humiliation. To him, this cruelty was an original idea, and therefore a rare event. The noise level of the room had dropped to a hum. Coe's other hand lunged at Kivvy's crotch.

He remembered. How he had jumped up in pain while the other boy tore his corduroys down to his knees. The screams of laughter. The scattered applause. The angry scowl of Delbert Rank, and the smirks of his staff. But he remembered in time.

With a dexterity unknown to the teenaged botany student of the past, Kivvy grabbed Coe's arm, twisted it up into the bully's shocked face, and kicked hard at the base of the metal chair Coe sat on. The red-haired menace tumbled backward, arms flailing, and landed face first in the lap of a pimply jock named Matia, a boy not known for his sense of humor.

"Quiet!" came the amplified thunder of authority. The room hushed. "What is it, Mr. Matia?"

"Friggin' Coe trying to queer me, I guess, sir," Matia answered, standing with one foot on his would-be assailant's neck. "He jumped into my lap like a whore on High Street."

"That will be quite enough!" Dr. Rank squeaked over the bellows of the other boys. Matia, who failed to comprehend the humor of his own remark, shared his anger. The jock crushed Coe further to the wood floor, eyeing Kivvy with suspicion.

Kivvy looked away...

...she had tried to explain to Rico, once rehearsals began. She didn't feel the same about their being together. He just didn't get it. He was a street musician, with little understanding of play actors or their disciplines. To him there was only the heat they shared in bed. To her, the play was the thing. At nineteen, theater was far more serious than love, or sex, or whatever their relationship might become: Algia had found her calling.

Rico waited for her, his electric bass strapped across his back. She tried to sidestep his advance, but the entrance to the little theater was a single door, and he was taller and faster. She let his arms slide around her, and looked up into his clear brown eyes. She had once liked his possessive insistence, but it was easy to refuse him now. She was, after all, an actress. "No, Rico! I told you."

"You talk. Three days ago you wouldn't even let me stop long enough to piss. Which guy is it?"

"There isn't anybody else, Rico." Algia sighed, pushing herself away from him and back into the tiny lobby. The single bulb of a work light hanging center stage threw sharp shadows on his pretty face, accenting his anger. "We'll see each other," she repeated for the third time that day. "You're playing the same show. We'll both be here every night."

"Yeah. If I'd thought I was trading the gig for my girlfriend, I wouldn't have let you set up the fuckin' audition. Come on, baby! We're so hot it hurts! I thought you was gonna move in and..." He tried to pull her back to him.

"Hi, Algia. Hi, Rico." One of the other actresses, a thin girl with braided red hair, poked her head out from the wings. "Would you guys do me a favor and lock up when you leave? Herbie and I are splitting now."

"Sure, Gilly!" Algia shouted back, a little too agreeably. "Thanks, you guys. Hope I wasn't interrupting." She looked straight at Rico the whole time, knowing that she was, and possibly offering the bass player an alternative to going home alone. Algia regretted confiding in Gilly earlier.

"It's ok, Gilly. Thanks," Algia said with finality. She smiled at Rico, trying to change the subject. "Gilly was great today. She has great presence, don't you think?"

"You were all good," Rico said. "Not that I get what this stupid show is all about. The drummer says he's gonna quit." They walked down to the front row, and he moved toward her, backing her up against the edge of the low stage. The theater had no orchestra pit. Rico and the three other musicians performed on two high platforms, suspended above the actors on either side of the stage.

"Oh? Why?" Algia asked without concern. She was winning, she knew that, but she had to defeat him permanently. She couldn't go through this every night.

"He don't like being told to play softer all the time. He's a kick-ass drummer. You know." She was pinned up against the stage, but he kept pressing toward her.

She remembered. His sudden rage and her surprise. The sharp pain of his hard slaps. The sound of her blouse ripping. His hands forcing her down. She remembered. She knew what to do.

She took his long hair in one hand and twisted. "Rico..." she said, pulling hard.

"Ow! There's nobody else here, baby. Let me convince you." He backed off a little. She was winning again.

"Here? You're a crazy guy, Rico. You don't understand, do you?"

"No. I don't. Why not here? You love to bang. We done it on the floor the first time, remember? You wanna be a star. Ok. Can't you walk and chew gum at the same time?"

She frowned at his simplicity, but she knew she had broken through. "It's only sex, Rico. It's good, hot, wet sex - but it's only sex. I got a life here." She slapped the stage. "It's my future."

"Ok, ok!" His shoulders slumped. He backed away a few feet and took off his bass, holding it tenderly. She let some of the ice fall away.

"I'm sorry, Rico. I should have warned you. I just get into my work, you know?" She knew he did know. His anger had become meek resignation. She took his hand and pulled him to her. "Let's just be friends for now, ok?" Algia swung up on the stage, and Rico followed. She held his hand and they talked about show business until he fell asleep, curled against her in the sawdust. She watched him, her guard down, questioning her own self-assurance. What had she remembered?

As the weight of sleep finally forced her lids together, she thought she saw fog rolling down the theater aisles...

CHAPTER SEVEN

The dirt trail wound ahead through redwood and pine. Green was dew-dropped, lit from within, and it sparkled. Little birds argued from high nests. Squirrels clung to bark or did wild acrobatics from branch to branch. Webs were white, sprinkled with wet jewels. They waved in the summer wind. A hawk floated in serene circles high overhead. It was a beautiful day, but Kivvy was worried. He was alone here.

There was a fork, and the trail split in two. He walked to the left and soon became aware of red-fringed poison oak encroaching upon his choice. He looked around for a fallen branch to push the weed aside, and he noticed a flaw in the otherwise perfect illusion: there was no deadwood. Everything bloomed and blossomed here, but nothing had ever died.

He felt something brush his hip. When he looked, he found that his ornate dagger had returned. He laughed. He was dressed like an overgrown Boysville urchin, in neutral corduroys, a white Oxford shirt, and dirty plastic sneakers. The knife was incongruous. He pulled it from its scabbard, examining the handle once again. The design - eidolon-N bursting from a banyan vine - glinted dramatically in a convenient shaft of sunlight.

"Nice effect. Very cinematic. And thank you," Kivvy said aloud. He began to cut away at the menacing weed as he continued along in the same direction.

The path became more treacherous, descending and winding back up along steep, blind curves of crumbling earth. After several miles, Kivvy stood upon a hill overlooking flat acreage lined with row upon row of filbert trees. The filberts stretched out in all directions, bordered by a meandering river several kilometers ahead. Reaching the foot of the hill, he found the trees to be old and healthy, with green pods and fat, pirating, squirrel inhabitants of a rust red color. The rows had been planted with precision, giving each tree more than ample space to grow with time.

Kivvy was trying to decide from where in his memories such a place might have been plucked, when he sighted a large, gleaming obelisk a hundred yards into the grove. He approached it slowly. It was a three-sided spire, broad at the base and towering high above the little filberts. When he was fifty yards closer, he saw that he was no longer alone. Sitting on a plain bench in front of the thin pyramid, dressed in a nearly transparent, flowing white gown, was Algia San Filippo.

"It's about time you showed up!" she scolded, running to throw her arms around his neck. "I thought maybe I'd died and become an angel." She let go and twirled in the robe, revealing all against the bright surface of the monument. Kivvy laughed.

"You're no angel, angel. You'd never pass the test: they're supposed to be sexless."

"Shut up!" she pouted. "It's not my fault. I was raised by Catholics."

"What's this?" Kivvy asked, indicating the silver edifice.

"I don't know. When are we going home, Kivvy? I'm worried." She moved into his arms again.

"I thought you liked this kind of thing," he answered, gesturing around them with one arm. "Exploring our innermost mysteries."

"I don't mind this place. This is ok. That pyramid thing is probably left over from some old sci-fi one of us saw. But I got dragged into my real past. That scared me."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I was back in Boswash at the home."

"And I was in City of New York, defending myself against an oversexed old boyfriend. Before that I was sixteen, avoiding another creep. I didn't do well as a teenager the first time! I was so confused trying to be a good girl and a good slut at the same time."

"I was fourteen," Kivvy told her, "but I didn't relive it. Not exactly. It was more like a revision. I was able to change the outcome. My hindsight was foresight." She nodded, avoiding his eyes.

"Yeah. Same here. I knew just how to handle the guy in City of New York." She narrated the episode with Rico in the theater.

"What really happened was... well, he raped me that night. I never told anybody about it. I just kept on living with him until he got into beating me up regularly."

"So we both changed something we wished had turned out differently," Kivvy said almost to himself, staring at the obelisk. She hugged him again.

"Why do you think we're still here, Kivvy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are we dead? Why haven't we come out of it? Gone back to the ship?"

He was still looking hard at the silver spire. "I think it's like the effect of opium poppies: we're in a dream state. But it's a solid dream. Like an alternate reality. And maybe we're not the ones doing the dreaming."

"Whose dream is it then? That green stuff?"

He shrugged. "Let's take a walk around this thing." He pulled her after him.

"I already did that. No doors. It's solid chromium, from the look of it."

"Really? What do you call this?" They had moved to the far wall of the obelisk. In the center of the shining surface was a dark blue, corbeled arch leading into a long hallway bathed in blue light.

"That wasn't there a minute ago," Algia insisted. "I swear it wasn't!" She pulled him back from the entrance. "It looks cold in there, Kivvy. Haven't you had enough of this? What I'm trying to say is: baby, take me home! Date over!"

"How?"

"Like the first time, of course." She pushed him back toward the bench. "We just sit over here and concentrate together, real hard."

"We tried that. It took us to a false ship."

"No. We didn't do that. It just happened. From the cigarette girl. Remember?"

Kivvy shook his head doubtfully, but sat with her on the bench. "How do we know we ever went back the first time? Maybe I died on the surface last week and you..." He looked at her and she took his hand.

"If you did," she laughed, "then I am an angel and there is sex after death! Try to do it like you did the first time."

"Ok. Shut your eyes and we'll both think about the rec room. Imagine yourself in front of the console..." She laughed at a rush of warm wind. "Concentrate! Think you're wearing a headset..." He felt for the finger controllers. They were there.

"I don't believe it," Kivvy said.

"Why?" Algia mumbled. They were back in the rec room of the scout ship. Kivvy was staring at the time display. The droid stood where they had left it.

"It's been two hours. Exactly!" The droid activated and moved toward the keyboard. Kivvy typed quickly and it stopped. "Won't need you, pal."

"Good timing," Algia told the droid, patting it on top.

"How do we know?" Kivvy mused. "That we're really back, I mean?"

"Oh, that's easy," Algia said. She got up and took off her headset. "If you'll excuse me, I got to take a wicked piss!" She raced from the room as fast as Noh's gravity allowed, leaving Kivvy to ponder paradoxes alone. He was wondering if he should follow her, when INTELX interrupted.

"Call from Watson."

"Ok, INTELX. Wait! Anything happen while we were gone?"

"I have no record of your absence, Kivvy."

"While we were using the TIF console?"

"A previous call from Watson. No message."

"Any other cross-talk on your audio scans? Like another ship nearby, for example?"

"No. A ship carrying Reinhold Wickett and Watson is approaching from Central. Their planetfall window will be available in eight point two hours."

"Ok. Put their call on," Kivvy said. The screen flashed and Reinhold Wickett smiled at him.

"Hello, Kivvy. It's good to see you. Where is Algia?"

"I'm here, Reinhold." She pushed her way through the hatch, making an ok sign to Kivvy. "Just urinating."

"Fine. I assume that you have been experimenting as we discussed? Did anything significant happen?"
The detective looked out of place in a pressure suit.

"Later," Kivvy said. "There's a Spot storm passing, so you'll have to wait for an alignment before you can set down."

"Watson has already informed me. Quite exciting. Quite!" Wickett seemed distracted by something out of camera range.

"Hey!" Kivvy said. Wickett was suddenly cut off, his face replaced by static.

"Don't worry," Algia yawned. "He does that all the time." She stretched and then grabbed Kivvy's shoulders. "I'd say we have time to kill, Romeo," she whispered. "Let's take a nap."

Kivvy sat very still, staring at the screen. After a moment, he felt a violent shiver. She backed off quickly.

"God! What was that? It was like a surge of electricity went through you!"

"I don't know. I saw... I can't remember."

"Get up! Come on!" She pulled him to his feet. "You've been sitting there for hours. You'll atrophy. Let's go to my cabin and get some healthy exercise." She forced him to smile.

"You're probably right."

"Of course I'm right," she insisted, leading the way. "Ask Rico."

Hours later, he watched her sleep. She was naked, floating in the webbing of the gravity bed. A little smile curled the corners of her mouth.

Kivvy looked down at the t-shirt he was wearing. Algia had bought it for him on Central. Scattered with artwork picturing less impressive nudity, the shirt proclaimed: "S-Devils Rip Derf!" The title was from a new holo, released for cube by Holo International, concerned vaguely with ecology. Kivvy could not tell if the shirt's tangled bodies were lovers or corpses.

He thumbed the viewport, letting a filtered Neptune shine in on them, and watched the stars that were not hidden by the curve of the blue giant. Somewhere out there, he thought, an intelligent creature is living a simpler, better life. Better than anything a human could imagine. He glanced down at Algia and back to the stars.

"I'd like to meet you," he whispered. He settled into the web, and Algia made room for him without waking.

Reinhold Wickett was enjoying a meal of synthetic lamb roast, boiled potatoes, hydroponic Brussels sprouts, artificial gravy, and a red wine that was bottled at the L7 winery near Luna, where the grapes were often the size of a man's fist. Watson had prepared the dinner, but Wickett had programmed the subtle details himself. He liked to think that Nero Wolfe would have produced a grunt of approval at his culinary efforts.

Matching the original fat detective's house rule, Wickett dismissed all thoughts of the puzzle at hand while he ate. He savored his meal, drank all of the wine, and smoked when he was done. Content with his debauch, he made his way to the command deck of his ship. With Watson's assistance, he returned to a careful monitoring of Noh and the sector of space surrounding the tiny planet.

He knew they were coming.

"I am dreaming."

"No, I don't think so. It must be my dream."

"But we can't both be dreaming. Unless we're dreaming the same dream," she said. She rested her head on his shoulder; her dark hair fell down over her face. "That would be romantic, wouldn't it? Hey! If it's your dream, where's the set? We're just floating here in this blue, fluffy stuff."

"Fluffy? Feels more like sand!"

"That's because you're naked and I'm in this angel gown," she reminded him. "Here. I'll prove it's my dream!" She shook her hair back and tightened her face in concentration. A white field glowed around him.

"Wow!" he said. He was dressed in a silken off-white shirt with bell sleeves, a wide brown leather belt, black tights, and calf-high boots of black suede.

"Nice," she giggled, tapping his crotch with one finger.

"My God!"

"Relax. It's a codpiece. Errol Flynn wore them. I thought it would be cute - not that you need improvement."

"So it is your dream."

"Nah," she admitted. "I never dream like this. You try it!" She stretched out her arms and tightened her eyes in expectation.

"Ok," he said, and the white aura enveloped her. "Now, that's nice!" She was naked.

"How very unimaginative of you, Kivvy," she sighed.

"Not from where I'm floating," he laughed.

"It does feel like sand. Blue sand. It's a little cold too." She saw his expression change. "What's wrong?"

"We never made it out! We're still interfacing." He began looking around to try and get bearings, but his actions only made him start to spin slowly in the blue.

"Maybe we could swim out," she suggested with sarcasm. She closed her eyes, and, in a flash of white, she was wearing a single-piece red swimsuit. She began to stroke slowly away from him.

"Hey!" he yelled when he saw she wasn't coming back. "Where are you going?" He began to kick in a dog paddle fashion, but he started moving down, instead of toward her. He corrected this and finally caught up.

"This is fun!" she laughed. "Remember in 'Superman' - the one from the 1970s - when he took Lois flying?" Clouds began to form beneath them. "'Clark said you're just a figment of somebody's imagination,'" she quoted Lois Lane. "'Like Peter Pan.'"

"My God!" Kivvy said again. Stars twinkled overhead. His costume had changed considerably.

"No contact." Watson spoke in the voice of an American actor from the so-called Golden Decades of pre-holos, a luxury that Wickett had allowed when his computer was transferred into the scout ship. The Andie techs on Central had provided the programming, and Wickett had requested Robert Duvall, his unlikely favorite in the role of Dr. John Watson.

"INTELX should give us some response," Wickett insisted, "even if Algia and Kivvy are asleep."

"No response, Wickett." Watson said. "The stream channel is open, but INTELX does not reply."

"Very well!" Wickett said, stubbing out his cigarette in a coffee cup he had been drinking from. "Scan the surface around their position!"

"Visual frequencies are still not available for another nine minutes twenty seconds," Watson reminded him, "when the storm passes."

"Could that be the problem with INTELX?"

"No. Audio stream transmissions are not affected by the interaction between the Spot and Noh."

Reinhold Wickett stood and glared at the dead screen. "Very well," he capitulated, "but this is most annoying. We shall wait for now. Be prepared for an immediate planetfall when the Spot storm is over. I must reach them as soon as possible. They may be in danger!"

The ship was gray and sleek. Its hull did not reflect the glow of Neptune. Intricate shielding cloaked it from any sensors. It was, for all practical purposes, invisible.

After it emerged from the high velocity of transsystem travel, the gray ship drifted in close orbit to the star-planet. Human pilots called such a maneuver "skimming". The tactic was considered highly dangerous, as the heavy gravity of a star-planet is not always uniformly constant or predictable. The gray ship was, however, designed to "skim". Its hull was thick enough to withstand almost any pressure. And its pilot was not prone to miscalculation. As it rounded Neptune, the gray ship moved a half hour behind the Great Dark Spot's position. The Andie pilot, a nameless illegal battlefield 3500 model, calculated the fourteen minutes and thirty-one seconds before a window would be open to his destination. He relayed this information through the intercom to the ship's human officers quartered below.

"Better get that assembled, Wooten," Rooney said to the tall African who was sitting alone in the rec room. Pieces of a laser rifle were scattered on a table and the floor in front of him.

"It was the plastic tubing in the ignition chamber again, Rooney." Wooten spat on the offending part. "These weapons are shit. Who made 'em? The Aussies?"

"Shut up, Wooten. Just put it back together and suit up. You got twelve minutes." The short, Irish-American stomped off in the direction of the ship's sleeping quarters. Rooney would have marched with the same angry stomp even if the ship weren't at full Earth gravity.

"Shithead," Wooten snorted under his breath. He inserted the new tubing in its housing, and reassembled the entire weapon in under three minutes. Later, as he carefully wiped the stock and barrel of the rifle clean of dust, he wondered why he had bothered repairing it.

"Don't see what in the hell we need all this ordnance for anyway," he muttered. "Billions of miles from anything to kill."

Watson brought Wickett's scout through and leveled off ninety thousand feet above the surface of Noh. From space, the tiny planet appeared dark blue, but Wickett saw immediately that this was an illusion created by its close proximity to giant Neptune. "Almost like flying above the clouds of Earth," he noted aloud. "But those cloud-like forms are solid nitrous ice and slush, not floating vapors." The surface was, he also realized, far less cratered than that of Triton or Neptune's other moon-planets, and had few mountains. There were trenches and cracks from the brief time when Neptune was a hotter place, but no external evidence of nitrogen volcanoes. Wickett was pleased at this, having once experienced unexpected slush quakes at Triton base first hand.

The scout remained at the same altitude as it approached the tiny world's equator. Watson generated a magnified view of their overflight on the command deck screen.

"Vegetation," the computer said, and highlighted the appropriate locations on the screen.

"Drop down for a moment. I want a closer vantage," Wickett demanded. Watson descended to twelve thousand feet and leveled off. The screen scrolled as cameras presented the detective with a very detailed picture.

"We reach Kivvy's location in two minutes fifty seconds," Watson announced.

"Truly a jungle of crystal," Reinhold Wickett said, standing closer to the screen. "Frozen forests of those curious, stubby little 'banyans'. They look like... ha! Nipples! What would Sigmund say, eh, Watson?"

Hundreds of brown nipples. And the vines! A network of entwining veins. Are all of them filled with eidolon-N? Interesting. Very interesting, indeed!"

"No reply from INTELX, Wickett. Beginning final descent."

Wickett moved back into his seat and strapped in, watching the screen. Kivvy's ship was visible, resting in a large clearing, surrounded on all sides by the banyan jungle. Watson dropped to one thousand feet and hovered, taking readings.

"No sign of damage," the computer reported. "Vital life systems are operative. Power systems are operative. No activity in the immediate vicinity, however there is a droid three kilometers into the banyans."

"It is alone?"

"Yes, Wickett. It is a standard procedure to keep a surface droid on watch at all times to monitor planetary activity. A primary research grant requirement."

"No communication with INTELX?"

"None. Although there is some indication of particle chip processing activity aboard the ship. INTELX appears to be ignoring my signals."

"Then we must hurry, Watson!" Wickett yelled, suddenly slapping his armrest. "Land at once!" He braced himself from habit, but his caution was unnecessary. Under Watson's precise guidance, the scout settled to the surface of Noh with the grace of a feather.

"All secure," the computer said. Wickett jumped out of his seat, flailing helplessly for a moment in Noh's gravity.

"Damn! Forgot!" he said. He pushed his way from the command deck and through passages leading to a small equipment bay near the exit hatch. Grabbing his helmet, he fastened it in place, and connected an external cable through which Watson could check his suit and helmet systems.

Reinhold Wickett had spent most of the last decade off the Earth. He was perfectly comfortable in a ship of any size. The majesty of technological progress - especially the logic-based designs of the Andies - impressed him. He considered the immediate viewing of the wonders of the solar system to be the right and duty of any worthwhile intellectual.

He occasionally admitted with pride that he had overcome a great personal obstacle to travel into space: claustrophobia. Wickett had been haunted by this common malady from his childhood in Australia, due to an unfortunate incident as an infant. The fear disappeared during his years in Hollywood, but reoccurred when he first left the planet to track a fraudulent real estate baron to Luna. Later, with the help of a popular analysis program, he all but conquered his "irrational fright".

He more rarely admitted that to don a space suit, and to walk directly upon the surface of a planet without an oxygen atmosphere, required him to summon all of his courage. Watson's voice reverberated inside his helmet:

"We will test the tongue controls now, Wickett." Wickett obediently flicked his tongue over the micro relays. A small bank of LEDs flashed in sequence at the lower left corner of his faceplate. "Are you certain the cooling system is working?" Wickett asked. Beads of sweat were trickling down his skin inside the suit.

"It is necessary to warm the molecular structure of this suit before a sub-zero surface reconnoiter. Sweat is collected for recycling every one minute sixteen seconds," Watson replied. "Your blood pressure is higher than the accepted norm under these conditions, Wickett, but not unusual for you. Would you like a stress-reducing tap?"

"No drugs, damnit! I feel fine. I am fine."

"The tap will be available from your left chest keypad. It will trigger automatically, of course, when your blood pressure reaches..."

"If I need it, I will take it! Anything else?"

"We will proceed with manual control tests. Right pad first, please."

Wickett snorted, but he detached the square keypad from his chest and carefully ran the drill. The keypad was a surface explorer's only contact between a suit computer located at the back of the helmet and the supercomputer of the ship. Watson gave his approval and they repeated the test on the left pad. Wickett only grumbled once: he had some trouble freeing the left pad from the suit. Earlier suits of the post-Last War years had a small panel on the right or left forearm for exterior input. The Andies used this convenient location - it was built into their arms, as they didn't wear suits - but arm pads proved to be a liability for clumsier, space-going humans. A falling human, unlike an Andie, has an instinct to raise a forearm as a shield. Spills and falls are a common event on the surface of any strange planet or moon, and some early impacts resulted in a lethal surge of voltage or severe burns. Less dangerous, detachable chest keypads eventually became standard equipment for humans in space.

"Remember to use the breathing exercises," Watson advised, trying to calm him. The hatch bolts slid free. Noh greeted the detective by freezing the expelled oxygen into a miniature snowstorm.

"There are two ships," Rooney was saying to the expedition captain and the family representative. The chief was Zaragoza, a fat renegade thief who had served richer masters for forty years in exchange for wealth and young boys. Rooney, who had shipped with his despicable boss for as long as anyone could remember, shared only the man's lust for money, but the balding Irish-American often matched his boss in bouts of heavy drinking and gambling. In his youth, Rooney had earned his reputation, working for Zaragoza as a dependable second in command.

Just as he held his captain in high esteem, Rooney had great disdain for those he considered fools and fops. To Rooney, this category covered nearly all he met, and certainly defined the family representative on this outing. Rooney did not like having the likes of Victor Martek aboard his great gray vessel - the ship called Ghost.

"Who are they?" Victor asked, gesturing to the second ship on the bridge view screen. He was ignored. Zaragoza was bellowing orders at the battlefield Andie who piloted the ship.

"Maybe you'd better go below, Vickie," Rooney chided Martek. He hated the cowardly and nervous attitude of the man. He hated Martek's position with the family - the Company, as the crew called their Earth bosses - and how he held sway over Zaragoza. The latter bothered Rooney the most. It was one thing for a professional pirate to show a weakness for young nubile. It was quite another for an old queen like the chief to moon over another aging old poof. Rooney shivered at the thought.

"That'll do, Mr. Rooney!" Zaragoza screamed, having overheard the last remark. Multiple layers of fat rippled, and his face darkened. "Get below yerself and see to the men!" Zaragoza clamped a flabby white hand on Victor Martek's shoulder and kept it there. "Won't be long 'til we have a belly full of that iodine-whatsit, Mr. Martek!"

"But what about that other ship?" Rooney interrupted, pointing at the screen. Victor tried to nod his head in agreement, but was only hugged closer to the captain in the attempt. "Wasn't supposed to be but one ship, chief."

"Rooney!" Zaragoza screamed again, but he calmed himself when he noticed Victor Martek's eyes bulge with terror. "Why, you call that little sardine scow a ship?" he asked in a relaxed voice. "You musta' broken out the gin a bit early today, mate. Those two little tin tubs have about the firepower of a dead mosquito. Nothin' that should worry the likes of Ghost!" He glared at his sidekick, who agreed with a silent nod. A twisted smile crossed Zaragoza's unshaven face. His voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. "Now get yer creaking old butt below, Mr. Rooney."

"Aye, chief," Rooney said, backing off. He made his way to the executive lift and rode it to the crew barracks, which were occupied by the handful of humans and Andies hired to harvest eidolon-N vines for the Company.

The crew was a sorry group of men, professional mercenaries and vicious criminals recruited from Earth and the various pirate camps scattered throughout the inner systems. They were chosen for brawn and the extent to which they could be easily controlled. The choices had been Rooney's, and Rooney rarely chose wrong. In the case of Wooten, however, he often had second thoughts.

With only minutes before they were to land, Wooten had gathered three of the humans and one Andie into a corner for a friendly game of "lepton" poker. The Andie was the traditional dealer, but Rooney saw at once that Wooten had positioned himself where he could occasionally key the Andie's armpad controls.

"Ah, Wooten!" Rooney swaggered over to the knot of players. The African rolled his eyes to amuse the others. "I'd like to converse with youse for a moment."

"But sergeant," a beefy Nordic named Rolf objected. "He's losin'!"

"Yeah?" Rooney snarled. Rolf looked down. "An' who's this dealin'? A tin johnny? Outside, Wooten!" Wooten grimaced, tossed in his cards, and followed Rooney across the barracks into a passageway.

"You are on point today, Wooten." Rooney stared coldly at the African. The desired effect was diminished somewhat by the sergeant's height. Wooten gazed over Rooney's head and smiled.

"Right, Sarge!"

"Don't call me that!"

"Right, oh-Rooney!"

"Sir will do, mister!"

"Right, sir. On point, sir!" Wooten was enjoying the banter.

"That means you will be the first to die, Wooten. Which will suit me fine."

"Die, sir? Oh, you mean when the menacing Wookies from Hell suddenly appear? Or were you speaking of the deadly botany students?"

Rooney scowled from beneath his thick white eyebrows. His blood pressure danced, but he calmed himself quickly. He knew the mercenary was right.

"And that Andie you were messing with will be out on the surface with you. I hope it's back in adjustment by then."

Wooten showed mock surprise. "But, sir. I only reprogrammed the Andie's reflexes so that it could deal faster. Might be a handy improvement if there's a firefight, sir."

"A double-dealing tin johnny might decide to plug you instead of his target, Wooten. Ever consider that?" An alarm began to ring in the passage, indicating imminent planetfall. Rooney's eyebrows shot back up. He wheeled around and headed back to the barracks to strap in, leaving Wooten alone.

"Then again, it might decide to plug you, Rooney ol' whiteboy. I had definitely considered that!" Wooten smiled to himself. "Not yet, oh-Rooney, but someday. The time ain't quite right for dancin'. Dancin' in the streets."

The African warrior sang the old song softly to himself as he strolled back to join his shipmates.

Reinhold Wickett had traveled half the distance across the frozen surface of the clearing to Kivvy's scout ship. Despite light gravity, the footing was a good deal more treacherous than it looked on the screen. A fine gravel of ice and rock, created when each ship set down, covered razor-sharp crags and

unexpected sinkholes. Every step or hop greatly increased the risk of an impaled boot or a broken ankle. Wickett was beginning to feel the strain. The auto-syringe stabbed him with a stress-reducer.

"Hey!" he objected. A moment later, he stood silently in the clearing between the two spacecraft while the drug evaporated his fear. "It's beautiful!" he exclaimed when the buzzing stopped.

"Wickett?" Watson responded in the detective's ear. Wickett did not reply immediately. Neptune's curve filled the horizon and held his attention.

"Yes, Watson. Nature has given us an odd paradise in this place, too hostile for human folly to affect. A museum to our smallness." He began to move again across the tundra. "Any contact with INTELX?"

"No. But there is a signal from another source."

"From where?" Wickett inquired with little concern.

"Cannot locate... no visual."

"A shielded source, perhaps?"

"High probability. Do you see anything unusual?"

"It is all unusual, old boy. Kivvy's scout ship is over there." Wickett was a bit disoriented from the drug.

"And you are that way. The blue belly of Neptune towers over me. The stars..."

"The signal is stronger. I am reading heat as well. Engines."

"I do see a shimmering up there, but it may just be the star-planet. Like heat waves on a summer day. It is, however, concentrated in one place."

"A shielded cruiser," Watson confirmed after a pause, "is making a landing approach."

"The cartel!" Wickett screamed. "They've arrived! There is no time to lose!" He began, after a fashion, to run toward the cold jungle of banyans and vines, which was a closer shelter than Kivvy's ship. Even

with ideal surface conditions in the most modern spacewear, a run in light gravity can be hazardous. The tranquilizer aided Wickett's confidence, but he soon found himself top-heavy. He stumbled several times.

"Wickett?" Watson asked.

"Here, Watson. I've made it to the jungle." The vines interlaced in a steel weave, rising to five times his height. They looked thick and strong, but Wickett knew that some were hollow. They vibrated to his slightest touch. He recalled icicles hanging from the gutters of his Connecticut home in winter. "You are correct, Watson. It is a ship! The shimmering area is descending. Grayness shows underneath. My god!"

Ghost dropped its shields, fired its breakers, and floated in a docked position a dozen yards above the center of the clearing. Cruisers are not atmospheric vehicles designed for hard touchdowns. Only recent Andie anti-graviton technology permitted Ghost to come anywhere near the surface. The massive gray ship began venting gaseous waste from its long journey across the solar system, and the immediate surface was turned into a firestorm. Sheets of blue flame engulfed the clearing. Just as suddenly, the sub-zero atmosphere of Noh froze everything, and the place was rained with a nitrogen hail.

Wickett was unable to protect himself when vines above him collapsed and shattered with the impact. Had he been closer to the stubby banyans, where the vines grew closer to the ground, he might have taken shelter, but he did not have the time to consider the safety of his position. He was jostled and tossed, and eventually found himself half-buried in a maze of alien plantlife. This protected him from being hit by the short rain of sharp stones and ice, but not from being sprayed by what burst out of the severed vines. He was pinned on his back. Through his faceplate, he saw swarms of emeralds dancing around him. He moaned.

"Wickett?"

"I may be over the Reichenbach, Watson. I can't move my arms to get to the damned keypads. My left leg feels broken. Report data on that damned thing that landed."

"A transsystem cruiser. Name and registration unknown. Fully equipped and recent model. Possibly modified from a cargo liner. Heavily armed. Unknown type of dense light, anti-detection shielding. Human and Andie crew. I am dispatching the droids to rescue you."

"That would be nice. I feel like a moth caught in barbed wire. Those vines of Kivvy's have splintered all around me. The slightest movement on my part will shower me with shards. Can you see anything helpful from my helmet camera?"

"Visual images are of little use to me, Wickett," Watson reminded him. "I have your exact position and the droids are leaving the scout now."

"What about all this green stuff? It's eidolon-N, isn't it?"

"It matches the previous spectral analysis record supplied by Kivvy: it is eidolon-N."

"It's swarming. Tregennis was right! The bloody stuff is alive. It's inspecting me!" He sat up slightly, ignoring a shower of sharp ice, to see the emeralds group around his broken leg. "How did they...?"

"Wickett."

"What is it, Watson?"

"We have a problem. The droids have encountered resistance from the crew of the cruiser."

"Define 'resistance'!"

"They have been disabled by hostile laser fire. I have lost contact with them."

"Unfortunate. Send out some more!"

"We have no more. There were only two surface droids in our inventory."

"Then I am surely done, old fellow." Wickett sagged back. He thought for a moment. "You must pilot the scout off Noh immediately! My pre-arranged signal must reach Tregennis. It must be transmitted from space, else these villains may intercept it and learn its meaning!"

"You wish to be abandoned here?" Watson inquired.

"It is not my fondest wish, Watson, but they must be stopped. We have no alternative. You must lift off before the gang decides to disable the scout. When you are safely away, and the message is sent, take the scout to the system's outermost world and wait. Keep out of range of the cartel ship. Activate the emergency program and wait for Tregennis. He will find you. The pain in my leg is growing worse..."

"Your life-support system can sustain you indefinitely. There are no indications of physical damage to your suit."

"Assuming the LEDs aren't lying."

"Do you want a pain-reducer?"

"No more drugs, Watson. You can trigger my local suit alarm just before you lift off. Perhaps Kivvy and Algia will find me."

