

**MINDWARP**

**Prelude to Earthsearch**

**a 120,000 word novel by**

**James Follett**

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**NB: The GoD (Guardian of Destiny) symbol above is based on the international circuit diagram symbol of the transistor.**

**For George Markstein.**

**Mentor and friend.**

**Sadly missed.**

**Part 1: Selection**

**Part 2: Training**

**Part 3: War!**

**Part 4: Mindwarp**

**Part 5: Discovery**

**Part 6: Fugitives**

**Part 7: Escape**

**Part 8: Outdoors**

**Part 9: Flight**

**Part 10: Prelude**

**Part 11: Prologue to Earthsearch**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Full of fire and fear,**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Where sinners disappear!**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Hell fires burn within,**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Throw the wicked in!**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Where flies and birds do dwell,**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Another name for hell!**

**Children's skipping rhyme**

**Origin unknown**

**FOREWORD**

**Excuses. Excuses.**

**Or, wriggling convincingly off the hook.**

**It doesn't matter if you haven't read the other books in the Earthsearch series because this book is a self-contained novel. Also it's the Earthsearch curtain-raiser although it**

**was not written first.**

**Its appearance is a touch embarrassing, so if you find the spectacle of a writer casting about frantically for excuses is unedifying, you can skip this intro and plunge straight into the story.**

**One of the pleasurable perks of being an author are the invitations to give lectures (I prefer to call them talks -- it's less pretentious) around the country to arts festivals, library groups, writers' circles, and science-fiction conventions etc. During the question and answer session I'm usually asked by loyal fans of both BBC series if I have plans to write anymore Earthsearch books, to which I have usually answered: no. To my shame, the reasons I've trotted out are usually along lines about how I need to move on to develop new ideas. There's some truth in this pretentious twaddle, but the real reason is that I thought I'd played all the aces in both books. I was convinced that there was little left to provide fresh twists and turns in the plot and, above all, surprises. Like everyone else, I was thinking in terms of a continuation of the story from the end of the last book, not realising that a story I've had simmering since 1975 is, in fact, the beginning of the Earthsearch story: a failure of that most precious tool of the writer -- lateral thinking.**

**Let me explain about 1975. This was the year when I forsook an index-linked pension to become a writer, and had**

**the good fortune to meet the late George Markstein, a partner in the literary agency, Marjacq Scripts. The other partner was Jacqui Lyons, who still represents me. George was the genius behind The Prisoner television series which he co-conceived and script edited besides writing some of the scripts. He was a great storyteller, and a master of indirection which he later demonstrated in his novels. He could also be a terrifying ogre, especially if he suspected a writer was not giving an audience or readership their best. Mindwarp was one of my very early ideas and George loved it. I still have his enthusiastic notes and suggestions on the shape the story should take, and I referred to them when writing this book. George said that Mindwarp had all the makings of a first class yarn of which the most important ingredient was its bizarre quest: the search for the mythical outdoors. The basic premise of the story was strong enough for Jacqui Lyons to persuade Thames TV to commission a pilot TV script, but there was something missing. Something important: Mindwarp did not have a convincing ending. Neither of us could come up with good one so the story had to be set aside. `Don't worry,' was George's advice. `All authors have a file containing great ideas that lack a vital piece of the jigsaw. Sooner or later the missing piece will turn up. When it does, it'll be so glaringly obvious, that you'll wonder why you never thought of it earlier.'**

**He was right on all counts. The missing piece materialised**

**in 1992 just as I was starting a four-week holiday having spent several months writing Savant.**

**Mindwarp is the prelude to Earthsearch!**

**The idea came as I was lazing in the Spanish sun, watching a beautiful girl emerging from the sea. I was so excited (by the idea, not the girl. Yeah... Okay then, the girl was pretty exciting too, and she's in this book) that I got straight down to work and wrote Mindwarp in a couple of months, tapping an unsuspected well of energy. For continuity I've included the prologue of the first Earthsearch book at the end of this book. Any suggestion that it's there as a commercial -- to whet your appetite and so persuade you to buy the Earthsearch books (to be reissued soon and available from all good bookshops, so place your orders) -- is, of course, a monstrous calumny.**

**A final twist in this odd tale is that this book contains the seeds of the continuation of the Earthsearch story, offering those essential twists and turns that had eluded me 10-years ago. Which means that a fourth book is now a distinct possibility. Thinking about a fourth book has given me an idea for a fifth, and even a sixth! And maybe a seventh! They've even got titles which means they're as good as written. All this from someone who was saying no more after the second book!**

**Wriggling over. Even if you were unimpressed by my**

**explanations, I do hope you enjoy the book. Now read on as they say.**

**James Follett**

**Godalming, Surrey**

**England**

**February 1993**

## **PART 1**

### **Selection**

#### **1**

**An image of a blonde appeared on the wall screen that dominated the huge reception hall where over 300 milling, whooping, boisterous children were gathered with their parents. She was wearing the high neck, pink uniform of a government information officer. The mothers and fathers quickly hushed their charges and looked expectantly up at the screen. It was the mid-morning war report.**

**`Good morning, fellow citizens of Arama!' The blonde was smiling blandly. There was a collective easing of the sudden tension; a smile meant good news. `The Department of Defence has announced the result of yesterday's war. Our glorious army of Arama has suffered this number of dead...'**

**A row of logo-like graphic representations of soldiers appeared along the foot of the screen. Each figure was clutching a plasma discharge weapon. They shone out on a**



**background of shimmering gold.**

**`And the profane forces of Diablo sustained these huge losses...'**

**Several rows of sinister black figures appeared below the first set so that it was possible to visualise the imbalance without an understanding of the numbers. For most people of Arama, counting beyond ten was difficult because they had to visualise the entire quantity as a string of units.**

**`We have now won the war on six consecutive days,' trumpeted the blonde. `A record, fellow citizens! A glorious achievement which his excellency, the First Secretary has decided to commemorate with an extra decra for every five decras earned today. And now some important messages.'**

**The blonde's face was replaced by a friendly cartoon character telling the audience that plastic was fantastic, but fibron was right on. The commercials ended and the stern still picture of the Emperor of Arama appeared on the screen. It was the same picture that was displayed in all public places throughout Arama.**

**Kally released Tarlan, who had squirmed in her arms during the announcement. For the five-year-old to keep still for even 30-seconds was a misery. The boy immediately made a lunge for Ewen. The brothers rolled on the floor, kicking and punching. Ewen put up a spirited defence. He was two years older than Tarlan, and much stronger despite his skinny frame,**

and could have beaten him easily had Kally not dragged them apart. Her consolation was that the behaviour of many of the restless children in the reception hall was not much better.

'You promised me that you'd both be on your best behaviour!' she scolded them equally.

'He started it!' Ewen yelled defensively, rubbing his calf where Tarlan had kicked him.

Kally thrust her youngest offspring into a moulded chair and threatened that she'd send for the technicians if he didn't behave. It was a threat she hated using. Not only because of its seriousness, but because of its echoes of a miserable childhood with a brutish, overbearing father.

'You do as I say, my girl or I'll send for the technicians to throw you to the outdoors where the Diablons will get you and eat you!'

Well she never went that far. She had never frightened her children with talk of the eternal damnation of the outdoors and the Diablons.

'Hardly any technicians in our sector. Takes ages for anything broke to get mended,' said Tarlan belligerently. But the look of anger in his mother's dark eyes stilled further aggression. He scowled sulkily at Ewen. It was always Ewen who got all the attention. Ewen this, Ewen that. Ewen had been given a toy hot air balloon for his birthday that he wouldn't let anyone else play with. They were even here because of Ewen. He hated his older brother and wanted to

**kill him.**

**A voice boomed around the hall. `Blue badges! All blue badges, forward please!'**

**It was an announcement that struck a sudden chord with Kally; she remembered it from her selection day in this very hall.**

**Some fifty children, all about Ewen's age, left their parents and surged towards the uniformed ushers who sorted them into groups and led them through light polarizing doors. Kally glanced anxiously at the round badge that an usher had attached to Ewen when they had first arrived. Its colour had changed from bright red to dull pink.**

**`My turn in about five minutes,' Ewen commented.**

**Kally looked sharply at her eldest. `How do you know?'**

**`They number the groups.' Ewen pointed to a display panel that hung down from the hall's vaulted roof. `A three and a five.'**

**Kally looked up at the display that consisted of two glowing boxes. There were three dots in the first box and five dots in the second box. She understood the individual numbers that the dots represented but not their collective value. Like everyone in Arama, the highest number she could visualise was nine which she accomplished by picturing three rows of three dots. Over that number was a struggle. Not because of any lack of mental ability, but because her**

**culture only dealt in numbers whereby each unit could be focussed on. Few people can concentrate on more than ten. Larger numbers were simply expressed as a row of dots or bars. For the people of Arama, the passing of the weeks was marked by every tenth day, a day that was set aside as a day of rest and worship.**

**`It's a counter,' said Ewen, following his mother's gaze up at the display. `It means three groups of ten and five added together. The badges turn blue every ten. I reckon my badge will turn blue when the boxes read four and nothing.'** He grinned at his mother's bewildered expression and wondered why it wasn't as oblivious to her as it was to him.

**`You mean that a four and a nothing is more numbers than a three and a five?'**

**`Yes.'** He suddenly felt guilty about his mother's worried expression. She was so tall and lovely. He loved everything about her; her long, dark hair that fell about her shoulders; the smart clothes she always wore -- today it was a figure-hugging one-piece suit in black that she had designed and made in her shop specially for this visit. Crimson and yellow hologram flames danced from her midriff, seeming to curl and twist around her breasts whenever she moved. She was so clever with materials that it seemed wrong that he should understand these things and not her. The 35 he could picture in his mind was less than 40. It was so obvious.

**`Stupid! Stupid! He's mad! They'll lock him away!' Tarlan**

yelled, beating the arm of his chair. He resented the attention Ewen was getting. He wanted to be back at home running war games on his play screen, zapping the hologram hordes of 3-D Diablon troops with his plasma discharge gun as they poured into his room.

Kally's dark eyes clouded with worry. She drew Ewen close to her so that he could feel the gentle pressure of her breasts against his cheek through the sparkling flame holograms. The contact and the scent of her closeness stirred something in him, and his love for his kind, gentle mother overwhelmed him. 'You mustn't tell them about the numbers you can see, Ewen,' she said.

'But--'

'You mustn't tell them! Promise me you won't say anything! Please, darling.'

'All right.'

'You promise?'

'Promise.'

She gave a little shudder of relief and tightened her grip. When she released Ewen, his badge was turning blue. High above, the display was showing four dots in the first box, and none in the second.

2

Most youngsters taking their seat before Technician-Father Gilith were immediately transfixed by the dancing ball that

**was suspended as if by magic above his desk. It gave him time to read the information that appeared on the data screen set into his desk top. But this boy had given the coloured sphere no more than a cursory glance as he sat down. Father Gilith was uncomfortably aware of the boy's intense blue eyes staring at his bald pate as he read:**

**EWEN SOLANT. 7 YEARS OLD**

**MOTHER: KALLY SOLANT -- WIDOW**

**ADDRESS: 1909, GALTHAN**

**MOTHER'S OCCUPATION: CLOTHES DESIGNER AND RETAILER**

**ADOPTIVE FATHER: WAS UNEMPLOYED. KIA (SEE REPORT 876/a/GALTHAN CONTROL)**

**REAL FATHER: ANONYMOUS ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION DONOR**

**SIBLING: TARLAN...**

**There was more information but Father Gilith skipped it because he didn't like the way the boy was gazing at him. An additional note at the foot of the display caught his eye.**

**MOTHER EXCEPTIONALLY GIFTED. SELECTED AT AGE OF 7 (SEE TEST RESULTS). DESELECTED SAME DAY ON ORDERS OF THE FIRST SECRETARY'S OFFICE**

**Out of curiosity, Father Gilith called up the page on Kally Solant's selection results. The score was the highest that the technician-father had ever seen. So why had the First Secretary deselected her? Very strange. Well, the woman's son was sitting before him. What were the chances that he had inherited his mother's remarkable talent?**

He looked up. A warm, expansive smile wreathed his florid face. A neat, well-scrubbed boy confronted him. A pinched, drawn face. Gaunt, almost craggy features that reminded him of someone although he couldn't think who. Light brown hair, and those remarkable blue eyes with a hint of incipient mischief that didn't seem to belong. A smart blue one-piece suit that fitted well. But then his mother was a clothes designer.

`Good morning... Er, Ewen, isn't it?' He had an idea that his smile, calculated to put children at their ease, was not required in this instance. Far from looking suitably intimidated at being in the presence of a technician, Ewen had shifted his attention to Father Gilith's Guardian of Destiny medallion. The iridescent bent arrow in a circle logo sparkled with myriads of varying colours as he moved.

`My full name is Ewen Solant. Should I call you "sir" like at school?'

Father Gilith's pulse quickened. Normally he hated the yearly selection days. He had interviewed over thirty kids that morning, and just about all of them had wet themselves with fear. Why, in the outdoors, weren't nine-year-olds selected for GoD training? What difference would a couple of years make? But something told him that this boy was different. Just how different Ewen was, the amiable Father Gilith was about to find out.

**`I'm Technician-Father Gilith.' He smiled again. `A bit of a mouthful, eh, Ewen?'**

**`You can read?' the boy asked.**

**Father Gilith toyed with his medallion. `Why, yes. All technicians can read. And if you're selected to become a technician to serve the Guardian of Destiny, you too will be taught to read and write at the GoD Centre.'**

**Ewen said nothing.**

**`So what do you think of my little toy?' Father Gilith nodded to the dancing ball.**

**Ewen took his eyes off the medallion to give the ball an indifferent glance. `What should I think of it?'**

**`It stays up without anything you can see that holds it up.'**

**Ewen shrugged. `I've got a toy balloon at home that stays up anywhere. Not just in one place.'**

**Father Gilith wished that he hadn't had the cornea re-profiling operation to correct his shortsightedness.**

**Polishing the spectacles he used to wear would have given him time to think. This boy was different.**

**`What do you think holds it up, Ewen?'**

**`Hot air.'**

**`No -- not your balloon,' said Father Gilith patiently. `I mean that ball.'**

**`The jet of air coming from that hole in your desk.'**

**A surprisingly prompt answer and it got the test underway.**



**`Really, Ewen? So, without touching the ball, how would you prove to me that a jet of air holds it up?'**

**Even before he had finished the sentence, Ewen had leaned forward and cupped his hand over the hole. Air hissed around his surprisingly long fingers. The ball dropped. Ewen turned his hand over quickly and caught it. He smiled sheepishly at Father Gilith.**

**`Sorry -- I touched it. I thought it might break.' He positioned the ball in the jet of compressed-air, watched it settle into place, suspended above the desk, and sat back in his chair.**

**Father Gilith wondered how many children had he had interviewed since taking this job five-years' ago. 500? 1000? He had no idea. What he did know was that not one kid in that five years had done what Ewen had just done. Sure, there had been a few who had eventually worked out what held the ball up. About one in a hundred, and that was usually after a guessing game with plenty of prompting. Although those kids had invariably been selected, not one had ever followed through his or her reasoning with a practical demonstration. And so quickly.**

**And none had ever put the ball back!**

**The technician pushed a box of plastic sticks of uniform length across his desk. `Take out three sticks please, Ewen.' Instead of counting out three sticks one by one, Ewen**

**picked up a small bundle and allowed the surplus to fall back into the box until he was holding three sticks.**

**Numeric subtraction! The boy understands numeric subtraction!**

**Unaware of the inner turmoil he was causing, Ewen placed the three sticks on the desk and looked inquiringly at his interviewer.**

**Father Gilith kept his voice calm. `Very good, Ewen. Now I want you to arrange them into a triangle using all three sticks.'**

**It was the easy part of the test. Ewen looked faintly contemptuous as he arranged the sticks.**

**`Now take three more sticks from the box.'**

**Ewen did so.**

**`Do you know what sort of triangle that is, Ewen?'**

**Ewen shook his head.**

**`It's called an equilateral triangle. The three sides are of equal length. Now listen carefully, Ewen. You already have one equilateral triangle on the desk. Using the three extra sticks, I want you to make three more triangles, all the same size as the one you have, so that you end up with four triangles.'**

**A girl Father Gilith had interviewed an hour before had solved the problem within the allowed time. After playing around with the sticks on the flat surface for about three minutes, it had eventually occurred to her to think in three-**

dimensions. She had stood the three extra sticks up to form a tripod with the apex supported by her finger, and the end of each of the three legs touching the corners of the triangle on the desk. The result had been a pyramid with three sides and a base, making the required four triangles.

But Ewen did not go through the two-dimensional stage.

Without even pausing to think, the moment Father Gilith stopped talking, he arranged the six sticks into a three-dimensional pyramid.

‘Well I’ll be...’

Ewen took his finger away, allowing the tripod to collapse. He looked worriedly at his interviewer's thunderstruck expression. ‘Was that all right?’

‘All right?’ Father Gilith recovered his composure and beamed at the boy. ‘Yes... That's very good indeed, Ewen.’ He slid a datapad and a stylus across the desk. ‘Do you like making pictures?’

Ewen nodded. ‘If you mean drawing, yes.’

The technician shot a glance at the boy to assure himself that he wasn't being facetious. ‘Good. Have you ever tried to draw yourself?’

Ewen gave a little smile and shook his head.

‘Well now's your chance, Ewen. I want you to draw a picture of yourself.’

