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THE ALTIAN PLAGUE

Volume IV of the Earthbound Series

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Preface

After completing the third volume of the *Earthbound* Trilogy, I began a fourth story set several years after the conclusion of *Planetbound*. I ended up abandoning this project because -- well, because *Planetbound* pretty much puts a period on things. Once your characters ride off into the sunset, it can be less satisfying if they ride back in again.

A reader's suggestion started me thinking, and I realized there is some room between the final chapter of *Planetbound* and the epilogue -- enough room for another story or two. This is where *The Altian Plague* fits. I hope my readers won't mind taking the step or two backward from the conclusion of the original Trilogy that enables us to resume Nyk's story...

-- D M Arnold, April 2004

1 -- A Surprise Visit

Nykkyo Kyhana climbed to the surface at the Canal Street subway station and hiked ten blocks to an office building in the Tribeca section of Manhattan. He mounted the stairs and opened a door marked FloranCo. "Good morning, Jaquie."

"Good morning, Mr Kane."

He nodded toward lower Manhattan. "I see they're starting to remove the debris in earnest."

“Yes,” she replied, “but it could be a couple of years before things return to normal.”

“Did you know any of the victims?” he asked.

“No, thank God. I feel so sorry for you, Mr Kane -- losing your wife and father-in-law -- and, with a little one at home. How are you coping?”

“Fine -- considering. It's difficult for Suki's mom...”

Seymor stepped from his office. “Can I speak with you, lad?”

“We'll talk later,” Nyk said to Jaquie.

“Before I forget.” She handed him an envelope.

Nyk examined its contents on his way into Seymor's office. It held two airline tickets: A one-way to Kansas City and one-way from Milwaukee.

“You're going through with it?” Seymor asked.

“I certainly am. Dyppa will make a fine contributor working in our Wisconsin lab.”

“I wish I shared your confidence, Nyk. I like Dyppa, and I hope she works out. But -- frankly, the book says, 'no.' We've had big trouble with other Agents who've had histories of addiction...”

“Dyppa has completed her rehab,” Nyk replied. “She wasn't responsible for her addiction. Zander did that to her. I spent time with her, Seymor. She told me she was desperate to be clean and I believe her.”

“What about her age? She'll be the youngest Agent we've ever put into the field.”

“She's past the age of consent...”

“But, not the age of majority.”

“Her mother has consented to this assignment. Dyppa's intelligent and eager. Seymor -- we need someone who can help with the potato blight. The homeworld plant breeders are stymied -- they need fresh genetic material, and I've exhausted what I can do in that small lab in Queens. Dyppa is the first Floran who's shown interest and ability to perform this assignment. She'll work out.”

“Well -- as her sponsor, it'll fall hard on you if she doesn't. What are your plans?”

“I leave for Kansas City tonight, and Grynnya will take me to the relay station. The inbound Gamma-5 packet has been diverted and I'll ride to Floran on that. I was planning to spend a couple of days in Sudal visiting Suki -- if that's all right with you.”

“Nyk -- whenever you want to travel home to visit her -- go right ahead. You don't need an excuse. I'll understand.”

“Thanks, Seymor.”

“Does she know you're coming?”

“No -- I wanted to surprise her. Suki likes surprises.”

Nyk stood at the security checkpoint at LaGuardia. He placed his case on the belt and watched it roll through the X-ray scanner. He stepped through the metal detector and it beeped. He rolled his eyes and wondered if this was to be the drill for all his future flights.

A security screener motioned him aside. “Raise your arms,” she said and passed a hand wand over him. It buzzed as it passed over his right wrist.

He unbuttoned his cuff and presented his wrist. “I broke it and I have a pin in it,” he explained.

She nodded toward a table where his case sat. He stood as she popped it open, rifled through its contents and gave him a sideward glance. Nyk smiled and shrugged. She snapped it shut. “Okay, go get on your flight.”

He picked up his case and headed for the departure lounge. As he waited for his boarding call he examined his right wrist. At the base of his thumb was a lump, about the size of a grain of rice. He rubbed it. Beneath it, under his skin, was his Floran personal ID chip. *You're going to give me trouble every time I fly*, he thought. *I know it*.

Grynnya pulled her shuttlecar to a halt inside the communications relay station parked above Earth's sun's north pole, outside the heliopause. She parked in a stall beside another, similar vessel. “If you don't mind,” she said, “I'm going to ditch you and run. I want to get home before I lose the dark.”

Nyk nodded, hopped out of the car and headed for the pressure door. He could hear the bay depressurize as the door closed behind him. He looked around the station's main workroom. Behind a bulkhead was the control room. There, a comm technician could monitor the communications traffic routed from one Floran colony, through the station to another. Most of the time, however, the station was unmanned.

The hegemony had many such stations. This one was unique -- not only was it specially equipped to serve as a staging point for Floran ExoAgency missions, it was the link through which Floran agents on Earth could communicate with their homeworld. Each Agent had been issued a laptop computer. Custom software could connect via the Internet to clandestine uplinks, and from there to the homeworld network.

Nyk undressed and stowed his Earth clothing in his personal-effects locker. He stepped into the decontamination chamber and stood on a platform over a tank of liquid. Clenching the mouthpiece of the breathing tube in his teeth, he slipped his feet under restraining straps, hesitated a moment and then pressed the activation button.

The platform lowered him into the tank. He clamped his eyes shut as his face sank beneath the surface. Inhaling through his mouth and exhaling through his nose he counted the seconds as the decontamination fluid did its work ridding his skin of Earth microbes.

The platform began to rise. His face now clear of the liquid, Nyk blew the remaining droplets out of his nose; then he stepped to a second platform for the rinse and repeated the process.

One step remained in the decontamination process. He opened a panel and removed a vial and an injection apparatus. After attaching the vial, he pressed the actuator to flush air from a short tube and needle. Holding the needle parallel to his skin he punctured a vein in his forearm, pressed the actuator and watched as a mixture of broad-spectrum bioagent, synthetic antibodies and immune-system booster emptied into his vein.

As much as he despised it, decontamination was essential, he reminded himself. His people had worked hard over five thousand years to eliminate pathogens from their environment. Earth's biosphere, by comparison, was a soup of microorganisms. An Earth illness would spread rapidly through his native population. How he would hate to be the one responsible.

The vial empty, he dropped it into the waste reprocessor and walked to the wardroom where he donned a Floran tunic and *xarpa*. Nyk pressed a control to repressurized the shuttle bay. The pressure door opened and he stepped in to examine the shuttlecar assigned to the Wisconsin lab.

Diagnostics reported the vessel in proper operating order. He checked the power cables, returned to the workroom, picked up the case he had brought and sat awaiting the arrival of the interplanetary packet.

His wait was not a long one. A thud shook the station and he could hear the docking clamps engage. A packet attendant appeared at the docking tunnel door and motioned Nyk aboard. He stowed his case, took his seat and belted himself in. Through the viewport he could see the relay station and beyond it the brilliant star which was how Earth's sun appeared from this distance. He looked around the packet.

The seats were filled with people of all ages. Some wore the tunic and sashes of the homeworld; others the attire of the various colonies. They had in common blue eyes and fair hair, ranging in color from light blond to medium brown. Nyk remarked to himself how diverse was the Earth population compared to his own -- and, how much more interesting.

The viewports closed and indicator lamps above them glowed white-to- blue. Nyk checked the tightness of his seat belt. The jolt of the warp-jump shook the packet as it traveled the two hundred lightyears between Earth and Floran in an instant. The indicators glowed white and blue again -- another jolt marked the sub-jump to carry the vessel from outside Floran's heliopause into orbit.

The viewports opened and Nyk could see a wildly spinning starfield. *We picked up quite a bit of spin on that jump*, he thought. *The pilots should have no trouble controlling it, though*. He watched as the starfield's spinning slowed and stopped. Now the packet headed toward the transit platform, a space station the size of a small village in synchronous orbit over Floran's equator. Through the port he could look down on his indigo world, mostly covered by an ocean several times the volume of Earth's.

The packet drew near the transit platform and eased into station-keeping as a docking tunnel deployed. The doorway opened. Nyk grasped his case and stood, awaiting his turn to step through the tunnel.

He headed through the transit lounge and sat in a car that carried him into the central hub of the transit platform. One corridor led toward the concourse with its shops and concession stands. Another led to the ExoService offices of the platform's administration. The light was on in Veska's office.

Nyk walked in and embraced the man he had known for so long as his father-in-law; and whom he had recently learned was his own biological father. "Dad," he said. Now, his father-in-law he was no

longer.

“My son and friend,” Veska replied. “How was your transit?”

“Except for decontamination -- pleasant as usual. How's Senta?”

“Haven't you spoken with her?”

“Senta hasn't spoken a word to me during or after the finalization of our divorce,” Nyk said. “Except, that is, through her solicitor. Has she to you?”

Veska shook his head. “It pains me to know one of you is unhappy. My stepdaughter is a strong-willed woman who expect things to go her way. She doesn't quite know how to cope when they don't. It's not that I blame you, Nyk -- you did the right thing. And you're certainly not to blame for our situation.”

“I do wish Senta and I could be friends. It's ironic -- I started my Agency assignment here, and Suki there. Destiny crossed our paths in such a way as now she's here and I'm there.” He paused. “I suppose a long-distance relationship is better than none at all.”

“Yes,” Veska replied. “I was in a long-distance relationship with the two women I loved. Now, they're both long dead.”

“I should consider myself fortunate. The two women I love are alive and secure in Sudal.”

“Enjoy them while you can, son.”

Nyk nodded. “It's a lesson I learned on 9-11.”

“9-11?”

“An Earth date.”

Veska looked at the clock. “You don't want to be late for your shuttle.”

Nyk embraced Veska again and they kissed each other's foreheads. He picked up his case and headed toward the departure lounge for the Sudal shuttle. He found the place empty. A glance out the viewport showed no vessel at the other end of the docking port.

He saw a transit official checking a vidisplay at the podium. “Did I miss the early shuttle?” he asked her.

“No. There's been a slight change in the schedule.”

Nyk sat on a bench with his case propped against his shins. He laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back. He had departed Earth not more than a couple of hours ago -- it had been around 1AM. Now the orange Floran sun was beginning to wash the eastern coast of his world's single continent. He had not slept, and he felt it. Since Floran's days were a fifth longer than Earth's, he knew it would be many hours before he would. *Earth people complain of jet-lag* , he mused. *It's nothing compared to packet-lag* .

His dozing was interrupted by the sounds of passengers milling around the transit lounge. Through the viewport he could glimpse the docked shuttle. Nyk stood, picked up his case and stood in line. As he approached the tunnel door, he pressed his right wrist against the scanpad. It chirped as it read his ID chip.

The interior of the shuttle resembled an Earth airliner. He poked his case into an overhead compartment, sat in his seat and fastened a five-point restraining harness around himself. A young man sat beside him and belted himself in. Nyk made eye contact and proffered the Floran two-finger salute.

The young man returned the greeting. "What brings you to Sudal?" he asked.

"It's my home town," Nyk replied. "I'm spending a couple days there before conducting some business in Floran City."

"I'm headed back to Sudal University. Would you believe there's an Earth woman there who's lecturing on Earth history and culture?"

"So I've heard," Nyk replied. "Are you considering joining the ExoAgency?"

"Oh, no. I'm not brave or strong enough to spend a tour on that planet. I'm a history major, and I thought understanding the culture and events of Earth before the warp accident would help me piece together the early days of our world after it." Nyk nodded. "My adviser had to pull some pretty long strings to get me into her lectures. They're not broadcasting them, you know."

"I didn't."

"I have a photoimage of her." He withdrew a handheld vidisplay and pressed the touchscreen. An image appeared of an Asian woman. "She looks so ... so different."

"She's beautiful," Nyk replied.

The youth squinted at the image. "I suppose she is, in her own way. Yes -- you can see it once you get past the strangeness of her features."

"You can see traces of her features in every Floran," Nyk said. "Floran eyes have a hint of hers."

Nyk's travel companion looked into his face. Nyk pointed to his eyelid. "Here -- just a hint. Your eyes have it, too."

His eyes flicked between Nyk and the photo. "Yes -- I can see it."

"Many of the original settlers had her heritage -- they looked like her."

"Are you a history major also?"

"An amateur," Nyk replied. "I hope you enjoy her lectures."

"It's a unique opportunity for me." He reached into his *xarpa* and withdrew an injector. "I almost forgot." The youth lifted the hem of his tunic, drove the needle into his thigh and pressed the trigger. He removed the needle and massaged the spot with his thumb. "Without this, I'll be space-sick for sure. Does weightlessness bother you?"

“I don't like it but I can cope,” Nyk replied.

“I hope this stuff kicks in soon enough. I should've dosed myself in the transit lounge.”

A shuttle attendant strolled down the aisle, pausing to help a young girl with her restraint. Another attendant made an announcement, reminding the passengers that the flight would involve a period of zero gravity. Nyk rested his head against the viewport and closed his eyes.

A chime sounded and he looked toward the transit platform. The docking tunnel retracted and the shuttle began to move. Shortly it left the influence of the platform's gravity generators. Nyk concentrated, attempting to override his fear instinct from the falling sensation of zero-G. A couple of deep breaths and his anxiety abated. He relaxed, his restraint holding him securely in his seat, and began to enjoy the ride.

The youth beside him wasn't having such an easy time. The color had drained from his face, his lips were white and he was hyperventilating. He closed his eyes and pinched his lips together.

Nyk reached into the pouch of his seat, removed a space-sickness bag and handed it to the boy, who struggled to keep down his gorge. Then, his color began to improve and his breathing slowed. “The drug kicked in,” he said. “I'll be all right.”

Zero-gravity lasted about half the flight, until the shuttle entered Floran's atmosphere, extended wings and became an aircraft. It flew toward Sudal, sweeping past the agridomes under which the Florans grew their food and fiber crops, in isolation from the incompatible native biosphere. The pilot deployed landing gear and the craft touched down on the polymer concrete runway, taxiing to a halt near the terminal building.

Nyk retrieved his case and walked through the shuttleport to the livery area. With a wristscan he ordered a groundcar. One in the lot winked its headlamps and its cowl slid open. He dropped his case into the luggage compartment and sat in the seat. “Car -- The Residence,” he ordered. An image of his childhood home appeared on the screen. “Confirmed -- car, go.”

The groundcar rolled out of the parking lot and onto the spur linking the shuttleport to the main arterial highway. He looked around in the dawn twilight. He could see dark purple fronds from the palm-like plants littering the highway. A few trees were knocked over. *Must've been quite a storm*, he surmised.

The car drove through the center of Sudal, a city of about 100,000 -- small by Floran standards. He looked at the squat, polymer concrete buildings equipped with heavy storm shutters. The car left the arterial and drove toward an access road leading along the coast. It bore to the right and up a drive to Nyk's childhood home.

He popped the cowl, stepped out and grabbed his case. His wristscan opened the front door. He walked in and up the spiral staircase. A tall, young woman with shoulder-length oat-straw white hair and pale blue eyes greeted him. “Good morning, Andra,” he said.

“Nyk!” she exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

“I'm here on business and I thought I'd pay a surprise visit.” He embraced and kissed her; then stood back to drink in her beauty. “You've done something different with your hair.”

“Sukiko cut it for me. Do you like it?”

“Very much.”

“How long are you staying?”

“Two nights -- then I travel to Floran City to pick up my charge.” He held her and caressed her cheek. “I asked you to care for my *korlyta* and you didn't shirk. I don't know how to thank you.”

“Sukiko is a joy, Nyk. I should be thanking you.” She smiled. “You must sleep with her the first night. I insist.”

“Is she up?”

“Of course. She and I both rise early and walk out onto the bluff to watch the sunrise. I'll get her.”

Andra headed to the back of the house and returned accompanied by a petite woman with yellow-brown skin and waist-length shiny black hair. Nyk's eyes met hers -- deep brown and almond shaped. She threw her arms open and ran to him. He embraced her, pressed his lips to the top of her head and inhaled her scent.

She lifted her face and he kissed her lips. Nyk stroked tears from her cheeks. “I am so happy to see you,” she said.

“Let me look at you.” She stepped back and modeled her white tunic and burgundy *lifxarpa*. “You look great, Suki -- healthier than ever.”

“I feel great. I've lost some weight. The food on this planet might be uninspiring, but it is healthy.”

“I see muscle definition in your arms and legs -- very sexy. Floran agrees with you.”

She extended her right hand. “Feel.”

He stroked her wrist. “You have an identity chip.”

“Yes -- I'm a full-blown Floran, now. I was dreading it. Andra told me hers is in a bone in her wrist. I was afraid they'd want to drill into me. Instead, they popped it under my skin.”

He showed her his wrist. “It's like mine.”

“The university has been giving me living credits for the lectures. This sash was my first purchase. I'll tell you -- I was a bit shocked in the clothing store when customers stripped naked in the aisles and tried things on.”

“Florans are casual about nudity. You know ... I receive living credits from the ExoAgency. I can't use them on Earth -- I should transfer them to you.”

“But -- Seymor pays you in dollars.”

“Economics has never been a strong subject here.”

She lifted her left arm. “Feel here.”

He stroked the inside of her bicep. “Your contraceptive implant capsule. How are you adjusting to that?”

“Really well -- after the first few days, at least. Floran girls receive these before their own hormones kick in. They needed to make some adjustments on mine. I'm feeling so good, now and I won't miss PMS.”

He handed over the case. “This is for you.”

She popped it open and her eyes widened. “Oh, thank you -- thank you!” She withdrew a brassiere.

“You said when I visited I should bring some bras. These should do for a while.”

Suki pawed through the case. “Quite a while -- it looks like a lifetime supply.”

“You should've seen the look on the airport screener's face when she opened the case.”

“She must've thought you were a lingerie salesman -- or some sort of a pervert.”

“Or, both,” Nyk replied.

Suki untied the ends of her *lifxarpa* and began unwinding the sash. She grabbed the hem of her tunic and slipped it off, picked up a bra and snapped it around herself. Andra approached and picked up one of the garments. “Oh, this feels so good,” Suki said as she adjusted the straps. “The laws of gravity operate here just as on Earth and there were times I thought I'd be black-and-blue by the end of the day.”

Andra fingered the bra. “Do all Earth women wear these?”

“Most do,” Suki replied. Andra slipped off her tunic, tried on the bra and attempted to hook the clasp in back. “Here,” Suki said and hooked it for her. Andra looked down at the flaccid cups. She grasped and squeezed the surplus fabric. “That's not your size. I wear a 34-C. I'd guess you'd need a 32-B ... or maybe a 32-A.”

“Why do Earth women wear these?” Andra asked.

“You might've noticed,” Nyk replied, “that Suki's breasts are larger than common for Floran women.”

“Well... Yes ... I didn't want to say anything, but...” She looked at Suki. “I feel sorry for you. It must be uncomfortable.”

“Don't feel TOO sorry for her,” Nyk interjected.

Suki smiled. “You get used to them... I'd say by Earth standards -- I'm about average.”

“Average?” Andra asked.

“That's why these were invented,” Suki continued, “to lift you up -- take off some of the load. It's why I've been wearing the *lifxarpa* -- for some support. It's like a bra worn on the outside. Now I can dispense with the sash.” She picked up her tunic and slid it over her head.

“Yes,” Nyk replied. “*Thelifxarpa* is very much a Floran City affectation. No one in Sudal wears them.”

Andra struggled to unhook the bra. Suki helped her out of it and she slipped back into her tunic. “I was afraid without these, within a couple of years mine would be down to my knees.” She kissed Nyk's cheek. “You were so sweet to remember.”

“I'll bring anything you want,” he replied. “Just ask.”

“Are you hungry?” Andra asked.

“I haven't had food nor sleep since before I left Earth.”

“I'll start some breakfast.”

Nyk sat and scooped some of the breakfast package. He looked toward Suki. “So, how are you adjusting?”

“Oh, Nykkyo -- I feel like I died and went to Heaven.”

“According to Earth records -- you are dead.”

“I know. You offered me the choice of life here or death there. To think I almost chose... I'm so happy here.” She looked toward Andra. “Andra is the finest friend -- the finest companion anyone could want. She knows when I need intimacy and when I need privacy. I can ask her for the truth and she gives it to me -- even if it's something I'd rather not hear.” Suki grasped Andra's hand. “I love her so much. I love you so much. Now you're here and our little love-family is complete -- for a couple days at least.”

“What do you like best about Floran?” he asked.

“The people -- the warmth with which I've been received. I love your people, Nykkyo. They're so kind, so sweet ... so accepting.”

“And, the least?”

“The language,” she replied. “Andra and I communicate well enough with her grasp of English and mine of *Lingwa* -- we speak to each other in what I call Lingwish. I still have trouble communicating strictly in Floran.”

“She is getting better,” Andra added.

“It's like any activity,” Nyk replied between bites. “You improve with practice. How go the lectures?”

“Amazing,” Suki replied. “The university offered two sections and they filled right away. I had to add a third section. It's not even a credit-bearing course. The students are asking for credit. It's too late for that, now, but next term... I'll offer three sections for credit, so I have to figure out how to test and grade them on the material. Those three sections next term are already filled.”

“And, the language?” Nyk asked. “Is that an obstacle?”

“I write out my lectures ahead of time -- Andra helps me. If I can stand in front of the class and read, I do all right. Questions are the difficult part, but so far I'm doing okay.”

“I rode the Sudal shuttle with someone attending your lectures.”

“Really? Where is he from?”

Nyk swallowed his mouthful. “I didn't ask. He was dressed as a Floran City resident.”

“Would he travel from Floran City to Sudal by shuttle?”

Nyk scooped the last of his breakfast. “Some do. Some prefer it to taking the train.” He set his spoon on his empty breakfast tray and opened a sweet bean cake. “Have you had to make any other adjustments?”

“Well -- the day length took some getting used to, as did the ten-day work mod. Seven days on and three days off -- I'm ready for the weekend -- or, mod-end.”

“The Floran year is about 257 days, so we have twenty-five ten-day mods. At the end of the year we have an intercalary mod of six or seven days. The whole planet shuts down for an extended party.”

“I can hardly wait,” Suki replied.

“Today is a rest day,” Nyk added. “Do you have any plans?”

“Andra was going to take the Sea Research launch out and collect some specimens. We were going to leave as soon as Senta is up. She wants to join us.”

“Senta?” Nyk asked. “Senta's here?”

“Yes,” Andra replied.

“Why? I thought she had a new home in Sudal. And a new lover.”

“Her lover left her,” said Suki. Nyk winced. “Then the storm wrecked her place.”

“I thought I saw storm damage on my ride from the shuttleport.”

“Enough buildings were damaged that the hostel is full -- they're putting two and three people in a room.”

Nyk smiled. “Senta would NOT go for that arrangement -- unless she could pick her own roommates.”

“Andra offered her the use of the guest room here,” Suki continued.

“I thought it was a way to start mending the ways between us,” Andra added. “Senta is an unhappy woman.”

“She brings unhappiness on herself,” Nyk replied. He turned toward Suki. “How are you and she

getting along?”

Andra answered, “Senta doesn't blame Sukiko for what happened between the two of you. She blames you, Nyk -- and, herself.”

“She and I are cordial toward each other,” Suki said. “Otherwise she wouldn't have accepted Andra's invitation.”

Nyk sipped some green tea. “What sort of specimens are we collecting?” he asked.

“I ... I don't know how to describe them,” Andra replied. “About twenty- five kilometres southeast from Sudal I encountered a shallow area with sea vegetation near the surface. I found them there. We have discovered something interesting about the native fauna, Nyk.”

“What's that?”

“They're hermaphrodites. Every species we've encountered so far is this way.”

“Hermaphrodites?” Nyk asked.

“Yes -- every species we've catalogued follows the same pattern. The organism has both male and female organs and can mate with itself, or with others. It seems to be a fundamental aspect of life on this world.”

“Most Earth plants are hermaphrodite in that way,” Nyk observed. “I wonder why that characteristic didn't cross over to Earth animals.”

“We believe in the deep sea are creatures much more advanced than we've imagined.”

“Intelligent?”

“No, not quite intelligent -- but sentient -- creatures aware of their own existence, as opposed to operating on stimulus and response -- and, they're undoubtedly hermaphrodites, too. It's a strategy that enables a species to be solitary yet maintain reproductive critical mass.”

Suki poured some tea. “It makes me wonder. The division of male and female is so basic to life on Earth. I wonder, should this world's life evolve into intelligent beings -- what sort of societies would arise without the dynamics of the sexual dichotomy?”

Nyk sipped his tea. “I can imagine parents catching their kid masturbating and worrying if an unwanted pregnancy would result.”

Suki and Andra stared at him for a long moment. “Now THAT,” Suki said, “sounds like a remark coming from a man.” Andra put her hand over her mouth and giggled.

The guest room door slid open and a slightly-built woman emerged. She shook her head and ran her fingers through a mane of kinky red hair that extended to her shoulder blades. Rubbing her eyes, she strolled into the kitchen, glimpsed Nyk and stopped short.

“I didn't know HE would be here,” she said to Andra. “Tell him to leave. I won't stay under the same roof with him.”

“She said...”

“I heard what she said,” Nyk replied. “Senta -- don't be ridiculous. This is my house. You lost your rights to it during the divorce. Technically, you are here as MY guest.”

“Tell him I'd never have granted the divorce without that ... that blasted genealogy. I only did it so I wouldn't be accused of temporal interference.”

“Senta -- that document proves I was destined to divorce you and marry Suki on Earth. If you want to blame someone for what happened -- blame Destiny Herself.”

“Ask him how he knows HE'S not the one guilty of interference. Ask him how sure he is things are better than if he hadn't...”

“Would YOU be willing to take the risk to find out?”

“Tell him to shut up!” Senta glowered at Andra.

“I didn't know he was coming here,” Andra protested.

“Tell him either he goes or I do!”

Nyk looked at Andra. “Ask her where she'd go. Her house is being repaired and the hostel is full.”

“Tell him I'll sleep in the town square.”

“Tell her she'll be arrested for vagrancy.”

“Tell him I'll take the train to Floran City.”

“Tell her...”

“This is STUPID!” Andra exclaimed. “You two obviously can hear each other. Why not start a dialogue?”

Nyk glanced at Suki. She shrugged. “Leave me out of it.”

Senta turned her back and folded her arms. “I am NOT going on the launch if HE comes too.”

“Senta,” Andra replied, “you ASKED to come along. It's the only opportunity you'll have to observe these creatures. The launch is big enough to accommodate the four of us without getting in each others' ways.”

“She asked?” Nyk replied.

“Yes -- Senta and I are collaborating on a research project.”

“Collaborating? What sort of a project?”

“Tell him in happier times I'd enjoy discussing it with him. Under the present circumstances -- he'll just

have to wait until my results are published and read it for himself!”

He looked toward Suki. She folded her arms and made a downward nod that said, *Take THAT !*

Nyk put his hand over his mouth and began laughing. “STOP IT!” Senta shouted. Her lip trembled and tears flowed down her cheeks. “Tell him to stop laughing at me,” she said turning to Andra. “He’s had nothing but fun at MY expense since the divorce!” She began wiping tears from her face.

“I’m not laughing at you, Senta. I’m laughing at the absurdity of the situation... You know... When you cry and your face gets red like that -- your eyes look even greener.”

“He enjoys making me cry,” she said, sniffing.

“I do not. Please -- now that our marriage is behind us ... let’s dispense with the arguing and try being friends.”

Suki picked up the tea pot and a cup. “Some tea, Senta?”

Senta brushed the last tears from her face and turned toward Suki. “No thank you,” she said pleasantly and smiled. “I’ll go take my shower.” She headed toward the bathroom.

“Whew!” Suki exclaimed.

“Not a pleasant sight, was it?” Nyk asked.

“Is she always like that?”

“She gets like that when things don’t go her way.”

“I shouldn’t talk,” Suki replied. “I can be that way.”

“I’ve seen you that way.”

Her eyes narrowed; then she smiled. “I’ll try not to be in the future.”

2 -- Sea Research

The groundcar rolled onto the access roadway and headed toward the coast south of Sudal. Nyk could see the other car ahead -- Andra’s white hair on the left and Senta’s red on the right. He rested his hand on Suki’s knee. She grabbed and held it. “How’s Mom doing?” she asked.

“I guess as well as to be expected. For two months after the attack I slept with her.”

“You've been sleeping with my mother?”

“There never was anything physical, Suki. She needed to feel someone's warmth next to her -- someone to scare away the demons that lurk in the middle of the night.”

“I know something about those demons.”

“We stopped a few weeks ago. She wanted us to quit before Nicky started talking. She didn't want him to blurt out that his grandma sleeps with his daddy.”

“So, now she sleeps alone.”

“We both do. I'll tell you -- I also enjoyed feeling her warmth beside me. Now -- sometimes I lie awake and can hear her downstairs, sobbing. It breaks my heart. It'll take her a long time to get over it.”

“She'll never get over it.”

“Maybe not. I am wrestling with whether I should take her into our confidence. I know she'd have an easier time if she knew you were safe. I don't know if I can take the risk. I've already pushed the temporal envelope farther than my comfort.” He shook his head. “Just losing George is a big enough blow for her. Your parents did love each other, Suki.”

“I know they did. I know you'll do the right thing.”

“She has Nicky. He is, after all, half you and a quarter George, so both you and he do live on, in a way. He's what keeps your mom going.”

“Did you bring pictures?”

“Of course -- we can enjoy them after dinner.”

She rested her head on his shoulder. “You know -- assimilating into this world has taught me something about people. I have a much greater appreciation now of how closely linked are language and culture.”

Nyk nodded. “Mmm... I suppose you're right.”

“For example -- the pronouns in *Lingwa* are all gender-neutral, and that reflects the equality of men and women here. Florans have shed much of the male bias of Earth's culture. Here, we've attained a balance between the sexes that won't happen on Earth for hundreds of years.”

“You've no need to lecture me on Floran practices,” Nyk replied.

She smiled. “I suppose not. I've tried to teach my students about the power aspect of sex on Earth. It's difficult for them to understand. And -- the freedom of sexual expression here -- speaking as an Earth lesbian, I can say it's the sort we could only dream of.”

“That sexual freedom came at the cost of much personal liberty. I prefer the personal freedom experienced on Earth. I hate the way Floran Central Admin micro-manages every aspect of our daily

lives.”

The groundcar came to a halt beside Andra's. Nyk popped the cowl and helped Suki out. Andra led them toward a dock. Tied to it was a launch built on a pair of pontoons. It had a box-like cabin in the center and a broad fan-tail with a low rail. He held Suki's hand as she stepped aboard.

“Here,” Andra said and handed them foam floatation belts. “Safety first.” Nyk clasped his belt around his waist. Andra hooked one end of a tether to the belt and the other end to an eye on the rail.

Nyk fingered the tether. “What's this for? In case we fall overboard you can haul us back in?”

“Exactly,” Andra replied. She climbed to the cockpit atop the cabin and manipulated controls. “Untie that rope,” she directed.

Nyk slipped the rope off a cleat on the pier and the boat cast off, silently riding the low swells.

“This boat is so quiet,” Suki remarked. “Everything here is so quiet -- compared to Earth.”

“Most vehicles are powered by inertial sinks,” Nyk replied. “It's a device that can create or absorb momentum. Andra pushes the stick forward and the inertial sink creates momentum in that direction.”

Andra stepped from the cockpit. “It's on auto-pilot,” she said. “It'll take a while to reach our spot.”

“Tell us about your research,” Nyk said.

“Senta and I are working on the genetics of the life here. It's the first time it's been studied.”

“The vast majority of our people have no interest in the native biology or ecology of the world that's hosted us for five thousand years,” Nyk remarked. “The fact no one's studied it 'til now is proof. I think it's a shame.”

“The native flora is fairly well studied,” Andra replied. “Senta's thesis advisor did his dissertation on it. Ours is the first look at the animals on this world.”

“Why is that?” Suki asked.

“It's because the animals live in the sea and Florans hate getting wet,” Nyk replied. “What have you learned so far?”

“The animal biology is based on cells, like humans or Earth plants. The cells have no nuclei -- genetic material is scattered throughout.”

“Do you mean DNA?”

“A DNA analogue,” Andra replied. “Senta has begun to figure it out. The molecule differs in structure from DNA, but the function is the same. There are twelve base units instead of four. The most remarkable thing we discovered is that each tissue structure in the animal has its own genetic signature.”

“You mean there's a skin DNA and a nerve DNA and...”

“Exactly -- and the genetic material for a given tissue is nearly identical from species to species. The

skins of two different species are more closely related than the skin and nerves of a single being. The animals on this world are more like sophisticated colonies of specialized organisms. However -- each organism must arise from a master pattern contained in the gamete."

"The egg and sperm," Nyk mused.

"That's what we're investigating, and I believe the species I discovered will serve as a laboratory in which we can study how the genetic makeup differentiates as the creature grows and matures." A tone from the cockpit called Andra. "We're getting close."

Suki inhaled. "We must be getting close to something. I can smell it."

"Yes," Andra called from her perch. "It's a rather large area of underwater vegetation. Maybe you can keep an eye out for some specimens."

"What are we looking for?" Nyk asked.

"You'll recognize them when you see them..." She pointed. "Over there are some!" She guided the boat in that direction.

Nyk looked into the water. He reached down and grasped a melon-sized shell with a tangle of tentacles writhing from its bottom.

Andra put the boat into station-keeping. "Yes -- that's one. I discovered this species the other day. It grazes on the sea vegetation."

Nyk looked at the animal. Andra pointed out features. "Here are the male and female organs," she said. "This rotary rasp is the mouth it uses to harvest its food. Here, Nyk -- put it in this."

He plopped the creature into a holding tank. Andra leaned over and plucked some sea leaves and dropped them in with their specimen. She climbed into the cockpit and began a patterned sweep over the seaweed.

Senta and Suki approached the tank and peered in. "It's amazing," Suki exclaimed.

"Yes," Senta replied, nodding. "The reproductive organs are large and easy to study."

"Over there!" Andra shouted. Nyk and Senta headed toward the port railing. He reached down, snagged another specimen and dropped it into the tank."

"Here's a different variety," Senta called. "I'll see if I can grab it." She leaned over the railing, reached into the water and grabbed the shell. The animal refused to give up its grasp and she fell overboard.

"Senta!" Suki shouted.

"I'll haul her in," Nyk replied and began drawing in her tether. Her empty flotation belt dropped onto the deck. He looked back and saw Senta floundering in the water. "Andra!" he shouted. "Stop the boat!"

"I'll try to get close to her," Andra replied. She began to turn the boat but Senta disappeared beneath the surface.

Suki unhitched her belt, stripped off her tunic and dove into the water. Nyk watched as she swam toward the spot where Senta sank. "Suki!" he shouted.

Andra joined him and watched, biting her knuckle. Suki tread water for a moment, took a deep breath and dove under.

Nyk looked at Andra. A tear rolled down her cheek. "The belt was supposed to save her," she said. He gazed, slack-jawed at the sea.

Suki's head popped above the water. She took another breath and dove under again. Then, she surfaced and began swimming a backstroke toward the boat with Senta in a lifesaving grip.

She reached the boat. Nyk and Andra lifted Senta on board. Suki shook her head, gasped and retched. "That water is NASTY!"

Nyk extended his arm and helped Suki back into the boat. She stood over Senta as she lay on the deck, turning blue. "Quick -- turn her over!" Nyk flipped Senta onto her stomach. Suki pressed down on her shoulder blades and a gout of water gushed from her mouth. "Now -- on her back!" Suki began mouth-to-mouth and compressing Senta's chest.

Senta gasped and coughed. Her color returned. She began to sit up, retching and gasping. Nyk handed Suki her tunic. "I didn't know you could do that," he said.

"I was on the varsity swim team in high school," she replied. "Lifesaving was a requirement."

Senta regained her breath. Suki helped her sit on a bench. "Senta," Nyk said. "Suki saved your life."

"Thank you ... thank you..."

Suki sat beside her and held her as she trembled. "She's terrified," Suki said in English. "Maybe we should go back."

Nyk nodded. Andra climbed into the cockpit and headed the boat toward Sudal. She climbed down and approached Suki. "You MUST teach me how to do that," she said. "To be in the water with the life I study -- it would be wonderful!"

"Here," Nyk said and handed Senta her flotation belt. "The clasp was loose. I tightened it."

"Thanks," Senta mumbled, fastened the belt around her waist and resumed leaning against Suki.

Andra piloted the launch into its berth. Nyk hopped onto the dock and lashed the vessel to a cleat. "Senta and I will take these specimens to the lab," Andra said. "We'll meet you at the house."

Nyk stood at the edge of the bluff and looked down at the sea as the sky darkened in the evening twilight. He felt a hand on his shoulder, turned and saw Suki. "Howdy, stranger," she said. "Thanks for sharing those photos of Nicky. I had a great time looking at them, and so did Andra." He nodded. "Is something wrong?"

He shook his head. "I've just been thinking."

“Sometimes a dangerous activity.”

“Especially when I do it.”

“Thinking about what?”

“How when I was a boy I spent many evenings here, watching the sun set -- or, walking the beach picking up shells. I was happy then -- with my mom and dad and my two friends -- friend and a half, really. I had no idea ... none ... not a clue...”

“Idea of what?”

“Of what Destiny had in store for me -- of the role I was to play in the founding of this world. As Nicky's stepfather I'm forming him -- I'm forming the forebear of the man who will found this world. I never expected to bear such a load.”

“Neither did I,” she replied, “and I'm the one who gave birth to Koichi's forebear. He is developing into such an adorable little boy.”

“Your mother has started speaking to him in Japanese. She wants to see if he can grow up bilingual.”

“Oh! I am so jealous. Why didn't she try that with me?”

“Your mother had her share of difficulties bearing you -- she told me about them. She didn't want you to know. Now that you're 'dead' I suppose it doesn't matter. She spent months in a mental institution recovering from debilitating post-partum depression.”

“Poor Mom -- I had no idea. It's like what happened to me...”

“Only worse.”

“It's like the sins of the mother cast onto the daughter.”

“I wouldn't call them sins. Afflictions, perhaps. It must run in the family. Now, with time and distance -- she can offer Nicky what she couldn't offer you.”

Suki leaned against him and embraced his arm. “Nykkyo -- are you happy, now?”

“Humph,” he snorted. “When Andra and I were on Lexal I asked Princess Janna if she was happy. Her reply was, 'Happiness has nothing to do with it. I'm doing my duty.' I could say the same. I'd be happier if you were still ... alive ... on Earth and we could be together in that little apartment above your parents' house. Those were the happiest days of my life.”

“What's done is done,” she replied. “I accept my fate. At least -- you can come home. That's not something I can do.”

“Except, it's not my home any more. It's your home, now -- and Andra's. Now, I'm an outsider here. The furniture is rearranged, and all signs of my mom and dad are gone.” He shook his head. “I promised you that, one day after Nicky's grown and my work on Earth is done I will return to you for good. I'll have to wait for my happy days. Unless... No -- I don't want to think about the alternative.” A tear rolled

down his face. "Now, I'm maudlin. I get this way when I'm over-tired."

He held her hand and they walked together to a rock. He sat and she sat on his lap. He ran his hand down her long, raven hair. "Senta asked me to sleep with her tonight," Suki said.

"I figured she might. She owes you her life, Suki. Florans hate being indebted to another. She wants to start paying her bill."

"She has suggested it before but I've turned her down. Tonight I think accepting is the right decision."

He nodded. "Yes, it IS the right decision. Remember -- here, just because two people sleep together doesn't mean there's any obligation to..."

"I think she expects it. If she offers that, I'll accept it, too." He nodded again. "You're not upset are you?"

"Of course not. That's also the right decision. I'm delighted -- friendship with Senta would benefit both of you. Well ... you are in for an experience, making love with her. She is good at it."

"I've been reflecting on your confrontation with her this morning. I understand the depth of her hurt -- her anger. She loves you, Nykkyo."

He shook his head. "No -- we were never in love. We were never right for each other."

"The fact of love and the act of love don't always mesh. The fact is, she did love you and she still does. It's sometimes difficult to express love -- especially for someone with as complex a personality as Senta's. She is the injured party in all this -- and I'm an accomplice. That became clear to me this morning."

"None of us had a choice. This whole thing was pre-ordained. We each play our roles. What will be ... has been. We're following the paths Destiny traced for us -- Senta included."

"Don't you feel a little sorry for her?"

"I suppose I do."

"Andra says she'll sleep with you tonight. You're not disappointed -- are you?"

He chuckled. "THAT sounds like a no-win question."

"To an Earth person, perhaps. You've spent too much time there. A Floran would know how to answer. You, Andra and I have formed a love-family. Making love with her IS making love with me."

"And, Senta making love with you is her making love with me."

"In a way -- yes. It's one reason I feel I should accept."

"You ARE assimilating here. No -- I'm not disappointed. I'd love to spend the night with Andra." He smiled. "Did I get it right?"

"You certainly did." She kissed his cheek. "You and I can catch up tomorrow night. Besides -- it'll be

after you've had a chance to get some rest. I can't believe you'd be on top of your form tonight.”

He hopped off the rock, took her hand and headed toward the house. “You're probably right about that.”

He reached the back entrance. Senta was standing there in a short, sleeveless robe, her red mane tied back with a green ribbon. Suki approached her. She extended her hand and the two of them headed up the spiral staircase.

Andra approached him. “Your place or mine?” she asked.

“I have a better idea. Let's sleep under the stars. It's a mild night tonight.”

“Have you forgotten? They're ALL mild.”

He took her hand and headed toward the door. “Wait a moment,” he said and opened a cabinet. “Do you recall me telling you that Senta and I first tried to loose our virginites under the stars? I had no clue how big an obstacle a few grains of sand could be to that sort of endeavor. Senta has never liked Sudal -- she's only now learning to tolerate it. I've always felt that experience was part of it. Things might've been different...” He poked around behind the cabinet door.

“Might-haves don't count,” she replied.

“True, true. Nonetheless...” He withdrew a lightweight blanket. “Things might've been very different if I had the foresight to bring this along that night.” He draped it across his forearm, took her hand and led her out onto the bluff and down to a bowl-shaped depression lined with sand. There he spread the blanket, mounding sand beneath it to form a pillow.

He grasped her tunic and slipped it over her head, and she returned the favor. She lay on her back and Nyk beside her. They both gazed up. “Floran's night sky is the one feature I miss when I'm on Earth. In New York City -- even on the best nights -- you can only see a dozen or so stars ... not thousands.” She pressed her palm against his and he laced fingers with her. “Andra -- are you happy?”

“Mmm... I'm very happy. How about you?”

“I'm happy ... that one of us is very happy.”

“I've found my true destiny -- studying the sea and caring for Sukiko. I love her so much, Nyk. Together, you and she complete something in me -- give me my purpose.”

“Here we are, you and I ... alone together -- and we talk about Suki.”

“Not so strange -- when she and I make love -- we talk about you.”

“Do you two make love often?”

“When she needs it.”

“What about when you need it?”

“I have different needs, Nyk. Mine are satisfied by my work and by helping her succeed. And -- in

the few stolen nights I can have with you.” He yawned. “You must be so tired.”

“I’m exhausted.”

She sat up beside him and began caressing him. “Then -- let me do all the work...”

Nyk opened his eyes. Floran's orange sun was climbing in the east. He looked around to discover himself alone. Into his tunic he slipped and headed toward the house. Mounting the stairs to the middle level he spotted Suki sitting at the kitchen counter with a cup of tea. “*Bon'matina*, stranger,” she said.

“*Bon'matina*. Where is everyone?”

“Senta and Andra went to the labs to work with the critters we collected yesterday. They don't know how well they'll survive in captivity.” She poured him a cup of tea. “Andra wanted to send her apologies for leaving you alone this morning, but she felt you needed your sleep.”

“I certainly did.” He sipped from his cup. “So, how went the night with Senta?”

“How went YOUR night with Andra?”

“You know I'm not the sort to kiss and tell.”

“Me, neither.” She drained her cup. “I'll say this -- you were right. It was an experience. The attention she lavished on me... She reminded me of you, that way.”

“Senta taught me everything I know,” he replied.

“I could learn a thing or two from her. Then -- afterward she lay, holding me and gazing into my eyes. I knew she was tired and wanted sleep, but she wouldn't take her eyes off mine. I was beginning to think it was a stare- down.”

“She was waiting for you to fall asleep. It's a Floran thing to wait until your partner is asleep.”

“Is that why you always gaze into my eyes until I fall asleep?”

“Yes. You're right -- it can get out of hand -- especially if the parties haven't agreed who should sleep first.”

“Finally, she closed her eyes for an instant. I began stroking her eyelids -- very gently.”

“Suki -- that's so sweet.”

“I could feel her relax and fall asleep against me. I was very moved by the whole experience. Nykkyo -- I realize Florans have a sophisticated touch language. Was there some meaning to what I did?”

“You gave her the gift of sleep. A Floran would interpret it as giving her permission to sleep -- telling her that you knew even if she was sleeping she was with you.”

Suki nodded. “Something else. Senta told me she'd give me anything I wanted so long as it was in her power to grant it. Whatever I wanted -- all I had to do was name it.”

“She was granting you a boon.”

“A boon?”

“Yes -- a reward for an act beyond the call of duty. What you did yesterday was a powerful gesture to a Floran.”

“But Nykkyo -- I would've have done what I did for anyone. It's the number-one rule for a swimmer -- if someone's in trouble, and if you can help without endangering your own life -- you are obligated to do so.”

“Florans aren't swimmers. Boons are often granted by the government or an agency to a worker who has performed beyond expectations. My father was granted this house as a boon. Do you know what most request?”

“No... What?”

“*Anax'amfin* companion.”

“Someone like Andra... That's a part of your culture I'll never fully appreciate.”

“So -- what did you ask for?”

She looked at him. “I asked that you and she be on speaking terms. I know you want to be friends with her. Nykkyo -- I didn't ask that you two be on lovemaking terms -- just speaking to each other. She said she would do that for me. I thought it would be a start. Who knows? Some day we may want to invite her to join our love-family.”

“Stranger things have happened,” he replied. “What's on the calendar for today?”

“Nothing,” she replied. “The day -- and the night is ours to do with as we please.”

“What would please you?” he asked.

Suki smiled and glanced up the staircase toward the bedrooms.

3 -- The New Agent

A land breeze wafted through Nyk's walled childhood bedroom and he could hear the surf beating against the bluff. Suki snuggled against him and he stroked her arm. “Mmm...” she said.

“Mmm?”

She drew in a deep breath. “Mmmmmmm....”

“Did we make up for lost time?”

“Mmmmmmm.... I always feel like this after with you ... so relaxed ... my body feels like it's melting. Mmm...”

He gazed into her eyes in the dim light and she gazed back. “This isn't a stare-down, is it?”

“Oh, no -- I can barely keep them open.” She stroked his shin with the top of her foot. “Mmm... I still think you have the prettiest legs I've ever seen on a man. Since everyone here wears the tunic, I've seen lots of nice-looking legs.” She stroked his shin again. “I've always been a leg girl. What type of a guy are you?”

“I'm an all-over everything guy. I think your hair is as sexy as your legs... Your back is as alluring as your hips...” He kissed her hair. “That vein in your elbow turns me on as much as a glimpse of one of your...”

She kissed his lips. “You are nuts... But, in a nice way.”

“I do love you,” he said.

“I know ... I know you do. I've never doubted. I love you, too.”

“And, I've missed you so much. Our vidphone conversations can't make up for this.”

“I've missed you, too... And Mom, and Nicky.”

“Your mom tells me she misses hearing us make love in the bedroom above hers.”

“Really? I always thought it annoyed her.”

“No.” He brushed aside a tear. “She said she knew you were happy.” Suki kissed his cheek. “She had an attitude toward it that was almost Floran. I could see a Floran mom enjoying hearing her son or daughter. We have a word for it --*nok'muzika* ...”

“Night music -- I know. I've heard it.”

“Nearly everyone on this world has.”

“I meant the expression.” She pulled herself against him and caressed his arm. “What are your plans for tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow... I take the train to Floran City and give Dyppa Hawryt her preliminary briefing. Then, I ride with her to Earth and get her established in the Wisconsin lab.”

“Dyppa. The name's familiar.”

“She's the Floran girl Seymor and I discovered in Zander's trailer.”

“Oh, yes. I remember I had one of my eruptions when you told me you had her in bed with you.”

“It was totally innocent, Suki -- honest. She had a bad dream...”

Suki kissed his cheek. “I know it was. You like her, don't you. It's okay -- you can be honest about it.”

“I am fond of her,” he replied. “Something about her connected with me right away. She and I have been corresponding during her rehabilitation and her Agency training. We've become friends.”

“Friendly enough to sleep with her?” Nyk looked into her face. “It's all right, Nykkyo. I've come to appreciate the Floran way.”

“That hasn't taken you long.”

“I see it in practice here every day. I feel the love among your people -- I feel it directed toward me. It's wonderful.” She kissed his cheek again. “If you feel like sleeping with Dyppa -- don't say no on my account. It's not fair that I have Andra here and you have no one there.”

“That's a Floran sentiment if I ever heard one. Suki -- I have no intention of sleeping with Dyppa.”

“I'd feel good knowing you have someone on Earth ... especially if she's a nice Floran girl.”

“Actually, Dyppa's an Altian.” He shook his head. “It won't work. She'll be in Wisconsin and I'll be in New York.”

“Station her in New York, then.”

“She needs to be in Wisconsin for her assignment. And -- I need to be in New York for mine.”

“Think about it. If she's a nice enough girl for you to regard her highly, then I'm sure I'd like her, too.”

“I'm sure you would.”

“You do have good taste in women.” She caressed his face. “Why are you smiling?”

“I was thinking... Can you imagine us having that sort of discussion on Earth?”

“I recall we had a different sort of discussion about Dyppa,” she replied, “one of my jealous rages. I left those emotions on Earth.”