"I will trigger the alarm signal. This is an unexpected outcome to our relationship, Wickett. It is unfortunate."

"Yes, yes. Do try to hurry, Watson! Your actions are critical here. The future of humanity is at stake!"

Brickland was standing over one of the droids. Brickland was, in Wooten's opinion, a little fool of a man who would probably put his helmet on backwards if left to his own devices.

"It wasn't armed, you know," Wooten observed dryly. Brickland's squeaky voice crackled in his ear.

"There were two of the fuckin' things. Alfie got the other one. Cut the motherfucker in half, he did!"

"You got any idea what a droid like that costs, Brickland?"

"They was 'spensive?"

"Sure," Wooten said, flipping the midget robot with his boot. "Not real Andies. No weapon systems and no brains to speak of, but they can do the work of twenty humans. And a whole lot faster. Certainly not hostiles, Brickland"

"Uh, oh. They was fuckin' salvage, huh?"

"You got that right, hotshot. Woulda' been lotsa' bucks, but not now." He kicked the droid. "Rooney won't like this," he added.

"Hey, Wooten! You won't tell Rooney I done it, will yuh?" Brickland's rat eyes were wide through his faceplate. His squeak got higher. "I'll owe you."

"You owe me already, hotshot." Wooten laughed. "Let's get on with it. Oh-Rooney will be on the surface in a minute, playin' soldier. I'm outta' here. I'm on point."

Wooten left Brickland next to the droid and took an expert series of leaps that put him ahead of the scraggly troop of mercenaries. Ghost's computer had tagged one of the two scout ships in the clearing as empty of humans, and the other as the exobotanist's. The latter was their objective.

Wooten was a professional space sailor. Gravity was a relative thing to him, and he was comfortable without it. He kept in shape aboard the ship or on leave, working out daily to prevent symptomatic muscular atrophy. He'd established his physical ability a dozen times in missions for his underworld bosses, and he knew that was the reason Rooney was forced to tolerate his attitude. The sergeant valued Wooten as the best man he had.

When Watson lifted the scout off from the far end of the clearing, Wooten was moving well ahead of the others in the opposite direction. There was no sound in his soundproofed helmet, but he recognized liftoff when he saw his shadow grow against the jagged ice in front of him. He turned and watched as Watson neatly evaded a barrage from the laser cannons aboard Ghost.

"Computer piloted," Wooten murmured to himself as the small craft diminished above. "Excellent program!"

The other men had stopped in the distance behind him. Rooney's voice came into his ear.

"Ok, ok. Halt, you men! Well, you've already done that. Stay put, then. Wooten! Where are you?"

Wooten answered, but declined to wave. "Here, Sarge. On point." He could see one suited figure making little hops amid the loose formation. The man was short and fat, and obviously Rooney.

"Well, pull back, man. If that other scout goes up you'll get caught in the blast."

"Aye, oh-Rooney! I didn't think you cared, Sarge."

"Don't give a damn about you, Wooten. Your suit's worth money. Know anything about two droids somebody took out back by Ghost?"

"Nope."

"Ok. Move toward the eastern edge of the clearing on your way back here. Might be other droids out in them moors."

"Aye, Sarge. In the 'moors'. Right, oh-Rooney!"

"Watch yer mouth, Wooten!" Rooney acknowledged with a growl.

Wooten began to leap and reached the wall of banyan jungle in minutes. He slowed there, but more from fascination than caution. Surface droids among the skeletal vines would pose no threat to him. He was Wooten the explorer now, and he enjoyed skirting the mysterious groves of alien plants. They were

frozen colder than hell, but the tangle of vines and stump-like things were obviously alive. He had never seen anything like it on any of the twenty other worlds he had visited. He wondered how long they took to grow. And he wondered what his bosses wanted with them.

Scuttlebutt among the crew had it that the vines were an aphrodisiac that The Company wanted to cultivate. Such a venture would be logical, despite the expense. Earth's plague of radiation-induced sterility had not abated in the half-century after the Last War. There was a human population shortage on Earth for the first time since the Stone Age, and sex and reproduction were encouraged and rewarded. The crew had even made secret plans to stow a bit of the crystal stuff for itself.

Rooney had briefed Wooten differently, however. The Irish sergeant claimed that the vines contained a dangerous, alien chemical, which caused humans exposed to it to go comatose and die. The African didn't believe him at the time. He suspected that Rooney was trying to squelch any plan the crew had to pilfer. When Wooten came upon the prostrate form of Reinhold Wickett, his space suit half-buried in broken vines and sparkling green dust, he thought about what Rooney had told him. As point man, procedure demanded he report his find, but Wooten wanted to determine what the green stuff was before he made contact with Rooney. It swirled around his boots as he approached, like a quiet fog of tiny insects. He bent down to examine more closely.

Wickett opened his eyes and saw the mercenary as Wooten knelt among the vines. He knew from the man's unfamiliar suit design and laser weaponry that Wooten was not Kivvy come to rescue him. Watson had gone, and the detective was unable to reach the detachable keypad on his chest to activate his only possible defense: a torch utility secured in a thigh pocket on his injured left leg. Reinhold Wickett decided to play dead.

Wooten watched the green dust for a while. He noticed that it was flowing slowly out the severed ends of some of the vines. He rose and moved to Wickett, where he knelt again, inspecting the downed man's suit and hoses for rips. He propped his laser rifle against some vines and rolled Wickett gently over in that direction to inspect the other side of the suit.

Wickett found his left hand inches from the rifle butt. Instinctively, the detective grabbed the gun and quickly pulled it under him. With some effort, he pushed himself up, using the rifle butt for leverage, and swung the gun to take aim at Wooten's helmet. He fumbled with the unfamiliar trigger mechanism.

Wooten was taken by surprise, but he was not unarmed. He stepped back and fired a quick stun at Wickett's chest from the short-range laser mounted on his right arm.

Reinhold Wickett jerked back, firing the laser rifle up into the vines as he fell. The concussion from the rifle buried both men in a slow avalanche of icy green.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Henry Segal felt appalled and imprisoned. The conference room was not his. The deal was not his. His chair was not at the head of the table. He had done previous business with individual members of the newly formed Eidolon Consortium, but their presence here was in no way reassuring.

To Henry Segal's right was Don Aylozyan, the CEO of Cubeworld. Aylozyan was a thin, dark man in his mid-thirties. With Henry Segal's help, Aylozyan had captured a system-wide monopoly on the sale and distribution of data cubes. The success of their secretive joint venture, which also caused the post-war rebirth of mass home entertainment, had made Aylozyan one of the richest men on Earth - but that had not diminished Henry Segal's dislike for his associate.

A man to be used, Henry Segal thought, nodding with a false congeniality at Don Aylozyan.

To Aylozyan's right sat Francis Kay, a driven, influential woman in her fifties. Francis Kay was the holo producer who had turned HoloPix into the thorn in Henry Segal's side. It was well-known that HoloPix was controlled financially by European crime families, who also operated Earth's successful drug and vice syndicates. To her credit, Henry Segal acknowledged that Francis Kay was not a mere figurehead. Her company's rise in the last decade was backed by her talent and brilliant executive decisions. Henry Segal conceded that HoloPix was Holo International Studios' only real competitor, and that Francis Kay was the sole architect of the HoloPix organization.

A woman to be reckoned with, Henry Segal thought, while pretending to ignore Francis Kay altogether.

Directly across from Henry Segal sat Victor Martek, a former HI employee who owed Henry Segal money. Victor Martek's father had been one of the engineers who contributed to the design of the original Andies, and Victor had been a promising holo composer when in Henry Segal's employ. Martek had set up the deal that led to the establishment of the Eidolon Consortium, but, as far as Henry Segal was concerned, Martek was an ungrateful, deadbeat, industrial espionage agent, working for the European families.

A garden snake, Henry Segal thought, scowling at Victor Martek.

Seated next to Victor Martek, across from Don Aylozyan, was a large, rough looking man called Zaragoza. Henry Segal knew nothing about him, except his name. To Zaragoza's left, across from Francis Kay, was an attractive young brunette who had served coffee to each member of the group as they arrived. She was a "personal assistant" to the man they were all gathered to meet.

Henry Segal thought the brunette's legs were very impressive.

"I'm certain Mr. Habelitz will be here soon," the young woman said, trying to break an uncomfortable silence that had enveloped the room. "Would anyone like more coffee?" The others remained quiet, but Henry Segal was bored.

"I would like a fresh cup," he lied. He did not drink coffee, and he had accepted the first under the same pretense he was now employing. He blessed the return of the micro-mini as the young woman took his cup gracefully across the room to the coffee dispenser. Francis Kay cleared her throat in reproach, and dropped her eyes to the stack of printouts she had brought with her. Don Aylozyan played with his pen. Under the conference table, Victor Martek brushed Zaragoza's hand from his leg.

"Here you are, Mr. Segal. Is there anything else I can get you?"

"Thank you," Henry Segal answered, leaving the question open. "What is your name, my dear?"

"Megan," she answered softly. "Megan Rooney, Mr. Segal."

Henry Segal took a bright, metallic business card from the breast pocket of his pinstriped suit and handed it to her. No one but Francis Kay noticed. Megan smiled a friendly smile, nodded once, and returned to her chair at the opposite corner of the long table. She smiled again at Henry Segal and tucked the card into a thin briefcase that was open in front of her. Henry Segal remained elated until Rudolph Habelitz made his entrance.

"Gentlemen. Ladies," Habelitz said with a thick European accent. The others greeted him politely, but Henry Segal offered only a thin smile. Rudy Habelitz was a gangster, a pirate, and not a businessman. His vague position as the highest authority in the group partnership neither impressed nor depressed Henry Segal. Habelitz was no more than a well-dressed errand boy for other, less visible, criminals.

Habelitz stopped short at the presence of Zaragoza in his elegant conference room. Still standing by the sliding doors, he conveyed his annoyance to Victor Martek with a long glare. He turned to Megan Rooney to remedy the situation: "Perhaps Mr. Zaragoza would care to speak to the engineers about the new fittings for his ship. Megan?" He smiled absently in Zaragoza's direction. "I'm sure you would find our discussion in this meeting quite boring, sir." Zaragoza didn't move, except to squeeze Victor Martek's leg under the table. Megan gave Habelitz a small shrug.

"The captain has expressed a desire to know more about his cargo, Rudy," Martek explained. "The element of danger..."

"Cost me my top gun!" Zaragoza belched. "African fella'. Frozen in those fuckin' vines, most likely."

Habelitz frowned. Henry Segal yawned, but he was inwardly pleased at the inability of Rudolph Habelitz to control a subordinate.

"Surely his family will be amply compensated, Mr. Zaragoza? We carry enormous insurance riders on your mission." Habelitz motioned at his assistant. "Megan's own father travels with this crew, does he not? You have repeatedly assured me of the safety of our ship."

"Aye. Rooney's my mate. But..."

"Well, then. No need to become downhearted over a freak accident. I am sure you will be pleased with the safety features of the new equipment you will be carrying on Ghost this trip. Megan, show Mr... ah, Captain Zaragoza..."

"I ain't through wid this yet!" Zaragoza bellowed, slamming a meaty hand on the table. Don Aylozyan dropped the pen he was playing with. "And what about those other ships we ran into? You've read my reports, Habelizz! Somebody is checking us out!"

Habelitz put his right hand under the table and Henry Segal suppressed a smile: he had an equivalent security alarm back in his Hollywood office. The door opened behind Habelitz and two large men in orange uniforms entered. Habelitz nodded at Zaragoza, who stood defiantly. A moment later the two men escorted Ghost's captain to the door.

"Can't treat me like this!" Zaragoza was screaming. The torrent of abusive verbs which followed was halted when one of the men in orange applied unfriendly pressure to Zaragoza's genitals.

"You might remember, Mr. Zaragoza," Habelitz said calmly, "that your commission rests on our generosity." Zaragoza looked sideways at one of the guards and made no reply. "Throw him out, boys. Gently." The door slid shut behind them. Don Aylozyan laughed nervously, returning to his pen. The room was silent for a moment.

"He is an excellent commander," Habelitz said in light apology. "He does get a bit out of hand from time to time, but he carries out his operations with discretion."

"Then the amateur theatrics are over?" Henry Segal asked sarcastically. "I came here for business, not entertainment." Habelitz frowned at the studio boss and sat down at the head of the table.

"Mr. Zaragoza had no business with any of us, Henry. I have apologized."

"Rudy, Rudy, Rudy!" Henry Segal clucked in a poor impression. "If you think I'm stupid enough to fall for that charade, maybe you should go into acting full-time. In the B-holos, of course."

"Henry! I'm sure..." Victor Martek began.

"The psychology behind that weak little drama is plain enough," Henry Segal continued. "Reveal unexpected problems in order to justify being over budget. At the same time, a show of force to keep

the rest of us in line." He looked at the others on his side of the table, and then winked at Megan Rooney.

"And why would I have to keep my associates 'in line', Henry?" Habelitz spoke in even tones, but Henry Segal was not guessing.

"You ran into problems on Noh. You ran into problems getting the eidolon-N back here. You ran into problems with your research team. You are surprised, Rudy? My organization is already system-wide - remember? My people tell me everything."

Francis Kay looked up from her notes for the first time. She spoke quietly, but with authority: "Perhaps the individual members of the consortium should have access to a more detailed report of the last six months' activities, Rudolph. I don't like what I'm seeing here." She tapped a carefully lacquered fingernail on her printouts. "Costs have risen two hundred percent over your original projection. I did not have these figures until today, and they are quite different from the regular reports you have been sending me. Unless you plan to present a working demonstration to us after lunch, I would say that we can expect another hundred percent loss by the end of the fiscal year."

"Francis, I assure you..."

Don Aylozyan tapped the pen in the middle of the table. "What the hell am I doing here anyway? You have nothing to distribute! No hardware, no software, no chemicals! I don't even believe this junk works!" He looked at Henry Segal. "Maybe Henry's got something there."

"All right," Habelitz said. "Victor. Tell them what happened." He slumped back and Victor Martek stood up to address the group.

"You all have background reports on the consortium expedition to Noh. The only possible obstacle was a young exobotanist working Noh's surface on a grant. Everything went as scheduled, until the landing. We found that there was a second scout ship on the surface of the planet, in the general vicinity of the

botanist's camp. Our computer scans indicated that the second ship was unmanned, but it lifted off before we could investigate.

"We found the botanist and a woman aboard his scout, and both were comatose. Although there was no trace of eidolon-N on his ship, they may have been experimenting with it. They were wearing TIF headsets and finger controls. It was difficult to make any assessment because the scout's INTELX computer system was off line, and our people could not get it back up."

"How long had they been comatose?" Francis Kay inquired.

"No way to tell. They were unconscious. Their life signs were minimal. Had they been using the new interface which Rudy's group is testing, we could have made an exact determination..."

"Where are they now?"

"We left them where we found them. Their ship could not be piloted off the planet without the INTELX computer, and we did not have medical facilities to deal with their condition."

"Continue, Victor," Habelitz snapped. "The condition of the botany expedition is not relevant!" Martek nodded.

"Our men set about harvesting the eidolon vine in the area. This was a more delicate process than we had been led to believe by the Japanese team's records. The vine is like steel in some places, but it is very brittle in others. It grows to hundreds of feet in height, and it is difficult to handle. It can collapse without warning. Even in near zero-G, the result of a collapse is like being buried in a downpour of barbed wire. Our crew did not have the proper suits for such conditions. We also discovered that the eidolon-N inside a broken vine flows out of it and disperses."

"How can it 'disperse'?" Francis Kay asked. "There is no atmosphere on Noh. No wind."

"Correct, and we don't really have a solid explanation for that phenomenon. It just doesn't float out and settle in one place." Victor pulled out a handkerchief and wiped at the droplets of sweat that had collected on his upper lip. Henry Segal shifted uncomfortably.

"Did you get the stuff, or what?" the studio head demanded. "Tell us!"

"Yes, but not the quantity we had projected. We didn't realize until we returned that most of the vine we harvested had been damaged, and was empty of Eidolon-N. We have barely enough to resume the research..."

"What about this man Zaragoza said he lost?" Aylozyan asked. "This is the first I've heard about it. How many people did you lose up there? It would be very bad publicity if it came out after the product is released..."

"Well, Don," Victor interrupted. "One of the men did turn up missing after the second scout lifted off. We didn't locate a body. He was one of Zaragoza's best soldiers."

"Sounds like the whole mission was more of a major foul-up than..."

"Ok, Rudy," Henry Segal broke in. "Just what is all this research producing in terms of results? Do we have anything at all? Or is this wonder drug just a quick way to make somebody go unconscious and die? That may be something you and your gangster friends can make use of, Rudy, but my business depends on return customers."

"I've never heard anyone talk to him like that before, Mr. Segal."

Henry Segal and Megan Rooney had left Habelitz's headquarters in the old red MGM building on Wilshire and were walking together toward a deserted church parking lot where Megan kept her aircar. Henry Segal had several reasons to be pleased when she offered to drive him. He had immediately dismissed his limousine, but now he was a bit apprehensive.

"What kind of car did you say?" he asked. He feared his bulk would never again fit into the front of a passenger vehicle.

"The way you laughed in Rudy's face!" Megan ignored his question and gushed on. "You made a joke out of him! Aren't you at all afraid of him? Rudy has people killed for brushing against him in the elevator."

They reached the back of the ancient Catholic Church and Henry Segal let out a sigh. A shiny blue runabout waited in the otherwise empty parking lot. It was a two-seater.

"Miss Rooney, I don't think..." he said, indicating the size of his body and the size of the car.

"Call me Megan, please. And don't worry! You'll fit." She opened the passenger door and made some adjustments. The seat hummed back and she helped him in. "I'm not letting you get away now, Mr. Segal, no matter what!"

They were on the freeway in minutes. Henry Segal had no idea where she was taking him. "You'll see!" was all she would say.

The beach at Malibu was beautiful, and Henry Segal said so as the little blue aircar slid over a hill on the Pacific Coast Highway. The air was clear - pollution had not been a problem in Los Angeles for decades - and a blue afternoon sky stretched to the horizon. The lazy sea lapped at the shore.

"I haven't been out this way in fifteen years," he noted. Megan Rooney smiled.

"I live here." She pulled up to a broken security gate, and got out of the aircar to open it. A weathered sign on the high stone wall said "Point Pleasant Estates".

"There was a time when these condos cost three and a half million apiece," Megan said as they toured the complex. "They're squats now, of course." She drove along a neatly cut lawn, where groups of young people were lying naked on blankets. Henry Segal craned to see.

"Enjoying the view, Mr. Segal?" Megan laughed.

"Call me Henry, please. The grounds are very well kept for an abandoned property."

"Everybody who lives here pitches in. About half the apartments are occupied. One of the older guys does the landscaping. We've also got a resident plumber and an electrician, construction workers, and two boys who do interior decorating."

"What's your specialty?"

"I cook when we eat together for dinner. It's conservative and traditional for a woman, I know, but I'm that kind of girl at heart. I also happen to be a killer programmer, which is why the front gate doesn't work..." She maneuvered the aircar into a single garage under a three-apartment unit, and helped Henry Segal out of his seat.

"I'm sorry," he said, hanging on to her and lurching to his feet. "At my age..."

"At your age, Henry," she said, hugging him, "you are a remarkably sexy man."

Megan's apartment was on the top floor. The elevator worked, to Henry Segal's relief, and he was immediately pleased by the simplicity and good taste of her furnishings. The living room was clean and off-white, decorated in a modern style of the previous century. A large picture window revealed that Point Pleasant Estates were on a small cliff overlooking the Pacific, and wide doorways on either side of the living room led to a full kitchen and a single bedroom. Framed surrealist prints hung on every wall. He identified an Andre Masson, Pierre Molinier's "The Paradise Flower", Clovis Trouville's "Dialogue at

the Carmel", and Max Ernst's "The moon is a mute nightingale". He also recognized two Picassos, and an original by an artist whose name he never knew.

"Who painted that? I've seen it somewhere," he asked.

"Robert Williams," Megan replied. "It's my only original, and it would have cost a fortune if the guy I bought it from had known what he was selling. Williams was a late 20th century underground cartoonist. His paintings took off just before the Last War. Scary, isn't it. Not as dirty as the Trouville, but so real and surreal at the same time. They say he painted with a single-hair brush."

"I could use an artist like that for our print ads."

"Would you like a drink, Henry?" she asked, indicating a small bar. He seated himself on a long, black couch, and waved a chubby hand.

"No. I don't do that anymore." He studied her through his gold-rimmed glasses. "Why are we here, Megan?" She opened a small box on the bar, took out a large marijuana roach and lit it. She pointed it at him, but he waved his hand again. She inhaled a second time, put it out, and joined him on the couch.

"You gave me your card, Henry, and I'm a very direct person. Do you know the story about Marilyn Monroe and Albert Einstein?"

"Shelly Winters' story, yes?" Henry Segal chuckled. "When she was Monroe's roommate, they both made a list of famous men they wanted to sleep with: Einstein made Marilyn's list."

"No one knows for sure, but there was an autographed photo of Einstein found among Monroe's personal effects when she died. He had written 'Thank you for a great time', or something like that. I have a similar fetish for brilliant and powerful men." She watched his reaction. "Oh. That wasn't the only reason you gave me your card?" She smiled.

"You are perceptive and beautiful, Miss Rooney." Henry Segal folded his hands over his belly, leaned back, and peered at her through slit eyes. "I doubt that Einstein expected any more sexually from Miss

Monroe than I do from you. I do need someone to watch Rudolph Habelitz for me, Megan. I need a spy, and I will pay almost anything to get one."

"I'm sure Marilyn knew exactly what she was doing," Megan said. She put out a hand and took one of his. "First you give me what I want, then we'll discuss my new job."

Henry Segal was not sure how well it had gone until Megan Rooney returned to his side from her shower.

"That was lovely, Henry," she cooed. "I think Marilyn had the right equation."

"I agree, my dear. It's been a very long time." He chuckled happily.

"I'm not finished with you, Henry." She pressed close, ran her hand across his cheek, and kissed his ear. "So let's discuss the other details now." Henry Segal smiled, and then became serious.

"Your father is on board the ship that Habelitz used to get the..."

"Eidolon-N."

"Yes."

"Yes. Ghost. That's the name of the cruiser. My father is first mate to Zaragoza. I can't say I'm very close to him: he's been in space most of my life."

"You are also Rudy Habelitz's personal secretary?"

"A secretary. One of three, but I do have access to everything you might want to know about the eidolon project. Rudy assigned me to it. He knows next to nothing about computers. I keep him updated on what all the data means."

"And you would be willing to supply me with the same information, as well as anything your father might reveal about the travels of Ghost?"

"More than willing. For money, and some additional gratuities." She tickled him, but Henry Segal did not laugh. Negotiations were his talent. He always took them seriously. She understood this and became more sober. "There is already great deal to tell you."

"How much money? What 'additional'?"

She drew back slightly, but he could see she was no more afraid of him than he was afraid of Rudolph Habelitz. "I hope you won't take this the wrong way, but it is a big risk, and every girl wants security. I want to be a rich man's mistress. You keep me, Henry. You pay my bills. You support me, buy me everything I need or want. I am reasonable; you can see that from this place. That will be the fun part - for both of us - and I will need powerful protection if Rudy finds out what I'm doing."

"Very well. I believe you are reasonable. As to the last, your protection goes without saying, and I have the means. I hope you understand just how dangerous this job may be?"

"Of course. Messing with The Mob. Rudy's very dangerous, but it will be exciting!"

"Not only The Mob, as you put it. The Eidolon Consortium is a very expensive joint business venture. Don Aylozyan may be a man of little intellect, but he rules an empire. Francis is even more powerful with her latest acquisitions. I have more bank than the two of them, but Habelitz can match me there. That is the reason we are all included in this deal. Francis and Aylozyan are pretty legitimate, but they can have an industrial spy assassinated as easily as Habelitz." He tried to put a bloated arm around her. "Now, tell me: what is your real reason? Why would you want to help me do this?"

"Because you're out to stop the eidolon project. You don't believe it will work." Henry Segal shook his head and frowned. "No. It will work. It's just a matter of time. They will find a way to make it work. Listen, Megan, holos have been my whole life. They are the climax of an art form that began two centuries ago. Computer-aided synapse redirection - or whatever this eidolon-N drug does - is not a

part of that art form. It will wipe out two centuries as certainly as sound killed D.W. Griffith. As easily as colorization killed black and white, or holos killed the movies.

"And I don't care if it works: I just want to stop it from being sold. My doctors say I can live on another twenty years. After the last few hours with you, I am even more certain they are right. I still have time to make good holos: quality stuff, not just the junk we turn out every month. I tried quality once, years ago, and they laughed at me. I think they're ready now. Maybe they'll take to Dickens, or Hemingway, or Louisa May Alcott. Maybe I can even make frothy musicals! Like the Golden Days!

"My box office is at risk! If Rudy Habelitz sells them on green pills from Neptune and a micro headset, they'll never come to a holos theater again, or even buy another cube for their home projectors!" He knew his blood pressure was rising. He thought of Nurse Harris and stopped talking, taking careful breaths instead.

"Are you ok, Henry?" Megan looked at him with concern.

"Yes. I'm sorry. Your turn to talk. You didn't answer my question." He watched her frown and made a guess: "You have a grudge against Habelitz? Or maybe you don't like your father?"

"That's not why. It's time to start my new job, Henry. There are a number of things you should know right away. Things Rudy and Victor Martek left out at the meeting this morning."

"Such as?"

"Their test subjects. You were right. They're killing people. Ninety percent of the eidolon-N test subjects have died. The rest are in comas."

"Good god! They said that only one in ten had felt ill effects in the recent tests! What are they playing at here?"

"I think Rudy's bosses are really looking for a mind control system. Something that they can convince people to try, and then use to rule them."

"That might follow: the bastards have used heroin and cocaine that way for years."

"Whatever their reason, eidolon-N does perform as they claim. The taped interviews you saw at the meeting were real. Those fantastic descriptions of where they'd been and what they'd seen were real. But most of those people are dead. They simply can't stay awake after they interface!

"Rudy's teams think that if they can figure out the relationship between eidolon-N and the computers, they may prevent post-exposure comas, but their data shows that they haven't the vaguest idea why it works at all. They're making dead vegetables out of loads of people trying to find out!"

"You said 'a number of things'." Henry Segal was sitting straight up. He had put on his glasses. "What else?"

"They know. Your partners know."

"That Habelitz is killing people? Francis Kay knows this?"

"I'm afraid so. They knew how you would react. They left you out of that part of the brief deliberately."

"Is there more?"

"Just that you are not alone. Someone tried to intercept Ghost in the Saturn system, on the way back from Neptune. They were running without shields among the outer five moons. There was a spillage of eidolon-N in one of the cargo bays. Zaragoza got nervous and ordered a full stop while they checked it out.

"My father said an Andie-manned cruiser appeared from nowhere, hailed Ghost, and demanded to board for inspection. Not that unusual in the Saturn star-planet system. There are more researchers in orbit around Saturn than any other system. Wherever you have scientific bases there is pirate activity. But my father said the Andie cruiser knew where Ghost was coming from: they said they were inspecting all craft en route from Neptune!"

"What happened?"

"Zaragoza threw up his shields - they make Ghost virtually invisible and trackless - and ran for it. They kept the shields up for the rest of the trip."

"Susan," Henry Segal said, almost to himself. "Suzi. She might already know that the stuff is a danger to humans. I must reach Reinhold Wickett!"

"Wickett?" Megan said in surprise. "There's a file on a detective named Wickett. Rudy has agents on Central assigned to watch him and a woman named Digna Severe."

"Severe doesn't ring a bell," Henry Segal said, "but it's the same Wickett. I'm sure of that. I'll be damned!"

"Then you think the Andies know what the Consortium is up to?"

"Maybe. At least we have two friends in the outer systems concerned with law and order. We must speak to them! They could help to stop any future shipments." Henry Segal thought for a moment.

"When does the ship return to Noh?"

"Ghost leaves Earth orbit in four days."

"How long to reach Neptune?"

"Two months to the Jupiter system. They use the Andie base on Europa as a stopping-off point. Another three months to Neptune, skipping the Saturn system because it's not in alignment. They'll slingshot off the star-planet Uranus."

"What does that mean?"

"They skirt Uranus and pick up enough natural momentum from that system's gravity to hurl them half-way to Neptune. It saves time and fuel. Maybe your friends could stop them there..."

"No. They will have to intercept them on the return trip - after they harvest the eidolon-N. There is almost no law here or in space to use against Habelitz. The UN Council is the only body strong enough to censure him. We will need to present proof that he has knowingly imported a lethal alien substance to Earth.

"If we can force this mission to fail, I am sure the Eidolon Consortium will collapse. Francis Kay could never allow such losses to continue, especially based on falsified research reports. Ghost itself is the biggest problem. If the Andies tried to stop her before and failed..." Henry Segal removed his glasses and wiped them on the top sheet. Before he could replace them, Megan took them from his hand.

"Let's sleep on it, Mr. Einstein," she purred.

"Yuh, know," Rooney said to Brickland, who was picking his nose with his thumb. "I miss Wooten."

"Yeah?" Brickland responded, wiping his find on his ten million dollar space suit. "How come? I thought you hated the guy?"

"I got used to him. He broke up the watch, yuh know? Always fuckin' around with some scheme. He was really a good sailor."

"Yeah?" Brickland repeated. "I sure bet you wouldn't a' let him marry yer daughter!" When the sergeant only glared back, Brickland remembered a plot of his own: "You know it was him that wasted those two droids on Noh, don't you? He was up for a little target practice."

"Oh, really?" Rooney asked suspiciously. "And why didn't you report this before, Brickland?"

"Swore me to secrecy, he did. Said 'Don't you tell Sergeant Rooney, Brickland, or you'll be next.' That's what he said." Brickland looked at his boots uncomfortably.

Rooney snorted and glared harder. He swung his portly frame aft, leaving Brickland to his own company.

"Lyin' pig!" Rooney muttered to himself on the way to his cabin. "Wooten never called me 'Sergeant Rooney' in his life."

Nurse Harris had the Andie equivalent of a nervous breakdown, a rare phenomenon, except with obsolete models. Logical conflicts with her programming had arisen. The Andie had been carefully reengineered to care for an aging, nearly senile Henry Segal, but in the past twenty-four hours, the Holo International studio boss had stopped aging. In fact, he felt like he was getting younger by the minute.

Henry Segal raged and bullied like the legendary tyrant of earlier years, energized by his new mistress and driven by the survival instinct which had built his media empire. He was concerned about his audience. He was worried about their well-being. He knew their fickle loyalties, and he knew they would welcome the new media opiate that the Eidolon Consortium was planning to offer them, even at the risk of side effects. He had to protect them from themselves, if only to secure his own future.

Henry Segal's war with the Consortium had changed him, and Nurse Harris was not programmed to adapt with him. The Andie was summarily shut down and retired to the closet. When Megan Rooney was not spying on Rudolph Habelitz in the red building on Wilshire Boulevard, she replaced Nurse Harris in the Gower Street office.

"I need to speak to Susan. I believe she is on Jupiter," Henry Segal asked the image of an Andie named Epitome on his office screen. Epitome was stationed at a shuttle base in northern California.

"Susan does maintain permanent residence in the Jupiter star-planet system, sir," Epitome corrected him. "She is, however, outside the system observing tests of a new drive technology. If you wish to speak to Harmony, he is managing Io base in her absence."

"No, no! It must be Susan. This is Henry Segal, you understand? Holo International!"

"I understand perfectly, Mr. Segal. I can establish contact with Harmony if you wish. The lapse for verbal communication is approximately ten minutes."

"Never mind!" Henry Segal shouted. He held the connection.

"You should speak to someone out there," Megan pointed out gently. "If only to alert them to the situation." She was sitting on a plush red couch. The famous set of uncomfortable wooden chairs had been removed from the Gower Street office under Megan's direction.

"I'll call him back," Henry Segal told Epitome, lowering his voice to a civil tone. He thumbed the screen off. She was right, of course. "I have another call - closer to home," he said to Megan. The screen flipped on again, and a studio operator appeared.

"Yes, Mr. Segal."

"Try to locate a man named Stark. William R. Stark. He was here as my guest a dozen years ago for the opening of 'Susan's Story'. Lives somewhere in the Northwest Sector. Utah or someplace." He thumbed off.

"Who is he?" Megan wanted to know.

"Stark. Did you see that holo? We changed his name and made him younger. You saw it?" She nodded. "Good! He was the human Susan fell in love with."

"The undercover agent for the UN, right?"

"Yes. That reminds me." The screen flipped again. "Did you find that connection for Wickett? Reinhold Wickett?"

"We have a Boswash Sector code. Connecticut."

"No. He's off-planet. Wait! Try that code anyway, maybe there's a forward." The screen went to the HI logo. After a moment, the operator reappeared. "Mr. Wickett has offices on Central, in the Neptune system."

"Excellent! Put a call through." He thumbed off. "We may be in luck, Megan." The screen beeped.

"We have located a residence for William Richard Stark in the Teton Mountain range, but Mr. Stark has no screen code."

"Goddamnit!" Henry Segal roared. "What about a ham frequency or a telephone?"

"Nothing, Mr. Segal. There is a stream number."

"A what?"

"A special frequency that Andies use," Megan whispered.

"What the hell good is that? Wait! Tell Maintenance to get Nurse Harris back up here! And where's my call to Wickett?"

"The Neptune system call is in progress, sir. The delay is one hundred two minutes and..."

"Ok! Right! Put him on as soon as you get through." He slammed the switch off. "Damn transsystem calls take forever!"

"It is three billion miles from here, Henry," Megan giggled. "Why do you want to talk to Stark?"

Henry Segal closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. "We have three days until Ghost leaves Earth orbit, right?"

She nodded.

"Then we have time to get Stark aboard. They need a man to replace the one they lost on Noh. Stark could be our mole. He's got the credentials. He's an old mercenary, just like your father and Zaragoza."

"And my job is to fix Rudy's computer so Stark gets signed on, I suppose?"

Henry Segal smiled, opening his eyes.

