

Alacrity didn't have to be told what a disaster Floyt was talking about, and what a hellish situation it must've been as colonists were felled by acute asthma and rhinitis, anaphylaxis and the like. "But what about Dorraine?"

"It turned out that a few colonists and crew had no allergic reaction of any kind. All that screening had turned up people immune even to Agora's allergens; something to do with immunoglobulin production, I think."

And the thymus and dendritic cells, Alacrity suspected, but it was Floyt's show, and he waited to hear more.

"They were the only ones who were really functional, and they ended up keeping the colony from falling apart. They ran things."

"Under those circumstances, they probably had to do a lot of the scut work too," Alacrity put in.

"I don't doubt it. At any rate, soon there was a faction favoring an attempt to repair the ship and leave Agora. The colony split wide open, and the bailout faction left under the leadership of one Beltran Severeem."

Alacrity mouthed, *O-ho!*

Floyt nodded. "That's right, the founding fiend. Only, none of the immunes went along with him. And when he and his people got to the planet they'd picked, Desideratum (and they only made it by the skin of their teeth), they found out that nature or the Precursors had played a stupendous prank on them—the biota of Desideratum were derivatives or forerunners of those on Agora."

Alacrity blew his breath out silently. Floyt continued, "Severeem and his followers dug in and survived somehow because it was either that or die; the ship was finished."

"That's been known to work wonders for personnel motivation," Alacrity mused, gazing out at The Strown.

"Meantime, back on Agora, Dorraine's ancestors naturally got to be in charge, and naturally interbred. It didn't cause too many problems, even though the gene pool was small; most of the undesirable recessives had been screened out of the colonists. Their children inherited immunity to Agora's allergens, and the immunity got to be synonymous with nobility."

"So her family's that intermarried, huh?"

"Most of the original blood's mixed now," Floyt replied. "Dorraine's the last of the purebred. And Inst, of course."

"Yeah, well, Redlock doesn't strike me as the type to give a damn whether his kids' noses run or not."

"Same here. Now, a few generations down the road, Agora got to the point where it could launch its own star-ships, one to Earth and one to Desideratum, with which there'd been very sporadic, garbled communication. Are you still with me?"

"Let 'er jet."

"The Severeemish were in rough shape, a warlike tribal society, most of its technology lost. They'd learned to cope with the allergens and IgE antibodies, using dilators and antihistamines, antishock agents and vaccines. Immunizing treatment had become part of their religion."

"The Agorans helped the Severeemish; the royal family's immunities practically had the Severeemish worshipping them."

"Oh yeah? Well if you ask me, those goons'd still probably kill somebody just to fill up a lull in the conversation."

Then: "So Dorraine's been the fair-haired princess to them. But Redlock—"

"No, no! I still haven't gotten to the part about the war."

She said, "Alacrity, you have to promise me this won't lead to more trouble."

"That's all right with me. What's your father got against me anyway?"

"You're a breakabout. When he was younger, serving out his apprenticeship aboard family vessels, the high movers always gave him such a difficult time. He still carries the resentment around in him, even though he buys and sells fleets now."

Alacrity knew that breakabouts could be cruel in their hazing and harassing. He wouldn't have been surprised, though, to find out that Dincrist had brought a lot of trouble down on himself.

"Won't he go into launch mode when he finds out you're here?"

"He's sleeping; the doctor gave him a sedative. I'll be back when he wakes up." She pillowed her head on her arm and looked him in the eye. "There's something else; you don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"You mean am I using birth control? Yes."

She poked him one in the ribs.

"All right, what?" He began trailing the backs of his fingertips up and down her body slowly and lightly.

"Well, Hobart—mmm, that feels nice—Hobart's a sweet man, but sometimes it seems as though he's got some sort of hold on you."

"No, nothing like that," the conditioning and his own pride made him reply.

"Good, because I like him." She squirmed a little under his delicate teasing, laughing. "Stop, or I'll go into seizures!"

He leaned over her. "I'll go with you."