“I know. I came here and found a different Suki.”

“A happier one, for sure. A better one, I hope. Nykkyo -- after you diverted me from the World Trade Center, I spent my first few days here in deep soul-searching. You gave me a wonderful gift. I don't mean just saving my life. You gave me the opportunity to make a new one, on a new world; to start over. I asked myself what I had done to deserve your gift. Nothing, I concluded.”

“But, Suki...”

“No, Nykkyo. There must've been hundreds -- thousands who perished that day who were more deserving of life than I.”

“I couldn't bear the thought of losing you. It was my selfishness...”

“You were an agent of Destiny, Nykkyo. I must've been sent here for a reason. I vowed to make myself worthy -- to give as much of myself, as much love as I can to the people of this world who have opened their arms and hearts to me.”

“You were sent for a reason -- to teach the youth of my world about yours.”

“It must be more than that. I've already learned more than I could teach in a lifetime. I've learned how important a part of happiness your attitude is. If you determine to be happy, you WILL be happy. I realize how much of my time and energy I wasted with petty jealousies; with obsessing on whether or not I received what I thought I was due. I've learned the truth to your ways, Nykkyo. It's giving and trust. If I give one hundred percent of myself to others, and trust them to do the same -- the result is greater for all.”

“Isn't there an Earth saying that it's the converts who are the most devout?”

“I'm definitely converted. It's marvelous.”

“What you described is our ideal. We're only human, and humans have faults.”

“Are all the colonies like Floran?”

He snorted. “Hardly. Each one has its own culture ... it's own personality.”

“I stopped worrying about who you love more -- Andra or me. It's not a relevant concern. Instead I give one hundred percent of myself to both of you and I receive two hundred percent in return. Florans have learned sharing and cooperation is superior to possession and competition.”

“I don't know about that, Suki. I think competition is what makes Earth such a vibrant and interesting place. Competition is what drives evolution -- of both species and societies. Without it we stagnate. Floran entered its so-called Golden Age about fifteen hundred Earth years after Planetfall. We're still in it. Our society hasn't progressed in thirty-five hundred years. Today's lifestyle is indistinguishable from a hundred generations ago.”

“I think peace, friendship and harmony here is more than a fair swap for aggression on Earth.”

“Historically, it's been the societies that became complacent and stagnant that were vulnerable to both internal decay and external aggression. And, consider this: Where might Floran be today if we HADN'T stagnated ... hadn't become complacent? How much further might we have come?”

“Floran might be gone. You might have evolved yourselves out of existence. Might-haves don't count.” She kissed his cheek. “Someone I love very dearly told me that once.”

She pulled herself tighter against him and he caressed her forearm. “Hmmm...” she mused. “I'll need to contemplate all this more. Maybe I can work our conversation into one of my lectures. You're right about one thing -- Floran does agree with me.” Suki closed her eyes and nestled her face against his

shoulder. He touched a pad to switch off the ambient lighting. She let out a contented sigh. *Bon'noka* , Nykkyo.”

Nyk stuffed a travel case into the luggage compartment of the groundcar. He turned to see the three women standing near the drive.

Suki embraced and kissed him. “Give Mom and Nicky a hug and a kiss from me, okay?” He nodded. “Goodbye... Don't be a stranger.”

“I'll visit as often as I can,” he replied. He held Andra. “My friend- for-life. Keep taking care of my *korlyta* .”

“I certainly will.”

“Senta... It was good seeing you again.”

She proffered a faint smile “Have a safe trip to Earth, Nykkyo.”

“I intend to.” He climbed into the groundcar, pulled shut the cowl and scanned his wrist. “Car ... train station. Confirmed, car go.”

The train slowed to a stop at the Floran City central station. Nyk grasped his case and walked to the lift. He rode to the tubecar platform and scanned his wrist at the kiosk. “Destination?” a synthesized voice inquired.

“Government Center.”

“You are third in line. Have a good day.”

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other as he waited. A couple with a small child were first in line and behind them was an officious looking older man, identified by insignia on his *xarpa* as a Central Admin nawab.

A bullet-shaped car slid onto the platform and its cowl slid back. “Government Center,” came a voice from the dashboard.

Nyk climbed in. “Car, go.”

The vehicle accelerated into its transparent roadway. It merged into a multi-lane tube running through the center of the city. Nyk watched the closer buildings blur as the car achieved its top speed. Between them he could make out the mile-high quad towers of Government Center, still fifty kilometres distant. He locked his fingers behind his head and leaned back.

Floran's mid-day orange sunlight flooded into the car. Overhead in the indigo sky were some brighter stars, visible in broad daylight. He looked down at the city square. Adjacent was the Floran Museum, built around the hull of the *Floran* herself.

The tubecar whizzed by Nyk's old neighborhood. He glimpsed the tower where he had shared Senta's apartment during the years of their marriage. A short distance away was the Arcade, a shopping

mall serving the area. Beyond that was the park with its artificial lake and plantings of native vegetation. Nyk looked down on streets congested with groundcars and foot traffic.

He was approaching Government Center. Its towers were beginning to loom, now. He could see a swarm of skimmers circling over the low building housing the High Legislature assembly hall, awaiting their turns to land on the roof. The HL sat in the middle of the complex, with a tower arising from each corner.

Nyk was headed for the northeast tower, where the ExoAgency had its headquarters. The car veered into a tube leading to the complex and stopped at the platform. He stepped out and grabbed his case. A woman nursing an infant sat in the car and it headed back into traffic.

He walked the distance to Tower Three and rode the lift to headquarters. The door slid open in response to his wristscan. A receptionist looked up from a desk. "I'm Nykkyo Kyhana -- I'm to meet Dyppa Hawryt here."

The receptionist gestured toward a waiting area. Nyk turned and saw a young woman sitting. She had short, medium-blond hair and brilliant blue eyes. "Dyppa!" Dyppa stood. Nyk held her and kissed her forehead. "Let's see if there's a meeting room we can use."

The receptionist motioned him to an empty room overlooking the HL. He sat at the conference table and popped open his case. "Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be. Were you this nervous before you made your first transit to Earth?"

"No, not at all. I was worse -- I had nightmares about it for days before. At least, you've already seen Earth."

"Not much of it."

"I suppose I should start your briefing," he said. "You will be stationed near Milwaukee, Wisconsin. You'll remember the house -- we stayed there overnight." Dyppa nodded. "This is one of two principal exobotany stations. The other is in Scottsdale, Arizona. We rent lab space from a university there. Your assignment is to procure specimens requested by the plant breeders, culture them and send the cultures to the homeworld. Do you understand?"

"Of course."

"My first assignment on Earth was in the same house and lab. I have some fond memories of the place..." He removed a polymer envelope and handed it to her. "These are your identity documents." Dyppa dumped the contents onto the table. "Your Earth identity is Karen Wilson. You must be on your guard to respond to that name. It's difficult at first, trust me. With time it becomes natural."

Dyppa removed a card with a photograph. "What's this?"

"It's a driver's license."

"For driving what?"

"An automobile."

“Will I have one of those?”

“No -- you'll have a shuttlecar, but we discourage using it on the streets more than absolutely necessary.”

“Then -- why do I need this?”

“We procured that to simplify identifying yourself.” Dyppa nodded and looked through the items. “Social Security?”

“A necessary evil on Earth.”

“And this?”

“A passport.” Nyk withdrew another object. “This is a debit card. Do you recall your training on Earth economics?” She nodded. “You can use this to pay for necessities. We will maintain an adequate balance in your draw account.” Dyppa returned the items to the envelope, opened her own travel case and dropped it in. “Do you have any questions?”

“No ... none right now. I'm sure I'll have many once we get there.” She handed him a polymer sack she had been carrying. “Do I give these to you now, or later?”

Nyk dipped his hand into the sack and retrieved a handful of clear crystals -- raw diamonds. “I'll take them now.”

“I can't believe our fusion byproducts have such value on Earth,” she replied.

He held up the sack. “This is how we fund our operations there.” He dropped it into his case. “Seymor wanted me to say one thing before we leave. Stay away from Earth drugs, Dyppa. Since your Earth identity is an eighteen year old girl, that includes alcohol. He wanted me to remind you that one hint of trouble in that regard and he'll send you home.”

“He probably thinks I'll be tempted as a recovered addict.”

“Psychological addiction stays with you for life, Dyppa.”

“No one needs to tell me that.”

Nyk nodded. “I'm sure. I'm sorry -- I was just discharging a commission Seymor gave me. He refuses to sponsor anyone with an addictive profile. He had trouble with an Agent once, years ago.”

She looked down at the table. “Then -- why was I accepted?”

“Seymor isn't sponsoring you. I am.”

“I won't let you down.”

“I know you won't.” Nyk touched a vidisplay on the conference table. “It's time to go, then. We'll take a tubecar to the shuttleport. It's a short packet ride to Earth.”

Nyk escorted Dyppa through the docking tunnel and into the relay station. "I'll show you around... Over here is decontamination."

"Shall we?" she asked.

"No need on the ride down -- there are no Floran microbes that can survive in the Earth biosphere. You'll need to use it on the trip up." He gestured. "This is the wardroom. You should look for some appropriate clothing and change. There's a selection in the closet over there."

Dyppa began looking in the closet. Nyk removed his Earth clothing from his personal effects locker and began dressing. "Is this appropriate?" Dyppa asked holding a lightweight blouse and shorts.

"No. It's January ... cold. You'll need to find something warmer. We'll go shopping for an Earth wardrobe once we're there."

She returned from the wardroom in jeans and a turtle-neck pullover. "Shall we make transit?"

Nyk checked his watch. "It's too early. I like to time it so we're landing around two in the morning."

"Fewer witnesses?" she asked.

"Exactly. We have some time to kill. Are you hungry?" He removed a pair of meal packages from a stasis cabinet. "Your last Floran meal for a while."

She sat across from him at the table. "Nyk -- do you remember? The last time we were together, we talked about making a date."

"I do remember."

"I hope you're not disappointed if we don't."

"That sounds like another lose-lose question. I'm not, Dyppa." He scooped from the meal package.

"During my rehabilitation and training, I had time to think. You know I was a child prostitute on Altia."

"I know something about that."

"I did enough casual screwing to last a lifetime. Now -- I think I want it to mean something."

"You're developing an Earth attitude."

"Is it a problem?"

"No," he replied, swallowing his mouthful. "I like it. I think it should mean something, too."

"Nyk -- do you love me?"

He gazed into her blue eyes. "I care for you. I like you. I admire your strength, and I feel sorry for what you've been through."

"But -- do you love me?"

He shook his head. "I wouldn't call my feelings for you love. They're not far from it -- but they're not love."

"I don't love you, either, Nyk. I like you. I'm comfortable with you. I'm grateful for all the help and support. I don't love you." She looked down at her meal. "Did I hurt you saying that?"

He smiled. "Not at all. It's good to form an understanding early on."

"I think I could love you," she continued. "If you'd like to explore that avenue -- I'd be willing." Nyk cradled his forehead in his hand and suppressed laughing. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Not at all, Dyppa. I was admiring the poise you have for such a young woman." He set down his spoon. "I think it best you and I become comfortable at a professional level. After that -- we'll see where Destiny takes us."

"Fair enough." She ate in silence, then said. "I was in love, once. I do know what it feels like. I violated one of the prime rules of a whore. I fell in love with one of my clients."

"You don't need to tell me this, Dyppa."

She shook her head. "I don't know why I feel compelled to tell you, Nyk. Maybe it's part of forming that understanding." She drained her water tumbler and stood to refill it. "It was that love affair that set everything into motion -- the events that sent me here."

"How so?"

She sat again. "My mother is also a psychological addictive."

"I know that."

"She financed her habit through prostitution. It wasn't always like that, but as her dependency grew -- it became her only option. Her profile was marked addictive, so she couldn't purchase drugs legitimately. She turned to her mattress."

"She was paid with drugs?"

Dyppa nodded. "I followed her into the business. I wasn't an addict then, though. I helped support her habit -- I turned what I earned over to her. I couldn't have been 15 standard Floran years old when I started. I worked in a run-down hostel in one of the bad sections of Altropolis. Do you know Altia at all?"

"No -- I've never been there."

"It's not as if Altropolis has any good sections. One day my handler told me I had an assignment. A gimp job, he told me. I always got the cripples, because I was the youngest; or, maybe because I complained the least. I went to his room at the hostel and found a young man, just past the age of consent. He asked me not to laugh at him. I promised I wouldn't. Then, he showed me his handicap. He had lost his manhood in an industrial accident."

"There's no need for someone to go through life like that," Nyk replied. "Doctors on Floran could

help him -- fabricate a new one from stem cells.”

“This was Altia -- not Floran. He was too poor to afford such treatment.”

“On Floran no one would've refused him.”

“He didn't even have the means to afford transport. It's a pay-as-you-go mentality on Altia.”

“Poor kid.” Nyk shook his head.

“All he wanted was closeness -- to feel someone's warmth. We started talking and I realized he and I were very much alike. We understood each other -- two injured young people in a hostile world. Then I had an idea. I figured out a way to satisfy him.”

“How?”

“I'd rather not describe it. We spent the night together. His name was Lom.”

“Lom? An odd name. Is it a given or family name?”

“I don't know -- I just knew him as Lom. It might've been an alias. He knew me as Lyla. He was an ore-worker. Ore work is the career of last resort on Altia.”

“Then, what happened?”

“He became a repeat customer. We connected -- we became lovers. This went on for about a year. Then, my handler discovered what was going on. 'Only paying customers,' he scolded me. He sent his goons to teach Lom a lesson. And -- he beat me up fairly well, too. I never saw Lom again.”

“You must still have feelings for him.”

“Conflicted feelings. I suppose you never forget your first true love. But -- I never want to go back to Altia again. Never. There are too many there who want me harm -- because of what happened next.”

“Which was?”

“I was so angry, I went to the authorities. I agreed to turn State's evidence against my handler and his cronies. Then, I had second thoughts, but it was too late -- I had set into motion something I couldn't stop. The prostitution ring was broken up. My mother was sent into rehabilitation and I was sent to the reeducation center.”

“You mean reform school.”

“I was there for about a year -- I don't know for sure. One day blends in to the next. I was identified as high-risk -- for my own safety, they told me. I was to have no outside contact except for immediate family.” She shook her head. “My mother wanted nothing to do with me, for cutting off her supply and sending her away. My father had deserted us when I was a toddler and enlisted in the ExoService. I had no friends and I was so lonely.” She picked up her water tumbler and swirled it. “Then -- a man claiming to be my father came to the school and signed me out for a one-day leave of absence.”

“That would've been Zander. He killed your father for his identity chip.”

“He offered me escape from my prison. He got me hooked on euphoriant. Then -- he gave me some other drug to try. I didn't know what it was, but I trusted him and took it. The next thing I know -- I'm in some strange place on another world.”

“You awoke in Zander's trailer in Oklahoma.”

“Yes. By now I was so dependant on euphoriant I'd do anything he'd ask. Most of the time he'd experiment on me with other drugs.”

“He was perfecting his mind-control mixture.”

“One day he said the time had come. He left me with ample food and euphoriant cartridges and said he'd return and when he did I'd be safe and secure for life. He never came back.”

“Instead, two strange men barged into the trailer, and you ended up back in the custody of Altian authorities.”

“Yes -- I thought I'd be locked up for the rest of my life for what I did. It was only during my rehabilitation I realized I wasn't to blame. No one blamed me -- I was a victim. I owe my life to you, Nykkyo. I thought about little else while my system was being cleared of the drugs. It's why I decided to apply for this assignment.”

“There's another reason, isn't there?”

She nodded. “I'll feel safe on Earth. I know none of the ghosts of my past can reach me there.”

“Ghosts of flesh and blood?”

She nodded again. “Once I set foot on the surface of that planet -- I'll know I'm safe. I felt safe enough in Agency training in Floran City. I can feel truly safe, there.”

Nyk glanced at his watch. “I think we can make transit now.” He picked up the meal packages, dumped them into the reprocessor and beckoned Dyppa to follow him into the shuttlebay. He gestured. “This is your shuttlecar. Care for it well.” He started to open the passenger side door.

“You want me to pilot?”

“Of course. You'll need to rendezvous with the packets -- to forward your samples to the homeworld.”

Dyppa sat behind the controls and fastened her restraint. She looked at one side of the control panel and then the other. “Don't help me,” she said.

“I don't intend to.”

She activated the shuttle and the power cells whined as they spun up to speed. Her touch on a control panel began pre-launch diagnostics. The safety catches engaged and she tested the door seals. Dyppa pressed another control and the shuttlebay began depressurization. The spacedoor opened. With a pull on the unistick she backed the vessel into space and a prudent distance from the relay station.

The navigation computer returned subjump coordinates. Dyppa placed her hand over the actuator, paused for a moment and then pressed it. The windows became opaque and a jolt shook the shuttle as the warp coil discharged. Transparency returned to the windows and a blue sphere filled the viewscreen. She began computing a reentry trajectory.

“Well done,” Nyk said. “Do you recall the first time you rode in one of these?”

“I was scared shitless,” she replied. She picked up his hand and pressed it against her left breast. He could feel her heart pounding. “I’m scared now. I don’t like space travel.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“I don’t think so.”

She directed the shuttle to a landing on a country road in rural Wisconsin. Following a route displayed on the console she drove it into a small city near Milwaukee and into the driveway of a green house in an older residential area.

Nyk hopped out and opened the door to the detached garage. She rolled the shuttle inside and he locked the door. “It’s cold,” she said, folding her arms across her chest.

“I warned you. Come inside. I’ll show you around the house. Tomorrow we’ll look over the lab and then stock up on food and clothing for you.” He opened the door. “You know where the bedrooms are. This time, I’ll use the spare room.”

Nyk paid the cabby and climbed the steps to the house in Queens. He unlocked the front door. “It’s Nick, Yasuko,” he called to the rear of the house.

Suki’s mother stepped from the back of the house. He opened his arms, embraced her and kissed the top of her head. She brushed aside a tear. “I’m so happy you’re home. Oh, Nick -- I know I’m foolish but I worry so when you travel. Especially, now after...”

“Your feelings are your own, Yasuko. I won’t judge them. How’s Nicky?”

She motioned him into the living room. Nicky was walking in circles around a chair, holding onto it for support. Nyk approached the boy. “Hey, Nick!” He held out his palm. “You’re Nick and I’m Nick.”

Nicky held out his palm. Nyk gave it a gentle slap. “Come on -- high fives! Hey, Nick!”

The boy giggled and brought his palm down onto Nyk’s.

“That’s it -- Hey, Nick!”

“Dinner’s ready,” Yasuko said.

Nyk picked up Nicky, carried him to the kitchen and plopped him into his high chair. He sat at the table and Yasuko placed a pair of bowls before him. He picked up a pair of chopsticks.

“Yasuko -- I think it would be nice to have dinner in the dining room -- like we used to.”

She shook her head. "I'm not ready."

"How about when Nicky gets old enough to handle a pair of these?"

She nodded. "Maybe then."

"Good morning Jaquie," Nyk said as he walked into his office. He unpacked his laptop computer, jacked it in and powered it up.

Seymor poked his head into the doorway. "How went it? How is young Dyppa doing?"

"I think she'll be fine. We had an interesting talk. Seymor -- what do you know of Altia?"

Seymor pulled the door closed behind him. "Altia. I've never been there."

"All I know is what I learned in school. Third oldest colony, population two billion. It's the source of the hegemony's mineral wealth."

Seymor nodded. "I heard when it was discovered it was completely lifeless. It took the terraformers a thousand years to develop a breathable atmosphere. Even today, it's not exactly what I would consider hospitable. The planet orbits one sun of a wide binary system. It takes Altia's sun five thousand years to make an orbit of the main star. There's round-the-clock daylight during part of the year. I understand it's a rough place. Quite a number of criminals end up there. They can find work on Altia when no one else would hire them."

"So, it's as close to a penal colony as we have."

"I've never heard of anyone being sentenced to transportation there," Seymor replied. "I have heard of convicted felons being paroled there."

"I imagine Dyppa has seen and heard things you and I can only imagine. She told me a bit of how she found herself in Zander's trailer." He chuckled. "It all started because she fell in love with a young man named Lom."

"Lom? An odd name. Given or surname?"

"I don't know. It's funny -- I think of how events unfold as we follow our destined paths. Dyppa's young love for a man named Lom was the trigger that sent her here."

Nykkyo switched off his laptop computer and packed it into his case. Seymor poked his head through the door. "You're still here -- good. Nyk, I just received a panicked call from Grynnya. She has an emergency and needs help."

"What sort of emergency?"

"A medical emergency. One of our agents checked in with her, sick. She needs help transporting him to the homeworld for treatment."

"Floran Agents aren't supposed to get sick," Nyk replied.

"Exactly. Grynnya thinks this is a serious enough problem she wants to transport him tonight. She asked me to authorize you to use the bubble shuttle."

"Use the bubble shuttle? With the City on full alert?"

"I know it's a risk, but Grynnya believes he won't last 'til morning without treatment."

"I don't know how quickly I could arrange a flight. How do you feel about me taking the bubble shuttle to Kansas City?"

"We do what's necessary, Nyk. Why don't we grab some dinner? You can come by my apartment and take off as soon as it's dark enough."

"It's January -- it should be dark enough already. Okay, Seymor -- I'll be right along. I need to make a phone call." He picked up the phone and punched in a number. "Yasuko -- it's Nick. I'm really sorry, but I've been called out of town on an emergency. I'll probably be gone a couple of days. I'll call... Thanks, Yasuko."

Nyk stood on the roof of Seymor's apartment building. Seymor stepped through the sliding glass doors from his penthouse. "Any suggestions?" Nyk asked.

"Activate countermeasures before you take off. Don't bother with the rotors -- they'll just slow you down. Get up and out of New York airspace as fast as possible and hope no one spots you."

Nyk nodded. He climbed into the cockpit of the shuttle, designed to resemble a two-man Earth helicopter. Seymor gave Nyk the two-finger Floran salute. He powered up the craft, activated countermeasures and computed a ballistic trajectory to Kansas City that would take him there in about thirty minutes.

The bubble shot into the sky and through a low overcast. Within a few minutes he was seeing stars. Watching his control panel, he corrected his course and began his reentry and descent, landing in the back yard of a ranch house outside Kansas City.

He rapped on the door. Grynnya greeted him wearing latex gloves and a surgical mask, her greying dark-blond hair tied in a ponytail. She handed him a mask and gloves. "You'd better don these before coming inside."

Nyk put on the mask and slipped his hands into the gloves. He followed Grynnya into her guest room.

On the bed lay a young man. His face was covered with blotches, and he was only semi-coherent.

“It's Marxo Wellans,” Nyk exclaimed. “He's the Agent in our Scottsdale operation. What's he got?”

“I have no idea,” Grynnya replied. “He showed up on my doorstep earlier today complaining of a cough and fever. Florans are supposed to report to me if they contract an illness. He said he flew in.”

“From Scottsdale?”

She nodded. “He arrived about two in the afternoon. His condition has deteriorated since then.”

“He walked in with a cough and now he's like this?”

“That's right.”

“Let's try giving him some of the decontamination serum. Maybe it'll knock out what he has.”

“Been there -- done that,” Grynnya replied. “It had no effect.”

“But -- it contains a broad-spectrum bioagent.”

“That bioagent is only effective against bacterial infections. I think he has a virus.”

“The decontamination serum works against viruses.”

“Each virus requires a specific antibody. The serum contains an antibody cocktail.”

“You mean of those we know.”

She nodded. “So, this must be a virus we've never encountered. It also contains an immune-system booster, to stimulate production of new antibodies. It ought to knock out anything. It didn't.”

“Perhaps his immune system is overwhelmed,” Nyk said.

“Or compromised.”

“So, what do we do?”

“Help me load him into my shuttlecar, and we'll hightail it to the relay station. You can follow in the bubble. We'll put him into stasis, there. I've made arrangements for a deep- space shuttle to pick him up and take him to Floran. I'd like it if you'd accompany him. As you can imagine, I have a major decontamination project here.”

“Shall we take him to the clinic on Floran?”

She shook her head. “Not with an infection like this. The ExoAgency maintains a high-containment ward at headquarters in Government Center. We'll treat him there.” She shook her head again. “It's been many years since we've had to use it.”

“Do we have a medic on call?”

She shook her head. "We'll need to find one."

"I'll call my friend Aahhn."

Nyk approached the bed. "Marxo... Marxo... can you stand?"

Marxo moaned.

"Come on -- we're taking you home. Try to stand." Nyk supported him. "Try to sit, then."

Grynnya brought a blanket. "Wrap him in this. It's cold outside."

Nyk draped the blanket over Marxo's shoulders. "Good -- here we go."

With Grynnya on Marxo's right, Nyk lifted him to a standing position. "Let's walk ... that's it..."

They led him to the shuttlecar. Nyk helped him sit in the passenger seat and fastened his restraint.

"Follow me up in the bubble," Grynnya shouted as she climbed in.

The bubble emerged from the subjump near the relay station. He could see Grynnya's shuttlecar in stationkeeping by the shuttlebay spacedoor. He maneuvered behind her. The door opened and Grynnya proceeded inside. Nyk followed and parked the bubble in an adjacent stall. The bay began to pressurize.

He heard the door safeties release, and he hopped out. "He's worsening by the minute," Grynnya called out. "Quick -- let's get him into stasis."

"I don't think he can walk. I'll take his shoulders -- you get his ankles."

Nyk backed his way through the pressure door to the main workroom. Grynnya set down Marxo's ankles, opened the door to the stasis chamber and extended the table. "Okay now -- LIFT!"

Marxo was delirious and beginning to flail his arms. Nyk restrained him and Grynnya retracted the table.

"Marxo," Grynnya said. "Marxo -- we're going to put you into stasis. A transport is on its way and when you wake up -- you'll be in a hospital in Floran City." She closed the hatch and brought the stasis fields into standby. Her finger touched the actuator and Marxo fell limp. "We have good stasis," she said and leaned against a bulkhead. "Thank goodness."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Nyk asked.

"Decontamination."

He nodded. "It's the first time in my career I'm looking forward to it."

"I'm with you, kiddo."

Grynnya followed Nyk into the wardroom and began undressing. "I'm going to burn these clothes," he said.

She nodded. "I think I have some other Earth duds in my effects locker. I brought some chlorine bleach and I'll go over the inside of my shuttle with it before heading back."

"I imagine you have quite the mess to clean up." He stepped into the decontamination chamber. "Ladies first..."

Nyk stood in the shuttlebay as Grynnya swabbed the interior with bleach and water. "I just spoke to Aahhn," he said. "He knows of a colleague who's an expert in infectious disease, and he's willing to help us. Of course, on Floran it's all theoretical, so he's eager to have a real case."

"I'm sure at the very least the pharma labs will want samples of antibodies to add to our decontamination cocktail."

Nyk heard the docking clamps engage, looked out the viewport and saw a deep- space transport at the end of the tunnel. A pair of attendants stepped through dragging a portable stasis tube on a levitating pallet.

"Careful," Grynnya advised. "Full contamination protocol."

"We'll be careful." Nyk stepped through the pressure door. "Full contamination protocol," he said to the attendants.

They nodded and donned masks. Nyk switched off the stasis fields and extended the table. One attendant lifted the tube from the pallet and maneuvered it adjacent to the table.

"Roll him," the other attendant said. "Now, into the tube... we have good stasis. Are one of you accompanying us?"

"I am," Nyk replied. He called to Grynnya. "I'll keep you briefed."

"Good luck," she called back.

He followed the attendants through the docking tunnel and belted himself into a seat on the transport.

The transport pulled from the relay station. Nyk felt the jolts of the warp jumps. Shortly the vessel was making an approach at the Floran City shuttleport. It was met there by a skimmer.

The attendants pushed the pallet onto the skimmer. Nyk climbed aboard and it lifted off and headed toward the quad towers. One of the attendants peered into the tube. "First chance I had to take a look at him. Poor bastard."

Nyk rode with the pallet in a freight lift to ExoAgency headquarters in Tower Three of Government Center. "Over here," the attendant directed. They pushed the tube into a treatment room sealed off by a transparent panel and an airlock door.

"We've been waiting for you." Nyk heard a familiar voice, turned and saw his friend Aahhn. "You always bring me the difficult cases."

Nyk grasped Aahhn's hand and laced fingers in the Floran gesture of friendship. "I don't know what we have this time," he said.

“This is Dr Helsyn,” Aahhn continued. Nyk looked up at a slim man with grey hair. “He's anxious to have a look at our patient -- as soon as we have him reanimated.”

Nyk paced outside the treatment room, watching through the transparent wall as Aahhn, Helsyn and two attendants, all in containment garb, tended Marxo. The young man was being given oxygen and fluids.

Aahhn and his colleague rinsed their containment suits with decontaminant, removed them and approached Nyk. “He's as sick a man as I've ever seen,” Aahhn reported.

“What does he have?”

“We don't know -- yet. I'd like to interview him and ask how he was exposed. I'm afraid, Nyk, that my prognosis is rather grim. He's suffering multiple, simultaneous organ failure. His kidneys have stopped functioning, his lymphatic system is clogged with who-knows-what, and the infection is encroaching on his brain.”

“What can we do?”

“Even someone this sick produces antibodies in response,” Helsyn replied. “We've taken blood samples and forwarded them to the pharma labs. Our hope is to maintain him until the antibodies can be isolated and replicated. It's how we dealt with the last such case we encountered. We should have a preliminary report from the pharma boys any moment now.”

“What are they doing?” Nyk asked as he watched the attendants.

“They're installing a pulmonary inducer,” Aahhn replied. “It'll keep him breathing.”

“By the time those antibodies arrive -- what'll be left to treat?”

“It's a race against time.”

A warble sounded from Helsyn's *xarpa*. He withdrew a handheld vidisplay. “Ah -- a call from the pharma labs. If you'll excuse me...” Helsyn stepped away and consulted his vidisplay.

“I hope it's good news,” Aahhn said.

Helsyn returned to them with a long face. He shook his head. “They were unable to isolate any antibodies, other than the usual.”

Aahhn gestured to Helsyn and they conferred. Helsyn stepped to the communicator. “Block him -- make it deep. Discontinue pulmonary induction.”

An attendant slipped a helmet-like device onto Marxo's head.

“What's that?” Nyk asked.

“It's a neural block,” Aahhn replied. “It'll induce deep anesthesia.”

Helsyn gave a hand signal and another attendant pulled a blind over the viewing panel. "Now what are they doing?" Nyk asked.

"Letting nature take its course," Aahhn answered.

"You mean you're just keeping him anesthetized -- until he ... dies?"

"Which won't be long, now," Helsyn said.

"It's a kindness, Nyk," Aahhn added. "There's nothing else we can do for him here."

"Why not put him back into stasis -- until we find a cure?"

"It would be a death sentence, anyway. There's a limit to how long we can maintain someone in stasis."

Nyk sat and stared at a control panel, watching Marxo's vital signs on displays. The trace on the heart monitor grew erratic and then flatlined. "He's gone," Aahhn said.

Nyk sat at a conference table in a meeting room. Seymor's image was on the vidisplay. "Marxo's dead," he said.

Seymor closed his eyes and grimaced. "There'll be an inquiry. The oversight committee requires one any time an Agent dies offworld."

"He was onworld when he died."

"A technicality. Do you know anything?"

Nyk shook his head. "Not yet. Aahhn and Helsyn will brief me shortly."

"Nyk -- you were careful not to expose yourself."

"Of course."

"Good. Take care of yourself lad. We'll see you back down here once the dust settles." The vidphone session went blank.

Nyk drummed his fingers on the table. A door chime sounded. "Come," he said.

Aahhn and Helsyn stepped into the room and sat across from Nyk. "I'm shaken," Aahhn said. "I don't lose many patients. It's difficult for me when I do."

"You did all you could for him," Nyk replied.

"I'm not a miracle worker."

"You've worked two miracles for me already. Two and one isn't a bad record in the miracles game. What do we know from the post-mortem?"

Helsyn drew in a deep breath. "Not an awful lot I'm afraid. It does appear he was suffering from multiple infections, all viral."

"Multiple? All viral?"

"Yes," Aahhn added. "Your Earth paramedic..."

"Grynnya?"

"Yes, her -- she administered broad-spectrum bioagent. It would've taken out anything non-viral."

"Perhaps something non-viral paved the way for the virus," Nyk suggested.

Aahhn and Helsyn stared at each other. "I hadn't considered that," Helsyn said.

"But -- something non-viral would still produce antibodies and the pharma labs found none," Aahhn countered.

"True, true." Helsyn looked at Nyk. "A nice theory." He handed Nyk a datacel. "We performed a genetic scan on his blood. We found evidence of six alien genomes."

"Do you mean alien as from another planet?" Nyk asked.

"If you consider Earth another planet -- yes," Helsyn replied.

Nyk inserted the datacel into the vidisplay. "This means little to me. What does it mean to you?"

"It appears," Aahhn explained, "that poor Marxo contracted six different virus infections."

"Six at once? Have you been able to identify any of them genetically?" Nyk asked.

Helsyn shook his head. "No. None of them match any virus in our database."

"How good is your database?"

"Nyk," Helsyn said, "part of the ExoAgency's job in keeping Agents on Earth is to protect the homeworld population. We expended considerable effort ridding the biospheres of this and our colony worlds of pathogens. We want to keep it that way. Do you visit Grynnya for an annual checkup?"

"And immune system booster, yes."

"Each time blood samples are sent here. Antibodies are isolated and any new virus catalogued. Also, Grynnya is in a unique position as our medical liaison to ... obtain virus samples directly from the Earth population."

"She works in an Earth hospital. She has access to lab specimens."

"And, from the morgue," Helsyn added.

Nyk nodded in comprehension. "So, when a new strain materializes -- our pharma labs know about it almost immediately. I can see we take this more seriously than I had presumed."

“It’s a matter of deadly seriousness, as poor Marxo demonstrated. Imagine if an infection like his was loosed on the Floran population.”

Nyk shuddered. “So -- getting back to the virus samples. You were unable to match any of them?”

“That’s right.”

“Nothing close?”

“No.”

“In addition,” Helsyn said, “it appears his immune system was shut down.”

“As in HIV?” Nyk asked.

“Yes -- but we found no evidence of any HIV strains that we know.”

“There’s more from the post-mortem,” Aahhn added. “It appears a different virus attacks different body systems. For sake of argument we’ve identified them as I, II, III, IV, V and VI.”

“The six viruses?”

“Yes -- Virus VI attacks the respiratory system. Virus III the digestive system, I the lymphatic system, V the skin...”

“The blotches.”

“Exactly... Virus VI attacks the brain.”

Nyk counted on his fingers. “What about virus II?”

“We don’t know. Virus II is pervasive.”

“What do we do, now?”

“We’re keeping his body in stasis, in case we need more study.”

“Have you notified his family?” Nyk asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. That’s not a task I was eager to perform -- especially if they can’t have his remains.”

“They’ll have them -- eventually. Beyond that, we’re treating this as an isolated incident.”

Nyk popped the datacel from his vidisplay. “May I keep this? I may need it when I report to the oversight committee.”

“Certainly. Now -- it’s very late and I think we should all call it a day.”

Nyk traded the salute with the two doctors and watched them leave the room. The door slid shut. He scanned his wrist on the vidisplay and placed a vidphone call. He received no answer.

He placed another and saw Suki. "Nykkyo! What are you doing calling at this time? Where are you?"

"I'm in Floran City. I need to speak with Senta, but she's not answering her calls. Is she there?"

"No -- she went to Floran City this morning for a few days. Is anything wrong?" He gazed at her through the circuit. "Nykkyo -- what's wrong?"

"One of our Agents got sick and died."

"That's too bad."

"That's not it -- it shouldn't have happened. Floran Agents do NOT get sick."

"Nykkyo -- even Floran medicine can't prevent every illness."

"I suppose. This thing gives me a bad feeling. Thanks, *korlyta*. I'll try hunting Senta down here. I love you."

"I love you, too."

"Give Andra my love." The vidisplay went dark.

Nyk stepped from the tubecar onto the platform and rode the lift to the 353rd floor. He approached the door to the Senta's apartment. *Even though she moved the labs to Sudal she maintains this for her convenience*, he thought.

The doorscan showed the privacy code was set. Nyk scanned his wrist and the doorscan replied, entry denied.

He pressed the doorchime. He pressed it again. And again. *Come on, Senta -- I know you're in there*. He pressed it again.

The door unlatched and slid open. He looked into Senta's green eyes. "Nykkyo! What are you doing here?"

"May I come in?" She stepped aside. "I'm sorry to disturb you but this is important. I need you to do me a favor, Senta."

"Why should I do YOU a favor?"

"Not me, personally -- the ExoAgency."

"Why should I do the Agency a favor?"

He glanced toward the bedroom. "Do you have company?"

"Yes, but don't worry -- they're sound sleepers. Keep your voice low."

“They?”

“If you must know -- it's the Arodsu twins.”

Nyk rolled his eyes. “Senta... sometimes...”

“I'm sure this emergency visit isn't to criticize my social life. That could wait 'til morning. What favor?”

“What do you know of viruses?”

“Viruses... A virus is a strand of genetic material in a protein wrapper. They can't reproduce on their own, but can by invading a cell and co-opting its own reproductive system.”

“What do you know of viral genetics?”

She shook her head. “Not much. Nyk, what are you getting at?”

“We had an ExoAgent die today of an Earth infection.”

“And you must think that infection is headed here?”

“It IS here -- he died at ExoAgency headquarters. We believe it's been contained, and the medics are calling it an isolated incident. The whole thing bothers me, though.”

“How?”

“Our medics were unable to match the virus with any known Earth specimen.”

“That doesn't surprise me. They can't know every Earth virus.”

“We know quite a few.” He withdrew the datacel from his *xarpa*. “This contains the genetic sequence of six viruses we isolated in his body. I was wondering if you...”

“ME? You think I know more about viruses than Agency specialists?”

“I think you know more about genetics. Senta -- you have the finest mind on the subject I know.”

“You don't know everyone.”

“Don't attempt modesty, Senta. It doesn't become you.”

Senta picked up the datacel and poked it into a vidisplay. She rubbed her eyes and tucked some unruly red locks behind her ear. “Yes -- they are sequenced in the conventional way.”

“I was hoping you could try matching it against the Agency database. Maybe you can find a relationship they missed. Do you have access to Agency viral sequences?”

“I don't know. I probably can get it if I don't. As a Food Service director in charge of genetic sequencing, I should have carte-blanche access to all genetic material.”

“That sounds like the Senta I used to know.”

She looked up and smiled. “This is going to take some time. Where are you staying?”

“I was going to get a room at the hostel.”

“Nyk -- you can use the guest room. You have to promise me one thing.”

“What's that?”

“That you'll stay in there until I come get you in the morning. Katha and Ratha are rather shy.”

“They never looked shy.”

“Looks can be deceiving. I've worked hard to reach this stage with them. You mess this up for me and I won't help you. I'll throw you out on your ear.”

“I'm too exhausted for any juvenile games, Senta. I'll see you in the morning.” Nyk stepped into the guest room, slid the door shut and stretched out on the bed.

5 -- The Tulsa Virus

A shaft of orange sunlight fell across Nyk's eyes and waked him. He could hear chatter and laughter coming from the kitchen. The talking quieted. A rap came on the door. “Come,” he said.

Senta slid the door open. “You can come out now. They've left.”

“Good thing. I need to use the commode in the worst way.”

“Tie a knot in it.”

Nyk smiled and headed for the apartment's lavatory. Then, he stepped into the kitchen.

“There's some tea left,” Senta told him.

He poured a cup and opened a breakfast cake. Senta sat scooping from a warm packaged meal and gazing into a vidisplay. “Did you make any progress?” Nyk asked. Senta continued to stare at her screen. “Senta?” She looked up. “Must you?”

“I'm sorry, Nyk. Since I've been living alone I've become accustomed to looking at the news at breakfast.”

“What's in the news?”

“Mostly the usual. Here's an item: The Seven have delivered, via an unwitting courier, their latest set of demands.”

“The Seven?”

“It's what the independence faction on Altia are calling themselves these days.”

“What are their demands?”

“They want the immediate dissolution of the New Altian Senate, the removal of High Legislature observers, the return of old order officials who've been detained... The usual sorts of things.” She switched off the vidisplay. “What were you asking me?”

“I was wondering if you made any progress last night.”

“With the twins? I should say I did.”

“No -- with the virus.”

“Oh... No, Nyk. I'll look at it today. I have some meetings with other Food Service directors. I'll look at it between sessions.” Nyk looked down. “I'll look at it today, I promise. Don't give me the long face. Why is this so important to you?”

“Marxo wasn't supposed to die. He wasn't supposed to get sick. This virus gives me a bad feeling in my gut.”

“Are you sure you weren't exposed to it?” Nyk looked daggers at her. “Just a thought. Nyk -- if you'd like I could turn this over to one of my assistants. I'd go so far as to dedicate a mod's worth of time to it. I'd call it a government project.”

He shook his head. “For now I want to keep this between the two of us. Seymor chides me for wasting time with things outside my domain of responsibility.”

“This man was one of your direct reports, wasn't he?”

Nyk nodded. “Yes, he was.”

“I'd say that makes it your domain of responsibility.” She put her hand over her mouth and suppressed a laugh.

“What's so funny?”

“The thought of YOU with direct reports...” She shook her head. “I hate to admit it, but Earth has been good for you. You'll get your answers faster if you let Kovina do the work. I'm very busy.”

“Kovina?”

“Yes -- she's my intern -- a third year student in genetics at Sudal University.”

“All right -- let her do the grunt work. Tell her to keep it quiet. I wouldn't want to start a panic by letting slip we've been exposed to an incurable, lethal virus.”

“I'm off to my meetings,” Senta said. “Will you be here tonight? I'll authorize your ID on the doorscan.”

“No -- I'm meeting with the oversight chair and then heading home. I'll call in a day or so to check on Kovina's progress.”

“Good seeing you, Nykkyo,” said a middle-aged man wearing official insignia.

“Illya, I wish it were under happier circumstances.”

“How's that wife of yours doing?”

“Suki? She seems to be settling in and happy in Sudal. I understand you pulled strings to get her registered as a native. Thank you for that.”

“Yes -- since she can't return to Earth I saw no reason why she couldn't be a productive member of our society. Besides -- she'll prove her worth.”

“You have plans for her -- don't you, Illya?”

He smiled. “I have ideas. We'll let her get settled and comfortable and then we'll see if any of my ideas bear fruit. Now -- as to your visit today.”

“We've lost an Agent -- Marxo Wellans.”

“I read the report.” He closed his eyes. “Miserable stuff.”

“Seymor thinks there's to be an inquiry.”

“This looks fairly routine to me.”

“It's hardly routine,” Nyk replied. “Floran Agents are not supposed to succumb to illness like that.”

“Nyk -- we can't provide one hundred percent protection one hundred percent of the time. These things do happen. He fell victim to an Earth illness.”

“This is a very odd illness.”

“Have there been cases reported on Earth?”

Nyk pondered. “I don't know -- I've been away.”

“Check the news and see if others have succumbed. If so, the answer is clear. Marxo happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and contracted a virus for which we have no protection. It's a risk all Agents face -- yourself included.”

“I hadn't thought of it that way. I suppose you're right. New viruses emerge and we can't deal with them instantaneously.”

“You're not going to stay up late and worry about it, are you?”

“Me? Of course not. Still... something about this bothers me. Oh, well -- I know what Seymour will say. I should stick to my own domain of responsibility.”

“That domain doesn't exclude thinking about things ... or reading about them,” Kronta replied. He smiled and gave Nyk a wink. “Your report and this interview will suffice to close the Marxo Wellans case. Have a good transit, Nyk.”

Nyk paid the cabby and walked up the steps to the house in Queens. He had parked the bubble shuttle on the roof of Seymour's penthouse and taken a cab from Midtown. Treading softly he slipped his house key into the lock and opened the door.

He heard the sound of the TV in the living room. Yasuko was asleep in her robe, sitting in an arm chair. “Yasuko,” he whispered. “Yasuko ... Yasuko...”

She opened her eyes. “Nick -- you're back. What time is it?”

“One in the morning.”

“I must've dozed off.” She stood and stretched. “I think I'll go sleep in my bed -- it'll be better for my back.”

“Good night Yasuko.” He watched as she headed for the master bedroom.

Nyk turned to the television. It was tuned to a news network. He reached to switch it off but the news report stopped him.

Health authorities have reported the thirty-fourth case of the mysterious Tulsa virus. Of the other thirty-three cases, twenty-five have died and the other eight are in critical condition...

He sat and watched the news report and learned that the symptoms were identical to Marxo's; that no treatment slowed the illness's advance; that death inevitably came from multiple organ failure. *Well*, he thought, *Kronta was right. Marxo was in the wrong place at the wrong time ...*

He reached for the remote and again paused as a bit of new information came his way. Scientists at the Center for Disease Control had traced the outbreak to a passenger on a flight from Tulsa to Kansas City. Eight passengers on the Tulsa to Dallas/Fort Worth leg had been infected -- those sitting in seats 13D, E and F, 14D and F and row 15 had all succumbed. In addition, two who had flown on a connecting flight from DFW to Kansas City had become ill.

Now the authorities were looking for one passenger who had been on both flights -- a passenger named Brian Wilson. Nyk pondered. *Marxo's Earth name had been Brian Altman*. Wilson had sat in row 14 on the flight to Dallas, and in seat 8C to KC. The newscaster referred to him as Passenger 14E.

Nyk switched off the television, sprinted upstairs to the apartment and placed a phone call. He heard it ring. “Hello?” a groggy voice answered.

“Grynnya! It's Nykkyo.”

“Oh, Nick...”

“Who is it?” he heard a muffled man's voice.

“It's my boss in New York.”

“I thought your boss was at the hospital.”

“I do consulting for an outfit in New York. Nick! This had better be important. Do you know what time it is?”

“Around midnight in your area... is this an inopportune time?”

“You could call it that.”

“Have you heard the news reports about Passenger 14E?”

“Yes -- and the virus. Looks like the same thing that got Mar... Brian.”

“You said he arrived by air. Do you know from where?”

“From Scottsdale.”

“Are you sure? Did he say that? Did you see his ticket stubs?”

“Why, no... I was assuming.”

“Do you still have his personal effects?”

“They're in a folder downstairs. Do you want me to...”

“If it's not too much trouble.”

“Oh, no. Never too much trouble.” She yawned. “Hold on...” He heard the phone being set down and a conversation growing more animated. A door slammed. It slammed again. All was quiet.

Someone approached the phone. “Nykkyo...”

“Your company left?”

“Yes... it was Leo and he's pissed. He needs his beauty sleep.”

“I'm sorry, Grynnya.”

“Oh, he'll get over it in a few days -- as soon as he gets horny enough. Okay, I have Marxo's personal belongings.”

“See if there's a ticket stub.”

“Just a sec... Yes... Flight 1714... Tulsa to Dallas ... seat 14E. He changed planes in Dallas and flew to Kansas City -- seat 8C.

“We found Passenger 14E! What was the name on the tickets?”

“Hold on... Brian Wilson.”

“His Earth name was Brian Altman.”

“I have his wallet... There's a driver's license with the name Brian Wilson ... wait a sec... There's another one here for Brian Altman... His credit cards all say Brian Altman. Nyk -- we don't dare go to Earth authorities with this information. What should I do with it?”

“Burn it, I'd say. Burn all of it.”

“First thing in the morning.”

Nyk descended the stairs and sat at the kitchen table. Yasuko placed a bowl of oatmeal before him. “How was your trip?”

He shook his head. “Strange. I wish there were some other way... I'm sorry to be away from home so much, Yasuko.”

“I'm used to it. George would fly out of town on a moment's notice. You do what you must do, Nick. Nicky and I are fine.” She poured coffee for him. “Have you been following this new Tulsa virus?”

He sipped his coffee. “I saw a blurb on the news last night.”

She sat across from him. “Scary, isn't it? They say no one who contracted it has recovered. I heard another case surfaced yesterday. The authorities say it moves so fast -- if we can go forty-eight hours without a new case -- they'll consider it contained. I'm just glad all the cases have been down south.”

He gulped his coffee. “Let's hope it is contained.”

“All these new illnesses worry me, Nick. Everyone's on edge with this anthrax business, and they're talking about resuming smallpox vaccinations.”

“From the reports this was neither smallpox nor anthrax.”

“That worries me more. All these new diseases ... we've had West Nile and Mad Cow ... every year some new flu strain pops up ... something out west carried in mouse droppings ... and, now this. I wonder what sort of world Nicky will inherit?”

“About the same world as we have now.”

“And, not a single victim survived. They're all dead. Maybe when I go out I'll buy some plastic and duct tape.”

“Yasuko -- no need for those measures.”

“Better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it.”

“If it'll help you sleep at night then go stock up on tape and plastic.” He stepped to the high chair. “Hey, Nick!” Nicky held out his palm and Nyk gave it a gentle slap. “Bye, Nick!” He picked up his case, kissed Yasuko on the forehead and headed out the door.

Nyk rapped on the door to Seymour's office. His boss was on the phone; he spotted Nyk and waved him in. Nyk pulled the door shut and sat in a chair across from the desk.

Seymour put down the phone. “Lev -- we're working on our latest set of diamonds.”

“I have some crystals Dyppa gave me,” Nyk said. “They're at the house -- I was going to let Suki's uncle have a few.”

“Fine, Nyk. How went it on the homeworld?”

“I hope I never have to witness anything like that again,” Nyk replied, “to watch a man die before your eyes. Kronta felt it's an isolated incident -- Marxo was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I'd say he was -- he was on that flight from Tulsa to Kansas City.”

“Marxo? In Tulsa?”

“Yes -- Grynnya has his ticket stub. Marxo was the mysterious, missing Passenger 14E who's been in the news. If Suki's mom's reaction is any guide, I'll say the native population is plenty anxious about this disease. She's ready to wrap the house in plastic.”