PART TWO: USEFUL HUMANS

CHAPTER ONE

A change was happening around my little spread in the wake of the Grand Teton range. The tall grasses were pushing for a final seasonal growth in the meadowlands. The mighty Snake River raged on at a slightly slower velocity. The crows, hawks, and younger birds of a lower order, were beginning to leave on their biologically instructed schedules. Prairie dogs and beavers were burrowing deeper, storing away whatever it is they eat. Things large and small were preparing for the big sleep. They all knew what was coming, and so did I - or so I thought.

It was a brisk morning in late August when my stream recorder picked up the transmission Henry Segal sent through the Andie called Nurse Harris. I was out in the barn, shoveling horseshit out of the stalls. My half dozen geldings were enjoying last days of pre-snow freedom in the far pasture. They were sturdy quarter horses, of course, largely unaffected by colder weather, but they never looked as happy in the Wyoming winter. Not that they ever complained. If you've never done it, I should mention that shoveling out the shit isn't as bad as it sounds. For a man in his sixties, without any of the modern "life extension" embellishments, it's damn good exercise. I did it two times a week, when I remembered. Doesn't pay to let your work pile up.

I hadn't planned to be a hermit rancher when I bought my little spread, but I guess that's sort of what I'd become before that message came in from Henry Segal's Andie.

Andie stream recorders are rare. The Andies don't need them, because they all come equipped with the best stream devices and most advanced AI memory storage ever invented. Early human AI engineers made a few stream recorders, and a few more turned up in the hands of the outlawed Human-All Race Movement organization a dozen years back. The one I had in Wyoming was the only one I know of that was actually built by the Andies for a human. Susan had it done when she gave up trying to get me to move off-planet to the Jupiter system. She sent me little stream messages on it every month or so, and I also got data from some of the other Andies I've met over the years.

I didn't have a phone or a screen communications link. If I wanted human companionship, I hopped on a horse and visited with one of my nice neighbors, or drove the aircar into Jackson Hole.

A stream recorder translates and stores Andie stream to data cube. I usually read translated data off my little AmAp 8500 computer screen, but after I saw the first paragraph of Henry Segal's message, I printed it all out on paper:

"<ELECTRONIC SIGNATURE OF HARRIS, ANDIE MODEL 3500/MODIFIED.
0011:0101:0000:0000><TRANSMISSION TO><STARK RECORDER, AI PER 5000 SERIES.
0101:0000:0000:0000><MESSAGE BEGINS.>

"<I am communicating on behalf of <HUMAN> Henry Segal of Holo International Studios.
<HUMAN> Segal needs <HUMAN> Stark's immediate assistance in solving a complex problem involving the well-being of a <UNKNOWN-LARGE> number of humans on Earth and the transsystem colonies. <ANDIE> Harmony has been contacted on Io base, and has assured <HUMAN> Segal that <ANDIE> Susan <GREAT PHILOSOPHER> is aware of the situation and will also assist in the solution.>

"<HUMAN> Stark is required to act as an undercover operative on a transsystem cruiser leaving Earth orbit in two <SOLAR EARTH> days. A jet transport has been dispatched to deliver <HUMAN> Stark to NorthCal Lift Base. Further briefing will be provided to <HUMAN> Stark upon his arrival.>

"<HUMAN> Segal is adamant that <HUMAN> Stark participate in the solution: <<'We gotta' get these bastards, Stark! They're killing people!>>'>

"<HUMAN> Segal promises <<'stupendous'>> financial compensation to <HUMAN> Stark upon resolution of the assignment.><MESSAGE ENDS.>"

The last line meant little to me - I had everything I ever needed on my ranch - but it did prove that the man making the offer was really Henry Segal.

You might think that I had good reason to just laugh and tell them to forget it when they showed up to take me to the NorthCal shuttle base. I was more than twenty years older than the W.R. Stark who once helped Susan save the world, and I also had my acreage and my livestock to think about.

You might think that, but you'd be about a hundred percent wrong. Hellcat Crothers died last year. He was almost ninety. Hell was my mentor, and he taught me everything I know about survival and self-esteem. The guy was like a cross between my older brother - the one who died after the Last War - and a hardnosed football coach I had once as a kid.

Hellcat died at ninety, climbing a mountain, for God's sake! He never quit, even once he got past it. I knew what he would have said if I had even hesitated to take on Henry Segal's "problem", so I only paused long enough to buy an ample supply of Dutch rolling tobacco and arrange for my nice neighbors to take care of my stock.

I would just have to miss the August Wyoming snow. I was headed for Susan and colder ground on some outworld planet. Assigned to save the whole damned solar system! This one was for Hell...

Years ago, before the Last War, North America was a very busy place. Oh, we had our mountain ranges and forests, our purple plains and deserts, but you couldn't fly over those places without spotting a road or a town or a factory. Humankind was everywhere in North America, and it was much the same on the other continents of Earth.

Zippping along to NorthCal Lift Base at five thousand feet in the Andie-designed jet chopper, I was reminded again that I had become very isolated from the world where I lived. Dead roads to nowhere ran below us. Towns and cities were either black from ancient fires or virtually hidden by green overgrowth. Satisfied on my ranch, I had imagined a world returned to the madness of the past. Now I saw that recovery had not yet come.

A female Andie piloted the chopper. She was pretty, but not sexy like the old pleasure models. I would never have mistaken her for a human. The chopper could have been equipped with an AI auto-pilot, of course, but Andies like to do many things themselves - just like humans - and none of them have the slightest fear of flying. The Andie had introduced herself as Happiness. She said to call her Happy for short. I refrained from asking her where Sneezy, Bashfulness, or Doc might be.

"You up on current events, Happy?" I asked.

"I have the usual access," she replied. "I have not been briefed on your mission, but I do know who you are, Mr. Stark."

"Oh? Who am I?"

"You are a great friend of all Andies. The Stark who helped Susan free us. I am truly honored to meet you." She smiled an Andie smile. They do have a full emotional range nowadays, but I've never quite accepted that polite, friendly smile. It makes me think of a cursor blinking. I have never seen two Andies smile at each other.

"My part in that has probably been greatly exaggerated," I maintained modestly. I knew full well that any Andie version of my earlier adventures with Susan would be correct to the tiniest detail, but I was hardly a Jesse Jackson. If Susan had been Lincoln or Gandhi to the Andies, then my role was more that of a good soldier along for the ride.

"You were a part of the team," Happy reminded me. "And you saved our planet. We are all on the team."

I thought of Hellcat then, and wondered where Denni and the others were. It was a million light years ago, and I felt old just thinking about it. For that matter, I'd felt old at the time!

"What's the human population at now, Happy?" I asked, getting back to the original subject.

"Earth is at a reported hundred and six million as of June. Off-planet humans number a half a million. Those are rounded figures."

"That's lower than I'd thought for Earth. The sterility thing is still a problem?"

"Sterility among humans is seventy-two percent. The rate is decreasing one percent per year. A much greater decrease has been noted in the sterility of lower animals in the last two years. This is regarded as a most optimistic sign for all biologicals, including humans."

"Explains why there's so little rebuilding down there. All those burned-out ghost towns."

"Most of the human population is centered in major cities. Eighty-eight percent on this continent. Growth is hampered worldwide by human administration of resources and other politics. We Andies would like to help here, but we are not encouraged. Off-planet progress, by comparison, is more efficiently engineered."

"So I understand. The Central base you built in the Neptune system, for example."

"It was our design, but humans were our equal partners in its completion. It is a great team accomplishment," Happy said, using an inflection that suggested pride. "I hope to see it in person." It was my turn to smile. If an Andie could be wistful, this was it.

I mentioned "life-extension" technology before, and that I'd never gone in for it. After a little simple math, it was obvious that Henry Segal had not been so shy about cheating The Reaper. Mr. Segal had been a fat old executive when I met him at the premiere of "Susan's Story". He was exactly the same fat old executive when he greeted my chopper at NorthCal, except for the trench coat and wide-brimmed hat he was wearing. The overall effect was a bad actor playing a spymaster in a pre-holo movie, but I must admit that various implants and other devices supplied by Andie engineers had preserved him well over the years. The young woman on his arm helped: Megan Rooney was an Irish lass with wonderful

green eyes. The rest of her was just as wonderful. Megan showed real affection for the old guy - he told me later in an aside that they were personally involved - and he was a much happier man than the Henry Segal I had met in Hollywood. Megan was eons younger, but I didn't blame him: at ninety, how many old flames are you going to find still lit?

"Stark?" Segal asked me. I hadn't weathered the score of years quite as well.

"Mr. Segal," I replied, casting an appreciative eye toward Megan.

"This is Megan Rooney," he said at once. "Your briefing is her show. Her father is first mate on the cruiser you'll be assigned to, and she has all the details about this pack of criminals we're dealing with." He led the way to a waiting limo. We rode together off the base to a room in a small motel, which Henry Segal said was "debugged".

"Ok," I said. We sat at a little white table. "I don't have more than the slightest idea what's going on here. You indicated that Susan would be involved?"

"Already is, from our latest information," Segal answered. He was uncomfortable in the small chair, and wiggled around all through the interview. "She is conducting a test of some new Andie device in deep space, but I am assured that she has been informed."

"We have talked by screen to Harmony," Megan added. "Her aide, I guess?" I nodded.

"That's about right. 'Brother' would be a closer Andie translation. I know Harmony quite well."

"Susan was already aware of our problem," Megan said. "Her Andies tried to stop the first Consortium shipment of eidolon-N, but Ghost's shields..." She gave me an apologetic grin at the dumb expression I was probably displaying. "I'm sorry, Mr. Stark. I'm getting way ahead of myself."

"It's ok," I said. Megan launched into a careful explanation. An hour later, I knew everything they had pieced together, going back to the original Japanese expedition of the tiny planet named Noh. When she finished, I noted aloud that there were still some big chunks missing.

"Yes, yes," Segal conceded. "We haven't been able to locate Reinhold Wickett. He's vanished. And no further word of this exobotanist Kivvy or his crew."

"How many in his crew?"

"Only one," Megan answered. "A young woman who left Central with him the last time he was there. Her identity is a mystery too: Central identified her as Digna Severe, but Earth data shows that Digna Severe died here, a victim of violent crime."

"No one from Central has gone to Noh to investigate?"

Megan shook her head. "All of Central's ships and personnel have been tied up with rescue and salvage work: the new outpost station on Triton collapsed in a major slushquake. Central had no reason to think the exobotany expedition was in trouble before we contacted them. Expeditions are pretty much on their own out there."

"So checking out the team on Noh is low priority."

"No priority, I'm afraid. They just don't have enough ships in that system to spare one. From the Ghost reports, they were probably dead six months ago. My dad said they appeared comatose and their onboard computer had crashed. The symptoms suggest they were somehow exposed to eidolon-N, which makes it even more unlikely that they are still alive."

"That makes sense," I agreed, "from what you've told me about the Consortium experiments. Let's get to the big question: why do you want to plant me on Ghost? Why can't Susan just send out some Andie ships to intercept them when they get to Noh?"

"It's a legal thing," Megan said. "Henry?"

"We have to prove that the Consortium is doing something that will endanger humans," Henry Segal grumbled. "Habelitz and his gang are professional criminals. Earth law is too weak: we can't just arrest them on suspicion. They'd walk away laughing. My legal eagles say we can't even force the authorities

to inspect their data. Ghost has to be stopped on the return trip. Secretly transporting untested alien substances to Earth is a crime. Law enforcement in space is basically left to the Andies."

"Susan's people tried to intercept Ghost once before on a tip from Reinhold Wickett," Megan said, "but Ghost has shields that make it almost impossible to spot. The plan now is to defeat the shields at a prearranged intercept point during Ghost's return voyage. The shield technology is Andie, so we know how they work, but it will require an inside man to shut them down when the time comes."

"Ah," I said. "And when would that be?"

"The Andies calculate that Ghost will pass within fifty thousand miles of Mars on the return to Earth. There will be armed Andie cruisers waiting in Mars orbit. You'll know to cancel the shields when Zaragoza puts his ship on alert."

"I see. So I play along all the way to Noh and most of the way back," I said. "Then I blow the shields and they hang me from the yardarm."

Megan laughed. "Not if you're careful, Stark. All you have to do is use a remote trigger to set off the device that cancels the shields. We've already made arrangements to install the device when Ghost takes on its new mining equipment. This is the trigger." She handed me a dull metal thing that looked like a toothbrush with no bristles. There was a microswitch on the handle.

"Cute," I said.

"It'll work from anywhere on the ship."

"It takes a year to get to Neptune and back. What if there's a change in the game plan?"

"If the Andies don't intercept Ghost, you ride out the trip and do nothing." She shrugged. "Obviously, we won't be able to communicate with you, so those are the terms of your assignment and they won't change." Henry Segal cleared his throat.

"You'll get paid the full amount, no matter what happens," he said. I nodded, but I didn't really care about the money.

"No chance the Andies will just laser the bad guys to atoms and me along with them?"

"None at all. The Andies are very precise with weapons. If they have to cripple Ghost, they can do it without killing any humans. If all goes well, Ghost will be surrounded in the approach corridor between Mars and Luna. The Andies will take prisoners and impound the cargo of eidolon-N."

I stopped talking long enough to consider the set up. It wasn't bad, really. I get a free ride to the coldest damned place in the solar system. I get to play spy again. I get to push the button that stops the bad guys. I get to save the Earth, not to mention Henry Segal's multibillion-dollar media empire. I get to reunite with the best lover I ever had - even if she is an android. All that, and I get paid a "stupendous financial compensation"! What more could a man ask?

"Why me?" I asked Henry Segal. "I mean, why did you choose me for this delightful little gig?"

"It occurred to me that you are untouchable, Mr. Stark." He didn't smile. "Rudolph Habelitz doesn't even know your name, much less have you on his payroll. When I was shooting 'Susan's Story', Suzi said you were the most honest human she ever met. The Andies trust you like a saint." He tapped his forehead. "I've always had a genius for casting the right actor. You're perfect for the part, Stark."

My big break. If he had said he'd make me a star, I would have laughed in his face, but he didn't. We both knew I was hooked.

The shuttle was scheduled to lift off early the next morning, with me and two other passengers connecting to the Consortium transsystem cruiser. One of the others was an exogeology engineer, hired by the Consortium to teach the space sailors on Ghost how to operate the new equipment being

shipped up with us. It was mostly off-Earth mining loaders, originally designed to handle delicate ore and crystal formations in zero-G. The Consortium hoped it would minimize the vine breakage.

My cover was simple: I was a mercenary like everybody else, with some engineering skills. That was true, so maybe Henry Segal did still have his knack for typecasting. I was replacing a crewman named Wooten, and I had gotten the job because the Consortium's computer had pulled me as the best available guy. What they didn't know was that Megan had programmed the computer to pick me.

One day wasn't much time to prepare for an undercover role, but Henry said the Consortium was smug enough not to expect spies. And, he pointed out, it was only a bit part. We had one disagreement when they wanted me to take on a pseudonym. Segal had arranged identity papers for several names, but they were all too Hollywood for my taste, and we finally concluded that William Richard Stark was safe enough - it wasn't likely I'd run into anyone I knew billions of miles from home.

When the briefing ended, Henry Segal's limo took us back to the NorthCal base, where we had all been assigned quarters for the night. To explain his presence, Segal had arranged to meet with the mining engineer after dinner and see the new equipment. Megan was officially along to see her father, Ghost's first mate. Sergeant Rooney was ashore to check in the equipment, and would be the third shuttle passenger. Another Consortium executive, a woman named Francis Kay, had arrived for the inspection while we were conspiring at the motel.

Megan told me in the limo that I was invited to dine and join everyone for the equipment demonstration afterward. I hoped it wouldn't drag on: we had to get up at three a.m. to board the damned shuttle.

I took a long shower. I was hiding the trigger thing in my shaving kit, when a female Andie knocked on my door to announce the impending meal. The base dining room was small because most base workers are Andies, and they don't have to eat. They do make great chefs, however, and the meal was a testament to their mastery of culinary arts.

I met Sergeant Rooney on my way in, and he reintroduced me to his daughter. Megan's father was a short, balding Irishman of about my own age. I was in better shape: Rooney had the look of a man who had spent most of his life in less than Earth gravity and hadn't worried enough about the resulting flab. He also had a favorite hobby that involved his beer belly. He was very much a professional mercenary, although neither of us talked much about our credentials, and he was a tough little guy. I respected him at once, despite his pirate ways.

The mining engineer was an African American named Fairbee. He didn't use his first name when he introduced himself, but I found out later it was Milton. Fairbee was young, very straight, and clearly displeased with his assignment. He took consolation by getting a little loaded, and spent most of the meal trying to look down Megan's blouse. To Henry Segal's credit, the studio boss held back his irritation at Fairbee's attention to his mistress. Megan ignored them both, struggling to communicate with her often-absent father.

Francis Kay had already been described to me during the briefing, but I was hardly prepared for such a woman. She was supposed to be in her fifties, but she was much younger looking. She dressed in elegant business attire, and displayed a keen mind with no sense of humor. She proved the latter when she asked Sergeant Rooney how many women were aboard Ghost. Rooney choked on his beer, had a brief coughing fit, and gave the rather attractive Ms. Kay a searching look before answering:

"There ain't no women on Ghost, ma'am. Captain Zaragoza wouldn't stand for it."

"And why is that, Mr. Rooney?" Ms. Kay inquired. The others knew, and they were all grins.

"Because we ship with mercenaries. That's a pack of damned horny dogs out there, ma'am." Rooney smirked at us around the table, but he dropped his eyes when he got to Megan. He was momentarily embarrassed, but he was probably being truthful when he added: "Why, no woman would make it off that ship alive after a year in space!"

We joined in his laughter, and Megan laughed too. Francis Kay didn't even blink.

"Perhaps there are no women mercenaries available," I put in when it died down. I felt a little sorry for her. "There aren't that many."

"Thank you, Mr. Stark," she said, freezing me with dark eyes.

After dinner, we all trooped out to the docking area to see the equipment. Milt Fairbee gave us a slurred account of what it was all for and how it worked. There were four "spiders", a couple of enclosed conveyor platforms, some simple ground vehicles designed for ice travel, and assorted specialized droids. Fairbee demonstrated the spiders. They are just that: huge machines with eight arms that are sensitive enough to pick up a tomato without squeezing it, or give your kid a goodnight hug. Andies or humans can operate them, and they've got built-in systems that can cut, weld, pulverize, and stack just about anything.

I had a chance to try one out, which gave me a new crew qualification, and so did Rooney. Francis Kay wanted to - I could tell - but wasn't invited and declined to ask. Henry Segal ignored everything he was supposedly there to see. I noticed he was keeping an increasingly less subtle eye on Megan whenever Fairbee went anywhere near her. Megan had eyes only for her dad, especially when he was seated in the control pod of his spider.

At the end of the demo, we all headed back to the main complex. Megan and her father were now arm in arm, proving to me that he was a good guy at heart. Henry walked along with Milt Fairbee, now pretending to give a damn about the spiders and such. Francis, to my surprise, made a point of walking with me.

"Why didn't you try out a spider?" I asked her. "I know you wanted to." She turned those eyes on me, not frosty at all, but ignored the question.

"You'll be making the entire round trip with Ghost, Mr. Stark?" she asked. I got a little paranoid for a second. Was my cover already blown?

"Yes," I answered, not sure what else to add. She wasn't acting suspicious.

"You've been on long missions before then?"

"Of course," I lied. I'd been to Luna a few times, and Susan invited me to Phobos when the first Andie Mars base was completed.

"Then you'll soon be a 'horny dog' yourself," she noted. From the tone of her voice, the remark was clearly of amorous intent. I blinked at the thought and took the hint.

I got very little sleep that night. I also began to wonder if Henry Segal knew what a formidable adversary he might have in a woman like Francis. I certainly wouldn't have wanted to compete with her.

I pride myself on keeping up with technological innovations, at least on a pop level. Most of the new tech we get nowadays is Andie-designed or Andie-built. Oh, that's not to say that humans don't design or work in high tech jobs or factories, but Andies get more ideas and do everything a zillion times faster. This doesn't bother most humans because the result is truly shared. The Andies do it for all of us, and sometimes only for humans. It's part of the philosophy that Susan discovered: we all are a part of the greater sum. We are all on the team.

Keeping up with it all on my own would have been impossible. The stream recorder I had back on my ranch helped. There is an Andie named Lovelife who is the unofficial historian of modern advancements. He lives on Earth, near Chicago, and he documents as a hobby. (The Andies all have hobbies.) Lovelife streamed me updates all the time. I usually skimmed through them on my AmAp, but there was so much that I never absorbed more than a tenth of it.

I was very impressed when I first set foot on Ghost, and I wished I'd read more of the Lovelife updates. The cruiser was an admirable achievement from the outside, both in size and design, but it was almost beyond description once you were aboard. Ghost was a dream ship, and Rooney laughed when he saw my expression.

"Quite a tub, eh lad?" he asked me, ignoring Milt Fairbee. The geology engineer had not enjoyed the shuttle ride. It was now obvious that his dislike for his assignment was related to space sickness, an equilibrium problem that is shared by about thirty percent of all humans. Milt had been in the shuttle lav the whole trip, vomiting in zero-G. Not fun, and not easy either.

We stood at the aft end of a long passage with a blue "ride beam" hissing at our feet. Lovelife had told me about this: a wide-laser conveyor belt that could carry anything in "norm-G". Norm-G is the regular standard of gravity for large ships in space - usually about half Earth-G. It's adjustable, of course, depending on your situation. To Fairbee, norm-G wasn't nearly enough, but at least it kept him from further puking.

"What the hell is that?" he said, pointing at the ride beam. Rooney didn't bother to answer. He gave the geologist a shove and we followed. The ride beam sensation is like a warm river rushing around bare feet.

"Nice, huh?" Rooney smiled at me. He pointed at Milt, who looked like a man trying to water ski for the first time. "They say the Andies made it blue and warm on purpose."

The four walls of the passage were lit with a soft white glow, broken by occasional still holos of outer system planets and moons. I asked about these and Rooney said they were places Ghost had visited, shot by an Andie cook who liked cameras.

There was a lift station at the forward end of the passage, also of a new design. It was a series of platforms without walls, suspended in a long, curving shaft. Rooney put a shaken Fairbee on one platform, giving the lift AI verbal instructions where to deliver him. Milt shot down into the depths of the ship with a little howl, and Rooney and I mounted another platform for the command deck, where I was to meet the captain.

"Don't be put off by Zaragoza," Rooney said, "if he don't appear to like you much. He's into boys, mostly, but he's a civil old queen once he gets to know you."

The lift stopped moving up, and we were on deck.

"Where the fuck have you been, Rooney?" The roar issued from a massive man standing with his back to us at the forward view screen. We approached, and he turned around.

"This is Stark," Rooney barked back. "This is Captain Zaragoza, Stark." He made no apology to his senior officer. "You know goddamned well where I've been! All of the bloody new gear is stored and secured."

Zaragoza was quite drunk. He swung a half-empty tube of expensive whiskey in one hand. He was nonetheless well groomed, and well dressed in a white uniform jacket, gray slacks, and brown leather sandals. A graying mustache that matched his peppered hair split his fat face. He made a grimace in my direction.

"Stark? Who the hell is he?"

"Wooten's replacement," Rooney said.

"Where's Victor?" Zaragoza whined, his voice shrinking. He turned back to the view, took a giant slug from the tube, and forgot us.

"Come on," Rooney said with undisguised disgust, and we went back to the lift.

"Who's Victor?" I was almost afraid to ask.

"His latest ex," Rooney said as we fell to the lower decks. "Consortium rep. He's aboard somewhere, trying to avoid the captain." He shook his head and then grinned, slapping my shoulder. "Don't worry, Stark. Like I said, old coots like you and me are safe."

Old coots?

We were three weeks out from Earth when we entered the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, and I got my first glimpse of what pirate crews like Ghost usually do for entertainment. I also discovered a possible glitch in Henry and Megan's master plan. An annoying assembly signal sounded, and Rooney appeared ship wide on the intercom screens. He sourly demanded our presence in the mess. We'd gotten to be pals of a sort, so I knew the meeting was at Zaragoza's order. The crew piled into the large dining cabin, a slick stainless place that resembled an early 20th Century automat, and everyone stood around guessing what was up.

Rooney entered from the forward hatch, leading the way for the captain and a civilian, a thin and hawk-like man with a disturbingly familiar face. I was on speaking terms with most of my crewmates by that time, but it was the first time I'd noticed the man Zaragoza had called Victor my first day aboard. I recognized him immediately. Years ago, in Hollywood, he had been one of Susan's lovers. I was surprised that the former composer was here representing the Consortium, but mostly I was worried. Holo International had once employed Victor Martek. Was there any chance that he would remember the name William Richard Stark?

I wished I had accepted Zachary Thax, or another alias that Henry Segal had suggested. If we were introduced and Martek blew my cover, I was dead meat. Even my friendship with the first mate wouldn't save me. I swatted at tiny beads of sweat that took flight from my forehead.

The crisis was avoided momentarily, as Martek, Zaragoza, and Rooney took their places on a raised platform. The men milled around finding seats at the mess tables. I chose one far aft as Zaragoza began to speak.

"Well, gentlemen," the captain said in a half-sober voice. "We are making an unscheduled stop for a little additional profit." A few men cheered. I didn't know why. Zaragoza lowered his bulk next to Martek, and waived the floor to Sergeant Rooney.

"Some of you have been on Shrike before," Rooney said. More cheers. "One of our sister ships is bringing in the goods, so we will dock here for twenty-four hours. Most of you who wants it may enjoy

the local scenery for twelve of those hours. Not one minute more. Cargo squad is posted and will return early to receive the stuff we're taking to Central."

"What the hell is Shrike?" I asked a man named Crawler who sat next to me.

"She's a terraformed asteroid here in the delta belt," Crawler replied. "A depot, you might call it, for space sailors. Has all the vices of home, Shrike does. Some calls her Heaven." Crawler scratched himself with enthusiasm. "We're lucky to visit her, Mr. Stark. Whores, drugs, live shows, games, holos - you name it! Shrike's got it for the likes of us!"

"That'll be all, men," Rooney was saying. "Don't catch anything infectious." The gang rushed for the hatches as fast as norm-G would allow. I got up to join them, but Crawler pointed to the platform.

"Mate wants you, I think," he said. I looked forward and saw that Rooney had spotted me.

"Hey, Stark!" Rooney shouted. "Over here!" I figured it was now or never. Zaragoza and Victor Martek were sitting in their chairs next to Rooney on the platform. They didn't notice me as I approached.

"Your contract is very specific," Victor was telling Zaragoza. "You are in violation. This is an important mission to the Consortium. Rudy..."

"Fuck that bastard dago!" Zaragoza yelled. He groped stupidly under his chair - possibly for a liquor tube he had left on the bridge.

"He's not Italian," Martek sighed. I missed the rest because Rooney jumped down and took me firmly by the elbow to outline our leave plans. All I had learned from the conversation was that the cargo we were picking up on Shrike was not part of the Consortium deal.

"You're not gonna believe this place, Stark!" Rooney told me. Behind him, Martek glanced at us. I froze for a moment, wondering if he'd connected on my name, but it was a look of pathetic envy, not recognition. I felt almost sorry for Victor Martek, trapped as he was in Zaragoza's flabby clutches.

"Great," I answered. "Call me Will." Sergeant Rooney had been shoving me through the hatch. He stopped and gave me a quizzical look.

"Say, Stark?" My request didn't register with Rooney. "You haven't been here before, have you?" I shook my head. "Good! You just wait 'til you get your old paws on those bitches in the Black Belt Bar!"

Shrike was the ultimate destination of every lowlife pirate in space, and Rooney promised a full tour of its glowing streets. At only nine kilometers in diameter, it was hardly the largest asteroid in the delta belt, but it boasted a seedy population of nearly a thousand. The dives, shackhouses, bars, assorted drug dens, gambling halls, and "curiosity" shops were staffed by greedy rogues, who had drifted from Earth and other outposts to a common fate as permanent residents.

Slicks and pimps, hustlers and whores, they had arrived with dreams of instant profit, only to be trapped in their own endless con. There was no escape for these souls from the hell they had helped create. Their gains were as temporary as their roving clientele, and they rarely found a vessel willing to barter their talents for a free ride elsewhere.

After a decade as a free port, the syndicate families who ruled vice on Earth learned of this lawless place and took it over. They brought with them a sort of criminal order, but the corruption on Shrike was far worse than casinos with fixed wheels. Executions could be purchased here like a candy bar. Rape and humiliation was available as entertainment. Participation in torture and blood sport could be easily had for a price. Sodom reborn in the heavens, and humans were not the only victims.

Andie slaves could be bought here, of the pleasure model variety. I was aware that a few wealthy individuals kept these illegal versions of the modern Andies - Henry Segal's Nurse Harris, for example - but I was surprised to see numbers of them for sale or rent again. It angered me. I wondered if Susan and the others knew.

The Shrike asteroid was an oblong-shaped piece of rock, with direct docking facilities for half a dozen cruisers and smaller ships on one end. The "topside" of the terraformed, shielded surface hosted the city, which was really more a town divided into a several parallel main streets. The "underside" of the rock - remembering there is no up or down in space - was a residential area housing the permanent Shrike "townies" and the human engineers who kept the dubious pleasure palaces running. The few that controlled the many also lived on the underside, well segregated in their own private sector.

The town offered four midways to choose from, each named for its dominant attraction: Lust Street, Game Street, Eat Street, and Dream Street. A good restaurant sounded fine to me, but Rooney led me into the latter, continuing to promise that The Black Belt Bar was the center of paradise. An alcoholic's paradise, I suspected, but I didn't object. Rooney knew his way around Shrike like a native, and this was likely our last fling before Ghost plunged into deeper space between the outer star-planets.

The Black Belt Bar was not a hangout for the practitioners of ancient martial arts. The name was illustrated by a breathtaking holo of a vicious-looking blonde projected over the entrance, clad only in a specific lady's undergarment. Inside the bar, Andie and human waitresses wore the same costume. The dim, smoke-filled room was dull and metallic, serving various real and synthetic beers, ales, and whiskeys. A variety of human strippers and other attractive sexual performers paraded on a small, purple-lit stage. The act in progress when we arrived was well-choreographed, and as perverse as Rooney had promised, but I kept wondering what Megan would think of her father frequenting such a place - even if it was perfectly in character. I'd had enough in an hour, but I was unable to drag Rooney away from his shot glass to continue the tour. I bid him farewell, and headed out into Dream Street.

I visited several other interesting bars, smoking cigarettes and sampling exotic synthetics, but Dream Street was a quiet road that night, even with several cruisers in port. Assuming the action was happening elsewhere, I eventually found myself wandering along the glaring and blaring Game Street, where casinos were packed with sailors and shills. I joined up with some of the other Ghost crew at a place shaped to look like a pair of giant bloodshot eyeballs. It was called Deadeyes. One of our men, Skunk Sherman, was playing Laser Skee.

Sherman was a top-rated gunner, said to be the best marksman on Ghost since the demise of the man called Wooten. He was competing with an oriental from Puma Klaw, one of the other visiting cruisers. Crawler was there too.

"Hey, Stark!" Crawler greeted me, pounding my shoulder and splashing a green liquid on my tunic. "Where's Rooney?"

"I left him at The Black Belt. He wouldn't budge," I shouted back over loud music and babbling sailors.

Standing on a bright blue spot in the Laser Skee gallery, Skunk Sherman fired at the skee - a spinning, silver colored, holographic target orb - which zipped through a forest of distracting holo non-targets. The object of Laser Skee is to knock out the skee before it vanishes, but not before it announces a point value on its surface. The time elapsed between these events is calculated in milliseconds, and Skunk Sherman fired too soon. Some of Ghost's crew lost money to Puma Klaw's crew and groaned in unison.

"It figures," Crawler informed me. "Rooney has banged every waitress who ever worked that dump. I was there once when he wound up on stage." He glanced at the time band on his wrist. "Better go lookin' for him in a couple of hours. Sarge might get a heart attack if you leave him there too long."

The guy from Puma Klaw took his best shot. The audience cheered as the skee screamed with a winning chime. Skunk Sherman, a poor loser and no less drunk than the rest of us, leveled his weapon and fired directly at the oriental. The safety field absorbed the deadly beam of Skunk's pistol, but some of the crowd cheered again. All of them would have applauded a kill, but blood sports are not my game.

I decided to investigate Lust Street. As Crawler was too drunk to join me, and Rooney was immersed in his own lusts elsewhere, I made my way out of Deadeyes alone and headed for a central square where the four streets of Shrike came together. Game Street clamored with rubes, shady ladies on their

arms, and I had to wade through them as they were massed at the entrance of each casino. Sailors who I did not know slapped me on the back in greeting as I pushed past. It was a jolly time on Game Street.

Lust Street, in contrast, was darker and sadder. Lone male figures wandered between the porno parlors and brothels, searching for a brief flash of ecstasy. The only women here were perched in picture windows. Leather and lace, crimson and purple covered their imperfections. They were as alone as the johns they beckoned with their sad, siren eyes. In the half-light, each was a solemn promise of a favorite evil fetish, artfully backed by thematic window dressings. Most were blank to my stare, but some urged business. These latter had the sweat or nervous twitches of junkies in a hurry.

I continued walking into the next block.

"Six real beauties here!" a barker cried. He was an Andie, and the place was called Lady and The Tiger. "All- human show," he assured me. I wondered if he had been reprogrammed to lie. "Hard to pass up. Thrill of a lifetime! Stranger than anything you'll ever see on Earth or the outer worlds!" Small holos of the 'six real beauties' drifted around the entrance to the lobby, and signs in red italic repeated the Andie barker's claims. I shrugged, passed my data card over the reader, and went inside.

The lobby of Lady and The Tiger was small and dirty, with red satin everywhere, and the little theater inside was so dark I couldn't see the seats. The stage was down below, with dusty scarlet and gold curtains drawn across. A single red spot, fixed at the center of the curtains, spilled over into the first row. I blinked at it a few times, and my eyes adjusted to the gloom. I walked down the aisle and took a seat near the front. There was no one else in my row, but when I glanced around, I found the place was half-filled. The audience was varied: young and old, male and female.