The boy touched the symbol on the tablet that gave him a

**broad line, and starting sketching quickly, using bold strokes. He drew the outline of the head first, full face, and added the eyes in the centre of the head. Father Gilith leaned forward. Remarkable. Truly remarkable. Even adults rarely realised that the eyes are actually located on the head's centre-line; they usually drew them too high. Also the boy had captured his own hollow-eyed expression with astonishing accuracy.**

**After a minute Ewen had completed the rest of the features and selected the tablet's colour palette. But instead of adding garish flesh tones like most children, he filled in the background with a blue wash. He gave the tablet back. Father Gilith hoped his astonishment didn't show. The sketch was an amazing likeness. It was a plain picture without great detail or expression although the hair looked untidy, but what detail the boy had shown was sufficient. The blue wash background puzzled him, but there was no blacking-in of the face or other additions that indicated a disturbed state of mind. One child that morning had drawn herself in a cage. 'That's a remarkable likeness of you, Ewen,' said Father Gilith admiringly. He was not supposed to ask questions about the children's pictures but he couldn't help inquiring, 'But why the blue background?' 'It's the inside of a beautiful blue dome,' said Ewen simply.**

**The man smiled. Only a kid could think that something as**

**alien as a blue dome could be beautiful.**

**`And your hair looks ruffled.'**

**`That's because there's something wrong with the dome's air-conditioning so it keeps getting blown about.'**

**Father Gilith threw his head back and laughed. Among the boy's many qualities was a delightful sense of humour. But, of course, there was a definite hint of fun in those intense blue eyes that were regarding him with great seriousness.**

**There were several more tests that Ewen solved without hesitation or difficulty although the last one, arranging coloured squares to match on the six sides of a plastic cube, took him the longest. 210 seconds according to the stopwatch display set into Father Gilith's desk. But still a record.**

**The technician took the cube and beamed. `Excellent, Ewen. Now sit back in your chair and keep your head still just for a few moments.'**

**Ewen did as he was told. Father Gilith touched a control on his desk. The boy felt a sharp buzz in his head that was gone before he could even wince.**

**An usher entered the room. `Thank you, Ewen,' said Father Gilith. `That is all for the moment. The usher will take you back to your mother.'**

**Ewen stood and experienced a moment's dizziness. He noticed that his badge had changed from bright blue to bold black and white stripes.**

**`That means we want you to wait a little longer,' Father Gilith explained in answer to the boy's puzzled expression. The moment he was alone, Father Gilith checked Ewen's astounding score. Both he and the girl would be sent to the GoD Training Centre immediately. But Ewen's score had been the maximum attainable. He called up his standing orders and read through them before touching out a number on his data screen. He hesitated before pressing the last digit. What if he were wrong? What if the mindwarps in the interview chairs weren't working properly and that the boy knew from other kids what the questions would be? But that was impossible, of course; all the interviewing technicians had checked their mindwarps that morning. The standing orders for all selection examiners under circumstances such as these were unequivocal. They also stated that the First Secretary always made himself available on selection days for such an eventuality. Father Gilith had no alternative but to touch the final digit.**

**First Secretary Caudo Inman's gaunt, timeless face appeared on the desk screen. The lights glittered menacingly on his rimless spectacles. Father Gilith shivered inwardly and with good reason. In addition to being First Secretary to the Emperor himself, and Vice-Chancellor of the GoD Training Centre, Caudo Inman held all the highest offices in Arama. Not a man to be trifled with.**

**`Yes...?' said Inman testily. He glanced down at a**

**monitor. `Gilith, isn't it? Why have you called this number?'**

**`I have a recording that I think you should see, sir.'**

**3**

**Kally was distraught from the moment Ewen had returned with his badge showing black and white stripes. She had a vague recollection that her badge had changed to such a pattern after her selection test but her memories of that day were elusive and refused to be pinned down. `But surely you remember what they asked you?' she asked.**

**`It was lot of questions,' said Ewen.**

**`What questions?'**

**`Don't remember.'**

**There was that look of defiance in his intense blue eyes.**

**That familiar jut of his jaw that she knew sprang more from quiet determination rather than arrogance. Ever since Ewen had learned to walk and talk, Kally wished she knew more about her son's father. All she had been told at the AI centre was that he was an extremely intelligent, ambitious man.**

**`But you must remember, Ewen!'**

**`Well I don't!'**

**Tarlan started jeering. `Stupid! Stupid! My brother's stupid!'**

**Kally rounded on her youngest. Tarlan saw trouble looming.**

**He sat back in his chair and clamped his mouth shut, swinging his legs in sulky annoyance.**

**Tears prickled Ewen's eyes. That he could remember nothing of the interview frightened him. Even the interviewer's face was lost in a strange fog. He could remember the blue dome but that was a part of his recurring dream. `Honestly, mother... I can't remember anything.'**

**Kally saw how upset Ewen was and wanted to put her arms around him, but any more displays of motherly affection would only make Tarlan worse. If she wasn't absolutely even-handed in her treatment of the two boys, Tarlan could become even more of a monster than he already was.**

**She stood abruptly and the wrinkles smoothed out of her elegant bodysuit. She looked around the hall. There were now half the numbers of parents and their offspring present that there had been when they had arrived. `This is ridiculous. Come on. We're going home.'**

**An usher blocked the revolving doors. He gestured to Ewen's badge. The stripes had started flashing as the boy had approached the exit holding Kally's hand.**

**`I'm sorry, but you can't leave yet,' said the usher, his eyes appraising the hologram flames that danced on the young woman's bodysuit.**

**`We've been here longer than anyone,' Kally protested.**

**`Surely my guardian angel can arrange another appointment?' She made a move to push past but the usher stood his ground.**



**`I'm very sorry, but you cannot leave yet. Please take a seat. I'm sure you won't have long to wait.'**

**They waited another hour with Tarlan getting so difficult that Kally was sorely tempted to break Arama's strict taboos against violence by smacking him. By now the hall was almost empty and the slightest scrape of a chair produced intimidating echoes.**

**Ewen spotted a fair-haired girl about his own age. She was playing an imaginary game that involved hopping up and down the aisle on one leg. She chanted an old skipping rhyme under her breath as she hopped along the aisle:**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Full of fire and fear,**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Where sinners disappear!**

**Ewen noticed that her badge was striped like his. She was aware that he was watching her but chose to ignore him.**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Hell fires burn within,**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Throw the wicked in!**

**`What are you doing?' Ewen demanded.**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Where flies and birds do dwell,**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Another name for hell!**

**`Well?'**

**The girl stopped chanting. She lowered her foot to the floor and regarded her interrogator with suspicion. She had bright, jade green eyes, and her hair was a mass of natural blonde curls. Her undoubted prettiness was lost on Ewen.**

**`Playing,' she retorted. `What does it look like?'**

**`Playing what?'**

**`Playing at pretending to only have one leg.'**

**The imaginative leap that it took to pretend that one had less legs than one really did would have been beyond most children, but Ewen merely gave an indulgent smile. `A stupid game,' he observed.**

**`In a minute I shall pretend to have six legs like a fly and I'll kick you around the hall,' the girl retorted.**

**The threat amused Ewen. His imagination could go even better. `And I shall pretend to have twelve legs like two flies and kick you right back. What's your name?'**

**The girl decided that she liked the impish twinkle in his blue eyes. `Jenine. What's yours?'**

**Ewen was about to tell her when a voice boomed around the hall. `Striped badges forward please! All striped badges forward!'**

**Ewen and Jenine were the only children with striped badges.**

4

The hall was now virtually empty. Kally kept Tarlan quiet with a tight grip on his wrist, and threats while she watched the technician out of the corner of her eye. It wasn't done to stare at a technician. He was talking to the only two parents left. They both looked too old to have such a young daughter. Suddenly the mother was crying. Her husband put a comforting arm around her.

'But you can't!' the mother sobbed loudly so that her voice echoed around the hall. 'You can't! You can't! Jenine's our only child! She came when we had given up hope of having a child! You can't take her from us! It'll kill us!'

At that moment Kally remembered more details of her selection day -- the anguish of her parents when the news had been broken to them. She watched the husband help his wife to her feet. They left the hall through the revolving doors. The reverberations of the woman's misery gradually died away.

The technician moved towards Kally, his medallion burning fire on his chest when it caught the lights. Kally unconsciously tightened her grip on Tarlan. Normally he would have been loud in his complaints, but he remained silent. A technician was coming! He was going to speak to her! It could mean only one thing!

'Kally Solant, mother of Ewen?'

He was a stocky man. Despite her dread, Kally couldn't

help noticing that his work suit was not a good fit and needed cleaning. He ignored the tantalising flames that twisted across her breasts when she moved. She heard herself say, 'Yes?'

'I'm Technician-Father Gilith. I interviewed Ewen.'

Kally's stomach turned to water. So they had found out. It was stupid of her to pretend that it could be hidden from them. They would lock Ewen away.

'A most remarkable boy, Kally. You should be very proud.'

For the first time she looked directly into the technician's eyes. Instead of the expected coldness, she saw a friendliness that left her even more confused and frightened.

'I don't understand...' she blurted.

'Ewen is going to be a technician. A very special technician. He has been called to worship the Guardian of Destiny and will be trained in the GoD sciences at the Guardian of Destiny Training Centre.'

'When he's nine?'

'Now.'

Kally's thoughts were a sick whirl. She suddenly realised why the other mother had burst into tears. 'You... You mean, I can't take him home with me? My angel told me that training starts at nine!'

'That is so, Kally, but Ewen is special. Very special. We want to start training him immediately. We know how you feel.'

**But you must be brave and proud.'**

**I'm not going to cry... I'm not going to cry...**

**She heard herself saying calmly: `But there's a mistake.**

**Like there was with me. I was selected then deselected. About an hour later, I think.'**

**`Deselection is almost unheard of, Kally.'**

**The quiet resolve was drowned by the swirling torment of misery that engulfed her; silent tears coursed down her cheeks.**

**`You will be able to visit him, of course,' said Father Gilith blandly. `Your guardian angel will have all the details.' He smiled down at Tarlan who had been awed into silence by the technician's presence. `See you here in two years, young man. Good day, Kally.'**

**He turned and walked through one of the light polarizing doors. The opening, which had lit up momentarily at the technician's approach, returned to black behind him.**

**`They're going to put him in a cage,' said Tarlan with relish. `And they're going to poke food to him through the bars.'**

**The savage comment did some good by jarring Kally back to reality. At least they'd never want Tarlan as a technician.**

**Her fingers trembled as she unclipped her guardian angel headband from her hip and settled it in place.**

**`Angel?'**

**The warm, reassuring masculine voice of her guardian angel spoke softly in her ear. `Yes, Kally?'**

**`They've taken Ewen from me.' She surprised herself at how steady her voice sounded.**

**`Yes, I've been told, Kally. It is a proud moment for you and Galthan.'**

**`But you don't understand! They've taken him now! They're not waiting until he's nine!'**

**`Exceptionally gifted children are selected to start their training earlier, Kally. There have been two such children today. You mustn't worry. He will be extremely well looked after, and you will be able to visit him once a month during his first year at the Guardian of Destiny Training Centre.**

**There are special visiting centres, and the chord-metro fares are free for visiting parents. Just as today's fares are free.'**

**The smooth, soporific voice droned on her ear. Since her husband had been killed three years before in the war, Kally's dependence on her guardian angel had grown to a level that was greater than she cared to admit.**

**`Perhaps we should go home now, Kally,' her guardian angel suggested. `Would you like Bel to be there?'**

**Bel was a personable young man that Kally had taken on the year before to help run her business. For the past three months they had been enjoying a casual relationship at a level that suited Kally. Bel could not be described as over-**

sexed and made few demands on her unless she took the initiative. It gave Kally a level of control that she had never had with her husband. She was about to dismiss the suggestion out of hand, but realised that she would be glad of Bel's company.

`I'll have a word with his guardian angel,' said the angel softly. `Do I have your permission to tell Bel's angel what has happened?'

The guardian angels were always very correct on matters of privacy or freewill.

`I suppose so,' said Kally absently. She was trying to permanently fix in her mind her last glimpse of Ewen. He had turned and given her a little wave before being ushered back to the interview room.

`Very well. Now, if we go out of the main entrance and turn left...'

Kally's angel guided her through the streets and small parks that consisted of grassy open spaces with miniature fountains, neat flowerbeds, and uniform palm trees. Scattered around were plastic benches where office workers ate their lunches. The usual IT'S VITAL TO RECYCLE banners, and pictures of the emperor were everywhere, flashing in a variety of lurid hues. It was midday; the batteries of zargon lights that reflected their glow off the inside of the intersecting domes of Arama were at maximum intensity. There

were no seasons -- the lights provided 14-hours daylight and ten hours of darkness throughout the year -- therefore the trees were tropical palms. Cold was unknown to the people of Arama; the equitable day and night temperatures encouraged people to express themselves in their dress -- the more outrageous, the better. To be fashionable was to wear what no-one else was wearing which was why Kally's powerful imagination and creativity made her clothes much sought after. Her tight bodysuit attracted admiring glances as she crossed the park. The women wore tops that exposed their breasts; the latest fashion craze that Kally had largely instigated although she would never wear them herself.

Tarlan, glad to be on the move at last, was remarkably well-behaved.

The chord-metro station was a complex maze of crowded, narrow tunnels and travelators. Nearly everyone was wearing their guardian angel headbands.

'Left here, Kally... Now right...'

It was a practical system for a populace whose majority could neither read or write. Also it steered the crowds away from a short, interconnecting tunnel where a technician was working on the fibre-optic circuits behind an open wall panel.

The train hissed on magnetic levitation motors into the station. The angel had told Kally where to wait on the crowded platform so that the passenger capsule that stopped



**where she was standing was the correct one for Galthan. It would later separate from the other capsules.**

**5**

**Bel walked quickly. He always felt self-conscious when entering Kally's neighbourhood. Although he was well-dressed in a one-piece suit that Kally had designed for him, better dressed than most of the locals, he always felt that people knew that he didn't belong here, and were staring at him. Her apartment was situated off one of the smartest residential squares of Galthan where all the living units were on one level. In the centre of the small, tree-lined square was that ultimate community status symbol: a liquid light fountain, shining with increased brilliance now that the daylight was greying to evening level. It was all very different from Bel's drab block. Even the pictures of the emperor were replaced frequently so that they always looked sharp and fresh. His apartment was so high above the street that he could actually see the inside of his area's dome from his balcony. It was strange being able to actually see, and nearly touch, the boundary between space and the infinity of the eternal rock.**

**He took a short-cut across the centre of the square where two gardeners were tending the flowerbeds. Sometimes they sold off flowers that were past their best. Kally loved**

flowers. He loved the way her dark yet luminous eyes lit up when he brought her presents. He was five years younger than Kally but the difference didn't matter. Nothing mattered when they were together.

Suddenly one of the gardeners gave a cry of alarm and pointed up at a tree.

'Bird! Bird!'

Bel froze. The shout provoked as much fear as the cry of 'fire' and produced an equally fast response. People lounging on benches, and couples sitting on the grass, jumped to their feet as one and stared. At that moment a small, black shape detached itself from the tree that the distraught gardener was pointing at. The creature swooped low across the square, wings beating furiously. The tiny body gained height and disappeared into the dense fronds of a palm tree near where Bel was standing. People running towards him to get out of the square changed direction abruptly. Bel had been present at bird sightings before. Even though he knew that there was no real danger from the strange thing, it was hard not to get caught up in the near-panic. He turned and walked quickly to the road that bordered the square. A blaring siren heralded the sudden appearance of a wheeled police car. It screeched around a corner and disgorged four police officers before it stopped rolling.

'That tree there,' said Bel, pointing.

He watched the men run across the grass, unholstering

**their plasma discharge sidearms. Another police car appeared and cruised around the square's periphery road.**

**'Everyone is to leave the square,' boomed the cruiser's public address. 'Please leave the square. Please leave the square now.'**

**The admonishments were hardly necessary. Everyone, including Bel, had left the square and was standing around the perimeter, waiting to see what would happen.**

**The senior of the four policemen peered up at the tree that Bel had pointed out. His three colleagues were aiming their PD weapons at the crown of fronds, holding the butts with both hands to ensure a steady aim.**

**'Fire!'**

**Three beams of brilliant plasma darted at the tree. The crown exploded as the sap in the tree was converted in an instant to superheated steam. The tree's headless bole hissed clouds of vapour like a pressure valve, and shredded palm fronds rained down. A police officer with faster reflexes than his colleagues tracked the black shape that had launched itself across the gap to the next tree. A wide angle fan of power spat from his weapon. The terrified bird hit the wall of energy. The police officers backed off quickly as bits of bone and feathers fluttered down onto the grass. None of them wanted even fragments of the abomination from hell to touch them.**

**A white air-cushion car bearing the GoD logo hummed across the grass to the police officers. A senior technician-priest climbed out when her chauffeur opened her door. She conferred with the senior police officer while the chauffeur marked off the area around the remains of the bird with a broad, white ribbon.**

**'It's all over, everyone,' announced the cruiser as it went on a circuit of the square. 'Please go about your business but stay out of the square. The square is off limits for the time-being. It's all over. Please disperse. Please disperse.'**

**But it wasn't over, of course. The square would be closed until the next Tenth Day when special cleansing and reconsecration services would be held. Also it was likely that all the trees that the bird had alighted in would be uprooted and recycled. And no doubt there would be an inquiry to track down the source of the heresies that had resulted in the creature from hell materializing in Galthan.**

**Bel walked around the square's periphery road which was now unusually crowded. People were talking in awed, hushed tones, and glancing furtively at the priest and the chauffeur who were using tongs to pick up the incinerated remains of the abomination and were dropping them in a bag.**

**He reached Kally's apartment and touched his fingertips on the identification panel. The door slid open. That pleased him. It meant that she wanted him there when she arrived**

home. He entered the living-room whose floor area was greater than his entire apartment. Owning her own business and having a war widows' pension meant that Kally could afford the largest family-size domestic unit available in a good neighbourhood. The living room bore a picture of the emperor; the only one in the apartment and the legal minimum.