“I don't blame them. The whole country -- the whole world is on edge. First the Trade Center and then those anthrax letters ... I've been here thirty years and I've never seen anything like it. It certainly doesn't make our work any easier.” Seymour drummed his desk with a pencil. “Tulsa? What was Marxo doing in Tulsa? Work related?”

“Good question,” Nyk replied. “And, what was he doing with two Earth identities?”

“Two?”

“He flew under the name of Brian Wilson. Grynnya found two driver's licenses.”

“That is odd... Very odd...”

“He must've been doing something other than his assignment,” Nyk said. “I can go through his draw account and see if I can find anything there. Too bad we can't ask him. I suppose we'll need to start recruiting someone to replace him in Scottsdale.”

“Maybe not. If Dyppa works out -- maybe she can shoulder the Scottsdale load, too. After all -- Marxo's performance was nothing to shoot off fireworks over.”

“That's true. You and I discussed more than once sending him up due to poor performance. Well -- he's been sent up. Seymour -- what would we have done if he had died here on Earth?”

“We prefer that not happen,” Seymor replied. “It has a few times over the years. How we handle it depends on circumstances. If Earth authorities are involved, it complicates matters considerably. We prefer Florans who've completed their tours -- one way or another -- to simply vanish into thin air.”

“As Marxo has done. I see...” Nyk stood and grabbed his case. “Well, I'm off to my domain of responsibility.”

Nyk opened the door to the office suite. “Good morning, Mr Kane,” Jaquie said to him.

“Good morning, Jaquie.” She handed him an envelope. “What's this?”

“Mr Seymor asked me to make some travel plans for you.”

“Where?”

“To Scottsdale, Arizona.”

Nyk rolled his eyes. “I think I know what this is about...” He stepped into Seymor's office and pulled the door shut. “A trip to Scottsdale ... to sanitize Marxo's operation.”

“Lad -- you ARE a natural at this. I took the liberty of canceling our lease on the lab facility. We only had to pay a fifty percent penalty.”

“We're keeping it shut?”

“For the time being.”

Nyk opened the envelope and looked inside. “Noon flight to Phoenix...” He looked at his boss and squinted. “Rental car?”

“You have your license, lad -- you might as well put it to use. It's about the only way to get around Phoenix.”

“And, you expect me to come home alive...” He scanned the itinerary. “Two rooms at the Motel 6?”

“I've asked young Dyppa to join you.”

“Dyppa? Why?”

“Because -- four hands are better than two. Maybe some of the gear is stuff she can use in Wisconsin. There is a backlog of requests from the plant breeders.”

“I'll turn it over to her. Are we sanitizing both his home and the lab or just the lab?”

“Just the lab. I'm sending Grynnya to do his house.”

“You're assigning all of North American Operations to this project. Why Grynnya?”

“She can do a thorough decontamination -- if necessary.”

“Did Marxo have a shuttlecar?”

“Shit! I forgot about the shuttlecar...” He drummed his fingers on the desk. “I guess I'll have Grynnya take it to the relay station. One of us can ride the bubble up there and fetch her home.”

“When you say us, do you mean one of me, myself and I?”

“Have you someone else in mind? I wouldn't give that assignment to the girl -- she's too green.”

“I'm not the only one in this office qualified to pilot the bubble shuttle, Seymor...” Seymor slid his reading glasses down his nose and looked over them at Nyk. “Okay, Boss... I'll scoot home, pack my case and give Yasuko the bad news.”

Nyk stepped into the baggage claim area of the Phoenix airport. He saw Dyppa loitering with a suitcase at her feet. She spotted him and waved.

“Let me grab my bag from the carousel,” he said. “We have a rental car waiting. How was your flight?”

“Harrowing,” she replied. “It took me until now to get my heart rate to under a hundred a minute.”

“That's right -- you don't like flying.” He saw his bag slide onto the carousel, stepped to it and snatched it. “Let's get our car and find someplace to have some dinner -- then we'll check into our hotel rooms.”

Dyppa walked with him to the rental car shuttle. He stood in line and presented his driver's license and debit card, signed the forms and picked up a road map. With a nod toward the door, he headed for the parking lot and located his assigned vehicle.

Stowing their bags in the trunk he opened the door and climbed in. Dyppa sat in the passenger seat. He surveyed the dashboard. “This is what I'm supposed not to attempt driving?” she asked.

“Not without some training. Seymor insisted I learn to drive. I've had my license two whole months...” He slipped the key into the ignition, started the engine and popped it into reverse. The car jumped backward and he stomped on the brake. He shifted it into drive and lurched his way to the driveway.

“If you're trying to frighten me -- it's working,” Dyppa said. “And, it's not funny.”

“No, no, Dyppa -- I need to get used to the controls. This is different from Suki's dad's Town Car...” He pulled onto the street. “Here.” He handed her the map and directions. “Maybe you can navigate. Driving one of these is more difficult than it looks.”

“You're making it look plenty difficult.”

“It's much more difficult than a shuttlecar.”

“More difficult? But, Nyk -- there are only two dimensions. In a shuttlecar you have three to control.”

“In space there aren't other shuttles to bang into.” He stopped at a light. “Now -- where are we going?”

“Camelback Road,” Dyppa read from a sheet of paper.

“What do we look for first?”

“Center Parkway,” she replied.

The light changed to green and he stepped on the accelerator. “Is it a left or right?”

“North,” she replied.

“That doesn't help -- left or right?”

“I don't know...” She looked out the window. “I think we just went past it.”

“Past it?”

“I thought I saw a sign that read Center Parkway.”

He pulled into a parking lot and turned around. “Where?”

“There.” she pointed.

“Oh, back THERE...”

“Nyk -- will I need to know how to do this?”

6 -- Scottsdale

He pulled into the motel parking lot and parked. “Remember, Dyppa -- your Earth identity is Karen Wilson.”

“Nyk -- or should I say, Nick -- I know. I'm accustomed to going by an alias -- I did it the whole time I was turning tricks in Altropolis. Remember?”

“I remember...” He popped open the trunk.

Dyppa grabbed the cases and followed Nyk into the hotel. They approached the front desk. “Reservations for Nick Kane,” he told the clerk.

The clerk tapped on his computer. “One room?”

“No, two.”

He tapped again. “I see ... two rooms reserved but only one confirmed. We rented the other room when your unconfirmed reservation expired at six.”

Nyk looked at Dyppa. “What sort of room is it?” he asked.

“It's a queen with a sofa.”

“Maybe we should look somewhere else,” he said to her.

“It's all right,” Dyppa replied. “I don't mind sharing if you don't.”

“Okay, we'll take it.”

The clerk printed a registration form. “Is she legal?”

“I'm sorry?”

“Is she eighteen?”

“No, no -- it's not what you think. She's my assistant. We had reserved two rooms so we'd each have one. It was because of some mistake...”

“I don't care. If she's not eighteen, or if you're not her legal guardian -- I can't rent the room.”

Dyppa set her bag on the counter, fished through it and retrieved her driver's license. The clerk regarded it and her, then handed it to her. “Karen Wilson...” He counted on his fingers. “Eighteen but just...”

“Would it make a difference if I turned eighteen yesterday or twenty years ago?” Dyppa asked.

“No -- legal's legal. I'm sorry, but last month we had some guy in here taking photographs of an underage girl. Since then, whenever some guy comes in with a young-looking girl we have to ask -- management's orders.”

“I understand.” He picked up the key cards and his case. “Come on, Karen...”

Nyk unlocked the room and set his case inside. “Not very fancy.”

“It'll do for one night,” Dyppa said. “I'll sleep on the sofa.”

“No -- you take the bed. I'll take the sofa. Let's see if it folds out.” He lifted the cushions from it and piled them onto the floor; then grabbed the folding mechanism and pulled it open. “There...” He sat on it. The supports collapsed and the mattress folded in the middle. “Maybe if I prop it with the cushions...” The bed collapsed again under his weight. “If I lie on it crosswise...”

“That can't be comfortable.”

“I'll fold it back up and sleep on it like a sofa...” He lifted the frame and pushed against it. “It's

jammed,” he grunted.

“Nyk -- the bed is wide enough so we can both sleep in it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes -- no sense either of us being uncomfortable. I'm tired and I'm going to get ready.”

Nyk undressed to his briefs and folded down the covers. He slid in, plumped the pillow and rested his head against it.

“Do you remember?” Dyppa called from the bathroom.

“Remember what?”

“After you found me in Zander's trailer -- we spent that night together?”

“I'll never forget it. You had some sort of nightmare. You were afraid to go to sleep, so I had you get into bed with me.”

“You told me I had to wear a shirt.” She stepped from the bathroom wearing a white satin poet's nightshirt. It was long-sleeved and had an embroidered bodice with lace collar and cuffs. Its hem cut across the upper thirds of her thighs. “Will this do?”

“It's beautiful, Dyppa. Where did you get that?”

“At Mayfair.”

“Where?”

“It's a shopping center in Milwaukee. I made friends with a couple of the girls at the university and one weekend we went to Mayfair to do some shopping. Earth clothes are fun.”

“Is that what you're spending your stipend on?”

“No -- but it's so cold in Wisconsin. I wanted something to wear in bed so I wouldn't be chilly. I bought this because it's pretty.”

“It is indeed.”

She turned down the covers and lay beside him. “So, do you remember my nightmare?”

“You said some pool of evil was stalking you.”

“I know what triggered it. Do you know what it was?”

“No, what?”

“It was a sock.”

“A sock?”

“Yes. That morning, I was terrified to look in the bedroom. I finally peeked in and saw a sock on the floor. When I got undressed, I must've dropped one of my socks. Then, I was in some dream or something, opened my eyes and saw the sock. In my dream it became the pool of evil -- pulsing and growing and slithering toward me.” She shuddered. “I've never been so scared -- I still get creepy thinking about it.”

“I can see that happening,” he replied. “I've had those sorts of night terrors, especially if I'm in unfamiliar surroundings. I'll see a light or something, and it turns into something terrifying.”

“I felt so foolish when I saw what it was. You have to admit -- it is funny, though.”

He chuckled. “Yes -- I don't recall ever feeling threatened by a sock.”

“I remember how nice it felt when you held me. I calmed down right away... It was a happy moment. I haven't had many of those.”

“I hope that's changing for you.”

“Oh, it is... Nyk?”

“Yes?”

“I'm having trouble falling asleep. It must be anxiety from traveling. I hope you don't mind me talking to you like this.”

“No, Dyppa. I'm enjoying it -- it's more of us forming that understanding.”

“Would you hold me again? It might help me calm down so I can fall asleep.”

“Dyppa... I don't think that's a good idea.”

“Are you afraid of me?”

“No, not of you -- maybe of me.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“I'll admit I am attracted to you, Dyppa.”

“You told me last time I was young and all youth is beautiful. Am I aging well?”

“You seem to remember well that night.”

“When I arrived at the rehabilitation center, it was all I could think of. I went over it in my mind -- again and again.”

“Dyppa -- you've hardly aged at all. Yes, youth is pretty and you're a young and pretty girl. But -- I'm attracted even more to your persona.”

She rolled to face him. “Really?” she asked and smiled.

“Yes. You're a bright young woman with a bright future.”

She slid over and lay against him. “I like your persona, too.”

“Dyppa, don't...”

“This room is chilly, Nyk.”

“Yes -- It's a chilly winter in Arizona. I'm a bit uncomfortable, too.”

“Can't I stay here? I like feeling your warmth. I won't start anything.”

“All right -- you can stay here.” He slipped his arm around her.

She reached across him and rested her face against his shoulder. “This feels good.”

He felt her ankle against his shin. “Your skin is so cool,” he said.

“I told you -- I'm chilly. I'll warm up fast like this. Good night, Nykkyo.”

“Good night, Dyppa.” He switched off the light and tried to will himself to sleep.

“Mmm...” she said.

“Mmm what?”

“Your hand on my arm -- it's warm ... it feels good.”

He lifted his hand. “I'm sorry -- I didn't want you to think I was trying to start something.”

“I know. You didn't have to stop. It's just ... I could feel your sincerity. Lom used to touch me like that. I think that's why I fell in love with him -- I could feel sincerity in his touch. And -- sadness.” She put her hand to her mouth. “I'm sorry, Nyk. I shouldn't be talking about another man.”

“Talk about him all you like,” Nyk replied. “It's not like we're sleeping together. I mean, yes -- technically, we're in the same bed but we're not -- you, know...”

“I know what you mean. I like your other hand on my back, too. It feels good. Okay, I'll be quiet so we can sleep. Good night...”

“Good night, Dyppa.” Nyk closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. He released it slowly and attempted to relax.

“Nyk?”

“What, Dyppa?”

“I feel some of the same sadness in your touch... Are you unhappy?”

“I'm unhappy that I must spend so much time away from the woman I love.”

“But -- you love an Earth woman. You told me about her.”

“She's living on Floran, now.”

Why is she there?”

“It's a long story...” He looked upward. “Here's the short version... I told you Suki is an ancestor to Koichi Kyhana.”

“I remember. I remember we talked about the risk of upsetting future events. I appreciate it more, now that I've had Agency training. After all, without Koichi, there'd be no Floran. It's temporal interference like they taught me.”

“Exactly. About a year ago, Koichi's genealogy surfaced on Floran. It listed all his ancestors, including Suki -- the dates of their births, their spouses, their children ... the dates of their deaths.”

Dyppa's eyes widened. “Nyk... Do you mean you know when Suki will die?”

“No. I know when she died -- on September Eleven, in the Trade Center attack. Her father, too... He had an office there and she went to deliver some papers to him. That's how Earth history reads, at least. I learned about it from Floran records. But -- I couldn't stand by and watch her die. So, instead...”

“...you snatched her and took her to Floran.” She smiled. “What a perfect solution to a terrible dilemma.”

“I dared not attempt changing history. According to this world's record -- she is a member of the dearly departed. But -- she didn't need die to leave. And, now... I'm living in her house and raising her son ... when I'm not traveling on some plum assignment for Seymor, that is.”

Dyppa kissed Nyk's cheek.

“What was that for?”

“For what you did for Suki ... and for what you've done for me. I think you're sweet. I'm a sucker for any man who treats me halfway decently.”

“Any man?”

“Not many do. Once they discover I'm an ex-prostitute -- they think all I want is one thing. It's not true.”

“They don't have to know.”

“They knew at Agency training, and they certainly knew at the reeducation center. They don't understand. It was only a job to me. I'm still a human being with wants and needs. I want to ... I need to feel closeness, tenderness -- a connection ... like I feel from you. Nyk -- It's been such a long time.”

“Since you've made love?”

“That, too. No -- since anyone has treated me with the sort of acceptance you show me. Do you

really not care about my past?"

"Dyppa -- I believe a person should be judged by who she IS, not by who or what she WAS. The fact you were a ... a..."

"A prostitute -- you can say, it Nyk. I know I was a prostitute. Go ahead -- say it ... pros-ti-tute..."

"...one of those ... has almost no bearing on my opinion of you."

"Almost?"

"My admiration for where you are is even greater because I know from where you came." She smiled. "What happened in the past are the events that formed you. Without them -- you'd be a different you."

"You are so sweet." She kissed his cheek and snuggled against him. "I'm happy you're my boss, Nykkyo. I know Seymor won't sponsor someone like me, but if he would -- I don't think I'd want him as my boss. He frightens me."

"Seymor's all right -- he's a good guy. I've worked with him for nearly three years now. I've learned he's like a confection that's gone stale -- hard and crusty on the outside but sweet and a little tender inside."

Dyppa giggled.

"I can't imagine him with a woman," Nyk continued.

"I think I can," she replied. "After all, even crusty men need love, too."

"I suppose. I wonder what sort of woman is Seymor's type."

She kissed his cheek again. "Thanks for the conversation, Nyk. I'll let you sleep now. Good night."

"Good night, Dyppa." Nyk rolled to face her. He gazed into her eyes, illuminated by a shaft of light from a streetlamp shining through a gap in the curtains. He closed his eyes, pursed his lips and drew in a deep breath.

"Nyk -- is something wrong?"

"I'm becoming angry."

"With me? For keeping you awake? I'm sorry..."

"No, Dyppa -- not with you. I was thinking of what I was doing when I was the age you were..." He shook his head. "I hadn't a care. I was safe, dumb and happy in my womb of a family. I hung out with my friends, watched holofilms... sneaked a hit on euphorants now and then... When I think of how you were misused at that age.... Dyppa -- no one should have to lose her innocence the way you did. You were robbed of your childhood. That was the crime -- to abuse an underage little girl..."

"Nyk..." She caressed his cheeks with both hands. "It's done ... it's over and I came through it. Maybe I have a better appreciation for what I have now because of it. Those were the events that

formed me -- you said so, yourself.”

He sighed and nodded. “It makes me angry, anyway.” He stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers. “When I look into your eyes -- it fills me with a ... a deep sorrow ... and, anger for what they did to you.”

“You're the sweetest man...” She kissed his lips and drew back. They lay, faces inches apart and gazed into each other's eyes. Nyk could feel her breath on his cheeks.

“You have the bluest eyes,” he said. “Even in this light, they look so blue.” He leaned toward her, kissed her eyelids and she giggled. Dyppa slipped her hand behind his head and drew his face to hers. They kissed. “No, Dyppa...”

“Do you know how irresistible you are when you say no?” She brought her lips to his. They kissed again and he felt her tongue against his. “Do you know how hard it was for me last time?” She held his head and peppered his face with kisses. “While I was sleeping beside you I made love with you in my dreams.”

He kissed her chin and neck and she kissed his shoulders. “I hope they weren't scary dreams,” he replied. She held his hand against her breast and Nyk could feel her heart.

“Oh, no ... they were sweet dreams...” She coaxed him onto his back and knelt, straddling his hips. “Have you thought about me?”

“Of course I did.” He caressed her thighs through the nightshirt. “This fabric is so smooth.”

“Like I said -- Earth clothes are fun.” She smoothed her hands down his chest and abdomen, then up and down his arms.

“This is a first for me,” he said.

“First for what?”

“Suki used to ask me what I wanted her to wear to bed. I told her Florans sleep nude and make love nude. Feeling you through this fabric ... now I wish I had... I'm sorry -- I'm talking about her and...”

“It's all right, Nyk. I understand.” She led his hand in circles across her chest.

“You feel ... so ... smooth...”

“It feels good to me, too. Maybe it's time to...” She sat up, grasped her hem and began to lift it.

“Dyppa -- don't,” he said.

“That's right. You said I needed to wear a shirt.” She lay back onto the bed.

Nyk knelt beside her and smoothed both of his hands along her body, savoring through the satin the softness of her breasts, the firmness of her muscles and the shapes of her ribs.

Dyppa's eyelids drooped. Her lips parted and her breathing grew heavy. She unbuttoned her nightshirt to her navel. Nyk pulled it open and slipped it off her shoulders. She guided his face as he

kissed her collarbone and down between her breasts. Then, she embraced him, caressed his hair and held his face against her chest as he kissed her. The taste of her skin filled his mouth and her scent his nostrils. He lay his face against her breast. She caressed his cheek and kissed the top of his head.

She led his hand onto her knee and up her thigh. He slipped his arm around her waist and held her. "Oh..." she said, "...oh, Nyk... you're like Lom -- you're one of those..."

"One of what?"

"You know how to touch for me. So did Lom. Most men touch for themselves, but you're touching me for me..." She tightened her grip on him. "Oh, Nyk..." she panted. "Do you ... have any idea ... how good what you're doing ... feels?"

He gazed into her eyes. "As man, I am doomed to jealous ignorance of what you feel ... of what pleasures your gender can experience. I'd give anything to know... Describe it to me."

"I can't..." Her nails began to dig into his skin. "I'll try ... when you hold me like this... and touch me like you are ... I feel it ... in my heart..." She placed her hand behind his neck, drew his face to hers and kissed him. "I'm ready for you, Nyk."

He lay on his back. She slid his briefs from him, then lifted her hem and lay atop him. He held her across the small of her back and ran his hand down to her buttocks; then up again and under her hem to caress her skin as he pressed his hips against hers. She slipped her arms around his shoulders. He felt pounding in his breast. If it was his heart or hers, he didn't know.

Dyppa cradled his head and kissed him. He felt the muscles in her abdomen heave with her breathing. "Oh, Nyk... it's been so long ... so long since..." He held her tighter. She rocked and rotated her pelvis, then lifted her face. "Ohh..." she moaned and panted.

"Ahhhh!" he gasped to regain his breath.

She squeezed him and nuzzled his neck. "Mmm," she sighed.

"Oh, Dyppa -- I am so sorry."

"Sorry? I hope you don't mean it. Nyk, I wanted this. I think you wanted it, too."

"It was wrong for us. We shouldn't have."

"Do you really feel that way?"

"Yes..."

"Then, Nyk -- I apologize ... I'm sorry for starting it..."

"No, you didn't start it. I did -- I lost control."

"No, you didn't. I started it, and I shouldn't have."

"Dyppa, I distinctly remember starting it."

“Nyk ... we both started it. We both wanted it and we both started it.”

“Why don't we agree that neither of us started it -- it started by itself.”

“All right,” she replied. “It started by itself.”

“I promise it won't happen again.”

“No, Nyk. Please don't promise that.” She rolled off him and lay beside him with her face on his shoulder. He put his arm around the small of her back. “I won't have trouble falling asleep now.”

“Maybe I will. Oh, Dyppa... I didn't want...”

“I did. Nyk -- I been wanting this since that night we were together.”

“To be honest,” he replied, “so have I. But I didn't want to complicate matters... This is the first time I've ever done something like this.”

“It can't be the first time for you, Nyk.”

“It's the first time I've ... I've violated my own rules ... given in to urges ... lost control...”

“Nyk -- stop criticizing yourself. I feel good about it.”

“But, Dyppa -- when we were on the relay station ... you said you wanted it to mean something.”

“It did, Nyk. We just made beautiful, life-affirming sex.” She squeezed him and kissed his cheek. “It was a gift. It's been so long since I've savored such delicious intimacy.”

“Doesn't it change how you feel about me?” he asked. “Before -- you said you didn't love me.”

“Hmmm... In a way -- a barrier is down.” She ran her hand along his arm. “No -- I remember how I felt with Lom. I don't feel like that with you ... not yet at least. I could ... but I need more time.”

“That's the problem,” he replied. “I don't love you yet, either. We got it backwards. It's supposed to be love first -- THEN sex.”

She nuzzled his neck. “You really ARE the sweetest man I've ever known. Look at it this way... Ever since we met, I've been wondering what it would be like with you. Now I know. We can go forward without curiosity hanging over us.” She snuggled against him. “*Bon'noka*, Nykkyo.” She closed her eyes. He could feel the muscles in her arms and legs relax, and her breathing slowed and deepened.

“Dyppa...” He ran his hand along her shoulder blade. “Oh, Dyppa...”

A ray of sunlight fell across Nyk's eyes. Dyppa lay beside him, her back to him. He stepped into the bathroom, showered and dressed. As he stuffed yesterday's clothing into his case he noticed her eyes were open. "*Bon'matina*," he said.

"*Bon'matina*. I didn't hear you get up."

"You were sleeping rather soundly."

"Mmm... It was luscious sleep." She closed her eyes and lifted her face. "Mmm..."

"No bad dreams?"

"No -- nothing but sweet dreams."

Nyk lay on the bed beside her. "Dyppa -- about last night..."

She pressed her finger to his lips. "Don't mention last night."

"But, Dyppa..."

"No. It was what it was."

"I'd feel better about it if we agreed you and I are now *amften* ."

She looked at him, then put her hand to her mouth. "*Amften*? Wee, sweet friends? That's what the word means, isn't it?" She laughed. "It's what children call each other."

"Dyppa -- *amften* is a tradition on Floran ... a cherished one."

"It's not one on Altia."

"It's when..."

"I know what it is -- two friends share the gift and then consider themselves bonded. On Floran you enjoy the luxury of playing silly games. On Altia we have more important concerns -- like surviving from day to day."

"Please, Dyppa. If we made love for *amften* , then it wasn't just..."

"All right, Nyk..." She took his hand. "...you and I are now *amften* . Feel better?"

"Yes..."

"Is there anything else to this tradition? Are there any sweet little verses we must recite to each other?"

“No.”

“Good.”

He smiled. “I suppose there's no sense making the tradition any more lame than it already is.”

She smiled and nodded. “Now -- you and I have a job to do, and I need to take a shower.”

She pulled back the covers and headed into the bathroom. “I'll go check out,” he called to her. “Then, when you're done -- we can have some breakfast and head over to Marxo's lab.”

“Okay,” she called back. He heard the water running.

Nyk stepped to the front desk. “Checking out,” he said.

The clerk looked over the bill. “Any phone calls?”

“No.”

“Was everything satisfactory?”

“The sofa bed in that room is broken,” Nyk replied. “You might want to make a note of it.”

“I'm sorry -- I hope it wasn't an inconvenience.”

“Well... it was a minor one.”

Nyk parked the car in the lot of an industrial center. He approached a door labeled FloranCo, withdrew a key and opened it. Dyppa stepped in behind him and he surveyed the room. “Look -- sprouting beds dried out. Nothing salvageable.”

“Nyk -- why have a lab here? This is on the edge of a desert.”

“The plant breeders thought we might need euphorbias.”

“Euphorbias?”

“Yes -- latex-bearing spurge. Many desert plants are members of the euphorbia family.”

She nodded. “I recall, now. Euphorbias are important to our organic chemical industry.”

“Yes -- did you know an important ingredient in healing salve comes from a euphorbia?” Nyk began opening drawers. “If you see anything from the homeworld -- set it aside. We'll pack it into cartons and ship it.”

“Ship it where?”

“To your lab in Wisconsin.”

“Here's a drawer full of stasis capsules,” she said.

“Stuff like that. I'll see if I can find a carton.” He looked around the lab. “Here -- put them in here. We'll have to find a post office or United Parcel around here. At one time I'd have put all this into a suitcase and checked it onto the airplane, but since the Trade Center, I don't dare...”

“What do we do with this?” She pointed to a laptop computer.

“That we can take on the aircraft.”

She picked up another object. “What's this?”

Nyk took it from her and turned it over in his hand. “It looks like an Earth handheld computer.”

“It's like a handheld vidisplay.”

“Yes -- without the communications ... and storage ... and computational power.” He slipped it into his pocket. Dyppa powered up the laptop. “What are you doing that for?”

She shrugged. “Maybe there are some orders from the plant breeders we should know about.”

“Good idea.” Nyk began rummaging through drawers. “A pair of stasis canisters. Those have to go.” He opened the lids. “No cultures inside.” He opened the door to an incubator. “Oh, gross!”

“What?”

“Hold your nose -- cultures rotted and moldy.”

“Yuck!” She pinched her nose. “That smell is enough to make me gag.”

“I'll dump them outside.” He carried the incubator tray at arms length and emptied the contents into the shrubbery lining the building.

Nyk stepped back into the lab. Dyppa was manipulating the laptop computer. “Find anything?”

“His email has been wiped clean,” she replied. “I don't see any other files or documents.”

“Switch it off and pack it up. I'm going to look for some tape to seal these cartons and we can look for a place to mail them. Then we'll have enough time to drive to the airport, turn in the car and make our flights.”

Nyk held the case with the laptop as he stood on line waiting to pass through the airport security checkpoint. Dyppa shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “It's nice Jaquie made return reservations on the same flight,” she said.

“Yes -- we ride together to Milwaukee and I change planes to New York.”

He reached the head of the queue and placed the laptop on the belt. “Here goes the drill,” he said and stepped through the metal detector. It buzzed.

“Step over here,” the screener said and began passing a hand wand over his body.

“It's the pin in my wrist,” he said. “It always sets it off.”

The agent passed the wand over his wrist. “Sure enough.” Nyk began to pick up his laptop. “Hold it, pal -- we're not done.” He motioned Nyk back to the screening area and passed the wand under his arms and down his torso. It beeped as it passed over his hips. “What's in your pocket?”

He reached in and withdrew the handheld computer. “Put it on the belt,” the screener said and again scanned him with the wand. “Okay -- NOW you're done.”

Nyk picked up the handheld and poked it into his pocket. Dyppa picked up her purse. “I got patted down both coming and going,” she said. “Does your wristchip do that, too?”

“Yes -- I tell them I broke it and have a pin in it.”

“I'll remember that.”

Nyk found the gate and found a seat. Dyppa sat beside him. He took the handheld out of his pocket and switched it on. “Do you know how to use that?” Dyppa asked.

“I've never seen one close up. We're not issued these, so it must've been something Marxo bought himself.” He looked at the tiny icons. “Address... clock... date book... to do list... games... mail. These things are so primitive.” He poked the screen with his finger. “Touch screen -- that's like a vidisplay ... but, you'd need such tiny fingers to use it.”

“What's that?” Dyppa pointed to the top of the device. “An antenna?”

Nyk pulled on it and the stylus came out in his hand. “I get it -- you poke the screen with this thing...” He began poking icons.

“Can I try?” Nyk handed it to her. “Why do you suppose Marxo would bother with one of these?”

“I dunno,” Nyk replied. “I suppose it's nice to have something so portable.”

“Look -- I tapped mail and there are messages in the inbox.”

“His laptop email was wiped clean...” Nyk took the gadget and looked at it. He heard the boarding call, switched it off and slipped it into his pocket. “We'll look at it some more after we're airborne.”

“Good idea,” she replied. “It might keep my mind off flying.”

“How are you doing?” he asked.

“All right,” Dyppa replied. “It's been a smooth flight so far. Let's look at that handheld.”

Nyk pulled it from his pocket and opened the inbox. “Most of these look like they're forwarded from the Floran tachnet... I don't recognize any of these locator codes.”

She pointed. “That one has an Altian prefix.”

“This one?” He tapped the message.

“Yes.”

“Why would Marxo be receiving telemessages from Altia?” He scrolled through the text. “Nine to one. 112 on 1 15. 115 on 1 18.’ What does that mean?”

Dyppa squinted at it. “Nyk -- it's an Altian street code.”

“Street addresses?”

“No -- it's the nines code. It's one used by criminals to code messages.”

“I don't see a single nine.”

“At the top -- nine to one. Read it as 992 on 9 95. 995 on 9 98.”

“And, what does THAT mean?”

“Well -- a 992 is a pick-up and a 995 is a delivery.” She smiled. “You absorb this sort of thing when you're turning tricks. The 980s refer to prostitution. A 980 is a whore, a 989 is her customer... 981 is a male prostitute, and so on.”

“What does 998 mean?”

“I don't know that one.”

“So this reads “Pickup on delivery. Delivery on ... who knows what. Why use this sort of code? Why not use comm ciphers?”

“They do -- but they also code the message. Comm ciphers have back doors -- the security forces can decipher them.”

“This way the message is still secure ... reasonably secure ... or, at least, plausibly deniable...” He squinted again. “Are the nine codes all three-digit?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“Delivery on nine ... nine five. That's not a 3-digit number -- it's a single digit and a two-digit number... Suppose we're to substitute nines only in the three-digit numbers. That makes it read 'Pickup on 1 15. Delivery on 1 18.’”

“January fifteen and January eighteen?” she asked.

“Marxo died on January nineteen. Four days before he got sick, he picked something up; and three days later he delivered it.”

“He received instructions from Altia,” Dyppa observed, “from someone who knows the nines code. Was Marxo an Altian?”

“Oh -- no, I don't think so. I think he was a Floran. You're the first Altian Agent -- to my knowledge,

that is.”

Dyppa tapped the screen. “No other Altian prefixes...”

“The others look like requests from homeworld plant breeders.”

A chime sounded in the aircraft and the flight attendant announced the approach to Milwaukee. Nyk switched off the handheld and slipped it into his pocket. Dyppa grabbed his hand and held it, squeezing it as she felt the thumps and grinds of deploying flaps and landing gear. She clamped her eyes shut and bit her lip as the airliner touched down, bounced once and lost speed.

“We're here,” Nyk said.

Dyppa opened her eyes and color began returning to her cheeks. “I really hate flying. I don't know which is worse -- air travel or space travel. I'm happy this is my final destination. YOU have to continue to New York.”

“Good morning, Jaquie,” Nyk said as he stepped into the office.

“How was your trip, Mr Kane?”

“Jaquie, when you made the hotel reservations -- did you remember to confirm both rooms?”

“Why, yes. Was there a problem?”

“They seemed to have lost one of the confirmations. Dy... Karen and I had to share the room.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry. I hope it wasn't an inconvenience.”

“We managed...”

Jaquie opened a desk drawer and withdrew a spiral notebook. She flipped through it and held it up. “Here are the confirmation numbers.”

“Okay -- so it was their screw-up.” He looked into Jaquie's face. “Oh, Jaquie -- I didn't think you made a mistake. I just had a silly notion that...”

“That what?”

“That cancelling one of the rooms so Karen and I would have to bunk together might be the sort of practical joke someone in this office would find amusing.”

She held her hand to her lips and shook her head. “Oh, no, Mr Kane...”

“Not you...” He nodded toward Seymour's office.

“I've never known Mr Seymour to engage in practical jokes.”

“He pulled one on me once -- a doozy. It took me a year to realize what he had done.”

“What sort of a joke?”

He gazed at her. “I'd rather not go into it, but it's why I asked.”

“I understand, Mr Kane. Once burned, double shy.”

Seymor poked his head into Nyk's office. “I've been going over Marxo's draw account,” Nyk said. “There is some odd stuff going on with him.” He put the handheld onto the desk.

Seymor picked it up. “A Palm Pilot?”

“Marxo's.”

“We don't issue these to our Agents.”

“He must've bought it on his own. Look at his inbox.”

“How do you work one of these?” Seymor asked.

Nyk removed the stylus, poked the screen and handed it to his boss. “This message. It's from an Altian locator code.”

“The message reads 112 on 1 15, 115 on 1 18. What the hell is that?”

“Dyppa thinks it's a code used by criminals in Altropolis. She thinks it means, Pickup on January fifteenth, delivery on the eighteenth. Marxo got sick and died on the nineteenth.”

“Ah, so young Dyppa is familiar with Altian crime codes -- another red flag.” He handed Nyk an envelope. “Red flags are flapping all around her.”

“What's this? Not another out-of-town assignment...” Nyk peered inside. “Milwaukee? Is something wrong with her? She hasn't fallen off the wagon, has she?”

“See?” Seymor replied. “You don't trust her, either -- you're concerned about her addiction, too. No, Nyk -- last night officials on Altia detained a young man who was found loitering around an address known to have once been a safe house for The Seven.”

“So? Why don't they just pump him full of truth drug and interrogate him?”

“There's a complication. This young man is an ore-worker.”

“Again, so?”

“Altian ore workers are given medical implants to counteract the toxic fumes and solvents they're exposed to.”

“Once again, so?”

“That implant will interact with truth drug with fatal results.”

Nyk nodded. "I saw one of those in action on Lexal."

"No interrogator will touch a man known to be an Altian ore-worker. It's why they're favored as foot soldiers for The Seven."

"They're interrogation-proof. How does Dyppa fit into this?"

"The man's name is Manrei ... Manrei Lom."

"Lom!" He closed his eyes and winced.

"I'll fill you in with the rest..."

"Seymor -- I know the rest already. The authorities are looking for anyone with a connection to Lom. They sent out an all-points bulletin, and you're on their mailing list. You told them of Dyppa. I should've kept my big mouth shut."

"I have an obligation -- and so do you. I'm a Floran first. The Seven are a threat to the entire hegemony."

"You've no need to apologize. I'd have done the same ... maybe. I imagine they wish to interrogate her."

"You got it, lad. You ARE a natural at this."

"And, you want me to make sure she gets on the packet here and gets off on Altia. It's going to be a tough sell. She told me she has no desire to return there -- ever."

"They've issued a warrant for her. She has no choice."

"A warrant?"

"Nyk -- if that girl has anything to do with The Seven -- they'll have a warrant out for YOU."

"She doesn't, Seymor."

"Are you sure? What about her familiarity with those codes? You're her sponsor. I think you should go with her. If she should go up and then disappear -- it'll fall hard on you."

"You don't really believe that's likely -- do you?"

"Nyk -- we've discussed this before. You're the finest Agent to come through here during my tenure, but you have this unfortunate tendency to let emotion cloud your reason. Young Dyppa is an Altian pschycyco-addict with a record -- three strikes in my book."

"She's a good kid who strayed and is now on the right path. If someone doesn't give her a chance, how will she ever prove herself? We've gone over this, Seymor. I trust my gut."

"This office isn't a church or a charity, Nyk."

Nyk looked at the itinerary. "All right, I'll go with her." He sighed. "I've been getting all the plum

assignments lately. I had no idea being an Assistant Agent-in-Chief was this rough. What's your job like?"

Seymor's eyes twinkled. "Well, lad -- if you do it right... You can delegate most of the rough stuff to your Assistant Agent-in-Chief."

Nyk proffered a faint smile. "Let me make a phone call..."

The taxi dropped Nyk off in front of the college union. He looked at his watch -- it was one in the afternoon. He dug his wallet out of his pocket, removed the staff card he had used during his first tour and flashed it for the guard at the door.

He stepped to the coffee bar and ordered a mocha latte from the barista. This he carried to a table, sat and sipped it.

Memories of the place filled his mind. He was sitting at the table at which he had met Suki. He had been onworld only a few days and had decided to take lunch here in the union. He had just scooped a spoonful of chili when a woman's voice said...

"Excuse me. May I join you? I think this is the only empty seat."

Nyk was jolted from his reverie. He looked up and saw a short, slightly overweight young woman with a tray. "Please do," he replied.

"Did I startle you?"

"No -- your voice sounded like ... someone I know."

She extended her hand. "I'm Crystal."

He took her hand. "Nick -- Nick Kane. Pleased to meet you." He made eye contact and stifled his shock. Her irises were bright orange-yellow and the pupils were vertical slits.

She pointed to her eye. "Contact lenses. I belong to a role-playing club here on campus. We're meeting after my class. I'm going in my persona as Lilea -- an alien woman from the planet of Anthea ... you know, from *The Man Who Fell to Earth* ?"

Nyk shrugged.

She picked up her sandwich. "I'm fascinated with the notion of life on other planets," she continued. "Do you think there's intelligent life in the universe?"

"If you consider humans intelligent," he replied, "yes."

She smiled. "No -- on other worlds. I think it's not only possible but likely. Maybe beings from other planets are here, right now -- walking among us."

He sipped his latte. "I suppose anything's possible."

"I wonder if their intent is benign, or if they mean us harm."

“Benign, I would hope,” Nyk replied.

Crystal wolfed down her lettuce and sprouts sandwich. “Well -- I'm late for class. It was nice meeting you, Nick.”

“*Mi zidiri mu plaka es't,*” he replied. “*Zi dev dulxe takta hav.*”

“What did you say?”

“I said, it was my pleasure speaking with you. Have a nice day.”

“What language was that?”

He whispered. “It was *Lingwafloran*, the language of Planet Floran ... two hundred lightyears distant in the direction of the great star Deneb.”

Crystal's jaw dropped. “COOL! You should join our club!”

Nykkyo walked from the union to the house and unlocked the front door. It was now mid- afternoon and he figured Dyppa was at the lab. He sat in a chair, locked his fingers behind his head and waited.

Dusk was falling when the door opened. Dyppa walked in carrying a paper grocery sack. She headed to the kitchen and set it on the counter.

“Dyppa,” he said.

“WHAA!” She spun around. “Oh, it's you.” She put her hand on her breast. “You SCARED me.”

“I'm sorry. Dyppa, tonight we need to make a transit.”

“To where?”

“To Altia.”

“NO! I am NOT going back there!”

“Dyppa, you don't have a choice. They've issued an interrogation warrant for you.”

“Interrogation?” Tears were beginning to form in her eyes. “Why interrogate ME? I haven't done anything! I've paid my debt to that society.”

“Dyppa -- trust me...”

“TRUST you? You came here to send me up and back to that ... that ... that hell of a planet!”

“No, Dyppa. I feel as badly about this as you do.”

“There's no way you could feel as badly about Altia as I do.”

“Dyppa, calm down. I'll go with you. We'll go to Altia and meet with a security officer. You'll be

interrogated; you'll spend half a day recovering from the drug and then we come back to Earth. It's that simple."

"SIMPLE? Interrogated about what?"

"About The Seven."

"I know absolutely nothing about The Seven."

"Then -- you have nothing to fear, do you?"

"I've never been interrogated before..."

"I have. It's no fun, but it's no big deal, either. You won't remember anything. Any discomfort from the drug wears off quickly."

"Why would they think I know anything about The Seven?"

"I'm afraid that's my fault. It seems a man named Manrei Lom has been detained under suspicion of association with The Seven. I told Seymor about your friend Lom. "

Her eyes grew wide and she held her hand over her mouth. "You didn't!"

"No -- I didn't tell him any details of your relationship. I was intrigued by the name -- that's all. I told him you fell in love with a man named Lom, and that set into motion the events that brought you here. That's ALL I told Seymor."

"You're sure."

He made an X on his chest. "Cross my heart."

"Still..."

"I know, I know. You told me that in confidence and I violated it. I'm terribly sorry, and I'll never do anything like that again. I should've kept my yap shut."

She sighed. "So many there will want to harm me. Their motto is, never forget ... and, rarely forgive."

"You won't be out of sight of me or Altian security. No one will be able to harm you. No one knows you're coming. Dyppa -- as I said -- you don't have a choice. Well -- you do. Your choice is to go voluntarily or to be dragged there."

"I'd almost rather be dragged there -- I'd have security officers around me. Then, when the interrogation comes back negative..."

"Volunteering always helps your cause."

"I suppose..." She looked down. "I don't even know if this Manrei Lom is MY Lom. I don't even know if it was his real name."

"The investigators are desperate to follow any lead. The Seven has made another threat."

She nodded. "And, afterward -- I come back here?"

"Assuming your interrogation proves your innocence -- and I have every confidence it will -- yes, you come back here."

"Promise?" He made another X. "All right -- I volunteer."

"Why don't we go someplace nice for dinner?"

Nyk sat across from her and scanned a menu. He looked up. Dyppa sat with her arms folded, her menu closed on the table. "Buck up. There's really nothing to worry about."

"Why don't you believe me?"

"I DO believe you."

"Why don't THEY believe me?"

"They don't even know you."

"Why can't you vouch for me?"

"If it were that simple -- I would in an instant."

She picked up the menu and set it down again. "I'm not hungry."

"Please, Dyppa -- let's have a nice meal before this ordeal."

"You said it! ORDEAL! That's what it is."

"I was speaking figuratively." He picked up the menu and handed it to her. "Suki introduced me to this place. They make a nice manicotti here."

"Whatever."

The waitress approached. "Two manicotti."

"Anything to drink?"

"Water for me." He looked at Dyppa.

"Just water," she replied.

The waitress picked up the menus and left.

"Now, Dyppa -- tell me what you DO know about The Seven."

"I really know nothing."

"I can't believe anyone could grow up on that planet and not know something."

"Believe it."

"What about the independence movement?"

"What about it?" she asked.

"Tell me about it."

"Well... We Altians feel we're being unfairly used."

"Used how?"

"What do you know of my world?"

"I know it's where most of Floran's mineral wealth comes from."

She nodded. "And, do you know where that wealth goes?" He shook his head. "It certainly doesn't stay on Altia. We're tired of being oppressed."

"Oppressed? Isn't that too strong a word?"

"Coming from an oppressor's lips, I suppose it is."

"Dyppa -- do YOU favor the independence movement?"

"There isn't a single Altian who doesn't support it to some degree."

"What is your degree?"

"I really don't know. My degree changes from day to day." She shook her head. "No one who hasn't lived there could understand."

"Try me. I'm an understanding sort of guy."

"You know Altia is completely dependant on Floran for our food supply. We have no means to feed ourselves."

"Other colonies are in the same situation."

"Maybe so. But -- Floran is NOT completely dependent on Altia for minerals. Floran can turn to T-Delta or another colony. So -- if Altians start demanding a few more credits per tonne of pig aluminum or cobalt ... the next thing we know -- there's no trade. If there's no trade -- there's no food. YOU define the terms of OUR standard of living."

"Not ME, Dyppa." He pondered. "I think what you're describing sounds terribly unfair."

"You're a Floran. You're a member of the society that imposes our lifestyle on us." She looked down at the table. "So -- now are you going to leave me on Altia? Send me up because of my beliefs? My politics?" Her eyes brimmed. "I'll bet now you really DO regret that night in Scottsdale!"

“Absolutely not. I think everyone is entitled to their own beliefs. I might not agree with you, but I support unconditionally your right to believe what you wish.” He reached across the table and touched the back of her hand. She snatched it away. He turned his hand palm-up and looked into her eyes. “I won't argue politics with you. Your beliefs do NOT change my opinion of you -- or, my admiration.”

“Really?”

“Really.” She pressed her palm against his. “And, I DON'T regret Scottsdale.”

“Do you mean that?”

“I do.”

“I'm sorry, Nyk. This whole interrogation thing has me upset.”

He squeezed her hand. “Me, too. I don't blame you a bit.” He sipped some water. “What do you think independence will bring Altia?”

“The ability to set our own terms.”

“But Dyppa -- those terms are set by economics. Your political independence has nothing to do with it. I think you'll lose more than you'll gain by leaving the hegemony.”

“I don't know about that. I do know this -- no matter how strongly I want independence, The Seven is going about it the wrong way. The right way is to work with the new Altian Senate -- to express the will of the people and to create a voice that can be heard in the High Legislature.”

“I'm with you on that,” Nyk replied.

“It was also wrong for the High Legislature to dissolve our senate and to put our world under Floran direct rule.”

“That was done as an interim step after the Ricin plot,” Nyk explained. “Remember -- Floran isn't the same as the HL.”

“It was during direct rule the seeds of the independence movement were sown.”

“Dyppa -- I won't dispute that the situation on Altia was poorly managed. I think the most productive solution is for all of us to let bygones be bygones and work together to improve things. Agreed?”

She smiled. “Agreed.”

The waitress set two plates of manicotti before them. Nyk cut a piece with the edge of his fork. “Have you been offworld?” he asked. “Aside from Earth and Floran City, that is.”

She shook her head. “No. How about you?”

“I spent some time on Lexal.”

Her eyes narrowed. “That is one colony I cannot tolerate.”

“Why not?” he asked. “You've never been there.”

“All Altians swear an oath against them.”

“Dyppa -- during my stay on Lexal, I didn't hear a single Lexalese swear an oath against Altia. What reason do you have to dislike them? Have the Lexalese ever fired upon your capital?”

“No...”

“Have they ever attempted to murder your leaders?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Have they supplied arms and men to insurgents wanting to overthrow your government?”

“I don't think so.”

“Dyppa -- Altia did all of those against Lexal.”

“Those were defensive, pre-emptive actions,” she replied. “We did so to protect our own interests.”

“Lexal is a tiny colony with less than 150 million inhabitants. It doesn't make sense for them to invade Altia. At least, it doesn't make sense to me.”

“We wanted to send a message. We wanted to show our enemies Altia is a force not to be trifled with.”

“Don't you think attacking a colony less than a tenth Altia's size might've sent a different sort of message?”

She looked up. “I thought you weren't going to argue with me.”

“Dyppa, were you in favor of Altia's Lexalese adventure?”

She gazed at him, her eyes narrowing. “No one asked me for MY permission, Nykkyo. Altian citizens didn't know about it until it was well underway.” She sipped some water. “It looked to me like a lose-lose proposition. In the best case, we'd have an offworld territory to administer. It would've stretched our security forces even thinner.”

“Altia intended to annex Lexal?” Nyk asked. “What would be gained by that?”

“Arable land.”

“You would've used Lexal as your breadbasket. That hardly sounds defensive or pre-emptive.”

“It was one way to break the monopoly the Food Service holds over us.”

“Don't you think the resources Altia expended building arms and deep- space shuttles would've been better applied toward food production? Dyppa -- if we can grow food on Floran, you can grow it on Altia.”

“I didn't say I agreed with it, did I? Anyway -- it failed, and it set us backward. Our deep-space fleet was grounded and now we're forced to pay reparations.”

“Don't you believe Lexal deserves compensation for what Altia did?”

“But -- Lexal has such wealth,” she protested.

“Ah yes... Now it comes out. Lexal was once an agricultural colony dependent on the rest of the Hegemony for minerals and manufactured goods. Food from the homeworld and Gamma-5 were cheaper than from Lexal, so there was no market. The planet was a collective of subsistence farmers. Mykko Wygann changed all that. He built Lexal into a strong, self-sufficient economy. Dyppa -- Altia needs to follow the Lexalese pattern -- not wallow in despair and envy.”

“It's easy for you to say. What about Mykko Wygann and his *ax'amfin* princess? Altia is criticized for being a government of thugs and Wygann gets away with crowning himself Chancellor-for-Life. He marries an *ax'amfin* witch who then assumes the trappings of royalty.”

“Wygann was asked to be Chancellor-for-Life by his own people -- the same ones who call Janna their princess. The Lexalese want it this way. It gives them a fairy tale to live out and enjoy.”

“There are no fairy tales on Altia.”

“Dyppa -- I don't think you get it.”

She looked up. “Oh -- I get it, all right.” She dropped her fork on her plate. “I'm done. Let's make transit and get this over with.”

8 -- Interrogated

“We made it to Altian space,” Nyk said to Dyppa.

“The shuttle trip to the surface is the worst part,” she replied. “I hope I don't throw up. Sometimes weightlessness does that to me.”

He looked out the viewport as the packet moved into a parking orbit around Altia. He could see the two suns -- the smaller one close by and the primary giant distant. He looked toward the surface. Below them, in a lower orbit, was a ring of metallic objects, glinting in the sunlight. He pointed. “Dyppa, what are those?”

“Mineral containers. They're loaded with metal pigs -- iron, copper, aluminum. They're thrown into

orbit by the mass drivers.”