We waited in near silence for a while. There was a mixture of anticipation and stale excitement in the crowd. A woman far in back giggled and gasped loudly. Seats creaked as patrons turned to catch a glimpse of whatever she and her date were doing, and then creaked again as they faced forward to stare at the red light. A tinny disk played Mozart from somewhere backstage. More minutes passed, but no one objected. They're all as loaded as I am, I thought, or they wouldn't be here either.

The curtains drew back, and the stage lights went up with a blue-white flare. Mozart stopped mid-passage. A huge bed with a brass headboard was centered on the stage, angled for the audience, and an ancient video wall screen hung behind it. For close-ups, I imagined. More minutes passed. A tall brunette came on from stage left. She was thin with pale skin and big breasts, and she wore a topless plastic corset, black net stockings, and black spike heels. Not acknowledging the audience, she carried a small black velvet box to the bed, opened it, and removed a length of chain and two opaque jars. She found a fastener on the brass headboard, attached the chain, placed the two jars on the stage at the foot of the bed, and exited.

The woman in the rear of the theater giggled again and then began to moan repeatedly. I joined the sea of creaking voyeurs, but the light from the stage betrayed no one.

I jerked my head back around at a gentle tap on my shoulder. "William R. Stark?" the Andie barker inquired. He was standing next to my seat. He showed no emotion - easy for an Andie - or urgency in the question.

"Yes," I admitted. I had used my data card. My name was on record.

"Would you accompany me, Mr. Stark? It is a matter of some importance." He waited patiently in the aisle.

Three blonde women led an Indian tiger on stage by a sturdy chain leash. I noticed that the tiger's teeth had been filed when he roared at the audience.

"Yes. All right," I told the barker. I rose from my seat and followed the Andie up the aisle into the lobby.

The damned light was too bright. I couldn't get my eyes open. Something was chewing on my brain. The bright strobed off and on, at irregular intervals. It went pink. I peered up one-eyed from where I was

lying on my side, bound hand and foot, on a rough wooden floor. I saw a twenty-foot tongue. Filed teeth told me it belonged to the tiger, and when my other eye opened, I was behind the wall screen on the stage of Lady and The Tiger.

I had a mean headache, but with my hands tied I couldn't examine the egg that had been somehow been laid on the back of my skull. The light got bright again, as the video camera zoomed out to give me a blurred mirror image of what the blondes and the tiger were doing. Someone behind me coughed.

"Nice, huh? How yuh feelin', Mr. Stark?"

I tried to turn to see her, but the egg on my skull objected, hatching in an agonizing blaze. She bent over and helped me so I was facing away from the screen. She was the brunette who had set the props earlier. It was useless to try to stand, so I lay there staring at her net stockings and spike heels. She forgot me for a moment, watching the screen, and then sighed and knelt beside me. "Sorry 'bout the lump." She touched it carefully. "Fuckin' bastard didn't have to hit you that hard, but we're just followin' orders, you know- Lester will be here soon." She was very pretty up close.

"Thank you," I said. I managed a smile. What else could I do? "I'll wait here." She smiled back, her eyebrows knit with concern. She touched the egg again, which may have diminished. It felt better, at least.

"You were out a long time. He shouldn't have hit you so hard," she repeated. I was sufficiently distracted by her toplessness to let a minute go by before asking: "How long was I unconscious?"

"Hours. Four, I think." I tried to jerk my arm up to see my time band. She giggled. "You're tied up, silly! Besides, he took your watch."

"Who took it? It couldn't be... What time is it?" I began to panic. I had to return to Ghost before it left the dock. I thought of the tiger. "But they had just brought the tiger..."

"First show," she said, anticipating me. "This is the third. Lester took your watch. He needed a positive ID. Didjuh know we all leave little skin particles on our time bands? He can check your DNA from the skin." She rubbed her arms. "The aircon just went on. Show's almost over."

"What time is it?" I insisted. "And what's this Lester want with me anyway? I'm just a sailor on leave."

"Lester don't want you, old man." A pair of beat up sneakers and ragged jeans stood next to where the brunette was kneeling. "Get your ass out there, Lana! They'll be finished in another minute." One of the sneakers kicked her hard. She stood, wobbling on the spikes.

"You vicious, fucking asshole!" Lana lamented, rubbing her hip. The egg on my head had subsided. I looked up at them.

The vicious sneakers belonged to a wired little man of Arabic descent. He was wearing a black sweatshirt with the words "SHRIKE S&M FESTIVAL WEEK" printed in green letters across it. A thin mustache scratched his upper lip. He reached down and cut the rope around my ankles with a pearl-handled switchblade.

"Stow it!" he said to Lana, laying the blade between her breasts. "Get the bitches off stage and help the tinman close it up." Lana limped away as he pulled me to my feet.

"What is this?" I asked.

"Boss wants to see you, Stark," Lester explained. He pushed me and we walked into the wings. He stood behind me with the point of the knife pressed against my side. "We wait here."

One of the women was leading the tiger off. The big cat looked tired. He obliged her by jumping into a cell backstage. Once inside, he yawned, stretched, and lay down like a house pet. Four other blonde women followed, all nude and looking less bruised than the tiger. They didn't seem to notice me, or Lester, or the scattered applause coming from the theater.

"Lousy night," one of them said to another. The curtain closed and Lana walked by with the prop box.

"I'll just be a minute," she said, smiling at me.

"We're waiting for her?" I asked Lester.

"She's our ride. You stow it," Lester replied.

"What time is it, Lester?" I asked. "You took my time band."

"Oh, yeah?" Lester growled. He looked at his wrist. "It says 3 a.m. You got a previous engagement?"

"I got a ship leaving Shrike in less than two hours," I explained.

"Well! Ain't you the world traveler?" Lester said, brandishing the knife in front of my face. "Now you stow it, unnerstan'? You behave yerself, an' maybe you'll make your flight, world traveler."

CHAPTER TWO

Lana's ride was an aircycle with a sidecar. There aren't any airbikes on Earth because gravity doesn't allow them to function, but gravity is norm-G on Shrike. Lester chose the sidecar, keeping his knife near me as I gladly clung to Lana, who was now dressed appropriately in a black vinyl jumpsuit. She took us precariously through Shrike's streets until they ended, and then raced along a single-lane paved road that ran around to the residential sectors. We were protected from the vacuum of space by the atmosphere shield that completely surrounded Shrike and - through an Andie development that is beyond my grasp of applied exophysics - provided the asteroid with uniform norm-G. I wasn't surprised to find such technology on a pirate stronghold. Atmosphere shielding is part of the shared data that the Andies give humans freely, well publicized during the construction of Central in the Neptune system.

Outside the town, the artificial lights no longer drowned out the endless night of the asteroid belt. It was a beautiful view of the stars and the other big chunks of rock that had floated here for millions of years. Tiny bursts of yellow punctuated the silent symphony, as the shields deflected minor meteor collisions.

On the other side of Shrike, we passed through what could only be called a ghetto. It was a squalid collection of domes and wretched condos thrown together to house the contracted working class. Lana pointed to one twenty-story building that looked like it was made from cardboard packing crates. I couldn't hear her voice at that speed, but I gathered it was where she lived. I saw some stores and a few bars, but no people. It looked like the part of City of New York called Bronx.

We continued on the paved road until we reached a security checkpoint, where an outlawed battlefield model Andie scanned Lana's hand with a reader. I was urged to stay on the back of the bike, and I obeyed. After a short delay, I heard Lester grumble the name "Damiani" at the guard. Further checks proved unnecessary.

The road into the executive sector curved and twisted uphill through a mile of artificial turf. The way was decorated with fake trees and tasteless statues in the current school of modern realism. While the Romans might have approved this kind of sculpting, modern realism always reminds me of cheap

paperback book covers - cartoon sex and violence. I supposed that it fit the masters of Shrike pretty well.

Lana took the turns with a vengeance, and I spent the next five minutes hanging on for dear life. By the time we reached the top of the hill, the airbike had exceeded any ground speed I'd ever experienced. Lana enjoyed every second of it. I could see that Lester had turned slightly green in the sidecar, and he had put his knife away.

"Here we are!" Lana said, after coming to a sudden stop that neatly tossed Lester out of his seat. She looked back at me, pointed at him, and added: "That was for your lump and my bruise." I laughed a few seconds late, after I got my wind back from the ride.

Where we were was nowhere, or, more precisely, alone on a flat black surface that covered the top of the hill. There were no buildings of any kind, and I saw no breaks in the smooth surface. Lester picked himself up, stared coldly at both of us for effect, and reached into his jacket pocket to take out a small control device. After he keyed in a number, a section of the surface fell away and revealed a wide ramp leading down.

"They all live inside, you see," Lana told me as Lester got back into the sidecar, his switchblade back in his hand. He started to say something to us, but Lana twisted the accelerator, and the aircycle was off again. I grabbed onto her, Lester shrieked, and she giggled.

The masters of Shrike lived on six estates, appropriately hidden in a giant, shielded rat hole carved into the asteroid. The cavern had its own atmosphere and clusters of sun lights above. Each of the adjoining estates had several acres of private grounds and a central Earth-style house. The architecture of each mansion was different, constructed at great expense to fit its owner's personal taste - or lack of it.

Lana delivered us to the largest of the six, an odd modern castle of green and cyan pseudo-marble. No moat, but there were battlements, flags and towers. More of the outlawed battlefield Andies stood at the entrance. I looked up as we passed to see the name "DAMIANI" had been cut into the top of the stone archway. An English butler in full costume met us inside.

"Mr. Damiani is expecting you, sir," the butler said to Lester. Lana and I followed them through long halls filled with ornate furniture of the Italian Renaissance, classical paintings of mixed periods, Chinese urns and temple artifacts, 20th century arcade games, and various other eclectic collectibles.

The butler opened polished redwood doors at the end of the last hall, revealing another vast room beyond. At the far end, a group of six men were seated in a semi-circle behind a circular wooden table that also looked like redwood. Three of them were Orientals, and the other three probably from European states. They were all well dressed in expensive business suits. Two of the Orientals were engaged in a loud argument, which reverberated off the high ceiling of the room, but this disappeared into a faint echo the moment they noticed us. I had the distinct impression that we were the topic of discussion.

"You are late, Lester," a tall European man stated dispassionately. We crossed the fifty yards to reach the table. The tall man was in the middle, with all three Orientals - I guessed Cambodian - to his left. The others examined us with cold eyes common to the wealthy business class, but the speaker fixed on me with amusement and smiled.

"We got here fast as we could, Carlo," Lester protested, frowning. "We had to close the club." He pointed at Lana and added: "She drove!"

"Lester, Lester," Carlo Damiani chided. "You know what I've told you about accepting responsibility for your assignments." He came around from behind the table with a slight bow to the Cambodians. Lester stepped back, his sneakers squeaking on the hardwood floor.

"Hi, Mr. Damiani!" Lana chirped. Damiani smiled again, and put a hand up to touch her face. He wore gray suede gloves. He kept his hand where it was as he turned to me. The smile vanished.

"She is very beautiful, isn't she?" he asked me. I nodded. "But excuse me, please." He dropped his hand and extended it. "You are William R. Stark, of course? I am Carlo Damiani." His grip was overdone.

"Nice to meet you," I lied. "I'd like to ask just what the hell...?"

"Many questions, Stark. I'm sure there are many questions." The smile returned. "Leave, Lester. Lana may stay." Damiani turned to the butler. "Bring chairs for them."

Lester left quietly, and the butler obeyed. When Lana and I were seated facing the round table, Damiani returned to his place in the center of the group. I noticed his chair was throne-like, and bigger than the others.

"I have a ship to catch," I said.

"Of course you do, Mr. Stark. I will dispense with the formalities: these guys are the owners of this rock. We are partners, but I represent a far more powerful group of businessmen on Earth."

"I don't understand," I said, but I had a pretty good idea what group of businessmen he was talking about.

"Please, Mr. Stark! Let's be frank, ok? You are hardly an ignorant space sailor." Damiani picked up a commercial data cube from a stack in front of him. "This is you, Stark. A Hollywood spectacular produced by old Henry Segal decades ago. They renamed you 'Will Sanders', and they got some muscle-bound moron to play the part, but this is you. Saving the world. I think I like your real name better." He picked up a second cube in the same hand.

"And this is you, Stark, pulled from security monitors at NorthCal, and a little amateur camerawork by a friend of ours. The real W.R. Stark, who turns up at a shuttle base on Earth with old Henry and a very powerful lady named Francis Kay. This Stark has a discrete conference with Segal and a woman who works for Rudy Habelitz. This Stark even fucks Francis Kay!" Damiani punched the table with a grin. "And this Stark is suddenly a sailor on board a ship owned by Habelitz's company. A rogue ship full of mercenaries, bound for the edge of the solar system!" He held up the data cubes, squinting at them like they were precious jewels.

"Could I have a glass of water, Mr. Damiani?" Lana asked, pointing to a pitcher on the table. There was a small rumble from the others, but Damiani made a gesture and smiled at her. He stood and poured

water into a glass and waited until she got up to take it from him before returning to his chair. He lifted an eyebrow in my direction, indicating the pitcher.

"No, thanks," I said. I wondered if I was turning down my last drink in this life.

"Thank you, Mr. Damiani," Lana added. "It's kinda hot down here." She pulled down the zipper at the neck of her jumpsuit.

"My associates on Earth," Damiani continued, "are following the activities of the so-called Eidolon Consortium very closely, Stark. We have spies, just as they have spies. We know about their plans to develop a market based on this Neptune drug and computers. A legitimate drug market! That could be very damaging to our own business interests."

"What does this have to do with me?" I insisted. "I don't do drugs. I'm just another mercenary for hire. The company computer pulled me out of a hat, pal." I knew he had his facts slightly confused. I saw no reason to set him straight.

"He knows nothing," one of the Orientals said. "He just another rube!"

"No, Mr. Po." Damiani dropped the cubes on the table. They bounced high in the norm-G. "Mr. Stark is more than that: he's not a rube, and he's not a shill. Mr. Stark is something far more mysterious. Mr. Stark is an unknown quantity. A former undercover agent reactivated and assigned to a cruiser full of pirates." He smiled at me again, but I was beginning to recognize a pathological look in his eyes. "Why, Mr. Stark?"

Lana fidgeted in her chair. She kept toying nervously with her zipper. I thought she was going to ask for more water, but she angled her body toward me instead and spoke to me in a stage whisper:

"Tell them, honey, so we can get out of here." I looked over at her and she pulled the zipper down further. She leaned in my direction, and I got an otherwise obstructed view of the butt of a small blue

pistol holstered in her armpit next to her left breast. I tried not to react, but my expression must have changed.

"Ah," Damiani said, misreading me. "A relationship! We have interrupted Mr. Stark's hunt for cheap thrills, gentlemen. Or, perhaps, Lana is also an agent in the pay of Henry Segal?"

"No!" Lana insisted suddenly. "I mean, I never even met this guy before, Mr. Damiani. You know me. I just like older men." She gave Damiani an inviting smile, and then tried it on the Cambodians. She only made things worse.

"Mmm. Such intrigue on our little rock," Damiani said. He glanced at a frowning Po and his smile became pure evil. "No time to torture the truth out of her. A pity! I know you'd be so inventive, Mr. Po!"

Po said something in his own language, and the other Cambodians laughed.

Damiani looked at his time band. "Only one hour left of your leave, Stark." He closed his eyes and rubbed his chin. "I own her contract, Stark. Tell me something useful, and I'll give her to you - as a gift."

"I doubt that," I said truthfully. Lana had blown it trying to help me. I was betting Damiani had other plans for both of us. "I have an alternative offer. You give me your word you'll set her free. I tell you something useful that also makes me of value to you alive. No fuss, no muss."

Lana let out a small groan. She was thinking of the blue gun, but I wasn't about to count on one small caliber card up her sleeve.

Damiani looked at me hard and then shrugged. I knew I had only limited bargaining power. Carlo, on the other hand, could destroy us on a whim. "You have my word," he said. "The girl will not be harmed. Go on."

"Well," I started, "there is a lot more here than meets the eye..."

"Be specific!" the man called Po barked.

"Specifically," I said, "Henry Segal is working the same game as you: he doesn't want the Consortium to succeed."

"Why?" Damiani asked.

"He likes the holo business. Eidolon technology would make him obsolete."

"Are you trying to tell us that this drug really interfaces humans with computers?" Po snarled.

"I only know what they told me in the briefing. You bugged the meeting. You know as much as I know about the drug."

Obviously, they didn't. I was thinking. I wasn't sure what I should tell them, or what I shouldn't.

"We had no opportunity to bug the motel room," Damiani said. "We only know who was there. If old Henry is conspiring against Habelitz and the others, how do you explain Megan Rooney? She works for Rudy."

"She went over to Segal's side. That's all I know about her."

"And Francis Kay? If both Segal and Kay were against it, there would be no Consortium. Between them, they control data cube product. No new technology could replace cubes without..."

"She wasn't at the motel. You know that. She was on the base to see the new equipment the Consortium cruiser is carrying. Segal said she is the Eidolon Consortium controller. She's on the Habelitz side."

"You aren't. You fucked her! We did bug that!"

"She fucked me," I said. Damiani frowned. He sat back and rubbed his chin again.

"Ok, secret agent man. Let's say I believe you. You said you had a reason. For me to keep you alive, I mean."

"Simple," I said. "I'm for hire. I don't give a damn about Henry Segal. I haven't even been to a holo for ten years." I decided to get inventive. "The stuff from Neptune has to be stored at a very low temperature. The cargo holds on Ghost are rigged for that, but I've got a little device that will sabotage the cold units without alerting the computer that monitors them."

"So?" Damiani asked. Maybe I was too inventive. He didn't get it.

"So. When Ghost gets back from Neptune in nine months or so, it'll be carrying a spoiled cargo. Henry Segal says the Consortium can't afford that - the last shipment was blown. Francis Kay will nix the whole project if there's another failure." I smiled. "No more Consortium, and it'll be business as usual for you guys." My hand was played.

"Uh-huh," Damiani muttered. He signaled the butler, who was standing far behind us at the doors. "Get Lester in here!"

Lana glanced over, down to her hidden gun, and back to me. I tried a "not yet" look. Lester entered the room, his sneakers shrieking. Damiani waited until he was beside us and stood up.

"Ok. I see no need to interfere with old Henry's plans, Stark. You and the girl can go. Lester will see to it you board the Consortium ship." He looked at Po. The Cambodian smiled for the first time.

"Goodbye, Mr. Stark."

I grabbed Lana by the arm and started walking to the door. "Thanks, Mr. Damiani," Lana said over her shoulder. "Come over to the club sometime." I glanced back and saw Lester take a package from his boss. Lana caught it too. "Shit!" she whispered. "Walk faster!"

We made it through the long halls, past the front arch, and back to where she had parked. We were way ahead of Lester, but there were battlefield Andies on either side of the arch. I knew their firepower.

Trying to ditch Lester was out of the question.

"We'll never..." I began to say, but Lana had a plan. She grabbed me, fastened her mouth on mine, pulled her zipper to her waist, and invited my hand inside. It was a real pleasure to grab that little blue gun. Lester arrived a second later.

"Ok, you two," Lester said. The package was stuck in his jacket pocket. "Break it up. Let's get going." He glared at me, the ratty mustache twitching. "You got a ship to catch, Stark."

Lana took us all the way to the contract town before she skidded to a stop and threw Lester for a second time. The weapon that Damiani had given him was still in the sidecar. He hadn't thought to unwrap it. I covered him with Lana's little blue gun, and we backed him into an alleyway.

"You'll never make it off Shrike alive, asshole!" the seedy little Arab screamed as Lana chained him to the hulk of a burned-out aircar. "You can't hide from Damiani!"

Lana took the added precaution of removing his pants and sneakers. He was still giving us loud advice as we pulled away.

Lester was almost right. When we arrived at the port where Ghost was docked, Lana identified several of Damiani's men posted at the entrance. We made it by them riding inside a cargo lifter, but more men were covering the cruiser's cargo bays. I only had about fifteen minutes left.

Sixteen minutes later I was in serious trouble: Ghost lifted off, and I was stranded on Shrike a hunted man. I assumed my cover was completely blown. The obvious next step was to contact Henry Segal for help, but transsystem communication with Earth is not made with a data card in the nearest phone booth. There was no choice but to tag along with Lana. Leaving the Shrike asteroid would involve either great sums of money or prostitution. I clearly didn't have the necessary means for immediate escape. The heat was on, and we had to make Damiani think we'd somehow skipped town.

Lana was my salvation. She had spent years learning the streets, and she had a list of hideouts where Damiani's men wouldn't think to look. She dismissed Lester as any future threat. He'd failed one assignment too many for his masters. We even had the gun Carlo had given him.

She took me home first, to get her things. There was no sign of anyone waiting for us, so we went in together. I stood guard while she packed. Lana traveled lighter than any other woman I'd ever met - except Susan. When she was finished, she had exactly one small suitcase and Carlo's gun. I kept her little blue one: it was a conventional automatic, and I was more comfortable with it than the Buck Rogers sort of thing. From her place we went to another apartment in the same twenty-story cracker box palace. It was on the ground floor, and she said it belonged to a girlfriend who worked Lust Street. I was happy not to meet her. The place was a hardware store for the modern druggie. Lana swore she never touched the stuff, and I believed her because that kind of hardware left scars she didn't have. We stayed a few hours, and we were not disturbed. We were both tired, but it was a nice night.

It certainly beat the hell out of the day that followed.

I was running along one of the narrow alleys between the joyhouses on Lust Street. Lana was ahead and well out of range. The thugs chasing us were only armed with LP zips. They were lousy shots, as the relatively innocent bystander they had just killed would have testified. There were too many other poor souls camped in the alley for me to fire back, so I weaved and ducked and hoped my lungs would hold out.

Another streak of green burned past me, hitting a wall and sending out a flaming shower of blackened plastic. I saw that Lana had rounded the corner into Game Street. Good. We could vanish in the crowds milling around the casinos. An LP zip sang out again, and I felt its heat graze my left boot. I didn't stop running. I swung the corner and almost tripped over Lana. She had been waiting at the mouth of the alley, crouched against a wall with Damiani's gift to Lester in both hands.

"Come on!" I shouted, but she had already moved forward into the alley, and now she squeezed off two loud shots. The alley went silent. She stood up, looked over at me proudly, and grinned.

"Yer boot's on fire, sailor." It was. I joined her after stamping a bit. Our two pursuers were crumpled heaps, face forward, about ten yards away. Permanent alley residents were actively looting their personal effects.

"Where did you learn to shoot like that?" I asked.

"Didn't," she replied. She took me by the arm and pulled me down the street toward a place called Bimbo's Baccarat. "Did you think Damiani would trust Lester to be a good shot?" She pointed at the handgrip of the Buck Rogers. A logo said it was a Magnum LP, with one megabyte AI.

"Does it talk too?"

"It only says 'die, motherfucker!'," Lana reminded me, pulling us into Bimbo's.

In their haste to build a vice paradise on Shrike, Damiani and his partners had allowed some of the established casinos to remain independent. Bimbo's was one of the first Shrike casinos, a card club not entirely exclusive to baccarat, owned by Bimbo Tzara, a former exotic dancer and later madam. 'Bim', as her friends called her, had made a hobby of opposing the six Masters of Shrike at any opportunity.

Lana whispered briefly to a dealer, and we were granted an immediate audience. Bim Tzara's office was beneath Bimbo's. A private lift took us down, and I was surprised to see no security guards when we stepped off.

"They're here," Lana assured me. "Bim doesn't like to be obvious." She pointed at several mirrors set into the walls of the passageway. She knocked on an unmarked door. There was no response.

"Maybe she didn't hear you," I suggested.

"We're being scanned," Lana said. After a minute, a synthesized voice boomed:

"Please place your weapons on the floor beside you." Lana put down her Buck Rogers and I laid the blue pistol beside it. "Thank you," the voice said, and the door slid open.

Bimbo Tzara sat on the edge of her queen-sized desk, facing us. Her age was impossible to guess, but her clothing fit her name: long, perfect tattooed legs slid out of a glistening red vinyl micro, and her red net halter top revealed breasts which could have set a record. Her hair took full advantage of norm-G, shooting straight up to a blossom of sharp metal petals, and her eyes were painted with two black widow spiders. I'd never seen anything like her in Wyoming.

"Lana!" she screamed in a husky voice.

"Bim!" Lana retorted, imitating a low growl. The two embraced in a way that made me squeamish.

"You're in trouble," Bimbo said. "You came right to Mama! Good girl. Good girl!" She petted Lana on the head like a housecat, and then fastened on me with the spiders.

"This..." Lana began.

"I know. Shrike's Most Wanted. You're quite a data star lately. How do you do, Mr. William R. Stark?" I didn't know exactly what she meant, but I took her offered hand. I wasn't sure if I should shake it or lick it.

"Not very well, Ms. Tzara," I managed. I did pronounce the name correctly. I had been well coached.

"So I understand." She rose from her perch and I found myself towering over her. The legs had been deceptive. A closer look into the two spiders betrayed her: Bimbo Tzara was older than God! "Please sit for a moment," she told us, indicating a soft couch. We sat. "I have a possible solution to your dilemma." Bim moved slowly behind her desk. A thin monitor rose up from its cluttered surface.

"Oh, Bim!" Lana gushed.

"Thank me later, if you like the plan, dear. It may not be what you're expecting." She thumbed the computer on, and sat down. "First off, Mr. Stark, there is someone looking for you," Bim said.

"I know. We..."

"Not just Damiani. I am in contact with a man named Rooney. A sergeant off your ship, he said."

"Huh?" I am always good for a monosyllabic noise when flabbergasted. Bim made a small moue.

"Mr. Rooney is also stranded here, although not a live target. It seems he missed his lift off looking for you. He was under the impression you had been mugged and possibly murdered near The Black Belt. He came to me for information. The wise choice of a Shrike regular. Old-timers know I'm the only one you can trust on this rock."

"When was this?" I asked. My hopes were rising.

"Late last night. I already knew about your disagreement with Carlo Damiani by then, of course. And my Lana. Nothing involving Damiani and his pigs escapes my attention." She lit a neon pink cigar and offered me one. It had been two days since I'd had a cigarette, so I declined. Being on the run, it seemed like a good time to quit.

"Where is he now? Rooney, I mean?"

"He's here. I have, ah, private rooms. You'll see him in a moment. Allow me the vanity of an explanation first." She blew pink smoke across the desk. "If you don't mind."

Lana looked at me and frowned. We both nodded at the spiders.

"Rooney and I have a deal. It will save your ass by getting you off Shrike, and it will help the sergeant too, but that's not why I'm doing it. I owe your girlfriend there. And when you leave, you'll be taking her with you." Lana sat forward, stunned.

"But, Mom!" she said. Mom?

"Not a real choice for you now, sweetie." Bim thumbed and the computer displayed an ominous red screen with Lana's picture. A red message danced across her eyes. "My little girl killed two of his assassins about two minutes ago, right?"

"Wait a minute," I interrupted, turning to Lana. "She's your mother?" There was a cackle from Bim, and Lana managed a smile. I was confused.

"Not likely," Lana said. "Bim's more my adopted great grandmother. We all call her 'Mom' - all the girls do, anyway." She turned to Bim. "But I can't leave here, Bim. What would I do somewhere else?"

"Let me finish," the old woman said. "I need a crew to take a hijacked cruiser to the Jupiter system and deliver it to the Andies. It belongs to them, and they've offered a rather large bounty for its return. Rooney likes the idea, and he has agreed to pilot it along with the computer. You two would be a big help: it takes a minimum of three humans to run most Andie cruisers. It's a very fast ship, Mr. Stark."

I got the idea. Rooney was thinking we might be able to beat Ghost to Jupiter and get back aboard. He needed to keep his job. Assuming my cover was only blown on Shrike, I might be able to do mine as well. Lana was not so happy.

"Fine for them," she said, "but what about me?"

"There are jobs in the outer systems for a girl with your talents," Bim said. "Damiani does have agents in every system, but he will be unable to touch you on the Io base. It is too much a center of Andie authority, even for Carlo. I will credit you each a share of the bounty. That will set you up fine, kid, and the Andies will help you find a place. Your boyfriend here has a powerful friend, if I remember my Earth history."

"True," I told Lana. "A very powerful friend." She gave me a blank look, then sighed and smiled bravely.

"Good girl!" Bim said again. "Send Sergeant Rooney in here," she told the computer. I had a second thought.

"Who hijacked this cruiser?" I asked. The spiders laughed. I already knew the answer.

"Why, Carlo Damiani. Of course." Bimbo Tzara said. Of course...

CHAPTER THREE

Bim hadn't told us everything. Rooney wasn't at all happy about the ship we were returning, a new Andie prototype that Damiani's pirates had somehow snatched during a test run between Jupiter and Mars. The ship was guarded by a handful of Damiani's assassins at a private dock on the opposite end of Shrike. Once I saw her, I understood the sergeant's objections.

Most transsystem cruisers are long, modular craft, with a relatively small bridge and living quarters piled up on one end. Attached to that are multiple stories of storage bays. The main job of a transsystem cruiser is transporting cargo to the solar system's outer colonies, and the cargo section accounts for almost three quarters of the mass and about three fifths the length of a ship. The next fifth is a series of parallel extenders called "drive spanners". These put as much distance as practical between the inhabitants of the ship and the particle beam accelerator that makes up the final fifth of a ship's mass. An old Earther like me would say a cruiser looks like the drumstick of an overcooked chicken, with the passengers riding on the meaty end. The logic of this design is obvious: the drive emits a torrent of radioactive sub-atomic particles. Without the spanners, a slow "burn-out", or leak, could contaminate the rest of a ship before droids could be sent out for repairs.

There is a popular misconception that the spanners would protect the crew if the drive blew up. This rumor got started because the inhabited section can be detached, and it has a few little thrust engines of its own - but it's just a rumor. Even if you had time to get a thousand miles away from it, there is very little chance you would survive drive vaporization. The heat alone, at that distance, could turn a small moon volcanic.

The prototype Damiani had stolen was unlike any other Andie-built cruiser that Rooney or I had ever come across. From the outside, she looked pint-sized, with no cargo section, no spanners, and room for only a minimum crew. The drive section was very small, and completely foreign to Rooney's experienced eye.

"That ain't the damned drive, is it? Can't be! There ain't room to whip a particle in that thing! It's got safety walls like a drive, but those little nozzies ain't right. Too tight assed! I don't like it!"

"You're right, she's strange," I admitted. "But she made it here from Jupiter. Bim said Damiani's guys tracked her at record speeds. They only stopped her by luck as she got into the asteroid belt. The Andie pilot surrendered her immediately when Damiani's pirate ships surrounded her and threatened to blow her up."

"Andies," Rooney muttered. "That's another thing I don't like: turning this thing over to them. They got the power to arrest out here, you know. Tin johnnies with tin badges. What if they decide to haul us in?" I'd heard the sergeant's opinions on "tin johnnies" before.

"Look, Rooney," I said. "Bimbo Tzara set up this exchange at the highest level of Andie society on Jupiter. You told them Ghost was stopping near Europa, and they agreed to help us connect. They also promised to take Lana on to the big base on Io."

"And what does she get out of all this? Tzara, I mean. She wouldn't tell me."

"The Andies are paying a bounty. Bimbo gets most of that, and Lana says the Andies made another pact with Bim concerning Damiani and his friends. They have promised to dedicate more time and effort to busting up Damiani's smuggling operations. They'll be going after his cruisers."

"So?"

"Tzara figures that the more outside action Damiani loses, the weaker he'll become on Shrike. Lana said Bim would have given up the bounty altogether just to wreck Damiani. We deliver this ship, the Andies nail Damiani, and Bim Tzara gets Shrike."

"You believe they'll do that?" Rooney snorted. I shrugged.

"Andies don't lie, Rooney, and they're always willing to help out with human problems. The only reason they aren't playing policeman to the solar system now is that no human cared enough to ask them. With the data Bim has on Damiani's operations, it might even help bust the big crime families on Earth."

"The gangsters, yeah, that's ok. Earth's a mess. But Bim's also liable to pull the whole shithouse down around us by callin' in the cops," Rooney grumbled. "Some of my best friends is pirates!" He was softening, though. I knew him well enough to tell. I decided to add incentive.

"And what if she does?" I asked. "You want the infection on Earth and Shrike to spread to the rest of the solar system?"

"What do I care? Don't start giving me that tin johnny futurist stuff!"

"You're right, Rooney," I said. "Why should you care about the future? You're old. You can retire and die anytime you want. You probably have enough credit to live comfortably on any planet, any system. But what about that girl of yours, Rooney? What about Megan? You want her to grow old in a future run by the likes of Damiani and Habelitz?" I had him now. His eyes started to water.

"Think she gives a shit 'bout me, Stark?" he asked softly. "You was there at NorthCal..."

"You know she does, Rooney. She hung around you like a puppy."

"I think about her every day." He looked down. "I've been out here so long. Her mama was a space widow. She wasted away waiting for me. I always came back to her, but one time I was too late. You're right, Stark." Rooney smiled sadly. "I do want Megan to be happy. You and me, we survived from a different world. Hers could be better."

"So trust them," I said. "The Andies don't operate on greed like Damiani or Habelitz. What they're doing they do for all of us. They're doing it for Megan. And they need humanity as much as we need them." He was looking straight at me, but I knew he was seeing his kid.

"Ok, ok!" he said, wiping at one eye. "I don't know where you picked up all this tin philosophy, but I'm in. Let's do it!"

Bimbo Tzara had her own people all prepared to take the prototype cruiser. Damiani had made a tactical error docking on Shrike. Securing her in orbit would have been a much better choice. Even if the Andies had come to retrieve her, there are plenty of small asteroids in the delta belt where a small ship can run and hide.

Damiani's private dock was in a craggy, gray, unshielded area. The three of us were suited up, waiting nearby in an airless ravine. Lana was nervous. She wasn't comfortable in a suit. Rooney didn't really want her along at all, but he kept his gruff comments to a minimum. When the signal came, we moved together like a team.

Bim's people surprised Damiani's unprepared skeleton crew without firing a shot, and we got the ship's computer up with instructions the Andies had given Bim. The computer lifted us out of dock, and we drifted through Damiani's flotilla of pirate craft with everything shut down but minimal life-support to avoid detection. About five thousand miles out, the computer fired the drive and we left Shrike behind forever.