`Kally?' he called out, just in case his guardian angel's information hadn't been updated.

`She'll be along soon, Bel,' said his angel from the Guardian of Destiny receptor that was set into the ceiling.

Every apartment had such a black GoD hemisphere. The guardian angel headband speakers operated only in public places.

`You've come straight from the shop so you must be hungry. Do you want to eat now or when Kally gets home?' Her voice was that of a woman; soft and alluring.

`I'll wait, thanks, angel. Let's have the news channel.

There's just been a bird sighting outside.' He dropped into the big lounge and waited for the screen to come alive. It was a floor to ceiling job whose sheer size always knocked him out, especially the occasional hologram programmes. But nothing happened. The giant screen remained blank.

`Angel?'

`I think you ought to eat now, Bel. You've had a long, tiring day managing the shop by yourself.'

Bel sighed. `And you know best, of course.'

**`Of course.'**

**`Okay.' With guardian angels it was best to treat their friendly suggestions as orders. You could argue with them, and occasionally they would give way, but generally it was better not to cross them. Their punishment for misdemeanors was a withdrawal of services. Once Bel had upset his angel so much that she had refused to speak to him or do anything for him for a whole day. Life in Arama without a guardian angel was impossible.**

**`Your meal is ready now, Bel.'**

**Bel jumped nimbly off the lounge to show his over-possessive guardian angel that he wasn't tired, and entered the kitchen. A light was glowing on the meal delivery unit. He pulled down the hatch. Printed on the plastic meal tray's peel-off cover was a photograph of him. He pressed his finger briefly against the touch square and pulled back the cover. It would not have opened for anyone else. Although there were snack and soft drink vending machines throughout Arama, which rationed citizens to three daily usages of their calorie, protein and fat-free offerings, citizens were not allowed to eat meals intended for anyone else other than themselves. Anyone gaining weight had their diet adjusted until their weight was back to normal. No-one was overweight in Arama; as a result the general health of the populace was good. Even the usual insipid smell that was released from the open tray was enough to tell Bel that he was hungry after all.**

**He grabbed a fork, and took the meal into the living-room.**

**The giant wall screen was active. He sat on the lounge and ate while watching the angular shape of Technician-General Frandel. The military leader was confidently explaining the day's war progress in the battle caverns to a government information officer who was doing her best to look interested.**

**Bel's thoughts turned to Ewen. He was very fond of the lad and would miss him dearly. And that led to another problem. It was only a matter of time before the question of him and Kally getting married arose. They had once half-talked around the subject and left it alone. It was certain to crop-up again. The notion of taking on the role as stepfather to Tarlan and Ewen had a certain appeal. But not Tarlan alone. That was unthinkable. The boys were so different in temperament and appearance that it was hard to believe that they had the same mother, or same father for that matter. Kally rarely mentioned her late husband.**

**Bel finished his meal and felt full. It had had an unusual but by no means unpleasant taste. Just different. The tray and peel-off cover were disposed of down the kitchen's recycling chute. A new commercial was running:**

**`We bring you news of a new wonder product called Less!'**

**the narrator proclaimed. `Whenever you go shopping, always buy Less!'**

**Bel chuckled. The ads were wittier than the programmes.**

**`Buy Less clothes! Less furniture! So remember, always ask for Less and save More! It's good for you and it's good for Arama!'**

**The wall screen changed to a mildly erotic programme. He watched the veils swirling around the girl as she danced. It was a hologram transmission. The patterned floor of Kally's apartment continued into the picture so that the girl appeared to be dancing in an adjoining room. She pirouetted gracefully. Her veils rode up, showing more of her than was usual so early in the evening.**

**`Is this the regular programme for this channel, angel?'**

**A seductive little giggle from his angel. But, to his amazement, it was the dancer who was speaking with the voice of his angel! She had stopped and was facing the camera.**

**`Something I thought you'd like, Bel. Do you want me to change it?'**

**Phantoms wriggled in Bel's stomach. He had heard rumours about guardian angels actually materializing and had always dismissed them as fantasy. But here was his angel confronting him! And she looked so much like Kally.**

**He heard himself saying, `No -- it's fine.'**

**The girl resumed her sensual movements. The tempo of the music increased. The dance quickened. The girl's veils flew out from her lithe body. Her resemblance to Kally was uncanny. Bel's initial fear melted away and he was disturbed**



by the realization that the girl's graceful, sinuous movements were causing him to respond. It was odd because although he occasionally enjoyed watching erotica, it never turned him on. At least, not as directly and as positively as this. The girl's movements and gestures became decidedly wicked, turning up his turn-on. He shifted his weight on the lounge to make himself more comfortable, and hoped that Kally wouldn't be returning for a few minutes. He could hardly jump up to greet her in his present state: it would be taking a demonstration of being pleased to see someone a little too far.

The front door slid open. The wall screen dissolved in an instant to the news. Bel groaned and prayed for tumescence. Kally came in with Tarlan in tow. She looked red-eyed and haggard. She flopped down beside Bel before he had a chance to rise.

'Wanna watch The Diablo Liquidators!' Tarlan demanded.

'Go and watch in your room,' said Kally wearily.

'Bigger screen in here!'

'Do as I say!'

The boy scowled and left without further argument. Muffled explosions were heard from his room.

'He's been giving me the outdoors today,' Kally muttered.

Bel slipped an arm around her shoulders, and drew her close, taking care not to betray the effects of the erotic

**dance. `My angel told me what's happened, Kal. I'm sorry... I don't know what to say...'**

**`Then don't say anything.' There was no reproach or scolding in her voice. Just exhaustion.**

**`If you'd rather I left--'**

**She sat up suddenly and looked at him as though forcing her mind to deal with other matters. `No I want you to stay. How was everything at the shop?'**

**`The church called. They've fixed a time for a technician to repair the seam welder.'**

**`Thank goodness for that. We've been waiting long enough.'**  
**Bel gave a worried glance up at the GoD receptor but the black hemisphere did not respond to the bitter remark. How could she talk about trivial things to do with the shop when her eldest son had been taken from her?**

**Tarlan burst in. `Can I have Ewen's hot air balloon? He won't need it now.' His eyes were cold and calculating. He had been insanely jealous of Ewen's new toy ever since Bel had bought it.**

**`If Bel doesn't mind and if you say please.'**

**`Please may I have Ewen's balloon?' There was a mocking tone in his voice. Bel was tempted to refuse, but what was the point? The little monster would only nag Kally and make her life more miserable than it was.**

**`Very well,' Bel relented.**

**Tarlan gave a triumphant whoop and dived into Ewen's**

**bedroom. He emerged with the toy balloon fully inflated. Hot air was hissing through the gadget's battery-powered air heater. He released it and watched it float up to the ceiling.**

**`In your room, please, Tarlan,' Kally requested.**

**`Higher ceiling here.'**

**`Please, Tarlan.'**

**The boy looked sulky but tugged the balloon down by its trailing line and left the room.**

**Kally closed her eyes and gave a long sigh as the tensions of the day drained from her. `I suppose I'd better order the evening meal. And Tarlan will be hungry when he gets bored with that thing.'**

**`I'll get it.' Bel immediately regretted the offer because it would mean standing up.**

**`It can wait a few minutes.' She circled an arm around Bel's waist. The quiet was disturbed by the muffled sound of plasma discharge cannons from Tarlan's room.**

**`Bel?'**

**`Yes?'**

**`I want you to stay the night and make love to me.'**

**Bel swallowed. He was slow at making love. But tonight it would be easy.**

**The mindwarp system did not work only for the benefit of society as a whole; it could also work for the good of**

**individuals.**

**Sometimes.**

**6**

**Technician-Father Regen Dadley was an old man who had seen many generations of youngsters pass through the GoD Centre. In deference to his years, he no longer taught, and had been made senior housefather to new arrivals. He was stooped, with a kindly, encouraging smile permanently wreathing his moon-like face. He had boundless patience, and a genuine love of all his charges. Today's intake was six children. Two were gifted seven-year-olds who had been selected that day. All six were suitably awed and tired after their preliminary orientation tour of the Centre.**

**He touched a wall pad and a door slid open. `And this is where you'll be sleeping for your first year.'**

**The six children entered the small, windowless dormitory and looked about them. There were ten ordinary beds in two rows, each one provided with a generous bedside chest and a study desk, complete with data screen. Folded neatly on each pillow was a unisex single-size nightgown. There was the usual picture of the emperor on the wall -- smilingly benignly instead of the normal hard gaze, and set into the ceiling was the ubiquitous black hemisphere of a GoD receptor. It was a necessary precaution for newcomers only. After their first year at the Centre, when they had been**

**suitably conditioned, there would be no more GoD receptors.**

**`Showers and toilets through that door at the end,' said**

**Father Dadley, beaming at his charges.**

**`Can we have any bed, father?' asked Jenine shyly.**

**Father Dadley looked down at the girl. What a pretty**

**child. An angelic, heart-shaped face, and such green eyes.**

**One of the exceptionally gifted children. He noticed that she**

**was clinging to Ewen's hand, the other EG rated child. Well,**

**that wouldn't do any harm. It was natural -- they were two**

**years younger than their four companions. His smile**

**broadened. His knees creaked painfully as he crouched, but he**

**knew he was that much less intimidating if he made the effort**

**to get down to the children's height. These two had been**

**through a lot today; taken away from their parents, and not**

**even given the chance to say proper goodbyes. The terrible**

**day seventy-years ago when Father Dadley had been taken from**

**his mother was still etched with painful clarity among his**

**fading memories.**

**`You can have any bed you like, Jenine.' He looked around**

**at the circle of small, anxious faces. `That goes for all of**

**you.' He wagged a bony forefinger. `But no changing your**

**minds after tonight.'**

**`Like this room,' said Jenine suddenly.**

**`And why do you like it, Jenine?'**

**The lovely green eyes were large and serious. `It's big.**

**Lot's of room. Bigger than my room at home.'**

**`You like space, do you. Jenine?'**

**The little girl nodded empathically. Father Dadley smiled and tousled her curls. He straightened, clapped his arthritic hands together, and pointed to the GoD symbol that was glowing bright blue on the wall. `Right. Everyone washed and showered and in bed by the time the Guardian of Destiny is burning green!'**

**`What happens tomorrow, Father Dadley?'**

**It was Ewen who had asked the question. The boy had been the most forthcoming of this group. The gaunt face looking up at Father Dadley made him feel uncomfortable. Where had he seen that face before?**

**`Tomorrow is Tenth Day. After church there will be a more detailed tour of the Centre, young man. It's a big place. Fifty domes. It'll be a long time before you'll be able to find your way around.'**

**`Why not give us guardian angels?'**

**Father Dadley chuckled. `Technicians don't have guardian angels, young man.'**

**`Will we be allowed to play on the glass pyramid?' Jenine demanded, voicing a question that had been uppermost in her mind since she had marvelled at the sight of students, with motorized auto suckers strapped to their elbows and knees scaling, or attempting to scale, a four-storey-high shining prism outside one of the Senate Houses.**

**`Not until you're in your sixth year, young lady. It's a very rough game.' My word, these two were precocious. `Right. No more talking. Everyone showered and in bed.' He turned and left the room.**

**`Ewen?'**

**Ewen glanced at Jenine. `Yes?'**

**`Can I have the bed next to yours?'**

**Ewen shrugged. Jenine's choice of bed was a matter of indifference. At least the beds were too far apart for her to insist on hanging onto his hand all night. She had been an embarrassing nuisance that day.**

**\* \* \* \***

**An hour later Technician-Father Dadley and his assistant, Technician-Father Framson, were sitting at the main desk in the dormitory reception area going over the medical records and dietary needs of the new arrivals. One of the screens at Father Dadley's elbow was a feed from Dormitory 6's GoD receptor showing the six children sleeping soundly.**

**A fly buzzed over the desk. Father Framson snatched an aerosol from a drawer and pursued the creature across the reception area with grim determination. Flies were an abomination: creatures from hell that somehow occasionally found their way into Arama. He succeeded in knocking it down with his fourth squirt of gas. He stamped on it repeatedly, cleaned up the smear with a tissue and consigned it to a**

recycling chute. Father Dadley watched the performance in amusement. The zeal of youth!

`That's the second this week, Father Dadley,' said the younger man, returning to his seat.

`And I daresay there will be more, Fram.'

Father Framson glanced sideways at the old man. `That could be interpreted as blasphemous, father. You are implying that the weakening of the GoD by the appearance of those... those things, is the norm.'

`I'm just being pragmatic, Fram. There have always been flies from time to time, and there always will be.' He yawned. `A long day.'

`A long day indeed, Father Dadley.' the younger man always showed deference to the old man by using the formal address that the social mores of the Centre expected.

Father Dadley nodded to the monitor that showed the sleeping youngsters. `A particularly bright bunch for once. Two actually selected today. Not often that happens. The girl -- Jenine -- suffers from mild claustrophobia according to these records. We must remember that, Fram. Right -- I'm for bed. Keep an eye on them. Just in case of any nightmares.'

`If only you would agree to a whiff of Morox, Father Dadley.'

`I've managed for twenty-years without that stuff; I don't intend to start--'

The soft whine of a settling cushion car outside the main



entrance caused him to break off. Traffic movements were not allowed in the vicinity of the dormitory building at night.

Both men looked at the screen that covered the outer area, but the picture was broken-up and flickering madly. That could mean only one thing.

`Damn!' Father Dadley muttered softly. `Now what in the outdoors does he want at this hour?' An icy hand closed around his heart when a memory of ten years ago jostled for attention.

Father Framson was perplexed. `Who is it?'

`It's a selection day,' said Father Dadley with uncharacteristic savagery. `He's never seen for months at a time, but he's always around on selection days.'

7

Caudo Inman was Supreme Representative of the Guardian of Destiny; First Secretary to the Emperor of Arama; Chairman of the Emperor's Advisory Committee; Vice-Chancellor of the GoD Training Centre; and Supreme Vice-Commander of the Armed Forces of Arama. He was every bit as imposing as his many titles. He was tall -- the tallest man Father Framson had ever seen. And he was gaunt. So gaunt that his facial skin appeared to be parchment stretched so tightly over his skull that there was no slack to permit even the faintest of wrinkles, and certainly none for a smile. Caudo Inman was not

noted for his smiles. He wore no regalia, no medals of office. Not even the Grand Master-Technician's medallion that he alone was entitled to wear. But he carried a long gold staff that was crowned with a fist-sized diamond that caught the subdued lighting of the dormitory block's reception area and turned it to a dazzling kaleidoscope of blazing hellfires within the gem's faceted depths. It was the Grand Mace of Arama. His cloak, flaring out as he strode purposefully towards the desk, was as black as his thunderous expression. His rimless spectacles glittered menacingly at the two technicians who had jumped hurriedly to their feet as he made his entrance.

'Your excellency,' said Father Dudley, bowing deeply in unison with Father Framson. 'This is indeed a great hon--' The sentence was cut short by Inman impatiently tapping his staff's titanium ferrule on the hard floor.

'Dadley isn't it?' the question was snapped out. The elderly technician bowed again. 'At your service, your excell--'

'"Sir" is sufficient in private, Dadley. You're getting forgetful in your dotage. You have had an intake of six selectees today. Correct?'

'That is correct, sir.'

Father Framson was rigid with shock. He was actually in the presence of the man who ruled all of Arama! True the Emperor was the titular ruler but this was the man who had,

for many decades, held the power of life and death over everyone, and who communicated directly with the Guardian of Destiny. Had Inman spoken to him, Father Framson was sure that he would have stuttered in panic. It was astonishing that Father Dudley could sound so calm in this forbidding presence.

‘One of them is named Ewen Solant,’ said Inman curtly. It was a statement rather than a question.

‘That is correct, sir,’ Father Dudley replied smoothly, meeting Inman’s hard gaze without flinching, much to the admiration of Father Framson who was on the point of fainting.

The tip of the gold staff waved at the screens.

‘Which one?’

‘Dormitory Six, sir.’

‘I know that! Which bed?’

Father Dudley seemed to hesitate for a fleeting moment before resting his finger on a screen. ‘That one, sir.’

‘Thank you. I know the way.’

A swirl of black and the apparition had vanished down the corridor. Father Framson recovered his senses and was horrified to see that his colleague was tracking Inman’s progress by switching in different screens. To spy on the First Secretary was unthinkable.

‘I want to know what he’s up to,’ said Father Dudley

**grimly in answer to the younger man's protest.**

**Father Framson saw the skeletal figure enter Dormitory 6 and quickly averted his eyes. But Father Dadley didn't take his mistrustful gaze off the First Secretary for an instant.**

**Inman stood staring down at the sleeping form of Ewen for some seconds. The elderly technician wished that he could see the man's face. As though reading his thoughts, Inman suddenly spun around and stared straight at Father Dadley via the GoD receptor. His eyes blazed balefully, causing the technician to recoil instinctively from the screen. Inman waved his staff at the receptor. The diamond flashed fire and the screen went blank.**

**The two men contemplated the dead screen. Father Framson fiddled with the controls.**

**'You're wasting your time,' said Father Dadley. 'Even if you tried to photograph him, you'd end up with a fogged hologram. His image has never been captured.'**

**'Why should he be interested in a selectee?' Father Framson whispered, fearful that he might be overheard. Father Dadley's finger trembled as he called-up the results of Ewen's selection tests that day. It was as he feared: the boy had scored the maximum number of points. A plus sign against every result indicated that the scores could have gone even higher had the scales been adjusted. Ewen's self-portrait test had been brilliantly executed according to the notes, although the blue background had**

raised a small question concerning his mental balance, which had been dismissed because the boy had made a joke about it.