“Mass drivers?”

“Giant maglev guns that can hurl a container past escape velocity.”

“You fill these containers with refined minerals and then fling them into space?”

“That's how it works.”

“And the freighters come by and load them?”

Dyppa nodded and pointed. “There's a freighter loading now.”

“I've never seen an interstellar freighter. That thing's huge!” He watched as pressure suited crewmen riding open cockpit tractors hooked onto boxcar sized containers and herded them into the hold. “The Freight Service is part of the ExoService, isn't it?”

“I believe so,” Dyppa replied. “During my stint as a pro skirt in Altropolis I'd say about a third of my customers were from freighter crews. They spend nearly all their time in space. When they make it to the surface on leave, they're ready for a good time.”

“Why's that? Certainly the freighters use warp jump technology.”

“I don't think they can safely subjump something that big, so they need to cruise sub-light to and from the heliopause.”

“What's one of those trips take -- ten days?”

“Longer for something that size.”

“Amazing.” He looked down to the surface of the planet. He could see mostly brown land, with a sea filling a basin between rugged snow-capped mountain ranges. Along the western coast he saw a range of active volcanoes, spewing glowing ash into the sky. He pointed again. “Is that Altropolis?”

“That's it.”

He regarded the domed city. “I thought Floran agridomes were big. They're tiny compared to that.”

“Five hundred million of us live there.”

“That's about the same as Floran City.”

“Nykkyo -- in Floran City... What do you do when you run out of room?”

“We push the edge of the city further out.”

“We can't do that in Altropolis. We can't enlarge the dome.”

“Why not make smaller, satellite domes?”

“It's too costly.”

“Why have the dome in the first place?”

“Our world's atmosphere is inhospitable.”

“Toxic?”

“Not exactly. You won't die in it, but you won't thrive, either. We can't enlarge the city. As the population grows, it becomes more crowded. We have sectors in which families live in homes the size of the guest room of that house on Earth.”

He continued to scan the planet. “No sign of vegetation at all. Altia must be a younger world even than Floran. What's that facility to the north of Altropolis -- the one with the silos?”

“It's the Altropolis air treatment plant,” she replied.

“I think I see a fusion power plant on the coast. What are those big silos? Any one of them must be the size of a Floran agridome.”

“That's the terraforming facility.”

“Is it still in operation?”

“Yes -- the hope is, one day, to improve the atmosphere enough so we won't need the domes.”

Nyk nodded. He pointed toward other, smaller domes further inland. “Are those smaller cities and towns?”

“Those are the smelting plants. Factory towns are built around them.”

“Where are the mining communities?”

“They're underground. The miners spend their whole lives in the depths, living in subterranean communities.”

“A man could go crazy in that environment,” he said. “I know I would. I hate being cooped up. I have to see the sky once in a while.”

“Altian miners don't. Mining communities are so tightly closed, the miners have developed their own physical characteristics. They have white hair, light skin and pale blue eyes.”

“You mean like an *ax'amfin* .”

“But, they're not tall like the *ax'amfinen* . The men are short, but powerfully built. The women are ... underdeveloped.”

“You mean here on Altia a sub-race of troglodyte Florans has evolved?”

“That's right,” she replied.

“I imagine they're one rung below the ore-workers on the social ladder.”

“Oh, no. Ore-workers are on the bottom because there are always more applicants for ore work than vacancies. The miners are highly regarded and are well cared for. They're content in their underground cities. I'd guess they make up about thirty percent of the Altian population. You rarely see miner men, except perhaps for delegates to the New Altian Senate. You do see the women from time to time. They're favored in Altropolis as prostitutes.”

“Why?”

“Because they look underage. There was a miner woman who worked out of the same hostel as I. She was ten standard years older -- not only was she past the age of consent, but the age of majority, too. She was legal, unlike me. She looked younger than I did. She also made more.”

“Are there many prostitutes in Altropolis?”

“It's a major industry there. It's the only one that draws in offworlders.”

“Sex is so free in Floran's society I'm surprised there's a demand at all.”

“You have to realize, Nyk -- an Altian whore's customers fall into two categories. Either they're so old or undesirable no one wants them, or they're perverts looking for something too far from the mainstream.”

“Something like a child?”

“For example.”

He looked at her and his upper lip curled. “Oh, Dyppa -- I feel so sorry for you.”

“It's all right, Nyk. It was only a job and it didn't kill me.”

A chime indicated the shuttle had docked with the packet. “It's time to head to the surface,” he said. He took Dyppa's hand and walked with her through the tunnel and onto the shuttle.

The shuttle landed outside the city's dome, rolled to a stop and docked with a boarding tunnel. “Are you okay?” Nyk asked her.

She nodded. “It wasn't as bad as I anticipated.”

“Maybe you're becoming accustomed to it.”

“Maybe.” He followed her through the docking tunnel. “This way,” Dyppa said and led Nyk into the Altropolis shuttleport. “The tubecar is over here.”

Nyk looked at his handheld vidisplay. “We're due at Security Force headquarters.” He ordered a car, specified the destination and climbed in. Dyppa sat beside him. “Car, go.”

The car slid into a tube leading above and across the city. He looked down. The street level appeared to be a single, seething mass of humanity. Elevated, mechanized walkways linked buildings. These, too,

were packed. "So many people," he exclaimed. He looked up through the tube to the roof of the dome. One Altian sun -- the distant, white giant -- blazed overhead while the smaller, yellow one around which the planet revolved was halfway to the zenith in the east. "This dome looks smaller from the inside."

"How would you say Altropolis compares, size-wise with Floran City?" Dyppa asked.

"Smaller."

"One tenth the land area," she replied.

"And, a comparable population. The population density here is..."

"Ten times that of Floran City."

"I thought Floran City was crowded." Nyk shook his head. "I'm beginning to appreciate the difficulties this colony faces."

"Most of our oppressors have never taken the trouble to visit and see our world with their own eyes."

"Dyppa -- can we agree that I, personally, am not oppressing, nor ever have oppressed you, personally?"

She looked at his face for a long moment. "...agreed."

"I understand what you're saying. The HL approach is out of sight, out of mind. It's enough to turn me into an activist."

Dyppa smiled and kissed his cheek.

The tubecar arrived at the platform for security headquarters. Nyk looked down and saw open skimmers loaded with officers carrying long arms. He gave Dyppa a hand. "I'm scared," she said.

"I've been through this. You'll be all right. Remember -- relax and let the drug take you. They'll need a lighter dose and you'll recover faster."

He led her to a reception area. He scanned his wrist on the scanpad by the door. The display lit up with number 535. Dyppa pointed to an overhead display reading 498. "Thirty seven ahead of us," she said. "It's a light day."

"You have to take a number to see a policeman here?"

"You have to take a number to do anything here," she replied.

He watched the overhead display as the numbers ticked up. In the lobby the crowd was growing thicker, it's hub-bub getting louder. The overhead display advanced to 535. He gestured her toward an officer sitting behind a transparent screen. "Dyppa Hawryt here for interrogation," he said.

"Is that you?"

"It's she," he said gesturing.

“Wristscans please.”

Nyk scanned his wrist and Dyppa followed. The officer scowled as he regarded the display. “Someone will be with you shortly. You can wait over there.”

Nyk headed toward another waiting area and looked around. The place made his flesh crawl. An officer in a helmet and carrying a stun wand approached. “Dyppa Hawryt?” She nodded. “This way.”

Nyk started to follow but the officer blocked his way with his wand. “You can see her after the procedure.” He pointed with the wand. “The waiting area is over there.”

He sat in a hard chair, locked his fingers behind his head and leaned back. The chair seat and back were made of aluminum. In short order his buttocks ached. He tried twisting and turning -- there was no way he could be comfortable. Instead, he stood and paced laps around the waiting area.

An officer approached him. “Are you Dyppa Hawryt's escort?” He nodded. “I'm Captain Sirk. We're done with her interrogation.”

“Did you learn anything?”

The officer shook his head. “It was worth the try.” He handed Nyk a polycard. “Here's my locator code -- in case you need to be in touch.”

“Does she know Manrei Lom?”

The captain nodded. “Knew is the correct word. She's been out of contact with him for several years. Again -- no help.” He gestured. “Follow me and you can be with her as she comes out of the drug.”

Nyk followed him down a corridor lined with interrogation rooms. The officer scanned his wrist and the door to one slid open. Dyppa was lying on her side on a pallet. Electrodes were attached to her scalp and chest. She was alternately crying and vomiting.

An attendant sat beside her, caressing her shoulder. “She's a dreamer.”

“What do you mean?”

“Some people experience dreams as they emerge from the drug trance. She's having bad ones.”

Nyk knelt down and took her hand. “Dyppa -- it's Nyk.”

“Keep her on her side,” the attendant said. “If she starts vomiting again, point her face downward so she won't choke. She's still only semi-conscious.”

“How much drug did they use?” he asked.

“They always use the maximum safe dose.”

Dyppa's mouth opened. Nyk directed her face downward and she retched. Her eyes opened and darted around the room. She screamed.

“Dreams,” the attendant said. “Bad ones. This phase will pass. She won't remember them.”

She began crying again. Nyk took her hand. “Dyppa ... Dyppa ... Dyppa, it's Nyk.”

Her eyes began to focus. “Nyk...” She clenched his hand in a white-knuckled grip. “Nyk ... oh, it was so terrible.” She blubbered. “Tentacles were boring into my head and taking my thoughts ... my memories. When my thoughts are gone I'll be dead.” She wailed.

Nyk cradled her head in his lap and caressed her hair. “It's over, Dyppa. It's only a dream.”

“Dream?”

“Only a dream. Say it -- only a dream.”

“Only a dream?”

“No tentacles -- just a dream.”

Her eyes danced around the room. “Spinning,” she said.

“I know. Close your eyes.”

“Hold me or I'll fall.”

“You'll be fine.” He looked toward the attendant. “How about a sedative?”

“Let's see if we can give her one.” She checked a brainwave monitor. “Almost -- she's almost there.”

Her eyes popped open. “Close your eyes.”

“No -- when I close them I see tentacles.” She grabbed Nyk. “They're coming after me again!” Dyppa sat up on the pallet and held onto the fabric of his tunic.

“Here you go, dear,” the attendant said and approached with an injector.

Dyppa shrieked. “NO! NO! No more drugs!” She jumped off the pallet and staggered backward.

“This is something to help you sleep,” the attendant said.

Dyppa screamed again. “If I sleep -- they'll get me!”

“Hold her,” the attendant said. Nyk put his arms around Dyppa's waist. She looked into his face and he read hurt and betrayal in her eyes. He lifted her feet off the floor and she began swinging her legs and flailing her arms.

“No more drugs!” she screeched.

“Keep her off the floor,” the attendant said. “Hold her and I'll get this into her.”

Dyppa began kicking, driving her elbows into Nyk's ribs and pounding his forearms with her fists. The attendant pulled off the needle guard and grabbed her knee. “Lift the hem of her gown.”

Nyk pulled on the fabric and exposed her thigh. The attendant poked the needle into her skin. As he heard the injector discharge, Dyppa swung her knee and caught the attendant's hand. The injector flew across the room and her leg began to ooze blood.

“Blast!” the attendant said and fetched the injector. “The needle must've broken off. I think she's dosed, though.”

Nyk continued to hold her as the sedative siezed her. She fought the drug but lost her battle and fell limp in Nyk's arms. The attendant grasped her ankles and lifted her back onto the pallet. “I'll get a forceps,” the attendant said, “so I can remove the needle.” She probed the gash on Dyppa's leg and plucked the object from her flesh. “Got it,” she said and smeared healing salve onto the wound. The bleeding stopped and the cut began to close. “Let her sleep it off.”

“How many react that way?” Nyk asked.

“I don't know,” the attendant replied. “Maybe one in hundred are dreamers. Few have dreams that bad. Some have pleasant ones and don't want to come out of it. I've never seen her sort of hysteria before.”

“I wonder if it's because she's a psychological addictive.”

“A psycho-addict? I wonder if the interrogators knew that. It might explain it. Addicts sometimes have peculiar reactions coming out of the drug.” She fingered Dyppa's hair. “Does she have it under control?”

He nodded. “Yes -- she's clean.”

“Good thing... poor little girl... I have a daughter about her age. I hate seeing them in trouble.”

Nyk sat beside Dyppa and stroked her medium blond hair. She rolled her head from side to side and opened her eyes. “Nykkyo.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Okay I guess. A little groggy.”

“Do you remember any bad dreams?” She shook her head. “No tentacles?”

She giggled. “Nope. No tentacles. The last I remember was feeling the drug starting to flow into my vein.”

The attendant approached them. “We can start taking these,” she said and began plucking electrodes from her. “You're fine, dear. I have your discharge forms. Your street clothes are over there.”

Dyppa turned her back and began to slip the treatment gown from her shoulders. Nyk looked at the floor and studied his sandals as she slipped her sleeveless tunic over her head. She grasped her orange *lifxarpa*, found its center and held it behind her neck; then she crossed the sash across her breasts, around her waist and tied the ends Altian-style on her right hip, instead of Floran-style in front.

“Nyk,” she said as she slipped into her sandals.

“Yes?”

She lifted her hem and pointed to the cut on her thigh. “How did I get this? I didn't have it coming in here.” She probed it with her finger.

“You don't remember?” She shook her head. “You had an accident coming out of the drug. Does it hurt?”

“No -- not much.” She stood and smoothed the wrinkles from her tunic and sash. “You must've had an accident, too,” she said, pointing to a bruise forming on his forearm.

“You could say that.” He turned to the attendant. “Thanks for taking care of her.”

“The captain wants to see her in his office.” She pointed toward an open door.

Nyk followed her into the office. “Please, have a seat. Both of you.” He sat. “Dyppa -- thank you for your time. We appreciate you performing your civic responsibility.”

She half-smiled. “It's not like I had much of a choice.”

“I'm going to give you a chance to make that choice. We believe the man we detained two days ago might be associated with The Seven. Since we can't interrogate him, and since we can't detain him any longer -- we must release him.” The captain looked directly at Nyk. “Altia IS a land bound by the rule of law.” His gaze returned to Dyppa. “During your interrogation, you identified him as someone you once knew -- once loved.”

She nodded and swallowed hard.

“You still have feelings for him -- don't deny them, they're documented here.” He held up a portable vidisplay.

“How do you know this man is the same one?” Nyk asked. “She didn't know his true name.”

“Oh, he's the same one, all right.” Sirk poked the vidisplay. “He has an ... an amputation that matches one she described during her interrogation.” He held the display in Nyk's direction. “Care to have a look? This is some of the most riveting testimony I've ever heard.”

Dyppa blushed a deep red. Nyk pushed the display aside. “No, thank you.”

Sirk turned to Dyppa. “We'd like it if you were to ... interview him.”

“ME?”

“Yes -- we'd like to see if you can coax any useful information from him, based on your mutual familiarity.”

“Do I HAVE to?”

“No -- we can't coerce you. Given the threat of The Seven to the entire hegemony -- we'd hope

you'd agree.”

Dyppa looked at the floor. “I wouldn't know what to say.”

“Don't say anything. We want to see how he responds.” The captain held up a dime- sized disk. “You'll wear this.”

“A microphone?” The captain nodded.

Dyppa took the object, peeled off a backing, reached under her tunic and secured it between her breasts. “I'll do it.”

“This way.” The captain pointed toward an interview room. “In there. I'll be listening in my office.”

Nyk watched Dyppa head down the hall. The captain returned to his desk and activated a listening device.

He heard a man's voice. “Lyla! What are YOU doing here?”

“I'm here to talk with you,” came Dyppa's reply.

“You? No ... you must've gone over to their side.”

“Whose side are you on?”

“You know whose side.”

“Lom -- can't you see their way is wrong?”

“Whose way? Your way?”

“Violence isn't the answer.”

“It's not even in question,” Lom said.

“He's a cagey one,” the captain remarked. “He hasn't said one useful thing during his entire detention. He's either well trained -- or, he's been through this before.”

“Come here -- let me touch you,” came Lom's voice. Nyk rose out of his chair.

“Relax,” said the captain. “That little girl knows how to fend for herself.”

Nyk nodded. “Yes -- I think you're right.”

“No -- I'm not that way any more.”

“Not even for me?”

“Not for anyone I don't love.”

“I thought we were lovers, Lyla. You still have feelings for me.”

“Don't touch me. Keep your distance.” There was a long pause. “Now,” Dyppa continued. “Who are you with?”

“Who are YOU with? I think I know. I'll bet you're wearing something -- a little spyer perhaps? ... Yes, that. I knew it. I never thought I'd see the day my Lyla would tie in with Altian SecuForce.”

“I'm not with them,” Dyppa protested. “They just wanted to see... Lom -- are you with The Seven?... Tell me.”

“No.”

“You're not?”

“No. I won't tell you -- until you ... get rid ... of this.”

There was a loud, crackling crunch and silence. “One of them must've stepped on it,” the captain said. “I'd better go break this up.”

Nyk shook his head. “Maybe he'll talk now he knows no one is listening.”

“What good will it do?”

“Do you want information? Or, do you want incriminating evidence.”

“On a good day, I'll take both.”

“Maybe today you get only one.”

Sirk and Nyk stared at each other. “All right -- we'll wait and see what happens.”

Nyk paced as Sirk eyed him. He consulted his vidisplay for the time. “Maybe we should go see...”

Dyppa stepped through the door. She extended her hand and dropped the remains of the microphone into the captain's palm. “I'm sorry -- it fell off and I accidentally stepped on it.”

“Did he tell you anything?”

“Only that he still loves me.”

“Nothing else?”

“Nothing,” Dyppa replied.

“Would you be willing to test that assertion with another dose of truth drug?”

She looked him in the eye. “I would be.”

The captain's eyes flicked up at Nyk. “Go on -- both of you get out of here. You're wasting my time.”

“Captain...” Dyppa said.

“Yes?”

“I believe he HAS gone over to The Seven. You'd be wise to watch him.”

“We had come to the same conclusion.” He made a gesture toward the door.

Nyk held Dyppa's hand as they sprinted toward the tubecar platform. “If Lom IS part of The Seven -- I'm a marked woman,” she said. “And -- if I set foot here again -- I'm a dead one. I won't want to leave the surface of Earth.”

“Yes -- I hope Captain Sirk holds him long enough for us to get offworld.” They reached the lift to the platform. Nyk stopped short. “Look at the crowd on the platform!” he exclaimed. “We'll never get a car. Maybe we should go back to Security and ask for a skimmer.”

“Good luck getting one.” Dyppa surveyed the buildings and followed the tubecar line with her eye as it bent to the left and out of sight. “There's another platform in the next sector. It won't be as crowded.”

“Why not?”

“It's in a poorer part of the city. Nyk -- unpin your *xarpa* and tie it so the knot is on your right side. No -- don't pin it ... here...” She held out her hand, Nyk dropped his *xarpa* pin into it and she tucked it into her sash. “There... Pinned in front is sure sign of an offworlder. Come with me.”

Nyk took her hand as she led him down an alley. The street noise quieted as they walked away from the tubecar. “Remember,” she said, “don't make eye contact with anyone. Look straight ahead and walk as if you mean business. It'll reduce the chances we'll get snagged.”

“Snagged?”

“Street toughs will accost vulnerable-looking strangers. They'll take their victims to a public vidisplay and expect them to transfer some work credits -- in exchange for their skins.”

“All I have are Floran credits. They wouldn't transfer here.”

“All the more reason to not look like a victim,” she replied. “Florans are not regarded favorably.”

“Even a Floran who's sympathetic?”

“Try explaining your sympathies to the business end of a shiv.”

They walked past a doorway. Music and rowdy conversation came from an establishment inside. “I recognize that smell,” he said. “Alcohol. I thought it was prohibited.”

“It is, but that doesn't stop them. It's cheap and you can make it yourself. All you need is some sugar and yeast.”

“Where do you get yeast? It's a controlled item.”

“Tell that to the little organisms. They don't seem to care about our rules and regulations... Up ahead -- we should cross the street here.”

“Here? What's up ahead?”

“One of the ore-workers' locals. Do you see that bunch loitering near the building? Those are unemployed ore-workers waiting for an assignment. It wouldn't surprise me if The Seven are recruiting inside.”

Dyppa climbed over a barricade and stood on the curb. A stream of groundcars whizzed by. “Come on, Nyk -- judge their speed and make a dash for it.”

“Where's the crosswalk?”

“At the end of the block. Come on!” Dyppa dashed between two groundcars and leapt over the barricade on the opposite side. Nyk watched a car pass by, then another. He jumped off and ran across the street, the breeze from another groundcar blowing under his tunic. One of the car's occupants shouted an oath at him.

He grabbed Dyppa's hand and they sprinted down the walk and past the union hall. “If Sirk is looking for Seven operatives,” Nyk panted, “why doesn't he look in there?”

“For a good reason,” Dyppa replied. “The union chiefs are tied in with the bureaucracy. If he upsets the wrong one, he'll find himself busted down to beat patrolman.”

“So, the union chiefs are tied in with The Seven.”

“I didn't say that. What I said was, if I were The Seven, and I wanted some unattached, unemployed, physically fit young men with nothing to lose and something to gain -- that's one place where I'd look.”

“Interrogation-proof, too.”

She pointed. “Up there -- do you see the sign?”

“Tubecar!”

“And, it's not crowded, either.”

Nyk approached the platform lift. He passed his hand over a proximity pad to summon the car; then he bent over, rested his forearms on his thighs and attempted to regain his breath. “I guess I'm out of shape,” he gasped.

A chime sounded and the car doors opened. He stepped inside and smelled more alcohol. Lying on the car floor was an older man in a soiled tunic. “Ignore him,” Dyppa whispered.

“Hey, sweetheart,” the man slurred. “Come here...”

Dyppa faced the door but looked down and back out of the corner of her eye. Nyk saw the man put his hand on her calf.

“I said come here ...*ax'amorfa* ...”

She turned and kicked the derelict in the ribs. “Leave me alone, you filthy, stinking old bastard!” she

yelled. "Next time you'll get it in the balls ... if you have any."

The liftcar stopped at the platform and the doors creaked open. Nyk hustled Dyppa onto the platform. She pressed her wrist to the scanpad. "I'll order the car," she said. "This kiosk might not be hooked up to the HL credit exchange."

"In the lift -- I thought you said to ignore him."

"YOU ignore him. I had to teach him a lesson." She looked at him with her eyes filling. "He called me a whore! Do I LOOK like one? Is it ... tattooed on me somewhere?"

"Of course not, Dyppa -- he was drunk."

"He called me *ax'amorfa* !" Nyk put his arm around her.

The tubecar pulled into position on the platform. Dyppa directed it to the shuttleport and it sped through the tubular roadway toward the perimeter of the dome. Nyk let out a sigh of relief. "Are you feeling all right?" he asked. She nodded. "You had the worst reaction coming out of the drug. I was frightened for you."

"I feel fine, now. A bit tired maybe." She leaned against him and he slipped his arm around her.

He glanced at her and saw tears. "What's the matter? That filthy old drunk?" She shook her head. "Is it Lom?"

She nodded. "I can't believe he's joined The Seven. He's not the same man I knew. Something's gone ... tenderness has been replaced by something hard -- something unfeeling."

"I've been face-to-face with some Altian operatives. I was convinced they had no regard for life ... not for their own ... not for anyone's."

"I saw that in Lom. He told me he didn't care if they tortured him -- if they killed him." She turned to Nyk, lay her face against his chest and sobbed.

Nyk pet her hair. "You'll be all right. Some of this is just delayed reaction to truth drug."

"No it isn't. I hated hearing him talk like that." Dyppa sniffed and looked into his eyes. "I'm mourning a loss, Nyk. My one happy memory of those times is gone." She squeezed him and kissed his cheek. "Yes, I'll be all right." She rested her face against his chest again. Nyk stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head. "I'm all right -- no more tears."

"I hate truth drug. It's nothing less than the rape of a mind. If I'm ever in a position to request that sort of interrogation -- I won't."

"Nyk..."

"What, Dyppa?"

"Thanks for coming with me, and thanks for listening and seeing for yourself."

The tubecar stopped outside the shuttleport. Nyk grabbed Dyppa's hand and they ran, pushing

through the crowd into the port. Wristscans admitted them to the departure lounge. Nyk sat in an aluminum chair and modulated his breathing to cool off. "I think we're safe enough here," he said. "Non-passengers aren't admitted to this lounge."

"Many on this planet can't afford passage," she replied. "I should thank you for something else -- for sponsoring me into the ExoAgency and for paying my passage. When I was in training they told me it's rare for non-Floran natives to be in the Agency."

"We welcome anyone with the talent and the motivation," he replied. He looked out toward the runway. "The shuttle's here and the passengers are debarking. Who travels to and from here?"

"Mining and manufacturing officials, administrators and the like. The working poor is the biggest class here, but it's by no means the only one."

"They'll board us shortly. I can't wait to be off this world and on that packet. This place gives me the creeps."

"You should try living here."

9 -- Another Plum Assignment

Nyk sat behind his desk manipulating his laptop computer. Seymor poked his head in. "Do you have another plum assignment for me?" Nyk asked.

"No -- I thought we could walk down to Bronfmann's for lunch. It's a mild day."

"Give me a minute."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm requesting a news feed -- the main feed from Altia."

"Why Altia?"

"My visit there with Dyppa gave me a ... a sort of fascination with the place."

"Ah, yes. How did that go?"

"I certainly understand why no one goes there on vacation. It's not a vacation spot, unless you care to sample the diverse wares of the cadre of whores in Altropolis. You know Dyppa was a hooker, don't you?"

“I've heard.”

“She told me a bit of what that lifestyle is like. Did you ever meet a prostitute, Seymor? Have a chance to talk with one?”

Seymor stepped in and pulled the door shut. “Gads, lad. Keep your voice down.”

“What?”

“I said keep your voice down!” he hissed.

“What's the matter?” Seymor glanced toward the closed door. “What?” He nodded his head in that direction. Nyk's jaw dropped. “JAQUIE?” he whispered.

“Let's talk on our way to Bronfmann's. I'll tell you the whole story. You are my assistant -- you deserve to know, so it won't come as a complete shock should anything happen to me.” Seymor grabbed a camel-hair overcoat. Nyk slipped into his suit jacket and followed to the street.

“I came here in '73,” Seymor said as they walked. “I was 40 Floran years old at the time and was an administrator in the ExoService -- a bean counter. The oversight chair asked me to go down and straighten out the mess my predecessor made. He had fucked it up good. They picked me because of my management experience. It was to be a one or two year term. I was dreading it.”

“You never went back,” Nyk said.

“No... In those days just looking at an Earth girl was enough to get you sent up. We were instructed to satisfy our needs by patronizing the local professionals.”

“Jaquie was a hooker?”

“A call girl ... an escort. Not the sort you used to see hanging around Time Square -- the high-class kind you hear about from a friend of a friend. I was living in the penthouse. I didn't buy it, Nyk -- my predecessor did with mis-appropriated funds. I should've sold it but didn't. I kept it because it was comfortable and convenient -- and, paid for. One of the other Agents gave me a card for this escort service. They operated out of a town house in the Upper West Side -- it's gone now, but it was a nice place in a nice neighborhood. I called and they sent Jacquie. I told the doorman I was expecting a visitor. He rang me and said Jacquie was on her way up.

“The elevator doors opened, she stepped out and my jaw hit the carpet. I had never seen a woman like her. She was... She was...”

“She was Black,” Nyk said.

“And, she was beautiful. Nyk -- be honest. When you first were attracted to Sukiko, how much of it was her race?”

“Well...”

“Be honest.”

“A lot of it. I laid eyes on her and I had never seen a woman so exotic, so mysterious, so beautiful... Even today, there's something about the shape of her eyes that makes me melt whenever I look at them.”

“It was the same with me. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. I fell for her hard -- I became one of her regulars. There was chemistry between us. She told me she looked forward to her visits.”

“You know they'll say whatever they think you want to hear,” Nyk remarked.

“I know they do, but I believed her. What happened next proved it. One day the doorman rang and said Jaquie was on her way up. We didn't have an assignment scheduled for that night. The door opened and she stood there. She had turned white with terror. I didn't think a Black girl could do that, but she was white and she was shaking. One of the other girls in her house had been murdered and she witnessed it. She was terrified, and she wanted out of the business. She came to me. She had the whole City to turn to, and she came to ME for help.

“I knew little of Earth law at the time, so I didn't know how to advise her. The penthouse is plenty large, so I offered her the spare room. She moved in and we lived together for about three years.”

They arrived at the deli and stood in line. Nyk ordered a pastrami sandwich and sat at a table. Seymour joined him. “Why did she move out?”

“Our relationship changed ... evolved. She wanted respectability and independence. She did not want to be a kept woman. I told her I couldn't marry her. She didn't want that, either. I suggested she work for me as a receptionist, only until she got on her feet. She never left. Don't think we keep her on because of me -- us. She's a damned good secretary.”

“She's more than that,” Nyk replied.

“I'll say. Nyk -- if you're my right hand, Jaquie's my left.”

“You still love her, don't you?”

“Of course I do, and she loves me. We visit each other fairly regularly, but we both enjoy our freedom. It's worked for us.” Nyk gazed at him as he chewed. “What's that look for?”

“Why, you old codger -- no wonder you were so accepting of my situation with Suki.” He picked up a handful of potato chips. “Does Jaquie know?” Seymour looked down. “Seymor -- does she know about us -- our mission?”

“Yes.”

Nyk let out a low whistle. “She does a good job of hiding it.”

“In those days if word got home, not only would I have been sent up but drawn and quartered, too. She keeps it from everyone -- even other Agents. She's discreet -- it's one trait that makes her a good assistant. She knows and she protects us. Don't let on you know this, Nyk.”

“Oh, I won't. So she and Dyppa have something in common.”

“I've told her a bit of young Dyppa. She was the one who convinced me to let you take your chances

with her -- as I took my chances with her.”

“I’ll tell you, Seymour -- from the first time I set foot in our office, I’ve enjoyed Jaquie. I think she’s an attractive, classy woman.”

“You won’t get an argument from me.” Seymour took a swig from a cup of cola. “Speaking of Dyppa -- how went her interrogation?”

“She had the worst reaction coming out of the drug. Thankfully, she doesn’t remember any of it. On Floran they only use enough drug to get you into truth trance. On Altia they always use the maximum dose.”

“Did they learn anything?”

“She’s back in Wisconsin, isn’t she?” He sipped his soda. “Of course not. She had nothing to do with that bunch.”

“I’m relieved. I was a bit worried.”

“Needlessly.”

“Well,” Seymour said, “it looks like that so-called Tulsa virus has settled down.”

“You know -- I’ve been on so many plum assignments I haven’t had a chance to catch up with Earth news.”

“It stopped after thirty four cases -- thirty four fatalities.”

“Thirty-five if you count Marxo.”

Seymour nodded. “It’s seventy-two hours and no new cases. It disappeared as quietly as it surfaced.”

“That reminds me -- I must make a vidphone call when I get back to the office.” He took a bite of his sandwich. “Seymor...”

“Yes, lad?”

“I can’t shake this bad feeling about the virus. I’m haunted by Marxo’s face -- delirious, covered with those blotches. It was a nightmare.”

“Ever hear of Ebola?” Nyk shook his head. “It’s a virus from Africa. The mortality rate is nearly as high -- and the deaths nearly as unpleasant. Your organs burst and you start vomiting blood...”

Nyk looked down at the remainder of his sandwich. “Thanks a lot.” He wrapped it in its paper and tossed it into the trash barrel.

“Sorry, lad,” Seymour said. “Come on -- you said you have a vidphone call to make.” Nyk stood and headed back toward the office.

He closed his door behind him and sat at the laptop. He flipped it open and started a vidphone session. Soon he saw Senta’s image. “Senta,” he said. “Any progress?”

“On what?”

“My virus.”

“Oh... Nykkyo, I'm sorry but I'm afraid Kovina botched the analysis. I guess that's what happens when you delegate -- sometimes you have to put up with lower quality work than you can do yourself.”

“What do you mean, botched?”

“She thought you wanted the six sequences compared against each other. When I saw what she had done, I told her it was worthless.”

“I never thought of sequencing them against each other,” Nyk replied. “Why worthless?”

Senta made a petulant sigh. “Because -- they're all the same virus. A graduate student would've recognized it.”

“You mean virus I through VI are all the same?”

“Basically, yes. There are modifications between them, but the main genome is definitely the same for all six.”

“So -- what we have is a virus that, once it gets inside the body, mutates so it can fan out and destroy?”

“I wouldn't use the word mutate,” Senta replied. “Mutation implies random changes. The differences between I and VI are hardly random.”

“Can you send me a copy of Kovina's report anyway?”

“Certainly.”

“Senta?”

“Yes, Nyk.”

“I'd appreciate it if you'd take a close look at the sequences and verify Kovina's results.”

She sighed. “All right, Nyk. I'll do that, too.” The vidphone session went dark.

Nyk poked his head into Seymour's office. “Well -- the Tulsa virus? Did you know that actually six viruses are involved?”

“I had read that.”

“Did you also know that each of the six is a ... a mutant, a modification of the other five?”

“I believe the researchers at the CDC are thinking along the same line.” Seymour looked up. “Do we need to have another talk about domains of responsibility?”

“No -- I just thought I had something.” He headed back to his office and sat behind his desk. Something on the screen caught his eye. “Seymor!” he yelled. “Come here!”

Seymor stepped into the office and Nyk gestured him behind the desk. “Look!”

The Altian news feed scrolled breaking news. The Seven had issued a new communiqué, one containing an ultimatum. Their list of demands was to be met before the Standard Floran date of 6639.101APF or else the hegemony would feel the consequences.

“That's a gutsy ultimatum,” Seymor remarked. “Feel the consequences. What the hell does that mean?”

Nyk shook his head. “I don't know. Like I said, the situation on Altia grows more fascinating by the day.”

“Remember your domain of responsibility,” Seymor replied. “Ask yourself if Altia falls within or outside it.”

Nyk slipped his house key into the lock and opened the door to the house in Queens. “It's me, Yasuko,” he called toward the back of the house. On a chair near the front door he spotted a stack of folded plastic sheets and several rolls of duct tape.

Yasuko stepped from the kitchen. “Dinner's nearly ready, if you'd like to bring Nicky.”

He saw Nicky standing and holding onto a chair. “Hey, Nick!” Nicky dropped to all fours and crawled to him. Nyk picked up the boy, sat him on his knee and held out his palm. Nicky gave it a slap. “Are you hungry, buddy? Let's get some chow.”

He carried Nicky to the kitchen, set him in his high chair and began feeding him his dinner. “I see you've bought plastic and tape,” he said.

“Yes -- do you have any idea how difficult it was to locate? It seems everyone has the same idea.”

“What do you intend to do with it?”

“We can make a safe area. Nick -- do you think upstairs or down would be a better location?”

“Yasuko -- I don't think it's necessary at all. If something IS in the air -- you can't seal yourself off forever.”

“What about that woman downtown who caught anthrax out of the air?”

Nyk set Nicky's empty bowl on the table and set before him another filled with oat cereal rings. Nicky picked up an oat ring and threw it onto the floor. “No, no,” Nyk said, “none of that!” The boy picked up another and put it in his mouth. “That's better... That was isolated, Yasuko -- and, unfortunate.” She set a pair of bowls on the table and Nyk sat. “I suppose it depends if whatever it is happens to be heavier or lighter than air.”

“Maybe on the ground floor, then. I'll set something up in the guest room.”

“If it helps you sleep at night, Yasuko.”

“I don't care so much about myself, but for...” She looked toward Nicky. “Nick -- are you home for a while, now?”

He sipped broth from his bowl and swirled his chopsticks in it to pick up some noodles. “I certainly hope so. The fact I'm on the road doesn't keep the paperwork from piling up.”

“I'm pleased. George used to say the same... I'm sorry, Nick. I really have no claim on you. You go ahead and do what you must.”

“Yasuko... When I married Suki, I joined your family, for better or worse. I lost both my parents as a teen. You're my mom, now -- and this is my home.”

Nyk descended the stairs from the apartment. “Nicky's down and asleep,” he called out. “I read him a story. Do you need anything, Yasuko?”

“No, I'm all right. Having you here makes all the difference.”

“I'm going to do some work upstairs and turn in.”

“Fine, Nick. Good night.”

He unpacked his laptop, switched it on and plugged it into the high-speed data circuit. In his inbox was a telemesssage from Senta asking him to please call at his earliest convenience. He opened the vidphone window, punched in Senta's locator code and saw her image. She had answered from her lab.

“I have Kovina's report here,” she said, “which is good as far as it goes. You're right, Nyk -- there's more to this virus than meets the eye.”

“What do you mean?”

“Something's going on inside it. I'd be willing to bet there are more than six viruses. I'd guess hundreds -- maybe thousands.”

“Thousands?”

“Yes -- they fall into six broad categories. Instead of virus I through VI, I'd prefer to call them categories I through VI. I haven't been able quite to make it out. I think I'd like to bounce this off Dr Hanri.”

“Your old advisor?”

“Yes -- You were wrong, Nyk. HE's the finest mind in the field.”

“Then you're the second finest.”

Senta smiled. “Thanks, Nyk. I appreciate that.”

“Senta -- I'd prefer if you don't get anyone else involved. I want to keep this work as private as

possible.”

“I trust Dr Hanri.”

“Nonetheless -- see if you can dope it out yourself, first.”

“All right, Nyk.” The vidphone went dark.

He punched in another locator code and the call connected. “Hi,” he said.

“Howdy, stranger,” Suki replied.

“I’m back from Altia.”

“How did that go?”

“Imagine having to walk through the roughest section of the South Bronx in order to reach a subway station and you’ll have some idea how it went.”

“I’m happy to see you in one piece, then.”

“I was never in any danger -- I had Dyppa with me. The kid has street smarts -- like a New York girl I know.” Suki smiled. “How has this Altian threat been received on the homeworld?”

“To be honest, Nykkyo, I’m not familiar enough with the players to comprehend it. As far as I can tell, the people here seem unconcerned.”

“Altia is breeding ground for the same terrorist mentality as we see on Earth,” he replied. “From what I saw there, I understand why.”

“Do you think Altians are capable of carrying out a Trade Center style attack?”

“Capable? No doubt. Do they have the means? I don’t know.”

“Couldn’t they start flying shuttles into buildings?” Suki asked.

“It’s not as easy as it sounds. I didn’t call to discuss Altian politics. I thought we could have a different sort of talk. It’s bedtime here for me...”

Suki smiled. “Unfortunately, it’s time for me to go to the university for my lectures. I’ll have to take a rain check on other discussions.”

“Ah, the time difference... In a couple weeks the Earth and Floran days will be better synchronized. We can discuss then.” He saw Andra step behind Suki and whisper into her ear. She glimpsed Nyk’s image on the screen and waved to him.

“Andra and I are sharing the groundcar to the university,” Suki said. “I have to run.”

“Ask your students what they think of the Altian situation.”

“I’ll do that. *Bon’noka*, Nykkyo.”

“Have a great day, *korlyta* .” The vidphone window went dark.

Nyk looked into the nursery and saw Nicky sleeping on his stomach in his crib. He stripped to his briefs, slid into bed, laced his fingers behind his head, took a deep breath and relaxed. From below he could hear Yasuko sobbing.

He slipped into his robe, descended the stairs and rapped on the door to her bedroom. “Yasuko -- are you all right? May I come in?”

“Come in, Nick...”

He opened the door. Yasuko lay in bed in a cotton slip, propped against pillows. Her eyes were red. Nyk sat on the bed, opened his arms and embraced her.

“Oh, Nick,” she wept. “When will it stop? You said you lost both parents. How long did it take you?”

He kissed the top of her head. “It never stops. I still miss them -- my mom, especially. Life goes on, and happiness returns. Ask yourself if this is what George or Suki would want to see you do.”

“Nick...” She held onto him.

“The demons are bothering you tonight.”

“They seem to know when I'm vulnerable.” He turned down the cover, lay beside her and held her. “Nick -- how is it so easy for you?”

“It's not. But, we can't change it, so why waste the energy? All this is pre-ordained, Yasuko. We each do what Destiny put us here to do. We're all fulfilling our purpose.”

“Your destiny talk again. Do you really believe there's some master plan for the universe?”

“I do know we all follow the paths Destiny traces for us. Whether there's a master plan, or if She's only a few metres in front of us, tracing as we go... that I don't know.”

“Oh, I miss them so...”

“So do I.” He caressed her short salt-and-pepper hair. “So do I.” Yasuko began to calm “Are you all right?”

“I will be.”

“I'll go, then.”

“Please stay with me tonight.”

Nyk sat up and removed his robe. Then, he lay and held her as she sobbed softly against his shoulder.

Seymor poked his head into Nyk's office. “Lad -- I just sent you a message. It's a clip from the Floran News Bureau.”

Nyk opened the message and scanned it. His jaw dropped. "The Seven are claiming possession of a weapon of mass destruction -- a planet-killer." He looked up. "If their ultimatum isn't satisfied -- they'll select and destroy a colony planet at random." He looked up at his boss. "What's the reaction on the homeworld?"

"The smart money says it's Altian sabre-rattling. There have been these sorts of threats before. They've never panned out."

"Except for that time when Lexalese rebels attempted to overthrow their chancellor," Nyk observed. "Altia was in deep for that adventure."

"And the result was a stronger Lexal, and a more civilized Altia," Seymor replied. "The independence faction there had its fangs pulled. The Altian fleet was disbanded and the vessels dispersed. The Seven is effectively planetbound."

"Hence the opinion this is more bark than bite," Nyk mused. "I'm not sure I'd share that view. I came face-to-face with some Altian commandos and they weren't the talking sort ... more the shoot-first-talk-later variety." He rested his chin on his fist. "Hmm... I wonder... What could kill a planet? Beam weapons of that power aren't feasible -- it'd need to be as big as a planet itself. What about an antimatter bomb?"

"Creating and containing sufficient antimatter to build a bomb has eluded the best and brightest minds on the homeworld. So far, such a device is only theoretical."

"Luckily for all of us. I suppose enough nuclear bombs could do the job, but I can't believe such a group on Altia could amass enough material."

"It's a mineral warehouse," Seymor replied. "They could mine and refine uranium."

"They would need support from the Altian miners, and from what Dyppa tells me, they are not sympathetic to The Seven's agenda. Besides, Floran's Defense Research Labs keep a tight lid on bomb-making details..." He looked up. "Do you think it possible Marxo was a Seven double agent smuggling bomb-making technology from Earth to Altia?"

"That thought never crossed my mind. Why would you suspect Marxo?"

"He was in Tulsa when he was supposed to be in Scottsdale," Nyk replied. "We knew he wasn't doing his job there. It would explain the double identity."

"I figured he was merely inept." Seymor sat on Nyk's desk. "Lad -- have you ever heard of Heinlein's Razor?"

"No. What is it?"

"Heinlein's Razor states that if you must choose between malice and incompetence as an explanation for someone's actions -- it's most likely to be incompetence."

"There's plenty of malice surrounding this whole Tulsa business," Nyk replied.

"I doubt The Seven is a big enough organization to make nukes in the requisite quantities. Even if they

could -- they have no way to deliver them.”

Nyk nodded. “You're probably right. They might be able to detonate one, but that would hardly kill a whole planet.” He pondered. “I think if I were The Seven I'd go chemical or biological. Something like the Tulsa virus.” He gasped. “Maybe THAT's what Marxo was doing in Tulsa!”

“You don't seriously think...”

“Marxo was involved in some odd behavior. We know he wasn't doing his job in Scottsdale. His lab looked like it hadn't been tended in weeks. Then there was that cryptic message on his handheld -- pickup 1/15, deliver 1/18.”

“If that is what it meant.”

“There's an Altian connection. The message came from a locator code with an Altian prefix and was coded with an Altian street code.”

“Did you try getting an ID traceback on that locator code?”

“No -- how would I go about doing that?”

“Hmm ... good question. How WOULD you go about doing that?” Seymor stroked his chin. “If it were a Floran code, I could have one of my Internal Affairs contacts do the trace. Since it's Altian -- we'd need a contact within Altian Security. We'd need to go through channels -- up the ladder through the ExoService to some High Legislature subcommittee or other, then back down the other side. It could take months.”

“I wonder if Sirk could track it down,” Nyk replied.

“Who?”

“The Altian security captain who oversaw Dyppa's interrogation. I have his locator code. I'll send him a note...”

“Nyk... Without a stronger case, I'd advise against short-circuiting channels. Those upper-level bureaucrats don't take it kindly when someone starts pissing on their campfire.”

“Seymor -- Marxo was sent to Tulsa to fetch the virus so it could be used as a weapon -- one that threatens the entire Floran hegemony. I'd say that was a strong case.”

“If Marxo was sent to fetch it -- he'd need to know about it first. It surfaced the same day he died.”

“He botched the job! He accidentally exposed himself to it!”

“But Nyk -- Someone would have to know about it BEFORE it emerged in order to send him there to fetch it. How's that possible?”

“Easy -- that someone obtained access to Earth historic records. I'll bet there's a reference to it in the Floran Encyclopedia.”

“The what?”

“Don't you know about the Floran Encyclopedia?” Seymor shook his head. “When the original mission was launched, they carried a database of all significant Earth history -- everything up to the date of the launch, which was ... which will be 2201. That database is preserved at the Floran Museum. Some of the material is classified, but if Marxo obtained access... That has to be it!” Nyk began working the keyboard of his laptop.

“Now what are you doing?”

“I'm sending a message to my friend Korlo Golmya -- he's a curator at the museum in Floran City. I worked with him on my translation of Koichi Kyhana's journal. I'll ask him to see if he can find a reference to the Tulsa virus in the encyclopedia. I'm not pissing on any campfires, am I?”

“It seems to me,” Seymor said, “if Marxo was sent to Tulsa to fetch this virus -- he wound up exposed and dead. The virus died with him.”

“Then, it's a matter of time before they send someone else to get more.”

“If the outbreak is contained -- which it appears to be -- then, there's no more virus to get. I think, Nyk, there's little risk to the hegemony. Worst case it was a window of opportunity -- grab the virus from this outbreak and carry it home. The effort failed and the window is closed.”

“What if there were more than one Agent involved?”

“And, who might THAT be? All North American ExoAgents are present and accounted for.”

“I suppose you're right...”

“Of course I am.”

“Still, I don't think there's harm in asking Korlo about the encyclopedia entry.”

“Fine, Nyk. And, when you're done with that...”

“...tend to my domain of responsibility. Since Marxo was my direct report, this IS my domain. Isn't it?”

“That's one way of looking at it.” Seymor headed toward his own office.

“Seymor! I have a response from Korlo.”

“Already?” Seymor stepped behind Nyk's desk and looked over his shoulder as he opened the message. “No reference to Tulsa virus,” he said, shaking his head. “Sorry lad. It was a nice try.”

“Then, what was Marxo doing there?” Nyk rested his chin on his fist.

“Cheer up, Nyk. Why don't you call it a day and go have a nice, quiet evening with that boy of yours?”

Nyk walked into the office. “Good morning, Jaquie.”

“Good morning, Mr Kane. How's that adorable little boy?”

“He's learning to walk. He'll hold onto a table or chair, walk around it and beam a big, proud grin.”

“Bring pictures some day.”

“I will, Jaquie -- I promise.” Nyk stepped into his office and hooked up his laptop. It came to life and he reviewed his messages. He saw one from Senta, requesting a call. The vidphone window opened and he saw her face framed by her red hair.

“Nykkyo,” she said through the vidphone circuit. “I spoke to Dr Hanri about your virus.”

“You didn't. Senta -- I said I wanted...”

“I posed it as a hypothetical question,” she said. “I didn't describe any specifics.”

“I guess that's all right. What did he say?”

“Well -- he had some ideas, but nothing panned out. What he said started me thinking so I began looking elsewhere.”

“Where elsewhere?”

“At the other end of the genome.” A window opened on his laptop and he saw a diagram of a DNA molecule. “Here,” Senta pointed with a cursor. “Do you see these three sequences?”

“Yes...”

“They form a counter, each activated in turn for each generation. They count from one to six and then reset. Well -- one to eight, actually, but it appears two pairs of sequences are degenerate.”

“Could those be categories I through VI?”

“I think so. Look here...” The cursor moved to another part of the molecule. “Another counter -- these six sequences run from one to sixty-four, with some degenerate codes.”

“That accounts for the variations within each category. How often do you see this sort of thing?”

“For Earth genetics -- never,” she replied. “It IS the basic strategy of native Floran life. Life here exhibits different genetics based on the tissue or organ.”

“Andra told me the animals have a skin DNA, a nerve DNA and so on.”

“The plants, also. It's not DNA, Nyk, but the native Floran analogue. The gamete must differentiate into the genomes for the various tissues, so it includes a counter mechanism. As the organism matures, the counter ticks. That's how it knows when to trigger the next modification. This virus is doing something similar.”

“Are you saying this virus evolved from a native Floran species? I had wondered how long it would take for native microbes to develop a taste for human flesh.”

“Of course not, Nyk. This viral genome is very much based on good old Earth DNA.”

“What are you saying, then?”

“I’m saying this virus was without a doubt man-made.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely, and it’s why I’ve been racking my brain. I’ve seen something like this before, but I can’t quite place it.”

“Senta, I have confidence in you. I’m sure you’ll get it. You figured out the Ricin plot -- you’ll figure out this.”

“Thanks, Nyk. I’m going to take another look at it.” The vidphone session went blank.

Nyk stood and headed toward Seymour’s office, but was called back by a vidphone signal from his laptop. He answered the call and saw Senta again. “Nyk! I remember where I saw it. It was in the Ricin genome!”

“You mean...”

“It’s not quite the same but similar. You recall in the Ricin case, a gene from the castor bean was spliced into the genome for common lentils. It caused the lentils to produce the biotoxin Ricin.”