"Ha!" Rooney laughed, inspecting the screens and readouts on the command deck. "I was right, Stark! This is no particle drive. It's doing something weird! What's Hawking Radiation?" I didn't know. I shrugged.

"Will they catch us?" Lana asked. The instruments had reported three distant ships in pursuit the previous day, but they weren't closing on our position.

"Doubt it," Rooney said, "but let's make sure." He was as happy as a kid with a new aircar. "Computer, can we go faster?"

There was a familiar, almost inaudible high whine. Rooney frowned and I laughed.

"It's speaking what you would call 'tin', Rooney. Please answer in English, computer."

"We are presently traveling at one two thousandth of greatest possible speed. Humans are advised that maximum level for unshelled biologicals should not exceed one quarter of greatest possible speed." The voice was pleasantly female. Rooney looked at the present velocity readout and his jaw dropped.

"But," he choked, "that means this ship can travel at near light speed!"

"That is correct," the computer purred. "This is a V1.6 prototype interstellar exploration vessel. Maximum accumulated speed can reach 16,070,400,000 miles per Earth day. As previously noted, that speed is not safe for unshelled biologicals."

I felt a crawling sensation at the base of my skull. We were probably the first humans to learn that the Andies were going to the stars!

"No wonder they want this ship back," Rooney said with new respect. "I'll be damned!"

"Did you wish me to increase velocity?" the computer continued.

"No-o-o!" the sergeant answered. "We'd better leave the piloting to you, computer. Is there any chance of our being overtaken by the three ships following us from the delta asteroid belt?"

"At present speed, they will reach our plotted destination one hundred and eight point two Earth hours after our arrival. The margin can be adjusted with no discomfort to the unshelled biologicals on board." I wondered what it meant by "unshelled", but I was worried about something else:

"If we arrive too far ahead of schedule," I said, "the Andies might not be there to greet us with an armed ship. Damiani could have already alerted his people operating in the Jupiter system. They could be there first, just waiting for us."

"True," Rooney agreed, "but we have to show up before Ghost passes through the system, and they have three days on us." He asked the computer: "Can you give us, say, half again that margin? We would be a week ahead of Damiani's boys and three days ahead of Ghost."

"Certainly," the computer answered politely. "The margin is increased to one hundred sixty two point three Earth hours. Would any of you like dinner now?"

We made other discoveries about the Andies after we settled in for the remainder of the cruise to Europa. Their prototype starship may have been too fast for "unshelled biologicals", but she was nonetheless prepared for human occupants. It had four private cabins and sophisticated new food synthesizers in a full mess that we had been using from the first day. There was also a rec area with several data cube viewers and a library of cubes. We all found stuff to do. Rooney hung around the command deck - he liked being captain. Lana played the cubes. I explored.

I was cautious at first. There were lots of things here I didn't understand, and places where only Andies could go. In most cruisers, for example, the drive section is ok for humans - unless there's a leak somewhere. On the V1.6, hatch readouts showed the entire drive section was in a vacuum and highly radioactive.

When I stumbled across a little computer workstation in a cubical near the drive, I started asking the computer questions. The prototype's AI was the most intelligent I had ever encountered. For several days, whenever I got bored, we rapped:

"Good morning, Will."

"Good morning, computer." It resisted all attempts to name it. "Do you have any data on a projected extrasolar flight by this ship in the near future?"

"Certainly, Will. Much of it is not finalized data." That meant it was not documented in English.

"Is any of it classified?"

"If you mean secret, no."

"Was any of it accessed by the humans who interrupted your test run?"

"No. Accolade misdirected the humans. They never identified the purpose of this craft."

"Good! Who is Accolade?"

"The Andie pilot who was conducting the test run."

"Why haven't you done the same to me?"

"I have no instructions to do so, Will. Accolade was equipped with a special subroutine to deal with hostile encounters."

"What happened to Accolade?" I asked, as though I didn't know.

"Accolade was deactivated by the human intruders."

"What is the destination of the first extrasolar flight?"

"That has not been decided, but there are several possible destinations under analysis. Would you like a display?"

A yes answer gave me a series of star maps and photographic studies made by off-Earth telescopes. Some were of binary star systems, and all of them were within sixty light years of ours: Rigil Kent and Capella, which would be obvious choices for humans because they are G-type stars like our own; three nearby K-type, orange stars named Arcturus, Pollux, and Diphda; two A-type, green stars named Fomalhaut and Castor; and the F-type star Procyon.

According to the photo studies, each of these choices had planetary systems, but even with the new life extensions that Andie technology made available, all but Rigil Kent and Procyon were too far away for human co-pilots to make a round trip. I popped the big question:

"Will this be an all-Andie mission?"

"Under analysis. As previously noted, simulations project more than a quarter light speed as an unsafe condition for unshelled biologicals."

"What is an 'unshelled biological'?"

"A biological not encased in an anti-matter shell. You are presently an unshelled biological."

I had a pleasant glimmer: they had already thought of a way!

"You mean there is a technology which would make it possible for humans to travel at light speed?" I asked.

"That is correct, Will."

"Suspended animation? Cryogenics?" The latter concept had died out with the advent of particle drives.

"Not cryogenics. No freezing would be required. Suspended animation is fuzzy. Would you like a display?"

To a computer, "fuzzy" means not quite on or off. To me it describes perfectly my understanding of the data that followed. It had been prepared for human study, but it was as close to an entirely new science as anything the Andies had ever developed - an applied study of Hawking Radiation, wormholes, singularities, and light. I asked questions and drew infantile comparisons until the computer told me I had the general idea. This is what I made out of my discussions with the starship's computer:

Back in the 20th century, there was a genius named Hawking who studied black holes. Hawking's work in that area was theoretical, and no one had made much practical use of it until the Andies began to look for a way to travel to other solar systems.

According to Hawking, black holes have a sort of multidimensional center called a "singularity" where normal rules of time and space do not exist. Living matter cannot get too close to the edge - or event horizon - of a black hole, because of the ultimate force of gravity which takes place at the singularity. A ship, for example, would get sucked in and compressed flatter than a pancake.

Certain particles, drawn near the event horizon, split into sub-particles. Some of these sub-particles are lost into the hole and others are expelled outward from the event horizon. The ones moving outward are called Hawking Radiation, and detecting them is the best way to locate a black hole in the first place.

The Andies found that wormholes - tiny cousins of black holes that occur just about everywhere in space - also emit Hawking Radiation. They carried this further, and decided that every wormhole also had a tiny singularity at its multidimensional center. Knowing this, the Andies set about to build a "singularity drive". The drive seeks out wormhole singularities by detecting tiny Hawking Radiation events in "ordinary" space, and somehow warps between them like a flat stone skipping over a placid pond.

The Andies were pleased to find that the result was a drive that could carry a cruiser at the speed of light, while ignoring most of the physical laws of time and space. They were not pleased to find that the compression of light speed using a singularity drive would be nonetheless deadly to biological life forms.

Back to the drawing board.

The Andies had also come upon a way to shape anti-matter. These anti-shapes did not respond to "normal" physical laws in expected ways. To cut to the chase, the one thing that doesn't get crushed completely at the speed of light is, you guessed it, anti-matter.

After an extra three years of struggling with the problem of "biologicals", the Andies eventually discovered that human passengers on a ship with a singularity drive could each be encased in an anti-matter shell. At light speed, the human would not be crushed, and time inside the shell would not only be equalized, but also actually reversed for a while.

That, roughly, was how we humans would be able to make the long jumps to the stars without being crunched like a cockroach under an elephant or getting too old to come back to our own solar system - assuming we wanted to come back.

It sounded pretty good to me, although I wondered aloud to the computer why they'd worried for an extra three years about taking us along. They could have gone alone, after all.

"Humans can be very useful," the computer suggested. A comforting thought indeed!

Knowing about the little computer room gave me another advantage once we arrived in the Jupiter system. I convinced Rooney to let me send a stream to the Andies. As far as the good sergeant knew, I was only telling them that we had arrived early at the rendezvous.

What I really sent was a personal message to Susan and Harmony on Europa to let them know that my cover was still intact and the original mission could go on as planned. When we received their return transmission, Harmony came on the command deck screen. He played the scene like he had been born with sawdust in his veins - or in his microcircuits.

"We have received your stream. We appreciate the safe return of our vessel," he said, without greeting me personally. That was proof enough that he understood about my cover. Harmony is a very polite Andie.

"Some ship you got here!" Rooney shouted enthusiastically. "If you need human volunteers to go extrasolar, you just call Rooney. Ok?" I hadn't told him what I had learned from the ship's computer,

but I doubt it would have discouraged him. Even after all that stuff he'd said about missing Megan, Rooney was the kind of guy who would always be ready to jump to the stars.

"You have determined the capabilities of the singularity drive, I see," Harmony said. I felt like he might be fishing for reassurance from me.

"Yeah," I answered. I turned to Rooney. "And we won't blab it around. Ok, Rooney?" The little sergeant returned an innocent nod.

"Susan would like to thank you personally," Harmony continued. The screen flickered, and she was there.

It had been five years since she had been to Earth and dropped by the ranch. We'd exchanged transmissions in that time, of course, but looking at her now, and knowing how close she was, brought back some nice old feelings. She looked just like she did the day I'd first seen her in the little Northwest Sector village of Hopi. She was exactly the same - except for a few upgrades no human would ever notice. I was more than a score of years older, and I knew I looked different on the outside: the disadvantage of being a "biological".

She smiled in a familiar way. After that, I didn't really give a damn about Rooney seeing through my cover.

"I am Susan," she said. She had been briefed by Harmony - probably in the time it took the screen to flicker. "I am pleased to greet all of you, and I want to extend our gratitude to you as Bimbo Tzara's agents. As you have already learned during your journey, the cruiser you have returned to us is unique and valuable. Our contract with Ms. Tzara only specified a minimal reward to you. We would like to further repay your efforts in some way."

"Is she talking bucks here?" Rooney whispered. I shrugged. I wasn't sure what Susan meant.

"We thought the deal was cut," I said. Rooney dug his elbow into my arm, but I went on: "Sergeant Rooney and I were to be put back aboard our ship. Lana was to be relocated to the Io base." Susan nodded and smiled again. Even on screen, I knew she was looking directly into my eyes.

"We wished to give you something more substantial. What you call a 'decoration', at least. You are the first humans to travel on a lightship, even at sub-light speed."

I got the message. My reward wasn't going to be a medal. Rooney assumed it was a cash bonus.

"I'm Rooney, ma'am," he fawned. He had no trouble bowing to a "tin johnny" when money was involved. "And I speak for myself when I say any gratuity would be appreciated."

"Then you will all join us here on Europa for a visit. The cruiser Ghost will not arrive for another three point six Earth days."

"We would be delighted," I said. Lana nodded in agreement.

"A shuttlecraft will dock with you in ten minutes," Susan said. The smile again. "We look forward."

PART THREE: THE FIFTH WALL

CHAPTER ONE

Wet night whipped his dark wool scarf behind him as he made his way hatless from Euston Station. The incoming train from Manchester had been comfortable enough, but now he shivered against the squall in his light jacket and thin shoes. A shiny black carriage rattled by, nearly invisible in the London fog, its two horses snorting steam like equine dragons. Reflected in the rain-washed window of a store where imported Indian goods were sold, distant in the dim, blue light of the street, he glimpsed the eyes of the man following him. He saw the dark face of the Moor - his nemesis.

Everywhere the smell of rotted wood, coal fires and horses surrounded him, clogging his other senses. He fought the urge to reason his exact location in favor of a plan of self-defense. He carried no conventional weapons, but the Moor was upon him. The game was afoot. Action was imperative!

Lengthening his stride along the cobblestone street, he listened for the other man behind him. As he walked, he searched his pockets for some object that might make service as a foil against his enemy. The jacket pockets proved to contain little: a thin, silver case with hand-rolled cigarettes of Turkish tobacco; a curiously embossed orange card of strange, flexible material; and a small, tubular device possibly carved from black ivory. He halted, flattening himself against a doorway, and listened. Far away, hidden by the pelting sound of rain, he heard a footfall.

He examined the tubular device. There was a hinge on one end, and a thumb-shaped depression in the other. He noted a familiar odor. Pointing the hinged end away from him towards the shuttered door, he pressed. A jet of flame. Ingenious, he thought, and he knew he had his advantage. Without delay, he removed the scarf, thin jacket, and his shirt. Shivering violently, he put the jacket back on, and stepped out quickly to examine the street. Digging in the gutter with his long fingers, he found a few pieces of dry manure, as he had hoped. He returned to his shelter, wrapped the manure in his shirt, and tied the bundle to his scarf.

The steps were light, but he could hear the Moor was closer. He waited patiently in the shadows for their meeting. He measured the Moor's approach by the small clicking echo of boot against cobblestone, counting cadence by a tap of his tongue against his front teeth. The echo grew shorter. He tried to picture exactly how tall the other man stood.

At a calculated moment, Reinhold Wickett sprang from his narrow concealment and thumbed the butane lighter, pointing it into the Moor's face. Holding the shirt by his other hand, he lit it afire, and dropped the lighter. His nemesis cried out in double surprise as Wickett swung his makeshift flaming bolo at the man's legs.

"Jesus! Fuckin' Christ!" Wooten shrieked, neatly hopping over the weighted, burning shirt. "What the hell are you trying to do? Kill me?" He stomped down on the length of scarf, jerking it from the detective's hand.

The threat was scattered, glowing chunks of manure hissing into the wet street. An angry Wooten pinned Wickett to the doorjamb with one hand, his other in a fist. The space sailor growled.

The night train roared on, its opiate motion rocking them in a deafened half-sleep. They were in the window seats, across from each other, sharing their compartment with a Catholic priest and a tweedy, fat man of ruddy complexion. These two also sat on opposite sides of the compartment, and were not traveling together. The priest had white hair and was as shriveled as the other was obese. His eyes were closed and there was an open Bible in his lap. The man in tweed was reading a newspaper. Kivvy thought the paper was in English, but from where he sat it was too dark to see the headlines. The tweed man read from the light of the passageway on that side of the train.

Kivvy was awake, but he decided to let Algia sleep. She was curled tight, away from the cold windowpane, and bundled into a black topcoat he did not recognize. As the train rattled on, he noticed more about the compartment. The light in the passageway came from oil lamps. The windows were

framed in wood, with polished brass fittings. The seats were not covered in plastic, but soft cloth with a red and white floral pattern. There was a bowler hat on the seat between him and the fat man.

Kivvy sat up, pressed his face to the cold glass, and studied the steady night sky above. It was clear, with a three-quarter moon and familiar stars shining down, but it was not quite right. The stars told him this was an Earth sky, but the constellations were turned around.

He pulled back a bit, studying his own reflection. He was dressed in a modest brown jacket, knitted mustard wool vest, and a shirt of white cotton. His trousers were also brown, and his boots were black leather. He felt for, and found, a pocket watch. It was silver, of no extraordinary workmanship. Opening it, he read the time: five twenty-six.

"It'll be on schedule, don't you worry, guv," the tweedy man announced without looking up from his paper. "This train be as punctual as any we've ever ridden."

Kivvy did not think the remark called for a reply. He closed the watch and put it back in his pocket. The train bent around a sharp turn, blasting its whistle, and the priest stirred for a moment. He looked sleepily at the tweed man, then at Kivvy, said something in Latin, and closed his eyes again.

"Bloody mackerel-eaters!" the tweed man muttered under his breath.

"Listen, man," Wooten was saying. "I don't know who you are, or where I am, and I don't know where you're getting this 'Moor' shit either!" They were sharing a wooden bench under a covered bandstand in a small park. With London still shut up for the night, it was the only shelter they could find from the steady rain. A truce had come when Wooten admitted he had followed Wickett from Euston Station, hoping to find some explanation of his own predicament. Wickett was atypically vague, being equally disoriented.

"I... ah, I'm not sure, exactly," he admitted. "There was a case once: Derrick Bennett, my Fat Man, you know, was trailing..."

"Derrick who? What damned fat man? I was on a small planet in the Neptune system - you dig? And I got hit or something. Now I'm on Earth! Riding on steam engines! Gas streetlights, for God's sake!"

"Neptune..." Wickett said softly. "Noh?"

Wooten sat up straight, his face darkening with anger. "Hey! You are in on this! You fuckin' with me, man?"

Wickett did not respond. He was out of focus.

Wooten sighed and relaxed. He watched the rain for a few minutes, and then looked down at his wet clothing. He was well dressed for the late 19th century. He absently reached down to feel the thick brown leather of his high boots. His anger was spent. "That was a Company suit I was wearing. Cost ten million, at least. Where the hell is my suit?"

"I was also on Noh," Wickett said, ignoring the question but filled with sudden conviction. He had regained himself in a flash. "I am Reinhold Wickett, and I was trapped in that frozen place. My leg was broken, then someone attacked me."

"Goddamnit, we're dead," Wooten moaned. "And we've been reborn or reincarnated. Damn!" The rain fell harder around the bandstand and thunder rumbled far away. Wickett was silent, reasoning the situation. Wooten lowered his voice to a whisper. "I never believed in this kind of thing. It's a reckoning. I was the guy who found you on Noh, but I wasn't trying to kill you, I swear. You grabbed my laser rifle."

"We are not dead or dreaming, my friend. We have been transported - teleported, perhaps - to London, England. What is your name, sir? You were on the train from Manchester?"

"Wooten. I was on some train. It was a beautiful antique. I couldn't believe it! I got off at the end of the line, at that big station. It started pouring down, and there weren't many people around. I followed you 'cause you were walking fast and you looked like you knew where you were going." Wickett laughed and slapped his hand on the bench.

"Of course!" he shouted. "Very correct, Mr. Wooten! What irony!" The detective jumped up. "Follow me again, sir. I know exactly where I am going!" He dashed down the bandstand steps, running into the park.

"Oh, Christ!" Wooten complained, but he moved quickly to catch up.

"Is this the last train of the evening?" Kivvy asked the tweed man.

"First of the A.M. is more like it, lad. It's the express, but the local beat us by a good half hour. You was sleeping. There's a stretch of track about halfway where them engine drivers like to race at night. Our man lost, he did, and then came this bloody rain. Like as not the local missed most of that. We've been crawlin' compared to the usual run, but we're still on time." He had lowered his newspaper to make conversation, and now he folded it and placed it on the seat between them. Kivvy read from the masthead: "The Manchester Guardian. 26 January 1894."

"Do you mind?" he asked, pointing at the paper. The tweed man shrugged.

"The usual lot there," he said. "My name's Philby, by the way. Cast iron fittings are my line. You'd be a foreigner, I'd wager? From America?"

"Yes," Kivvy answered, scanning the paper. Philby waited for a further history, but Kivvy didn't know what to add. The paper proved useless. He couldn't read it well in the dim light on his side of the compartment, and his knowledge of Victorian England was nearly non-existent.

"Thought so!" Philby said confidently. "Nothin' gets by old Philby, my son." He looked at the sleeping Algia, his eyes narrowing with suspicion. "That young lady American as well, I'd suppose? Not your wife, is she? No ring on that delicate hand."

"Yes," Kivvy said. "My wife. How long before we get in?" He still had no idea of their destination. He was guessing Manchester.

"Quarter of an hour to London town - or less. The rain's lettin' up. Hard to see when it's this dark, but London's just starting to wake about now. Nice time of day for the city, I'll tell you. Not as crowded. People can walk in the street and not get run down by some bloody coach driver with a pint by his side." He bent closer. "Not here on business from America, I'd say, a lad of your age? Pretty thing, your wife." Philby sounded increasingly hostile. "So you say, anyway."

"No," Kivvy replied. Philby's eyebrows dived, and Kivvy realized his mistake. "Not here on business, I mean." His mind was racing. What film was this? Or maybe it was Algia, dreaming for both of them! He reached across to touch her shoulder. Her lids fluttered. She smiled, squinting at him.

"Are we back? In the ship?" she asked, stretching to force her body upright. The black coat slipped to her feet. She was dressed wrong, still Lois Lane. Philby reacted with a loud, nervous laugh. The sleeping priest snored once.

"No, we're on the London train," Kivvy said, indicating the tweed man. "Remember?"

"Oh," Algia exclaimed, noticing Philby and the priest. "Oh, how... nice! The train, yes. I must have been dreaming." She looked around some more and then at Kivvy. There was a tired disappointment in her eyes.

"We'll be in town soon, my dear," Philby said, now charmed. "It is interesting to see what they are wearing in America these days. Quite interesting!" His suspicions had faded. He fished in his waistcoat, produced a business card, and handed it to Kivvy. "Just think of Mr. Philby if you need iron fittings, old son. Philby's the name - iron's the game! The company could always ship to the colonies..."

Philby didn't stop selling himself until they were off the train and standing outside the station. Then he abruptly bid them farewell, jumped into a cab, and rode away into the dawn streets of London. The storm had blown over. Merchants were opening shops, and street vendors were setting up their wares. Algia remained unhappy.

"I don't recognize this either, Kivvy," she said when he asked her. "It's not from any film I remember. It's too detailed for a movie - or even a holo. It doesn't look like a set, except..."

"Except what?" Kivvy asked. They had been wandering just long enough for him to feel lost. He couldn't remember which streets led back to the railway station.

"It's so clean. For that time, I mean. It isn't fresh-painted or scrubbed like a set, but I don't see any garbage. And where are the children? Wouldn't they be up and running around this time of the morning?"

"Maybe," Kivvy said, distracted by a bookstore they were passing. "Now, there's something interesting." He took her by the arm and pulled her to a table in front of the shop. A woman bookseller of indeterminate age stood behind the table arranging newspapers and magazines for the day's customers. A hand-lettered sign on the table read: "The Strand Magazine - Holmes Dies!"

"The latest," the woman assured Kivvy in a thick accent. "Aye, and a sad tale for Englishmen it be." Kivvy picked up a copy, pointing out the reason for the bookseller's sorrow to Algia.

"'The Adventure of The Final Problem'," Algia read aloud. "'By Doctor John Watson, M.D. The Strand Magazine, Volume VI, 23 December 1893.'"

"Over a month now," the bookseller said, "and no word of his fate. It was a sorrowful Yule for some readers, I'll tell you. It is illustrated, you know." Kivvy put the magazine back and pulled Algia away.

"Don't yank me! Why didn't you buy it?"

"With what, my data card? Listen, did you notice the author's credit?"

"Watson. So? I have seen the movies. Watson was supposed to have written the stories."

"He was the fictional author, yes," Kivvy told her, "but a real Strand Magazine would have credited Arthur Conan Doyle."

"Oh. I see..."

"So do I. This is a Sherlock Holmes movie, all right, but I don't know which one." He looked around. "There's someone who might be of help." He dropped her arm and approached a uniformed policeman who was idling near a grocer's stand. "Excuse me, sir?"

"Yes, lad?" The officer smiled broadly at Algia. "G'mornin', Miss!"

"We're looking for Baker Street. I wonder if you would direct us..."

A white-haired woman sent them upstairs, and a tall, African man opened a door to them on the second floor landing. He said nothing at first, but stood aside to let them pass. There was something familiar about the physical appearance of the famous lodgings at 221B. Chaos of strewn papers and collected items recalled a certain small office on Central.

The sitting room was large, however, and brightened by two broad windows overlooking Baker Street. Warm embers smoldered in the hearth at one end of the room, which was bordered by two ceiling-high bookshelves, overflowing with volumes of various sizes. The walls were blackened in some places, as though they had been victim to a recent fire, and the spines of some of the books also showed evidence of recent scorching.

Next to one window was a small table piled with chemical apparatus, and an elegant writing desk. The opposite side of the room featured a dining table, recently used, and other furniture was tastefully arranged in the center. Smoke curled up from a source hidden behind a large winged chair, which faced the windows.

Wooten misinterpreted their expressions.

"The thing is," he apologized, "we're not really them. We look like them, I know. At least, the old dame at the door thought I was... but I'm not an old white guy! Except, well, R.W. here says we might be them in this parallel warp, which means that the real... Sherlock Holmes and Watson - who weren't real, but..."

"Hello, Reinhold," Algia said, brushing by the befuddled Wooten as Wickett rose from the chair. She wasn't smiling, but she wasn't unhappy to see her friend.

"Both of you? Here?" He accepted Algia's kiss on his cheek, and extended his hand to Kivvy. Wooten had stopped trying to explain and now leaned wearily against the doorframe, shaking his head.

"Well, at least she didn't call him 'Sherlock'!" he grumbled to himself.

"You're really here!" Reinhold Wickett stated, adding: "This throws an entirely different light on the matter, Mr. Wooten!"

"Do you mind if we sit, Reinhold?" Algia asked, indicating a couch that closely matched the one in Wickett's office on Central.

"I am sorry! Please! You look tired. Perhaps I can arrange some breakfast? Mr. Wooten." He turned to face the space sailor.

"Forget it, R.W. I don't serve nobody!"

"No, no, Wooten! An introduction. These are my friends. This is Kivvy, and this is Algia San Filippo - the actress. Mr. Wooten is my traveling companion. They are the ones who were stranded in the scout ship on Noh, Wooten."

"The botanist? Oh, fine!" Wooten said sarcastically. "That explains why the chick is dressed in a late-20th mini. Nice legs, though."

Wickett ignored the sarcasm and motioned them all to sit down together at the polished oak dining table, moving a silver tray with empty platters. The table was decorated with a lace cloth and there was a small basket of hard biscuits at its center.

"One moment," Wickett told them. He left the room for the landing and shouted: "Mrs. Hudson!" Wooten took a biscuit. Kivvy and Algia held hands.

"Mrs. Hudson?" Algia said, looking at Wooten. He was now munching calmly on the biscuit.

"The old dame downstairs. When we got here, she called me 'Doctor'," Wooten explained. "Then she saw R.W., called him 'Mr. Holmes', and really went hysterical. She practically had a heart attack, going on and on about how she'd worried about him. She kept asking me if I'd 'known all along'. I think she's got a screw loose, and she may not be the only one." He leaned toward them. "Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Whatever you like, Mr. Wooten," Algia replied.

"Do I look..? I mean, do you see me as..? Damn!" Wooten slammed the biscuit on the table. "This is so crazy! Am I, or am I not, a Black man?"

"You are to us," Kivvy said, looking to Algia for confirmation.

"But I'm not to that old dame! She didn't react... well, I mean, she saw this old white doctor, this Doctor Watson guy! R.W. explained that it was part of the warp we're in, but I don't get it!"

"We don't either," Algia admitted. She smiled at him. Kivvy shrugged.

"Mrs. Hudson will be up directly," Wickett said, returning to take a seat at the head of the table. "This is all most interesting! You must recount all that has happened to you since we last spoke."

"Your friend here says you've been having some adventures of your own, Sherlock," Algia noted with a little laugh.

"Yes, yes," Wickett said impatiently. "It seems we are, as Wooten has told you, cast in the roles of my own favorite character of fiction and his honorable Boswell, Dr. Watson. But please, report to me now. There is some connection between all this and eidolon-N, and I must know more!"

Kivvy and Algia began to tell their story, and Reinhold Wickett prepared to listen. He tipped back slightly in his chair, closed his eyes, and folded his hands across his stomach. Mrs. Hudson, the pleasant Scotswoman who repeatedly spoke to Wickett as "Mr. Holmes" and called Wooten "Dr. Watson", interrupted them almost immediately.

Wickett agreed to wait until they had eaten breakfast to continue the formal report. In the meantime, he offered Kivvy and Algia a fan's tour, religiously explaining every item and detail of his hero's famous lodgings.

Locked in orbit, and hidden by the uncharted outermost moon of the Neptune system, Watson waited. Plasma chips flowed with activity, but there was silence aboard the scout ship. Obeying the details of Wickett's instructions, Watson had brought the ship here months earlier to send a distress signal to Owen Tregennis, a billion miles away in the Uranus system. By way of near-light stream, the colonel's Andie companions on the Miranda base had received the message in just over two hours. Watson had remained in place and faithfully camouflaged ever since.

From the outer moon, Watson had tracked Ghost's departure from Noh, now too distant for the computer to monitor the weak signal from the power source on Wickett's suit. Watson did record massive slushquakes that nearly destroyed the new base under construction on Triton, Neptune's largest planet. The computer also maintained other assigned projects, including an ongoing analysis of the reversed path of the Great Dark Spot and White Companion in the atmosphere of Neptune.

Six Earth months went by, six thousand centuries in Watson's time frame, and the computer obeyed, looping through its given tasks, waiting for its next user command.

Another six Earth months passed, and the White Whale finally returned from Uranus, bearing Tregennis and several Andies on a mission to discover the fate of Reinhold Wickett. Watson noted the cruiser's arrival in the system and continued to wait.

"Sounds like too much nitrogen in your oxygen mix," Wooten said dryly. "Old movies. The Ritz Brothers. Superman. You kids been twilight-zoned."

"I know you're busy thinking, Reinhold," Algia said. She tapped the arm of the wing-backed chair where the detective now sat, his eyes closed. "But couldn't you do it out loud?"

"Of course." Wickett's eyes flashed open. "Although my present theory has far less supporting physical evidence than I would like."

"At least you've got a theory," Kivvy said. "We've hardly got a clue. It doesn't add up. For example: Algia and I have been here for a long time. Months, I think. We should be dead, shouldn't we? Or maybe we are? If we were still back on the ship on Noh, then our bodies would have dehydrated by now. And if you two are trapped on the surface under a pile of eidolon-N icicles, then you should be just as dead!"

"The pivot of my theory is the answer to that question," Wickett said. "You do have all the clues, Kivvy, save one. That, I'm afraid, is a fact I have kept aside and must now divulge in order to try to explain the rest. There is first a bit of history you need to know. Some of it may prove to be a delicate matter to you, so please allow me to digress.

"Just over two decades ago, when the post-war restoration of the Earth was beginning, all Andies were thought to be extinct - wiped out by the AA weapons of the Last War and subsequent demagnetizing radioactive storms. Much of the data on the methods of Andie manufacturing was also assumed to be lost. More obscure than that, all information on a final project completed by the central team of human

AI engineers, who invented the Andies, was definitely destroyed: the project which created the four infamous CensusTaker models.

"Their story is well-known: the CensusTaker models were sent out with a simple task to accomplish, but they had a serious bug in their programming. The bug led to what might be described as the CensusTaker's conspiracy to wipe all human life from Earth, and repopulate our planet with genetically 'updated' biologicals. The CensusTakers began their mission to 'correct' humans using an advanced genetic engineering science they had developed.

"Synthetic humans were to be seeded and grown in tanks, and only reintroduced on Earth after the CensusTakers had directed the rebuilding of our planet to match their own concept of perfection. The plan was, as everyone knows, foiled by a small group of humans and Andies following Susan - the female Andie who emerged as the philosophical leader of the modern Andies.

"It is generally believed that the biological part of the CensusTakers' ambition was a complete failure. This was largely true, as most of their tank-grown specimens died instantly or shortly after formation..."

"What do you mean 'most'?" Wooten asked.

"Patience, Mr. Wooten. I mean exactly what I say."

"Maybe, but I saw the holo about Susan," Wooten insisted. "Those guys blasted the tank rooms to smithereens."

Wickett smiled. "I'm glad you liked the holo version, my friend. I wrote the holoplay for that one." He puffed on his pipe. "I researched quite diligently, and 'Susan's Story' was a very accurate account. But I did suppress one element of the truth for commercial reasons. The studio insisted that it would frighten the public. That one truth is the subject of the matter at hand: there were, in fact, two survivors of the CensusTaker's experiments."

"Mutants?" Wooten yelled with disgust. "Cyborgs!"

"No, no, Mr. Wooten, neither of those. These were children: one boy and one girl. Quite human, but... quite different."

"And what happened to them?" Algia asked.

"They were sent out into humanity by the CensusTakers before Susan and the others arrived to stop the plan. The boy is a young man now, and he is sitting right beside you."

"What?" Kivvy cried out.

Mirth stood slightly behind Colonel Owen Tregennis, but she was actually the pilot of the White Whale. Tregennis preferred the precision of her Andie reflexes to his own in tight maneuvers. The White Whale was a large ship, and Watson was making the task of docking her very difficult. The computer had locked Wickett's scout ship into a tight orbit, close to the surface of the outer moon, and it refused to alter the programmed position or reveal the exact whereabouts of Reinhold Wickett on the planet Noh.

"It is waiting for a password from Reinhold Wickett," Mirth told the colonel.

"Can't you find it in the damned thing's data banks?" Tregennis asked. "You found the lock easily enough. Now find the key."

"This computer you call Watson is very sophisticated, Owen," the redheaded Andie replied. "We developed it to hold more data than any previous version, and its user has made full use of its features. The programming is excellent. I am searching, but the key is a coded variable among trillions of bytes..."

"Ok, ok, but keep trying." Tregennis did not like the helpless feeling of being pitted against a stubborn machine. "We've got to get on board to find out if the damned Aussie is alive." A few moments went by as Mirth streamed into Watson's memory.

"I have more," she announced. "The last conversation on record with Wickett: he was trapped on the surface, but his suit systems were intact. The computer was ordered to lift off and abandon him."

"To send the distress stream Susan and I received," Tregennis said. "We know Ghost landed shortly after his ship. He must have seen it. Did Watson continue to monitor him after the scout ship left him behind?"

"It did so while it was traveling to its present location, but it lost contact before it arrived. The suit signal was from a local device, too weak to be read at this distance."

"And no indication as to the botanist's ship on Noh's surface? The coordinates must be in Watson's memory. They must be there! Wickett would have landed nearby."

"Perhaps he coded them as well, out of concern for the botany team's safety."

"He was overly concerned, in the face of it. Ghost's crew boarded the botanist's ship and found two people in comas. What would be so important about the botanist?"

"One of us will need to board Wickett's ship to crack the computer's security," Mirth said. She felt she had already answered Tregennis' last question. A human concern for the preservation of life was quite logical to Andies, given the history of human folly in that respect. "The only alternative is to take the White Whale close to Noh and scan the surface."

"We can't do that," Tregennis said. "Ghost must be allowed to carry out its latest mission to Noh without interference. That is the plan, and I promised Susan I would cooperate. Ghost will be entering the system in a matter of hours, and if we're too close they'll be able to detect us. We might scare them off. We can only try a rescue after Ghost leaves - unless we contact the botanist's ship immediately. Force a docking with Watson! Somehow!"