Father Dadley felt sick. It had been the same ten years before with Simo Belan. A brilliant boy in whom the First Secretary had shown an unusual interest. And Simo had vanished a few years later before his ordination ceremony. And there had been others before Simo... Many others according to the Centre's records.

A shadow flitted across the desk. The two men looked up in time to see the cloaked figure vanish into the night. There was the soft hum of a ground car lifting onto its air-cushion.

Father Framson let out a long sigh of relief and looked questioningly at his older colleague. The furnace that was burning in the old man's usually kindly eyes frightened him.

'Why, Father Dadley? A seven-year-old boy? What possible interest could the First Secretary have in him?'

There was no reply. The old man was lost in his thoughts, his hands clasped tightly together, knuckles white with tension.

'Father...?'

The senior technician stirred himself. 'How old do you think the First Secretary is?'

The question puzzled Father Framson. 'I don't know. 55? 60?'

**`Much older.'**

**`Well I suppose he could be approaching 70.'**

**Father Dudley shook his head. `Look up the history of Arama, Fram. Caudo Inman was First Secretary when I first came here at the age of seven. And that was seventy years ago. And there were old technician-lecturers then who remembered Caudo Inman when they were children.'**

**The younger man looked stunned. `It's not possible!' he exclaimed.**

**`He uses children. Always the very clever ones. They train for a few years and then disappear. I don't know what he does with them, and I'm almost too frightened to guess... I'm an old man, Fram... I don't have many years left, and little strength... But, by the outdoors, this time I'm going to use what strength and time I have left to stop him.'**

## **PART 2**

### **Training**

#### **1**

**Jenine jerked her feet off the floor of the three student communal living room, and hauled herself onto the couch.**

**`Ewen! Will you please stop that!'**

**Ewen gave up trying to tickle Jenine's feet. He rolled over onto his back and stretched his long legs, the result of a growth spurt the previous year. He liked lying on the**

floor. Harsh, white daylight streamed onto his face through the open window of the study apartment that he and Jenine shared with another 10th year student. It was midday. The batteries of zargon discharge lamps that were trained on the inside of the Centre's Dome 16 were at maximum intensity. From outside came the cries, cheers and yelps of the warring teams climbing the four-storey high glass pyramid. The Communications and Transport Faculty that Ewen and Jenine belonged to was playing against Energy Conservation, an inherently lazy team who, for once, were putting up a spirited defence.

'Okay, Jenny next question.' He always called her Jenny when he wanted to annoy her.

She administered a kick. 'It's Jenine! I've given up a practice session on the pyramid to help with this revision.

The least you can do is behave.'

Ewen closed his eyes. 'Yes, Jenine. Sorry, Jenine. Next question, Jenine.'

The girl settled her datapad on her lap and called up another set of examination questions. Apart from her height, she had changed little. Her blonde curls were a little darker, but she still had the same angelic, heart-shaped face that had so captivated Father Dadley when she had first entered the Centre. 'A travelator develops an intermittent fault on the low speed band. It occasionally matches speed

**with the intermediate speed band, and sometimes stops altogether. Give the corrective steps you would take, and in right order.'**

**'Step 1 close the travelator.'**

**Jenine gestured impatiently. 'Ten out of ten. Next?'**

**'Step 2 open the access cover to that section's controller.'**

**'Oh, for goodness sake, be serious, Ewen. If you start giving answers like that in this year's finals, you'll have to take them all over again.'**

**'So?'**

**'So that will mean me moving onto the final year without you. I'd hate that.'**

**'No one to bully and dominate?'**

**'Exactly.' To Jenine, the idea of being without Ewen was unthinkable. During their ten years at the Centre, their study careers had moved in quarrelsome parallel.**

**Ewen regarded the girl through half-closed eyes. She was staring anxiously down at him with those green eyes, and he immediately regretted teasing her.**

**'Okay,' he said. 'The fault is probably with the controller unit.'**

**'Probably is sloppy!'**

**'Probability of a controller unit fault 80 per cent! All right?'**

**'Go on,' Jenine prompted.**



**`Remove the controller board, test IC258 for correct logic activity on line 10. If IC258 is within spec, repeat test on IC389.'**

**`Very good,' said Jenine grudgingly, looking at her datapad. `Word for word. And if IC258 and IC389 are working?'**

**`Then it's a 90% probability that fault is an intermittent failure of the GoD power to the slave motors.'**

**`An interruption of the GoD power,' Jenine corrected.**

**`What's the difference?'**

**`The difference is between your wording and the wording in this answer. A difference that could cost you several points. Father Hilyad has warned you before about using that word. God power never fails. It is interrupted.'**

**Ewen gave the girl a mischievous half smile. `And if it's not a GoD power interruption, then a faulty slave motor or motors is a 100% probability. Replace all slave motors in that section, test in accordance with Public Safety Specification PSS/104A, and return motors to the nearest maintenance depot for recycling or repair.'**

**`Tools required?'**

**`Uh... I'd go for Toolkit 108.'**

**`Not bad.'**

**`What do you mean "not bad"? That was perfect!'**

**`It would be perfect only if you use the right wording and don't try to be clever all the time,' Jenine retorted.**

**'I don't have to try to be clever,' Ewen fired back. 'And your constant bullying undermines my self-confidence.'**

**Jenine laughed at that. She sat up and held out the datapad to Ewen. 'Now you test me.'**

**Ewen did just that by tickling her feet. She responded by giving an indignant cry and tucking them out of reach again.**

**'Why do you do that, Ewen? Does it give you pleasure to annoy me?'**

**Ewen flopped back on the floor. The burst of cheering from outside when the Communications and Transport Faculty got a team mate to the top of the pyramid changed to groans when their man was dislodged from the apex. There was a loud squeal as the contestant used his suckers to break his slide to the base. 'No... But why does it annoy you, Jenine? Just because we were taught in our first year that touching was wrong? That was ten years ago.'**

**'It annoys me. You annoy me. That's enough reason.'**

**He propped himself up on his elbows. 'It's a serious question. We're now allowed to do all sorts of things that we weren't allowed to do when we were kids. I don't think you're ticklish. You play silly games on the pyramid, which is pretty physical, and yet it annoys you if I touch you. Why?'**

**Jenine brushed her hair from her eyes. She still had the mass of natural blonde curls that Ewen remembered when they first met ten years ago at the selection centre. 'Is it important?' she demanded. 'And what's brought on these stupid**

**questions anyway?'**

**'I didn't tell you about my field trip with Father Winim yesterday. It was boring really. We went to the Keltro chord-metro station to fix a mag-lev's sliding doors. There was a couple sitting on a bench -- a boy and a girl about our age. Naturally, they moved away when they saw us, but not too far. I watched them while Windbag Winim tested the doors. They were kissing each other. On the mouth.'**

**Jenine shuddered. 'They do that on the outside. How can they? And the clothes they wear--'**

**'My mother designs clothes,' Ewen pointed out.**

**'Clothes which encourage their awful breeding habits.**

**There's those tops that show women's... you know. It must be horrible having those awful growths on your chest.'**

**Ewen didn't share her feelings of distaste. His mother's breasts looked wonderful, but he always kept such thoughts to himself. Nevertheless, the ten years at the Centre during their formative years had institutionalised both of them almost to the point of no return. 'It wasn't just the kissing. He was tickling her as well, and she seemed to enjoy it.'**

**'So?'**

**'So I merely wondered why she liked it, and you don't.**

**It's not like kissing.'**

**'Because we're different. We're special. Our brains are**

**special; our bodies are special; we don't have body hair;**

**women don't have those growths--**

**`Breasts,' Ewen interjected, rolling the word off his tongue with mischievous relish, knowing what her reaction would be.**

**She stared at him and grimaced. `Even the word's horrible.**

**I don't know how you can say it. You don't have to shave like men on the outside -- like the others. We're the GoD's chosen ones.'**

**`I upset poor old Windbag,' said Ewen pensively.**

**`So what's new? How?'**

**`There's a screw on the doors which is in difficult place.**

**Windbag said that they were always a problem so I said, why not alter the design of all new doors? He got very angry.**

**"Alter the design without the consent of the Revelation Centre?" he squawked, and went on to give me a lecture about tampering with the word of the GoD.'**

**`He's right,' said Jenine seriously.**

**`I hardly think changing the position of one screw is challenging the GoD.'**

**`It's not for us to suggest such things, Ewen.'**

**`Come and lie beside me.'**

**`What?'**

**Ewen repeated his request. Jenine gave a sigh of exasperation. She never had understood Ewen's favourite mode of relaxation. Her one-piece white recreation suit rustled as**

she stretched out beside him on the floor near the open window, taking care not to touch him. She was nearly his height but much thinner. The harsh white zargon light reflected from the inside of the huge faculty dome hurt her eyes. She closed them tightly.

`Now what?'

`Now nothing. Just relax. Pull faces at the emperor if you must have something to do.'

`We've got our 10th year finals--'

`We'll walk them,' Ewen interrupted. `Can you feel it?'

`Feel what?' Jenine was getting impatient with his infantile games.

`The warmth...'

`Well there's bound to be some, you idiot. It's midday and zargon light is only 71 percent efficient. There's a four percent invisible spectrum loss, and the remaining 25 percent is lost in the infra-red part of the spectrum as heat. Some heat is absorbed through the dome, and some is reflected. That's what we're feeling. Okay?'

Ewen's next question was wholly unexpected. `Do you ever wonder what's beyond the domes?'

`Rock, of course.'

`And beyond the rock?'

Jenine's reply was scolding. `Have you forgotten everything from our second year? Rock is infinite. It goes on

**forever. It's been mathematically proven.'**

**'We ought to explore the rock.'**

**Keeping still for any length of time was beyond Jenine.**

**She sat up and looked worriedly at Ewen. 'What do you mean, we?'**

**'Society.'**

**'What? To make new domes?'**

**'Or chord-metro tunnels,' Ewen suggested.**

**'Why would the Guardian of Destiny authorise such waste?**

**Imagine the cost in materials to build boring machines, and the energy they would use. We have a stable population; we recycle all materials. We don't need new domes or transport tunnels.'**

**The two climbed to their feet and stood at the window, watching students battling to reach the pyramid's apex. The harsh, white zargon light glared on the dazzling glass pyramid and cast strange light patterns on office buildings and lecture halls that surrounded the campus' central open space. There was a ring of ten light batteries grouped around the campus at strategic intervals, their huge lenses directed up at the great dome so that their light would be reflected down to the best advantage.**

**A foul by the Energy Conservation team was being hotly disputed, and all activity stopped. The glass pyramid had been intended as a symbol of the triangle stick test that the Centre's students had passed although none could remember the**

test. Over the years it had become a challenge to physical prowess. Rules had been evolved; now the strange structure was the centre of inter-faculty tournaments.

‘Do you know what I miss most since I came here, Jenine?’

The girl pulled a face. ‘If you mean home life, no I don't miss it. My parents are old, and forgetful, and argumentative. Their house is small and cramped -- as soon as I go in the door, I want to rush out. I hate home visits.’

‘Dreams.’

Jenine gave a sudden laugh.

‘We don't have dreams, do we?’ said Ewen seriously.

‘Dreams fantasies are for them on the outside,’ said Jenine distastefully. She added with a vehemence that surprised Ewen, ‘Dreams can be disgusting. The others may enjoy them, but we're better off without them.’

‘Hey! My dreams weren't disgusting, madam.’

‘You can remember them in detail?’

Ewen stared at the far side of the great dome with unseeing eyes. He nodded. ‘Vividly. And it was nearly always the same dream.’ He had never brought up the subject before and he didn't know why he wanted to talk about it now.

Jenine grimaced. ‘I don't think I want to hear it. I'm sure all our dreams before we came here were nasty.’

‘Well mine wasn't. It was nearly always the same. I was lying on my back, like just now, and I was under a huge

**dome... Really huge... I was lying beside a recreation reservoir. A huge one with lots of water. I could always hear children playing nearby. Shrieking... making a terrible noise but I never minded.'**

**'It doesn't sound like a very interesting dream,' Jenine remarked uncomfortably. She didn't like the conversation, nor did she like the strange, faraway look in Ewen's eyes. There was a lot of work to be done preparing for their finals which she wanted them to get back to. Keeping Ewen on the straight and narrow was hard work.**

**'Dreams don't have to be interesting,' said Ewen. 'They're out of body experiences. In my case the experience was lying under a vast blue dome. And there was warmth, but much more warmth than from the zargon lights. You'd like it there, Jenine -- lots of space. And there was something else... My hair was blowing about.'**

**Jenine laugh was scathing. 'There you are. You were born to be a technician. You dream about a dome which is the wrong colour, and it has something wrong with its air-conditioning.'**

**Her mocking tone annoyed Ewen. 'No... It seemed right...'**

**His face twisted in frustration. 'I wish I was good at explaining to you, Jenine. I wish I could make you see what I see.'**

**'You mean, what you used to see?'**

**'Present tense is correct,' Ewen answered. 'I've been**



having those dreams again.'

Jenine became serious. 'You should see the doctor. Maybe your food needs changing.'

'But I like my dreams,' Ewen protested. 'They don't do any harm.'

'Well I don't think I'd want to see a blue dome, even if it was spacious,' Jenine replied tartly. 'I don't think anyone would. It sounds like the sort of place where flies and birds live. I can't think of anything more horrible or unnatural. Blue! Ugh!'

'But it seems so right! So beautiful. Perhaps I could draw it for you?'

'I wouldn't want to look.'

Her words hurt Ewen. He reached for her hand, but she recoiled sharply from him as though he were a fly that had buzzed in through the window. Her jade green eyes flashed angrily.

'We used to hold hands,' said Ewen reproachfully.

'That was a long time ago, Ewen. We're different now.'

Ewen nodded. She was right. They were different.

Everything about them had changed.

But the memories of his dream had never changed. After ten years his picture of the vaulting splendour of the wonderful blue dome was undiminished, and now the strange visions were returning. He longed to be able to share that wonder with

**Jenine so that she would understand.**

**2**

**Ewen loved Technician-Father Regen Dadley.**

**The kindly old housefather and been his mentor and confidant during his early years at the Centre. There had been times when Ewen had resented his protectiveness. But that was a long time ago. Now he felt nothing but warmth for the old man. But visiting him at the retirement home was painful. It was a pleasant enough place: corridors in pleasing pastel shades; small neat rooms with everything to hand. Paved walkways, lawns and fountains, pleasing light pattern screens. There was a wing where disabled ex-soldiers received loving care, yet Ewen considered it a cold, sterile place, its bleakness heightened by the thought that one day he would be an inmate.**

**It's where retired technicians go to live, they said. But Ewen knew better: it was where they went to die. The long chord-metro journey discouraged many visitors. Why hadn't the home been built in one of the faculties? It would have been kinder and there was plenty of room. But to ask such questions would have meant questioning the decisions of the Guardian of Destiny.**

**'He's had a good day today, technician-student,' grated the warden, opening Father Dadley's door. He was a giant, unsmiling brute, but with a greater regard for those in his**

care than his appearance suggested. He was known to the residents as the Laughing Gnome. 'Shall we say... Ten minutes?' His phrasing made it sound as though the period of time was something they had both agreed to after an amicable discussion.

'Ewen!' the old man exclaimed, sitting up in bed. The mattress whirred softly as its motors re-profiled to his new posture. 'Lovely to see you. Sit down. Sit down.' He waved a gnarled hand to a chair. The Laughing Gnome withdrew. They talked for five minutes. Father Dadley was eager for news of the Centre. His body was wasted and weak, but his eyes were bright, and his mind alert. Ewen was telling him about his most recent field trip when the old man leaned forward suddenly.

'Do you have it?'

Ewen knew what he was talking about. 'Of course, father. He felt in a pocket and handed over the radio capsule that Father Dadley had given him four years ago.

'If you're ever in serious trouble, Ewen. Big trouble.

Squeeze the ends together hard and someone will hear. Now you must promise me that you'll never tell anyone about it. If anyone ever finds it and wants to know what it is, you must say that you found it. Do you promise me?'

And Ewen had promised.

'I have a new battery for it.' The old technician fumbled

with the device but it fell through his clumsy, arthritic fingers. He muttered a curse. `You'll have to do it, Ewen. Just twist the ring at the base.'

Ewen knew what to do; he had fiddled with the device many times, wondering at its effectiveness. Once he had even exposed it to X-Ray analysis, at a low level for fear of damaging it, but the capsule's secrets had remained locked in its encapsulated interior.

`There's a new battery in the locker.'

Ewen recovered the tiny tablet cell from the bedside drawer, and slipped it into the recess in the capsule's base. The compartment was well-designed -- polarized so that the battery would fit only one way.

`Good. Good. Now put it away. It'll be good for another five years.'

Ewen slipped the capsule back into his pocket. `If I were to use it, father, who would hear?'

`Someone I can trust. That's all you need to know. Now, what of yourself? We've only a few more minutes before the Laughing Gnome throws you out. Tell me what you've been up to. How are things with you personally?'