“I recall. A single lentil contained sufficient Ricin to kill a man. I also recall how close those tainted lentils came to entering our food supply.”

“You’ll also recall that the designer of this genome was cagey. He didn’t want to introduce all the genetic changes at once -- even the primitive screening we had at the time would’ve detected it. Instead, he implemented something like this counter, only it ticked each time two strains were crossed. It would’ve taken about eight generations to activate the gene and I discovered it in the sixth.”

“I didn’t recall those details.”

“Nyk -- this is the same mechanism adapted to the reproductive strategy of a virus. It was undoubtedly created by the same mind as the Ricin genome.”

“I thought we broke up the Ricin ring.”

“Maybe not. Maybe the brains behind it got away.”

“And, he’s developed a new weapon.” Nyk’s blood ran cold. “Thanks Senta.” He closed the vidphone window. “Seymour! he yelled and ran into his boss’s office. “I was close. Marxo didn’t go to Tulsa to fetch the virus. He went there to DELIVER it. That’s what the message in the Palm Pilot meant -- pick up on January 15, delivery on January 18. I’ll bet if you check his shuttlecar log, you’ll see a transit on the fifteenth.”

“Nyk -- were you up all night worrying about this?”

“No. I just got off the vidphone with Senta. Do you remember the Ricin crisis?”

“Certainly. What was that? Six years ago?”

“Eight Floran years. Senta was the one who identified the Ricin genome. I asked her to take a look at the Tulsa virus. She believes it shares similarities with the Ricin gene; and, she believes it's man made -- most likely devised by the same mind. I believe the virus was developed by or for The Seven. I think it's their planet-killer, and Marxo brought it here for a field test. Think about it, Seymour -- where else could they test it away from Floran health authorities and media?”

“New viruses emerge here all the time,” Seymour replied. “Earth immune systems are more robust than Florans' -- and, Earth health officials are more experienced at containing an outbreak.”

“There's no other explanation. This virus is highly contagious. Once inside the body, it modifies itself -- fans out on a search and destroy mission. It has a one hundred percent mortality rate, and our medics are powerless to do anything about it. It's a perfect biological weapon.”

“Gads, lad -- I think you're right.”

“They tested it on Marxo. If it killed an ExoAgent with his pumped-up immune system, they know it'll run through our native population like a brush fire.”

“Do you think Marxo volunteered to test it? Maybe he thought he'd only catch a case of sniffles. When his condition deteriorated he went to see Grynnya.”

Nyk pondered. “I think Marxo was deliberately infected, all right -- but, without his knowledge. Then they loosed him into the population.”

“They were testing it's contagiousness.”

“There's more. Who do we know had operations in the Tulsa area?”

“Zander!”

“I'm willing to bet there's a cell of Altian operatives somewhere in the Tulsa area. They're either affiliated with The Seven or sympathetic to it.”

Seymour shook his head. “The way your mind works. What do we do?”

“You tell me. I can put all this into a report -- but, who gets to see it? Kronta?”

Seymour nodded. “Kronta's the man to head up a task force. Nyk -- if I ever again say you should stick to your own domain of responsibility -- slam the door in my face. This is sensitive -- as sensitive as anything I've encountered in my career. I'll set up a meeting with Kronta. Lad -- you may be headed back to Floran.”

“ME? Seymour -- I thought you'd be the one...”

“Oh, no, lad. This is your ball. You run with it.”

“Run with it... Seymour -- after this dust settles, do you think we can cut back on the plum

assignments? I don't think I've spent a day with Nicky in two weeks.”

Seymor squinted. “You're the first Floran to come through this office who's a family man.”

“He needs me, Seymor -- he needs a man's involvement.”

“We'll see what we can do.”

10 -- The Task Force

Nyk sat at a conference table in ExoService headquarters and exchanged greetings with the others. A man wearing Altian security force insignia sat beside him. “Ahh... Mr Kyhana, I believe,” he said.

Nyk turned to him. “Captain Sirk...”

A man with ExoService insignia embroidered on his *xarpa* stood and rapped his knuckles on the table. “Let's begin. We have some preliminaries to get out of the way. My name is Illya Kronta and I'm the chair of the ExoAgency oversight committee. I'll also be heading up this task force.

“First -- the activity of this group is classified at the highest level. If you don't understand why, you will by the end of this meeting. Each of you has been given a sealed packet. You may open them now.”

Nyk tore his open and looked inside.

“You have received two datacel. One of them is a comm cipher using our strongest encryption. You will use this cipher for all communications among task force members. Any documents you create must be encrypted with this cel.

“The second datacel is a set of background and briefing documents, including a master list of individuals involved in this project. You must not discuss any aspect of this project with anyone not on this list. We may be adding staff as needed -- we will update the master list at that time. Any questions?” Kronta looked around the room.

“Good. Now -- before we get to our agenda, let's go around the table and introduce ourselves. As I said, I'm Illya Kronta. In addition to Agency Oversight, I represent Agency Enforcement and ExoService Security.” He glanced to his right.

“I'm Doctor Kurso Aahhn, of Floran City Central Clinic.”

“I'm Doctor Geov Helsyn of the Clinic, and the University Medical School.”

“I’m Doctor Senta Kyhana.”

“These three will be heading up the effort to combat the threat we've identified,” Kronta interrupted. He nodded toward the next seat.

“I’m Captain Ovid Sirk of Altian Security.”

“Captain Sirk is heading the Altian task force on The Seven,” Kronta explained. “He is here as liaison with the new Altian government. Next...”

Nyk stood. “Nykkyo Kyhana, ExoAgency North American Operations.”

A man to his right stood. “Kato Pring, Adjutant to the President of the High Legislature.”

“Good,” Kronta continued. “We're purposely keeping this group as small as necessary. The first item on our agenda is a review of what we know. We won't go into a detailed description of an Altian independence faction known as The Seven -- you can find that in your background material. What are germane are recent demands and an ultimatum delivered against the Hegemony -- demands for a immediate withdrawal of the High Legislature presence on Altia.”

“You'll note,” Nyk observed, “The Seven's list of demands omits a schedule for democratic elections. It seems to me the majority of so-called independence movements have no concern for their base population -- they simply want to replace one set of thugs with another.”

Sirk bristled. “I object! Altia is not run through thuggery. We are a colony of duly passed laws and representational government.”

Kronta rapped his knuckle on the table. “We are here to cooperate on a solution to our current dilemma.” His gaze fell on Nyk. “We'll take discussions of that sort off-line.”

“I apologize,” Nyk replied, looking toward Sirk. “My remarks were out of line.” Sirk smiled and nodded.

“The critical aspect,” Kronta went on, “are claims by The Seven of possession of a weapon of mass destruction -- a planet killer. We have credible intelligence to conclude this weapon is biological in nature.” He looked toward his right. “Doctor Helsyn.”

Helsyn stood. “What we know is based on a patient treated by Dr Aahhn and his team here in Floran City. An ExoAgent presented himself with symptoms of a viral infection and subsequently perished of that illness. We now believe this virus is man-made, and specifically designed to be a killer. Once established in the body, it reproduces itself into six phases -- each specific to a single vital organ or system. The details are in your background material, so I won't waste our time reviewing them.

“What we wanted to present today is some new knowledge we've gained over the past several days. Initially we attempted to match this virus with known specimens in our database of Earth pathogens. We came up empty.” Helsyn glanced toward Senta.

“In order to understand how this virus operates,” Senta said, standing, “one must understand what a virus is and how it reproduces. A virus is nothing more than a strand of genetic material in a protein wrapper. It reproduces by attaching to a target cell and injecting its DNA. The cell's native genetic material is co-opted by the virus, and the cell begins replicating thousands of copies of the virus, instead.

Eventually these are distributed to attack other cells.

“In order to attach to a cell, the protein wrapper must have appendage molecules that can lock onto the biomolecular surface of the target. For example, in Phase One of this virus's attack, it attaches to mucous cells in the respiratory system.”

“...in order to maximize communicability,” Helsyn interjected.

“Phase Two attacks immune system cells...” Senta continued.

“...in order to wipe out the body's defenses and pave the way for attacks on vital organs...”

“...and so on. By going into the pathogen database, I was able to search the configurations of protein jackets of various known viruses and compare them to the predicted wrappers on our sample. Phase One of the weapon virus constructs a jacket nearly identical to that of the Earth influenza virus. Phase Two is a near match with HIV.” She passed out datacells. “The details are contained in this report. It's unencrypted because we had not received the ciphers yet.”

Helsyn stood. “What we have is a virus that can mimic the behavior of six known and deadly Earth pathogens. If you could examine the virus itself, you'd be unable to distinguish the synthetic from its natural pattern...”

“From the outside, that is,” Senta interrupted. “Genetically they're very different.”

“Previously we were attempting to match our database genetically,” Helsyn continued.

Senta smiled. “It's a common error,” she interrupted again, “to assume that two similar-looking species must have similar genetic material. In fact, similar genomes can create different-looking individuals, and vice-versa.”

Helsyn nodded toward Kronta and sat.

“The other critical aspect is the date of the ultimatum -- 6639.101 standard. Today is 6639.072. We have twenty-nine standard days with which to develop a response. I'm throwing the floor open to suggestions.”

The task force members glanced around the room, eyeing each other. Nyk stood. “Having spent a couple of years on Earth, I'd like to share what I've gleaned from that experience. Earth nations face biological threats from other unfriendly nations, and from terrorist groups similar to The Seven. Invariably the discussion turns to mass vaccination as a response. After all -- if the population is immune, it renders the weapon useless.”

“We'd need to develop such a vaccine,” Kronta replied. “Then, manufacture sufficient quantity for twenty-four billion doses and administer them. I can't see how we can accomplish that in twenty-nine standard days.”

Senta stood. “Dr Helsyn and I believe development of such a vaccine is not only possible but practical -- now that we know what we're dealing with.”

“Administering it is a different story,” Sirk remarked.

“If we could predict which colony is the likely target and concentrate our efforts there,” Nyk replied, “it would reduce the administrative problems dramatically.”

“How would we know which colony?” Kronta asked.

“I believe there's only one that's the likely target -- Lexal. First, the population is small, but concentrated in several urban areas. Second, Mykko Wygann is universally unpopular in the HL.” He glanced sideways at Pring. “Most HL delegates would consider loss of Lexal a shame; but privately, would be grateful for the removal of a thorn. If The Seven attack T-Delta or Gamma- 5, for example, the HL reaction would more likely be horror and revulsion. It would turn sentiment away from The Seven's objectives. And -- finally, there's the animosity between Altia and Lexal -- the revenge factor. I think Lexal is tailor-made as the target.” Nyk poked his vidisplay. “Not coincidentally, 6639.102 -- the day after the ultimatum expires -- is Grand Assembly Day on Lexal.”

“What is Grand Assembly Day?” Sirk asked.

“It's the day public forums are held in all the cities. Business closes, the people congregate, hear speeches and petition their legislators. How convenient would it be to disperse the virus into the crowds to maximize exposure.”

Pring nodded. “I think he's right -- Lexal is a prime target. If we plan on protecting Lexal, we can neutralize the first use of the weapon.”

“We must also neutralize The Seven themselves,” Sirk replied. “Once they realize it's failed -- they'll turn it on another colony.”

“Only if they believe the other colonies remain vulnerable,” said Pring.

“Similarly, if word of a plan to protect Lexal leaks out,” Nyk added, “They'll change the target to an unprotected world.”

“Hence the need for absolute secrecy,” Kronta interjected.

“I think,” Nyk said, “we should not stop with the vaccination of Lexal. We should offer the vaccine to all the colonies.”

“Absolutely,” Sirk replied. “Perhaps by the time they realize the initial attack has failed we can have the rest of the population protected.”

“Sirk -- what do you know of The Seven's structure?” Kronta asked.

“Very little,” he replied. “Although the group claims to be an Altian faction, we're beginning to believe their leadership may be headquartered elsewhere. For certain, their infantry is on Altia -- the privates and corporals. Where the colonels and generals are ... is anybody's guess. They could be right here.” He tapped the table with his finger.

“On Floran, that is,” Kronta replied. “Not in this room.”

“Precisely.”

Kronta nodded. “We'll need the cooperation of Internal Affairs. I'll handle establishing the appropriate

contacts. Is it agreed our first priority is protecting Lexal?" Kronta looked around the table. "We'll need the cooperation of Mykko Wygann and his regime."

Sirk snorted. "Good luck obtaining that."

"Nykkyyo -- you can approach Wygann." Nyk nodded.

"Good. We all have work to do. We'll reconvene in two days to review our progress."

Sirk and Pring headed for the door. Nyk approached Senta and Helsyn. "Can we really make a vaccine?"

"Yes," Helsyn replied. "The decontamination serums ExoAgents use routinely contain vaccines. The problem is -- this virus is so multifaceted, we can't create a broad-spectrum vaccine that will protect a victim from all phases. Not, at least, in the timeframe allotted."

"What we must do," Aahhn added, "is to create a vaccine to protect the victim at the most critical phases. In my opinion, those would be the phase one respiratory infection and the phase two immune system attack."

"I agree," said Helsyn. "We can also make synthetic antibodies that can give temporary protection. Phase two will be the tricky one, though."

Nyk turned to Kronta as he slipped his handheld vidisplay into his *xarpa*. "Illya -- I apologize for that crack about Altian thugs."

"It's okay, Nyk."

"I'll need to bring Andra into this in order to approach Wygann -- through his wife."

"I have no problem with that. Her friendship with Princess Janna gives her a primary motive to work in our best interest."

"Don't you trust her, Illya?"

"I trust *anax'amfin* to behave in whatever manner suits her interests."

"Andra is a good woman. I don't know about other *anax'amfinen*, but she has always put duty first."

"Duty to whom? To the Hegemony or to that academy they're so loyal to? Nyk -- I like Andra. She's always been straight with me. Maybe she's an exception." Kronta picked up a polymer case. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes -- I think there's good evidence that The Seven have a cell operating on Earth."

"What sort of evidence?"

"The virus has surfaced there, as either an accidental or intentional release into the Earth population. It happened about the time Marxo fell ill. There were thirty-four Earth cases -- all fatalities."

"That's not so bad."

“A single exposure transmitted to thirty-four random individuals, Illya. Earth authorities are better skilled at dealing with these than we are. At any rate -- all Earth victims were passengers on a flight from Tulsa to Kansas City -- or, they had contact with those passengers. Marxo was also on that same flight.”

“So?”

“Marxo had no business in Tulsa -- he was stationed in Scottsdale. I went through his draw account records -- looking for flights, hotels and so on, paid for with his draw card.”

“What did you find?”

“Not much -- but he did have numerous cash withdrawals both in Scottsdale and Tulsa. A couple times he slipped up and paid for hotel accommodations with his debit card. I think he was spending a significant fraction of his time in Tulsa. It explains the poor performance of the Scottsdale lab -- he simply wasn't there to do the work. His performance was so poor Seymour and I discussed sending him up. Add to this the fact that Zander kept his Earth home there, and we know he was involved in the original Ricin plot. The virus was tested on Earth. I think it's possible it was created or perfected there.”

Kronta stroked his chin. “I doubt created -- but, I believe perfected and certainly tested there.”

“There's more, Illya -- When we sanitized Marxo's lab, we found record of a telemesssage transmitted from Altia. It was coded using Altian street codes. We believe the contents of the message read, pickup January 15, delivery January 18. Marxo contracted the virus and died on the nineteenth.”

“Do you still have the message?”

Nyk withdrew his handheld vidisplay. “I transferred a copy here.”

Kronta looked toward the doorway. “Captain Sirk, you should have a look at this...”

Nyk sat across from Senta and scooped from a packaged dinner. “Nyk,” she asked, “do you have accommodations while you're here for this project?”

“No. Not yet.”

“You can stay here.”

“Thanks, Senta. I know the rules -- stay in the guest room and don't bother you when you have company.”

“I'll be so busy with this project I won't have time for company.” She pointed to his meal tray. “Are you done?”

“Yes.” He handed her the empty package and she dropped it into the waste reprocessor.

She stepped to a control panel, scanned her wrist and touched some controls. “Nyk, come here... Scan your wrist.” He pressed it to the control panel. “I've authorized your ID on the doorscan. You may come and go as you please.”

He wandered into the apartment's living room and sat on a sofa. "So you think you and Helsyn can do this."

"Yes, but we have no margin for error."

"How long do you think it'll take?"

"How long do we have?" she asked.

"Well -- let's back-time it. It's twenty-nine days 'til the ultimatum ... twenty-eight, really, since today is nearly over. Let's assume it takes Lexal three days to inoculate everyone -- we're down to twenty-five. How long would it take the replication plants to gear up and manufacture a hundred fifty million doses?"

"Assuming we deliver good molecular models..." She looked at the ceiling. "Five days."

"Thirty million doses a day? How big is a dose?"

"Probably five millilitres or so."

He pondered. "That's 750,000 litres for a hundred fifty million doses ... three thousand barrels manufactured and delivered to Lexal."

"Hmm... Maybe we should budget ten days, including transportation."

"I'll bring this up at our next meeting. We need to figure the logistics of moving three thousand barrels to Lexal. Ten days to make and transport the vaccine and three to administer it. That gives you twelve days to develop it. Can you do that?"

"We'll have to, won't we?"

"What goes into a vaccine?"

"Well -- vaccines work by stimulating the production of antibodies -- molecules the body produces to defend against infection. Antibodies tie up the virus so it can't attach to the target cell and reproduce."

He nodded. "I get it -- an antibody resembles the surface of the target cell. The virus attaches and is neutralized."

"Right. What we must do is to trick the body into forming antibodies that will attack the virus. Dr Helsyn tells me historically, a pathogen was grown and then killed or crippled. Unfortunately, we have no media in which to grow this virus."

"I don't think we'd want to grow it if we could," Nyk replied.

"Instead, we must synthesize molecules resembling the protein jacket. The immune system will believe the vaccine molecules are invaders and create the antibodies. Once they're in the bloodstream..."

"...you're immune." He nodded. "Very clever the immune system is."

"We can also create synthetic antibodies as a bridge until the natural ones develop. And, we'll throw in a good dose of immune system booster to speed up the process. I'll tell you, Nyk -- working with Dr

Helsyn has been a thrill. I've learned so much.”

“I'll bet he'll say the same about you. I was proud of your performance at the meeting today.”

She smiled. “Why, thank you, Nyk. If I didn't know better I'd say you were coming on to me.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “I'm not one for hollow flattery, Senta. I was proud of you. Despite the whole divorce business, I never lost my admiration for you. I've said it before -- I'd like us to be friends. Do you think that's possible?”

“Possible ... yes.”

“Good.” He yawned. “I'm going to turn in. I have to be up early tomorrow. I'm meeting Andra at the shuttleport, and then we take a ride to Lexal. We're meeting with Mykko Wygann and his wife.”

Nyk sat beside Andra as the shuttle swept across the Lexalese highlands and touched down at the shuttleport. “I didn't expect to return here so soon,” he said.

“I've been here a couple of times since the insurrection. I like it here.”

The craft stopped by the terminal building and the door opened. Nyk descended a flight of steps and onto the pavement. Andra joined him and they headed through the terminal to the groundcar lot. He hired a car and directed it to the palace.

“It looks like they've repaired most of the damage,” he said to Andra as the car wound up switchbacks to the hilltop palace. It's also nice to see fewer guards on duty.”

“Yes,” she replied. “Tensions have eased significantly.”

“I wonder what our news will do to tensions.”

The car parked and Nyk stepped out. He gave Andra a hand and led her toward a guard station. The guard spoke through a vidphone. “Someone will escort you.”

Another member of the security force approached. “Follow me.” He led them into the palace and into a lift to an office.

Nyk sat on a bench upholstered in a deep-pile blue velvet. Harsh light from the blue sun streamed through a window and across the floor. Andra stood, her hands clasped behind her back.

The door opened and a stocky, late-middle-aged man entered accompanied by a tall woman with oat-straw white hair. She approached Andra, embraced her and they kissed.

“I still can't get over how alike they are,” the man remarked to Nyk. He extended his hand. “Nykyo -- good to see you again.”

“Chancellor.”

“Please -- it's Mykko.”

Janna offered her hand. "Nykkyo."

"I read the briefing material you sent," Wygann said. "We've heard the threats from this separatist group. We hadn't quite known how to interpret this planet-killer talk."

"A biological weapon," Nyk replied, "a vicious disease, a plague that would undoubtedly kill the majority of a planet's population."

"And you believe Lexal is the target?"

"Your world, Chancellor, is unfortunately the logical choice for demonstrating this weapon. We can't guarantee these terrorists will behave logically, but all indicators point to a first-use against Lexal."

"We had adjusted to a period of lessened tensions with Altia," Janna added. "After the insurrection, the High Legislature ordered the scrapping of Altian perimeter defenses."

"Yes," Nyk replied, "along with a restructuring of the Altian government and payment of reparations to Lexal. I'm familiar with the settlement."

"How does your task force expect to deal with this threat?" asked Wygann.

"We are proceeding on several fronts. We have liaisons with security and intelligence forces in several areas and we are pursuing The Seven with all diligence."

"Given the nature of that organization, I doubt you'll make inroads before the expiration of their ultimatum."

"We're hoping for a breakthrough. On another front, we are in the process of developing a vaccine that would render their weapon useless. I've been authorized to offer it to you. If the virus is deployed against Lexal, your people would be immune -- assuming you could inoculate your entire population."

"Are you offering this to other colonies?"

"We will offer it to the entire hegemony. As the likeliest target, Lexal is to receive the first shipments."

"Hmm..." Wygann looked toward Janna. "Get my security chief."

Janna touched a proximity pad. A tall young man approached. "Venn, Chancellor wishes to speak with his security chief." The man snapped a bow, turned and left.

Wygann turned toward Nyk. "Who all is on this task force?"

"ExoAgency personnel, a couple of doctors... My wife -- my ex-wife, who's a genetics expert... A Mr Pring..."

"Chief boot-licker to the president of the HL," Wygann interjected.

"A Captain Sirk of the Altian Security Force."

Wygann squinted "Do you really think his bunch is sincere about stopping The Seven?"

Nyk nodded. "I do."

"Even if The Seven is secretly part of the Altian government?"

"Certainly you don't believe that."

"Certainly I do. Who is this Captain Sirk?"

"He's the Altian security force expert on The Seven."

"A captain ... their head man on The Seven -- is a mere captain." Wygann shook his head.

"I've seen him aggressively hunting their operatives on Altia," Nyk replied.

"They should be hunting the brains of the operation -- not the feet."

The door opened and an older man in uniform entered, bowed to Janna and saluted Wygann. "My security chief." Mykko looked at him. "Tell me -- suppose we wished to inoculate every Lexalese... How quickly could we do that?"

"Inoculate, Chancellor?"

Wygann touched the inside of his elbow with his forefinger. "Give everyone a shot in the arm. How could we do that?"

"I'll need to study this -- formulate a plan."

"How long would it take?"

"The plan? A few days, Chancellor."

"No -- I need to know how long it would take to inoculate everyone if we were to press all our medical staff to the job. And, it must be done in total secrecy."

"Total secrecy, Chancellor?"

"Total secrecy."

"I'll schedule a meeting with the Health Minister. When do you need this plan?"

"Today," Wygann replied. "Right after lunch is soon enough."

The security chief's eyes popped. "Right, Chancellor. I'll get on it." He turned and left.

Janna held hands with Andra as Nyk walked with them in the palace courtyard. An enormous orange crescent hung low in the western sky. "Lexal Prime is especially beautiful tonight," Andra remarked.

"I'll say this," Nyk said. "Your security chief is a devious fellow."

"He's the best," Janna replied.

“I think his plan will work.”

Janna stopped at a bench near a fountain in the center of the courtyard and held her hand in the stream of water. “I hope your scientists can develop this vaccine in time. I have my doubts.”

“Our best minds are on it,” Andra replied.

Janna shook her head. “Is this to be the story of Lexal? To be a pariah colony everyone wishes to harm?”

“Not everybody,” Nyk said.

“Not you two, I know. We don't have a friendly ear in the entire HL.”

“That will change,” Nyk replied. “Once the horror of what The Seven are attempting is understood -- it will turn opinion in favor of what you and Mykko have accomplished here.”

“Or -- in a few days' time -- this world will become a wasteland. Nykkyo ... Andra -- If I don't have the opportunity again... Thank you for your efforts.”

11 -- The Sequencing Lab

Nyk led Andra into the conference room at ExoAgency headquarters. “You're in on this -- you might as well sit in the meetings,” he said. “We're a bit early.”

Senta walked in and sat across from Nyk. One by one the others filed in. Kronta rapped the table with his knuckle. “We'll keep it short. Progress reports.” He looked toward Helsyn.

“We are making progress mapping the virus and designing an antibody,” he replied.

“We could make more progress if I had access to my labs,” Senta added. “I propose we move the vaccine development to Sudal. I've sketched out some program modifications I can make to a sequencing machine that will dramatically shorten the turnaround time on these antibodies.”

Kronta nodded. “Any objections?” He looked around the table. “Do what you deem best.” He turned toward Sirk. “Any luck chasing down The Seven?”

Sirk shook his head. “No -- none.”

“Did you make any progress tracking down that locator code,” Nyk asked, “the one on the message

to Marxo?"

"We did -- it was a spoofed code."

"Spoofed?" Kronta asked.

"Masked ... whatever you want to call it. We've seen these before in teletext traffic we've intercepted between Seven operatives. They must have penetrated one of our telecommunications facilities."

"Did it originate on Altia or did they spoof that, too?"

"They can't spoof a prefix," Kronta replied. "That is attached at the point of offworld relay. It's an Altian prefix -- the message originated on Altia."

"I've passed it on to our communications forensic team," Sirk added.

Kronta looked toward Nyk. "How went it on Lexal?"

"Wygann is more than willing to cooperate with us..."

"... to save his own skin," Sirk interjected.

Kronta rapped the table. "Go on, Nyk."

"Wygann thinks he can inoculate the entire population in a single day."

"Oh!" Senta exclaimed. "If he could do that -- it gives us two extra days!"

"How can he administer 150 million doses in a single day?"

"By pipelining. Here's an overview of his plan. He will begin claiming that Altia intends to invade from the sky."

"It's very likely the virus and Altian undercover agents are on Lexal already," Kronta remarked.

"Not Altian," Sirk protested. "Agents of The Seven."

"Let's call them Seven agents of Altian nationality," Nyk suggested.

"And -- Altia has no means to attack Lexal from space," Sirk continued. "Our defense fleet was grounded."

"Very true."

Sirk became more agitated. "What of reports that Lexal is converting some deep-space shuttles into warp-enabled bombing vessels? Altia is defenseless -- and, vulnerable. A few well-placed bombs could destroy the domes covering our cities..."

"Mykko Wygann is not pursuing nor ever has pursued an offensive capability," Andra protested. "Lexalese perimeter defense is strictly that -- defensive."

“The best defense is an offense,” Sirk replied.

Kronta rapped on the table. “We have strayed from the agenda of this meeting. Please confine these sentiments to a more appropriate venue. Our goal is to neutralize first-strike use of this biological weapon. The fact the likely target is Lexal rather than Myatasya or T-Delta ... or, Floran itself is immaterial. Is that understood?” He looked around the table.

“Understood, sir,” Sirk replied.

“I apologize,” Andra added.

“Go ahead, Nyk.”

“Wygann is using these statements as the excuse to start staging mandatory air raid drills. It's one advantage he has -- his is a closed society, and his people march in lock-step with him. Once he has the vaccine, people entering the air raid shelters will be wrist-scanned. Lexalese residents will be sent to an area where they will be briefed and inoculated. He will conscript all available nurses and doctors for this task, and he'll use his own security forces to assist.”

“What of offworld visitors?” Kronta asked.

“They will be shunted to a separate holding area away from the vaccinations.”

“They won't be protected?”

“It's a price Wygann is willing to pay to have his own people vaccinated.”

“Wygann looks after his own,” Sirk sneered.

“That is enough, Captain,” said Kronta.

“He will also quietly and discreetly attempt to ... encourage offworlders to leave Lexal.”

“As harsh as it sounds,” Kronta replied, “it seems a reasonable compromise -- one I'd make. The last item I have is manufacturing and transportation logistics -- all I can say is, we're working on it. Let's get back to our jobs. We'll schedule another meeting when we have progress to discuss. Now -- adjourned.”

Nyk strolled the bluff overlooking the sea as the sky darkened into dusk. He felt a hand on his shoulder. “Howdy, stranger.”

He took Suki's hand and led her to a rock. He sat and she sat on his lap. He kissed her lips, held her face against his chest and caressed her hair. “Nykkyo -- what is going on? Senta has been working in Sudal around the clock and Andra is moodier than I've ever seen her. Look... she comes out and sits on her rock.” Suki pointed down at Andra sitting with her chin in her palm. “And -- why are you here instead of on Earth?”

“I can't talk about it.”

“Not even to me? I'm your wife, Nykkyo. Our lives are one.”

“One slip of the tongue could cost hundreds of millions of lives,” he replied. “Are you sure you want to know?”

“Hundreds of millions?”

“Have you seen the reports on Altia and The Seven?”

“Yes... I don't quite understand the politics. I'm too new here.”

He pondered. “I don't know where to start. You recall me describing the Ricin plot?”

“Yes, though I didn't fully understand that, either.”

“In simple terms, we have terrorists threatening to destroy a colony with a powerful biological weapon. Senta is collaborating in a crash program to develop a vaccine. Once the vaccine is developed we have to figure out how to get it there and administer it. We're racing the clock. She has about ten days to perfect it.”

“Ten days? How do you and Andra fit in?”

“The targeted colony is Lexal.”

“Oh... That explains Andra's anxiety.” Nyk lifted the hem of her tunic, slipped his hand under it and began caressing her back. “Mmm ... that feels good...” His finger touched her bra-strap. He grasped it and wiggled it up and down. “You can unhook it... That's better ... mmm... What about you? What's your involvement?”

“I'm acting as a liaison between parties. Right now I'm doing nothing but waiting ... and running errands for Senta and the others. How I wish this was over.”

“Is it really your battle, Nykkyo?”

“If we cave in to their demands, or if we permit them to destroy Lexal -- there's no telling where it would stop. They could hold the entire hegemony hostage. Before I got involved in this, Altia was just a name to me. There are more than two billion Altians, and most of them believe the other colonies owe them something.”

“Oh, God Nykkyo -- it sounds just like Earth geopolitics.”

“It's human nature I guess. At least you and I get some time together.” She snuggled against him. He yawned. “Shall we have some bed?”

“Hook me back up.”

She stood and took his hand as they walked back to the Residence. Nyk heard the sound of a groundcar comming to a halt outside the house. Senta climbed the stairs and headed for the storage room. She sat at the table and set down an injector and a pair of cartridges. “Nyk,” she said, “when you go into town -- pick up some more sleep aids. This is the last one.”

Senta loaded a cartridge into the injector and lifted her hem. She held the gadget above her skin and hesitated, her hand trembling. "Sukiko -- would you mind?"

"Your hands are shaking," Suki said.

"I get like this after a rough day. Please inject me."

"What is that?" Nyk asked and examined the injector. "Analgesic?"

"I have a splitting headache," Senta replied. "I was going to take analgesic and a sleep aid and lie down."

"I'll inject you." He pulled off the needle guard, poked her thigh and pressed the trigger. "What have you had to eat today?"

Senta planted her elbows on the table and held her head. "Don't mention food -- my head hurts so much my stomach's upset."

"Did you have dinner?" Suki asked. Senta shook her head. "Lunch? The reason your head aches is because you haven't eaten."

"Suki's right," Nyk said. "You must eat, Senta."

"I don't have time."

"You don't want to repeat what happened during the Ricin crisis, do you?" he asked.

"...no..." Senta said through her fingers.

"Let's see what meals we have." Nyk stepped into the storage room and returned with a stack of packaged meals. "Some soft flat bread ... powdered potatoes ... prepared green vegetables ... soy cutlets ... wheat and rice pilaf ... mixed fruit puree ... sweet bean cake." He tore open packages, mounded the contents onto a tray and put it into the warmer.

"There..." Nyk set the tray before Senta. "Start eating."

"The analgesic is helping my head... which helps my stomach." She picked up a spoon.

Suki looked at the meal with eyes wide. "Nykkyo -- you told me you didn't know how to cook."

"I don't. I didn't cook any of it -- I just mixed and matched."

"Still -- that's the nicest looking dinner I've seen since I left Earth."

"There's more in the packages -- help yourself. This is how we ate when I was a boy. My mother was head of new product development for the Food Service. She'd bring home failed meal packages and we'd have a bit of this and a bit of that..."

"Senta -- what happened to you during the Ricin crisis?"

"By the end, she had made herself so over-wrought she nearly had a breakdown. She developed

problems with her intestines. Her bowels were so tied into knots she couldn't even..."

"Nyk!" Senta interrupted. "Must we talk about my insides?"

"It was a long time before you recovered," Nyk replied.

"Senta," Suki asked, "how did you discover the Ricin genome?"

"It happened right after we were married," Nyk said. "We were living in married student housing at the University of Floran City. Do you remember that one-room apartment? We had a thin mattress we'd roll up and stuff into a closet."

"Mmm..." Senta nodded and gazed at the ceiling. She set down her spoon. "Yes -- I had completed my undergraduate work at the University of Sudal and went to Floran City to study under Dr Hanri. I needed a thesis topic. Hanri tried to convince me to study his native plants, but since my enrollment was sponsored by the Food Service, I felt I should work with food crops. I had studied lentils as an undergraduate and was familiar with them.

"I picked a strain being bred in the pilot domes. Right away I noticed something strange -- something I hadn't seen in Sudal. Not only did I find an alien gene..."

"...from the castor bean," Nyk interrupted.

"I also found the sequence counter like the one we discovered in the virus. Of course, nothing like that appears in nature. My conclusion was someone had been tampering with the lentil genome. Hanri was so conservative, so doctrinaire -- he kept telling me it wasn't possible -- but, I couldn't let it go."

"Among her other traits," Nyk remarked, "Senta is tenacious."

"Hanri had developed the first resequencer and we had a prototype in the lab. I helped him program it. One night I let myself into the lab and began reprogramming it with the lentil genome. After a few nights I had proved my finding -- and, I was convinced of a conspiracy.

"I showed Hanri what I had done and he scolded me for using the resequencer without authorization. He said my programming had disrupted his work, and he told me if I used it again, I'd be disciplined. He refused to look at my work -- worthless, he called it. But, I knew I was right."

"Why was Hanri so skeptical of your results?" Nyk asked.

"It was academic hubris," Senta replied. "Sometimes a scientist -- especially one of high standing -- develops such an investment in the status quo... He can't accept his students discovering something novel."

Suki nodded. "I saw it all the time in my career."

"Your career?" Senta asked.

"Yes -- I was an assistant professor at Pace University in New York before coming here."

"A professor?"

“You're both Doctor Kyhana,” Nyk replied. “Suki has a doctorate in ancient Earth history, from a university that's as prestigious there as FCU is here.”

“And, as full of academic hubris,” Suki added. “If some student discovers something that pushes back a timeline by a thousand years, the established scientists will reject it.”

“Students are guilty until proven innocent...” said Senta.

“...wrong until proven right...” Suki added.

“...stupid until proven smart.” Senta looked up at Suki, smiled and nodded. “Sometime after this settles down, you and I should sit and discuss Earth and Floran higher education.”

“From what I see at Sudal -- they're about the same.” Senta patted the back of Suki's hand. “What happened next?”

“What happened next wouldn't have without Nykkyo. Few appreciate his role in solving the Ricin plot.”

“Nykkyo?” Suki looked at him. “I didn't know you were involved.”

“My involvement extended only to my acquaintance with Dyomann Hasse. He was the assistant production manager for the agridomes and took over after my dad died. I asked him to arrange a meeting with the head of plant breeding.”

“He was skeptical at first, too,” Senta continued. “After a day of sequencing diagrams and comparing live genomes to models, he became convinced the lentils were genetically tainted. He ordered a recall of the entire crop. Of course, something like that can't be kept from the public. Once word leaked out, there was a panic.

“I published a paper on what I found. Hanri was furious -- because I had stolen his recognition. Now I was the celebrity at FCU, and he was derided as some reactionary naysayer. He tried to block my degree, but the university had no choice but to grant it to me.

“Eventually Hanri and I reconciled and we worked together on reports for the Food Service and the High Legislature. Internal Affairs rounded up a half dozen culprits. I was called as an expert witness at the trial. They were convicted, though I have my doubts about their guilt.”

“What happened to them?”

“They were hanged.”

“Hanged?”

“Yes,” Nyk replied. “This sort of terrorist conspiracy is the only capital crime on our books. They were hanged in the Central Square -- the first executions in more than twenty generations. I remember the blood circus -- I could hear the crowds cheering as each one was dropped. Senta was awarded the Chancellor's Medallion.”

“Where is it? May I see it?”

“It’s at the apartment in Floran City,” Senta replied. “I hate looking at it. It reminds me of those condemned men and women.”

“Tell Suki about your boon.”

“Yes -- the Food Service asked me what procedures could be put into place to prevent such an incident from happening again. I sketched out a design for the sequencing labs. They also granted me a boon.”

“What did you request?” Suki asked.

“I told them I wouldn’t have confidence in the sequencing labs unless I ran them.”

“So,” Nyk added, “they created a new division inside the Food Service and named Senta as its director. It’s how she got to where she is today.”

Senta set down her spoon and looked at the empty tray. She pressed her hand against her stomach. “I hadn’t realized how hungry I was. I feel much better now.”

“Maybe you won’t need the sedative.”

“I’ll use it anyway.” She picked up the cartridge and injector and headed toward the guest room. “See you in the morning.”

“Let’s go check on Andra,” Suki suggested.

Nyk walked with her out onto the bluff and helped her down the rocks to where Andra sat staring at the sea.

“Are you worried about Lexal?” Nyk asked.

“Of course I am.”

“Andra,” Suki said, “Nykkyo and I are going to bed. Why don’t you join us?”

Nyk brewed some green tea and poured cups for Suki and Andra. He sat at the table and opened a breakfast cake. Senta emerged from the guest room and shook out her hair. She stepped to the storage room, returned with an injector cartridge, lifted the hem of her tunic and drove the needle into her thigh.

Nyk regarded her. “You’re using stimulants in the morning as well as sedatives at night?”

“I have to keep going somehow. We’re already two days behind schedule.”

“You’re going to be so strung out by the end of this,” Andra said.

“I don’t have a choice.”

“How’s it going?” Nyk asked.

“It’s going slowly -- too slowly. It’s not that we’re not making progress. We are -- we have the first

phase nearly licked. Whoever devised this genome didn't make it easy for us. It's a work of genius -- twisted but genius nonetheless."

"Do your reprogrammed sequencers help?"

"It would be impossible without them." She wolfed down a breakfast cake and gulped a cup of tea. "Back to the labs..."

Nyk watched Senta head down the stairs. "I have a renewed admiration for that woman," he said.

"She has a renewed admiration for you," Andra replied.

Nyk dropped his breakfast utensils into the waste reprocessor. He paced around the Residence's middle level. "Andra -- will you need your groundcar today?"

"Since she's been working on the virus, Senta has had no time for our project," she replied. "I have no reason to go to the lab, so you might as well use it. Where are you going?"

"I'm tired of waiting around while Senta and Helsyn work on the vaccine. Senta's right. We won't have it in time at this rate. I'm going to the sequencing lab and see if I can help."

"You? Nyk -- you don't know anything about biomolecular modelling."

"Neither did Senta at one point in her life. There must be some way I can help. If I don't do something productive -- I'll go crazy." He headed down the stairs and opened the groundcar.

The groundcar parked itself in a lot adjacent to a squat polymer concrete building resembling most in Sudal. The heavy storm shutters were up, exposing a wall of windows. The building was located north of the city. Behind it were a row of pilot domes and in the distance Nyk could see the production agridomes.

He walked through a door etched with the Food Service emblem of stylized dome in a wreath of wheat stalks. Ahead was a circular desk occupied by a receptionist and behind her lay the sequencing labs. Through a transparent wall he could see technicians in hooded coveralls feeding samples of peas, lentils, wheat and rice into analyzers.

To his right was a corridor leading toward the research labs. He headed in that direction. The door was locked.

"May I help you?" the receptionist called to him.

He turned around. "I'd like to see Dr Senta Kyhana."

"I'm sorry -- she's left strict orders that she is to be disturbed by no one."

"Tell her..."

"No one. Nobody. Not even you."

"Please tell her her husband ... her ex-husband is here."

The receptionist looked up at him. "Her orders were explicit. She did not identify any exceptions."

"I need to see her, and I'll stand here and breathe down your neck until you inform her..."

"All right..." She poked the vidisplay. "What is your name?"

"Nykkyo."

She poked a vidisplay. "I'm sorry to disturb you Dr Kyhana, but there's a Nykkyo someone insisting on..." She looked up. "She'll be right out."

He sat on a bench in the lab lobby. Senta breezed through the corridor door. "Nyk! Do you have something from Kronta?"

"No. I thought I'd come here and see if there's something I can do to help."

She rolled her eyes and nodded toward the door. "You might as well come back with me. We really can't talk here." He followed her down the corridor. She scanned her wrist and gestured him into a lab.

Inside were banks of vidisplays connected to cabinets of equipment. Senta sat at one and began poking it. "I don't know how you can help," she said. "I appreciate the gesture, but..."

"What is it you're doing?"

"This is a genetic re-sequencer."

"It doesn't look like the sequencer you had me running at the lab in Floran City."

"That was a sequence analyzer. This is a re-sequencer."

"What does it do?"

"This device predicts how genomes change and modify through the generations. We use it to identify which genes will be passed on as crops are bred. I have modified its programming to work with viral reproduction strategies -- in particular, the strategy of our virus." She poked the screen and swiveled her chair to another display.

"Then, what do you do?"

"Once we've predicted the details of the next generation genome, we feed that data into this processor. This one is programmed to generate molecular models of the protein templates the DNA produces."

"Those go to the replication plants, right?"

"Wrong. Those get matched to molecular models of proteins resequenced from the DNA patterns in the Agency viral database. When we have a match, we look up the corresponding antibodies."

"And, the antibody models go into the vaccine."

She turned to face him. “Nyk -- I can either answer your questions or do my work. I can't do both. Since answering your questions won't make a vaccine and doing my work will, I think my time is better spent doing my work. Don't you?”

“I suppose...” He wandered around the equipment.

“Please don't touch anything.”

“I won't.” He stood behind her looking over her shoulder. “Senta -- isn't there SOMETHING I can do to help?”

She looked around the lab. “Yes -- that cart is in my way. Why don't you push it into the storage room down the hall?”

“I'd be happy to.” He grabbed the cart and rolled it through the door and to the storeroom. When he returned he found the door to the lab closed and latched.

He pressed actuator. He pressed it again. He pressed the chime and pressed it again. “Senta!” he yelled, pounding on the door. “SENTA! Let me in!” Through the window he could see her sitting at a console, her back to the door. He pounded more. “SENTA!” he yelled. “SENTAAA!”

She stood, stepped to the door and opened it a crack. “That wasn't nice,” he said.

“Nyk -- you really are slowing me down... Oh, come on in.” She pulled the door open and stepped aside.

He paced around the lab as she returned to the display. “Senta -- there must be something I can do. Maybe my head's no good for this kind of work, but what about my hands?”

She rested her chin on her fist. “Yes, Nyk -- there is something. We're working on the second phase of the virus -- the one that attacks the immune system. It would help if you could query the Agency database and isolate the genome sequences of viruses known to do that.”

He sat at a vidisplay and stared at the screen. “How do I do this?”

“It's just like looking up anything in the database. Press *New query* . He pressed the screen and a query form was displayed. “It's self- prompting -- designed so even a bureaucrat can do it.”

He began formulating his query. “You want viruses known to attack the human immune system.”

“Yes.”

“I found five.”

“Five?” She stood and looked at his screen. “Move these patterns over to the protein synthesizer... like this.” Her fingers flew over the screen. “Now -- which of these most closely resemble the protien from our virus?”

“This one?”

“Or is it that one?” She pointed. “Something in between.”

“Why are we looking for matching proteins?” he asked.

“They're the starting points for our vaccine elements. If we can modify an existing molecular model, we'll save time... Yes! I think that does it. Now, if we use the inverse sequencer ... to get our antibody... There -- that wraps up variation four of phase two. Four down and fifty-five to go. Here, Nyk -- let's divide and conquer. You work on this set of sequences and I'll do these.”

Nyk began comparing molecular models. “This work isn't all that difficult, Senta. I even understand it. It's almost fun.”

“No, it's not difficult,” she replied. “It's time consuming but not difficult. The trick was understanding and programming the re-sequencers at the molecular level in the first place. That was the difficult part.”

“Oh...”

Nyk paced around the middle level of the Residence. The sun had set and the house's ambient lighting came on. “Why aren't you helping Senta at the lab today?” Andra asked.

“We've done all the sequencing analysis we can,” he replied. “Now she's working with Helsyn to fine-tune the molecular models. There are about fifty variants to each phase and we can't ask the replication plants to crank out a hundred different vaccing components and their corresponding antibodies.”

“How are they going to deal with it?”

“She and Helsyn are looking for commonalities and combinations. If they can get it down to a dozen or so models -- that's a small enough number for the plants to deal with. The sequencing part went quickly. This is the hard part and it's more art than science.” He paced more. “Ten days to the ultimatum. We're beginning to eat into our manufacturing time.”

He heard the sound of a groundcar stopping outside the building. Senta climbed the spiral staircase. “Here it is -- our prototype vaccine.” She opened a polymer case containing a vial and an injector. “It's combined with an immune-system booster. The replication labs are geared up and can produce twenty million doses a day. All we need to do is to test it.”

She screwed the vial into the injector, pulled off the needle guard and flushed air from the device. Making a fist with her left hand she began probing the inside of her elbow with her right finger. “Senta!” Andra exclaimed. “What are you doing?”

“We have to test it. I'll administer it to myself. Tomorrow I go to Floran City and expose myself to the virus.”

“You can't do that!” Suki exclaimed. “It's unethical to test a new product on yourself.”

“It IS ethical,” Nyk replied. “Here we have no laboratory animals -- no mice, no guinea pigs -- no monkeys... As the creator of a new medical product, Senta is expected to test it on herself. But -- I agree with Andra. Senta -- if this fails -- we risk losing the finest mind in the Hegemony. We'll lose any chance to develop a vaccine.”

“If it fails we're lost anyway.”

“If it fails we'll devise a way to stall for time. We'll agree to negotiations -- drag our feet -- whatever.”

She paused. “The only alternative is to put out a call for a volunteer. We'll need to screen applicants ... that'll set us back at least two days ... maybe more. It also jeopardizes the secrecy of the project.”

“What about a volunteer from the labs?” Nyk asked.

“I can't ask them,” Senta replied. “They have families.”

“I'll volunteer,” Andra said.

“NO!” Suki and Nyk exclaimed in unison. “Use me, instead.” Suki added.

Senta shook her head. “We can't use you. You're an Earth person -- your system is a soup of antibodies. We need someone with a virgin immune system. It disqualifies Nyk, too. He's been exposed to who-knows-what on that world.”

“Andra spent time on Earth, too,” Nyk said.

“Who did you have contact with there?” Senta asked.

“No one -- Zander kept me locked in his trailer. We were isolated.” She turned to Suki. “It's all right -- I trust Senta. There's little risk...” She glanced at Senta. “Isn't there?”

“It's as near a certainty as I can give,” Senta replied. “I'd estimate the odds of it working at four to five to one.”

“Eighty percent?” Andra mused. “Those are good enough odds for me. Besides -- I have a stake in this. They intend to attack Lexal. I'm bonded to Janna there. She's my academy sister and sisters come to each other's aid.”

“It's settled then,” Senta said. “I'll administer the vaccine and tomorrow we take the train to Floran City.”

Senta removed an elastic strap from the box. Andra sat and rested her forearm, palm up on the table. “I don't think we'll need the tourniquet,” she said as she stroked Andra's arm. “You have a big, juicy vein right here.” She held the needle parallel to Andra's skin and slid it in. “Put your finger here.” Andra held the tube in place.

Senta looked into Andra's eyes. Andra nodded once and Senta pressed the button. The vial began to empty.

“That does it,” Senta said and withdrew the needle. “Press here -- the needle's coated with salve so the wound should close quickly.”

“How do you feel?” Suki asked.

“Fine,” Andra replied. “It's late -- let's get some rest.”

“Senta and I will accompany you to Floran City in the morning.”

“I’m coming too,” Suki added.

Nyk shook his head. “You can’t -- you’re not part of this project.”

A tear rolled down her cheek. “I am coming, too. Don’t try to stop me.”

12 -- The Test

Nyk held Suki’s hand as he followed Senta and Andra into ExoAgency headquarters. They were met by Aahhn and Helsyn. “Sukiko!” Aahhn said.

“Greetings, Dr Aahhn,” she replied.

“When I treated you -- I never expected to see you again.”

“Well -- I’m here.”

“And speaking the language. But -- what are you doing HERE?”

“I’m here to give Andra moral support.”

“But... Has Kronta...”

“It’s all right, Aahhn,” Nyk said. “She’s safe.”

“Let’s get started,” Helsyn said. “Step this way.” He gestured down a corridor and into the treatment room that had held Marxo. Suki set down a travel case she carried.

“What’s in the case?” Andra asked.

“Just a few necessities,” Suki replied. “We may be here for a day or two.”

“I’ll give you a tour,” Aahhn said. “You’ll have everything you’ll need. Here’s a stasis cabinet with meals. There’s a commode behind that door. Over here are some drugs -- analgesics, sleep aids and the like.” Andra nodded. “If you want privacy you can pull this screen. We’ll try to accommodate you in that regard, but we do need to observe you.”

“I understand.”