CHAPTER 13—TARGETS OF OPPORTUNITY

The next morning Alacrity and Floyt went forth just after Halidome rose, as preparations for the Hunt reached their climax.

Floyt wore brown bush fatigues and Alacrity an old, comfortable gray groundside coverall, along with his pathfinder boots and a big, cobalt-colored kerchief knotted around his neck. The kerchief, like the broly he carried slung from his shoulder, was a simple, versatile, and durable piece of gear with any number of survival uses.

Since both men had been opposed to Sintilla's accompanying them, she'd elected to sleep in and cover the event in a more leisurely and comfortable fashion.

The two arrived at one of Frostpile's expansive outer yards to find a scene of near-chaos.

All around stood Inheritors and others who planned to do their hunting from the luxury and safety of air and land craft, many of them organizing themselves into parties, in both the celebratory and sporting sense of the word. The hunting areas set aside for these groups had been carefully marked on the ground, so that airborne gunners wouldn't shoot those afoot or on animals. No pedal-powered airbikes were aloft this morning; the turbulence caused by the hunters' low-flying spotters made the flimsy craft too hazardous.

Some would-be hunters insisted they'd stalk on foot. Others demanded that shooting blinds be set up for them. A few stubbornly refused to hunt other than from animal back. Many individuals and parties demanded to be dropped into selected areas; others had decided to ride as far as possible on the ground and hike from there.

And apparently every one of the high-ranking visitors was used to having his or her way. Tiajo's staff

"So you send us a phony note?" Alacrity snapped, recalling now that Endwraithe had been aboard their tram earlier and heard Sintilla call out to them. "Or *do* you know something about Heart?"

"Only what everyone else knows," the banker admitted smoothly. "Dincrisc sent her home—had to be quite forceful about packing her off, I understand. I'm obliged to deal with him in matters of business, but candidly, the man can be such a rustic at times."

Floyd was weighing what Endwraithe had said. He and Alacrity had to find a way to get to Blackguard; perhaps Endwraithe would stake them to the money in return for a portion of the proceeds from the *Astrea Imprimatur's* sale, or her earnings, or whatever.

But Alacrity, warning senses shrilling, told the banker, "Thanks anyway, but he's got nothing you'd be interested in."

Endwraithe gave them an urbane smile. "That's something for Hobart to decide, Alacrity."

The Earther had come to a certain respect for the breakabout's judgments. "I'm afraid he's right, Board Member Endwraithe. The inheritance is a confidential matter."

Endwraithe shrugged, chubby, bearded fingers toying with his meticulous white beard. "It is also a secondary one." He brought his hand out from behind Weir's floater chair with a snubby energy pistol in it, and fired.

Endwraithe had taken into account Alacrity's reflexes, but not the breakabout's already being in motion when the banker made his move. Alerted by the drift of the conversation, Alacrity had correctly read Endwraithe's controlled expression and body kinesics as something much more than a simple shift of posture.

The breakabout had thrown himself at Floyd, bearing him over backward. They went flailing into the darkness between rows of exhibits as a narrow green pinbeam cooked the air where they'd stood. It was, in a way, a vindication of Supervisor Bear and the theory behind Project Shepherd.

They knocked over a display case in a crash of delicate old glass blown 150 years earlier on Eclat; Alacrity was on his feet instantly, yanking the stunned Floyd deeper into the shadows. They heard Endwraithe pounding toward them.

The breakabout cursed the fact that Endwraithe had lured them to where the surveillance equipment had been shut down and Invincibles would no doubt patrol infrequently. And the odds against a drone drifting by up here, high in Frostpile, were long. But the Spican had overlooked one thing—Alacrity hoped.

"Very good! You're very quick!" the banker chuckled. "But not as fast as a beam, I daresay." He moved around a case, pistol ready, but saw no target.

"So how did you get your hands on a persuader?" Alacrity yelled up one aisle as he led Floyd into another.