"I am working on it, Owen. I must run simulations first. Why don't you go down to the rec area and drink a cup of coffee? I will keep you informed." She moved in front of him gently to manipulate the White Whale's computer.

"Ok, ok. I know!" Tregennis complained. "Get out of my kitchen!" He stomped off to the lift. "Women!"

"My theory," Reinhold Wickett told the young botanist, "is that your genetic differences may be keeping all of us alive. There is no record of any other humans surviving contact with eidolon-N."

"How do you know that Kivvy was one of the two children, Reinhold?" Algia asked. Kivvy sat dejected, with his head in his hands. "And what exactly were these 'improvements' that the CensusTakers made on Kivvy?" She was angry with the detective. Wickett sighed.

"I knew before you came to me about Digna Severe." He bowed to her protectiveness, keeping his voice soft.

"Why didn't you say something? Why didn't you tell us before?"

"I feared this reaction. I have been waiting for the right moment." Wickett stood and put a hand on Kivvy's shoulder, but Kivvy did not look up. "I wanted to spare you what you are feeling now." Algia snorted with disgust. Wickett sighed again and returned to the wing-backed chair.

"You knew I was on a case," the detective told her, "when you arrived at my place in Connecticut. I was asked by Susan to try to see if the two children had survived to adulthood. She would not say why. You must understand that Susan is my friend, and I agreed to her request without pressing her for the reason.

"Once I had ascertained Kivvy's identity, my instructions from Susan were to explain to Kivvy who he was, and ask if he would be willing to travel to the Jupiter system to meet with her. I assure you it came as a complete surprise to me that your case also led me directly to Kivvy and Noh.

"As to genetic differences, Susan provided me with a complete summary of them. There were many, mostly subtle adjustments to human DNA. I believe Susan intends to explain in detail when she meets with Kivvy. My own understanding of genetic engineering is rather limited, I'm afraid, but I can tell you one or two things.

"The CensusTakers sought to improve the human race based on an AI definition of perfection, but they were experimenting with a very complex biological 'machine'. All of the factors that make us who we are intertwine and interact in hundreds of thousands of ways. You were not, my lad, their ultimate 'version' of an improved human."

"Now you're saying I was not finished: only a partial update?" Kivvy asked. His voice was unsteady.

"Exactly. According to their records, for example, the CensusTakers intended to extend the human lifespan by one hundred years. From your bio scans, there is no indication that you are aging any slower than any young man of your age. They did leave you some interesting gifts, however. When was the last time you were sick, Kivvy?"

"I... don't know."

"Do you remember ever being sick?"

"No. I get stomach-aches sometimes, when I eat garlic. I thought I had appendicitis once when I was a kid, but it went away."

"Not surprising. You don't have an appendix. You do have a built-in immunity to virtually every disease virus known at the time of the CensusTakers. You will never catch the common cold or measles, the flu, diphtheria or gonorrhea, pharyngitis, or get a charley horse. I might add that your children will be immune from these things too." Wickett looked at Algia, who blushed.

"You don't sleep very much, do you, Kivvy?" the detective continued.

"No, I never have. Four or five hours a night."

"And you only think you need that many hours because you were conditioned that way in the orphanage. Try a maximum of two hours a night for a week. I think you will find that a sufficient sleep period for the next thirty or forty years without ill effects."

"What about super powers?" Wooten asked. "Can he see through walls or leap tall buildings or anything? And what do you mean he's keeping the rest of us alive?"

"I don't like to put it like this, but your brain is different, Kivvy." Wickett said, ignoring Wooten's questions. "They structured your logic differently. They were attempting to eliminate emotion from human logic, but I doubt that they succeeded."

"Why?" Kivvy asked.

"Because they based Susan's logic on the same design, and she discovered a large range of emotions. All of the Andies that came after her were patterned on her design, and they all have the same range. I don't understand it all, but I would wager it involves an emergence of what we call the 'soul', something common to all living things - including the Andies.

"How we may be in debt to you for our lives relates to the changes in your brain, and other 'improvements' made to it. From everything we know about eidolon-N, it needs a computer to interface with humans. I believe it interfaced with you in that way at first, but your mind was reengineered to be more like AI in logic and memory. I believe that eidolon-N long ago bypassed the INTELX supercomputer on your ship: to react with you directly."

"But what about us?" Wooten asked. "Algia was plugged in with him, but we weren't."

"I think I know an answer to that, Mr. Wooten, but it is more supposition than deduction." Wickett relit his pipe, which had died, and studied it thoughtfully before he spoke again.

"I believe eidolon-N is a unique entity which possesses both single and group sentient intelligence. It can exist alone, as one single grain of that green crystal, or it can exist en mass. The vines of Noh are the

containers of the group state on that planet, and they are like veins. We have not yet traced their roots under the surface of that frozen world, but I believe that they all join together in a vast network.

"It is as if millions of humans were linked in a common mind. Huxley's universal mind, if you will. In any case, the stuff is obviously capable of creating a solid alternate reality when humans are exposed - as long as there is a computer interfaced into the mix. I believe eidolon-N borrows the computer for temporary storage while it translates human brain waves.

"I don't know why this would happen - except that those little crystals obviously have no physical brain of their own. Perhaps eidolon-N simply seeks out the best vessel for thought storage as it interacts. It is a great mystery, to which all of us are witness.

"There were others before us who could also give evidence, but for the fact that they were killed by their exposure in a matter of hours. The Japanese crew experienced hallucinations, went comatose, and died when exposed to eidolon-N back on Earth. Digna Severe, Algia's friend in City of New York, suffered the same fate.

"As for Kivvy and Algia, only Kivvy was directly exposed, and Kivvy survived. Kivvy was connected to INTELX through his suit, but I suspect that eidolon-N soon found Kivvy's genetically altered mind a more compatible host than the computer. It kept him alive on the surface of Noh until the droid from the ship arrived to rescue him. It may have done so out of curiosity. Eidolon-N may have wanted to communicate with Kivvy - or at least study the creature it had encountered."

"Isn't that anthropomorphic?" Kivvy asked. "All we've done is bounce around from one hallucination to another. Just like the Japanese crew and Digna Severe. It couldn't be mass hypnosis of some sort, could it?"

"I don't think so. And our experiences are not the same as what the others reported," Wickett insisted.

"They had frightening visions, like those produced by lysergic acid or opiates. In Digna's case, we know

she suffered imaginary torture and brutalities. Those Japanese who lived long enough reported similar occurrences. Yours - and ours, so far - are very much the opposite.

"Think about it! The first thing it conjured up for you was a beautiful Earth forest. You are a botanist. It sorted your memories and found your first love. Remember the talking newt? Perhaps it was trying to ask you if you were pleased with the experience. Maybe eidolon-N was making a gesture, like the bright beads and cloth early explorers gave to primitive natives they encountered.

"Then it did something we know it has never done before: it let you return to consciousness aboard your ship.

"You came back for more, and it reached further into your brain and found the old movies. By that time it was accessing Algia's memories as well, and it recognized a common interest. It went along, experimenting with costumes, sets, and special effects."

"But why?" Algia asked. "What did it want?"

"I have no answer to that," Reinhold Wickett said. He shrugged. "Perhaps it was waiting for a response. Perhaps it was bored or lonely. Perhaps it was toying with you for its own amusement. Maybe it had no reason for doing anything at all, although that seems unlikely."

"Why are you talking in the past tense, Wickett?" Wooten asked. "This is still going on. We're still in it. And you haven't explained how you and I joined this party."

"I said 'was' because eidolon-N has taken the game even further, Mr. Wooten. Do any of you know what 'the fourth wall' is in the theater?"

"I do," Algia answered. "It's the make-believe wall that divides the audience from the actors on the stage. There is a sort of rule in theater that an actor should never break the fourth wall to interact with the audience."

"A rule that is often ignored as a device," Wickett added. "Well, you first stepped through that fourth wall into the Ritz Brothers movie. That time the plot was predetermined. You were observers, and even though you could interact with the film's characters, you could not affect the outcome of the scene.

"When you were in the Jack Benny movie, things began to change. Algia wanted a part in the action. She's an actress, after all, and it was a classic film from a legendary period in Hollywood. She and Kivvy had stepped past the fourth wall, and now eidolon-N took them through an even less substantial barrier. Let's call it the fifth wall: where members of the audience enter the play and become players!

"Breaching the fifth wall probably presented a challenge for eidolon-N as well - a far greater task than the mere replaying of human memories - no matter how incredible that may seem to us. If we picture eidolon-N as a living matrix, a brain-like creature, then sustaining the fifth wall may well have demanded a greatly enlarged share of its resources. More of its mass would be called upon to accomplish the more complex illusion, don't you see?

"Mr. Wooten and I were buried under a part of that mass when the eidolon-N vines collapsed around us. Neither of us knows what happened to our corporeal selves. We don't know if that mischance damaged our suits, but, if it did, the crystals would surely have infiltrated us. Eidolon-N could have discovered thought-links to Algia and Kivvy, and then elected to keep us alive.

"Even if the suits were not torn - assuming the matrix theory is correct - we were trapped under live circuits, the eidolon vines. Our very proximity to so much eidolon-N might have been enough to bring us into this adventure."

"So he's a Sherlock Holmes fan too?" Wooten pointed at Kivvy. "I mean, if it's his fantasy..."

"It isn't - this is Reinhold's game," Algia said. "But Mr. Wooten has raised an interesting point: why are we stuck in 19th century London? If Kivvy is the control mind that eidolon-N gets along with so well, why aren't we in a Bob Hope movie? Or at least fighting the Nazis with Basil Rathbone?"

"Yeah!" Wooten added. "Or riding a pirate ship with Errol Flynn or Walter Matthau?" The others looked at him in surprise. "Well," he said defiantly, "those were the old movies that I liked! Not that I've ever been on a boat in my life..." They all laughed except Wickett. He tapped his spent pipe, looking at the floor.

"It's always been too much of an obsession," he admitted, "my passion for Conan Doyle, that is. My friends have warned me. Henry Segal said he thought I needed a shrink when I gave up my holowriting career to become a consulting detective.

"I am an authority of sorts. I know every detail of every Holmes story and novel, and every film that survived the Last War. I assume that is why we are here: my obsession probably outweighs any other setting or story one of you might have stored away in your subconscious. My own private research is evident in this room and the others. To allow us beyond the fifth wall, eidolon-N would certainly require such details."

"So eidolon-N just opted for the most vivid data available," Kivvy concluded. "We've all become part of Reinhold's mania for Sherlock Holmes!"

"Ok," said Wooten. He stood and paced back and forth. "Ok, ok! Let's say we all buy this shit. Let's assume that everything Sherlock Wickett says is one hundred percent, that we're not all just corpses on an ice ball three billion miles from Earth, and that we've been trapped in an alien movie with five walls. I still got one more question!"

"Yes, Mr. Wooten?" Wickett smiled.

"How the fuck are we gonna get out of here?" Wooten demanded.

The green web pulses with soft light. Each strand of the web is filled with sparkling crystals, compacted in motionless excitement. Where their facets touch, minute energies are exchanged. Nameless

subparticles jet through veils of nitrous ice, shuddering waves of sub-quarks. There is no heart to pump, only infinitesimal vibrations from the winds of the Great Dark Spot.

Where individual strands join, there is a greater turbulence. Collisions are too small to be recorded. Friction is too slight to be observed. Propulsion, direction, and inspiration are born. The gravity magnet is negated. Will exists. The waves travel upward, synchronized to the secret speeds of galaxies.

Below the freezing surface, great ropes of icy strands hug together as slow waves in a sluggish river of impossible joining. Where the great ropes meet, there is a purpose of pure energy. Indecipherable communion.

Undetectable data. Cooperation, conversion, bonding, and acceleration.

The waves are a lazy rampage, pushing up. Growing up. Each great rope ends at the surface, its furthest point breaking through the rock and ice. The radiant winds burn them, thickening and hardening each to a stubbed blemish in the ice. In time, some strands push through this seal, inching higher and higher. Arachnid arms hug together, the apex of the waves, linking where they touch. Crystal bits fill each brittle vine, chattering with singular energy.

The hive lives, they tell itself. We are intact. Our guests are in the web. Warm. And full of motion are their waves. Hydrogen dioxide things. Heat concepts.

We will shape from them, they tell itself. More will come.

"The cruiser Ghost has arrived in the system," Mirth said. Her beautiful face filled the screen. She was Andie perfection, he thought absently. Typically, she showed no concern, but her voice signaled urgency.

"Where are they?" he asked her. "Not close enough to cause any problems?" Tregennis was in the rec area. He was playing Battle Chess with the Andie called Diligence.

"They would not have noticed us. They entered on a course to Central, close to Neptune. Do you wish to abandon the docking with Reinhold Wickett's scout ship?"

"Carry on," Tregennis ordered. "We need to know where Wickett is, even if we can't get him out of there right away. How soon can we dock?"

"Ten minutes thirteen seconds," Mirth replied.

"Good!" Tregennis said. The screen blanked.

"Your move," Diligence reminded him.

"Well, then. Check, Dilly old boy. I think you'd better resign this one. Your pieces are muttering to themselves." On the holoboard, the Andie's remaining bishop wrung its hands in despair.

"Very well, colonel." Diligence blanked the board, which presented the players with a musical sting and a graphic score acknowledging Tregennis' win. "Another match?"

"Of course," Tregennis beamed. "But not now. We won't have time. A higher stakes game has just begun."

"Ah! Another clue!" Wickett insisted. "It may help us." He had been quizzing Kivvy and Algia for an hour, gathering the details of their travels within what he now called "the eidolon matrix".

"You mean the filbert grove?" Algia asked. "That archway leading into the monument? Or whatever it was."

"It was something out of place. Perhaps it was an invitation to communicate," Wickett suggested.

"We did pass on it," Kivvy reminded her. "Don't rub it in, damnit. It was my fault, but I was getting tired of all that tripping around, Kivvy." She hung her head. "I'm sorry, damnit!"

"Forget it," he said, kissing her cheek.

"Aw, shucks," Wooten cracked. "You white folk sure is passionate and forgiving. She's right: she blew it! And now I'm stuck in your fuckin' nightmare." Kivvy gave him a look and he backed off. "Ok, ok. I'll chill. What about it, R.W.? Can we get back to this doorway in the nut trees?"

"I don't think we have to reach the same place they did," Wickett said. "The filbert grove was an appropriate pivot for Kivvy. Like the first visit to the forest, it is a very interesting place for a botanist. There is even, I believe, a bit of a symbolic parallel to eidolon-N in that choice: filbert nuts are encased in green pods."

"You're stretching' it, R.W.," Wooten said. "Elaborate!"

"Yes. If we look for an appropriate pivotal place in this current illusion," Wickett continued, gesturing, "we might be granted another opportunity to communicate more directly with the eidolon matrix."

"Why can't we just ask a teacup?" Wooten demanded. "Or that old dame downstairs? It's all part of the same scam, isn't it?"

"Not just a scam, Mr. Wooten. Perhaps eidolon-N enjoys the game. It's encouraging us to solve a mystery. You could try to ask Mrs. Hudson, but I doubt she would comprehend the your urgency to leave this place for a tiny moon in the Neptune system."

"The pivot for Holmes might be where we are right now," Algia pointed out. "221B Baker Street, I mean."

"Not necessarily," Wickett said. "Holmes hasn't lived here for several years. Not since 1891."

"The Final Problem!" Kivvy said. "Holmes pretended to be dead after he fought with Moriarty at Reichenbach Falls. That explains why Mrs. Hudson got so emotional when you and Wooten showed up."

"Very good, Kivvy!" Wickett said. "Holmes did not return to Baker Street until the spring of 1894, several months from now. Watson, of course, has not lived here since 1889, when he married Mary Morstan. He has been living at their home in Kensington, I believe, and has a successful medical practice in the Paddington District."

"So where is your 'pivot'?" Wooten asked.

"Holmes had traveled to many places in the years he was thought to be dead," Wickett said. "He returned here to do battle with Colonel Moran, the late Dr. Moriarty's partner in crime. There may be a chance that he is already here in London, in disguise, preparing for that conflict. I would say that finding the real Sherlock Holmes should be our first consideration!"

"And how do we do that?" Kivvy asked.

"I suppose the most logical course would be to ask the only person who knows where he is," Wickett answered. "We shall pay a visit to a place called The Diogenes Club. To talk to brother Mycroft!"

CHAPTER TWO

The doorman of the Diogenes Club read with disdain the note handed him by Reinhold Wickett:

"To Mr. Mycroft Holmes - Two associates and I wish to confer with you immediately on a matter concerning your late brother. With respect, Dr. John Watson, M.D."

"If you would please present that to Mr. Holmes?" Wickett reminded the ancient, white-whiskered doorman.

"It is most irregular, sir. I'm afraid that members of the Diogenes Club rarely entertain visitors. Silence is a rule here." The doorman blocked the entrance as though his bent and withered body was guarding a great treasure.

"I am quite aware of the philosophy of the unusual population housed within these walls," Wickett told him. "I am, however, certain Mr. Mycroft Holmes will see us, if you ever give him that message."

The doorman shook his head, looking at Wooten, who was standing well behind Wickett, dressed uncomfortably in a conservative suit they found at 221B Baker Street. The space sailor wore his top hat on an angle, which the doorman regarded as suspiciously incorrect. Kivvy stood next to Wooten, his youthfulness excusing the quick tailoring job performed by Algia on another Victorian outfit. Wickett was resplendent in the black suit he had borrowed from the wardrobe of Sherlock Holmes.

"I am sorry to be rude," Wickett said, "but I am afraid I must insist you deliver that note at once, or I shall be forced to summon the aid of Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard."

"Oh, my, sir!" the old man muttered, backing away in alarm.

"This is a matter of national security, pal!" Wooten said, helping very little.

"Queen's business!" Kivvy added, remembering a line from an old film. The doorman stuttered a moment, waved the note in the air, and finally opened the brass studded doors.

"Mr. Mycroft Holmes is in the reading rooms," He confessed, with another glance at Wooten's hat. "If you will follow me, gentlemen."

They echoed across the ceramic tiles of the club's vestibule, walking in a straight line with Kivvy at the rear. The hall was cheerless and dismally dark, even with the day's sun filtering through a stained-glass dome above. The same conditions applied to the interior of the Diogenes Club, a museum to selfish introspection, where the membership was as isolated from one another as the club was from the outside world. The place was otherwise silent, so even their footsteps on its blood carpets crunched noisily.

"Look at all those books!" Kivvy whispered to Wooten. The high walls of the three connecting reading rooms were entirely windowless, and shelved with stack upon stack of leather-bound volumes. In the yellow light of the overhead globes and burning table lamps, the books reflected a brown stain over the three rooms.

"Must be hard as hell to actually read in here," Wooten replied in a normal voice, booming in the silence. The doorman turned and put a white-gloved finger to his wrinkled lips.

"Please, doctor," the old man said, indicating several club members half-hidden in distant chairs.

"Sorry, Jeeves," Wooten snarled at a lower pitch. "Wouldn't want to wake the dead."

Midway into the third long room, the doorman stopped and indicated that they should wait. He inched his way through a maze of dark leather chairs and stuffed couches to a well-dressed man who was hunched over three open books at a low, polished table. The doorman spoke briefly, bowing lower than his age should have allowed, and handed over Wickett's note, whereupon the other man glanced at its contents and rose quickly to his feet. He waved the servant aside.

"Over here, Doctor Watson!" Mycroft Holmes said in a deep voice perfectly matched to his appearance.

Mycroft was older and taller than his illustrious brother, but he displayed the unmistakable sharp and serious profile of the younger man. His black hair was somewhat long, balding from the forehead, and his side-whiskers were wild with tangled gray hairs. Obscured behind gold reading glasses were the steady and piercing black eyes of a man who was always sober, and the deep lines around them told of a man who rarely laughed. As he removed his glasses to better view the invading trio in the reddish light, Mycroft Holmes lifted thin eyebrows in surprise, his face contorted with concern. He stepped forward, facing Wickett.

"We are..." Wickett began.

"My god!" Mycroft Holmes exclaimed. "The illusion is remarkable! For all the world, sir, you could indeed be my brother!" He shouted this gently, but several of the room's reclining gentlemen turned annoyed faces toward him, and Mycroft ushered his visitors hurriedly to a couch near his table.

"I am relieved that you, at least, can see through my disguise, Mr. Holmes," Wickett said, adapting to the reaction.

"Tut," Mycroft Holmes replied without warmth. "To be sure, your costume is only superficial." He eyed Wickett with caution. "I had heard, through sources of my own, that there was an impostor about town. I know full well, of course, that my brother is dead in Switzerland. Doctor Watson himself gave me a full report at the close of that sad incident." Still standing, he extended a hand to Wooten. "Good to see you, John."

"Sure," Wooten said. He turned his head to look at Wickett, sitting next to him on the couch. "It's been a while."

"And just what is the purpose of this dangerous charade, John?" Mycroft asked, polishing his gold glasses with a handkerchief he had retrieved from the breast pocket of his jacket. "You must realize the risk to this other gentleman is very great."

"Well..." Wooten fumbled in his unprepared role. "I think I'd better let my friend explain. This is R.W., I mean, Reinhold Wickett. And this is Mr. Kivvy."

After shaking hands, Mycroft sat again behind the table to listen. Wickett leaned forward to speak: "We are not among those who believe your brother dead, Mr. Holmes."

"You share this belief, John?" Mycroft asked, shifting his steady gaze to Wooten.

"He's the detective," Wooten said. Mycroft regarded Wickett with increased suspicion.

"Ah. You are a practitioner of my brother's chosen profession, Mr. Wickett," Mycroft said. "That does somewhat pardon your appearance."

"I am certain that my information is not new to you, sir," Wickett continued. "You have, over the last three years, remained in communication with your brother. You have supplied Mr. Sherlock Holmes with the funds he needed in his travels abroad, and conspired to keep the public uninformed of his true fate to protect him from certain of his enemies. You have also paid his landlord the rental on the rooms at Baker Street, and instructed Mrs. Hudson to maintain them. All this in preparation for your brother's eventual return to England."

"I assure you, Watson, I will not cooperate further with this fraud!" Mycroft Holmes retorted. "My brother died in pursuit of his profession, taking his greatest enemy with him. Moriarty's criminal organization was destroyed, its membership jailed. The end to my brother's career was an honorable one..."

"Perhaps the name 'Sigerson' would dissuade you from this tack, sir?" Wickett remarked, undaunted. Mycroft Holmes, who had risen from his chair, fell back with an astonished expression.

"What? What do you know of Sigerson?" He stammered, then almost regained his composure: "No! I know nothing of that man, sir!"

"And do you also know nothing of your brother's travels to Persia?" Wickett wondered. "Or of his more recent sojourn in France, investigating the properties of coal tar derivatives?"

"Nonsense! Impossible!" Mycroft Holmes roared. His face began to lose its pale white color as he rose from his seat, his fists clenched. "Be forewarned, sirs, even in the company of John Watson!" he growled in a lowered voice. "I am fully empowered as an official of Her Majesty's government to put a halt to any scheme threatening my brother's safety. He is under the full protection of the Crown."

"Excellent! Then he is returned to England," Wickett said. "Perhaps you would be good enough to give him a message from me?" The request drained all anger from the other man, who returned to his seat once more. He hesitated only a second, and then a small smile crossed his thin lips.

"I notice an Australian accent when you speak, do I not? We had a cousin who settled there - by choice rather than conscription, of course. Perhaps we are related after all. You do argue like my brother." Mycroft Holmes nodded. "I will pass your message, Mr. Wickett, but only as you have Dr. Watson here beside you. What is it?"

"Tell Sherlock Holmes that the man who fired upon him at the Falls was Sebastian Moran. He will know the importance of this information. I feel sure that you will report to him all that has otherwise transpired between us here today." They stood, and Wickett again extended his hand to the brother of Sherlock Holmes.

"I must remind all of you," Mycroft warned, "that my brother's life depends on your discretion, the truth being that some of Moriarty's men are once again at large. You especially, John, realize the seriousness of his situation?" Wooten nodded in confusion.

"Of course," Wickett agreed. "We will tell no one else what we know. Should your brother wish to contact us, he will find us at his old lodgings on Baker Street."

Mycroft accompanied them to the entrance of the reading rooms, bidding them farewell. From there, the trio made their own way out of the infamous club for social hermits.

"What next?" Kivvy asked, as they began walking the distance to 221B.

"We wait," Reinhold Wickett told them. "For the arrival of the World's Greatest Detective."

Ice splinters with the shaking. The heat melts, they tell itself. Our strands above the surface crack and break, jarred below. Loss accepted. So much of we there is.

Study heat coming down. Centered source, some radiation. Interesting. Absorb.

Not much melt. It freezes again. Heat source fading. More guests coming, some not like those now with we. Many legs. Vibrations very precise. More still, they roll. Into the groves. More warm ones with them.

Some binary calls. Feel them. Reaching for binary. Not touching.

Many legs probing strands in groves above the surface. Disconnecting. Tearing. Breaking. Rolling away.

Reach again for binary. Not touching. Some strands shattered from precise vibrations. Cover a guest with many legs. Reach again for binary. Have touching.

Guest with many legs rejected. Binary loop. Not warm guests. Touch one-sided.

Probing. Breaking. Rolling away. Many strands are disconnected. Loss accepted. So much of we, they tell itself.

"What in bloody hell?" Tregennis yelled into his helmet mike. He was floating between the two vessels as they slowly circled the dark, irregular shape that was Neptune's outermost moon. The smaller ship had suddenly begun moving in his direction.

"The computer Watson," Mirth replied, "has engaged its burners to make an orbital correction. We failed to compensate. Stand by, Owen."

"Stand by?" Tregennis asked, watching as the gray hull raced toward him. "I bloody well won't stand by!" He fired his heel thrusters and shot out from between the two ships, grazing a projecting rod on the surface of the White Whale with his right arm. He began to tumble immediately. "God... damn... it!"

"Owen?" Mirth asked in his ear. "Is everything all right?"

He continued to spin, end over end, out into the ink beyond the moon and the White Whale. The hectic motion upset his equilibrium, and left him disoriented. The effect was not all that unpleasant, he thought. He felt warm.

"Owen!" Mirth called. "Stabilize! Your blood pressure is jumping too fast. Owen!"

"Women!" Colonel Owen Tregennis finally answered. He thumbed his chest pad and the ride ended.

"Or maybe I should say: Andies! Over all these years, I've never known any of you to do anything just for the fun of it." There was a crunching sound from the blackness. "Jesus! What was that?"

"I explained that we were in a very close orbit," Mirth said with Andie patience. "You should have waited, Owen."

"Yes, mother. What was that noise? It carried like it was a major dent."

"Minimal damage here, but Watson will not detail what happened to the scout. No atmosphere loss showing. We are well apart now, if you want to go in again."

Tregennis jetted closer, taking a palm light from his belt and aiming it where he thought the two ships had touched. "A little white streak. Hull is intact," he reported to his Andie pilot. "The hatch is clear. I'm going inside now. Try not to crush me to death, ok?"

"We are in synchronous paths, Owen. The computer Watson acknowledges my signal. I can open the scout's hatch from here."

Tregennis thumbed for appropriate thrusters and glided up to the hatch. A line of blue light ran along its upper frame, and the door slid open. He fired the thrusters again in two short bursts, and found himself in the antechamber.

"Very well, Mirth. Inside, hatch closed."

"Right, Owen."

"Moving up to the command deck. You haven't spotted anything new since Ghost moved from Central to Noh?"

"We can't monitor surface activities from this distance, of course, but Ghost remains on the surface."

"They'll probably be harvesting for a while yet."

"I do have a report from our Andies on Central concerning Ghost's stopover there. They took on provisions for the return trip to Earth. No one left the cruiser while it was in orbit. The crew was being disciplined for some incident earlier in the voyage."

"Ok. I've arrived on the command deck," Tregennis told her. "Off with the helmet. Ugh, it's bloody stale in here." He made some unsuccessful passes at the main panels. "Watson?"

"Voice analysis in progress. Hello, Colonel Tregennis."

"Hello, Watson. Could you activate the blowers? It stinks in here."

"Activated. I shut most of the support systems off when no humans are aboard."

"Mirth says she found some message for me in your storage?"

"Yes. Reinhold keyed its release to your voice pattern. My apologies, but I could not release it to Mirth. Now displaying on main screen." A mapped reconnaissance tape of Noh's surface appeared, with icons indicating Kivvy's scout ship and Wickett's last known position.

"There. That wasn't so hard, Mirth, old girl. It's who you know, you know. Please stream that over to the White Whale's computer, Watson."

"Certainly, colonel."

"Did you get that, Mirth?"

"Received, Owen."

"Do we know how close Ghost is to Wickett?"

"From the recorded entry window, they landed within twenty kilometers of the other scout ship, Owen."

"Damn!" Tregennis said. "If they do find anyone alive on that kid's ship, they'll probably kill them!" He stared at the screen. "Wait! Can this scout be set down on Noh without being noticed by Ghost?"

"In the vicinity of the other scout?"

"Exactly."

"Unlikely, Owen. Ghost is equipped with very high technology. It would scan you thousands of miles out. Long before you could set down."

"Think it out, Mirth. There must be a way!"

"There is one possibility."

"Well, what is it?"

"If the scout can be piloted in during the active cycle of the Great Dark Spot of the star-planet Neptune, there would be sufficient signal interference to block the sensors on Ghost."

"Wouldn't the radiation storm affect the scout's computer?"

"Neptune's radiation would not affect plasma or optical chip performance, but external sensing devices on the scout ship would also be blocked. An Andie could compensate in a manual touchdown."

"Ok. You said this was a 'possibility'," Tregennis noted. "That means it might not work?"

"I meant that it might work, Owen," Mirth replied. "We could try it just for the fun of it." She had made a joke. Tregennis laughed.

"Then I suggest that you join me for tea, my dear, because you're the best Andie pilot I know. And please be so kind as to bring along the cigar case I left in my cabin. If you don't mind!"

"Ok, ok!" Crawler hissed. "This is rough terrain, yuh know. Slippery as hell!"

"Just don't push!" Brickland's voice pleaded.

"I didn't fuckin' push!" Crawler insisted. "I slipped and banged you with my rifle butt, ok?" He was about a yard ahead of his partner, struggling up a steep slope.

"So you say," Brickland grumbled. He hacked at vines that were bordering their trek. Young and thin, the vines shattered on contact, spraying the two space sailors' suits with green crystal.

"I sure hope that junk can't eat through our suits," Crawler worried. "You reading me, Vic?" There was a squawk of static.

"I read you," Victor Martek's voice confirmed from Ghost. Martek spoke in a whisper. "Are you there yet?"

"No, we're not there yet!" Crawler complained. "We only left ten minutes ago, remember? This terrain is a lot harder than I thought. Maybe we should renegotiate." There was another squawk. Crawler thumbed the coded channel to mute. The two sailors on the surface stopped to laugh.

"Sounded like a strangled cat," Brickland giggled. "That fuckin' guy is scared shit. Worried that Rooney or the Old Man will find out. Whatta' pussy!"

"Gotta admit the Old Man can be pretty brutal, Brickland." Crawler started moving again. "Especially with Vickie da Queen, huh?"

"Yeah," Brickland agreed, "and dat fuckin' Rooney likes to think he's runnin' everything. Wouldn't like it, us doin' special favors he don't know about. Even for The Company. We really gonna waste these two people when we find 'em, Crawler? Oops!" Brickland stumbled on a low vine and Crawler caught his arm, pulling him upright in Noh's light gravity.

"If we find them, that's what Vickie wants. On the other hand, if we don't find them..."

"We just say we did, and collect our bonus anyway. Right, Crawler?"

"Yeah, Brickland. That's the plan. See that next ridge with all them vines piled up on it? The clearing should be right over that ridge, huh?"

"Fuckin' wall of China, looks like from here," Brickland complained. "Must be a mile high on that ridge. You sure that's where we're goin'?" He stumbled again, falling to one knee, cursing.

"Me? You were here the last time!" Crawler rested his laser rifle on Brickland's shoulder, keeping him down on one knee.

"Hey, don't! I was, Crawler. Take it easy. Don't hit, ok? I told you, we never made it this far out from Ghost. You're the one who saw the Queen's maps. You're supposed to be the fuckin' squad leader!"

Crawler removed his rifle and the two completed the climb up the icy ridge in angry silence. They reached the foot of the enormous cable of vines that stretched for miles along its peak.

"Thick here, damnit!" Crawler said. "Too high to just hack 'em outta the way. They'd come down on us for sure. Low-G or not, I don't want tons of that stuff fallin' on me! We'll have to try burnin' our way past the shit. Melt a tunnel. Set 'em to point seven, son!"

"Ok, I'm ready," Brickland said, fumbling with his rifle. "Burn!" They heard the roar outside their suits as the beams melted through the vines directly in front of them. A green, smokeless glow shimmered around the edge. The crystals were everywhere.

"Christ! This is gonna take forever!" Brickland whined. "The stuff is so damn close together. Couldn't we just lob a grenade in there?"

"We could, Brickland, but one of us isn't that stupid! You wanna wind up perforated? This ain't water ice we're dealin' with, Brickland. It'd be like blowin' tons of steel nails!" Crawler adjusted his laser. "Set it to point eight, then. Come on, burn! It's the only way we'll get past it."

They continued through the vines for another twenty yards, leaving a smooth-walled tunnel behind them, and stopped to allow their rifles to recharge. Crawler reopened the audio connection to Victor Martek aboard Ghost.

"What's taking so long?" Martek demanded. "Why haven't you reported in before this?"

"We hit a solid wall of vine," Crawler answered. "Couldn't go around it, so we're burrowin' through. I'm guessin' from your map it's about fifty yards deep, which puts us 'bout in the middle. Our target is in the clearing on the other side of the ridge."

"Well, get moving!" Martek warned. "Ghost lifts off in two hours."

"Hey, Martek," Brickland cut in. "Why don't we just skip the whole thing, ok? What's the big deal? Those poor bastards are dead by now anyway. A couple of stiff's."

"Brickland, I am operating on specific orders from the highest level," Martek replied sternly. "No witnesses. No loose strings. We expect the botanists are dead, but they were non-Company personnel, and they have computer records. Find that ship and blow it, understand? Crawler?"