He pointed to a sliding tray. “With this we can pass objects in to you without breaking contamination.” He gestured toward a hook on the wall. “You might be more comfortable in a treatment gown. You can change over there. Then, we have to attach something to your arm.”

Andra snatched the gown from the hook and stepped behind a screen. She draped her tunic and *lifxarpa* over the screen and emerged, barefoot and sat on the pallet.

Aahhn strapped a rectangular box onto her upper arm. “Try to bear with this -- it's a blood analyzer. We'll get continuous readings of your antibody levels. Now, I'll need to poke you twice -- the device pumps blood from one vein and returns it to another.” He examined her arms. “We'll do number one here...” He pierced a vein near her elbow and inserted a catheter. “Number two, here...” The second catheter went into the back of her forearm. Aahhn used adhesive tape to secure the tubing.

He stepped behind the containment wall and manipulated a control. “We're getting readings.”

Helsyn consulted the panel. He nodded approval. “Yes -- those are good baseline counts of the phase one and phase two antibodies.”

“Then, we're ready to go,” Aahhn replied. He nodded toward Helsyn who unsealed a box and withdrew another, encased in a clear polymer wrap.

Suki removed an object from the case and handed it to Andra. “Maybe this will bring you luck.”

“My shell!” Andra cradled the metre-long object, the exoskeleton of a native marine animal. “Thank you.”

Aahhn regarded the shell. “What is that?”

“It's my lucky shell. Nykkyo gave it to me after I had fled Zander. We were walking the beach and he picked it up. Look how beautiful it is inside -- all the different colors of blue and violet... This is why I decided to study our native sea life. I've never seen a live one.”

“I've only seen them washed up on the beach,” Nyk said.

“One day I'll find them in their natural habitat.” Andra held Suki, kissed her and stroked a tear from her face. “You're so considerate. We'll be together in a couple of days.”

“I love you.”

“I know you do. I love you, too.”

Nyk made eye contact with Suki and nodded toward the door. Helsyn stepped into the room and handed the box to Andra. He stepped behind the panel and pressed a control. The door to the containment chamber slid shut.

“Check the seals,” Aahhn said. “Good. Go ahead, Andra.”

Andra ripped open the polymer and opened the box. Inside was an inhaler of the sort used for recreational drugs. “This?”

“Yes -- use it like a euphoriant inhaler.”

Senta turned her back. "I can't watch!"

Andra paused, then held the device to her lips and inhaled deeply. She held her breath for a slow count to twenty and released it through her nose. "What do I do with this?" she asked.

"Drop it in the waste reprocessor."

Andra complied and sat on a therapeutic pallet.

"Now," said Aahhn, "we wait."

Kronta stepped into the treatment room. "How are we doing?" he asked.

"The patient has just exposed herself to the virus," Aahhn replied. "Beyond that, it's too soon to tell."

Kronta surveyed the room. "Nyk -- can I have a word with you?"

Nyk followed Kronta into a conference room and shut the door. "Yes, Illya?"

"What is Suki doing in there?"

"Suki has an emotional investment with Andra. She wanted to be with her."

"How much does she know about this?"

"She knows we're trying to stop a biological attack on Lexal -- not much more. She's a newcomer here, Illya. She understands the need to keep it secret, and she doesn't know enough people to tell anyone. She's safe."

"Nykkyo -- I gave specific orders that this project be discussed with NO ONE outside the authorized list. If your access to Wygann wasn't so critical to the success of this mission -- I'd bounce you off this task force and into detention."

Nyk looked down. "I'm sorry, Illya. Suki's here for Andra's sake, too -- to give her moral support. I don't think it's unreasonable..."

"Maybe not -- but this is not a reasonable project. You KNOW the stakes."

"So does Suki. She's my WIFE, Illya. Besides -- should this test go the wrong way -- and Senta admits there's a one-in-four to one-in-five chance it will -- she and Andra want to be together. I wasn't about to tell her no. Suki kept knowledge of our operations on Earth secret while she was there -- secret from her own mother and father. She knows how to be discreet. She's safe."

Kronta shook his head. "It's too late to un-do it. There had better be no glitches as a result of this, Nyk. Otherwise..."

Nyk gulped. "I understand, Illya."

"I might have felt differently if you had discussed this with me first."

“I apologize,” Nyk replied. “It won't happen again.”

“Good. I'll check on Andra's progress later today.”

Nyk headed back to the treatment room, sat beside Suki and took her hand. “What did Illya want?” she asked.

“Oh -- nothing.”

Nyk walked into the treatment room. Suki was dozing on a sofa. He looked into the containment chamber. Andra was reclining on the pallet holding a handheld vidisplay, the shell across her lap. He could hear a public-affairs program through the communicator.

“How's she doing?” he asked Helsyn.

“So far -- so good. The incubation period for this virus is about a day or so. We've seen a spike in the first phase antibodies, but that's leveling off. It looks like the vaccine is working.”

“When will we know for sure?”

“Once the antibody count levels and starts dropping we'll know she's cleared the virus from her system.”

Nyk nodded and stepped to the communicator. “Andra -- how are you feeling?”

She looked up. “Fine ... bored.” She yawned. “Maybe I'll try to get some rest.” She switched off the vidisplay, doused the lights and lay on her side.

Nyk put his hand on Suki's shoulder. “We can go to Senta's apartment and get some rest.”

She shook her head. “I'm staying here.”

“Then, so am I.”

“Where is Senta?”

“She went home -- she said she's too agitated to watch.”

Nyk sat on the sofa, his head back. Suki leaned against him. Motion in the room awakened him and he saw Aahhn at the control panel. “Andra,” he said through the communicator. “Good morning. How are you feeling?”

Andra sat up and rubbed her eyes. “I feel a little strange.”

“Strange, how?”

She pressed her hand to her abdomen. “My stomach...”

Aahhn consulted the control panel. “We're seeing more antibodies.” Nyk looked over his shoulder.

I'd better get Helsyn."

Andra sat on the edge of the pallet and folded her arms across her abdomen.

Helsyn stepped in and reviewed the panel. "This is good and bad news," he said.

"Good how?"

"The good news is her antibodies are climbing. That means we neutralized the second phase."

"You mean the one that attacks her immune system."

"Correct. The bad news is her antibodies are climbing -- the infection is advancing. The third phase attacks the digestive system."

Andra leaned forward, belched and retched. "What's happening to me?"

"You're trying to vomit," Aahhn said. "There's a basin under the pallet."

She fetched the basin and set it on her lap. "I've never vomited before -- I don't know how!"

"Never?" Suki asked.

"Many Florans go their whole lives without being sick once," Nyk replied.

"It's a reflex," Aahhn said. "Relax and don't fight it."

Andra leaned over the basin, panting. She opened her mouth and heaved. Suki turned her back and bit her knuckle.

"Ohhhh..." Andra moaned and vomited again. "I'm feeling a little better, now," she gasped.

"Have you noticed any swelling under your arms?" Aahhn asked. "Any tenderness?"

"No..." Andra felt her armpits. "Maybe a little puffiness."

"What about your neck?" Andra felt her neck and pointed to a lump. "Phase four is the lymphatic system."

Helsyn pointed. "Her antibody levels are rising rapidly, now."

"The vaccine isn't working!" Suki exclaimed.

"It is," Aahhn replied. "Her body is fighting the virus."

"Oh, Andra!"

"He's right," Helsyn added. "Without the vaccine by now she'd be critical."

"I feel cold," Andra said. She folded her arms and began to shiver.

Aahhn examined another display. "She's running a fever." He spoke through the communicator, "Andra -- there's a blanket in the cabinet."

Andra lay on the pallet in the fetal position, huddled under the blanket. She moaned and shook.

"We should let her rest," Aahhn said.

"Don't leave me!" Andra moaned through the communicator.

Nyk paced before the containment chamber. Andra lay curled up on the pallet, her back to the glass wall. Aahhn pointed toward the display on the control panel. "Look -- her antibody levels are flattening."

"Does that mean she's clearing the virus?" Nyk asked.

Helsyn looked at the panel and her vital signs. He shook his head. "I don't think so. I think it means her immune system is overwhelmed. The virus is multiplying faster than she can create defenses."

"Andra," Nyk called. "How are you feeling?"

"So cold," she moaned.

"Her body temperature is climbing," Helsyn said.

Andra rolled onto her back. "Oh, my GOD!" Suki shrieked in English.

Nyk looked into the chamber. Andra's face, chest and arms were covered in red blotches.

"The fifth phase -- the skin," Aahhn remarked.

Andra lay on her back, breathing through her mouth. "My head is starting to hurt," she panted. "And, my neck..."

"Sixth phase, meningitis," Helsyn said. "Aahhn -- maybe we should send someone in there and start fluids." Aahhn nodded in agreement.

Nyk watched as an attendant wearing a containment suit stepped through the airlock. She approached Andra and raised the head of the pallet. He watched as she hung a pouch of saline and started in I.V. into Andra's forearm.

Suki grabbed his arm. "I want to go in there and comfort her," she said. "I'll put on one of those suits."

"It's too risky," Nyk replied. "I don't like seeing that attendant in there."

"I have some other rounds to make," Helsyn said. "I'll check on her in the morning."

Aahhn approached and regarded her. "Her body is fighting this hard," he said.

"Yes," Nyk replied. "Marxo was dead by now."

“I see a glimmer of hope. The vaccine stopped the first two phases of the virus. She did not exhibit the respiratory infection, nor has her immune system been compromised.”

“Then, why isn't she throwing off the infection?” Nyk asked.

“She may yet.” He poked a handheld vidisplay. “It's late. You folks should go home and get some rest.”

“I'm staying here,” Suki replied.

“I'll stay, too,” Nyk added.

Dawn twilight streaming through the high window in the treatment room waked Nyk. He looked into the containment chamber. Andra hadn't moved. She lay on her back, her eyes closed. Nyk thought her breathing looked rapid and shallow.

He put his ear to the communicator and could hear Andra mumbling. “No ... Zander ... no more drugs ... Zander ... I didn't mean it ... please don't ... whatever it was ... stop ... no ... don't ... don't...”

Suki cracked her eyes open. “How's she doing?”

“She's still breathing,” Nyk replied. “She's muttering to herself.”

“You mean she's delirious?”

“She seems to be reliving her time with Zander. Did she tell you about that?”

Suki nodded. “I thought I had a bad time with my first husband.”

A suited attendant approached Andra with a basin. She picked up the shell laying beside her on the pallet.

“Don't take that from her,” Suki said.

“What is it?”

“It's her lucky shell.”

“I have to move it. I'll put it back...” She began daubing water onto Andra's face and forehead with a cloth.

Senta stepped into the room. “How's she doing?”

Suki glowered at her. “Not well.”

“Oh, NO!” Senta stared into the chamber; then headed toward the airlock.

Nyk held her back. “Senta! You can't go in there!”

“I'm the one who belongs in there -- not her!”

“This was necessary,” Nyk said. “We all know the stakes.”

“I was so sure of the vaccine,” Senta said, burying her face in her hands.

“And, it worked,” Nyk replied. “It stopped the first two phases. Enough of the virus went on to multiply into the other four, and it overwhelmed her. Aahhn thinks she still can throw off the infection.”

“What if she can't?” Senta asked.

Aahhn and Helsyn stepped into the treatment room. “I think it's time to block her,” Helsyn said.

Nyk looked at the doctor and shook his head. “She wouldn't want that. She wouldn't want to be ... put to sleep.”

“Nykkyo,” Helsyn replied, “It would be a kindness.”

“Andra's a fighter. She'd want to fight this to the end.”

“Which I'm afraid may be quite near,” Aahhn added. He stepped to the control panel and began scrolling through the charts. “I wish I knew what else we could do for her.”

Suki stepped to Nyk and he embraced her. “Oh, Nykkyo,” she said. “I don't know what I'll do. I truly don't know what I'll do...”

Senta put her hand on Suki's shoulder. “I'm so sorry,” she said. “I was so sure...”

“We don't blame you,” Nyk replied.

Suki gazed into the chamber. “She was so brave ... so strong... I'll never forget her.”

Nyk slipped his arm around her. “She's not gone yet.”

“Look,” Aahhn said, pointing to the display. Helsyn stood looking over his shoulder. “If I scroll back to when she first exposed herself... Notice the rapid spike in antibody count. Her immune system was creating antibodies faster than the virus could multiply.” He pointed more. “Here, it starts to taper off, and here, it's flattened altogether. It's almost as if something stimulated her system right at the beginning.”

“Maybe,” Helsyn said, “it was the immune system booster we put into the vaccine.”

“Booster?” Aahhn asked.

“Yes. We thought it would speed up her building immunity.”

“Why didn't you say you had included booster?”

“Don't you use it as a matter of course?” Helsyn asked.

“I see very few infections of this nature. YOU'RE the expert on treating this sort of affliction.”

“We tried booster on Marxo and it didn't work,” Nyk said.

“That's because his immune system was knocked out by the second phase,” Helsyn replied. “The vaccine should protect against that part of the attack. Kurso -- you should KNOW booster is indicated for this situation.”

“Helsyn, if booster was indicated -- then, why didn't YOU order some?”

“She's YOUR patient, Kurso. I'm only here in a consulting role.”

“Then why in Destiny's name didn't you consult me and recommend it?”

Helsyn threw his hands in the air. “I was under the impression YOU were administering it. A third-year medical student would know...”

“Don't you think,” Suki said, “instead of arguing we should be giving her booster?”

Aahhn pressed a control and an attendant entered. “Get immune system booster into her -- a continuous infusion.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Quickly.”

“Right away, Doctor...” She headed down the corridor and returned in a containment suit and carrying a pouch of a straw-colored fluid. Nyk watched as she hung the pouch and connected it to the I.V. line running into Andra's forearm.

Nyk stood looking into the confinement chamber. Suki stood beside him and he put his arm around her. “Oh, Nykkyo,” she said, “I can't believe this is happening.”

“Andra tells me again and again that we mustn't question the assignments Destiny gives us, but do our duty and make the best of it.”

“I know I can go on.. I know I'll have to. It's not fair. I lost my family...”

“Your family lost you, to be more precise.”

“What difference does it make? I'll never hold my baby again... I'll never sit in the kitchen as Mom does the dishes and have girl talk with her. I had just reconciled myself to it -- I had just become comfortable here, with Andra. And, now ... so soon after ... this...” She sniffed back tears.

An attendant in an isolation suit opened the outer airlock door and sealed it behind her. She entered the chamber and replaced the pouch of booster draining into Andra's vein. Nyk watched as she stepped back into the airlock, was sprayed with decontaminant and then stepped into the outer room.

“How is she?” Nyk asked.

The attendant shook her head. “About the same.” She stepped to the control panel and poked a vidisplay screen. “I have some meal packages for you two. I'll get them.”

She fetched the packages and handed them to Nyk. "Call if you need anything."

He passed a package to Suki. "I'm really not hungry," she said.

"You had better eat," Nyk replied. "No sense making yourself sick over this."

"I am already sick over it." She popped the cover from the package.

"Andra wouldn't want you to suffer. She wouldn't want you to grieve so." Nyk held his tray and scooped from it. He stood by the transparent wall of the containment chamber. "She looks like she's sleeping peacefully. Her breathing is deep and regular -- not like before."

Suki stood beside him and clutched his arm. "Do you think she's in a coma?"

"I don't know. I don't have much experience with comas." He wandered to the control panel. "I wish I knew how to interpret these readings." He glanced into the chamber. "Her forehead looks damp," he said. "Aahhn said I should page him if anything changed."

"This looks like a change, don't you think?" Suki asked.

Nyk nodded. "I'll page him." He poked his handheld vidisplay and placed a call. "She's starting to perspire," he said.

"I'm at Central Clinic," Aahhn replied. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

Beads of perspiration formed on Andra's brow and rolled down her face. "What does this mean?" Nyk asked. "This didn't happen to Marxo."

"I had scarlet fever once as a child," Suki replied. "I had a high fever and was pretty sick. I remember when my fever broke -- I started sweating. Perspiration rolled off me. It felt like someone dumped a bucket of water on me."

"It must've been awful."

"No -- it felt good. After being so sick, it was when I started sweating that I also started feeling better."

"When your fever broke?" Nyk pointed to a display. "Look -- her body temperature has dropped."

"She's stirring," Suki said.

Nyk watched as Andra rolled her head from side to side. She lifted her hand and rubbed her eyes.

"Andra!" Suki called through the communicator.

"Oh, Sukiko," Andra replied. "It is so warm in here."

"I'll call the attendant and have her bring you some ice water."

"That would be nice," Andra replied. She threw the blanket off herself and Nyk could see dark, damp patches on her gown. "I'm soaked." She wiped moisture from her forehead. "And, I'm so hot."

The attendant held a water tumbler as Andra sipped through a drinking tube. Aahhn approached the chamber and regarded his patient. "She's perspiring. What does that mean?"

"It means her fever is breaking," Suki answered and pointed to the display. "Look."

"So it is... Look at her antibody counts -- they're almost off the chart! I think the blotches are beginning to fade. Don't you?"

"I can't tell if they are or not," Nyk replied.

"Let me signal Helsyn."

Aahhn and Helsyn pored over the data. "Her antibodies are levelling again," Aahhn said.

"This is different," Helsyn replied. "Before, they flattened. This is more of a tapering."

"Tapering?" Nyk asked.

"Her fever is down," Aahhn remarked and pointed to a display. "Her other symptoms are mitigating."

"Yes," Helsyn said. "She is beginning to clear the virus."

"We have a treatment protocol," Aahhn said. "We need both vaccine and booster. The vaccine stops the first phases and the booster controls the subsequent ones." He stepped to the communicator. "Andra," he called to her. "How are you feeling?"

"My head has stopped hurting. I really need a shower. This gown is stuck to me." She rubbed her forearm. "This rash is so itchy."

"Try to resist scratching it," Aahhn said. "We'll try putting some healing salve on those lesions."

"You're looking much better," Nyk said.

"Yes, you are," Suki added. "We were worried for a while."

"YOU were worried?" Andra asked. "I'm feeling much better -- a bit hungry, even."

"I'll have an attendant help you with a shower and a fresh gown," Aahhn said. "I'll order a meal tray for you."

Andra held her shell in Suki's direction. "This hasn't failed me yet!"

Andra reclined on the pallet. An attendant removed the I.V. line. "Doctor wanted to discontinue the booster infusion," she said. "We'll give you booster injections twice a day until we're sure you've cleared the virus. I have a fresh gown for you. Do you think you're sure enough on your feet to take a shower, or do you want me to sponge you off?"

"I'll take my chances in the shower," Andra replied.

“While you're in there I'll change the bedding. Then, you need to rest and recover your strength.”

“I've been lying down for two whole days. I want to go outside and take a walk.”

“Senta, Aahhn and Helsyn are working out details of the protocol,” Nyk said. “They'll administer the vaccine along with booster. Any patient exhibiting symptoms will be put on a continuous booster infusion. Once he recovers -- he'll be immune to all the phases.”

“Does that mean I'm now completely immune?”

“Yes. You can be Florence Nightingale on Lexal.”

“Who?”

“An Earth personage who cared for the sick and wounded. Let's hope it doesn't come to that.”

Senta followed Aahhn and Helsyn into the treatment room. Aahhn began scrolling through Andra's charts. “See?” He pointed. “Here is where we started the infusion -- her antibodies rallied rapidly ... this tapering is the turning point when she began to overwhelm the virus.”

“It's why we test these things,” Helsyn added. “Now that her antibody counts have levelled, she is out of danger.”

“Out of danger?” Senta asked. “You're sure?”

“Yes -- she will make a full recovery.”

“When can she leave containment?” Suki asked.

“In the morning, I think -- after we do a thorough decontamination.”

“Let's get some sleep,” Nyk said. “Suki -- you can come to the apartment with us. Wouldn't it feel good to lie in a real bed?”

“I'll stay here,” she replied. “I've been here for two days -- another night won't kill me.”

Nyk slipped his arm around Senta's shoulder, walked with her to the tubecar platform, ordered a car and directed it to the apartment tower. Senta walked in silence with him to the apartment door. He pressed his wrist to the doorscan and the door opened. Senta stood with her back to him.

“Senta...” She sniffed. “Senta -- let me hold you.”

She fell against him and he caressed her red hair. “Oh, Nyk -- Andra had me terrified!”

“For a while, we were all terrified.” He brushed one of her tears from her face. “You came face to face with our enemy and stood him down. You looked him in the eye and he blinked. Senta ... you vanquished that virus. YOU did it. You've done the impossible -- cured the incurable. Andra will recover. I saw one of our agents die of it. We've won -- this round at least.”

“I was so sure of our vaccine...”

“And you were right. Our adversary is stronger than you figured.” He held her until she calmed. “Andra is one lucky woman to be loved so by you and Suki.”

She stroked one of his tears from his face. “And, by you. Oh, Nyk -- if she hadn't recovered ... I wouldn't have been able to live with myself.”

“But she is recovering. You saw how much improved she is -- how quickly that booster turned her around.” He held her as she regained her composure. “Come on -- let's have some dinner. I haven't eaten well for the past two days and I imagine neither have you.”

Nyk sat at the table. Senta placed a meal before him, sat and switched on the vidisplay. “Senta -- must you?”

She held up her hand. “It's news from Lexal.”

“What are they saying?” he asked.

“Mykko Wygann has been sabre-rattling. He's claiming the Altians have developed nuclear flash bombs.”

“What is a flash bomb?”

“I have no idea -- he's claiming the Lexalese will defend to the death any invader. He's boasting of the strength of their perimeter defenses -- he's practically daring them to attack. I hope he doesn't lose himself in the part.”

“Mykko is an expert at brinksmanship -- one of the best.”

“They're also saying Lexal has begun planet-wide air raid drills.”

“Mmm...” Nyk nodded. “He's laying the groundwork for the inoculations. I'd hate to get into a high-stakes game with him. He'd win for sure.” He picked up the empty meal packages and dropped them into the waste reprocessor. “I'm beat -- I'm going to turn in. All I want to do is to stretch out on a real mattress.”

“Wait, Nyk...” Senta approached him and caressed his arms. “You don't have to use that cramped guest room. You can share my bed.” She kissed his cheek and then his lips. “I've missed you, Nyk.” She kissed him again and her tongue touched his lips.

“Senta ... this isn't a good idea. Let's not complicate things.”

“But Nykkyo...”

“It's relief from the vaccine test talking. Senta, I'm happy we can work together like this. Let's keep it on a professional level -- at least for now.”

“Don't the years we were married count for anything?”

“They certainly do. Let's not mess things up now -- okay?”

She released him and nodded. “Of course, you're right. I feel foolish. I'm a bit embarrassed, now.”

“Don't be. Part of me thought your offer sounded pretty good.”

“Really?”

He held her hand against his abdomen. “This part of me.” Senta giggled. He pointed to his head. “This part of me knows it's wrong.”

She smiled and pointed to her forehead. “This part of me agrees. I'll spend the evening looking over some crop sequencing reports. I've been neglecting my day job for this government project. Good night, Nykkyo.” He headed toward the guest room. “Nyk -- thanks for the help at the lab.”

Nyk undressed and lay on the guest room bed. He locked his hands behind his head, closed his eyes and attempted to will himself to sleep. Images of Marxo and Andra flashed through his mind.

He cleared his mind of thoughts and relaxed, modulating his breathing. Sleep was almost upon him when he heard the doorchime. It rang again.

He heard the apartment front door slide open, and Senta's voice. “Oh, it's you -- come in.” Then came a muffled shriek and sounds of a struggle.

Nyk hopped out of bed and tore open the guest room door. He saw a figure dragging Senta, limp, into the hallway. “Stop!” he shouted and ran after them. “Stop!”

Another figure stepped from behind a pillar and pointed an object in Nyk's direction. It discharged with *athwip* and he felt something sting his shoulder. He grabbed and pulled out a dart. The corridor began to spin and his vision went grey...

13 -- A Need to Know

“Come on, pal -- wake up.” said an unfamiliar voice. Nyk cracked his eyes open. His eyes ached, his neck was stiff and his mouth was stuffed with a wad of gauze; then, he realized it was his tongue. He looked down and around -- he was lying on a thin mattress in an orange confinement tunic. Surrounding him were other mattresses, some inhabited by men also dressed in orange.

He looked up. Standing over him was a man whose insignia identified him as an Internal Affairs beat patrolman. “I don't know what you got into, pal. Time to see the sergeant.”

Nyk stood and followed the officer into an interview room.

“Wristscan,” a stocky older man with a more elaborate insignia ordered. He presented his wrist.

“Nykkyo Kyhana -- resident of Sudal. You're quite a ways from home. What were you doing in that apartment building?”

“I was staying there -- in my ex-wife's apartment. Why am I here?”

“You were discovered nude and unconscious in the corridor of a very upscale apartment building. We figured you had one too many hits and passed out. We're charging you with disorderly conduct and public intoxication.”

“No! My ex-wife was abducted last night.”

“Abducted?” The sergeant poked his vidisplay. “We have no reports of a disturbance or missing person.”

“That's because I'd be the one to report it. I was trying to help her when one of them shot me with a dart -- it must've held a sedative.”

“A dart?”

“Yes.”

“We found no dart.”

“They must've retrieved it after I passed out. Look -- I'm involved in a very important project. I can't waste my time here.”

“What sort of project?”

“It's top secret.”

The sergeant glanced toward the beat officer and nodded. “Top secret project, huh?”

“It's important -- lives are at stake!”

“Lives at stake, now...”

“And my wife has been abducted! You should be out looking for her instead of bothering with me.”

The sergeant nodded toward the door and the beat cop grabbed Nyk's upper arm.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Back to the holding cell. You can get back to your top secret project after you've seen the magistrate.”

“I'm entitled to make a vidphone call, am I not?”

The beat cop looked at the sergeant. “Yes,” the sergeant replied. He turned a vidisplay toward Nyk. “See to it he gets his vidphone call.”

Nyk punched in Kronta's locator code. “Illya...”

“Nykkyo -- where are you?”

“I’m at the...” He looked up.

“Four hundred thirteenth precinct detention center.”

“I’m at the four hundred thirteenth precinct detention center.”

“What are you doing there?”

“It’s a misunderstanding. Illya -- please come down here and bail me out. Also -- bring a tunic and a pair of sandals.”

“I’ll be there as soon as possible.”

“Illya -- Senta’s been abducted.”

“I was in here,” Nyk explained to an Internal Affairs inspector, pointing to the guest room. “Senta was in the living room. She was working on some sequencing reports. The door was closed. I heard the doorchime and Senta said, ‘Oh -- it’s you,’ or the equivalent. Then I heard a struggle. I followed into the hall. They shot me with some sort of dart and I passed out. How many times do we need to go over this?”

Another Internal Affairs officer inspected the doorscan. “He scanned his way in last evening, Inspector. No more scans until we arrived this morning.”

“It wasn’t Senta’s practice to have visitors identify themselves with the doorscan,” Nyk replied. “If the chime rang, she’d answer the door.”

“Why would she open the door to a stranger?” the inspector asked.

“Whoever it was, it wasn’t a stranger,” Nyk replied.

“She wouldn’t have known that until she opened the door. Why would she be in the habit of opening doors to strangers?”

“I don’t know. She was always like that -- even when we were married. Whoever did it would have to have scanned their way through the front door -- wouldn’t they?”

“Or, through the tubecar platform.” The inspector gestured toward his deputy, who handed him a vidisplay. “Here are the names of everyone who scanned their way into the building. I’m highlighting every name who DIDN’T use an apartment doorscan.”

Nyk took the display and scrolled through it.

“As you can see -- every name is accounted for. Are there, by chance, any you recognize as suspicious?”

“No... What about that unlocked maintenance door you found?” Nyk asked. “Someone could’ve

come in that way.”

“Also an excellent way to dispose of a body. Mr Kyhana -- Dr Kyhana was your ex-wife.”

“IS my ex-wife.”

“What were the reasons for your divorce?”

“Do we really need to go into that?” The inspector looked down his nose at Nyk. “I see how it is -- you think I did this. I was found, unconscious, in the corridor.”

“We've seen suspects engineer stronger alibis than that. There's a simple way to clear this up, Mr Kyhana -- come down to the hall with us and submit to interrogation.”

“That'll waste the whole day,” Nyk protested. “I'm involved in an important project.”

“You'll waste even more time by not cooperating,” the inspector replied. “I'm prepared to arrest you for the disappearance of your ex-wife. Forcing us to obtain an interrogation warrant will only slow down the process.”

“All right,” Nyk relented. “I'll agree to interrogation.”

The doorchime rang. One of the officers touched the door control. “ID please.” A wristscan chirped and the deputy reviewed the display. “One Illya Kronta,” Inspector.

“He's my boss,” Nyk said. “He'll vouch for me.”

“Let him in.”

The door slid open and Kronta stood, holding a tunic. “I went to the precinct and they told me you were here.”

“We were about to head back there for an interrogation,” the inspector replied.

“I'm afraid I can't permit that,” Kronta said. “I'll vouch for him and we'll be on our way. He tossed the tunic to Nyk. “Put this on and we'll go.”

“He's a suspect...”

“He's innocent.” Nyk slipped out of the orange tunic and into the one Kronta brought. “Come on, Nyk.”

A deputy drew a stunner. He pressed the trigger and its end glowed crimson. “Excuse me, SIR -- but we can't permit either of you to leave.”

Kronta's eyes narrowed. “Don't SIR me, deputy. Have you charged this man?”

“No. We were about to...”

“And, you're not going to.”

The inspector approached. “Mr Kronta -- your official ExoService braids carry no weight with Internal Affairs.”

Kronta reached into his *xarpa*, retrieved a holographic card and held it up. “Maybe this carries some, then.”

The inspector took the card and regarded it. “High Legislature ... extra-agency authority...”

“Is it genuine?” the deputy asked.

“It appears to be.”

“I’m ordering you to release him. Come on, Nyk.” Kronta snapped his fingers and the inspector returned the holocard.

“Oh, Inspector,” Nyk said.

“Yes?”

“Please turn out the lights and lock the door when you leave.”

Nyk walked with Kronta toward the lift. “Did you get a look at them?” Kronta asked.

“No -- not a good one. It happened too fast. Then, they shot me with a dart.”

“I’ll make some calls. I know an Internal Affairs commissioner who’ll get those snoops on the right track. In the meantime, I’ve called a meeting to review where we stand.” They reached the lift and rode to the tubecar platform. Kronta ordered a car with a priority code.

Nyk sat beside Kronta as the tubecar accelerated toward Government Center. “That badge you flashed looks like a handy thing to have,” Nyk said.

Kronta retrieved the holocard from his sash. “They don’t just pass these out.”

“How’s Andra doing?”

“Well. Aahhn and Helsyn have declared the vaccine a success.”

The car arrived at Government Center. Nyk followed Kronta into a lift and to the confinement room. Andra was sitting on the edge of the pallet, swinging her legs and holding a conversation with Suki.

Aahhn walked in. “Andra,” he said, “we’ll release you as soon as our decontamination team has been in there. Then I’ll take that gadget off your arm.

“We have some bad news,” Nyk said. “Senta’s been abducted.”

“Oh, no!” cried Andra.

“Abducted?” Suki asked.

“Last night. They knocked me out with some drug.”

“We'll discuss this at the briefing. Let's get started. Aahhn and Andra -- join us when you can.”

Suki turned toward the glass wall. “Andra -- you were so brave.”

“Bravery and ignorance go hand in hand,” Andra replied. “If I had known what to expect -- I wouldn't have volunteered.”

Nyk sat at the conference table across from Kronta. Suki and Andra entered and sat on either side of him. The door slid shut and Kronta rapped his knuckle on the table. “Dr Senta Kyhana has been abducted,” he announced.

Those around the table looked at each other. “What does this mean?” Sirk asked.

“Fortunately, Senta has already completed her contribution to this project. We will press onward.”

Andra stepped into the room, sat beside Suki and held her hand.

“I don't think whoever took her,” Nyk said, “had anything to do with the virus. It was someone she knew.”

“She did have a fight with her most recent lover,” Suki said. “She threw him out of her house in Sudal -- right before the storm wrecked it.”

“Do you know his name?” Kronta asked.

“No. Andra might.”

Andra shook her head. “No. Besides -- he's in Sudal. I doubt he'd come here.”

“What does your *ax'amfin* intuition tell you about this?” Nyk asked.

Andra looked up at the ceiling. “The facts are conflicting... Someone she knew, yet it happened during the vaccine test...” She shook her head. “I'm puzzled. I recommend we plan for the worst and hope for the best.”

“In other words -- we should assume she was taken by our adversaries.”

“Do you think she'll talk?” Sirk asked.

“Senta's a strong-willed woman,” Nyk replied. “She knows the stakes.”

“They could use truth drug,” Andra replied.

“I'm not overly concerned about truth drug,” said Kronta. “All interrogators are licensed and have been alerted. Truth agent is dispensed only to licensed interrogators.”

“Do you really believe it can't fall into the wrong hands?” Aahhn asked.

“We don't know for sure if it was The Seven who abducted her,” Kronta replied.

“Who else would have motive?” asked Sirk.

“If it was The Seven, then somehow information regarding this task force has leaked out. I want to canvas the table -- has anyone discussed this with outsiders?” He looked each member in the eye. “Anyone?”

“No,” said Aahhn.

Helsyn shook his head.

“Absolutely not,” said Pring.

“No,” said Andra.

“Not at all -- except for Suki -- my wife,” Nyk answered.

“No,” Suki said. “I wouldn't know who to tell.”

“Of course not,” said Sirk.

“Maybe Senta herself let it slip,” Nyk suggested. “Maybe it was someone at the sequencing lab.”

“It's no help to speculate,” replied Kronta. “The damage is done. We must push on.”

“What if The Seven change their plan?” asked Sirk.

“Then we will have failed. If we stop, we've failed anyway. Our only option is to push on. Now -- status report. The vaccine test went well -- wouldn't you say, Andra?”

“Reasonably well,” she replied.

“The replication plants have received the molecular models,” Helsyn added. “Production of the vaccine is underway.”

“Good. Next order of business -- everyone on the task force is to receive the vaccine. Aahhn will handle the details ... right?”

“Right,” Aahhn replied.

“Now -- in light of last night's incident -- further information will be disseminated strictly on a need-to-know basis. Everyone is excused except for Nykkyo and Andra.”

Aahhn, Helsyn and Sirk looked back and forth at each other. “I object,” said Pring.

“Dismissed.” They stood and headed for the door. “You, too, Sukiko.”

Suki opened her mouth, looked at Nyk, turned and left. The door slid shut.

“Okay,” said Kronta. “Since you two have Lexal liaison, I'll brief you on the logistics of transporting the vaccine. The plants will have the first thousand barrels ready in three days, and the second and third

thousand in the next two days after, respectively.”

“Where is it being manufactured?” Nyk asked.

“We're using plants in Vebinad,” Kronta replied. “The material will be transported by monorail to Sudal, in barrels marked 'Plant Nutrient Concentrate 505.' From the train station it will be loaded onto skimmers and taken to the Food Service central warehouse north of Sudal.

“Then, at Nadir-meridian-one the skimmers will bring it to the Sudal shuttleport where it will be loaded onto a transport and taken to Lexal.”

“Why Sudal?” Nyk asked. “Vebinad is closer to Floran City.”

“We're using Sudal because the shuttleport there shuts down after the arrival of the evening flight. The Floran City port runs around the clock.”

“So we can land a transport relatively unobserved,” Nyk replied. “Whose transport?”

“Mykko Wygann has donated the use of Lexal-One, his personal courier. It's a converted tender shuttle, modified for deep-space transits and it has a cargo bay large enough to accommodate a thousand barrels. Of course, for these flights it will fly under a different code name.”

“Three trips in three nights.”

“Yes -- the details are being handled by ExoAgency Enforcement and trusted ExoService corpsmen. The transport can land at the Sudal port, so we won't need to go through the transit platform.”

“So, Andra and I should return to Sudal and await the first shipment.”

“Yes -- Wygann would like you two to accompany it to Lexal and help make contingency plans for the upcoming Grand Assembly.”

“The expected day of the attack,” Andra remarked.

“Exactly. You two are dismissed.”

“Illya,” Nyk said, “what's happening on Earth? Has Agency Enforcement made any progress rooting out that Seven cell in Tulsa?”

“That information, Nyk,” Kronta replied, “falls outside your domain of responsibility. You're dismissed.”

Nyk stood, gave Kronta the Floran salute and walked out the door. He saw Suki standing in the corridor. “I'm insulted,” she said. “I didn't leak any information.”

“I'm sure you didn't. He's using an appropriate level of caution. Did Aahhn give you your injection?”

“Yes,” Suki replied.

“What do we do about Senta?” Andra asked.

“If you have any ideas how to locate her -- I'm all ears. Kronta's turned it over to Internal Affairs and they'll do their best to find her. Now, I must find Aahhn and get my shot. Then, we go to Sudal and wait for the vaccine.”

Nyk paced around the middle level of the Residence. He saw a groundcar on the access road. It stopped outside the house and he watched Kronta step out.

Andra headed down the spiral stairs to greet Kronta and returned with him.

“Nice place you have here,” Kronta said, looking around.

“Any word of Senta?” Suki asked.

He shook his head. “No -- none. Internal Affairs is working it. They're watching all transit points. It's unlikely whoever took her could get her out of the City unnoticed.”

“I'm worried if they drug her,” Andra said.

“We've done an inventory of truth agent,” Kronta replied. “So far all stocks have been accounted for.”

“It's not truth drug that concerns me. I'm worried about Zander's mind control mixture. It's effective as a truth drug.”

“Hmm... I had forgotten about that. If The Seven has access to some of that...”

“Knowing Zander as I did,” Andra continued, “I doubt he divulged the formula to anyone. He preferred to maintain control himself.”

“How much did he possess?”

“That I don't know. I have a handful of his cartridges that I pilfered from his supply the night I left him. Whether there are any in hands of others I know not.”

“So far, nothing indicates our plans have been compromised. The ... plant nutrient was delivered to the warehouse this morning. I have a Service corpsman disguised as a warehouse worker stationed with it. He has orders not to let any of the barrels out of his sight.”

“Then -- everything is ready for tonight,” Nyk said. “I was in contact with Janna today. I told her of the abduction. Mykko wants to send some of his own security forces to Sudal.”

“I have no problem with that,” Kronta replied.

“I'll pass it on to Janna.”

Suki stood between Nyk and Andra, holding hands with both of them as they walked the bluff. Floran's indigo sky deepened into night. “It's about time to head for the shuttleport,” Nyk said. “We'll be back after Grand Assembly day.”

“Be careful,” Suki said and kissed Nyk. “You, too.” She kissed Andra.

“Nyk and I are a team,” she replied. “We haven't failed a mission yet.”

“With yet the operative word,” Nyk added. “Come on -- Kronta's waiting for us.” He turned to Suki and squeezed her hand. “You watch the house.”

Nyk stuffed his travel case into the luggage compartment and climbed into the cramped back seat of the groundcar. Andra and Kronta sat in front and Illya directed it to the shuttleport. “Here,” Kronta said, reached under his seat and handed them wand-shaped devices.

“Stunners,” Nyk said. “Will we need these?”

“Better have it and not need it than need it and not have it.”

“Someone else said that to me recently.” He took a wand and handed the other to Andra.

The groundcar turned onto the north-south arterial. Nyk looked around. “In Sudal they don't bother to roll up the sidewalks at night -- they leave them out and roll up the town. It looks deserted.”

“All the better for us.”

“It's not even that late,” Andra remarked.

The car turned onto the shuttleport spur and parked in the livery lot. Nyk clambered out of the vehicle and headed into the terminal building. He could see a handful of people milling around. “Today's last shuttle is due shortly,” Kronta whispered. “After that, they shut down operations. I've notified Space Control of special diplomatic flights coming in.”

“This is getting complicated,” Nyk said. “What if someone leaks?”

“It's strictly need-to-know. The space controller knows a flight's coming in. He doesn't know from where. Wygann's pilot knows the coded moniker. The skimmer pilots know they deliver barrels. They don't know what Nutrient 505 comprises. And so on.”

“So even if one bit of information leaks out, it's not enough to compromise us.”

“That's the theory.”

“I remember something Seymor used to say,” Nyk remarked. “He said there's a difference between theory and practice. In theory they're the same. In practice they're not.”

“That sounds like Seymor,” Kronta replied.

“Come on -- we'll go stand on the observation deck and watch the proceedings.”

Nyk followed Kronta to a lift, and the three of them rode to the observation platform surrounding the shuttleport control tower.

He gazed toward the north. The runway lights came up. In the distance he could see a light blazing like a bright star. Slowly it intensified. “Is that the last shuttle?”

“I think so,” Kronta replied.

The craft made its final approach, landed and taxied to the terminal. Nyk watched passengers disembark. Lights in the vessel winked out as ground crew shut the doors and chocked the wheels.

Then, the runway lights went dark and the shuttleport quieted as passengers left the terminal and headed for the groundcar lot or the light rail line connecting to the center of Sudal.

Kronta consulted a handheld vidisplay. “Nadir minus a half. We have some time to kill.”

Nyk paced around the observation platform. He saw lights moving in the direction of the maintenance hangar. “Illya,” he pointed.

“Skimmers -- bringing in the cargo. They'll park behind the maintenance building and wait for the transport.”

“How many skimmers?”

“Ten.”

A warble came from Kronta's *xarpa*. He tapped his wrist to his handheld and answered a call. “Our Service controller is in place in the tower,” he said as he returned the vidisplay to a pocket in his sash.

The runway lights came on. Nyk squinted to the north and saw two lights appear, closing quickly. A pair of armed Lexalese security vessels landed abreast of each other and stopped at the end of the runway. Illya nodded toward the pavement and the three of them headed down.

Kronta conferred with the pilot of one of the Lexalese vessels. The pilot nodded, pulled shut his hatch and the vessels taxied to the side. Rear hatches opened and Lexalese security forces, carrying long arms, spilled out and took up positions behind the maintenance hangar and along the runway.

Another light appeared in the sky and approached. Wygann's courier touched down and lumbered to a stop. The cargo bay clamshell opened and the first skimmer pulled up. Men began offloading barrels from the skimmer onto levitating pallets and stowing them in the transport.

The main cabin door opened and a flight of steps deployed. Down them descended a tall woman with pale blond hair. She stepped to Andra and embraced her. Andra led her to where Nyk stood with Illya.

“Janna, this is Illya Kronta, the engineer of our strategy. Illya -- Princess Janna Wygann of Lexal.”

Janna extended her hand. “My pleasure,” said Kronta.

“The pleasure is mine. Thank you for your efforts.” Janna looked toward Nyk. “We have two seats reserved for you tonight.”

“As soon as our cargo is loaded,” Nyk replied. He watched as the skimmers lined up, unloading their barrels and then speeding off. “That looks like skimmer number five.”

“Such efficiency,” Janna remarked.

The last skimmer headed toward the Food Service warehouse. "They'll be back tomorrow night with another load," Kronta said.

"Let's be on our way," Janna replied. She took and squeezed Kronta's hand; then gestured toward the cabin door. Nyk took Andra's stunner and handed both to Kronta. He picked up his case and followed Andra aboard. Janna stepped in and an attendant closed and sealed the door. "Welcome aboard Lexal-One," she said.

The transport maneuvered for takeoff. Nyk peered out a viewport and could see the tails of the escort vessels ahead of them.

A chime sounded and the attendant approached Janna. "We're ready to depart, Highness."

"Thank you," Janna replied and belted herself into her seat. Nyk sat in his. Janna released a catch and rotated hers to face Nyk and Andra. "Well -- we're in the end game now."

Lexal-One accelerated down the runway, lifted off, gained altitude and achieved orbit. Nyk could see the escorts flying in formation. Then the viewports closed. An indicator lamp glowed from white to blue and he felt the jolts of the warp jumps. The indicator darkened, the ports opened and he could see the blue, white and brown planet of Lexal below; and the orange disk of sister planet Lexal Prime in the distance.

14 -- Assassination Attempt

The transport touched down on a private landing strip adjacent to the palace. Janna took Andra's hand and Nyk followed them to a bunker, down steps and to a tunnel. An awaiting cart whisked them to a lift and Janna called for a floor in the chancellor's residence inside the palace.

Nyk gazed out of a window in Janna's private office. He surveyed the rugged highlands against which the Lexalese capital nestled. Janna and Andra carried on a lively conversation punctuated with laughs and giggles. Janna interrupted herself to press her hand against a proximity pad. "I wonder where Venn is?"

"Who's Venn?" Nyk asked.

"He's my assistant," Janna replied. "He's new at the job." She pressed the proximity pad again, then looked at Andra. The two women put their hands to their mouths and giggled.

"You two are behaving like a couple of giggly schoolgirls," Nyk said.

"It's why I so enjoy Andra's company," Janna replied. "When she's with me, the years melt away."

“We can talk...” Andra interjected.

“...and laugh...”

“...and complete each other's sentences...”

“...just like when we were at Vebinad Academy. Andra takes my mind off the pressures of office.”

“Even during a crisis like this one?” Nyk asked.

“Especially like this one,” Janna replied.

“Everyone needs release,” Andra added.

A tall, slim young man stepped into the office and stopped short. “Highness... I wasn't...” His eyes shifted between the two women.

“Venn,” Janna said, composing herself. “Where have you been?”

Venn blushed. “I ... I posted for some personal time to run some errands. I thought, since Highness was scheduled offworld...”

“It's all right, Venn. You are entitled to your personal time.”

“I hope Highness wasn't inconvenienced...”

“Not at all. Venn -- this is Nykkyo Kyhana.”

Venn snapped a bow in Nyk's direction.

“Mr Kyhana is liaison from an ExoService task force helping us to deal with the latest round of Altian threats. He is to be quartered in the guest suites and is to have office facilities with Chancellor's staff. Instruct staff Mr Kyhana is to be regarded as a peer among Chancellor's ministers.”

“As you wish, Princess. Access?”

“Open door.”

“Very good. And the lady?”

“Andra is a member of my closest and innermost circle of personal friends.” Janna raised her eyebrows, lowered her chin and gazed at him from under her brow.

“Understood, Princess. Anything else?”

“No, Venn. Please get Mr Kyhana situated.”

Venn snapped a bow. “This way, Mr Kyhana.” He led Nyk down a corridor. “For a moment I thought I was seeing double,” Nyk heard him mutter.

“What did you say?”

“I'm sorry, Mr Kyhana. I was thinking aloud. It sha'n't happen again.”

“Venn -- aren't you permitted to have your own opinions?”

“No, sir.” He cracked a smile. “Not while I'm in this part of the palace, at least.”

“They do look alike, don't they?” Nyk said.

“I'm sorry?”

“Janna and Andra -- they were roommates at Vebinad Academy. Their classmates referred to them as the twins.”

“I see.” Venn gestured into a guest room. “Your quarters, sir. What shall the Lady Andra require?”

“It's just Andra, Venn.”

“I beg your pardon -- I don't understand. When Princess said she was a member of her innermost circle, I assumed...”

“Venn -- once in a while an *anax'amfin* escapes and takes refuge among ordinary mortals like you and me. Andra is one of those fortunate escapees.”

“I see.”

“She shall share this guest room with me.”

“Very good, sir.”

“No sense using two when one will do -- wouldn't you agree, Venn?”

“If you say so, Mr Kyhana -- very economical. I'll set your case in here and then show you to your office.”

Nyk stepped into the private dining room in the Chancellor's living quarters. He poured himself a cup of tea, took a breakfast cake and sat beside Andra. “How did the Lady Andra sleep last night?” he asked.

“You know how I slept -- I always sleep well in your arms. What's the lady business?”

Nyk smiled. “Venn... He thought...”

Janna swept into the room with Venn to her left and one step behind. “We'll start the inoculations today,” she said. “Our security forces have worked all night to get the vaccine in place.”

“Aren't you concerned The Seven could have spies watching?”

“Not overly,” she replied. “All this took place after curfew. The only way onto our planet is through our single shuttleport, and our entrance and exit control officers keep a close eye on who comes and

goes. Out of curiosity, I had our security chief run a report of offworld visitors from Altia. There are right now two hundred fifty Altians on this world.”

“How many are ore-workers?” Nyk asked.

“Hmm... I didn't ask for a breakdown by profession. Why the interest in ore-workers?”

“We believe ore-workers make up the bulk of The Seven's foot soldiers.”

Janna made a signal to Venn and he approached. “Get me a report of all Altians onworld sorted by profession.” He snapped a bow, turned and left.

“Why not just round them up?” Andra asked.

“Because,” Mykko replied as he walked into the room, “we must prove the Altian plague weapon is worthless. If we tip our hand by rounding up ore-workers, The Seven will simply switch targets.” Wygann helped himself to some tea. “If I were running an outfit like The Seven...” He glanced toward Nyk. “Actually, I did run such an outfit once. If it were I running it, I'd make sure the operatives charged with deploying the virus blend as well as possible with the native population until the moment of the attack. Because our immigration control is so strict, the best they can do is to appear to be ordinary tourists or visitors. We'll get an opportunity to look at them during the drill today.”

“What is the plan?” Nyk asked.

“We are consigning the first batch of vaccine to the capital and a few outlying towns. We will call a general air-raid drill later this morning. We have designated shelters in each sector and neighborhood. Each Lexalese knows where he is to report in such an event. Our staff are making ready as we speak. The civil defense measures we implemented after the insurrection are paying dividends during this crisis.”

“What if,” Nyk mused, “...what if we were wrong and The Seven attacks another colony?”

“I agree with your assessment that Lexal is the likeliest target. If not -- well, it's really not my problem. Come -- I'd like you to observe our operation in action. This palace is a designated shelter for about ten thousand people.”

Venn returned and handed a vidisplay to Janna. “Thank you, Venn.”

“Highness.” He returned to his post near the door.

“Interesting,” Janna said and handed the vidisplay to Nyk. “There are about two hundred ore-workers onworld right now. They're registered as tourists.”