Endwraithe wasn't fooled, but he elected to play the same game. "It's been here all the time. I concealed it in Weir's chair the night he died." He stopped to listen for their movements, then tiptoed up an aisle a meter or two. "I very nearly killed him with it, out there in the fields, in a thunderstorm he had whistled up."

He turned his head slowly, concentrating on his ears. He thought he detected the whisper of their slippers. "But that turned out to be unnecessary." He reversed field and leapt to the end of the next aisle, gun raised. It was empty.

The words made frightening sense to Alacrity. Weir's chair was an object that the Invincibles would expect to give off power readings, and it was nearly a holy relic, relatively immune to routine probing or dismantling for inspection.

Endwraithe didn't have everything covered, though, Alacrity reflected, as he and Floyd stopped by the

case containing Weir's old Emancipator pistol. Using gestures, the breakabout instructed Floyt to be ready to overturn a shelf. The Terran got ready as Alacrity, making a fist, poised his elbow over the glass. At a nod from his companion, the Terran gave the shelf a shove with his shoulder, tipping it over.

It crashed, and at the same moment Alacrity shattered the case with one blow of his elbow. He hoped the sounds had merged sufficiently that it wouldn't occur to Endwraithe that his victims were breaking into a display. That would make the man more cautious.

Alacrity gingerly plucked the Emancipator from among the shards of glass, blowing and brushing away the bits that clung to it as best he could in his frantic haste. He checked it; there was a round in it, a metallic slug of some kind, but the power pack that supplied its propulsion unit was deader than a year-old economic forecast.

"Clumsy!" Endwraithe chided. "Or are you inviting me into a trap, gentlemen? Let's find out, shall we?" They heard his footsteps.

Some of the display cases were antiques, Alacrity knew. The lights in them were off, but at least some of them must have fed off leads rather than broadcast power or storage packs. He hoped.

He lowered himself as quietly as he could. Floyt crouched, listening with an animal intensity for the banker's approach. The breakabout located an outlet by feel, slicing his fingers on a stray piece of glass in the process. He mated the Emancipator's adaptor to it. Power flowed as Alacrity waited, dreading an explosion that would blow his hand off; the pistol had been inert for something like seventy-five years. The Invincibles hadn't even felt the need to keep it locked away securely.

But it was a durable old relic; it accepted a charge. He got to his feet with an assist from Floyt, praying that it would still fire. *One shot, just one*, he reminded himself, as with a mantra.

He padded toward Endwraithe as silently as he could, with the Earther close behind. They had to ambush their would-be assassin before he came across the shattered case and discovered that they were armed, or they'd lose their main advantage.

The breakabout came to a section without even the dim illumination thrown by the ceiling panels. An oversize cabinet extended beyond the others in its row, offering concealment. Farther along was a lighted stretch of aisle. They hid themselves. Endwraithe's footfalls became louder.

Alacrity began a slow, controlled breathing, gripping the unfamiliar handgun. Floyt scarcely breathed at all. Both were perspiring freely. Alacrity peeked around the cabinet with one eye. He saw the figure of Endwraithe, silhouetted by some light source behind it, appear, pistol clearly outlined. The breakabout waited for the best possible shot that he could get while holding on to the edge that surprise would give him.

The banker paused to kick off his shoes. Then the man came on, keeping to one side of the aisle. The breakabout thought for a moment about making a flanking run and heading for the Hall's main door, but he was no longer sure of the direction. In addition, there was the possibility that their enemy had secured it somehow, which would make them exposed, easy targets.

Endwraithe eased into the lighted area, cautious but confident, pinbeam raised, eyes flickering in this direction and that. Alacrity already knew that the man's speed and accuracy merited respect; he steeled himself for as fast a move as he could make.

Floyt tapped his shoulder. The Earther was holding up a plaque silently lifted from a display case; he made gestures. Understanding, Alacrity nodded. The Terran skimmed the plaque off into the darkened aisles.

It landed somewhere with a clatter. Startled, Endwraithe looked off somewhere behind him for the source of the sound.