It was the opportunity Ewen had been waiting patiently for. He needed to unburden himself to this one person whom he could trust not to sneer.

`Father, do you really believe that rock is infinite?'

The old technician's sunken eyes sparkled. `Ah ha. The

**difficulty of accepting the concept of infinity. The sign of a true thinker in the making. Although infinity defies shallow logical analysis, it stands up to disciplined analysis.'**

**Ewen shook his head in disbelief. `So the rock that the domes of Arama are carved from, goes on for ever and ever? How can that be so?'**

**The old man's face became severe. `Because the word of the GoD tells us that it is so.' His features relaxed into a smile. `Not a very intellectually stimulating argument, I fancy. Let's poise a little thought experiment. Can you imagine a straight line that goes from this room, right up through the building, through the dome, and extends through the rock?'**

**Ewen thought for a moment and nodded.**

**`Now make your line infinite in length. Make it go on for ever. Can you imagine that?'**

**Another pause and Ewen nodded, his blue eyes fixed on the old man.**

**`So you created your line in your mind. Now it must be surrounded by something, mustn't it? So, logic tells us that it must be surrounded by rock. Your line is infinite therefore rock is infinite.'**

**`But supposing the rock above us and around us eventually comes to an end?'**

Father Dadley chuckled. `Do I smell blasphemy? Okay -- the rock comes to an end. To be replaced by what, Ewen?'

Ewen shook his head. The argument was getting beyond him.

`I don't know, father. More domes?'

`But domes are finite in size. The rock must eventually resume.'

`There was a dome in my dreams. It wasn't finite -- it seemed to be vast -- endless.'

Father Dadley blinked in surprise. His crooked fingers played idly with the bedcovers. `Dreams. You have dreams?'

`Before I came to the Centre I used to have a dream about a vast dome. So vast that you couldn't see its surface. Those dreams have started again.'

The old man suddenly looked haggard. `The colour of this dome is wrong. Yes?'

Ewen looked at him in surprise. `Yes. It's--

`Blue!' Father Dadley pushed himself up on one elbow.

`It's blue! Am I right?'

Ewen's eyes had widened in astonishment. `How do you know?' He forgot the customary `father'.

The old technician sank back into his pillow looking utterly drained. `There have been others, Ewen... Long before your time. Gifted students like you... They used to have similar dreams... A vast blue dome...'

Ewen moved onto the edge of his chair in excitement at the thought that he was not alone. `Others? Others with the same

**dream? Who are they, father?'**

**The sunken eyes that turned to Ewen were now filled with sorrow. `All so long ago... I cannot remember names...'**

**`But the most recent! Who was the most recent? Surely you can remember!'**

**Father Dadley waved his hand in front of his face as if the gesture would assist his memory. `Simo... Simo Belan. About fifteen years ago. But there have been others from other faculties.'**

**`Where is he now? Please, father. I have to know!'**

**The voice was tired. `Simo vanished, Ewen. They all vanished.'**

**The door suddenly slid open. The Laughing Gnome's intimidating bulk filled the threshold.**

**`Time's up, student-technician.'**

**And he meant it.**

**3**

**Ewen pressed an audio amplifier microphone to the thin partition wall that separated their respective bedroom and shower rooms, and listened to Jenine's regular breathing. He slipped from his bed and checked the opposite wall. Deg Calen, the third student who shared the communal study apartment, was also asleep.**

**Ewen was fully-dressed in black inspection coveralls, and**

**black surgical gloves that would permit him to work without tactile loss. He picked up a bag that he had packed that day, removed his student medallion from around his neck and dropped it on the bed. He had no firm evidence but he was certain that the medallion could be used to track movements, just as the beacon transmissions from the guardian angel headbands kept tabs on members of the public.**

**He left the study apartment. The corridor was deserted. At the far end, beneath the frowning picture of the emperor, was a door leading onto a balcony on the dark side of the students' residential block. He stepped onto the balcony and grabbed the door as it slid closed to prevent its noisy impact on the stops.**

**The campus was still and quiet, lit only by the suffused glow from a few low-power zargon night lamps. The buildings created pools of darkness. The bag contained a length of tough GoD power cable which he had knotted at intervals. He secured the cable to the balcony's safety rail, dropped it over the side and checked that it was long enough to reach the ground four floors below. He slung the bag from his shoulder, and went nimbly down the cable, hand over hand. Five minutes later he was examining the door set into the side of the low, circular building of the master zargon light battery. He had noticed during his daylight observation of the door that it did not have a medallion reader to release the lock. Close to, he realised why: the door was old. At**



**first its mechanics puzzled him until he realised that it was manually-operated and opened on hinges. It was stiff from lack of use -- a testament to the reliability of the ring of ten mighty light batteries that provided the campus with daylight. He closed the door behind him, and pulled an inspection lamp from his pocket. The musty, ancient interior was filled with a bright light from the tiny discharge tube. The layout of the control room came as no surprise because Ewen had spent most of the morning studying the system. What information he hadn't been able to glean from his datapad had been dredged from the library. The zargon gas that provided the light when energized was pumped to all the batteries on a ring circuit that started and terminated in this room. Looming in front of Ewen was the main gas pump, now silent, and the complex tangle of pipework of the cooling system. Largest of all was the huge zargon gas reservoir that kept the entire system topped-up and pressurised to compensate for the inevitable gas losses. The whole set-up was controlled by a surprisingly old-fashioned time-switch. Clearly no-one had seen fit to incorporate the latest designs which flowed from the GoD Revelation Centre. Even the picture of the emperor was old and faded. Strange to think that the work, relaxation and sleep patterns of a 1000 people was controlled by such an antiquated piece of junk. The thought was blasphemous but it didn't much worry him.**

**It was the gas reservoir that concerned him. He found its recharging valve without difficulty and connected it to a length of high-pressure tubing that was coiled in his bag. Also in the bag was a small cylinder filled with blue phosgene gas which he had purloined from the test laboratory. He quickly attached the other end of the tube to the cylinder and tried to open the charging valve. It was awkwardly placed and stiff so he removed a glove. His fingers found the lever and twisted. There was a soft hissing. Two minutes later the zargon gas in the entire daylight system of Dome 16 was contaminated with one part in one million of phosgene gas. Very little, but more than enough for his purpose. He quickly stowed his gear and left. As a final touch, he sprayed fast-setting super adhesive around the door frame before pulling the door closed. A few more squirts around the hinges and catch, and the job was done.**

**He returned to his room the way he had come, hid the bag, got undressed, and climbed into bed, feeling very pleased with himself.**

**He hoped that Jenine would also be pleased although it was doubtful. Jenine was conservative and would probably be shocked. But maybe the results of his little enterprise would help her understand.**

**And maybe not.**

**He suddenly remembered that he had taken a glove off when tampering with the valve and had forgotten to wipe the area**

**clean of fingerprints. He cursed his foolhardiness, but it was too late to do anything about it -- he would never get the door open now having bonded it closed, and it would soon be dawn. He worried for some minutes and decided that it was unlikely that Tarant would think to check for fingerprints. Ho hum. Try to sleep.**

**4**

**Chief Technician Dom Aster Tarant, Head of the Communications and Transport Faculty at the GoD Centre, was a man who liked to express his points of view with great candour; who admired in others the ability to see his views with a minimum of debate and explanation; and who gave generously of his time in acquainting others of his academic achievements. Put another way, Dom Aster Tarant was an arrogant, boastful, overbearing bully.**

**It was a few minutes before dawn when he threw open the windows of his penthouse and office on top of Senate House, and stepped naked onto his 7th floor balcony -- the highest in Dome 16 -- to check that all was well with his empire. It was the first step on the worn path of his daily routine. Dom Tarant was addicted to his routine. If anything interfered with it, his demeanour went from difficult to impossible, and the lives of those around him did likewise.**

**He breathed deeply, sucking clean air into his stocky**

body. This was his favourite time of the day. When all was quiet. When the students were shut away in their rooms with their appalling smells, and not kicking up a racket on the glass pyramid in front of Senate House.

A couple of joggers caught his approving eye. Students were a lazy lot. He reflected on how much more efficiently his faculty could be run without them.

A faint glow sprang from the zargon lights. This was the only time of day when it was possible to look directly at the batteries. The glow brightened and infused the glass pyramid with a curious milky light. Tarant blinked and shook his head. It was time to visit those frauds in the Health and Hygiene Faculty in Dome 10 and get his vision checked. Of course, one should not look at zargon lights, even when they were warming up.

He looked up at the inside of dome and blinked again. He leaned over the balcony and stared down at Senate House's glass facade. Something decidedly odd was happening. The joggers had stopped and were looking up. His head snapped up. The dome was the wrong colour! The lights waxed to a tenth of their midday intensity and continued to brighten.

If it hadn't been for windows being opened on the residential block and curious heads and shoulders leaning out, Tarant might have doubted his sanity.

The whole campus was turning blue!

No -- that was wrong; it wasn't turning blue -- it was

**BLUE! The lights were blue, the dome was blue, the buildings were blue, the glass pyramid was blue, the grass and flowerbeds were blue, even his belly and other bits were blue; everything as far as the eye could see was suffused with a hideous, nausea-inducing deep blue light.**

**`Zenna!' he roared for his secretary, and plunged back into the penthouse -- a far from happy man whose routine for that day was going through Phase 1 of being well and truly buggered.**

**5**

**Few of the technician-students crowding around the windows of the residential block were so institutionalised that they didn't secretly welcome the diversion that the strangely-coloured daylight provided. But Jenine, as Ewen suspected might happen, was an exception.**

**`This is your doing!' she hissed, pulling on a dressing gown and joining Ewen at the window.**

**`Now why do you think that?'**

**She stared at the campus bathed in the eerie blue light.**

**`It's a stupid, irresponsible stunt to recreate a childhood dream!' she snapped.**

**`This is a much deeper blue than my dream,' said Ewen regretfully.**

**He was spared a squirt of verbal paraquat from Jenine by**

**Deg Calen, the third student that Ewen and Jenine roomed with. He wandered in, spooning breakfast into his mouth from its container. The foil cover bearing his name and photograph was pulled half off. He was tall and lean, with an acerbic sense of humour. The product of a rich family that ran the biggest law practice in Arama, whose good fortune to produce a son like Calen with brains, was completely negated by his sense of honesty. He was one of the few students at the Centre who could afford a personal car. His breeding was reflected in his general demeanour; he somehow managed to make his shapeless regulation-issue dressing gown look elegant.**

**'Well. Well. Well,' he remarked. 'Our well-ordered routine does seem to be falling apart somewhat this morning. Bit embarrassing, don't you think? All those homilies from our worthy faculty head about the need for constant maintenance, and this happens right on his patch. We'll have the place full of birds next.'**

**'Any idea what might've caused it?' Ewen asked.**

**Jenine shot him a withering look but remained silent.**

**Calen shrugged. 'Lighting is not my sphere. But one suspects contamination of the zargon gas. All the batteries are splatting blue light, so I daresay they're on a common circuit.' He spooned more food past his thin, bloodless lips, and peered through the window.**

**A levi-car was hurtling around the perimeter road,**

ignoring the speed limit. To Ewen's discomfort, it crossed the grass and rocked to a standstill near the residential block. Three technician-lecturers piled out. One was clutching a sheaf of plans which he waved about angrily as they hurried to the master battery.

'I do believe that's our erstwhile chief,' Calen murmured.

'In a somewhat bad humour, I fancy.'

It was a remarkable understatement; Dom Tarant's foul temper went from bad to worse when it was discovered that no amount of pushing, heaving and kicking could open the door. A lecturer hurried back to the car and returned with a portable laser cutter. He sliced a hole in the door through which the three men disappeared.

An audience of students in night attire gathered a respectful distance from the master battery, anxious not to miss anything. Their numbers even included a few students equipped with power suckers on their elbows and knees who had decided that what was happening was more interesting than an early morning training session on the glass pyramid. The bolder ones who ventured near the door reported that profane language could be heard issuing from the hole.

A minute passed and suddenly the campus was plunged into darkness.

'A short but happy day,' Calen observed dryly. 'Am I right in thinking that the GoD power to zargon tubes the size of

**those should be reduced gradually and not just turned off?'**

**'You're right,' Jenine agreed.**

**The lights blazed into life a minute later, burning at maximum midday intensity, even bluer than before, and causing the glass pyramid to shine like an emerald. A few of the more courageous students near the door risked a cheer.**

**'And am I also right in thinking that the GoD power should be restored gradually for the same reason?' Calen inquired.**

**Jenine nodded. 'You're absolutely right, Calen.'**

**As if to underline the point, one of the more distant zargon batteries near the laboratory complex suddenly expired with a loud, expensive report. The light output from the remaining nine batteries intensified. And when one of their number gave up the struggle, the knock-on effect caused the eight functioning batteries to brighten even more.**

**'It's all going to end in tears,' Calen commented somberly.**

**And then all the remaining light batteries burned out one after the other in rapid succession.**

**'Well,' said Calen laconically as he moved off. 'Looking at that ghastly light has made me feel as sick as a seized-up travelator. Two dawns in one day must be a record. I'm going to check the meal dispenser to see if there's an extra breakfast awaiting me.'**

**Jenine stared at Ewen for some moments when they were alone. 'Why? Why do such a crazy thing?'**



**Ewen shrugged and tried to keep a straight face. `You were right. I wanted you to see what a blue dome looked like.'**

**`I'll have to report you.'**

**`Oh?' Ewen made a strange noise through his nose.**

**`It's no laughing matter!'**

**And then he was chanting under his breath. A silly kids' rhyme that snatched her back ten years to the selection centre when she had first met him.**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Where flies and birds do dwell,**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Another name for hell!**

**There was that same mischievous gleam in his impossibly blue eyes that had endeared him to her all those years ago; an impish look that cut through ten years of conditioning and the relentless instilling of conformity.**

**She fought the twitch that tugged persistently at the corners of her mouth. But the twitch triumphed, and her face broke into a reluctant smile.**

**Ewen smiled back.**

**And they both burst out laughing.**

**6**

**Chief Technician Dom Aster Tarant was in no mood for excuses.**

**He thumped his desk angrily. `I don't care how long it takes,**

or how much an investigation will cost. Someone sabotaged the lights and I want him or her brought to book. It can't be a student therefore it must be one of the civilian workers. Maybe a former student we employ. Someone with a grudge about being mindwarped.'

The campus's chief security officer was a civilian with more than his fair share of grudges, most of them directed at chief technicians who had him dragged out of bed just after dawn in order to rave at him. 'It will be difficult, sir...' he began.

'Why?' Tarant demanded.

'Employees don't always carry their headbands so we can't check on all their movements. And with respect, sir, it could be a student -- they're a high-spirited lot, and they're the ones with the technical knowledge.'

'Rubbish! No student would ever do such a thing!'

'With respect, sir. If you recall, it was students who presented you with that birthday present.'

Tarant scowled. There were certain things he did not like to reminded of. Naked girls jumping out of gift-wrapped birthday presents was one of them. 'Destroying GoD-powered equipment amounts to desecration! No student would do such a thing.'

'I'm sure you're right, sir. But if you want a proper investigation, I need your permission to check everyone.'

'Even me?'

**`Even you, sir. A process of elimination, you understand.**

**So where were you when the lights went out?'**

**`They didn't go out, you idiot! They went on!'**

**7**

**Ewen skirted the glass pyramid that was free of students for once, and paused outside the faculty library to allow the open top cushion-car to glide past. In the rear passenger seats were two wide-eyed children. It was selection day. The two boys were being taken on their preliminary orientation tour. They stared at Ewen, too over-awed to return his friendly smile and wave.**

**`A 10th year student,' Ewen heard the guide telling his charges. `You can tell by the colour and size of his GoD medallion. Wave back to him. Everyone in the Centre is friendly.'**

**The darker of the two boys twisted in his seat and returned Ewen's gesture.**

**The guide's assurance to the youngsters was not wholly true. The duty librarian was far from friendly when Ewen outlined his request. Like most civilian employees in the Centre, she was a failed student. She had been mindwarped to erase all memories of what she had learned. The residual bitterness was in her tone of voice and unfriendly eyes.**

**`The Centre's archives? Can't you access them on your**

**datapad?'**

**Ewen's cheery smile never faltered. He had had dealings with the woman before. Perhaps she liked to be obstructive as a chance to exercise her meagre morsel of authority. Either that or she considered the library's records her personal property, whose information was corrupted each time they were examined.'**

**'My datapad is limited to around a million data sheets of storage,' he explained. 'I agree with you -- hopeless. I'd be most grateful if you'd exercise your considerable authority and have a word with the Revelation Centre, and get them to come up with an improved model. I don't suppose for a minute that they'd listen to me.'**

**The librarian treated Ewen to a look that could have liquified oxygen. As far as she was concerned, students were around the same social level as flies. She waved her identity reader wand in front of his medallion and touched her data screen. 'I've opened Study Booth six and four,' she said huffily.**

**Ewen thanked her with exaggerated warmth, and threaded his way past shelves laden with discs, tapes and ordinary-looking books. He closed the door to his assigned booth and sat at the desk. The data screen was extra large for the examination of complex plans and circuit diagrams.**

**The menus that gave access to the archive databases were unfamiliar to Ewen, who was more used to using the study**

booths to look-up repair and maintenance procedures for the vast numbers of machines and systems that made up the technological infrastructure of Arama. Headings about student intakes, examination pass percentages, and suchlike, were wholly unfamiliar to him. He stared at the usual wall picture of emperor for a moment, hoping for inspiration. He did a little experimental exploring and quickly discovered that the database's structure lacked the rigid discipline of the engineering databases. Loosely related topics were filed together under unusual headings. When he searched `Sport', he came across pages from a now defunct student newspaper that included the results of long-forgotten matches and tournaments that could not be of interest to anyone. Some of the cuttings went back over 300-years. One page even showed a 200-year-old map of Arama. The huge sprawl of domes, galleries and chord-metro tunnels was exactly the same then as it was today. There were daily wars being fought against Diablo then as they were today.