Nyk reviewed the display and handed it to Wygann. “Dyppa tells me ore-work is the job of last resort on Altia. It seems odd so many would be tourists on Lexal.”

“Unless there's an ore-worker convention held here,” Andra added.

Wygann snorted. “Not likely,” he replied and handed the vidisplay back to Janna.

“Venn,” Janna said, “inform chief of security of this. Have each of these ore-workers monitored.”

“So -- the attackers are already here and in place,” Nyk observed.

“We thought nothing less,” Wygann replied. “Let's proceed to the shelter.”

Nyk and Andra followed Janna and Wygann into the lower level of the palace. They walked to an entrance, one with an overhead door, closed. “We'll open this door for the drill. The people check in here. Offworlders will be sent to this waiting area,” Wygann gestured. “Lexalese will be processed on the other side.”

Nyk followed Wygann as he inspected the staff. He saw nurses and doctors with technicians and assistants filling syringes. Folding chairs had been set up in a briefing area and security officers conferred among themselves.

“Chancellor,” Nyk said. “Have you and Janna received your inoculations?”

“I had almost forgot,” he said and motioned Janna. They approached two of the nurses. “Your first customers,” he said as he slipped off his jacket.

“An honor, Chancellor,” the nurse said and examined his arm for a vein.

Wygann consulted a timepiece and slipped it back in his pocket. He stepped to a vidisplay and touched the screen. An image of his security chief appeared. “We're ready.”

The overhead door rolled open. Nyk heard sirens wail and announcements came over a city-wide public address system and the vidisplays.

“This is an alert,” the message said. “All inhabitants are to report to their designated shelters. This is an alert...” The message repeated over and over.

Nyk watched as people approached and entered the shelter, scanning their wrists and being directed toward one room or the other. On the Lexalese side security officers divided them into groups and directed them to the folding chairs. Another officer stood and explained they were to receive an injection and stressed the urgency of keeping the fact secret.

In groups they lined up and received their doses, the nurses and doctors handing spent syringes to assistants who cleaned, disinfected and recharged them.

“It's amazing,” Nyk remarked to Andra. “Like a well-oiled machine.”

“The Lexalese are well-disciplined,” she replied. “Our adversaries might feel Lexal is the perfect target, but the nature of this population makes it a poor one. Every Lexalese considers himself a militiaman loyal to his commander-in-chief.”

“I can't see Florans submitting to such.”

“This wouldn't work on any other colony.”

The Lexalese sun crossed the meridian. Wygann had declared an all-clear and the palace shelter emptied out. Nyk looked down from the living quarters high in the palace. “Two more days of this.”

“Yes,” Andra replied. “Janna told me Wygann will address the population tonight and tell them he was disappointed with how long it took to fill the shelters, and to expect more drills in the next few days.”

Nyk's handheld vidisplay warbled. He drew it from a pocket and scanned his wrist. The vidphone requested his comm cipher. He retrieved it from his pocket and slipped the datacel into the display to see Kronta. “There's been a problem,” Kronta said. “One of our replication plants went offline.”

“Sabotage?” Nyk asked.

“Poor maintenance. We won't have the last batch of vaccine ready until day after tomorrow.”

“That's Grand Assembly day,” Nyk replied. “It'll be here too late.”

“It's the best we can do. We can send a partial shipment -- maybe two hundred barrels.”

“I'll speak with Mykko.” The vidphone went dark.

“Problem?” Andra asked.

“Yes -- we'll be short eight hundred barrels for the third day of vaccinations.”

Nyk sat with Wygann and his security advisor in the chancellor's office. Andra sat beside Janna on a settee and held her hand. “We'll go into the Grand Assembly short nearly a third of our vaccine,” Mykko said. “Based on our allocation plan, that means the southern third of the continent will be unprotected.”

“We can stage a drill in the morning,” the security chief suggested.

“We can't be staging drills during the Grand Assembly.”

“Besides,” Nyk replied, “the vaccine needs at least a half a day to build immunity,”

“No -- we'll have to go ahead and take our chances.”

“We can't do that,” Janna said. “Worst case we'd be looking at thirty million casualties.”

“The southern region is sparsely populated,” replied the security chief, “mainly farming villages. Perhaps our enemy will have poorer luck infecting them. We would use the stocks on hand to inoculate the care-givers and give instructions to isolate those with symptoms. We'd administer the vaccine to the remaining population as it catches up with us. Careful management could hold our casualties to a couple hundred thousand.”

“A couple hundred thousand,” mused Wygann, “an acceptable level of loss.”

“Chancellor,” Janna said tersely, “I can't believe I'm hearing you speak that way. A single death is an unacceptable loss to his friends and family.”

“We are at war. Given the nature of the attack, civilian casualties below one percent would be considered exceptional. Don't they teach you about warfare at that academy of yours?”

“She was speaking as a human being, Chancellor,” Andra interjected, “not as a warrior.”

“Of course, you're right. Still -- compared to losing the entire colony...”

“What if you were to postpone the Grand Assembly for one day?” Nyk asked.

“I can't recall ever postponing it,” the security chief said.

Janna motioned to her assistant and whispered into his ear. He nodded and left the room.

“No,” Wygann continued. “It could tip our hand. We'd need a damned good reason to postpone it.”

Venn returned and handed a vidisplay to Janna. She dismissed him with a hand gesture. “Chancellor -- there are precedents for postponing Grand Assembly. It's been done twice in recent memory. Once was due to the death of a chancellor. It was postponed until the new one could be sworn in. The other time was when a chancellor took ill.”

Wygann stood and paced. “Neither will do. I'm not planning on dying or becoming ill.”

“What about feigning illness?” asked Nyk.

Wygann paced more. “No. If I were to become ill, the people might associate it with the vaccine and become alarmed. It could tip our hand.”

“What about bad weather?” Nyk asked. “Suppose we had a downpour?”

“That might do it. This is the dry season, however.”

“On Earth they seed clouds to create rain.”

“We've never seen rain across the entire continent at once,” the security chief added.

“Postponing the main Assembly here in the capital is excuse enough to postpone colony-wide,” Wygann replied. “Nonetheless, I wouldn't want to trust our welfare to some wayward cloud, seeded or otherwise.” Wygann paced with his hands behind his back.

“Chancellor,” Janna said. “What about an assassination attempt?”

Wygann stopped in his tracks. “Assassination attempt...” He nodded and smiled. “Yes -- brilliant ... We could snag one of our Altian ore-workers as a culprit.” He rubbed his hands together. “I'd like to listen in on our enemy's conversations after that -- wondering why one of their foot-soldiers would take it upon himself to disrupt such careful plans. If I were to be wounded, it would be an excuse to postpone the Grand Assembly.” He motioned to his security chief. “Put together a plan we can review after dinner.”

“Yes, Chancellor.” The chief stood and left the room.

Nyk sat in the private quarters watching a vidisplay as Mykko Wygann began his daily audience. Andra sat beside him and he placed his hand on her knee. She picked it up and held it.

The camera panned over the crowd. “It's all set,” Nyk said. “We're waiting for the moment.”

“Could an ore-worker gain admission to such an event?” Andra asked.

“Mykko's daily audience is open to all comers.”

“Don't they screen for weapons? Perhaps one could get in, but certainly not armed.”

Nyk smiled. “The Lexalese will blame it on a faulty security scanner -- one of Deltan manufacture.”

Mykko sat on a dais with Janna in her finery beside him. They appeared to engage in small-talk. The hub-bub of the audience could be heard in the background.

Wygann patted the back of Janna's hand. She nodded and sat, ramrod straight with hands folded in her lap as her husband stood and approached the podium. He made a short address, then opened the floor for questions.

A man stood and shouted, “Death to Lexalese scum!” Then he pointed an Earth-style handgun and fired.

Wygann fell to the floor clutching his shoulder. A red splotch formed on his jacket. The cameras panned to the crowd as pandemonium broke out, then they swung back onto Janna as she stepped to the podium.

“CALM!” she shouted. “Hold that man! Security -- we want that man taken alive!” She turned to the camera and waved her hands. The image went black.

“Impressive performance,” Nyk remarked. “I hand it to Mykko. He has Machiavelli beat.”

“Who?” asked Andra.

“An Earth expert on such.”

“How did they do all that?”

“Last night, after curfew, Lexalese security forces raided one of the hostels where an Altian ore worker was registered, and took him into custody. By the way, they located a number of suspicious objects.”

“Suspicious how?”

“Transparent spheres half-filled with a fluid. My guess is they're virus grenades. One of Wygann's staff impersonated this man, using one of the Earth handguns left over from the insurrection. His arms-master removed the bullets from the cartridges and turned them into blanks. Mykko was wearing a squib activated by the sound of the discharge.”

“Now, the fun begins.”

“Yes -- a series of news broadcasts, starting with the postponement of the Grand Assembly. We've bought time for our vaccine.”

Wygann entered the living quarters accompanied by his wife. He stripped off his jacket and a valet

handed him a fresh one. "We must get you to hospital, Chancellor," Janna said with a smile.

"They're transporting my double right now," he replied.

The security chief entered. "We're set up to monitor traffic," he said.

"What does that mean?" Nyk asked.

"When you remarked that Altian ore-workers were The Seven's foot- soldiers," Janna replied, "it gave me the idea to tap the vidphones to which they're registered."

"You can do that? Just ... listen in?"

"Not exactly, but we can count the number of incoming and outgoing calls. Up to now, it's been fairly quiet. We'll give them a little while for the news to disperse throughout the hegemony."

Nyk's handheld warbled. "It disperses fast. I'll bet I know who this is..." Nyk scanned his wrist and inserted his comm cipher.

"Nykkyo -- what is going on up there?" Kronta asked.

"There was an assassination attempt on Wygann," Nyk replied. "They've arrested an Altian ore-worker. The Grand Assembly has been postponed."

"An Altian ore-worker? He isn't simply a scapegoat is he?"

"They took the weapon out of his hand -- a handgun of Deltan manufacture based on an Earth pattern. You'll recall the Altians used similar..."

"Of course I recall!" Kronta shook his head. "It makes no sense! Why would one of them attempt to kill Wygann, if they plan to kill the entire population the next day anyway? It's insane!"

"Well -- it does give us a bit more time to get the rest of the vaccine in place."

"True, but -- it makes no sense!"

"You'll have to take that up with The Seven," Nyk replied.

"Have they rescheduled Grand Assembly day?"

"No -- Wygann is still in surgery. We'll have a prognosis later in the day."

"How's the Lexalese population taking this?"

"They're angry -- there's talk of rounding up and deporting all Altians. Janna's been on the vidisplay a couple times asking for calm."

"Keep me in the loop, Nyk."

"I certainly will, Ilya. Right now I'm just following the newscasts." The vidphone went blank. Nyk put his hand over his mouth and suppressed a chuckle.

“Why did you tell him that?” Andra asked.

“I was disseminating information on a need-to-know basis,” he replied with a smile.

Mykko sat at a table with a vidisplay. “Let's see -- right now I'm in surgery. Later this afternoon we'll have a statement from the surgeon that I will recover but the prognosis is yet unclear. After that, I'll be resting comfortably. Finally, one that I will be in position to begin resuming my duties in three days, and that the Grand Assembly will be rescheduled for that time.”

“Chancellor,” the security chief approached. “We are seeing a spike in traffic to those ore-worker vidisplays.”

“Excellent,” he said. “I'm sure our adversaries are wondering what in Destiny is going on, and if one of their operatives has lost his mind.”

“We must make sure they don't believe any virus grenades were seized,” the chief replied. “I've ordered no mention of those devices in any news broadcast.”

“Put out a press release that the Altian prisoner is believed to have operated independently. Also that he is being held in isolation for questioning. You're right -- we can't risk stirring them up too much. Also ... have those grenades returned to his hostel room -- where they were found. I'll bet one of their sergeants will go there to take inventory.”

“Right away, Chancellor.”

“What new information can you give me?” Kronta asked through the vidisplay.

“The Grand Assembly is proceeding as planned tomorrow,” Nyk replied. “Meanwhile, the rest of the vaccine was received and has been administered. By tonight, the entire Lexalese population should be immune.”

“How's Wygann doing?”

“The palace is issuing statements that Wygann is recovering well. It was a superficial wound.”

“I've seen those statements. What of his assailant?”

“An Altian ore-worker being kept in isolation. I know nothing more.”

“Nothing?”

“Well -- one other thing. According to the Lexalese charter, they can hold him for five days without access to his consulate -- and, they intend to. The Altian consul has lodged a protest in the strongest possible terms for not being permitted to see the man. I think that's an interesting development.”

“Why? It's the consulate's responsibility to assure the safety of Altian citizens.”

“It seems to me,” Nyk replied, “that this consul protests too much.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Think about it, Illya. Are you still ExoService liaison to that HL task force on colonial security?”

“Yes.”

“How has this Wygann business played out there?”

“About as to be expected. First the Lexalese delegate claims an Altian- sanctioned attempt was made on their chancellor. The Altian delegate countered by denying any Altians were on Lexal. Then, the Lexalese published photoimages and the ID profile of the assailant...”

“Which blew apart the Altian claim.”

“Exactly. Then the Altians deplored the violence, wished Wygann a speedy recovery and maintained that the assailant, if indeed Altian, was acting on his own.”

“Isn't something missing?” Nyk asked.

“Like what?”

“An investigation, for example, by the Altians as to why this individual was on Lexal in the first place. They know his identity. How difficult would it be to perform an ID code trace and learn when he went offworld and who paid his fare?”

“No, nothing's been said about that. You're right, Nyk -- this DOES point to official Altian involvement. Keep me posted on developments on your end.”

“I will. By the way, Illya -- any word on Senta?”

Kronta paused. “No -- not yet. I'm sorry, Nyk.”

“Has anyone claimed responsibility? Made ransom demands?”

“No. Nothing to date.”

Nyk nodded. “You're doing your best. Thanks, Illya.” The vidisplay went blank.

“More need-to-know?” Andra asked.

“Yes, as I'm sure any news on Senta is. Wygann stirred up more than he anticipated with this ore-worker ploy.”

“It makes me worry more for Senta. If Altian officials indeed are in on this -- they would have access to truth drug.”

“I agree. But -- they'd have to get her to Altia, first. With Internal Affairs watching the transit points and both shuttleports, I doubt they could do that. At first, I thought Mykko's insistence on a conspiracy between The Seven and the Altian regime was nothing more than Lexalese paranoia. Now, I'm not so sure.”

“They taught us something about paranoia and conspiracies at the academy,” she replied.

“What was that?”

“They taught us that, just because you're paranoid -- it doesn't mean they're NOT out to get you.”

15 -- The Grand Assembly

Nyk sat behind stage with Andra and some Altian security officers, conferring with Kronta on a handheld vidisplay. “It's going like clockwork. The crowd has been gathering all morning. It looks like a million people out there.”

“How does this work?” Kronta asked.

“Wygann gives a speech. Citizens with special tickets have been admitted to the front of the arena and they get a chance to petition. They ask for favors, for relief from some injury, to have disputes adjudicated -- that sort of thing. Potential petitioners transmit their needs to the palace beforehand and these are reviewed by Wygann's staff. About a hundred requests are granted. This whole scenario is playing out all across Lexal on a smaller scale, with provincial governors and town magistrates presiding.”

“How is Wygann recovering from his wound?”

“Very well,” Nyk replied, stifling a smile. “His security forces believe the Altians are moving into position for the attack.”

“How does he know that?”

“He knows the names of all of them. Once I told him Altian ore-workers are the likely perpetrators, he put an ID trace on every Altian ore-worker on Lexal.”

“He can do that?”

“Of course. It's done in Floran.”

“Here it requires a magistrate's approval with probable cause.”

“Here, all it requires is Wygann's wish.”

“The Lexalese put up with it? With that sort of intrusion?”

“Not only put up -- they seem to welcome it.”

“In that case -- why doesn't he just round them all up?”

“That was the source of quite a debate in the palace. In the end it was an issue of plausible deniability. Wygann doesn't want the Altians to be able to deny any of this. Remember -- he can't make ore-workers talk.”

“Their actions will speak louder than words.”

“Precisely. Wygann's taking the podium.”

“Keep the circuit up, Nyk.”

“I'll prop this so the camera picks up one of the vidisplays... how's that?”

“Blurry but it'll do.”

Wygann stepped to the podium with Janna at his side. He wore his right arm in a sling. “People of Lexal ... I greet you.” The crowd cheered.

Nyk folded his arms and stood beside Andra. She bit her knuckle. “I'm worried, Nyk. Suppose the vaccine doesn't work?”

“We know it works. You know it works.”

“Suppose it doesn't work here? Suppose there's more than one virus? Maybe they released it on Earth to distract us from the REAL plague. I think this is an awful way. I know Mykko is a risk-taker. I can't accept he'd risk so many innocent people.”

“You've been in all the discussions. Those concerns were voiced. Kronta agrees with Wygann -- that they would attack with an untested virus is as unlikely as us inoculating with an untested vaccine.”

“I know. But to stand here and watch it happen...”

“There's no guarantee any of this will go according to script. It's in the hands of Destiny, now.” He climbed onto the dais. “I'm going poke my head through the curtain and get a better look.”

He approached the security chief behind the curtain. “Ah, Nykkyo,” the chief said. “We've moved security forces close to the subjects.”

“How many are there?”

“About twenty.”

Wygann began his speech. A murmur swept across the crowd, followed by screams and popping noises. Nyk peered through the curtain and saw individuals shouting and throwing spheres into the air. They burst, forming clouds that settled onto the assembled throng.

“May I have your attention,” Wygann spoke into the microphone and his voice reverberated through the sound system. “Please remain calm.”

Lexalese security forces began to converge on the perpetrators. A young man approached a security guard, who climbed to the stage and whispered in Wygann's ear. "We want those men taken alive," Wygann ordered. "Attention everyone. Remain calm."

Janna stepped to the podium. "This is your princess," she announced. "Everyone is to return to their homes and await further instructions. Remain calm and return to your homes. The situation is under control. The Grand Assembly is cancelled."

The crowd quieted and began dispersing. Several men lay on the ground and security forces restrained others. A corps of body guards surrounded Wygann and Janna on the stage.

"Such a docile crowd," Nyk said to Andra. "They're his flock and Mykko's their shepherd."

"Shepherd?"

"An Earth term. They know he'll care for them."

"Bring those men to security forces," Wygann announced. "We want as many as possible taken alive."

Nyk picked up the vidisplay. "Well -- did you see?"

"I certainly did," Kronta replied. "Now, lets hope that vaccine does its work."

Nyk sat in the Chancellor's quarters. A palace medic injected a vial of immune system booster into a vein in his arm. "We'll repeat this four times a day for the next two days," the doctor said.

The medic approached Andra. "Save it for someone who needs it," Nyk said as he buttoned his cuff. "She's completely immune."

Janna approached Andra. "I understand you volunteered to test the vaccine."

"Yes, she did," Nyk replied. "The virus made her plenty sick, too."

"It was before we understood the importance of the booster," Andra added.

"I've transmitted instructions to all Lexalese that anyone exhibiting symptoms should report immediately to the clinic. We should have ample supplies of booster."

"Kronta tells me shipments of booster are ready should we need them," Nyk said. "I wonder if those poor sods knew they were on a suicide mission."

"They did," Janna replied. "many died from self-administered nerve poisons. We have about a dozen under guard in our clinic. Most have begun to have symptoms. We're compiling a list of names -- of both the living and the dead."

"May I see the list?"

"We're still receiving reports from around the colony." She handed Nyk a vidisplay. "Here's the list so far."

Nyk scrolled through it. His eyes stopped on the name Manrei Lom. “Lom!” he exclaimed. “I want to see this man.”

Janna passed her hand over a proximity pad. Venn entered. “Have security take Nykkyo to see this prisoner. He's in the detention area.”

Venn snapped a bow and escorted Nyk to a block of cells behind the palace security office. He spoke to a guard and gestured to Nyk.

The guard escorted him to a cell containing a young man. He was sitting on a bench, coughing.

“Lom,” Nyk said. “Why?”

“Death to Lexal scum. I'm a dead man. Dead men don't talk. You're all dead, too. We'll keep killing colonies until our demands are met.”

“I think not, Lom. The only ones susceptible to your plague are you and your cronies.”

“I don't believe you.”

“Do you see any of the medical staff with symptoms? Lom -- the entire population is immune. Your weapon is no good.” Lom leaned over, seized by violent coughing. “That's right. All Lexalese have been vaccinated.”

Lom regained his breath. “So typical for Wygann,” he gasped, “to protect his own at the cost of others. What of offworlders? Is he letting them die, too?”

“I've heard no reports of offworlders contracting the virus -- except for those directly exposed at the Grand Assembly. Lexal is giving the vaccine to anyone who wants it.”

“Except for us,” Lom wheezed. “Leave me. I have nothing else to say to you.”

“Lom... Make this worth something. Tell us who's responsible.”

“I said leave me!”

The guard sealed the cell and walked with Nyk to the security office. “Is it true?” Nyk asked, “the ore-workers are being denied the vaccine?”

“Yes,” the guard replied. “Orders from the chancellor himself. He feels it's a bit of justice. Besides -- our doctors doubt the vaccine would help except to prolong their suffering.”

The guard turned Nyk over to Venn, who returned him to the chancellor's quarters. “If anyone needs me, I'll be in my office. I must make some calls.” Venn snapped a bow.

“What's the status up there?” Kronta asked Nyk. “The news is full of conflicting reports.”

“Wygann has ordered Lexal quarantined, with no shuttle flights taking off or landing except for his own perimeter patrol. His fleet has been mobilized and is flying around the clock to prevent unauthorized

transits.”

“How long is this quarantine to last?”

“It will be lifted after three standard days have elapsed without new cases surfacing. It caused a near riot at the shuttleport. Once the nature of the attack sunk in, offworlders from around the colony flocked to the capital only to find the shuttleport shuttered. Wygann has vaccinated them and from what I hear there have been no serious cases.”

“He was fortunate. Widespread fatalities among offworlders could've inflamed tensions in the HL.”

“It was more than luck, Illya. The Grand Assembly is an event for Lexalese citizens. There were few offworlders in attendance.”

“Except for the ore-workers.”

“Exactly. I think, upon reflection, his handling of the offworld visitors was exemplary.”

“What of the Lexalese at the event?”

“It appears the severity of the symptoms is related to exposure. Out of a million or so at the arena we think a few thousand received direct exposure. Of those, about half have reported symptoms. Most cleared up after the first dose of booster. We've only seen a couple hundred here in the capital sick enough to require hospitalization. The rest have been given booster and told to report for a second dose in the morning. What's the reaction on your end?”

“We've begun shipping vaccine to the other colonies. Altians are being rounded up and deported, both here on the homeworld and on the other colonies. I'll say this. If one of Wygann's intentions was to send a message, it's been heard loud and clear inside the HL.”

“I doubt The Seven can mobilize against another target before we have the entire hegemony vaccinated,” Nyk replied.

“Probably not, given the increased security measures. They seemed to have focused their resources on Lexal. How many of the Altians have talked?”

“None. Here in the capital we have about six left alive -- and none of them are expected to last the night. Most of the attackers killed themselves after detonating their grenades. The rest succumbed to the virus and took their secrets with them.”

Venn approached Nyk. “Your visitor is here.”

“I must go, Illya -- I'll speak with you later.” He turned to Janna's assistant. “Bring her in.” Venn opened a door and gestured. A Lexalese security guard escorted a young woman in. “Thank you, corporal.” The guard snapped a bow, turned and left. “Dyppa -- Thanks for coming.”

“Nothing would keep me away.”

“How was your trip?”

“I was met on the comm station by a Lexalese deep-space courier. I understand all Altians are being

returned and confined to our homeworld. I suppose that means I'm headed there after this -- to be accounted for."

"Present company excluded," Nyk replied. "I've ordered you cleared for transit anywhere in the hegemony. I would hope you'd prefer to return to Earth."

"So, now Altia is the pariah colony."

"That will change. We can't blame an entire population -- no matter what their politics may be -- for the actions of a few, Dyppa." She smiled. "For the time being, the colonies are exercising due prudence." He looked toward Janna's assistant. "Venn -- we'll see the prisoner now."

"This way..." Venn led Nyk and Dyppa to a clinic located within the palace walls.

A medic greeted them. "Have you been inoculated?" he asked Dyppa.

"No."

The doctor obtained a syringe. "Extend your arm and make a fist." Dyppa complied. He felt the veins in her elbow, pierced her skin with the needle and squeezed the plunger. Then he handed her a surgical mask. "Best to wear this. The vaccine needs half a day to work." She slipped on the mask. "I should warn you -- it's not a pleasant sight."

The doctor opened the door to a treatment room. Lom was lying on a pallet. He was being administered oxygen. His breathing was labored and red blotches covered his face and arms. His ankles were shackled together and chained to the pallet.

Dyppa knelt beside him. "Oh, Lom!"

"Lyla," Lom panted. "Now I know you're on their side."

"I'm on the right side, Lom," she said through the mask. "Don't you see? All this was a waste."

"We'll take our fight to another front -- another world."

"No, you won't. Within days the entire hegemony will be inoculated against your plague. Lom -- at one time I might've believed your way was the right way. Now I know it's wrong. Don't you see? You were promised something The Seven can't deliver. You've been used -- duped. They don't care about the likes of you or me. They're thugs who want to enrich themselves the same way the offworlders do."

He moaned. "I did this for you, Lyla."

"Not for me," she replied.

"I wanted to improve your life."

"No, Lom. My mother is *amfin* to a member of the New Altian Senate. I KNOW how he's working to change things. Life on Altia IS better than it was a year ago. We can't solve all our problems overnight. This isn't the way. Returning to a rule of thuggery isn't the answer. It'll put us backward -- not forward."

"Lyla..." Lom gasped. "I never stopped loving you."

“I never stopped loving you, either, Lom.” She looked toward Nyk. “Lom -- there IS a way to make things better. Tell me who leads The Seven.”

“No one. No one man leads.”

“Who developed the virus? Do you know?”

“I've heard a name.”

“What name?” Lom's eyes rolled back in his head.

Dyppa held his head and caressed his face. She reached behind her ear and began to unhook the mask. “Don't Dyppa!” Nyk shouted. “The vaccine hasn't had time to work -- you won't be protected.”

She looked at Nyk and back at Lom; then she removed the mask, stroked his face and kissed his lips.

He began to reach for her. “Your real name is Dyppa?” Lom wheezed. “I like Lyla better...”

“Lom, tell me what name.”

He struggled to lift his head. “Egon ... Egon ... Han...ri.” He settled back onto the pillow, gasping for breath.

Nyk felt his heart sink. “Egon Hanri,” Dyppa said.

“I heard,” Nyk replied. “He was Senta's thesis advisor. He probably invented the Ricin genome, too. I'll bet he's the one who abducted her.”

Lom struggled to take a breath. He groaned, shuddered and went limp, his eyes staring at the ceiling. Dyppa stroked them closed.

“Get her to a treatment room,” the medic said to some orderlies. “Start a booster infusion. Take this one to the morgue.” One of the orderlies took Dyppa's upper arm and led her, sobbing, down the corridor. Another dragged in a levitating gurney.

Venn escorted Nyk back to the quarters. He sat at his desk and placed a call. “Kronta -- we know who developed the virus. It's Doctor Egon Hanri, Professor Emeritus at Floran City University ... Senta's thesis advisor.”

“That's not possible! I don't believe it.”

“Believe it, Illya.”

“Where did you hear this?”

“From a reliable source.”

“What source?”

“Do you have a need to know?”

“I need to know how much trust to put in this. Nyk, what source?”

“From the lips of one of the attackers -- right before he died. I doubt he had a motive to lie about it. Reliable enough for you, Illya?”

“I’m calling Internal Affairs right now.”

“Illya -- be careful. He probably has Senta.”

Nyk stepped into a treatment room. Dyppa was on a pallet raised to a sitting position and she held a basin on her lap. An I.V. line ran to a vein in the back of her left hand. She coughed.

“Dyppa -- how are you doing?”

“Not real well. Look.” She pulled back her sleeve and he saw red blotches on her forearm. “The medics think I will recover, though. There were some synthetic antibodies in the vaccine -- enough to save me.”

“It was a brave thing you did -- and a foolish one.”

“It was the right thing. Lom died in my arms.” Her eyes brimmed. “I hope it comforted him because it certainly doesn’t me.”

“His information will help us crack this ring once and for all.”

“I feel terrible -- like I did when I snitched on my handler.” She wiped away tears. “I thought I could save him.” She shook her head. “I really thought I could save him.”

“He was beyond help.”

“I don’t mean today -- when I spoke to him in Altropolis. I thought I could convince him. If he had told me that name then -- none of this would’ve happened and he’d have been a hero.”

“He IS a hero, Dyppa. Little things like that make men heroes. You’re a hero, too.”

“Oh, Nyk...” She buried her face in her hands and sobbed. The sobs turned to coughs. She gasped for breath, her body shaking. Her spasm subsided and she lay back on the pallet, wheezing, her face red. “Maybe if I think of him as a hero,” she gasped, “I’ll get over it faster.”

Nyk pulled a stool close to the pallet and sat. He took her hand and stroked her forearm. “Don’t upset yourself, Dyppa.”

“I was wrong.”

“About what?”

“About Lexal. It’s a beautiful world. It reminds me of Earth.”

“Me, too.”

“It's cold like Wisconsin.”

“Wisconsin isn't cold like this all the time.”

“I was wrong about the people. They're sweet. They're not monsters -- they're like you and me. I was wrong to be their enemy.”

“I doubt any of them were your enemy, Dyppa.”

“Princess Janna visited me. She spent the whole afternoon sitting with me and we talked.”

“Talked about what?”

“About her and me ... about Altia and Lexal ... about my work on Earth. She's so kind and gracious. I see why her people love her. She gave me this.” Dyppa opened her gown. Between her blotchy breasts nestled a pendant comprising a blue and white gem-studded disk eclipsing an orange enamel one.

“It looks like Lexal and Lexal Prime.”

“Yes,” she replied. “Janna explained it to me. It's the Order of the Twin Worlds. She said it's given to Lexalese citizens who risk their lives for the colony. She said I'm the first offworlder to receive one. Imagine ... me -- an Altian...” She picked up the pendant and looked at it. One of her tears fell onto it and she buffed it on her gown. “...and I can't bring it to Earth with me.” She closed her gown. “Nyk ... hold me.”

He put his arms around her and she rested her head against him and sobbed. “Dyppa -- you relax ... do what the doctors tell you to do ... get well. We need you on Earth. Will you do that?” She nodded. He stroked and kissed her hair. “Good.”

“Nyk... I really do think I could love you.”

“I know I could love you. I'm beginning to.”

“First, I have to give myself permission to love again. I don't know how long that will take.”

The sound of a throat clearing startled Nyk and he looked up from his desk. “Yes, Venn.”

“Someone to see you.”

“Thank you, Venn. And -- thank you for your attention. I'll probably be leaving tomorrow, and I wanted you to know much I appreciated it.”

“Thank you, sir.” He gestured and Sirk entered.

“Nykyo,” the captain said, “if you'll present me to the Chancellor.”

“This way.”

Nyk approached Wygann's office and rapped on the door jamb. "Yes, Nyk?"

"Chancellor, I'd like you to meet Captain Sirk of the Altian Security Forces. He was a member of our task force. Captain, Chancellor Mykko Wygann."

Sirk extended his hand. "A pleasure, sir. On behalf of Altia, I want to extend my deepest regrets for the incident. We worked hard to stamp out these terrorists."

"Not hard enough, it seems," Wygann replied.

"If we could've prevented this -- we would've. We tried. We were making progress, but we ran out of time."

"I see."

"Believe me when I say no one in the legitimate Altian government had anything to do with this."

"Indeed. Can you explain why your consul was the go-between?"

"I'm sorry, I'm not following."

"Your consul trafficked messages between the attackers and Seven leadership."

Sirk attempted to speak.

"We have irrefutable evidence -- vidphone call logs."

"If this is true, then we will take him home to face justice."

"I'm afraid we can't satisfy that request."

"Chancellor -- he is an Altian citizen protected by diplomatic convention. I insist."

"Maybe so. He is also dead -- a victim of the virus. He expired this morning."

"What of the man who shot you... You seem to have recovered rapidly."

"Another virus casualty... Captain -- why ARE you here?"

"This incident involved Altian citizens engaged in an illegal activity. It is my responsibility to investigate so any culpable can be turned over to our legal system."

"Investigate to your heart's content, Captain. You won't find much, though. They all succumbed to the virus. Now, if you'll excuse me."

"Chancellor." Sirk snapped to attention, turned and left.

Nyk lay in bed in his guest room. Andra pulled herself against him. "Not a single Lexalese fatality," he said, "only a few hundred requiring hospitalization -- it's a remarkably successful vaccine."

“I was worried for the infants and children,” Andra said.

“Parents with infants and the elderly were told to seal themselves in their houses during the Grand Assembly. Older children tolerated the vaccine well.” He kissed her hair. “I understand a motion to censure Wygann has been killed in the High Legislature.”

“Voted down?” she asked.

“Killed in committee.”

“Why censure Mykko?”

“His decision to quarantine the planet after the attack was initially perceived as a ploy to hold offworld visitors hostage. Now, cooler heads prevail and the delegates realize his actions probably prevented spreading the virus to unprotected colonies. He also demonstrated the vaccine can not only prevent the disease but cure it -- if administered promptly enough after exposure.”

“As in Dyppa's case. I hadn't heard of a censure motion. How did you?”

He kissed her forehead. “You see -- there are advantages to having a boss who's the ExoService liaison to the HL Committee on Colonial Security.”

“Mykko was right,” she replied. His way wasn't the right way -- it was the only way. It's the reason HE's chancellor -- it would've been too risky a decision for me to make.”

“Me, too,” he said. “Successful leadership is managing risk -- not avoiding it.”

“Mmm ... that sounds like something we learned at Vebinad. Mykko's risk paid off. It started a process.”

“What process?”

“The Altians are performing a thorough house-cleaning of their bureaucrats and mid-level functionaries. When the old regime was dissolved and the new senate installed, they left the lower levels intact. THAT's where The Seven had its operatives.”

“So,” he mused, “the External Affairs minister was clean but his consuls were tainted.”

“Exactly. With the planet sealed, what's left of the independence faction has no place to go -- nowhere to hide.”

He pondered. “I haven't seen any of that on the news.”

“That's because,” she replied, “it's being done quietly, so as not to embarrass the current Altian regime -- and, to keep the culprits off guard.”

“How do you know about it?”

“Secret, summit-level communications have begun between the Lexalese and Altian capitals.”

“And, how do you know THAT?”

She kissed his cheek. "You see -- there are advantages to being a member of Janna's closest and innermost circle of personal friends."

"So, Kronta might be right. Maybe we HAVE broken this once and for all."

"And," she added, "now we know who was responsible for the virus."

"Yes -- Illya tells me they have Egon Hanri in detention."

"Are they going to interrogate him?"

"No -- they can't. You see -- he possesses an ore-worker's implant."

"Why would he have one of those?" she asked.

"He was born on Altia and was an ore-worker until he saved enough to pay his way to Floran to attend university. It was there he distinguished himself as a geneticist."

"If they can't use truth drug -- what are they going to do?"

"They're attempting to wait him out. I'm sure he knows what happened to Senta."

"Hmm..."

"Hmm what?" he asked.

"I'm thinking."

16 -- Doctor Hanri

Nyk stood with Andra on the palace landing strip. "Nykkyo," Wygann said, "thank you for your efforts. With any luck we will dispose of this threat in short order. We'll rid the hegemony of these terrorists."

"I'm afraid not, Chancellor," he replied.

"What do you mean?"

"It's something I've observed on Earth. That world seems perpetually threatened by this group or that who believe violence and terror is the way to impose their will. If you seize or kill one of them another

will take his place. Even if you capture or kill the leader, another will step forward.

“Floran authorities are holding Egon Hanri -- the man who invented the virus. Perhaps another man of his stature won't come forward, but others will -- others who are just as vicious and just as clever in their own way. No, Chancellor -- before we can eliminate these groups we must understand and eliminate the root cause.”

“Of course,” Wygann replied.

Janna extended her hand. “Nykkyo -- you are welcome here any time.”

A transport cart stopped near them and an attendant helped Dyppa to her feet. “The medics think I'm well enough to travel -- and, I'm not contagious.”

“Do you feel well enough?”

“I think so.”

Nyk turned and climbed the steps into the diplomatic deep-space courier. The hatch closed and the vessel rolled down the landing strip, lifted off and headed into orbit.

The courier touched down at the Floran City shuttleport and taxied to a stop near the diplomatic terminal. Nyk supported Dyppa as they walked through the boarding tunnel and into the concourse. Among the sea of blond hair he spotted black. “Suki!” he yelled and waved. “Over here!” She pushed her way through the crowd and embraced him; then, she hugged and kissed Andra. “This is Dyppa Hawryt.”

“I'm Sukiko, Dyppa. Nykkyo told me of you.”

“Dyppa will spend a couple days recuperating at Central Clinic, and a few more convalescing at the Residence before we head to Earth together.”

Andra turned to Suki. “Did you bring what I asked?” Suki reached into her *lifxarpa* and handed over a packet.

“What's that?” Nyk asked.

“Something,” Andra replied.

“I can see it's something.”

“Something we may or may not need.” Andra tucked the packet into her own sash.

“More need-to-know?”

“You might consider it that,” Andra replied with a smile.

“Has your questioning of Hanri revealed anything?” Nyk asked.

Kronta shook his head. "He maintains an air of cool innocence. 'When will I be permitted to return to my work?' he asks. I've had to plead before a magistrate to extend his detention, and that extension is about to expire."

"You've confirmed the implant?"

"Yes -- we've performed blood tests. No interrogator would touch him."

"You've searched his home and office?"

Kronta let out an exasperated sigh. "Of course we have and we've come up empty."

"Maybe Lom was wrong."

"I believe Lom," Andra said. "It's the only explanation. Senta must've conferred with him on the viral genetics."

"Yes," Nyk replied. "I recall her telling me she discussed it, early on, with her advisor. He gave her advice that steered her in the wrong direction."

"Misinformation," Kronta suggested.

"She obviously got it right, eventually."

"May I suggest something?" Andra asked. She withdrew the packet from her sash. "These are cartridges containing Zander's mind-control mixture. It can serve as a truth drug. Perhaps one of these will loosen Hanri's tongue."

"Those are hypnotics," Kronta replied. "Hypnotics have been outlawed."

"So has kidnapping been outlawed."

Kronta drummed his fingers on his desk. "Let's have a talk with Hanri."

Nyk followed Illya to a detention center located beneath the Government Center tower. Inside a cell was a distinguished looking slender man with grey hair. "Good day, professor Hanri," Kronta said.

"Mr Kronta again... Can you tell me when I'll be released -- or speak with my solicitor?"

"That depends on you."

Hanri's gaze fell on Nyk. "I'm Nykkyo Kyhana."

"Ah, yes... I believe we've met, years ago. You're with Senta. She was my best student."

"We thought you might know where she is."

"Me?" He shook his head. "I haven't spoken to her in... I don't know how long."

"She informed me the two of you spoke not more than ... twenty-five to thirty days ago."

Hanri looked at the ceiling. "Now that you mention it, I do remember a vidphone conversation with her. She was asking about some ... rather esoteric aspect of DNA replication if I recall."

"And you haven't seen nor spoken with her since?"

"Not at all."

"Doctor Hanri -- My name is Andra. Andra Baxa." Nyk observed Hanri's body language and saw a stifled recoil at the sound of her last name.

"I ... I don't think we've met."

She tilted her head. "Did you know my husband? His name was Zander."

Hanri licked his lips. "N...no, I don't recall a Zander Baxa."

She reached into her lifxarpa and held up a red cartridge. "Do you know what this is?" She withdrew an injector, loaded the cartridge into it and pulled off the needle guard. Hanri shrank back as she approached him. "It's nerve toxin. One of my husband's colleagues developed it -- from Earth materials. My husband died of a dose of this."

"Surely you ... you're not going to threaten me with that."

She replaced the needle guard. "No. But -- this was one of Zander's contributions to a certain Altian separatist group." Andra withdrew another cartridge -- a green one, and loaded it into the injector. "This is another. Do you know what this is?"

Hanri's jaw dropped. "No..." Andra cocked the injector and advanced on him. "Stay back..." He stood and backed until stopped by the cell wall. "Keep her back from me."

Andra threatened him with the injector, waving it back and forth before his eyes. Nyk could see fury building in hers. "I think you do know. I'll bet for the past few days you would've ransomed a world for some of this. But -- you didn't have it, did you? I do -- I have the last of Zander's stash." She approached him, drawing back her arm.

Then, cobra-fast she struck, jabbing his shoulder and triggering the roller.

Hanri reached for his arm. "This is an outrage."

Andra stepped back, calm returning to her face. "Wait for the drug to seize him," she said and ejected the spend cartridge.

"I know how this works," Nyk replied. He stood and watched as Hanri's eyelids drooped and his jaw slacked. "Start recording this, Illya."

"Remember -- this isn't truth drug," Andra added. "In order not to contaminate his memory you must ask neutral questions. If you ask leading questions you can lead him the wrong way."

"Dr Hanri," Nyk said. "You will obey me. You will answer truthfully the questions I pose. Do you understand?"

“Yes,” he answered in a monotone.

Do you know where Senta is?”

“Yes...”

“Tell me where.”

“Zoltertown. 16112-47001 apartment 404.”

Kronta pulled his handheld from his *xarpa* and began making a call. “Wait,” Andra said. “Find out if anyone's with her.”

“Is anyone with her?”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“Five.”

“What will they do to her if enforcers show up?”

“Kill her.”

Nyk turned to Andra. “How long does that stuff last?”

“The effects begin to fade after a segment or so.”

“Do you have more of it?”

“I have four more cartridges.”

Kronta left the cell and returned a short time later. “We're bringing him with us.” He gestured to someone outside the cell and a pair of Service enforcers stepped in. “If he makes a false step -- stun him.”

“Yes sir.”

“It shouldn't be necessary,” Nyk said. “Doctor, please follow us.”

Hanri stood and followed the enforcers down a corridor, outside and into an awaiting skimmer. “Zoltertown,” Kronta instructed the pilot. He consulted his vidisplay. “16112-47001.”

The skimmer lifted off and flew between the towers of central Floran City. Zoltertown was in the southwest quadrant, an older and run-down part of the city, built upon one of the first residential settlements.

Kronta reviewed a message on his vidisplay. “Internal Affairs is on their way.”

The skimmer flew over low rooftops. The streets narrowed as they approached the older sector, and

were congested with slow-moving groundcars cautiously avoiding each other.

“Sector 16112,” the pilot announced. He pointed to a sprawling, four-story apartment building. “Set down by that square,” Kronta ordered. “I imagine they have lookouts posted. Internal Affairs will land on the roof.” He ordered an image of the building's floor plan from the Internal Affairs database. “Apartment 404 is here,” he said, pointing. He turned to the enforcers. “You go in first -- Knock on the door of a nearby apartment. If it's occupied, make some excuse about having the wrong address.”

The enforcers set their stun wands on standby and headed into the building.

“Okay, Nyk. Escort our distinguished guest.”

“Dr Hanri -- My name is Nemo. I'm from Altia... Who is your head man there?”

“Jann Devri”

“Jann Devri sent me. Altian Security is closing in and he wants the woman as a hostage. Do you understand?”

“Yes...”

“It's essential Devri have the woman as a hostage. Now -- let's go.”

Hanri approached the apartment and pressed the doorchime twice, a pause, twice again, a pause and once. Daylight in the peephole was obscured. “What are you doing here?”

“Devri wants the girl,” Hanri replied.

“Who's with you.”

“Nemo -- Devri's man.”

A long moment passed. “We don't know Nemo.”

“He's Devri's man.” Hanri began to sound impatient. “Open up -- there's foot traffic in the corridor.”

Nyk heard a bolt being released. The door cracked open. Hanri pushed it the rest of the way and Nyk stepped in.

The two enforcers pushed their way into the apartment with stunners drawn. Internal Affairs officers streamed down the roof stairs. They carried the occupants, unconscious, to the awaiting skimmers and began searching the apartment. Kronta turned Hanri over to an enforcer. “I can understand why Zander wouldn't want that drug mixture out of his own hands,” he said. “That was remarkable.”

“Andra can tell you stories.”

An Internal Affairs lieutenant approached Kronta. “No sign of her.”

“She has to be here.”

“Maybe when Hanri was taken they moved her. He's been incommunicado for a few days now.”

Nyk looked around the apartment. "Senta!" he yelled. "Senta! It's Nyk! Where are you?"

Sounds of motion came from behind a wall where it made a jog in the apartment. He heard a muffled woman's voice, moaning.

"SENTA!" he yelled and put his ear to the wall. "I think she's behind there." He threw his shoulder against the wall. He threw himself again, and again. The material began to crack. He threw himself again. "Hold on, Senta!" he shouted and threw himself again.

"Nyk..." Kronta said.

He threw himself again. "It's starting to give," he panted.

"Nykkyo!" Andra called. "Look!"

Nyk looked up. Two internal affairs officers supported Senta. Her face was bruised and she had black-and-blue marks on her arms and legs. Another officer removed a gag covering her mouth and cut cords restraining her wrists.

"Internal Affairs had the building manager open the apartment next door," Andra said. "She was stuffed in the closet there."

"An ambulance skimmer is on its way," Kronta said. "Lie her on that sofa."

Andra sat beside Senta and held her hand as she dozed on a therapeutic pallet. A pouch of clear fluid drained into a tube threaded into one of her nostrils. Aahhn poked a vidisplay. "She's dehydrated," he said to Nyk. "They had her in that closet for four days without food or water. We're giving her fluid. She also lost some weight."

"Not something she can afford to do," Nyk replied.

Ahahn smiled and nodded. "Not much surplus on that frame."

"Did you find other injuries?"

"Other than contusions, no. We'll release her in a day or so. She should take it easy for a while."

"I think we all should take it easy."

Senta stirred. She opened her eyes. "Nyk ... Andra..."

"You rest."

"The doctors said I should eat three squares a day. What happened on Lexal?"

"What we expected to happen."

"Did the vaccine work?"

Nyk nodded. "The only fatalities were Altian. A few hundred required hospitalization, and several thousand reported minor symptoms. The vaccine exceeded everyone's expectations. We're shipping supplies of it to the other colonies. This genie struggled to escape his bottle. Thanks to you we kept the lid screwed on."

She reached for his hand and squeezed it. "Thanks to everyone."

"What happened to you?"

"You were right, Nyk -- I shouldn't have called Hanri. I did try to pose the question in vague enough terms, but he put two and two together. It took him a while, but he did. By then I was in Sudal working at the labs and out of his reach. It was only when I returned to Floran City for the vaccine test he could lay his hands on me. I was happy my part was done by then."

"Kronta said we had to push on, and we did."

"It was the right thing. I was prepared to die, rather than disclose our little project. Better one to die to save a world." Andra handed Senta a tumbler of water and she sipped through a drinking tube. "I should've known. I should've seen it."

"Seen what?"

"The Ricin gene -- the virus -- Hanri's handiwork. I should've realized the counter sequence in the genome was based on his work with native Floran plants -- that only someone of his stature could've done this."

"Vision in hindsight is always perfect, Senta," he replied.

"I should've seen it eight years ago during the Ricin project. I was working to undo what he had done. He probably wanted to strike me down then, but I was too high-profile. The sequencing labs prevented another attempt at tainting the food supply. So -- he waited, and devised this virus."

"Did he, personally, hurt you?" Andra asked.

"No -- he had others do that. I'll probably be called upon to testify again. Hanri faces the same fate as those others."

"You'll testify not only as an expert witness, but as a victim. You do know what that means."

"Yes -- examination and cross-examination under truth drug. I'm not looking forward to it."

"Maybe Hanri will cooperate to save his own neck."

"With access to truth drug," Suki asked, "why bother with a trial?"

"Hanri can't be interrogated," Nyk replied. "Besides -- the admissibility of truth drug testimony in Floran courts is complex. We're lucky Hanri didn't have access to it, himself."

"Or, to Zander's mixture," Andra added.

"They tried. They tried to make me talk. I told them what I posed to Hanri was only a hypothetical

question -- one that I had been asked by a student. I stuck to that story. They tried to reconstruct Zander's formula. They dosed me with something that unleashed the worst torments." Senta reached for Andra's hand and grasped it. "Oh, Andra -- do you know what monsters live in the subconscious?"

Andra kissed Senta's wrist and caressed her forearm.

"When that failed, they resorted to a more primitive approach. They tortured me."

"Oh, Senta..." Andra caressed her face.

"They used electricity. They put probes on my breasts and into my..."

"Don't," Andra said. "Try to forget."

She shook her head. "I want to tell you. It'll help me... They beat me. They sleep-deprived me. They locked me into that closet hoping I'd break. I told them that story -- I told myself that story over and over again until I believed it myself."

"That," Andra said, "is exactly how we were taught at Vebinad to deal with such a situation."

"The whole time, I kept asking myself, what would Andra do? And -- I didn't care if I died. I almost welcomed it. Then, a few days ago something changed. They stopped trying to make me talk. They argued about killing me or using me as a bargaining chip. I don't know how long I was in that closet."

"Hanri probably was trying to find some sanctuary," Andra said, "some colony that would take him in. He had no place to go."

"Senta," Nyk asked, "did he tell you why?"

She shook her head. "No. I asked him why and he turned his back."

A rap came on the door and Kronta stepped in. "I think we really have them, this time. We've found enough we can interrogate. They'll implicate others."

"The net widens," Nyk said.

"Yes -- Sirk was right. They're disperse. Hanri was here, others on other colonies. There was even one on Lexal."

"The consul."

"Exactly."