Alacrity didn't stop to wonder why; he brought his right hand up, gunbutt cupped in his left palm. Endwraithe caught the movement and spun toward him, wide-eyed, bringing the pinbeam around. The

breakabout, centering the Emancipator's crude, open sights on him, fired.

The pistol made little noise, its propellant unit hurling the slug with an acceleration field rather than a chemical explosion. The slug left the barrel with a *chuff*.

Then the banker seemed to fragment, spiderwebbing, the projectile's impact point centering low on his torso. Nevertheless, he fired.

But his green pinbeam never reached Alacrity and Floyt. It splashed, deflected, and dispersed halfway to its mark. The banker appeared to come apart, his fragments dropping to the floor in a glittering shower.

"It was a mirror!" Floyt yelled. He was only partially wrong; the banker and the breakabout had seen one another in—and fired at—one facet of a display booth in the center of a rotunda, at the confluence of several aisles. Its sides had been highly reflective.

The difference between them now was that Alacrity's weapon was empty.

"C'mon!" Alacrity and Floyt dashed away in the opposite direction, expecting a pinbeam to find their backs at any moment. They cut abruptly into a side aisle, the soles of their tabi giving them fair purchase on the slick, reflective floor. A beam hissed through the air where they'd been.

They came to an aisle that stretched away in either direction, offering no concealment or cover. But the cross aisle continued, leading to an exit door. Hearing Endwraithe's running, heavy-footed pursuit, they plunged through the exit like two startled hares—

—And found themselves on a broad, pourmelt ramp that spiraled into the distance up and down the cylindrical well. But the way down was blocked by a locked security gate. They sprinted upward.

After traversing a half-dozen coils of the ramp, they came to a large access door only to find that it too was locked. No amount of pounding, yelling, or leaning on the door signal produced any result.

"If this keeps up, he'll corner us," Floyt puffed.

"He sure can't afford to forget about us," Alacrity replied, panting. He added, "I think there's still power in the gun; if only we had another round for it."

But they had nothing except their soft robes and slippers, and Floyt's Inheritor's belt, which, given the available tools, was practically indestructible. They even checked the folds of their clothing and the soles of their tabi, searching for a fragment of glass from the Hall, but found none. The ramp and walls were smooth and featureless.

Then Floyt exclaimed, "Alacrity! The light!"

The breakabout saw what he meant: high overhead was an illumiplate two meters long and half as wide. Alacrity hurled the Emancipator up at it.

But the builders of Frostpile had meant for their creation to last; the pistol bounced off the resilient plate without even scratching it. Alacrity barely caught the rebounding weapon, nearly losing it and himself over the ramp's railing, dragged back from the abyss by Floyt, who seized fistsful of his robe.

"No good," the breakabout judged.

"We've got to keep moving," Floyt whispered.

They raced on. In another minute they came to a halt on the roof of the tower. The air had become cold, the unfamiliar stars clear and bright since Weir's remains had been projected away across eternity.

The tower was set apart from the others. Their shouts and waving drew no response from distant windows and terraces. The roof was a circular area nearly a hundred meters across, perfectly flat, without railing, and featureless except for the rampwell opening. A quick, desperate reconnaissance showed them that the tower walls were smooth, offering no chance for a climb, dead drop, or hand traverse.

"We'll have to jump him when he shows up," Alacrity concluded grimly.

"But there's nowhere to hide, Alacrity." Floyt glanced around for a pebble or bit of appropriate debris to use as a bullet, but it was hopeless; domestic automata kept the roof as clean-swept as an operating room. He couldn't even think of a way to leave some message naming Endwraithe as their assassin.

"Ambush, just the same," Alacrity maintained as he paced back toward the ramp head. "Unless you know how to flap your robe and fly away."

The breakabout began to consider assorted ploys and tactics, none of which promised anything but a more strenuous and protracted death. He reversed his grip on the Emancipator and edged closer to the ramp, prepared to throw the pistol if the unlikely opportunity presented itself.