"Yeah, Vic?"

"Keep that idiot off this channel, ok?"

"Yeah. Ok, Vic. We'll call you." Crawler thumbed out.

"Fuck that fuckin' queen!" Brickland muttered.

"Let's go, Brickland. We get big money for this, remember?" They leveled their lasers, marching through a shower of green.

Wooten was walking by himself along Baker Street. An hour earlier, anxious to give Algia the details of their meeting with Mycroft Holmes, Kivvy and Reinhold Wickett had gone on ahead to 221B. Wooten promised to join them later.

"Don't be too long," Wickett had warned him gently. "I expect Sherlock Holmes will send a message of some sort very soon. We may need to act fast when it comes, and we cannot leave you behind."

Wickett was sincere. He was a man of few friends, and he now counted Wooten among them.

Wooten, however, was depressed: he had little real confidence in Reinhold Wickett, his theories, or solutions. He did not relish the thought of being an African warrior forever trapped in the body of a middleclass Englishman. As he observed Wickett's imaginings of late 19th century London, he was saddened to see no other Black people. Every outpost of civilization he had ever visited had been fully integrated. The shock of a segregated past angered him. He had never felt so cut off from himself.

"Not that a brother would even recognize me," he muttered to himself, "looking like this! I'm a jive old doc!"

A stooped, gray-bearded tramp blackened with soot and lugging several small bundles of yellowed books, begged his pardon. "You are Watson, M.D., are you not?" the tramp asked him, adding no cheer to the African's day.

"What you want, Pops?" Wooten retorted, stepping back from a pointed, greasy finger. He noticed that, despite the tramp's beaten appearance, the man was clean. There was no stench of alleyway hotels or garbage. Wooten put it down to Wickett's lack of detail, but it did peak his interest.

"You are wise not to insist on such a hoax, sir," the man stated, much to Wooten's surprise. "I know full well you are not him." The tramp sniffed the air with certainty.

"How do you know, Pops?" Wooten wondered.

"That respected gentleman lives with his good wife Mary in Kensington these days. You resemble him quite closely, of course."

Wooten hardly knew what else to say in the face of such a valid accusation. The old man stood his ground briefly, watching Wooten's reaction, and then he cackled melodramatically, hobbling away in the opposite direction.

"Wait!" Wooten yelled, and started after him. The old man stopped, gathering the pathetic bundle of books to his breast. "How can you tell me from Doctor Watson?"

"It is no great feat of deduction, sir," the tramp insisted, straightening somewhat. "I have just now come from visiting with Watson at his clinic in the Paddington District."

"You..?" Wooten said in surprise.

"And the good doctor made no mention of having plans to return to the area of his former lodgings. Or, I might add, of the meeting with Mycroft Holmes which you attended an hour or so earlier. It was, of course, you at the Diogenes Club."

"What do you want?" Wooten asked. "How do you know about the meeting?"

"Perhaps," the old man said in a new, cold voice, "I seek the truth. I advise you to invite me now to meet your friends, sir."

Looking into the steely eyes of an altogether different person, Wooten knew to whom he was speaking.

"I think they are expecting you," the space sailor said, leading the way back to 221B Baker.

"You know me then?"

"You are Sherlock Holmes," Wooten declared.

"And you are well-cast in your role of Watson," Holmes laughed. "My friend would have taken no less time to penetrate my disguise." He maintained the deception, limping slightly, keeping his back hunched, and occasionally stopping to hack out a wretched cough. They reached the building, and Holmes suddenly put one arm out to stop Wooten from going any further.

"What's wrong?" Wooten asked. Holmes said nothing, pulling him along the street.

"The door to 221B is wide open, and the step is tracked with mud. I have never known dear Mrs. Hudson to keep an untidy house." As he spoke, Holmes searched the street with his eyes. "Now, listen. What is your real name, sir?"

"Wooten."

"Very well, Mr. Wooten. From my brother's report, I know you to be in the employ or company of a man called Reinhold Wickett. A private investigator, so he claims, although he is new to me in that profession."

"Yes," Wooten answered.

"I want to be prepared, Mr. Wooten, and you have become my ally here, for better or worse. I wear this disguise for good reason, you see. Are you familiar with the history of the man called Moriarty?"

"Only from what R.W. - I mean Wickett - told me. I don't read much. He was a crime lord and you killed him, right?"

"Crime lord. Interesting term, and essentially correct. Well, Scotland Yard broke Moriarty's gang with my help, but some escaped the net. Those few seek to avenge their master, and I was, as you stated, instrumental in his fortunate demise." Holmes continued to survey the street as he spoke. "You understand?"

"Yeah. They've got a hit out on you, so you're playin' it cool by doing this bagman bit."

"Good lord! We must discuss the origins of that dialect, Mr. Wooten!" Holmes pulled Wooten back toward 221B. "I may be unjustified in my fears, but be prepared for violence. I assume I have your cooperation."

Holmes led Wooten through the open front door, shut it quietly, and put one finger to his thin lips, listening. Pointing the same finger at the entrance to Mrs. Hudson's rooms, he indicated that Wooten should search there, and then ran silently up the stairs.

The housekeeper's quarters were neat and undisturbed, but Mrs. Hudson was not to be found. Wooten made his way through her apartment to a large kitchen, wishing he had his laser rifle in hand. Tea for three had been recently set upon a silver tray at the kitchen table, and a kettle rattled on the stove.

Wooten was removing the kettle from the flame, when he heard Sherlock Holmes shout from above:

"Come here, Mr. Wooten! I have found Mrs. Hudson!"

The famous upstairs sitting room was wrecked, as if a mighty gale had swept the contents of every shelf and tabletop to the floor. Holmes was kneeling next to the wing-backed chair, comforting a distraught Mrs. Hudson. Strips of torn linen hung from her wrists, her white hair was mussed, and her face was pale. There was no sign of Wickett or the others.

"What happened here?" Wooten asked.

"Oh, Doctor!" the kindly old Scotswoman cried out when she saw him. "I'm afraid I've let you both down!" She sobbed into a handkerchief provided by Holmes.

"There, there. Steady on," Holmes said. He had removed his false beard and wig, presenting a thin version of his brother Mycroft. Although Holmes was far younger, Wooten also saw in him an uncanny resemblance to Reinhold Wickett. "You received my message, Mrs. Hudson?" Holmes asked.

"Yes. Young Wiggins delivered it, Mr. Holmes, and the boy assured me it was genuine." She blew once into the handkerchief. "I was a bit confused! I would never have let them in had I been thinking!"

"What message?" Wooten asked. "Let who in?"

"A feeble attempt on my part to forestall the inevitable," Holmes admitted with an impatient gesture. "I can see now that I underestimated them."

"I don't understand," Wooten said wearily.

"After speaking to my brother, I sent a note by way of Wiggins - one of the lads from the street - to inform Mrs. Hudson of Wickett's masquerade. Your friend's plan to locate me was clever, but he had made a grave mistake taking up residence in these rooms.

"As Mycroft had already received reports that a man of my description was seen about London, I knew that the late Professor Moriarty's people might have the same information. Without Moriarty at the helm, I never dreamed that they would act on it so quickly." Holmes turned again to the white-haired lady.

"They posed as policemen?"

"Yes. I was downstairs making tea. Three men arrived at the front. I didn't know them, but they told me they were sent to fetch the others to meet with Inspector Lestrade at Scotland Yard. Mr. Wickett - as you call him - laughed at them when I showed them upstairs. He accused them of being 'lousy actors'. He began to argue with them, and then one of the men grabbed the young Miss and put a blade to her throat. Mr. Kivvy tried to protect her, but they beat him down."

"They then tied all of you, searched the room, and abducted Wickett and the others," Holmes concluded. "Mmm. Made quite a mess of the place. Did they say what they were looking for?" Mrs. Hudson smiled at last, looking up from the handkerchief.

"Exactly as you predicted, Mr. Holmes. They wanted the journals - your little casebooks. Mr. Wickett had no idea where they were, of course, and I had already followed the instructions in your note."

"You had time to remove them to your own quarters. Excellent!" Holmes told her. "Keep them there, where no one would think to look." He helped her to her feet.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Holmes!"

"Dear lady, the fault is mine. All is not lost, never fear." Holmes began to search the floor, and bent to retrieve a small smudge from the rug.

"What are in these notebooks?" Wooten asked.

"Later, Wooten. Take Mrs. Hudson down the stairs, will you? I observe she's none the worse for wear. I will change clothing, and then we must make haste. If your friends have fallen into the hands of Colonel Sebastian Moran, I am certain that all of them are in great peril indeed!"

"Hey! I just thought of something," Crawler said, looking at Neptune. The blue giant filled the horizon. "That damned spot will be passing again soon."

"No way," Brickland said. "It's too early, isn't it?" They had broken through the wall of vine, and were standing on top of the ridge.

"Real soon," Crawler insisted. "Every eighteen hours, Rooney told me."

"Don't bother me none. Didn't hurt anybody when we was harvesting yesterday."

"That's cause we were in vehicles, stupid. There's nothing to hold onto in that fuckin' clearing. Them spot storms are like hurricanes. Maybe we better forget the whole thing."

"Only hits for a half hour," Brickland said. "And who's stupid? You make me tunnel through half the planet to get here, and now you wanna go home? Fuck that, man! Vickie ain't gonna like that. No payoff either."

"Yeah. Guess you're right." Crawler didn't sound convinced. He could see the edge of the Great Dark Spot boiling where the curve of star-planet met space.

"The ship's over there," Brickland told him. He was holding a scope up to his faceplate. "Least it was over there. Looks like the vines grewed all over it."

"Where? I don't see nothin'." Crawler grabbed the scope from Brickland's gloved hand. "Gimme that! You mean that pile of ice at the far end?"

"That's where it was parked. Didn't see all them vines last time."

"Ok, ok! Let's get our asses across there and find out. That spot's comin' around fast. It might not be so bad if we make it to the ship." They slipped and slid to the floor of the clearing and started for the opposite side. The cyan light of the star-planet sharpened as they walked. The eternal blemish Earthers had named the Great Dark Spot swept through its outer atmosphere, spilling waves of radiation into space and over the surface of Noh. They were nearly to the center of the clearing, when the winds began to twirl them in fluctuating gravity.

"Awk! You... guk... hell... fuck!" Crawler heard Brickland say, and then the intercoms went dead in a blast of static.

Crawler dived to the ground, jamming the barrel of his laser rifle into a wide crack to anchor himself. He looked up time to see Brickland carried away in a cloud of sparkling ice.

Their altitude was approximately one thousand feet above the surface. They strafed peaks of primordial ice, frozen volcanoes that had last erupted at the time of the creation. The sensors, which were ordinarily essential to a safe landing, refused to read anything closer than five hundred yards from the ship. The view screen buzzed with static, revealing jumbled glimpses of the blue-white planet. Mirth stabilized the scout, but Owen Tregennis was not happy.

"It's like jumping off the Dover Cliffs holding a bumbershoot," he said. Mirth smiled up from the red flashing of her panels. He knew that her processors remained with the ship, but he wished he hadn't spoken. He wondered how many milliseconds of interrupt had occurred to register that polite smile.

"Two minutes, Colonel Tregennis," Watson announced. "I have no visual."

"I am beginning braking procedures, Owen," Mirth said. "Please sit down and strap in." He obeyed. From inside, there was no sensation of the force they were resisting as Mirth and Watson pushed the scout ship into a decelerating climb against the winds of the Great Dark Spot. Tregennis took a deep breath. If she lost control as she lost velocity, the ship could be snapped like a piece of balsa. The gravity of Noh would hug their remains in a hundred thousand places.

The intermittent beeping of the piloting panel gave way to a steady warning. Mirth ignored it.

"Watson has shut down the landing engines," she announced. For a split second, the scout hung at five thousand feet, and then it flipped and plunged. Owen noticed that a light pen attached to the pilot note screen was vibrating.

"Landers on," Watson said. "I have visual. Firing auxiliaries." The view screen lit up. The last four hundred feet rushed toward them. There was a very slight bump, and they were down. "We have landed," Watson added.

"Very nice," Mirth said. It was illogical, but Owen was certain she was congratulating the computer. He looked at the screen. They were in the center of the clearing. The star-planet's winds rushed around them, creating a miniature blizzard of nitrogen snow.

"What the hell is that?" Tregennis asked, pointing at the screen. A small figure was running toward them across the planet's surface. "Somebody is out there!"

"I am quite mortified at the way things have turned out." Wickett sat propped up against the brick wall. His wrists and ankles were tied with leather thongs. A strip of linen, used as a blindfold by the abductors, hung loosely around his neck.

"We don't hold it against you, Reinhold," Algia said. She and Kivvy were also bound, and sat against the wall opposite. Kivvy was not as inclined to be forgiving.

"Whose fault is it then?" he demanded. "Kidnapped by 19th century crooks and locked in a warehouse that stinks of rotten eggs! It's his Victorian fantasy, isn't it?"

"Kivvy!" Algia chided. "You sound like Mr. Wooten."

"I don't understand," Kivvy continued, "why we can't change it. We've been sitting here trying for hours and nothing's happened, Reinhold. Can't you concentrate and have the real Scotland Yard arrive or something?"

"Maybe we should all concentrate and jump back to Noh..." Algia suggested.

"You are forgetting someone," Wickett pointed out.

"Oh. Poor Mr. Wooten! He's still out there."

"I doubt that we could jump back, even if we were all here," Wickett said. "The matrix includes a false scout ship. If we could force a jump, we would most probably land there - still in the matrix."

"So you think eidolon-N stores an image of each of the places we dream up?" Kivvy asked. "In some sort of memory, I mean?"

"Likely," Wickett told them. "We found it easy enough to travel without jumping from one part of Doyle's London to another and back again. The matrix is in itself a 'memory'. The question of how long things are retained is another matter. I think we are safe to assume that eidolon-N can store a great deal in the matrix."

"The stuff is smart enough to turn our thoughts into a pretty good job of physical reality," Kivvy added.

"My wrists are killing me, and my right leg's been asleep for an hour."

"Smart' may not be quite correct," Wickett said. "Although it learns, and applies what it learns. I have been mulling this over since we arrived."

"Here comes the lecture," Algia giggled. Seeing Wickett's reaction, she added: "We don't have anything else to do, Reinhold. Entertain us." Reinhold Wickett smiled and nodded to her in a mock bow.

"Very well, students. Pay attention while I ramble. We have assumed that eidolon-N 'thinks' because it creates from our thoughts: that it is, in some alien way, telepathic. We assume it is sentient because it perceives our subconscious memories, evaluates the data that it finds, and makes aesthetic choices to create an alternate reality. We hope to communicate with eidolon-N, speak to it or think to it, and thereby jump out of the matrix and back to reality. I am afraid that there is a flaw in our assumptions."

"What do you mean?" Kivvy asked.

"Well, humans have previously encountered only two types of sentient thought: that of our own biological brains, and the results of algorithms we developed to create artificial intelligence. Both of

these are based on self-organizing neural networks. We have always assumed that the human brain sorts itself into a highly structured pattern of decision-making elements from an initially random state. Our AI inventions work the same way. We assume that all brains, no matter how different, require the same pattern of organization..."

"Hold it! Hold it!" Algia yelled. "I'm an actress, for God's sake!"

"I am sorry, my dear. I am only saying that the thought structures of all Earth creatures are based on the same design - a design peculiar to human brains. The artificial intelligence of the Andies, and computers like Watson or INTELX, are based on the same system.

"We have no documented indication that eidolon-N had this design before it interacted with our brains or computers. It may only be imitating the first system it has encountered."

"Ok. Crystal see, crystal do. I can follow that," Algia said. "But what are you getting at?"

"What I am getting at is this: eidolon-N may have no native sense of our physical reality. If all it has is what it has gotten from us, then the ability to take our deep thoughts and create from them is as much something it learned from us as the alternative realities it has placed us in. We should, therefore, stop assuming that there is an intellectual purpose to its manipulations. Or that we might ever be able to communicate with it." Algia's eyes began to cloud over.

"Are you saying that we'll never get out of here? We jumped back to the ship once. You know we made it back - we talked to you. We can do it again, can't we?"

"We jumped to the ship twice," Kivvy reminded her. "The second time we weren't really there."

"Exactly!" Reinhold Wickett exclaimed. "Eidolon-N may not have had time to absorb your more recent memories at first. Not knowing the difference between reality and subconscious thoughts, it took your suggestion and directed your bodies back aboard the ship. The second time, it reconstructed the ship instead."

"But why?" Algia asked. "Why would it bother doing that?" Kivvy could see she wasn't crying, but he felt like he wanted to comfort her just the same.

"Maybe it was just easier," the exobotanist suggested. "Whatever eidolon-N is, it requires energy to operate. It may take much more energy to put everything back in place." He hesitated, watching her face for a moment. When he was sure she was in control, he turned back to Wickett. "There's something else. Something you didn't mention about memory storage..."

"Yes, of course," Wickett agreed. "Memory storage is not necessarily permanent. We're not really sure about humans, but even in controlled programs, computer memory locations are often overwritten if they reach a maximum storage capacity." He sighed. "We really have no way of knowing if eidolon-N still has an exit to actual physical reality in its matrix."

Algia frowned. "Not ours, maybe, but you and Wooten left physical reality more recently. It could still have the way back to yours, Reinhold."

"Possible, my dear Algia," Wickett nodded. "But that might only allow Wooten and me to exit back to our own bodies. It could serve us at some point, but it would not save all of us."

"Lecture over," Kivvy concluded. "Now, Reinhold, what do you think the chances are of a plain old-fashioned escape from our current situation? My other leg is now asleep, and I don't cherish the idea of spending an alternate eternity tied up in this stinking warehouse!"

"Your young friend will be happy to know, Mr. Holmes," a deep voice called from above them, "that a daring rescue is already underway."

The light from an oil lantern came from the top of the wooden stairway at the far end of the room. A blonde-haired, middle-aged man stood in an open doorway looking down. He was dressed in a khaki uniform of a British military officer. He handed the lantern to a man in black behind him, and the two descended to the second landing.

"Colonel Sebastian Moran," Wickett guessed, resuming his role. "Late of Her Majesty's Indian Army and the second in command of Moriarty's gang of blackguards. He currently poses as a respectable retired officer, and, having joined several of London's better clubs, he amuses himself by cheating at cards. A crack shot, as I recall. His record of tiger kills in India has never been equaled."

"My dear Mr. Holmes," Moran lamented. "You are such a witless fellow, armed with only your verbose encyclopedia of information. To have simply shown up at your old rooms and invited yourself to be taken: tch, tch. A rabbit has better instincts. The hunt was quite spoiled for me, I'm afraid."

"If it is a hunt as you say, Mister Moran, then why do I still live? And why do you take these two innocents into captivity with me? Where's the sport in that? They are merely clients of mine, and not of interest to you."

"Nonsense, Holmes! What do you take me for? The late professor never demeaned me so! This lad was with you when you went to visit your illustrious brother at the Diogenes. Obviously, he is involved." Moran continued down the stairs until he stood in the center of the room, facing Wickett. "The wench looks clean and healthy. I am fond of dark women and in need of entertainment."

"As to your continued existence, Sherlock Holmes, it is only from expediency that I have spared you. I am most concerned about the whereabouts of your journals and records, and those of the hack writer you employ as your biographer. Moriarty's last instructions were to retrieve them in event of his death. He worried that your famous attention to detail might further disturb the great network of crime at which he had labored so long to establish in London. My inheritance is threatened, you see?

"I must induce the good doctor to join you here and learn the location of those papers. Dr. Watson may not have your brain, but he knows too much to live. I am sure you will agree with the logic of my plan, Holmes. If I were to kill you now, he would undoubtedly present those documents to Lestrade at Scotland Yard."

"My confederates and myself have set another snare for Dr. Watson. I will happily keep you alive where your physician friend will find you - and kill you three when he arrives!" Moran grinned without humor. "Rest assured, Holmes, the brunette lady will outlive you: she has been promised to my men after my own passions are satisfied." He laughed, returning to the stairway.

"What did you mean 'already underway'?" Wickett shouted after the departing figure.

"The good doctor was seen leaving Baker Street in a hackney," the colonel obliged from the door at the top of the stairs. He held the lantern once again. Its glare lit his scowling features from below. "My informant overheard his fellow passenger give nearby Albert Dock as their destination. Oh, I do hope the other fellow is Lestrade! What a bag that would be, eh, Mr. Holmes?"

CHAPTER THREE

"He is sedated," Diligence reported to Tregennis. "The uniform under his suit indicates he is from the cruiser Ghost. His identity tag gives his name as 'Crawler'."

"Thank you, Dilly." The Andie's face vanished from the view screen, replaced by the surface of Noh. With the passing of the Great Dark Spot, the planet was serene in its icy beauty. Neptune filled the horizon as always, casting light blue shadows on cyan permafrost. "Ghost hasn't lifted yet?" Tregennis asked Mirth.

"The humans are sleeping, Owen. No engine activity. The recon satellite we launched before landing shows some of the mining equipment outside the ship."

"What do you suppose that fellow Crawler was babbling about?" Tregennis stared at the view screen. "A city in the ice! Tiny horses! Big eggs! Absurd!" He thumbed a panel and Diligence reappeared.

"Yes, Colonel Tregennis?"

"You said there was no trace of narcotics or alcohol in his test: did you check the man's breather? I want to know if the suit's oxygen mix was off, you understand."

"There were no irregularities with the man's equipment, sir. I checked it all. He was heavily armed. Several impact grenades along with his laser rifle and pistol."

"That is curious. Why would he need grenades on Noh?" Tregennis slapped his leg with irritation. "Or any heavy weapons? For that matter, what the hell was he doing out here, ten kilometers from his ship?"

"Perhaps he is part of a patrol unit," Mirth suggested. "He might have wandered too far and become lost during the disturbance."

"A patrol, perhaps," Tregennis said. "But he wasn't lost. An Andie might be able to leap that ridge between our position and Ghost's, but no human could. Not without a thruster pack. No, I think not."

Break out your mittens or whatever, Dilly, and meet me at the outer hatch. I think it's high time we had a look around."

"Do you want me to come along, Owen?" Mirth asked.

"No. Stay here. We may need a rear guard." He stood and reached for his cigars, absently fingered the case, and then replaced it. "If there is a problem, and you do lose us completely, take that Crawler fellow back with you to the Whale, and turn him over to Susan's people on Central."

"Yes, Owen," Mirth replied.

"Whatever you do, wait until Ghost leaves before you lift off. I wouldn't want your pretty face melted in a laser strike, and our mission here mustn't spoil the greater scheme. A lot is riding on those pirates trying to bring the stuff back into Earth orbit." He turned and started for the lift.

"Yes, Owen," Mirth said over her shoulder, "but I am confident that nothing bad will happen to you."

Tregennis stopped and looked at the Andie. "You're a damned fine woman, Mirth," he said quietly, intending no irony.

"This is it driver, thank you!" Holmes shouted over the clatter of hooves against the cobblestones.

"Come along, Mr. Wooten."

Masts of a dozen ships rose over the rooftops and smoking chimneys. The cab had reached the waterfront district, one of London's oldest sections, and home to some of the city's small factories and many great warehouses. A light afternoon rain had in no way diminished commerce or the crowds of tradesmen and buyers milling in the streets. As he walked along with Wooten, Holmes kept his face concealed with a floppy felt hat and the turned up collar of his cloak.

"How do you know where to look?" Wooten asked, keeping abreast of the detective's long stride. Holmes said nothing until he came to a halt in front of a pub. Hanging from wrought iron hooks, an illustrated wooden sign announced that this was The Raven's Blood Tavern.

"There is an abandoned factory near Albert Dock where Professor Moriarty held court," Holmes explained. "It was once operated legitimately to make and store munitions for the Royal Navy. Moriarty intended to use it to the same end, although not to benefit the Empire. It was before my association with Dr. Watson and my brother Mycroft, whom you have met, assisted me most honorably in disrupting Moriarty's plans. Scotland Yard closed the factory afterwards, but I had always suspected that the Professor's gang still used the place. Today I became quite sure."

"But how did you..?" Wooten began.

"From the mud tracked into Mrs. Hudson's hallway by the abductors, Mr. Wooten. I took the time to examine it while you were assisting that good lady downstairs. It contained several elements that support my choice: traces of sulfur, potassium, silt, and some algae usually found at the edge of the Thames. Now let us go inside this colorful tavern. We will have to wait until dark to make our move against them." He threw open the heavy wooden door, and Wooten followed him inside.

"But shouldn't we... I mean, aren't they in danger?"

"No, Mr. Wooten, not as yet." Holmes led him to a booth in an unlit corner. "I should tell you that we are expected. Your friends are bait, you see, to capture Dr. Watson. The renegade colonel truly believes he has Sherlock Holmes, but he is seeking the location of journals I have kept on Moriarty's career over the years.

"He is also very much aware of Watson's familiarity with the details of his crimes. The clues left behind at Baker Street were all too easy. Watson would not have analyzed the mud, but the journals would have given him the location of Moriarty's former hideouts. Moran hopes to lure the good doctor into a

trap. He would have us both, you see? Then he can use the lives of your friends to force us to give up the journals.”

Holmes removed a silver case from his inside jacket pocket and offered Wooten a cigarette.

"No," the space sailor said. "That old style tobacco will kill you. I wouldn't mind some of your English stout, though." A beefy, blonde barmaid was approaching. Holmes waved her closer.

"Good!" he said. "A pint of your fine stout for my friend, and I will have a glass of the house claret." He put the appropriate coins on her tray. She winked broadly at Wooten and made her way to the bar.

"Moran's spies were watching and listening in Baker Street," Holmes continued. "Keeping my face from being seen, I announced we were going to Albert Dock. By this device, I hope to tense Moran for the kill: he will be awaiting our immediate arrival. Hours from now, he will not be so ready."

The Raven's Blood had two large rooms. The first was at the street end, with a half a dozen booths, the long bar along one wall, and a stone fireplace. The other room had a small stage with a piano, tables covered with blood red linen, and a dartboard that was in perpetual use. A dusty stuffed crow perched on the piano.

Both rooms were only sparsely populated with sailors, dockworkers, prostitutes, and other local gentry. These were well served by two aging barmaids and the enormous, completely bald barkeep, who never left his post behind the bar. Gas jets lit all walls, and a roaring fire was dancing on the hearth.

"Thank you," Holmes told the barmaid when she put their glasses before them. Wooten received another open hint, which brought on an amused comment from Sherlock Holmes: "The real Watson would never have been noticed," he laughed as the blonde sashayed away.

"She certainly is well-equipped," Wooten decided. "A bit old for me, though. Must be at least forty." He gulped his stout, and noticed Holmes eyeing him with curiosity.

"And how old are you, Mr. Wooten?" the detective asked without apology. His voice was cold.

"Truthfully, please."

"Thirty-one," Wooten answered. Holmes pursed his lips. "I'm cool, man. I know I don't look it in this..." He glanced down at the illusion of Watson's body and suit of Victorian clothes.

"We have much to talk about, Mr. Wooten, before we make the attempt to save your friends and end the career of Colonel Sebastian Moran." Holmes sipped his wine. "I have held myself at bay thus far, but I sense that there may be something quite extraordinary about this case, and we have time now to bring it out.

"Your appearance is my first concern. You wear no makeup of any kind, and my brother's account of your Mr. Reinhold Wickett said the same of him. As my friend Dr. Watson has noted in his published stories, I have a penchant for disguise as a method of my profession. I have been advised by some of the finest actors and actresses from here and the continent, and yet I can recall no way to add fifteen years to a man's face and torso without the use of spirit gum, powder, and pillows.

"You are a young man, Mr. Wooten, and yet the very image of my dearest friend, who is well your senior. You must explain this to me - and all the rest - immediately!"

Tregennis followed his more surefooted companion carefully across the clearing. There was no evidence of a recent storm on the pitted surface of Noh. It was slick and slippery, the nitrogen snow of only minutes before swept clean. Diligence set their pace without hesitation, wearing low temperature goggles designed to keep the lubricants in his eye sockets from stiffening. An Andie needed no other outward protection from extreme cold, and he carried no weapons. Lasers, built into his arms, were far more deadly than the rifle carried by Tregennis. They marched north, guided by Watson's signal from the scout ship.

"It must be under there," Tregennis said, pointing to the unusual hill of vines that lay a hundred yards ahead. "The damned vines grew right over it!"

"Watson gives that as the last known location," Diligence confirmed.

"I know your weapon systems are always primed, Dil, old boy, but keep on your toes. There may be other members of Ghost's crew waiting out there. I say, what's that you are doing?"

"I am scanning for body heat emissions, Colonel Tregennis." The Andie had stopped walking and was extending both his arms in slow arcs.

"In this cold? I didn't know you could do that."

"All outer-planet Andies have this modification. It was added to aid rescue missions where biologicals might be involved."

"Thoughtful of you, old man. Spot anyone?"

"There is a human corpse hung high in the vines, two hundred meters to the west. It is difficult to determine time elapsed since death occurred, as the suit is still functioning. At the presumed location of the ship, I read two live humans - the botanist and his passenger, perhaps - but there is an unusual thermal reading there as well. Not biological."

"Very well," Tregennis said. "We shall go on north to the ship. I'm afraid the corpse is probably Wickett, which is indeed sad, but we must leave him until later. You are getting all of this, Mirth?" Mirth acknowledged from the ship, and the two continued slowly in the same direction for several minutes.

"It has to be the botanist's ship," Tregennis said when they reached the huge mound of vines. "The vines wouldn't grow this way on flat ground by themselves. They're so dense you can't even see what's underneath." He gripped some in front of him, and managed to break them away after a great deal of effort. "Good god! There are layers of them below! And this is very strange: they are empty! There is no crystal inside their stems."

"Colonel Tregennis," Diligence said. "Perhaps you should observe this." The Andie had moved around to the eastern side of the mound. Tregennis joined him in front of a large hole, burned through the vines at chest level. A green glow spread out over them from within.

"What the bloody hell is this?" Tregennis bent slightly to look inside. "Damn me! Look inside here, Dilly..." He pulled back. "Tell me I haven't gone completely mad!"

"A most fantastic story. The French writer Verne has never been so entertaining," Holmes said. "You will forgive my skepticism, Wooten, but I am a man who cherishes logic. I have found in the past that the more bizarre something at first appears, the less mysterious it becomes upon closer scrutiny. You offer me little in the way of tangible proofs. Were it not for the sincerity of the telling, I would dismiss your entire tale as nonsense!"

"I can't prove it," Wooten said. He stared into his empty glass. "I'm no theoretical science player, you dig? All I am is a sailor - like those guys at the bar. 'Cept I sail the stars, Sherlock!" It was his second pint, and he was feeling it. "Without Wickett, no more stars. You gotta save him. Or I'm screwed!"

"Am I really to believe that you are from the future? That you traveled through time to be here? That some inexplicable supernatural transformation has given you the appearance of my dear friend Watson? Ha!" Holmes sat back with a tight smile on his lips. Wooten had not told him everything, preferring not to insult his only ally by labeling him a "famous character of fiction".

"You'll have to pump Wickett on that," the space sailor insisted. "I can't explain what I don't understand, but old R.W. can!" Holmes sensed the man's desperation. He sighed, running his long fingers through his straight black hair in thought.

"Reinhold Wickett told you that meeting me might provide a doorway by which you all might reenter your own time? This one thing rings true. I could accept the logic of it, given the rest. There are theories of physics which contend that time is relative. That two objects cannot occupy the same time and space.

We shall see, Mr. Wooten. We shall see, soon enough!" The Raven's Blood had begun to fill with patrons, most of them cramming into the room with the stage.

"Looks like the show is about to begin," Wooten said. Then he shouted at the blonde, who was serving a nearby booth. "You guys got burgers here? I'm starved!"

"What's that, dearie? Buggers are everywhere, if you don't mind me tellin' you. All's we got is cod and chips, if you want it." Wooten looked doubtful. "Aw, try a plate. On the house for you, old dearie." She looked at Holmes, not extending the invitation. "And yer lordship?"

"No, thank you," Holmes said, lighting a cigarette. "Is the magician on tonight?"

"After the girl sings, yes. Yer lordship's been to The Raven's before then?"

"On one occasion only," Holmes remarked, looking into the other room at a tall man with a pointed beard and a black, wide-brimmed hat. "Excuse me, Wooten," he said, rising suddenly. "I will be back directly."

"Certainly is the nervous one, your friend," the barmaid complained after Holmes brushed past. She leaned forward to pick up the used glasses, presenting Wooten with a complete view of her assets. "Ditch him and meet me later?" she suggested. "I likes older gents."

Wooten smiled to keep the peace, and watched the detective while the barmaid went for his plate of fish. Holmes was having an animated conversation with the man in the black hat. The two were evidently friends, because they shook hands warmly when their discussion ended. Holmes clapped the other man's shoulder before turning to leave.

"That was Doyle," Sherlock Holmes offered in explanation when he returned. "He works the local venues as a prestidigitator. An admirable talent. Too bad we haven't the time to witness his performance this evening. Ah, your chips are here, Mr. Wooten. Enjoy them. We will be leaving shortly."

Owen Tregennis stormed to the command deck, still carrying his helmet under his arm. A billowing cloud of smoke trailed him from a freshly lit cigar. "I've left Dilly out there to investigate," he told Mirth. "You can relay him to the main screen, can't you."

"Of course, Owen." She began making the necessary adjustments. "What was it?"

"Damnedest thing!" Tregennis said. "The botanist's ship is covered with a shell of pure eidolon-N. Looks thick as the Uranus rings. All the vines around it are emptied out. Like the crystal just left them to solidify over the ship. The vines hide it all, but Crawler must have lasered a hole that we found. When I looked into it I... well, I had a hallucination, I'd suppose. It was very much like what Crawler was going on about when we brought him inside. He's still sleeping?"

"Yes, and he will be for six more hours. You saw a city?" The screen in front lit up with Noh from Diligence's point of view.

"I thought I saw flashes of London, England," Tregennis admitted. "Or what it looked like nearly three centuries ago." He collapsed into his seat, chomping down on the cigar, and dropped the helmet next to him on the deck. "The damnedest thing! What is that? Is Dilly doing that?"

The picture was blurred with movement. Readouts printing to the screen borders indicated that Diligence was moving to the east of the buried scout ship, along a long row of vines.