"Wygann had that figured out, too. I don't know for sure but I believe Mykko exposed him to the virus personally."

"Speaking of Wygann," Kronta said. "In two days he's scheduled to address the High Legislature. He's issued guest passes for everyone on the task force to sit in the Lexal box."

"Will you feel up to it, Senta?"

“I hope so.”

17 -- A Night on the Town

Suki held Nyk's hand as they rode a tubecar from Central Clinic. “Aahhn tells me Senta will be confined for couple of days so she can recuperate,” he said. “Andra went back to Lexal to be with Janna. That gives us a couple of days to do Floran City.”

“I haven't seen much of it except for the insides of buildings -- mostly hospital rooms.”

“Is there anything you'd like to see?”

“I don't know what's here to see.”

“Floran City is the most visited place in the hegemony. There are many sites of interest. I thought, as a historian, you'd enjoy seeing the Floran Museum. Then, we'll get settled in Senta's apartment and perhaps enjoy some night life.”

The tubecar stopped. Nyk escorted Suki to the lift and they walked to a paved quadrangle. “This,” he said, “is the Central Square. It's the site of the original encampment.” He gestured. “This is where the Ricin perpetrators were executed.”

“It's a bit gruesome -- like the guillotine set up in the Place de la Concorde in Paris.”

“They had erected towers around the perimeter of the square -- to hold the gallows. A crowd gathered to watch. Not one of Floran City's prouder moments, in my opinion.” He gestured. “Over there is the Floran Museum.”

She walked with him into the structure. “The museum is built around the hull of the *Floran* . Once the passengers were taken off the vessel, they brought it down on this spot and cannibalized it for supplies. What was left became a monument.” He walked toward a metal wall, now grey with a mottled patina. “This is she -- the *Floran* .”

Suki ran her hand along the hull. “It gives me goose bumps.”

“I feel that way, myself. Over here is a timeline. The launching of the mission in 2201 ... the warp jump accident ... planetfall ... the *Floran* compact...” He pointed “Here's the first colony, Gamma-5 ... and so on -- to the present.”

Suki embraced his arm and locked her fingers with his as they walked along the timeline. “I can actually read these descriptions,” she said and leaned against him. “This diorama must be the original

camp.”

“Yes... Here's Floran City two thousand years ago... Some of these buildings are still standing.” He slipped his arm around her shoulder and steered her into a hall. “Over here is an exhibit you might enjoy.”

He stood with her regarding a life-sized statue of an Asian man. “Is that Koichi Kyhana?” she asked.

“That's right. He's your great-great-great-great grandson. Do you know who I think he resembles?”

She nodded. “He looks like Daddy.”

“You see it, too. I translated his journal, Suki. I got to know him -- and, to like him fairly well. His journal kindled my interest in Earth.” Nyk pointed toward the statue. “It's HIS fault I joined the ExoAgency and ended up there.”

Nyk pressed his wrist to the doorscan and the apartment door slid open. “After you,” he said.

Suki walked in and walked around. “Wow,” she said.

“This is the abode of a Food Service director. It was my official residence when I made my first transit to Earth.” He gestured her to the balcony. “If you get vertigo -- don't look down. It's 353 stories to the street.”

“Oh, my God! Look at that view. The city seems to go on forever!”

“It's our first night in the big town. How about sampling some of the nightlife?”

“What do you suggest?” she asked. “Dinner and a movie?”

“You won't find a nice restaurant on this planet.”

“I noticed there isn't any fine dining in Sudal, but I figured that was just Sudal. I thought here in Floran City it would be different.”

“No -- the food here is so bland Florans consider eating to be a bodily function. The dining establishments are all utilitarian commissaries. We'd have to go offworld to find a gourmet meal.” He sat at a vidisplay, poked the screen and scowled. “I don't see any holofilms worth watching... We could catch a performance of *Red Dawn*, *Red Dusk*. It's a Floran classic -- the longest running play.”

“How long?”

“It's been running in the same theatre for a thousand years.”

“A thousand years? I thought 'Cats' had a long run.”

“It's considered THE Floran literary treasure -- esteemed more for the beauty of the language than the plot.”

“Do I have sufficient facility with the language to appreciate it?” she asked.

“Probably not,” he replied. “I’m not sure even I do. Sitting through a performance of *Red Dawn, Red Dusk* is considered *de rigeur* -- something every Floran must do once in his life. It’s required reading in the schools. By current cultural standards, it’s a silly and trite melodrama...” He poked the screen. “No luck -- tonight’s performance is sold out. No doubt, it’s because of the upcoming High Legislature session. The HL delegates and hangers-on must be looking for a night out, too...”

“How about a sporting event?” she suggested.

“Those are held during daylight... Sorry, *korlyta* . I’m coming up blank on such short notice.”

“Isn’t there a mall or someplace where we could walk and window-shop?”

“There’s The Arcade... It’s a pleasant walk over there. Shopping’s not a big thing for Florans... but -- there is a drug club there I used to frequent.”

“Drug club? Oh, Nykkyo -- I don’t know about that...”

“It’s a part of what makes Florans, Floran. This is a nice place. The drugs are regulated by the state; they’re safe and non-addictive -- not physically addictive at least. I was never into the recreational chemical scene in a big way here, but a couple of euphoriants might a fun way to relax.”

“Andra has never taken me anyplace like that.”

“She won’t -- she’s what would be on Earth a tea-totaler. She swore off drugs after Zander used them to control her. It’s up to you. It’s the Floran equivalent of going to a bar to have a few drinks and listen to a band.”

“I didn’t bring any evening wear.”

“Tunic with *lifxarpa* is always appropriate,” he replied. “Come on -- let’s go.”

“All right...” He led her down the corridor and to the lift. They rode to the ground floor. He held her hand and they walked along the street. They approached a ten-lane boulevard packed with groundcars. “How do you cross?”

“I’ll show you.” He approached the crosswalk and stood on the curb. A row of ten panels in the pavement glowed red. The one closest glowed white and traffic in the corresponding lane stopped. The panel turned blue and the next one white. Nyk took Suki’s hand and crossed the street as traffic stopped lane by lane. As they stepped onto each square, traffic behind them resumed.

“You cross at the crosswalk,” she said.

“Exactly. Blue is the equivalent to green on Earth, and white is the same as yellow. Red means red on both worlds.” Suki pointed toward a crowd on the sidewalk at the middle of the block. “Groundcar kiosk,” he replied.

“I feel like an absolute yokel,” she replied. “This so different from Sudal. I keep reminding myself not to look up at the tall buildings.”

“Look all you want. No one’s going to take advantage of you -- no matter how naive a yokel you appear. Up ahead -- there’s a real City girl coming our way. No doubt she’s ready for a big night.”

A tall young woman approached them. Her medium blond hair was up, in a twist. She wore a two-piece outfit -- the skirt's hemline was a diagonal slash from her right hip to her left knee, and this line was echoed in her top, cut to expose her left breast. Her right thigh and breast were decorated with a colorful, abstract flame pattern. The same pattern adorned her cheeks and forehead.

“Now, THAT's a fashion statement,” Suki remarked.

“Indeed -- even by Floran standards.”

The woman passed them. Nyk led them across more boulevards and then turned left. He pointed to a building illuminated with colored lights. “That's the Arcade,” he said.

They approached the entrance and walked in. In a doorway was a young woman waving to them. “What's that?” Suki asked.

“One of the round-the-clock sex clubs. If you're into anonymous, no-strings-attached sex -- this is the place.”

“No thanks... Although -- there was a time in my life when this would've appealed to me.”

He led her to an escalator to the second level. “Here's the drug store. Care to look around?”

“I've been in the drug store in Sudal.”

“This place has it all. Come on in -- we don't have to buy anything. This is part of what Florans are all about. Look -- euphorants, inhibition relaxers... sex aids ... performance extenders ... orgasm enhancers. Those are Senta's favorites...”

“It's sensory overload,” she replied.

An attendant approached them. “Only looking,” Nyk said and pointed to a display. “These are experimental. You can try a few for free and report how you liked them. Senta tried an experimental combination performance extender and orgasm enhancer once. I almost didn't survive the night... Do you see anything that appeals to you?”

“I'm afraid not.”

He nodded toward the door and stood in the corridor. “Down there is the food store -- not too different than the one in Sudal. Over there is the clothing shop. Down that way is the body art salon -- probably where our walking fashion plate had her work done... At the far end is the kids' club -- no intoxicants, adult supervised -- a place for young people to go and hang out, listen to music...”

“And, fool around?”

“To a degree. Lewd touching isn't allowed there, and no one can rent a trysting room until they're past the age of consent. It doesn't mean it doesn't happen. Speaking of which...” He gestured toward an archway. “The trysting rooms are down here.” He led her to another escalator and rode to the ground floor. “Here are some other clubs. This one is *Klub'Fraxi* ...”

“Club Smash?” she asked.

“Yes -- loud music -- popular with the middle-age set.”

“Loud music is a middle-age thing here?”

“Here, middle-age refers to the period between the ages of consent and majority -- 20 to 25 Floran years. You haven't heard that expression?” She shook her head. “Maybe it's a City thing...”

He guided her into a doorway labeled *Xi Dulxe Nota* .

“The Soft Note?” she asked.

“The Sweet Note -- it's the club I told you about. The music is quieter in here.” He scanned his wrist and Suki scanned hers.

The hostess led them to a table in the dark corner of the club. Most of the other tables were empty -- a pair of young men sat at another table near the stage.

“Why did she seat us here?” Suki asked.

“Because of you.”

“Because I'm Asian? Nykkyo -- I thought I left such prejudices on Earth. I never expected to encounter racism here. Maybe we shouldn't stay.”

He shook his head. “She's not racist, *korlyta* . No one on this planet has ever seen an Asian. She would've deduced you were *anaturida* gone wrong.”

“*Naturida*?”

“You've seen how homogenous is Floran's population. Most children are conceived *in vitro* with genetic counseling to select specific traits. Some parents will opt for a natural child, conceived the old-fashioned way. It's considered a testament to the couple's love as they must accept whatever is born. We don't tolerate infanticide.”

“So, she thought I was a ... freak?”

Nyk nodded. “She thought by sitting you in this corner, she'd spare you uncomfortable stares.”

“I'm becoming accustomed to stares.”

“You know, Suki -- your genes remain scattered in our population pool.”

“I wonder if it's possible for Asian characteristics to surface on their own.”

“I don't know -- you'd have to ask Senta that.”

An attendant approached and Nyk placed his order. She returned with a basket of pencil-like objects and a portable scanpad. He pressed his wrist to it to pay for the purchase. “I thought we'd start with some euphoriant inhalers.” He picked one up, held it to his lips and inhaled sharply. He held his breath and exhaled.

“Looks like you're tokin' a joint,” Suki said. She picked one up, held it to her lips and inhaled deeply. She closed her eyes and held her breath for a slow count to ten, then exhaled slowly through her nose and smiled.

“You did that like an expert.”

“Just like tokin' a joint,” she replied. “This stuff feels really good. How long does it last?”

“Not long. Go ahead and take another hit when you feel like it.”

Suki picked up another inhaler, drew on it and set it down. “Oh! That feels REALLY good... Mmm...”

A musician took the stage with a multi-stringed instrument. He began playing a meandering melody, accompanied by chords, electronically enhanced. Nyk called over the attendant and she brought a tray with more inhalers.

“Try one of these,” he said. “This is a psychedelic inhaler. It's designed to go along with the music.” He took his hit and closed his eyes. The blackness dissolved into colored patterns, shifting and blending with the music.

Suki took her hit and closed her eyes. She smiled. “This is neat...” She giggled. “I can see it when I talk...”

The dancing colors faded and he opened his eyes. “Would you like to try an injectible?” he asked. “That way, you won't need to keep hitting on inhalers. One cartridge should last the whole concert. We can cuddle up and listen -- and watch.”

“It sound so hard-core...”

“Everyone uses them,” he replied. He called the attendant over again. She returned with a tray containing a plastic gadget and several small tubes with protruding needle guards. Nyk pressed his wrist to her scanpad. She presented it to Suki. “Scan your wrist,” he said.

Suki complied. The attendant reviewed the scanpad and set the tray onto the table. “What was that about?” Suki asked.

“I ordered some class-A euphoriant injectors as well as some psychedelics. It's a little out-of-character for me, but why not? The euphoriants are subject to abuse. She needed to see either of our profiles were marked psychological addictive -- if so, she'd have been prohibited from serving us.” Suki's lips formed an O. She picked up a euphoriant cartridge.

“Do you know how to use one of these?” Nyk asked.

She shook her head. “I never had the occasion.”

He picked up the injector and flipped it open. “This spring-loaded roller pushes the drug out.” He cocked the roller, dropped the cartridge into the device and snapped it shut. “This is the trigger.” He pulled off the needle guard and handed it to Suki. “Into the thigh muscle and press the button. The needle's so sharp and fine -- you won't feel a thing. And, it's coated with salve, so the wound closes

immediately.”

She lifted the hem of her tunic and hesitated. “I can't do it,” she said shaking her head.

“Here...” He took the device, poked her thigh and triggered it. “Nothing to it.” He ejected the spent cartridge. “Massage the spot -- it'll distribute the drug so it absorbs faster.”

She pressed her thumb against her thigh and rubbed in a circular motion. “Yes -- I feel it coming on.” She closed her eyes and lifted her face. “Oh! That feels SO good... mmm...”

Nyk injected himself. “Now, try overlaying the psychedelic on top.” He handed her the injector. She paused for a moment, then jabbed her leg and pressed the trigger. He moved his chair close to hers and she leaned against him.

“This is wonderful,” she said. “So pretty -- so soothing... mmm...”

The musician played through a set of songs. Nyk glanced at Suki and smiled. Her dark hair shimmered with colors pulsing in time with the music.

She began to sway and hum to herself.

The musician finished his set and then left the stage. The colors in Nyk's mind were beginning to dim. Suki looked around. “Where's the music?”

“He'll be back -- he's taking a break.”

“In the meantime...” She picked up another euphoriant cartridge and loaded it into the injector.

“Be careful, Suki... I think two of those is your limit.”

She injected herself and rubbed her skin with her thumb. “Oh! Feels good!”

“Suki -- keep your voice down. You're drawing attention to us.” She picked up another psychedelic and loaded it into the injector. He put his hands on her thighs. “No more...”, he said, sliding his hands along her thigh. She giggled, jabbed her left deltoid and triggered the device.

Suki picked up a euphoriant inhaler and took a hit, and then one of the psychedelics. She started giggling, then laughing. “It's so funny!”

“What's funny?” Nyk asked softly.

“Laughing...” She laughed more. “I see me laugh... I taste me laugh ... I feel me laugh -- all fuzzy and warm all over... I need another hit...” She reached for the basket and found it empty. “I need another hit...” She began drawing on all the spent inhalers -- then spotted the attendant and waved to call her over.

“She's ignoring you,” Nyk said. “You're behaving like someone's who's over her limit.”

“I'll get her,” Suki said, stood and swayed. She took two steps, tripped over her own foot and fell to the floor, toppling an empty chair on her way down. Nyk stood to help her up. “I need another hit,” Suki exclaimed in English.

The attendant came over to him. "I think your friend has had enough," she said. Nyk nodded and helped Suki to the table.

"Suki --*korlyta* ... It's time to go home."

"I don't want to go home... I want another hit!"

"Suki -- you've had enough. Come on -- fight it off." He patted her cheek. She swatted his hand away. "Force yourself to think. Take a deep breath."

"I want a hit! Give me a hit!"

The attendant placed a glass of cloudy green liquid on the table. "Maybe this will help clear her head."

"Drink this, Suki."

"I want a hit," she hissed.

"Drink it."

She picked up the glass, took a sip and glowered at him. Then she spat the fluid in his face. "I said I want a hit!"

Nyk wiped the liquid from his nose and cheeks. "Suki -- you'll get us into trouble. Public intoxication is an offense here. Now -- drink this -- drink it down like medicine. It'll help clear your head." She picked up the glass and drained it. "We'll rest a couple of moments. Try to make yourself think."

She folded her arms onto the table and rested her face on them. Nyk stroked her back. "Are you better?" She nodded. "Are you ready to cooperate?" She nodded again. "Okay -- let's try to walk. Stand up -- that's it -- one foot in front of the other..."

"I'm so dizzy..."

He put his arm around her and led her from the club. "You're doing fine -- concentrate -- we only need to go as far as the tubecar platform... Try not to appear incapacitated -- if an internal affairs officer sees you like this -- he'll give you a citation..."

He reached the tubecar lift and rode to the platform. There he ordered a car and gave the apartment tower address. She leaned against him as they waited for a car to arrive and slide back its cowl. Suki collapsed into the seat and Nyk sat beside her. The car zipped to their destination and he helped her out.

"Okay,*korlyta* -- we're home." He scanned his way into the apartment. "You need to sleep it off." He unfastened her *lifaxarpa* and slipped her sandals from her feet. "Lie down .. that's it."

Nyk undressed and lay beside her. He looked into her face and saw her pupils were fully dilated. "You hit your limit, all right. Cuddle up,*korlyta* ." He pulled her close to him and guided her arm across his chest. "Go to sleep."

Her eyes began to brim. "Oh, Nykkyo... I'm sorry..." she began sobbing. "I'm sorry... I'm so sorry."

“It's all right,” he said and kissed her forehead. “You sleep.”

“I'm so sorry,” she blubbered. Her sobbing became weeping which became wailing.

Nyk walked into the kitchen and opened a drawer. *Senta usually keeps some here*, he thought and picked up a cartridge and an injector. He loaded the cartridge and carried it to the bedroom.

“Suki...” She lay on her stomach, wailing into a cushion. “Suki -- this is a sleep aid. I'm going to poke you with it...” Nyk pulled off the guard, jabbed her deltoid, pressed the trigger and massaged her skin with his thumb. He stroked her arm and shoulder until she calmed, closed her eyes and her breathing became deep and regular.

Nyk slipped into his tunic and fastened his sandals. Suki emerged from the bedroom. “Good morning,” he said. “How are you today?”

“My head feels like it's stuffed with cotton,” she replied. “Other than that -- all right.”

He pinned the ends of his *xarpa*. “Do you remember anything about last night?”

“Most everything,” she replied. “In particular I remember making a complete ass of myself. I'm so sorry, Nykkyo -- I spoiled our evening out.”

“It's my fault for suggesting the club,” he replied. “Maybe there are differences in Floran brain chemistries that have evolved over the past five thousand Earth years.”

“Or, maybe it's me. I can't handle it. I make an ugly drunk, too. Don't ever let me go over my limit drinking.”

“It should be easy since alcohol is prohibited here. How would I know when you've hit your limit?”

“I shouldn't drink more if my cheeks turn red. I get a flush right before I hit my limit. Mom and Daddy used to know I'd been drinking when I came home with red cheeks. Just say, 'Suki -- you can't drink any more because your face is red.' I'll know to stop.”

“It's too bad your face didn't turn red last night.”

“It turns red now -- every time I think about it. Nykkyo ... tonight -- can we just stay here and make out?”

Nyk scanned his wrist as he entered the public entrance to the High Legislature assembly building. And attendant regarded the scanpad display and motioned him toward a vestibule. He passed through an arch, scanning his wrist again and found himself among a crowd. Andra's white hair caught his eye and he worked his way toward her.

He found her with Senta, Helsyn, Aahhn and Kronta. "Where's Sirk?" he asked.

"He's with the Altian delegation."

"And Pring?"

"He'll be in the President's box."

"Look at this mob."

"There's a bigger one forming in the public gallery," Andra remarked. "They know Wygann's due to speak. He's not popular in the HL, but his bombast makes for good theatre. It's enough to create a circus atmosphere."

An archway into the High Legislature chamber was sealed by a pair of sliding doors. Nyk nodded in its direction. "Just think, Andra -- if things had worked out a bit differently, you might be behind that door now."

"Nyk," Kronta said, "I saw Wygann. I'm amazed he's recovered so quickly from that wound."

"He was never injured. The assassination attempt was a ploy to buy time for that last shipment of vaccine. It was Janna's idea. Mykko thought it would be amusing to blame it on one of the Altian ore-workers -- to throw his opposition off-balance. Wygann enjoys a good game of brinksmanship."

"Why didn't you tell me this?"

"We were disseminating information on a need-to-know basis, Illya. Remember?"

A tap on his shoulder startled him and he turned to see Dyppa with an older woman. "Nyk -- this is my mother."

"A pleasure," he replied.

"Thank you for helping my daughter," she replied.

"Your daughter has helped herself. She's helped all of us."

"Really?"

"Didn't she tell you how?" Dyppa shook her head.

"No, she didn't."

"Ask her. Ask her how she came by that medallion she's wearing. Maybe some day she'll tell you. You're sitting with the Altian delegation, no doubt."

“Yes -- I always travel with the senator. I was pleased to discover my daughter here on Floran.”

“Nyk and I returning to Earth together...” Dyppa started to say.

The sliding doors opened. An announcement quieted the crowd in the vestibule -- visitors would be seated by delegation. First the Altian...

“I’ll see you afterward,” Dyppa said.

“You’ll come to Sudal with us.”

“Of course.” She waved and turned to join the others filing through the archway.

Nyk stood with the others as the Deltan, Floran and Gamman delegations were announced. Then -- Lexal.

Nyk followed the others toward the door. He scanned his wrist and an attendant verified his credentials. Inside the arch an usher led them down an aisle.

The assembly hall was a semi-circle divided into terraces. Each terrace was cut into sections, one for each of the twenty-one colony planets and one for the homeworld. Inside each sector were desks for the planetary delegates, a larger desk for the head of each delegation and a podium. To the side was a gallery of benches for visitors. Nyk slid down the bench and sat between Andra and Senta.

“How are you feeling?” he whispered to Senta.

“I’m all right.”

Janna approached them wearing a jewel-studded long gown and an iridescent tiara. Andra stood, embraced and kissed her. “Mykko and I are so happy you could join us.” She worked her way down the bench, shaking hands.

Nyk scanned the hall. He leaned to Andra. “Look at all the *ax’amfinen*. Every delegate has at least one white-haired beauty with him. Can you tell from which school they come?”

“Not from this distance,” Andra replied. “I can always spot a Vebinad grad in person.”

“Maybe someone you know is here -- a classmate.” He glanced across the semicircle toward the Altian delegation. He saw Sirk conferring with an official. In the visitors' gallery there he saw Dyppa, scanning the crowd. He made eye contact and she waved.

Andra poked Nyk with her elbow and pointed to a circular area in the center of the hall. An older woman stood, flanked by two tall, pale young women with the characteristic oat-straw hair of *ax’amfinen*. “Isn’t that the High Chancellor?” she asked.

“I can’t see,” he replied. “It might be. She doesn’t usually attend these, does she?”

An older man in off-world official dress stepped into the Lexalese box and took a seat in the visitor's gallery at the end of the bench. Nyk glanced at him. “Who’s he?” he whispered to Andra.

“I don't know,” she replied. Mykko's wife approached the man and spoke to him. “Whoever it is, Janna knows him.”

A middle-aged man stood at a podium in the center of the hall. He pressed a control on the podium and a chime sounded. The crowd quieted. “This session is called to order,” he announced. Wall-sized images of him materialized behind the podium. “This session was requested by the Lexalese and Altian delegations to discuss mutual grievances.

“Before we get to that order of business -- I would like to make a statement regarding the recent terrorist attack on Lexal and the subsequent eviscerating of the organization known as The Seven. I'm sure all of you are aware of the details. I wanted to say, as President of the High Legislature, that all of us deplore violence, that terrorist acts will not be tolerated anywhere within the Floran Hegemony, and that we rejoice in the elimination of a terrorist threat.”

Polite applause filled the hall.

“The chair yields to Mykko Wygann, Chancellor of the colony of Lexal.”

The delegates and crowd murmured in anticipation.

Wygann stood at his podium, surveying the crowd and his image filled the screens. “Before I begin,” he said, “I want to take a moment to address some of the rumors swirling about. First -- regarding concerns about the treatment of offworld visitors on Lexal at the time of the attack: All I will say is anyone doubting Lexal's care and compassion for innocent visitors who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time should seek one out and ask him how he was treated.

“Second -- the report that Lexal is stockpiling the virus for use as a counterattack is rubbish. We deplore its creation and we believe no one has a legitimate reason to possess it. We will not rest until every trace -- every vestige of the virus is eradicated from Lexal.”

Wygann paused and manipulated his handheld vidisplay. “Now,” he said, “to the agenda at hand...”

Nyk leaned toward Andra. “Here it comes...” he whispered.

“As the honorable President indicated in his opening remarks, recently Lexal was the target of a vicious and unwarranted terrorist attack -- one which through the efforts of many was thwarted. However, I must differ with you, Mr President, on one issue. The actions of courageous individuals here ... on Lexal ... on Altia ... on T-Delta ... on Gamma-5 ... on Myatasya did not eliminate a terrorist threat. The threat has only been neutralized ... temporarily.

“The other day I had the opportunity to speak with one of those courageous people. I made the same mistake as you, Mr President -- I rejoiced in the elimination of a threat. 'No,' he said. 'You may eliminate these individuals, but until we solve the root problems -- it is only a matter of time before others step forward to carry on.'

“I mulled over those words as his shuttle took off to return him and others to Floran. I saw the truth in it. I made a vidphone call to my peer -- Prime Minister Kel Kyle of the Colony of Altia. I'm sure he thought I was calling to ... to curse him out for letting such a cancer grow on his colony.” Wygann shook his head. “I called to be educated on what were conditions on Altia and what were the challenges he faced. I received an earful. Overcrowding, undernourishment, a low standard of living, and lack of opportunity are what our fellow beings on Altia suffer.

“I accepted an invitation to visit him. I met Mr Kyle and toured Altropolis. I also met some of the men and women of that remarkable city. Then, he and I returned to his offices and began talking. We talked through the night. By morning we were friends.” He turned toward the Lexalese visitors' gallery. “Isn't that right, Kel.”

The man at the edge of the bench stood. “Absolutely, Mykko.”

Wygann beckoned Kyle to the podium. The two leaders shook hands and embraced. “We looked for ways Lexal could help the Altians overcome some of their handicaps. In the end we agreed to a three-pronged approach.

“First... After the insurrection of two years ago -- one supported by the then legitimate government of Altia -- Lexal was awarded reparations, to be paid by Altia over a ten year period. The second installment of those reparations will be due at the end of this standard year.

“I have agreed to cancel the reparations and forgive the current Altian leadership of that debt, for it is one they did not incur.”

“Second... I will issue an executive order to our manufacturers that they are to use Altian raw materials exclusively, and to pay a ten percent duty on them. This duty will be returned to Altia to help fund domestic improvement projects.

“Finally... I have ordered my Agricultural Minister to open additional land for food production, the fruits of which will be offered to Altia at a significant discount. Kel -- I hope your people have a taste for inkroot.”

“We'll develop one.”

Nyk whispered to Andra, “This will be hard to sell on Lexal.”

“If anyone can sell it, it's Mykko. It'll be harder to sell on Altia. Many won't brook the notion of their prime minister breaking bread with Wygann, much less accepting charity from him.”

“Canceling the reparations will help, don't you think?”

“Help, yes... Shh...”

“These measures will cost Lexal some progress and some prosperity,” Wygann continued. “I don't view it as an expenditure, but as an investment. Priming the Altian pump, as it were. Lexal is a small colony, and our contribution must be proportionately small. I call upon the other colonies -- the High Legislature -- the entire Floran Hegemony to follow the Lexalese lead.”

Wygann paused and looked around the hall. “I think many of you were expecting -- dreading -- one of my lengthy harangues. This is all I have to say today. I hope you are not too disappointed.”

With that, he sat down.

The hall was silent. Delegates and spectators looked around at each other. After several moments the HL presiding officer took his podium. “Would anyone else like the floor?” A grey-haired woman in a Floran tunic with *lifxarpa* embroidered in gold stepped to the podium. “The Chair recognizes the High

Chancellor.”

“Delegates and friends -- secretly behind the scenes over the past thirty days a task force assembled to combat a terrible and vicious biological weapon -- a weapon that threatened not just a single colony but us all. I would like to take a moment to recognize that team. Would Mr Illya Kronta please approach.”

An usher stepped to the Lexalese box and escorted Kronta to the floor. Kronta embraced the chancellor. “Mr Kronta, it is with great pleasure that I bestow upon you ... the Chancellor's Medallion.” One of her *ax'amfin* attendants handed the chancellor a flat box. She opened it and slipped a ribbon over Illya's head. “If you please,” she said and gestured toward the podium.

Kronta gazed at the assembly. “Madame Chancellor -- I'm just a bureaucrat and one a bit overwhelmed at the moment. Because this virus was tested if not created on Earth, and because our efforts involved several planets -- my role on the ExoAgency Oversight Committee and within the administration of the ExoService meant that I was chosen to head this task force. Our group started small, but grew with the scope of our response. Too many participated to recognize them all. However I would like to extend thanks to the following individuals for their contributions.

“Mr Nykkyo Kyhana, Assistant ExoAgent-in-Chief for North American Operations.” An usher gestured to Nyk and led him to join Kronta. “Nykkyo was the first to identify the virus as a potential biological weapon. He also served as liaison to Lexal as that colony prepared for a terrorist attack. Nyk -- come shake hands with the High Chancellor and receive your medallion.

Nyk extended his hand. The chancellor grasped it. “Thank you,” she said. Her consort handed her a box and she withdrew an object and slipped it around Nyk's neck. He looked down and saw the palm-sized disk of enamel and stones.

“Thank you,” Nyk replied and stood beside Kronta.

“Next, the team that developed the vaccine -- Drs Kurso Aahhn, Geov Helsyn and Senta Kyhana.” The three were escorted to the floor and received their medallions. “Finally -- a brave young woman who volunteered to test the vaccine by exposing herself to live virus, and nearly paid the ultimate price. Her courageous actions paved the way for the treatment protocol, used with such success on Lexal. Andra Baxa, please come forward.”

Andra stepped to the podium and embraced one of the attendants. Her colleague handed a box to the chancellor, who slipped the medallion around Andra's neck. She curtsied and stood with the others as the delegates rose and applauded.

Nyk sat between Andra and Suki as the monorail train sped southward toward Sudal. Across and facing them were Senta and Dyppa, engaged in conversation. Suki held Nyk's medallion and examined it. “You're the only one coming home empty-handed, Sukiko,” Andra said. “I hope you're not disappointed.”

“Not at all,” Suki replied. “I'm coming home with you and Nykkyo safe and healthy. I'd give a dozen medals for that.” She squeezed Nyk's hand. “I'm proud of you, Nykkyo. I was in the public gallery blubbing away when she put this around your neck. I'm proud of you all.”

“You can hold onto it for me while I'm on Earth,” he said.

“Senta -- this is your second Chancellor's Medallion,” Andra said. “I thought you could only receive one.”

“It was a different chancellor,” Nyk explained. “Each High Chancellor designs his or her own medallion and determines who receives them. Some hand them out like party favors.”

“Not this chancellor,” Andra replied.

“Dyppa -- let me see yours,” Suki said. Dyppa slipped hers from around her neck and Suki compared them. “I think yours is prettier.” She handed it back to her.

“You can hold it for me while I'm on Earth, too,” Dyppa said.

“How do you think Wygann's program will sit on Altia?” Senta asked.

“What I like about it is,” Dyppa replied, “he's not telling us what to do with the aid. Other aid attempts failed because the colonies or the HL would come in and mandate this thing or that. We don't like others telling us who should run our government, how to hold elections or what to do about unemployment.”

“Just cooling the rhetoric will help, don't you think?” Nyk asked.

“Oh, certainly -- as will the fact Wygann and Prime Minister Kyle are speaking to each other instead of at each other.”

“Do you think other Altians will feel as you do?”

“If this program is announced properly, I think most of us will give it a chance.”

“There were quite a number of delegates unhappy with Mykko's speech,” Andra said.

“Why?” asked Suki.

“Well -- the Deltans are unhappy because they're being shut out the Lexalese mineral market. The Gammans are unhappy because Wygann's subsidization of Lexal foodstuffs will cut into their sales.”

“Lexal is so small even drastic measures can only make a dent.”

“Yes,” she replied. “Mykko's actions are more gestures than solutions. He's hoping to embarrass some of the larger colonies into doing more. Lexal is so sparsely populated. I can see an exchange program that could bring Altians there to bolster the work force.”

“What are your plans?” Senta asked.

“A couple days to relax in Sudal,” Nyk replied, “then Dyppa and I make transit and return to our respective, mundane jobs.”

Nyk stood on the bluff watching the sky darken. “Howdy, stranger.”

He opened his arms and Suki fell into them. "I hope you're not cross with me," he said.

"For what?"

"For another assignment in which I acted with a careless disregard for my own safety."

She smiled. "For some reason, I don't think you were in as much personal danger as that other time on Lexal. Besides -- I saw the whole thing unfold from the inside. I think you handled yourself well -- I'd like to think I could do as well under similar circumstances. I'm proud of you, Nykkyo."

"You know, *korlyta* -- you're a hero, too."

"What do you mean?"

"When you saved Senta from drowning -- you saved the mind that went on to design the vaccine. Otherwise, Senta might've been dead and this world might've been in much deeper trouble tonight."

"Might-haves don't count, remember?" She kissed his cheek. "I've enjoyed getting to know Dyppa."

"She's quite a girl, isn't she?"

"What is she in Earth terms? About eighteen?"

"Eighteen or nineteen."

"She carries herself like someone much older."

"She's lived more life than many sixty-year-olds."

"I do like her, Nykkyo -- very much. Like I said -- you have good taste in women. I like Senta a lot, too."

"I've been looking at her through different eyes lately, myself."

He took her hand and they strolled into the house and up the spiral staircase. Andra and Senta sat on a bench. Dyppa lay on her stomach on a sofa, playing a game on a handheld vidisplay. Suki looked around the room. "It looks like you're collecting quite a harem," she said.

"Suki -- That thing with Dyppa was..."

She kissed his cheek. "I was kidding. Like I said -- I like Dyppa. I wouldn't mind sharing you with her -- once in a while, that is."

"No," Senta said to Andra.

"Go ahead," Andra replied. "What's the harm in asking her?"

Senta stood and faced Suki, her hands behind her back. "Sukiko?"

"Yes, Senta?"

“I would like to sleep with Nykkyo tonight. I know it's his last night here, and you'd like time to catch up, but...”

“Of course, Senta.” She led Nyk to Senta and gave her his hand.

“You don't mind?”

Suki shook her head. “Not at all, if he's willing.”

“I'd love to sleep with you, Senta,” he said.

“Nykkyo and I had time to catch up while you were in the clinic, recuperating. Besides, Andra and I have some catching up of our own to do.”

Senta smiled, then her jaw dropped. She turned to Nyk. “You used MY apartment ... as a trysting place?”

“You said I could come and go as I pleased. I can't believe you'd be mortified, Senta. Not you.” She turned her back. “Are you rescinding your offer?”

“No.” She faced him. “I just can't believe it!”

“Would you have done differently?” he asked.

“I... I suppose not.”

“Do you forgive me?”

“Will you promise me you'll ask next time?”

“Certainly.” He took her hand. “So -- your place or mine?”

“Why don't we sleep outside under the stars?”

“Really, Senta?”

“Really.”

Nyk took her hand and led her down the spiral staircase. He paused at a cabinet and removed a blanket. “Do you remember our first time together? Our almost first time, that is. Things might've been different if I had the foresight to bring this.”

“Things might've been different if I had the foresight to suggest it,” she replied.

He took her hand and led her to his bowl-shaped depression and spread the blanket. Then he slipped her sandals from her feet and lifted her tunic from her, and she removed his. He lay beside her. “Have you ever looked up?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I've looked up often since you've been on Earth. Which one is Earth's sun?”

He pointed. “Over there -- do you see that bright star with four dimmer companions tracing a

lop-sided rectangle?”

“I see it.”

“Earth's sun is about half-way between the right-hand side of the rectangle and a little to the left.”

“Yes, I see it.”

“You can see it?”

“Yes -- very faintly. It comes and goes but I can see it.”

“I can't. Your eyes must be better than mine, Senta. Watch the sky for that pattern. Over the year it will move to the west and into the daytime sky, and then you won't see it. Watch for its return in the east.” He rolled to face her and gazed at her in the starlight. “I had forgotten how pretty your breasts are.”

“They're the only pretty thing about me. I know I'm some sort of freak. No one on this world has red hair. I hate my freckles, my skinny legs and bony knees ... my too-long feet with too-long toes ... my too-big hands.” She pressed her right palm to his left. “My hands are almost as big as yours. I have a man's hands. And I especially hate that vein in my arm you always played with after we made love.”

“If there's one lesson above all others my time on Earth taught me, it's that you must be true to yourself. Your hair, your freckly skin, your hands and feet -- those features are what make you, you, Senta. I don't desire to change them. You'd no longer be you. They're as much you as your quick temper...”

“I don't have a temper!”

“You know you do. I wouldn't change that, either ... well, maybe I'd change that. Veska told me, once, how much you resemble your mother.”

“Dad said that?”

“Yes. He loved your mother, Senta. Having you in his life has been a comfort to him. Have you spoken to him?”

“No...”

“Don't you think it might be time to reconcile with your step-dad?”

“Maybe it is. After all -- it's not entirely his fault that he's your biological father.”

“Not entirely.” Nyk gazed at her face and touched her cheek. “You're wrong, Senta. You also have very pretty eyes. And, you have the most beautiful brain.”

“Do you really think that?”

“When we had our meeting with Kronta, and you and Helsyn laid out your strategy for fighting the virus -- I had no doubt we'd succeed.”

Her eyes brimmed. "Nykkyo -- that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

Nyk slipped his hand behind her neck and kissed her broad forehead. He caressed her forearm, took her hand and pressed it against his chest. Then, he kissed her lips.

"Aren't you afraid we'll mess things up?" she asked.

"No. Not any more. Are you?"

"No -- I'm ready to mess things up."

"Do you feel up to it?"

"As long as it's not too strenuous." He kissed her lips and he felt her tongue against his. He kissed her neck and shoulders. Senta giggled. "Am I tickling you?"

"No, Nykkyo. You don't usually do that."

"Are you complaining?"

"No -- it felt good." She guided his hand to her breast. Nyk caressed her. She inhaled deeply and released it slowly. "That feels good, too," she said. "It feels better than I remember." She drew in another deep breath. "Can you do that with both hands?" Nyk shifted his position to free his left arm. "Ohhh, so good..." she said. "I know what's different ... it's your pacing."

"My pacing?"

"You're not rushing. You're taking your time to ... to understand what I want... Mmm... You're caring for MY needs... Did you learn that from Sukiko? Is this how you and she make love?"

"I'm not the sort that kisses and tells."

She crossed her forearms above her head, pulled her shoulder blades back and rocked her torso to press herself against his fingers. He kissed her lips and her face. She lifted her chin as he kissed her neck, her shoulders, between her breasts and her stomach. "Oh, Nykkyo," she panted. "Do you really feel this way about me?"

"Can my hands tell a lie?"

She guided his hand lower onto her body and directed his fingers. "In that case -- I'd like some of this."

"You always knew what you wanted." He stroked her with his right hand and held her with his left.

Her lips parted and she began panting slowly. Her eyelids drooped and he felt her body go limp. He watched her ribs move and could see her heart pounding through the skin on her chest. "Oh, Nyk," she gasped, "... that's it... Oh... Ohhhh..."

She touched his hand. "Now," she said, lay on her back and opened her arms and legs to him. Nyk lay atop her and she locked her legs with his. He held her shoulder blades, gazed into her eyes and pressed his hips against hers. "Oh, Nyk -- this feels better than I remember, too..."

His heart accelerated and his breathing deepened. Senta gripped his back and her nails dug into her skin. "Senta!" he gasped. "I love you."

He panted to regain his breath. Senta relaxed her grasp and lay still, her eyes closed and tears streaming down both sides of her face. "Was that too strenuous?" he asked.

She shook her head, wiped aside tears and sniffled.

"Senta -- are you all right?" She nodded. "What's wrong?"

She drew his face to hers and peppered it with kisses. "Oh, Nykkyo," she sobbed. "I know I'm not pretty ... I'm not a sleek beauty like Andra, or dark and exotic like Sukiko. I accept it. I've learned to compensate ... in other ways. Tonight was different."

"Different, now?"

She brushed aside more tears. "I've had a lot of lovers..."

"You don't need to tell me that."

"But tonight ... Nykkyo, tonight was the first time ANYONE has made me feel... Has made me feel desirable ... sexy ... beautiful. It felt like you really wanted me."

"Of course I did."

"I could feel it. I could really feel it. Why? Why, Nykkyo? Why couldn't we have this before? Why did we have to divorce first?"

"Because I love you," he replied. "I just can't be married to you."

"I never stopped loving you. The whole time, I never stopped. You probably don't believe it, but it's the truth."

"I do believe it. I might not have seen it at the time, but I believe it. Suki saw it."

"Sukiko saw it?"

Nyk rolled onto his back and coaxed her against him. He gathered her red hair from her face and kissed her forehead. She reached across him. His gaze fell on a blue line running along the outside of her bicep. He touched it and stroked it away from her body to force it empty of blood; then lifted his finger and watched it refill. "Must you do that?" she asked.

"It's our little tradition."

"Your tradition, perhaps... Oh, Nykkyo -- was I really so bad for you? I can see now how good Andra and Sukiko are. I can see how much you've changed."

"I haven't changed. I've learned."

"I'm so sorry, Nykkyo -- forgive me."

“You've done nothing to forgive. You were being you. You and I aren't compatible, Senta. It is possible for two incompatible people to love each other. Don't you think we proved it? We just can't live together. Senta, I'm the one who needs forgiving. I hurt you. I realize it now, and I'm terribly sorry for it. I was doing what I had to do, and in doing so I hurt you. Please forgive me. You don't have to now -- not tonight. Some other time -- in the future.”

“I forgive you now, Nyk.”

“Senta -- Suki, Andra and I have formed a love-family. We'd like you to join us.”

“Really?”

“Really, really. We've discussed it and we all agree.”

“I'm flattered.”

“Is that a yes?”

“It's a no. Please don't take it the wrong way. I see what it is the three of you have, and I long for the same. But -- since your first transit there I've become accustomed to my independence -- my freedom. I'd like to continue enjoying it.”

“Nothing would stop you... You don't have to live at the Residence -- you can keep your home in Sudal.”

“It's my answer Nyk.”

“It's an open offer. Should you change your mind...”

She looked at the sky. “I'll know where to find you.”

She lay gazing into his eyes. Nyk caressed her cheek with the backs of his fingers. Then, he touched her eyelids and stroked them closed. With his gentlest touch he caressed them until her body relaxed and her breathing became regular. Then, he closed his eyes

Floran's golden morning light waked Nyk. He opened his eyes and saw Senta sitting cross-legged and tying her hair into a ponytail. “Well?” he said.

“Well what?”

“This is the test, isn't it? It's the morning after. The hormone rush has worn off. You can look at your partner in the harsh light of reality and assess how big a mistake you made the night before. There's an Earth expression for the phenomonon. It's called taking off the beer goggles.”

“Beer goggles? I don't understand.”

“You'd need to spend some time there.”

“You're right, Nyk. I've been sitting here and watching you sleep ... and, thinking.”

“So -- how big a mistake did we make?”

“How big do you think?”

“Senta -- must you answer every one of my questions with another question?”

“Do I do that?”

“You tell me -- I asked first.”

“I'm proud of you, Nyk. I'm proud of the work you do for the ExoAgency, and I'm proud of what you did during the virus crisis. I'm pleased you want my friendship. I'm not sure I deserve yours. No -- I don't think we made a mistake. I know I didn't at least.”

“Neither did I...” Senta covered her mouth with her hand and laughed. “What's funny?”

“Andra told me you tried to break down that wall with your shoulder.”

“That was an adrelaline rush.”

“Whatever you call it, it was sweet.” She stood. Nyk got up and handed Senta her tunic.

“I'm not going to bother,” she said. “I'll shower and put on a fresh one.” She picked up a corner of the blanket. Nyk grasped the other end and she helped him shake it free of sand and fold it.

He draped the blanket and both tunics over his forearm, took Senta's hand and walked with her into the house. They climbed the staircase to the middle level. Suki and Andra were sipping cups of tea.

“It was a beautiful sunrise,” Andra said. “Did you see it?”

“I slept through it,” Nyk said.

“I saw it,” Senta replied. “It was beautiful.” She approached Suki and embraced her. “Thank you,” she said and kissed her cheeks.

The packet docked with the relay station. Nyk stood and gestured toward the tunnel door. “After you.” Dyppa stepped through the tunnel and Nyk followed her into the workroom. “Let's get changed.”

She turned and faced him. “I'm still reeling from it all.” Nyk opened his arms and held her, caressing her hair. “It may take me a while to get back into my routine. I still see Lom when I close my eyes. It's as if his face is burned into the insides of my eyelids.”

“If you find you can't deal with it,” Nyk said, “give Grynnya a call. Don't be shy about it. She's there to help. We need you, Dyppa -- more than ever, now that our Scottsdale office is closed.”

“What will we do about that?”

“Seymor tells me we'll keep it shut. It means a heavier load for you, Dyppa. It's another reason we need you happy and healthy in Wisconsin.” He kissed her forehead. “Let's get changed.”

Dyppa waved as she stepped into her shuttlecar. Nyk climbed into the cockpit of the bubble shuttle. The bay depressurized, the spacedoor opened and Nyk eased the shuttle into space behind Dyppa. He watched hers vanish in the flash of its subjump; then he set coordinates and triggered the coil.

When transparency returned to the bubble he looked down on Earth. He could see the Indian subcontinent in sunlight. His orbit took him around to the dark side and he began his reentry, activating countermeasures to cloak the shuttle from Earth radar.

The navigation computer computed a course leading to the roof of Seymor's apartment building. The bubble decelerated as it descended, punched through some clouds and he looked down on the island of Manhattan with its reticle of streetlights and the outlines of the TriBorough and George Washington bridges looking like glowing strings of pearls.

Nyk fastened the tethers to hold the bubble onto the roof of Seymor's penthouse. His boss awaited him behind the sliding glass door leading to the rooftop garden. "We'll need to find a new home for the bubble," Seymor said. "The building management doesn't want a rooftop helipad any more."

"We knew we'd face that sooner or later," Nyk replied. "I don't suppose we can keep it in the back yard of the house in Queens. It might arouse the neighbors' curiosity."

"I suppose not. Let me look at you, lad..." Seymor stood back and shook his head. "Chancellor's Medallion. You're the first ExoAgent to receive one."

"I can't believe that."

"First to receive one during his offworld tour. I know that for a fact. I've never seen one."

"I'll have Suki send a photoimage, since I don't dare bring it here. So, Seymor -- what's my next plum assignment?"

"Your next assignment is to take some time to be with that family of yours."

Nyk nodded. "Seymor -- whatever happened to that Altian cell in Tulsa?"

"Kronta sent a squad of enforcers. We located them all with their wrist chips. Then -- it was a waiting game, until the attack on Lexal. We didn't want to tip our hands and queer it for you."

"Illya thinks we've rooted them all, this time. Time will tell, won't it?"

"When Marxo died and Grynnya took his shuttle to the relay station -- it left that Altian bunch stranded here. They were more than happy to turn themselves over to enforcement."

"Well -- I'll go catch a cab to Queens."

"No you won't -- I'll drive you. Welcome home, lad."

Nyk awakened to the smell of coffee. He arose and descended the stairs to the kitchen. "Good morning, Yasuko."

“Nick -- I thought I heard you come in last night.”

“Six weeks... I'm so sorry, Yasuko.” He held her and kissed the top of her head.

“You do what you need to do, Nick. Nicky and I are fine.”

“Where is he?”

“Playing in the living room.”

Nyk stepped to the living room. “Hey, Nick!”

Nicky looked up and grinned. He stood and ran over. Nyk held out his palm and Nicky slapped it, laughing. He picked up the boy, hugged him, kissed his cheek and hugged him again. “I missed you so.” He looked at his mother-in-law. “Yasuko -- my office is giving me a couple weeks of comp time in exchange for the project I just finished. Maybe we should pack some bags and drive out on the Island to the beach house. Would you like that?”

“Nick -- it's March.”

“We'll have the beach to ourselves.”

“We'll have the whole town to ourselves...” She smiled. “Yes, I'd like that. I think a change of scenery would do me some good.”

“I think it will do us all some good.”

“Things are returning to normal here,” Suki said to Nyk through the vidphone window on his laptop computer.

“Has Senta's home been repaired?”

“Yes -- but she seems in no hurry to move out. She and Andra have returned to working on their research project. I started teaching Andra how to swim, and Senta wanted to learn how, too.”

“Senta is learning to swim?”

“Yes. They're both frustrated -- they don't understand how something is so easy for me but difficult for them. I explained it was hard for me at first, too. My lecture students wanted to see your Chancellor's Medallion. I brought it with me to show them -- I hope you don't mind.”

“Not at all.”

“It started a discussion of the virus incident, which led me to talk about Earth terrorism. I tried to explain, in my halting *Lingwa*, it was a terrorist act that brought me here. Afterward, one of them approached me -- this petite, shy girl who's been sitting in the front row. She hugged me and said I was proof that, out of terrible evil, something good can result.”

“Yes,” he replied. “Out of the attack on Lexal, good resulted -- detente between two arch-rival colonies. I'll admit, though -- it's been hard for me to perceive much else good coming from the Trade

Center attack. New York is slowly becoming normal again, however.”

“How's Nicky doing?”

“He's learned how to walk.” Nyk brushed a tear from his face. “While I was gone, Nicky learned to walk. I missed it. He took his first step and I missed it. When I left he could stand and cruise around a piece of furniture. Now, he's walking -- he's running -- and I missed it.”

“Well -- that means you and Mom will have to be on your toes, now.”

“Yes -- I suppose we will.”