He circled the ramp head, looking for the best vantage point. "You'd better get back, Ho. If I don't stop him, I might manage to slow him up. It'll be up to you after that."

"Alacrity, I think there's another way!"

"What, give up and make life simple for him? Damn it, Citizen Floyt, I'm not—"

He stopped, staring in amazement at the Earther, who was grinning a bizarre and unnatural grin, eyes bulging, lips drawn back in exaggerated humor.

Alacrity's own eyes widened as he understood. "They still breed 'em nutty and daring on Old Earth, don't they?"

Lines of tension bracketed the breakabout's mouth; the muscles along his jaws jumped. He dropped the pistol, clamped his left hand on Floyt's shoulder, and swung a long right to the Earther's face.

Endwraithe advanced slowly up the ramp way, watchful for an ambush. Aware that his two prey had the Emancipator, he was certain that they were out of ammunition; they'd had several opportunities to use the gun but hadn't. He went guardedly nonetheless, knowing that the breakabout was athletic and unpredictable. The pistol itself would make a dangerous missile at close range.

But as he emerged onto the roof, he saw the two, one standing, one stretched out flat, not far off. A few glances told him that there was no one else around, no patrol craft overhead or watchers on other roofs or in windows.

He was relieved in some measure, though still cautious. The banker had cringed inwardly when his *own* deep and thorough conditioning had been activated by commands from his superiors, moving him to immediate and drastic action, the assassination attempt in the Forager lashup on Luna having failed. He'd been astounded to discover that someone else was making attempts on the two companions, and content to let that third party handle things. But with Inst's death—Endwraithe had received word of it through his own sources—matters had fallen to him once more.

Alacrity Fitzhugh now stood over the limp body of Hobart Floyt. Floyt lay with his face in a pool of blood. The breakabout held the little Emancipator in his hand, offering it to the banker, glowering at him. He held it with grip extended.

Empty, registered Endwraithe, smug that he'd been fairly confident of that all along. He stepped a little closer.

Alacrity tensed. "I'll make you a deal," he said.

Endwraithe almost guffawed at the man's naïveté. Still, it might be an opportunity to learn Weir's enigmatic bequest to Floyt. And that could be worth quite a lot. He took a few steps closer, keeping in mind that he must finish things quickly. "What sort of deal? Toss the pistol over here!"

"All right, Endwraithe: you get the gun and the groundling, then you let me go and we're quits."

Only too promptly, the banker responded, "Very well, it's a bargain. But throw down the gun right now!" He wasn't too afraid of the weapon; the breakabout held it by the barrel.

"Anything you say," Alacrity agreed, seeing that the man could be lured no closer. His hand swung down and back, preparing to toss. But when it came up, it gripped the pistol normally and Alacrity was taking aim.

Endwraithe's pinbeam began to rise. Remembering that his weapon had fired low the first time, Alacrity aimed higher. The projectile passed through Endwraithe's left eye in an eruption of blood and aqueous humor.

The banker reeled backward, dropping his weapon, clapping hands to his face, falling. He convulsed, blood running between his fingers. The spasms and kicks were weakening even as Alacrity got to him, pistol reversed again, prepared to club him. In moments, Endwraithe had stopped moving.

Alacrity scooped up the pinbeam. "It's over."

But Floyt had already sprung up and charged in to back up his companion. Now he slid to a stop. The Terran's mouth still streamed blood and froth. He looked down pensively at Endwraithe.

"I guess we won't be needing this," he remarked, holding out a palm in which a bloody tooth lay, his own upper left cuspid.

"Nope. Your bicuspid did the trick. A little light for distance work, though, I'd say. How's your mouth feeling?"

Floyt spat out a goblet of blood. "*You* try it sometime. And my nose hurts again, too."

"I'm sorry, Ho. I truly am. But it *was* your idea, after all."

Alacrity started for the ramp. Floyt fell in with him. "What about his body, Alacrity?"