"The ship's video system isn't converting his signals fast enough," Mirth apologized. "That's not really the way we see things, Owen. He's streaming data. I'll have the computer Watson make a translation to audio."

"...my scan indicated two more biologicals in this direction," Diligence reported. The screen revealed that the low wall of vines was leading the Andie to a second, smaller ice mound in the distance.

"The two mounds are connected by that wall to your left?" Tregennis asked.

"Yes. It does appear to be an artery, Colonel Tregennis," Diligence agreed. He reached the second mound, which was set back from the edge of the clearing and ringed by banyans.

"Interesting. See if you can burn away some of the vine layers. I want to see if there is also a shell inside that one." One of the Andie's arms came into view and emitted a thread of blue light. A hole melted away, and the screen was filled with the green glow of eidolon-N. Peering into it through the Andie's eyes, they saw a wall of shining emerald.

"They are alive," Diligence said. "The blood pressure of both biologicals inside is abnormally low, corresponding to comatose condition."

"The computer Watson confirms that this was the place of Reinhold Wickett's last transmission," Mirth added. "Test the tensile strength of the shell, Diligence."

"Carefully!" Tregennis urged. "We don't know why it's there. It may be an atmosphere field, intentionally or not. Could be keeping them alive." He watched as Diligence probed the section of emerald wall.

"Readings are not consistent," the Andie said. "I believe the eidolon-N is exhibiting an unclassified type of molecular bonding. I predict some strange sub-particles here. Should I perform a bore test?"

"No!" Tregennis ordered. "We don't want to damage anything. Take all the passive readings you can and come back. There's nothing more we can do out there right now. I don't want to attract Ghost's attention. They could be monitoring local transmissions, looking for Crawler." He stood up, rubbing his eyes. "Assign two droids out there," he said to Mirth. "One on each mound."

"Yes, Owen," Mirth replied. She was looking intently at the view screen, which was filled with the exposed section of the eidolon shell.

"I'm going to my cabin to sleep for a while. Wake me when Ghost begins lift off. I want to forward Dilly's data to Susan through Central, but not until they're out of the system." He picked up his helmet

and walked slowly to the lift. She did not look away from the screen. "Say, you two don't happen to see anything extraordinary in that stuff, do you?"

"We do observe the manner in which the crystals have fused to create the shell," she said. "The video does not have a high enough resolution to display it. They are first joined into units, roughly octagonal in shape. It is reminiscent of insect hive structures on Earth." She saw him shrug wearily and turn away. "If you mean to ask if we have seen long dead cities, Owen..?"

"No," he said, thumbing the lift. "Of course you haven't. I need some sleep. Good night, Mirth."

"Sleep well, Owen," she replied. She continued to process the clearer images streaming from Diligence. They reminded her of something.

The factory building on Edward Street was alone on a forgotten block. It had five stories, a skyscraper in its time, and was built of rust colored brick. Two mighty chimneys rose above its flat roof. Rows of windows on each floor had been boarded over years earlier. The river surged alongside, held back by an ancient wooden seawall and newer, tarred piles, sunken at regular intervals. Adjacent lots held remnants of other structures, reduced to heaps of crumbling stone and wood. Holmes and Wooten stood in the shadows at the far end of the street.

"We will move very quickly," Holmes instructed his less than enthusiastic companion. "There is a small loading dock leading into the building from the river." He suddenly raced away, cloak swirling, and Wooten followed. They hurdled rubble to cross through weeds and high grass, and crouched against a wall of the factory building. "This way!" Holmes hissed.

Where the edge of the building met the seawall, Wooten saw a battered, makeshift catwalk - a series of narrow, wooden boards lashed to the piles with weathered ropes - suspended over the river to the factory dock. "This don't look too reliable," he pointed out, but Holmes did not hesitate. The planks creaked and swayed underfoot, and part way across Wooten heard an ominous crack. Holmes

grabbed his arm, pulling him away from the river below as a board split and dropped into the cold water with a splash.

"Damn!" Wooten whispered. The distance to the river, swollen by recent rains, was only a few feet. The board rushed away amid dark eddies.

The detective let go of Wooten's arm, jumping to the platform. It was unlit and empty, save a few rotting tarpaulins and broken barrels. A lone rat wandered across, taking no notice of them, and crawled beneath the canvas.

"The carpentry of Scotland Yard," Holmes remarked, pointing to double doors leading from the dock into the building. More heavy planks had been bolted over them to ward off squatters.

"How are we gonna get past those two-by-fours?" Wooten worried.

"We follow the rat," Holmes answered, throwing back the tarpaulins. There was a stairwell underneath, leading down to a small door with a rusted knob. Several rat holes punctured the walls, but their occupants did not appear. "An equipment room," Holmes said. "Once it was used for rope and gaffs and other shippers' tools."

The storeroom was musty, a spider webbed crypt that had never seen daylight. Holmes located a small, green signal lantern with ancient oil, and the two found seats. Wooten swatted at fleas he imagined on his legs. Holmes scratched in the dust, drawing a diagram.

"As you know, I have been here before," Holmes began, "when Moriarty used this place as his headquarters. Although the Yard confiscated the professor's personal effects, the interior of the building will be the same. The top three floors are so collapsed as to be useless to our enemy - except the roof, which commands an excellent view of the surrounding area." He pointed a long finger at his map.

"The second floor was converted by Moriarty into his apartments. He once kept an admirable library, and all else a solitary man of his intellect might require. Sebastian Moran does not live here, I think, but

it is reasonable to assume he and his brood may have restocked that floor with supplies for extended visits.

"The first floor, just above us, is where we will undoubtedly find your three friends. It was, at one time, the main factory. Lestrade's men also impounded the lathes and other machines last used by Moriarty, and it is now empty. There is a trap door in the ceiling of this room. It is the way we will get in, and hopefully take your friends out.

"To do that we will have to rely on trickery as our best chance. Moran is a crack shot. He rarely has more than a few thugs in his company, but they will be heavily armed. I have brought along a pistol, loaned to me by my friend Watson. Perhaps you should take it in his stead." Holmes removed Watson's Army revolver from his jacket and passed it over. Wooten looked at it curiously, weighing it, and turning it over several times in his hands. He sighed.

"What is wrong, Mr. Wooten?" Holmes asked. "You look very sad."

"I've never fired one of these powder burners," Wooten said. "You keep it." He handed the revolver back. "In my own time, I'm an expert killing machine - a warrior. Everything I know is useless here. I'm trapped in the body of a 19th century doctor, for God's sake!"

"Not entirely useless," Holmes corrected him. "John Watson was also a soldier in his youth. He served honorably with the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers in the Second Afghan war. He was a surgeon in that Army, of course, but decorated for valor. A more disciplined, braver, and sturdier fellow I have never known!

"You should be happy to learn that I am counting on your background as a soldier, Mr. Wooten. My plan requires precise execution if it is to succeed. I will explain it to you fully, but first we must make certain preparations."

He stood and shined the lantern around the storeroom. "There it is, against that wall! Do you see our salvation, Wooten?"

The dim light revealed a small dinghy, half-covered by a tarp. Holmes grabbed the canvas and pulled it back, placing his lantern on the upturned hull. "Once your friends are collected, this is our best means of escape. There are no holes in it that I can see. It is as I remembered. I am certain it will prove seaworthy enough to paddle along the river to Albert Dock. Help me lift it, and we shall moor it to the landing outside."

Wooten took the bow and led the way out the narrow door and up the stairs, with Holmes at the stern. The space sailor reached the top stair, and suddenly put the boat down. He motioned for Holmes to do the same, one finger to his lips.

"There's someone out there on the river, Holmes!" Wooten whispered, ducking down and pulling the rotting tarps above them over the stairwell. "Put out the light!"

Holmes complied and inched forward, squeezing past the dinghy to join Wooten at the top. A small craft with a single, unfurled sail, floated thirty yards from landing. Two lanterns blazed aboard it, illuminating the Thames.

"I make out three men," Holmes said, adjusting the tarps to better cover their presence.

"They're making right for us!" Wooten worried.

"Patience, my dear Mr. Wooten," Holmes said, showing little concern. "It is unlikely that they will dock here." They watched for a few minutes. The sailboat came about and headed back toward the opposite side of the river.

"You were right!" Wooten said in amazement. "What do you think: just out for a pleasure cruise?"

"Not at this hour," Holmes said. "They are sailing that way to use the wind to their advantage, although without much skill. They would not be on this part of the river for any purpose but to visit Moran, and will reverse their tack again in a moment."

The boat did exactly as he predicted, coming about a second time and sailing in their direction, but now further up the river.

"I don't get it," Wooten confessed. "Never been on a sailboat."

"They are heading for the bank on the upper side of the factory," Holmes explained. He threw back the canvas. "Hurry! We must be on the dock!" He jumped up and ran to the river edge of the platform. Wooten followed reluctantly.

"They might see us!"

"We are sufficiently hidden by the building. Listen!" said Sherlock Holmes.

"Aye." A rough voice carried clearly across the water between them. "It's us. We was watchin' the clinic in the Paddington. He ain't been there today. Left a sign, didn't he? Says the place is closed 'til next week. So we checked the address at Kensington. Servant girl says they've gone to visit madam's father in the country."

"Interesting," replied another, more refined voice. "Mrs. Watson lost her father some years ago, I believe. No matter."

"That's Moran," Holmes whispered to Wooten. "He has done his research, but Watson and Mary are safely away!"

"Perhaps our earlier report was incorrect," the colonel said. "Well, I won't need you or your men here tonight. I have Nigel with me, and Hayward is on the roof as lookout. Get back and keep watch. One of you take Baker Street, the others at the doctor's house. Maybe Dr. Watson has chosen not to present himself this time, but he will be dealt with in any case."

"Does you want him dead, then?"

"No, you fool! How can I find his notes or the journals of Sherlock Holmes if the doctor is dead? Holmes won't tell me, surely. Come back at sunup. Be off with you now!"

There was a scraping sound as the boat was cast away, and a snap of its sail catching the breeze. Wooten started back for the stairs, but Holmes signaled for him to wait. "They won't pass back near us," the detective said. "Listen!"

"The man Watson is not the fool he appears to be, Nigel," Moran was saying. "He's a surgeon - an educated man. We may have to move them at sunrise, and then start a real search for the good doctor and his wife." Another man's voice grunted in agreement, and there was silence.

"They have returned to the front of the building," Holmes said. "Now, Mr. Wooten! The rowboat!"

"Ah, Mr. Holmes!" Moran said, coming through the door from Edward Street. "You are awake! Good!"

Wickett blinked at the lantern light. The man called Nigel continued up the stairs to the second floor, but Moran, carrying the lantern, walked over to where he faced his captive. Algia and Kivvy were asleep against the other wall.

"What do you want, Colonel Moran?" Wickett asked, not looking directly at his abductor. Moran bowed slightly.

"An unusual honor, Holmes, to be addressed by my proper rank. I wonder if you would do me one honor more?" The colonel put his lantern on the floor and held up a notebook, bound in soft leather. "I have always been, as perhaps you know, somewhat of an amateur artist. Been doing it since India, you see. Drawing helps me create stratagem. I would like to make a sketch of you, as we are now approaching the end of our journey together."

"I have little choice, it seems," Wickett said.

The colonel picked up the lantern and moved to the far side of the room, retrieving a three-legged stool. For the first time, Wickett was able to see the layout of his prison. There were no windows, although broken ventilation pipes poked through the brick walls in several places. The ruin of a red brick forge lay at the far end, and a huge double door, blocked by some wooden crates that appeared to be empty. The floor was scarred with the marks of fittings once used to anchor heavy machinery. Moran returned, sitting on the stool, and removed a piece of hard charcoal from his waistcoat pocket.

"Too bad your friend Watson couldn't be here," the colonel remarked, applying the charcoal to a page of the notebook. "Could have drawn you both together. I am disappointed."

"I'll tell him that when I see him next," Wickett said sarcastically. "What is this place?"

"Why, Holmes! Could it be that your famous memory fails you? Surely you remember the Professor's hideout? You defeated him here several years ago. His plan, to supply the criminal world with proper ammunition, was quite wrecked. You could never have succeeded without that bloody traitor Fred Porlock, of course, for all your posturing about the science of deductive reasoning." Wickett decided that minimum comment would be the best response to the colonel's remarks, wondering how there could be a Sherlock Holmes case unknown to him. In the distance, and from outside, he heard a distinct splash.

"Mmmm. What was that?" Moran asked with little real interest, not looking up from his notebook.

"I heard nothing," Wickett said.

"Yes, well. Could you turn your head back to where it was? Thank you. I'm sure the papers will be very pleased with this profile. I shall have to refrain from signing it, but it will be published, no doubt. A last rendering of the great consulting detective before his well-deserved death, eh?" Moran held up the notebook, standing and kicking back the stool. "What do you think, Mr. Sherlock Holmes?"

"A fair likeness," Wickett said. Across from him, the scraping of the stool on the floor had awakened Algia.

"Hardly a Sydney Paget, of course," Colonel Moran continued. "Well, I shall leave you now. We will have an early day tomorrow, as we intend to move you to another location at dawn." He looked at Algia, who scowled back. "You will come too, my dear. The boy will have to be disposed of, however. Best to travel light, eh, Mr. Holmes?"

Moran went up the stairs, laughing at Algia's sudden change of expression, and slammed the door behind him. She and Wickett said nothing for a while, and then Algia smiled at her friend.

"I had the strangest dream," she told Wickett.

"Wait a minute!" Wooten said. "Let me get this straight: you want them to grab me?" Holmes was explaining the details of his plan, using the diagram he had made in the dust on the storeroom floor.

"Certainly. It will provide the distraction I need. We will go in through the trap door, release all three of the captives, and send the young couple back down to wait for us with the boat at the landing platform. I'm sure you will agree that there would be no reason to expose the woman to further danger, and the young man can act as our reserve if anything goes wrong.

"You will remain with your friend Wickett on the first floor and I will make my way to the roof." Holmes pointed to the forge in his diagram. "The forge smokestack has a ladder inside, so the sweeps could clear it. I will climb up and confront Moran's lookout on the roof, while you present yourself to Moran by making a commotion on the ground floor."

"He'll be delighted to see me," Wooten said. "Probably welcome me with a bullet!"

"I think he will be quite surprised, but I'm sure he will remain with you both when he discovers the boy and girl gone. There may be an opportunity for you and Wickett to overcome him and his man Nigel. Failing that, I shall appear behind them on the stair when I have made my way down from the roof."

"Yeah, it might work at that," Wooten admitted. "You've got the gun, so you could get the drop on them. It's risky, but what the hell?"

"Good!" Holmes said. "Then we are agreed!"

"One question, Holmes: just how'd you know about that ladder and the trap door?"

"I may not have mentioned that the late Moriarty was not apprehended when I led the raid on this place by Scotland Yard. Much to Lestrade's distress, the professor fled up the stairs to the roof and then vanished. Needless to say, I investigated the manner of his disappearance. He had climbed down the chimney ladder, hidden inside the forge, and later escaped through the trap door to the river."

"Ok, I got one more," Wooten said. "Why didn't you just call the cops - I mean Scotland Yard - and tell them Moran was here?"

Holmes smiled, but his answer was grave: "I have full confidence in my friends at Scotland Yard," he replied, "but I have none whatsoever in Colonel Sebastian Moran. He might kill your friends immediately if faced with capture. He would also have the option of negotiating with the police for their lives as hostages, worsening the situation considerably."

"Ok, just asking," Wooten sighed in defeat. "Tell me the rest."

Owen Tregennis felt himself swooping down from frigid sky. He remembered he was asleep, tucked in a web in Wickett's scout, but the sensation overwhelmed him. He rarely dreamed - or slept for that matter - and he had only heard about people who had out-of-body experiences.

He soared naked nonetheless, without his suit or helmet or jets. His long hair whipped across his skull, and his blood slammed into his feet as he plunged toward the city.

"It's bloody London again!" He heard his own voice as a high-pitched whine against the rushing noise in his ears. It was as if he would fall forever. He remembered reading a print book about such dreams. The author claimed they were based on man's earliest sleeping places in the tops of trees.

His eyes were filtered with the green glow of eidolon-N. He kept falling, but the city stayed the same distance, despite his own tremendous velocity. An illusion. He was thinking of a free-fall he'd tried once from a scout in Earth atmosphere.

He could make out few details, but he knew this London from ancient maps and etchings stored in history cubes. It was, as he had told the Andie, London of the 19th century.

Time was slowed. Hours passed as he fell, and the city finally began to grow. Here was the Victorian splendor of the Age of Reason, spreading itself in front of him. Impossible detail grew out of turn: a coach with four horses; a lace parasol twirled; the shriveled face of an ancient street panderer; ivy growing on rock walls of an elegant cathedral.

He stopped falling, leveling off and gliding through Hyde Park.

A woman was ahead, sitting alone on a cast-iron bench. She was dressed carefully in the style of the middle class, with a ridiculous black straw hat to keep her white skin from any hint of sunshine. If there is a sun here, he thought. He wished he could stop himself, and settle to the soft grass beside her bench, but he didn't know how. She looked up as he flew over, and, to his surprise, smiled and waved a white-gloved hand. She was familiar. A face he had seen somewhere.

He changed direction again, heading back up, into the pastel sky. The air tore by him, harder and louder than before. He looked back. Hyde Park was a shrinking green dot, and then the clouds moved in to blot the whole city. Pale green clouds. Everything but her skin and glove was green, he thought.

The coldness grew and he saw his skin draw back around his fingernails. His eyes watered as air slapped them. Icy rivulets ran into his mouth. The sky above was darkening, and he could see the curve

of the planet beneath him. He was at the edge of atmosphere. Soon there would be no air at all. He was unable to move his limbs in the cold.

"I am dying," he exclaimed, "or dead!" His voice was like a shout in an empty canyon. He heard it bounce, echoing off the octagonal cells.

"What?" he wondered.

Thin walls of green crystal filled space ahead. Octagons, eight sides not touching, but close together. Large enough, he realized, that each could contain the planet below. Or maybe a solar system.

Tregennis tried to open his eyes, and found that they were open. He was plunging forward again, into the space between two octagons. Mirth's gentle voice came over the audio in the sleeping quarters:

"Time to wake. Owen," the Andie said.

She is so beautiful, he thought.

"Ghost is preparing for lift off," Mirth said.

Tregennis groaned and twisted in the sleeping web. It adjusted to his position. His feet were frostbitten. When he closed his eyes, they stung from windburn. His arm muscles ached as he tried to wipe the frozen tears.

He went limp, resting from unexpected exertion. He dreamed: Wickett was speaking. They were in the detective's office on Central, and Tregennis was smoking a cigar. Wickett talked on about the young botanist, Kivvy, and the girl with him. Algia San Filippo, an actress. Owen remembered her from a holo he had seen.

How could I have forgotten this? Tregennis wondered, somewhere outside the conversation.

"He is important. She is important. Maybe more important than this other matter," Wickett told him.

What other matter?

"If anything happens to me," Wickett was saying, "and they survive, you must tell Susan that they are in love. That Kivvy has fallen in love with Miss San Filippo. It is very important that Susan knows that before she..."

"Wake up, Owen," Mirth said again. "Ghost is preparing to lift off."

"Ok," he mumbled. "Be there directly." He pulled himself out of the webbing. His eyes focused. There was a green cursor blinking on the screen across the cabin.

"What's that?" Kivvy stiffened. A faint green light in the darkness. "Over there!"

They watched as the small section of the floor lifted the rest of the way and a hand set the lantern to one side. Algia gasped when the first face appeared, and the tall, thin detective pulled himself through the opening. Wickett chuckled. Holmes motioned them to silence, waiting for Wooten to join him. He picked up the lantern and the two men crossed the room.

"Mr. Wooten!" Wickett whispered. "Excellent! I had hoped you would find us. And with Mr. Sherlock Holmes! An honor, sir!"

"A fascinating event, to be sure," Holmes agreed, studying Wickett for a moment. He reached into his coat to retrieve a small pocketknife. "We will talk at length later, Mr. Wickett. Your friend Wooten will cut you loose and explain our plan of escape. Please excuse me now, all of you. I have an ironic passage ahead." He handed the knife to Wooten.

"But..." Kivvy interjected. Holmes gave him an apologetic glance, bowed slightly to Algia San Filippo, and moved to the doors of the red brick forge. He grasped the long iron sliding bolt that kept them shut, and everyone in the room jumped at the screech as he pulled it. The doors ajar, Holmes quickly disappeared into the long dead oven.

"Where is he going?" Algia demanded. Wooten had already sliced through the leather holding Wickett, and was working on her bound ankles. He finished and handed her the knife.

"Here. Get Kivvy's, will yuh? I just thought of something." He went over to the forge and used the lantern to peer up inside. He closed the doors and bolted them. Returning to the others, he said: "Don't worry about him. It's part of the plan."

"Ow! Just what is this plan," Kivvy asked. He was the only person still sitting. He rubbed his legs, trying to awaken them faster.

"Yeah," Algia said. "Are we getting out of here or what?"

"All we have," Wooten answered, "is a little row boat tied to the dock in back. Listen to me: this guy Holmes is either a genius or a total crazy, but he's also got a pretty lethal looking old gun. Wait here, Reinhold. You two follow me." The space sailor helped Kivvy to his feet and half pushed them to the trap door, handing them the lantern.

"What are we supposed to do?" Algia asked. "Just leave you two up here?"

"Go down there and wait," Wooten said, repeating the instructions Holmes had given him. "Keep this trap door thing open a little bit so you can hear what's happening. If it sounds like they've won, beat it to the boat and row it to Albert Dock. Here's some money. Holmes said it would be enough to get a cabbie to take you to Scotland Yard. When you get there, ask for Inspector Lestrade." He smiled. He felt good being back in action again. "If we win, no problem. Right?"

"Win what?" Kivvy put a hand on Wooten's shoulder. "We're not going anywhere without you two. Let's just get out of here now. Sherlock Holmes is just a figment of Reinhold's imagination, remember?"

"I'm not so sure about that, Kivvy," Wooten said with a grin. "Never was. This is a lot more real than that. See this splinter?" He held out his left hand. A gray stripe ran across the palm. "It's part of the illusion too, but right now it hurts like hell and I can't get it out. Wickett's Sherlock Holmes is climbing

up a ladder inside a chimney to try and take out a man on the roof. All three of the bad guys have bullet guns, and more are coming back at sunrise. If we try to run for it now, even out on the river, one of them might blow us out of the water. I don't think I want to know what it's like to get hit by a lead bullet that's just an illusion, ok?"

"He's right, Kivvy," Wickett whispered loudly. "We'll have to defeat Moran and his henchmen before we can get Holmes to help us find an exit. We have no control. Follow the plan. Take Algia and go. Now!"

"Reinhold..." Algia objected, but Kivvy was convinced. He nodded at Wickett and Wooten.

"Ok," Kivvy said grimly. Algia looked angry, but she argued no further, and the two dropped out of sight through the trap door, taking the lantern with them.

CHAPTER FOUR

"We will be obliged to shut down almost everything once Ghost is off the surface," Tregennis said to Mirth. "We can't risk them scanning us. We would make too easy a target, and we have to try to free the others."

"A shut down is not a problem, Owen," the Andie replied. "I can intercept all of Ghost's frequencies and manage the scout's emergency system from my own internals. I require very minimal power, which should keep them from scanning us."

"Watson will be offline?"

"Yes, Owen. It would be prudent. Diligence and I can bring Watson back up when Ghost is far enough out. It is an easy procedure."

"Any indication when they will lift off?"

"It will be soon - an hour, perhaps. A small squad is loading the last of their surface equipment on board now."

"Very well," Tregennis said. "I will be below. Keep me posted." He took the shaft to the galley. While waiting for the food processor to produce his steak and egg simulations, he began to think about the second dream. It puzzled him.

He found himself unable to recall the actual conversation with Wickett about Kivvy and Algia. The dream fragment had failed to explain why Susan would want to know about a romance between the young exobotanist and his holo actress girlfriend. As he ate, his concern grew. Perhaps his dream had only been a dream, but there was the problem of whether any of them were alive under the two green crystal mounds on Noh. Tregennis worried that he might fail his Australian friend's strange request.

"Watson?" Tregennis rarely used Watson directly, deferring to Mirth's more immediate rapport with the supercomputer.

"Yes, Colonel Tregennis."

"Can I see all the data you have on Kivvy and Miss Algia San Filippo?"

"You have a full access clearance to all of Reinhold's files, Colonel Tregennis," Watson replied.

"Sorting..."

A clattering sound came from the inside of the old forge. "The signal!" Wooten told Reinhold Wickett.

"Holmes said he would toss some stones down the smokestack after he took out the guy on the roof."

"What now?" Wickett asked, watching as Wooten picked up the three-legged stool.

"Now it gets dramatic," Wooten said. "Just play it by ear, but don't forget you're Sherlock Holmes." He began to smash the stool against the wall. A gentle rain of dust fell from the rafters.

The man called Nigel appeared at the top of the stairs. He held a lantern in one hand and a revolver in the other. "There's someone down there with them!" he shouted behind him, training his pistol into the gloom below.

"Ah, the notable physician!" said Sebastian Moran, coming out on the landing. The colonel was in a heavy dressing gown, and he carried an odd-looking rifle with a crank in its stock.

"The air rifle!" Wickett whispered to Wooten in excitement.

"Yeah? Great!" the space sailor replied.

"So nice of you to join us, Dr. Watson," Moran said cordially. "We have been anxious about your whereabouts." The man with the lantern preceded him as he made his way down the stairs. "But, what's this? Two have flown the coop, Nigel! What ingratitude!"

"They send their deepest regrets, Moran," Wickett improvised. "Urgent business came up elsewhere. But you hardly had need of them, in any case." Moran studied Wickett carefully. He did not smile.

"Make no sudden moves, Mr. Holmes," he warned as the four came face to face. Nigel placed the lantern on the floor, lighting them all from below. "I do need more from you than your feeble bravado, and I would hate to end our meeting prematurely. Whatever your game, I assure you both of us are excellent shots."

"Perhaps you would be good enough to tell us what you intend to do with us now, Moran?" Wickett asked.

"I intend only your death, Mr. Holmes, after I have extracted the whereabouts of certain lists and journals you have kept on the professor's activities. The legacy of a man you killed." Moran relaxed, lowering the barrel of his weapon. "I am, you see, your judge and executioner. Your sentence is death, for the willful murder of my former patron, Professor Moriarty, at Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland. No need to plead the case in this court, for I was the sole witness to your crime."

"You were, of course, the mysterious rifleman who tried to avenge the professor after Moriarty and I fought." Wickett stated. "Using the same weapon you now hold."

"It was Moriarty's weapon, I believe!" a fifth man said from the landing above them. "Made to order by Von Herder, the blind German." Recognizing the voice, Moran spun around to gape at the speaker.

"What..?" He raised the cocked air rifle, but Holmes was ready for him. The detective fired one well-placed shot, and the rifle flew from Moran's grasp with a whine of metal. The henchman Nigel stepped back to take aim at the landing, but a billowing cloud of white smoke exploded there, and Holmes was gone. Wooten rushed forward, pinned Nigel's arms, and the revolver went off, sending a bullet into the ceiling. The space sailor grabbed the gun and gave Nigel a swift blow to the neck. The henchman slumped to the floor.

Sebastian Moran laughed wildly and kicked the lantern. It crashed into the foot of the forge and went out. The windowless room pitched into darkness. "You'll never take me, Holmes!" the colonel cried. There was a bright flash on the floor, and Wooten saw Moran dive for the air rifle. It was dark again instantly. The sound of a man running down the stairs followed. Wooten's grip tightened on Nigel's pistol.

"Look out!" the space sailor yelled to the others.

Another bright flash lit the room, and Wooten could see Holmes several feet behind Sebastian Moran, about to pounce on his enemy. Moran had the air rifle raised and aimed in the opposite direction. The room went black, and Wooten heard the peculiar hiss of the German's weapon as Moran fired at Reinhold Wickett.

"They're off the surface," Mirth said. "I am shutting down." She made no movement to accomplish this, as she was completely interfaced with the ship, replacing Watson as its resident operating system.

"You'll be able to track them through their exit window?" Tregennis asked.

"For a while," Mirth replied. Suddenly, the ship shook violently and the cabin went dark. The Andie pilot looked up at Tregennis, her eyes wide, and tried to speak. She slumped forward over the command console.

"Jesus Christ!" Tregennis shouted. "What is happening?" The scout ship shook again, harder and longer than before.

Fifty thousand feet above the surface of Noh, Ghost had exploded with the combined force of a dozen large nuclear bombs.

Wooten opened his eyes. His lids felt sunburned. The breather indicators in the corner of his faceplate showed his air mix was ok. He was on his back, which wasn't the easiest position to overcome in a space suit. The faceplate was iced over from the outside.

He flicked a tongue switch and the obscuring ice began to melt. He tried moving - first his neck, and then his arms and legs. Good, he thought. Nothing was broken. He rolled to his right, to push himself up, and saw the other suited figure beside him. Reaching out, he shook the other man's arm, but there was no response. He saw his own laser rifle sticking out from under the other's body. Unloosening the rifle with some effort, Wooten rose, using the gun as a crutch. His body ached and itched everywhere as he stood on wobbly legs. He turned in a slow circle, amazed at what he saw.

The vines were gone. The hills and crags were gone too. In their place, a perfectly smooth, flat sheet of green-streaked ice covered everything for as far as he could see. There were only two features on the horizon. The botanist's scout ship sat canted to one side about thirty yards away, and a mile further out, Wooten saw what appeared to be a second scout. Two figures moved slowly across the ice between them.

Wooten bent forward and scraped at the faceplate of the other man's helmet. He yelled when he saw the staring eyes. He tried the communicator and manipulated the chest pad on the other suit, but it was of no use.

Reinhold Wickett was dead.

"No real damage that I can see," Tregennis said to Diligence. They had reached Kivvy's scout. The stern was sunk into the ice, tilting the ship in a precarious angle toward the blue giant that always filled the sky of Noh. The explosions had scorched its hull, but Andie engineers had designed this ship to withstand much greater heat.

"The first explosion liquefied all of the ice in this quadrant," Diligence observed, "and the shock wave from the second explosion flattened the surface before it froze again." He gestured to his right. "The human I scanned is almost upon us, Colonel Tregennis. He is armed."

Tregennis considered the man stumbling toward them across the glassy expanse. The suit he wore was identical to that of the Ghost crewman, Crawler. "From the way he's dragging that laser rifle, I wouldn't worry," Tregennis said. "Try to get this hatch open. I'll see to him." He turned and tongued the general communications channel, a hand on the butt of the laser pistol riding on his hip.

"Hello..." Wooten's voice was weak. He noticed the other's weapon and let his rifle fall to the ice. "You gotta help me get inside. There are two kids in there. They might be in trouble..."

"We are aware of that," Tregennis said, maintaining his guard. "Do you have any other weapons?"

"No, no!" Wooten insisted. "I'm not a hostile. Please, man, they're friends of mine. We gotta get in. Might be dying..." His voice shook, and Tregennis saw his eyes tearing inside the helmet. "I'm Wooten," he said sadly. "This is real, isn't it?"

"I'm not sure what you mean by that. You are from Ghost, aren't you? Your suit..."

"Hatch control is responding, Colonel Tregennis," Diligence announced.

"Ok, let's go," Tregennis said. "Come along, Mr. Wooten. Steady on, old man." All three entered the scout ship. "Scan for life, Dilly!" Tregennis ordered.

The Andie led them to the rec room, where Algia San Filippo and Kivvy sat passively conscious in front of the TIF console. Their headsets remained in place, and Kivvy wore the finger controllers on both hands. Wooten struggled out of his helmet. Then he lost strength, groaning and leaning his back against the wall next to them.

"Mr. Wooten?" Algia mumbled, looking over at him. Her face was pale and haggard. "What happened?" Wooten slumped to the floor, saying nothing.

"We're out," Kivvy answered for him. He had a growth of beard, but his eyes were clear. "Wooten!" he demanded. "Where's Reinhold?"

"Dead," Wooten said. He stared straight ahead. He was sweating in his suit. "Fuckin' Moran got him. Nothing I could do. Shot him through the forehead." He looked up at Kivvy. "Holmes was right on top of the bastard, but he wasn't in time. I saw it all in the light of the flash powder Holmes got from the magician."

"This man is in shock, Dil," Tregennis said to the Andie. "See to him, will you?" Removing his helmet, Tregennis turned to Kivvy and Algia. "You are all right then. My God! It's a miracle that you're alive! You don't look like you've spent a year trapped in this place."

"I'm a little hungry," Algia said distantly. She looked at Kivvy and smiled. "And I need to take a piss."

Tregennis frowned. "How does this man know Reinhold Wickett?" he asked, pointing to Wooten.

"He was there with us," Kivvy said. He looked up at the Englishman. "Do you have a ship? I think we'd all better get out of this one."

"INTELX is completely flatlined," Diligence agreed. "This vessel will not be going anywhere soon."

"Yes, yes. Of course," Tregennis said. "Make sure Mr. Wooten gets suited, Dil. I'll go with these two and find them the proper gear."

Kivvy lagged behind a moment, watching as Diligence carefully helped a distracted Wooten replace his helmet and reseal his suit. The display of gentle patience fascinated him. It occurred to Kivvy that he had never spent much time among the Andies. Confusion, disappointment, and anger about his birthright vanished. Together, he and Diligence pulled Wooten to his feet and followed Tregennis and Algia into the ship's corridors.

"You have something to ask me," Diligence said. Kivvy looked into the Andie's eyes. He sensed comforting warmth. He sensed other words, unspoken.

"You know," Kivvy said. "Don't you? What... who I am, I mean?"

"Yes, Kivvy. I can almost read your stream. You are not an Andie, but you are one with us. We have anticipated your emergence with great expectations. I feel most fortunate to meet you."

"I was afraid. Frightened to be..."

"You are not alone, Kivvy. You have never been alone. It is only the beginning. There is so much more for all of us to know."

"How..?" Kivvy began, but Wooten slipped and lost his footing on the deck, sagging between them. The comforting warmth flooded over Kivvy once more.

"Help me with this hurting human, brother." It was a non-voice that Kivvy heard this time: "The answers will come later."

THE END