After a few minutes he felt more at ease with the database therefore it was time to get down to the serious business of why he was here.

He cleared the data screen, picked up his stylus and spelled out on the screen the name Father Dadley had given him -- the gifted student who had had similar dreams to his about vast, blue domes. He formed each letter of the

**student's name on the screen with care so that there would be no ambiguity:**

**SIMO BELAN.**

**\* \* \* \***

**Serendipity played a dubious hand in the shaping of the momentous events that would soon imperil Ewen's life. First Secretary Caudo Inman was rarely in his office at the Revelation Centre, and would not have found out about Ewen's delving for weeks, perhaps even months. But today was selection day therefore he was sitting at his desk in his penthouse office, sifting through the reports coming in from the selection centre. Any citizen of Arama seeing the office would have been astonished by the absence of a picture of the emperor. All senior officials had particularly large portraits of the emperor on their walls, and Caudo Inman was the most senior official of them all. The reason was simple: there was no Emperor of Arama and never had been. The ruling family did not exist. Because no citizen of Arama ever entered Inman's office, or ever would, he saw no reason why the pretence should be extended to his inner sanctum. His terminal bleeped. The Guardian of Destiny computer was on standby, it would automatically log anything of interest for his attention later. He could ignore it if he so wished, but the selection reports were of little interest. He rose from his desk, sat at the terminal, and regarded the screen with hard, grey eyes.**

**SIMO BELAN.**

**Someone was accessing information on the former student.**

**Interesting.**

**His gaze dropped to the information at the foot of the screen. That someone was Ewen Solant.**

**Inman rested his bony elbows on the arms of his chair, steepled his long fingers against his chin, and watched.**

**A old sports report on Simo Belan's performance during an inter-faculty pyramid tournament appeared on the screen. It disappeared after ten seconds. Ewen Solant was either a fast reader or skimming.**

**A review of a show in which Simo Belan had dazzled everyone with his juggling and acrobatic skills appeared and disappeared almost immediately.**

**Skimming.**

**Even in the privacy of his office, Caudo Inman's control over his forbidding features was such that it was not possible to gauge his feelings about this prying.**

**\* \* \* \***

**Unaware that everything he called up on his screen was being echoed on a screen far away in the Revelation Centre, Ewen stopped his search to give himself time to think. He was wasting his time; there was nothing of significance in the databases about the mysterious Simo Belan. It was what the records did not say that was interesting.**

**Fact 1: Simo Belan's name was missing from the 11th year roll of honour of his contemporaries who had been ordained as technicians.**

**Fact 2: There were no more references to Simo Belan after his 9th year at the Centre. He had vanished at the age of 16.**

**Ewen checked the census databases. Simo Belan had not died during the period, and his name wasn't on the Department of Defence listings as having been a war casualty, or a serving soldier. The civilian index showed two Belans living at Keltro, about a thirty-minute metro ride from the Centre.**

**They turned out to be Simo Belan's mother and father. Next he looked up the communication directory to check on guardian angel assignments. The names of Simo Belan's parents occurred again, listed as sharing a guardian angel. All perfectly normal, but still no trace of Simo himself.**

**By now Ewen's curiosity was fired. If Simo Belan hadn't wanted to complete his studies, the normal procedure would have been to mindwarp his knowledge acquired at the Centre, assign him a guardian angel, and let him take his place in the community. His name would be unchanged. People did not disappear in Arama.**

**He sat staring at the screen, recalling Father Dadley's words on his last visit to the old man:**

**`There have been others, Ewen. Long before your time.**

**Gifted students like you... They used to have similar dreams before coming to the Centre... A vast blue dome... They all**



**vanished.'**

**Ewen was about to call Simo's parents via their guardian angel, but hesitated. He knew that all guardian angel circuits were routed through the Revelation Centre, and he had never been able to find out why.**

**8**

**Elena and Gal Belan's apartment was on the 5th floor of a middle class block in the centre of Keltro. The woman who answered the door became flustered when she saw Ewen's medallion.**

**'I'm so sorry. I had no idea a technician was due to call.**

**I'll go out immediately. If you'd just give me a minute.'**

**Ewen put his hand on the door to prevent it sliding**

**closed. 'It's all right. I'm only a technician-student. Are**

**you Elena Belan?'**

**She was small and neat, dark-haired, aged about 55. She**

**looked more closely at Ewen's medallion and nodded. His**

**friendly smile reassured her. 'Are you from the Centre?**

**What's the matter?'**

**'I've been sent to replace the battery in your guardian**

**angel headband.'**

**'But it was replaced only a few months ago.'**

**'A field trip. Training only. Can I come in?'**

**She showed Ewen into a small living-room and handed him a**

headband. He sat down, opened his shoulderbag and fitted the headband into a servicing jig. The woman turned instinctively away; one didn't pry into the work of the technicians. A burst of pulses from the jig released the headband's atomic lock. It opened. Ewen removed its tiny battery.

`We can talk freely now.'

The woman looked surprised and glanced worriedly up at the room's GoD receptor. `What about?'

`I need your help, Elena. May I call you Elena?'

She nodded uncertainly and frowned. `Now how could I help a technician-student?'

`Father Dadley sends you his regards,' said Ewen gently.

`Do you remember him?'

`He used... Yes, of course. He was very kind to... To Simo.'

`Your son?'

A nod.

`He told me about him,' said Ewen. He looked at the wall. Beneath the usual bleak picture of the emperor was a photograph of a smiling, fresh-faced youth with swept back dark hair. There was another picture that showed him in an acrobat's costume with the cast of a revue. He was dominating the setting, sitting on a trapeze at the rear of the group.

`Is that him?'

Elena glanced at the pictures. `Yes.'

`I heard that he disappeared a long time ago. Have you

**ever heard from him?'**

**The questions hurt. A little flash of anger. `I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't know your name.'**

**Ewen gave her his full name.**

**`I think you'd better tell me why you're here, Mr Solant.'**

**`Do you know why Simo disappeared?' Ewen pressed.**

**`Why do you want to know?'**

**`I believe we might have something in common. Like your son, I was sent to the Centre when I was seven.'**

**`What could you possibly have in common with my son? He disappeared fifteen years ago.'**

**`I believe we used to have the same sort of dream.'**

**Elena's face softened. `People could never take Simo seriously. He was always playing jokes, acting the clown. And such an acrobat... But underneath he was a dreamer.'**

**Ewen smiled wistfully, watching her carefully. `So am I.**

**At least, I used to be before I was sent to the Centre. I used to have dreams about being in vast dome. It was so big that you couldn't see the edges.'**

**She looked down at the floor. `Is this some kind of cruel trick?' she asked. `Because if it is--'**

**`The dome was blue, Elena,' said Ewen quietly. `Memories of that dream have started coming back to me. I thought that perhaps there was some sort of madness growing in me. I told Father Dudley and he said that there had been others with the**

same dream... That was when he told me about Simo.'

Neither spoke for a while. The woman eventually nodded.

She raised sad eyes to Ewen. 'That was Simo's dream.' She bit hard on her lower lip.

'I'm sorry to stir old memories,' said Ewen. 'It's just that I need to know. Did Simo ever say anything about his dream? Did he ever say what the dome was? Did he think it really existed?'

'It wasn't just a dream with him,' said Elena. 'It was an obsession. And the dreams didn't stop after he went to the Centre. The last time I saw him was at the visiting centre when he was 16. He told me that he was convinced that the huge blue dome really did exist and that he was going to find it.'

'Where did he think it was? I've checked all the maps of Arama.'

She closed her eyes to hide her distress. 'If I told you where Simo thought that the blue dome was, you'd think of him as insane. I owe his memory more than that.'

Ewen took her hand the way his mother used to hold his hand when he was troubled. He thought that the contact would be unpleasant and was pleased to discover that it was not.

'Elena. I promise you that I'd never think that of Simo. We've never met and yet I feel that we have so much in common. Please believe me.'

She looked questioningly at him and seemed to accept the

sincerity in his eyes. `Do you believe in the outdoors?' she asked.

The question took Ewen by surprise. `A place where sinners and unbelievers and blasphemers against the GoD suffer eternal damnation? Well, I suppose as a future technician, I ought to believe in it, but I don't think any of us really do at the Centre.'

`But do you believe in it?' the woman persisted.

`No. It's an ancient myth that was cooked-up to frighten children.' He looked sharply at her. `Why?'

Her lips moved silently at first, and then she blurted out: `Simo believed in it. He thought that the blue dome was the outdoors... That they were one and the same. He said that if flies and birds could find a way in, then he could find a way out.'

9

`The outdoors?' Jenine queried, looking over Ewen's shoulder, and reading the nursery rhyme that was displayed on his datapad. `We don't get seriously into GoD studies until our final year. Aren't you jumping the gun?'

`I believe in panicking early,' Ewen replied equably.

Jenine pulled up a chair in the library study booth. The desk was covered in children's books, some that she remembered well. One large book was open at brilliant colour

plates of birds and the many other mythical creatures that filled childhood stories and hologram cartoons. `Nursery rhymes, Ewen? I knew it -- you're regressing into childhood.'

`There's a lot of them. And nearly all about the outdoors. They go back over four-hundred years.'

`And you'll go back a year if you blow your exams.'

`Just for once, Jenine, do you think you could stop going on at me? I don't criticize you for all the time you waste playing that stupid pyramid game.'

Jenine opened her mouth and promptly closed it. The library was not the place for a brawl. `So why nursery rhymes?'

`They're interesting.'

`They're silly.'

`On the contrary, they're very interesting.' He pointed to the screen. `There's your old favourite.' He recited:

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Full of fire and fear,**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Where sinners disappear!**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Hell fires burn within,**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Throw the wicked in!**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Where flies and birds do dwell,**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Another name for hell!**

**Jenine smiled. `We used to skip to that. Even the last verse. I hate flies and birds. What's so interesting about these rhymes?'**

**`Their wording hasn't changed in nearly half a millennium.**

**Doesn't that strike you as odd?'**

**`Why should it?'**

**`The Tenth Day prayers and hymns have changed quite a lot over the years. But not these little ditties. Every Tenth Day we troop along to church and sing hymns written by technician-scholars that have undergone change. Words altered here and there. Punctuation messed about. The venerable Technician-Scholar Trant wouldn't recognise the words to his Guardian of Destiny, bind our spirits to you in Heaven today.'**

**Jenine snorted. `Well of course they change. Society changes. The meanings of words change.'**

**`But not these little rhymes,' Ewen insisted. He gestured to the screen. `Remember that one? "Tomy was a naughty boy, Tomy was a pain, They threw him to the Outdoors..."'**

**Jenine joined in with the last line:**

**`"And was never seen again!"'**

**`The point is,' Jenine continued, surprised at herself for enjoying this discussion of what she considered a banal**

**subject, `is that those little rhymes are so simple that you couldn't change their wording without upsetting their scan and rhythm.'**

**`That's precisely it!' Ewen declared excitedly, thumping the arm of his chair. `Their simplicity is their strength. Whoever wrote them knew what they were doing. They're timeless. And that's what has made them so effective.'**

**`Effective at what?'**

**`At conditioning us from when we were children.'**

**Jenine looked incredulous but Ewen pressed on, unperturbed. `When you think about it, these rhymes must be some of the most effective advertising copy ever written. All over Arama, they're the first thing that children learn even before they even start talking because parents recite them. And the message running through all of them is the same, and it lodges deep in their subconscious: that the outdoors is a terrible place where they'll end up burning in agony from the eternal fires of damnation if they don't toe the line.'**

**`Don't be silly, Ewen. They were never actually written. They just...'** She groped for the right words. **`Well, they just happened.'**

**`Did they? Then you tell me how it is that they're more enduring than those stupid hymns we have to sing every Tenth Day that were written by some of the most worthy technician-scholars that Arama has ever produced.'**

**Jenine stared at Ewen, not liking this unexpected turn the**



conversation had taken. 'The outdoors is a metaphor,' she said with quiet conviction. 'It's to give us an insight into what will happen to our spiritual being if we don't follow the Guardian of Destiny.'

Ewen looked faintly contemptuous. 'You mean what will happen to us if we don't go to heaven?'

'As you put it like that, yes... Look, Ewen. You better start work on revising. We've got our tenth year finals--'

'Supposing it's heaven that's the metaphor and not the outdoors, Jenine? Supposing the outdoors is a real place? Supposing it's a place where flies and birds really live?'

'Then where is it?'

Ewen opened his mouth to say something but his confidence deserted him. He shook his head.

'And what is it, Ewen? Tell me that.'

There was a noise outside and the booth door burst open. Two uniformed civilian police officers entered, their huge frames filling the confined space. Their equipment included plasma discharge handguns. Their heavy-jowled expressions suggested that they had left their sense of fun at home.

'Technician-Student Ewen Solant?' the senior of the two men demanded. He managed to make Ewen's name sound like the identity of a new and particularly virulent disease.

Ewen's face paled. He half rose from his chair. 'Yes -- that's me.'

**`You're under arrest, Technician-Student Solant.'**

**`On what charge?'**

**`Desecration and sabotage head the list. You can either accompany us without a fuss, or you can give us a rare and welcome opportunity to put our training in assertiveness to the test.'**

**10**

**The years had been kind to Kally. Her youthful, dark beauty was unchanged. Ewen wondered if there would ever be a time when her remarkable loveliness would no longer move him as it did. She was sitting on the edge of his bed in his tiny cell at the detention centre, doing her best to keep her voice steady and the conversation normal.**

**`It's a five minute shorter journey to this place than the visiting centre,' she said, her tone matter-of-fact.**

**Ewen turned from the barred window and sat beside her. He was wearing grey prison-issue coveralls and no students' medallion. The last time Kally had seen him without one was when he had been taken from her at the selection centre ten-years before.**

**`How's Bel?' Ewen asked.**

**Kally gave a half-smile. `Oh he's fine. He's waiting outside. He thought we'd prefer to be alone. Tomorrow's our ninth wedding anniversary.'**

**Ewen's blue eyes flashed with his customary humour. `I**

**know. I was planning on sending you a present, mother. But now...'**

**She gestured dismissively. `And Tarlan starts his military service next week. He's actually looking forward to it.'**

**There was a long silence -- each thinking the same: that Tarlan's call-up at the age of 16 was inevitable. He was the sort of aggressive misfit that the army liked.**

**A fly buzzed across the cell and settled on the wall.**

**Kally eyed it with misgiving and made a move to kill it but Ewen stayed her hand.**

**`Leave it, mother.'**

**`It's a fly!'**

**`It's company.'**

**Kally gave a little shudder and did her best to ignore the loathsome creature. `Is it bad in here?' she asked at length. It was a trite question but she could think of nothing else to say.**

**Ewen shrugged. `It's an old building which they've not bothered to maintain because it suits their purpose.**

**Criminals are rare these days. But it's not as bad as it looks. There's no lock on the door. I can wander about as I please.'**

**`Then how...?'**

**He pointed to a gleaming band around his right ankle. `If I venture beyond the perimeter path, that thing blows my foot**

**off. If I try to tamper with it, it blows my foot off. If I throw a tantrum or get violent, it blows my foot off.' He broke off and smiled ruefully. `It could be just an ordinary hardened steel band, but I'm prepared to take their word that it isn't.'**

**Kally shuddered but refrained from comment because there was the brooding presence of the black hemisphere of a GoD receptor fixed to the ceiling, and a large, vandal-proof picture of the emperor glowering from the wall.**

**`Funny having to live with one of those again,' Ewen remarked, noticing her furtive upward glance at the receptor.**

**`I wonder how long they'll keep me here?'**

**His mother looked as if she was about to say something but changed her mind.**

**`Go on...' Ewen prodded.**

**`Your arrest was on the news last night.'**

**The blue eyes twinkled at her. `Really? I'm that important? I don't have a screen so you probably know more about my fate than I do.'**

**`Your trial will be held in four days. They're convening an imperial court.'**

**Ewen's smile faded. `Surely not? All I did was--'**

**`You desecrated and sabotaged Centre equipment!' Kally suddenly flared. `You launched a direct attack on the GoD! That's what they're saying!'**

**Ewen stood and stared out of the window so that Kally**

could not see his change of expression. The detention centre was in the middle of an old industrial estate that was in the process of being demolished. There was an acrid taste of building dust in the air, and the inside of the dome was coated in a thick layer of grime.

`What else, mother?'

`There's nothing else.'

He spun around to face her. `What else?'

Kally stared down at the floor. `There was an interview with the head of your faculty.'

`Dom Aster Tarant?'

She nodded. `Yes, that was his name.'

Ewen was surprised. Technicians usually shunned publicity.

But Tarant was ambitious; it was widely known that he wanted to be deputy vice-chancellor. Holders of the post were noted for their tough stance on religious issues. `What about him?'

`He said...' Her voice trembled. `He said that he would be pressing the prosecution to demand the maximum penalty on the desecration charge. That you should be hanged.'