"It's not going anywhere."

They'd barely walked three coils of the ramp when they encountered a mob of Invincibles bearing heavy weapons, hand-held spotlights, detectors, portable shields, and loudhailers. They were instantly surrounded and disarmed. It was clear that they'd receive a thorough pummeling at the first sign of resistance. Officers shouted a barrage of questions at them.

"They never told me this was in my job description," Alacrity sighed to Floyt.

"Mine either."

CHAPTER 19—STRANGE ATTRACTORS

From the hill on which the alpha bureaucrat's conference villa sat, virtually every part of Kathmandu could be seen, and the great valley in which it sat. The city had escaped destruction in the Final Smear.

The gathered Alphas looked out on buildings of red-brown brick made in time-honored style, side by side with glassy domes; millennia-old stupas next to permacrete minarets. The rainy season was over, but the hour was too early for the heat of the day to have begun blowing the city's dust about.

Ranged along the outdoor breakfast table, Terra's ruling public servants dined on shell eggs, fresh meats in unlimited quantity and genuine coffee, tea, and juices. They were waited upon by attractive, well-trained human servants.

The Alpha Bureaucrats gave their meal appropriate attention; no one else on the planet rated food of such quality. All the Alphas had aged beyond the ability of Earth's medicine to fight off signs of catabolism; all contemplated retirement with great joy.

Their meetings were characterized by a conspicuous, even forced casualness. They maintained an informal clubbishness to set themselves aside from the tightly controlled masses they ruled and to mask the wary and unrelenting competitiveness among them.

"One last thing," Cynthia Chin said around a mouthful of coddled egg, as if she'd just remembered

it—though the subject had been hovering in the air all morning.

"There's the matter of that Weir bequest. The one in which that delightful Supervisor Bear person of yours has embroiled us, Raymond."

Stemp contemplated a gorgeous fruit cocktail, pretending to smile. Eyes went to him. The Alphas waited, dressed in their uniforms and ceremonial outfits and eccentric, one-of-a-kind costumes from Earth's past.

"That situation has been dealt with," Stemp assured them with elaborate calm.

"Surely you'll forgive our being curious," Chin pursued. It looked like an afterthought when she added casually, "I understand that there are rumors to the effect that Weir had become aware of certain Blackguard information."

Stemp hid the impact of that warhead by languidly sampling the fruit cocktail, but he'd been rocked. *Blackguard information!* He wondered where she'd obtained her data—who might be allying with her against him.

Yielding to Chin's probe would be surrendering an Alpha's right to privacy and autonomy. The others might take it as a sign of vulnerability or decline—a very dangerous thing for Stemp.

On the other hand, if he refused to reassure, to keep them abreast of a matter potentially disastrous to all, it might bring about a consensus against him.

And occasionally the predators fed on one another.

He elected to cut his losses and salvage all he could from the skirmish. "Well then, let me put your mind at ease, dear Cynthia. We should never hold back pertinent information, don't you agree?"

Although she tried to avoid answering, showing a noncommittal expression, he went on congenially, "Yes, of course you do." He'd nailed it down, making it awkward for her to refute, since she'd done the asking. He vowed to use it against her one day.

He continued, making strong eye contact with the others as he spoke. "Our agent, the Spican banker Endwraithe, is in place and has been activated. He has orders to discover what he can about the bequest, but his primary mission is to execute Floyt and his escort. He will then transmit confirmation to me on the fastest available ship."

"Ah!" Cynthia Chin toyed with a dish of sherbet. "What if—unthinkable, I know, but isn't preparedness-in-depth always a good idea?—what if the banker fails you?"

Fails *you*. Stemp considered the possibilities in an instant's hesitation. Endwraithe was one of their most capable operatives. Surely, with his long-established position in Frostpile and the advantage of surprise, he'd have no trouble carrying out an assignment against a minor functionary and a nameless space tramp.

Stemp gave Chin a blase look. "I can give you my personal guarantee: the matter will be dealt with."