\* \* \* \*

The moment he was alone, Ewen pulled a face at the emperor and went back to scraping the paint from the cell wall by his bunk. He lay on his side so that the scratching of his fingernail would not be seen by the GoD receptor. The fly crawled down the wall as though interested in what he was

doing. The paint had been badly applied and flaked away easily. The inscription was faded and illegible. But by carefully removing the paint a little at a time, he was able to decipher the name of its author:

**SIMO BELAN.**

\* \* \* \*

Bel was waiting in the back seat of the auto-taxi. Kally slipped in beside him and sat staring through the front windscreen at the bleak building that was holding Ewen. Her dark waves of hair obscured her face. He knew when it was best to remain silent. A sentence of death was hanging over both her sons.

‘He doesn't seem to realise the trouble he's in,’ she said in a low voice.

‘Is there anything we can do?’ Bel asked. ‘Money for defence? Anything like that?’

‘No. Everything has to be handled by the Centre. It's an internal matter.’

An auto-taxi drew up behind them and latched onto a charging point. A tall, angular blonde wearing a tight, one-piece technicians' uniform got out. She brushed passed the vehicle that Kally and Bel were sitting in, and crossed to the detention centre's forbidding front entrance.

‘Jenine,’ said Kally in answer to Bel's inquiry. ‘I've seen her at the visiting centre. She shares a study apartment with him.’

**Bel had never been so close to a female technician before.**

**`She looks odd,' he commented.**

**`In what way?'**

**`She has to be the most flat-chested girl I've ever seen.**

**Are they all like that?'**

**`Ewen doesn't have to shave,' said Kally absently. `That's why they're selected -- because they're different.' She wondered if she should tell him that she had nearly been selected to be technician, but what was the point? It was all so long ago and her memories of that day were unclear. Bel touched the control pad and the auto taxi hissed out of its recharging and parking slot.**

**11**

**That night, after lights out, Ewen pulled the blankets over his head and slipped his hand under the mattress. His fingers closed around the radio capsule that Father Dadley had given him.**

**`If you're ever in serious trouble, Ewen. Big trouble.**

**Squeeze the ends together hard and someone will hear.'**

**He had been allowed to visit the toilet before being taken to the detention centre and had used the opportunity to hide the capsule with the aid of some soap. Fortunately, the search on arrival was desultory; its effectiveness depended merely on taking his clothes away and issuing him with prison**

**garb.**

**He pressed the ends of capsule with his thumb and forefinger. Nothing seemed to happen. He used the heels of his palms and heard a faint click. He held the device to his ear and listened. There was a faint hum of a carrier wave but nothing else. If the device was a radio transceiver, he wondered what frequency it operated on and how well the signals were digitally scrambled. And then a faint, reedy voice:**

**`Hallo, Ewen.'**

**Ewen had no idea which end of the gadget concealed the microphone. He held the capsule close to his lips and whispered a guarded hello.**

**`Let matters take their course,' said the voice before he had a chance to say anything else. It was so faint that he had to press the capsule hard against his ear to hear what was being said. `We are aware of your situation. Let matters take their course.'**

**The message was repeated three times with no variation in the speaker's voice. A recording?**

**There was the softest of clicks and the carrier went dead.**

**Ewen thought about the extreme discomfort he had endured to hide the capsule and wondered if it had been worth it.**

**Eventually he fell asleep and was woken at first light by the fly buzzing around the cell. He watched it with interest, wondering at its remarkable source of energy that enabled it**



**to remain airborne. No-one ever studied the few flies that entered Arama. The law of the GoD was that they were abominations and should always be killed.**

**The creature settled on his hand. Ewen fought against a lifetime's conditioning and kept his hand perfectly still.**

**The fly's legs tickled as it explored its landing site.**

**`Where do you come from, fly?'**

**The insect cleaned its wings with its rear legs.**

**`Do you really come from hell or was Simo Belan right in thinking that you come from the outdoors?'**

**Ewen glanced at the GoD receptor. What did it matter if they thought him mad?**

**`What's the outdoors like, fly?' He was about to add: `Is it blue?' but checked himself.**

**The fly took off and resumed its inane circling of the cell.**

**12**

**It had been nearly 100-years since the last convening of the imperial court therefore records had been consulted as to layout and procedure. Everything was much the same as for a normal court with the exception of an imposing central throne for the emperor or his first secretary as president of the court. An extra-large picture of the emperor had been fixed to the wall.**

**Ewen sat in the well of the court at an empty desk while the court chairman and his four advisors, seated at a long desk below the throne, checked with the clerk that the president did not have to be present before proceedings could get underway.**

**Chief Technician Dom Aster Tarant fidgeted impatiently. It was improper that someone of his status had to share a hard witness bench with his minions. Also the court had been convened in a lecture hall in the GoD Centre's Waste Management faculty, which didn't please him, and the chairman of the court was his old enemy, the head of information, which pleased him even less. Nevertheless, he was confident of the outcome of this trial. None of the legally competent lecturers in the Centre had come forward to defend the accused because there was a chance that Tarant would soon be deputy vice-chancellor. One rank below Caudo Inman and highest office a citizen of Arama could aspire to. It was a promotion that Dom Aster Tarant craved.**

**Ewen's medallion gleamed on its pedestal on the presidential desk. One thing was for sure, thought Tarant, the wretched student wouldn't be wearing that again.**

**An usher herded the ten members of public into the courtroom. Tarant had objected on the grounds that the trial was an internal affair, but the admission of the public was mandatory. They were a motley collection who looked uneasily about them at the numbers of GoD medallions that twinkled in**

**the lights. The exception was a senile old man who mumbled to himself and seemed surprised to find himself in a courtroom. Ewen watched them settling in their seats, thankful that his mother and stepfather, and Jenine weren't among them. Jenine had wanted to attend, but, knowing how she hated being kept indoors for long periods, he had insisted on her staying away.**

**The clerk brought the court to order and started to read out the charges against the accused. Uncertain of the correct protocol, Ewen put his hand up.**

**`Shouldn't I have someone to defend me?'**

**Text books were poured over, datapads consulted. It seemed a valid procedural point so the court was adjourned until the next day.**

**\* \* \* \***

**Deg Calen, suave and debonair as always, breezed into the students' rest room that served as a court cell. `Hallo, old man. Your troubles are over. I'm your defending counsel.' He hefted a steel toolbox that served as his briefcase onto the desk, and grinned amiably at Ewen's shocked expression.**

**`Sorry I'm late. Spent the night going through depositions and statements. You're in a bit of a mess, old chap, but I expect you've already worked that out.'**

**Ewen gaped in alarm at his fellow student. `You! You're not a lawyer!'**

**Calen looked hurt. `I come from an old and distinguished family of lawyers.'**

**`You're a technician-student. And a bad one at that.'**

**`You have a right to be defended by your peers.'**

**`I thought it was a right to be tried by one's peers?'**

**A frown creased Calen's elegant forehead. `You could be right. I'm a bit rusty on the old legal mumbo-jumbo.'**

**`A bit rusty!' Ewen wailed. `Legal mumbo-jumbo! What's going to happen to me!'**

**Calen considered. `Desecration is the worst charge. An automatic hanging offence I think, but I'll check up if you think it's important. I suppose an impassioned plea in mitigation might result in a verbal reprimand, but I'm not hopeful.'**

**13**

**Chief Technician Dom Aster Tarant was seething and sweating.**

**It was monstrous: a pipsqueak 10th year student was giving him a roasting! Nor was this the trial proper -- merely the first stage to determine whether or not there were charges to answer. Worse -- the chairman of the court was secretly laughing at him.**

**`So you didn't bother read the instructions on the control panel even though they're printed on a sign in bold red lettering?' Calen inquired mildly.**

**`My immediate concern was to do something about the damned**

**lights!' The defendant, sitting at the desk beside Calen, appeared to be smirking, adding to Tarant's anger.**

**`But neither you or your colleagues bothered to read the instructions before playing around with the main switch?'**

**Calen persisted.**

**`We don't like the phrase "playing around",' the chairman warned.**

**Calen bowed and returned to the attack. `So... You didn't read the warning sign before messing about with the main switch?'**

**`No!'**

**`I'll read it then,' said Calen. `I have a copy.' He gave one of his pauses for dramatic effect that had earned the admiration of everyone except the witness, and recited in clear voice the warning that operating the main switch with full GoD power connected to the zargon lights would result in catastrophic failure of the tubes unless the manual regulators were used.**

**Calen paused as though waiting for divine guidance. `We've already heard that the introduction of phosgene gas would not have harmed the lights, and that its effect would have decayed by noon had the lights been left alone, therefore the damage was due to your negligence, and not the actions of my client.' He turned to the bench and requested that Charge Two, the sabotage indictment, be dismissed.**

**The prosecuting counsel protested. The chairman and his panel considered and agreed with Calen.**

**The next charge to fall was that of forcible entry. Calen argued that there was no evidence of forcible entry to the battery room by Ewen. What signs of forcible entry there were had been caused by the witness and his colleagues. Over a 100 students had seen the witness use a laser cutter on the door.**

**'But he used adhesive around the door to prevent it being opened!' Tarant objected.**

**A pause as a smile spread across Calen's face. 'Ah... But that's forcible exit, and that's not the charge.'**

**One of the chairman's colleagues hid his face behind a handkerchief to stifle what might have been a fit of coughing.**

**The charge of misuse of the lights fell by the wayside on a technicality because Calen's eloquent line of reasoning was that the lights weren't providing illumination, their sole function, at the time of the alleged offence, therefore they could not be considered to have been misused. His convoluted logic led to some wrangling, but he got his way.**

**Next to go was theft of the phosgene gas from the laboratory complex, the second place where Ewen had left an incriminating fingerprint. Calen's point was that the gas had not been stolen: merely transferred from one Centre application to another. The offence was unauthorized use of the gas, but that was a separate charge.**

**After a brief adjournment, the bench agreed.**

**Ewen's spirits lifted. They didn't actually soar because**

**there were still several charges in need of verbal**

**demolition, including the worst: Charge 1 -- desecration.**

**Nevertheless, Deg Calen sank his surprisingly capable legal**

**teeth into it with all the enthusiasm of a novice tattooist**

**presented with a willing, unblemished naked body.**

**'Desecration,' he said, consulting a datapad. 'The law is**

**clear: the wilful destruction or defacing, either temporarily**

**or permanently, of any article, work or thing that**

**commemorates or celebrates or depicts or represents the works**

**and word of the Guardian of Destiny or uses the works of the**

**GoD to perform its function.'** He paused and glanced at the

**public gallery before continuing. 'Well there's no doubt that**

**the zargon gas tubes are powered by the GoD force. But...'**

**Another pause for dramatic effect. 'The court has already**

**decided that the destruction of the zargon tubes was due to**

**the negligence of Chief Technician Dom Aster Tarant, and was**

**not as a result of my client's action.'**

**This was too much for Tarant. He was yelling at Calen**

**before the prosecuting counsel had a chance to open his**

**mouth. 'It was defacing! He turned the lights blue!**

**Everything in the campus was turned a disgusting bright blue!**

**What's that if it's not defacing!'**

**The clerk restored order. There followed a tussle between**

**Calen and the prosecuting counsel that ended with a ruling from the bench:**

**`We've agreed that the destruction element of the charge should be set aside,' said the chairman. `But defacing must go forward. Please continue.'**

**Ewen's spirits sank when he recalled the brilliant blue glow that had suffused the entire campus. Although stunned by Calen's amazing performance, it was obvious that there was little hope of his fellow student talking down the charge. Calen's elegant figure rose. For a moment he seemed to be distracted by the mumbling of the old man on the public bench.**

**`Let us consider what my client did to turn the campus lights from white to blue. He mixed a tiny amount of phosgene gas with the zargon gas. How did he know what the effect would be? His education, of course -- the wonderful word of the GoD that has been passed to him in this Centre by his tutors.' He paused and spoke to the clerk. `Would you circulate Document 6B please.'**

**Copies of an imposing-looking, close-printed document that bore the great seal of the Revelation Centre were passed reverently around the court. Such documents were the source of all knowledge.**

**`That,' said Calen, injecting a suitably awed tone into his voice, `is Revelation 604. Revealed to us by the Guardian of Destiny over 200 years ago. It describes in great detail**



**the interactions of many gases, including zargon gas and phosgene gas. Paragraph 14A details the percentages of zargon and phosgene that are required to achieve blue light in varying degrees. These holy formulae are used to this day in industrial applications where intense blue light is required. Therefore there is no doubt that such light, which the chief technician referred as "disgusting", is the work of the GoD.'**

**Another pause.**

**The prosecuting counsel half rose, and changed his mind. He had an uncomfortable idea where Calen's line of reasoning was leading.**

**'So the phenomenon my client employed,' Calen continued, 'was not the callous wielding of an axe, or the mindless splashing of a paintbrush -- deeds which the law rightly condemns. He used the word of the Guardian of Destiny to achieve the effect!'**

**Yet another pause followed by a subtle change of tone.**

**'Like many of you here today, I witnessed the event of that remarkable dawn. And as that wonderful blue light filled the air with its beauty and awesome majesty, I recall thinking to myself that here was the true glory of the Guardian of Destiny being revealed to us all. A stunning reminder of the omnipotent powers that have been entrusted to us and which we so often take for granted. On that morning, members of the bench, my faith in the GoD underwent a**

**profound reaffirmation that will accompany me to my grave...**

**And then...'**

**The courtroom hung onto his every word.**

**'...as we revelled in the glory of that wondrous light,**

**there came a sudden and unspeakable darkness brought about by**

**the mindless tampering of the chief technician. It was utter**

**darkness... The darkness of the profane forces of Diablo...**

**The darkness that shrouds the spirits of those who reject the**

**Guardian of Destiny... The darkness of despair and the**

**outdoors. That darkness, members of the bench, was the only**

**deseccration perpetrated that morning, and it was brought**

**about, not by my client, but by the ill-considered actions of**

**Chief Technician Dom Aster Tarant... Thank you.'** He sat down

**to a thunderous silence.**

**For the moment Ewen forgot his predicament, such was his**

**admiration for Calen's oratory. Not so much for the flight of**

**heady purple prose, but because it came from someone who, on**

**the morning of the blue dawn, had declared that it made him**

**feel as sick as a seized-up travelator.**

**The chairman announced a short recess. When the court**

**reconvened, he read out a brief statement saying that the**

**charge of deseccration could not stand.**

**Tarant stared aghast at his copy of the indictment sheet**

**as though a picture of a bird had appeared on it. There was**

**only one charge left. He jumped to his feet to add his**

**vehement protests to the sudden babble of conversation that**

had broken out.

'This is outrageous!' he bellowed. 'A travesty of justice!

A mockery of the judiciary!'

He would have continued raving but for the sudden and awed hush that descended on the courtroom like a deathly hand snuffing out a candle. There was a massed scramble to rigid attention. Even the mumbling old man climbed shakily to his feet.

The gaunt, forbidding figure of First Secretary Caudo Inman had appeared in the doorway.

14

Had colliding air molecules in the courtroom atmosphere been any noisier, they would have been heard as Inman stepped up to the presidential chair. He gathered his cloak about him and sat, the new posture making little difference to his intimidating height. He laid his staff across the desk. The great diamond shone like a beacon. A scornful gesture with a skeletal forefinger and the entire courtroom subsided onto benches and chairs. Before the chairman had a chance to bid him welcome, he snapped imperious fingers for a copy of the revised charge sheet, which was hurriedly passed to him. He glanced at it, and trained the glare from his rimless spectacles first on Ewen, and then on the chairman. When he spoke, the icy contempt in his voice could have been framed

and hung on the wall.

‘If I am reading this correctly, Mr Chairman, it would seem that no less than an imperial court has been convened to consider the misuse of ten decras worth of gas. Do you not feel that a faculty disciplinary council would be more a appropriate body to deal with such a matter? Preferably a junior council?’

The chairman shifted uncomfortably. Damn Tarant and his mindless baying for blood. ‘There were other serious charges that have been dropped, your excellency. I shall, of course, refer the remaining charge to the junior disciplinary council.’

‘We might as well dispose of it as we're all here,’ said Inman impatiently. His glare sprayed gamma rays around the courtroom. ‘And the plea being offered in answer to this most heinous misdemeanour?’

Calen rose. He hesitated nervously before addressing Inman direct. ‘My client has entered a plea of guilty, your excellency. No defence is being offered and no plea of mitigation is being put forward. It only remains for the court to pass sentence.’

Inman drummed skeletal fingers while the bench conferred to determine what punishment they were empowered to inflict for Ewen's crime. A courageous woman on the public bench risked a quick hologram snap of the First Secretary, and looked in dismay at the fogged image that emerged from her

camera.

‘Ewen Solant,’ said the chairman, fixing a steely gaze on the defendant. ‘You will please stand.’

Ewen stood, his expression sombre, uncomfortably aware of Inman's glacier glare.

‘It has been decided to sentence you to five days community service, and that you should lose--’

‘Ten days,’ Inman snapped. ‘I have the power to double any punishment. The sentence is to be fulfilled after the accused has sat his 10th year finals.’ He rose suddenly, bringing the entire courtroom to its feet. He snatched up his staff and Ewen's medallion, and stepped down from his chair. Before striding from the courtroom, he paused near Ewen and regarded him with an icy stare. The hard eyes were intimidating but Ewen stared right back without flinching.

Inman held out Ewen's medallion. It swung by its chain from a bony forefinger. ‘Take it!’

Ewen hesitated and took the offering.

‘Put it on then!’