"So." She appeared to go back to her egg. "If Alpha Bureaucrat Stemp promises to see to a problem personally, there's nothing more to be alarmed about."

That wasn't what he'd said, as everyone at the table knew. But retrenching and redefining would be tactically unwise, indicating confusion and lack of confidence. Little as he intended to become personally involved in the affair, he let her distortion stand.

The thought of those two idiots, Floyt and Fitzhugh, on the loose with some unnamed Weir legacy and a valid Earthservice letter of Free Import in their possession chilled him. But Stemp forced down his misgivings and exchanged small talk with the other Alphas. After all, Endwraithe was a capable, rigorously conditioned agent.

And his prey? Two hapless pawns. Insignificant nobodies.

This time, it was Tiajo who favored shooting them.

And, oddly, it was Governor Redlock who intervened, with the help of Dorraine and Maska. But all the furor over Endwraithe's death was deflected when, in grudging response to the claims of Floyt and Alacrity, Tiajo had Endwraithe's suite and personal effects examined. Among the personal commo codes of the deceased were several no one could identify. A canny, squint-eyed old house cryptographer vouched that they were not commercial codes nor anything recognizably Spican. At about that same time, an Invincible forensic officer reported that the story told by Floyt and Alacrity checked out; the banker had attempted to kill them, and they'd ambushed him in self-defense.

"But why would a Spican banker care what happens to us?" Floyt repeated. Medics had stopped the bleeding of his gums and lips, controlled the swelling, and taken away most of the excruciating pain. They'd also removed the sharp-edged roots of his missing teeth, but replacement or regeneration would have to wait.

He was just thankful that he'd had the presence of mind to open his mouth at the last second to minimize the damage done by Alacrity's big fist. Still, the analgesics and the gap in his dentition made his speech lispy, distorted, and a bit sloppy.

Alacrity stood with folded arms, not answering Floyt's question. The doctors had seen to his wounds and tended the fractured knuckles in his right hand, disinfecting the deep lacerations made by Floyt's teeth.

No one else had an answer for the Earther. Finally, Dorraine said, "If you two still intend to go to Blackguard to claim the bequest, I think you'd be well advised to go at once, as quickly as you can."

"But how?" Floyt demanded.

"My wife and I are departing in half an hour, in the *Blue Pearl*," Redlock answered. "We'll take you as far as Epiphany's spaceport. From there you're on your own."

The two companions looked at Tiajo. The old woman made no objection to Redlock's offer of minor assistance. Neither did she relent on the penalty she'd imposed on them. "If you remain here, I'm reasonably certain that my legal staff can present a number of serious indictments. Spican observers would be present at any legal proceedings."

The pair instantly abandoned any thought of pleading for further aid. Their Earthservice conditioning and their instincts of self-preservation had their hair standing on end; their irresistible urge was to get into motion. Bowing and backing toward the door, bumping into one another, they were gone in moments.

"Strange Attractors," Admiral Maska mused.

"How's that again, my Lord?" Dorraine asked.

"Strange Attractors," the Srillan said again, louder. "Something of an interest of mine. Enigmatic forces affecting the turbulence around them. The subject held a certain fascination for Director Weir, as you know."

"Is *that* how you perceive those two blatherskites, Admiral?" Tiajo exploded.

"Wouldn't you say that that's been their impact here on Epiphany, madam?" He looked at the door through which Alacrity and Floyt had disappeared.

"And now they're on the loose together in the grandest turbulence of all: the chaotic dynamics of the Third Breath of humankind."

A contemplative silence settled over the chamber.

There was no time to wait for automated valets or household servants. Their suite became a whirlwind scene of hysterical packing, of yelling, accusation, and counteraccusation. Nevertheless, they were in too much of a hurry to be angry with one another.

Out in the corridor again, they glanced at the door to Sintilla's suite. "I forgot all about Endwraithe's phony message," Floyt said. "You don't suppose he hurt her, do you?"

"We'd better check. Besides, she might have some advice."

Prolonged leaning on her door signal produced no result. Finally, Floyt pressed out the entry code. "I couldn't help noticing it the other day." He blushed.

"Don't apologize to me; I do it all the time."

She was not inside. On a hunch, Floyt went and hit the playback on her answering unit. On a table lay his and Alacrity's proteuses; they'd completely slipped his mind. He shoved them into a pocket.

No messages were recorded, but in her answering recording, Sintilla said that she would be at funeral rites slated to be held by some of the non-Inheritors.

"So she went straight there after we left her in the corridor," Floyt concluded with relief, "and she won't be back until midnight or so. She's all right, then. Alacrity? What are you doing?"

The breakabout was bent over the journalist's personal, desk-model proteus. "Oh *no*! Oh, God, Buddha, and Freud in the Void!"

"What is it?"

"Read for yourself!"

Floyt leaned over the screen and read the message on which Sintilla had been working.

TO: ANDRAX MIXTO, MANAGING EDITOR, FIRST BURST PUBLICATIONS
FROM: SINTILLA ANDY, SIT DOWN BEFORE YOU READ THIS, LOVE! I
HAVE THE
PERFECT NEW SERIES FOR PUBLICATION UNDER MY BOMBASTICO
HERDMAN PSEUDONYM! THE SITUATION FITS THE
READERSHIP-PSYCHOMETRICIANS' REQUIREMENT EXACTLY:
VERIFIABLY EXTANT MAIN CHARACTERS WITH AN "EVERYMAN"
TOUCH; VERY LOW PROBABILITY THAT THEY'D EVEN STEP FORWARD
TO IDENTIFY THEMSELVES, MUCH LESS DENOUNCE THE STORIES;
PLENTY OF LEEWAY TO "SWEETEN" THE STORY LINES. IT'S A NATURAL
FOR MY READERS!
WORKING TITLE FOR THE FIRST BOOK IS HOBART FLOYT AND
ALACRITY FITZHUGH IN THE CASTLE OF THE DEATH ADDICTS. OTHERS
ALREADY OUTLINED ARE HOBART FLOYT AND ALACRITY FITZHUGH
VERSUS THE BRAIN EATERS OF THE GALACTICRIM, AND HOBART
FLOYT AND ALACRITY FITZHUGH CHALLENGE THE AMAZON SLAVE
WOMEN OF THE SUPERNOVA.
IT COULD MAKE US EVEN MORE MONEY THAN THE WEIR BOOKS! I'LL
BE WAITING TO HEAR FROM YOU, ANDY!
KISSES, TILLA

"Well, she *said* we were going to make her rich," Floyt remarked weakly.

"So. She wrote all those Weir books too. No wonder she's a privileged character around here. I'll bet that's how he bribed her into not writing any more of them."

"Alacrity, she can't *do* this to us!"

"What're *you* complaining about? At least your name's first." He settled into a chair, shoulders

slumped. "If I sat right here and thought all day, I couldn't think of anything that'd get Earthservice madder, or make things tougher on us. Once this gets out, every mental case in the galaxy's gonna be on the lookout for us."

They both had the same thought in that moment: Kid Risk, and the many kinds of sorrow a similar fate had brought down upon him.

"Alacrity, we've got to hurry." Floyt grabbed his luggage; Alacrity snatched up his warbag. They made for the door.

"Yeah, that's the ticket, Ho! If we can get everything squared away before she gets those books published, maybe we'll be all right."

They spied a corridor tram and hastened toward it. "And if we don't manage that?" Floyt couldn't help wondering aloud.

"The crackpots'll be all over us like a cheap spacesuit. They'll be out to rob us, or challenge us!"

"Or *interview* us!"

"Run, Ho! *Run!*"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Daley is the author of seven previous novels of science fiction and fantasy, the most recent being *A Tapestry of Magics*. He also scripted the National Public Radio serial adaptations of *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back*. His whereabouts are subject to change without notice, but he favors Manhattan.

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