Ewen hung the medallion around his neck. As he did so, he thought he saw something else behind those forbidding rimless spectacles. There had been an instant when Inman had lowered his guard and permitted a flicker of compassion to cross his austere face. No -- it wasn't possible. Ewen knew that he had been mistaken. As if to confirm the error of judgement,

**Inman's cold expression became even more unforgiving, and he swept abruptly from the courtroom, his swirling cloak emphasising his cold contempt, and creating a blizzard of papers in his wake.**

**15**

**The fruits of Jenine's raids on every vending machine on the campus for snacks and soft drinks, together with loud music ensured that the party to celebrate Ewen's victory was a success, and was heard in the chief technician's penthouse. She didn't care: the arraignment of Ewen on what she considered trumped-up charges had done much to shake her conservative views on the administration of the campus, and indeed, although she would have vehemently denied it, even her faith in the Centre and its purpose was being unconsciously questioned. Not that that prevented her quarreling with Ewen at every opportunity. But tonight they had called a truce.**

**Deg Calen arrived late and looked around at the throng crowded into the study apartment as everyone tried to shake his hand at once.**

**`Deg!' Ewen cried, pushing his way through the revellers.**

**`You disappeared on me! What happened to you?'**

**`Sorry -- had to drive someone home,' Calen replied.**

**Jenine pushed a drink into Calen's hand. The tall student looked admiringly at Ewen's medallion as he returned the warm**

handshake. 'It looks better around your neck than up on that pedestal,' he observed. 'Well done, Ewen.'

'Well done!' Ewen echoed. 'It was you who did well! I don't know how to thank you.'

Calen looked pained. 'Well if someone had saved my neck, I'm certain I'd be able to think of something.'

Ewen threw back his head and laughed. As he did so, Jenine experienced a momentary desire to throw her arms around him and to shut out the world. Perhaps it was the music, the crowd, the laughter and relaxed conversation. Perhaps it was that sudden sparkle of his blue eyes. She didn't know. But what she did know was that for a fleeting moment she had wished that she was not in the Centre with her whole life as a technician in the service of the GoD mapped out before her. For a fleeting moment she had pictured herself on the outside as an ordinary citizen with an ordinary citizen's desires and needs. She had seen herself naked on a bed with a man, touching him, stroking him, and wanting more. The man's face was hidden in shadows but she was sure it was Ewen. The sensation had lasted less than a couple of seconds, like a light flashing on for an instant in a darkened, forbidden room.

And she hadn't been afraid or nauseated.

'Wouldn't you, Jenine?'

Calen was talking to her.

**She recovered her composure and smiled at Ewen. `Oh, you shouldn't expect gratitude from him, Deg.'**

**`I have none for the first secretary,' said Ewen wryly.**

**`Doubling my sentence like that.'**

**`Be grateful that he did,' said Calen seriously. `I had a word with the chairman afterwards. Don't you remember how he interrupted the chairman in mid-sentence? In addition to their five days, you were going to lose two years, but Inman beat them to it. By jumping the gun as he did, he didn't double your sentence, he effectively slashed it to nothing. As for this ten days community service thing; our erstwhile chief technician has submitted a whole host of ideas to the court. All of them nasty. As he's lost so much face, they're going to listen to him. You'll probably find yourself working on sewage recycling and maintenance.'**

**Ewen was nonplussed. `Well -- I daresay I'll survive ten days of that. Anyway, I really am most grateful to you, Deg.'**  
**He added with a grin, `Your defence was brilliant. You have unsuspected talents.'**

**Calen sipped his drink. `You should be grateful to my dear old Uncle Trevan. Retired, a bit slow, but still a brilliant lawyer.'**

**Ewen looked bewildered. `Who?'**

**`Remember the old man on the public bench? Mumbling to himself all the time?'**

**`Er... Yes.'**



**`He wasn't mumbling to himself, he was mumbling to me.'**

**Calen felt in his pocket and opened his hand. Sitting in the middle of his palm was a tiny earpiece radio transceiver.**

**`Hopeless range these things have got but at least that reduces the risk of them being detected by scanners. That's why we had to get Uncle Trevan into the courtroom. Bone microphone which means that the audio quality is terrible. Half the time I couldn't make out what he was saying, but I caught all the important bits.'**

**Ewen started to laugh.**

**Jenine looked at the earphone with an expression of astonishment. `Was that a proper thing to do?'**

**`No,' Calen replied.**

**`She's disappointed that I haven't got a noose around my neck,' said Ewen.**

**`That's a terrible thing to say!' Jenine retorted angrily.**

**When Ewen slipped an arm around her waist, her initial reaction was to protest at the contact and pull away, but she suddenly realised that she didn't mind.**

**In fact she rather liked it.**

### **PART 3**

**War!**

**Sergeant Jode Altir of the 3rd Battalion, Imperial Light Infantry, had seen three years of front line combat in the vast labyrinth of the battle caverns. His lot had been three years of the stink of the battleground; three years of seeing his comrades blown to pieces in the unrelenting and unending war against the Diablons; three years of squalor, deprivation, lice and flies, and, when food supply pallets couldn't get through, hunger. The result of this unremitting exposure to carnage and suffering was that he was not easily impressed. He was unimpressed by Ewen's technician-student's medallion; he was unimpressed by the fact that Ewen was in his final year at the Centre. And he was singularly unimpressed by the physique of the slightly-built, blue-eyed, nervous-looking young man standing before him. Araman regulars were huge and muscular.**

**He leaned across his desk so that his unshaven face was a palm width from Ewen, and regarded him with eyes bloodshot from a thousand plasma blasts. `We get something straight, tekkie. I'm a professional soldier and I have a deep-rooted, implacable loathing of over-privileged, weedy little conscripts, and see no reason why I shouldn't extend that deep-rooted, implacable loathing to over-privileged weedy, beardless little technicians. Looking at you, I've decided that you are a worthy candidate for a large measure of my deep-rooted, implacable loathing. Do we understand each other?'**

**Ewen decided that to point out that he wasn't a technician yet was a clarification that the battle-hardened veteran would not appreciate. He opted for a diplomatic nod.**

**Sergeant Altir continued. `Now I don't know what you've done to deserve this community service order, tekkie, and I don't care, and I don't know what I've done to deserve having you foisted on me...'**

**A plasma ball impacted near the front-line bunker that served as a command post. The ground shook, rattling the wall picture of the emperor. Ewen jumped at the nearness of the explosion, but Sergeant Altir remained unperturbed. Dust flaked down from the bunker's patched reinforced plastron roof onto both men.**

**`But what I do know,' the soldier continued, `is that for some obscure reason, your unmarked, pretty skin is regarded as precious.' He crashed a massive fist on the desk to underline his point. `Which means you will do exactly as you're told! You will respond to orders so smartly that you'll carry them out before they're given. You will rise at 0600 with the rest of the men in your maintenance unit. You will help round up ordnance and equipment abandoned on the battleground, help spray the killing zones with fly-killer, and you're to be back, behind the yellow markers, before 0800 when the day's war starts. Understood?'**

**Ewen nodded again and remained silent. Sergeant Altir was**

**an intimidating giant of a man.**

**`And if I catch you beyond the yellow markers after 0800, you'll end up thinking that what a Diablon plasma blast can do to you must be heaven compared with what I'll do to you. The nasty, vicious rumour circulating around this battalion that I once caught, killed, cooked, and ate a conscript, is absolutely true.'**

**Ewen decided that it was time to assert himself. `Then what are my duties the rest of the time, sergeant?'**

**The NCO tossed a fireman onto the desk. It was a plasma discharge weapon with a bloated cylinder made of high-density plastron below the muzzle that gave it an extended capacity of fifty blasts. It was a crude, sightless weapon with a wide flare angle, designed for close-quarters combat, which was what the daily Diablon wars mainly consisted of.**

**`You will help collect and repair PD weapons. They're simple and they're standard on both sides. Anything we can't fix at the front line depot goes back to industry. As a tekkie, you're to repair any other faulty equipment that comes your way. Corporal Nive will sort you out a uniform and show you what's what. You'll work with him. Now move!'**

**Ewen moved.**

**2**

**The still shape lying face down was the first dead man that Ewen had ever seen.**

**It was his third day in the war zone and the first time he had been allowed to round up firearms on the battleground with a booty buggy. This was Cavern 7 -- the main battleground; rubble-strewn, riddled with smoking craters and piles of boulders from overhead rockfalls, and was largest open area that Ewen had ever experienced. Cavern 7 was truly vast. As near as he could judge it would take 20-minutes to cross it in the booty buggy. It occupied a strategic position at the intersection of several smaller caverns. It had been won and lost so many times over the years that even the longest-serving men in his maintenance detail had lost count. Today it was being held by the Araman forces and had been for several weeks.**

**He switched off the buggy's fly spray nozzles and stopped the laden two-man vehicle near the edge of the gully where Corporal Nive had told him to wait, and stared down at the still form that was sprawled face down halfway down the slope, the arms and legs lying at an unnatural angle. The air was thick with the smell of fly-killer. Behind him Araman troopers in their grey uniforms and full-face anti-flash helmets were reoccupying the positions they had held the previous night when the fighting had stopped. The war ended at the same time each night. After the cease fire sirens had sounded off, there was a 30-minute body count period, and then the mobile zargon light batteries, positioned far behind**

**the yellow marker line, were closed down.**

**Ewen scrambled clumsily down the gully, dislodging loose rocks because his combat boots were two sizes too large. The morning lights brightened and he saw that he was near the yawning opening of a smaller cavern that was held by Diablons. He cautiously neared the body and realised that the reddish discoloration of the man's uniform was not due to dust as he had supposed, but because the uniform was red. The dead man was a Diablon.**

**Ewen froze. His orders were strict -- don't go near Diablon bodies. Normally all the dead from both sides were collected during the evening body count and disposed of in the brigade recycling plant so that there were no bodies lying about the following morning. This one in the gully must have been overlooked. Had the man been alive, an Araman trooper would have to be called to finish him off. Neither side took prisoners.**

**He glanced quickly around. The gully was deserted. Corporal Nive was some way off, building a pile of abandoned weapons to be collected on their next trip. He crept nearer the dead soldier. The stories he had heard about the Diablons were that most of them were degenerate pygmies, yet the proportions of this man looked normal. Apart from their colour, the dead man's helmet and uniform looked remarkably similar to those of the Araman forces.**

**Questions crowded into Ewen's mind that had never troubled**

him before. Who were the Diablons? Who were these mysterious people and where did they come from? What sort of society did they have? What did they eat? And if they were as degenerate as was claimed, how was it that Arama had never defeated them outright after centuries of conflict? He glanced with some trepidation at the opening to the cavern that was held by the Diablons. But, as always with Ewen, curiosity was stronger than fear.

He edged nearer and saw the terrible wound that had torn out the man's back and lower spine. The plasma discharge weapon the man was lying across looked undamaged, and he was still wearing his helmet. Ewen gave the body a tentative push with his boot. The body lolled but the man remained face down. A half-dead fly rose up in protest and fell buzzing into the dust. A harder push. This time the dead man rolled over. Something fell from a fold in his uniform.

`Look out!' yelled a voice.

Ewen had just registered that the object was an anti-personnel mine when a heavy shape crashed into him. The pebble-size mine exploded with an ear-numbing WHUMPPPP! just as Corporal Nive and Ewen rolled down the gully's steep slope. They tumbled the short distance to the bottom and were covered in a rain of flesh, stones, and debris that rattled off their helmets.

`Idiot!' Corporal Nive snarled, standing up and brushing

himself down. 'Stupid, stupid idiot! I thought you tekkies had brains?' He helped Ewen to his feet.

'What happened?'

'Before they pull out at ceasefire, the little bastards sometimes booby-trap corpses -- even their own.'

'I didn't know,' said Ewen shakily.

The corporal's tone became conciliatory. 'You all right?'

'Yes, fine,' said Ewen, supporting his weight against the soldier for a moment while the ringing in his ears faded.

'Thank you. You're right -- it was stupid of me. Are you going to report me?'

The corporal shrugged and then grinned. 'No harm done so what is there to report? Can you walk?'

'Yes, I'm okay now.'

'Okay let's get back before the plasma starts flying.'

Ewen's foot kicked against something as he was about to scramble up the slope. He looked down. It was the Diablon's head, still encased in its scarlet helmet. The force of the explosion had blown the man's flash shield away. He caught a glimpse of black beard before Corporal Nive swung a savage kick at the head and sent it bouncing along the gully.

'You don't ever look at their faces,' he said harshly.

'They say their stare can drive a man mad, even after they're dead.'

They arrived back at their headquarters just as the war sirens were wailing the start of the day's hostilities.



**3**

**After five days, Ewen had become accustomed to the hustle and bustle of the battalion workshop, and even enjoyed it. Most of the work for the twenty or so men in his unit consisted of making up usable PD weapons from those that had been recovered. It was straightforward dismantling, inspection, and reassembly. Damaged components were consigned to the mobile recycling plant, but Ewen's training enabled him to apply his skills to some of the more sophisticated equipment that filled the booty bags.**

**Occasionally combat troopers came swaggering in to reclaim favourite PD weapons. From their conversation, Ewen learned that the Diablons were an uncouth, uneducated bunch of thugs with a callous indifference to themselves and everyone else. Many were mentally retarded, and had just enough intelligence to fire a PD weapon at a grey uniform. They were the ones that died first. The criminal, street-wise types survived a little longer, but they were all doomed to die. There were no tours of duty for the combat troopers in the Diablon Army. Their officers ordered them to fight until they died. Rumour had it that their walking wounded were flung in a cavern and left to die of their injuries. None ever returned home, wherever that was. Ewen's few casual questions about Diablon social structure had been greeted with laughter.**

**`If they have got a cultural and social structure,' an officer had declared, `I reckon we're doing them a big favour by wiping-out the criminal scum they enlist in their army.'**

**A voice broke in on Ewen's thoughts.**

**`Mixed lot for you this morning, tekkie,' said the NCO in charge of the workshop. He emptied a bagful of infrared visors, radios, and miscellaneous gear onto Ewen's bench. `Do what you can. Don't waste time on rubbish.' He moved to the bench behind Ewen to collect some cannibalized PD weapons. Ewen sorted through the cascade of junk. Those items that were obviously beyond repair he dropped in his recycling bin. He opened a radio transceiver carrying case and discovered that it contained several Araman army ration packs with unbroken seals. The logo on each one depicted a man eating. Interestingly, there was no fingerprint panel on each carton because soldiers received general purpose ration packs that were not designated for particular individuals. Ewen's own food packs were diverted to him at the battalion headquarters for him to collect each day.**

**He glanced quickly around to ensure he wasn't being watched and slipped his fingernail under the seal. The vacuum pack opened with a soft hiss. Inside were the biscuits and vitamin capsules that he'd seen soldiers eating. He stared down at them, wondering.**

**What if...?**

**No -- it was food intended for others; it would be certain**

**to poison him. Even the act of picking up one of the biscuits required an effort because even to touch someone else's food was breaking the conditioning of a lifetime. But, like his curiosity about flies, Ewen had taught himself to question his conditioning. He took a cautious sniff at the biscuit. It smelt good. He broke a piece off and nibbled experimentally, ready to spit it out if it tasted foul. A rich, indescribable flavour filled his mouth and roller-coastered over his taste buds. He ate the biscuit with guilty relish while pretending to examine an infrared visor. Never had he tasted anything so good. It even seemed to make him feel good. There was less guilt when he ate the second biscuit, even less on the third, and none at all on the fourth.**

**4**

**On his 7th evening Ewen was allowed to queue at the battalion communication trailer that was parked in the HQ cavern and make one call. Voice only. Jenine was delighted to hear him and bubbled over with questions about his well-being and safety.**

**`Is your food getting through to you, Ewen?'**

**Ewen assured her that he was eating well. Which was true: he had taken to surreptitiously collecting soldiers' ration packs on his daily battleground forays. He now had a large horde in the kitbag under his bed.**

**`Guess what, Ewen. I've been selected for the faculty's 11th year womens' team.'**

**Ewen chuckled. `Here I am, fighting a war, and all you can do is go on about your silly games. Have you no sense of proportion?'**

**`You are not fighting.'**

**`Ah. You've been snooping?'**

**Jenine got angry. `I checked up on what you were doing. Believe it or not, I was worried about you, although on second thoughts, I think it would be an excellent idea if you had luminous targets tattooed on you, and you were paraded naked up and down the front line.'**

**`Jenine, I need a favour.'**

**`Ha!'**

**`It's only a small favour. I wouldn't dream of undermining your vindictiveness towards me too much. I need the complete maps of Arama that are on my main datapad. Is it within your ability to transfer them over this line to my pocket pad?'**

**`It is, but I don't see why I should.'**

**`Because your doing me such a favour will make me feel guilty about the way I treat you. It will cause me sleepless nights. Surely that makes it worthwhile?'**

**`Is that your lateral thinking at work?'**

**`Just my scheming nature.'**

**`Have you cleared its memory? Those toys don't hold much.'**  
**Ewen glanced down at his pocket datapad that was plugged**

into the telephone's data bus. `Yes... All ready.'

`Hold on.'

The troopers in the queue behind Ewen got impatient so he pretended to hold a conversation. He stopped talking when Jenine came back on the line.

`Okay, Ewen, standby.'

A light flashed on the datapad to indicate that it was receiving data. It glowed steadily when the transfer was complete.

`How's that?'

`Jenine you're wonderful. Must go now. There're others waiting. The comms facilities here are antique. See you in four days. Try not to break too many legs on the pyramid.'

He cleared the line, pulled his pocket datapad from the bus slot, and hurried across the compound to the accommodation hut.

Corporal Nive entered the hut an hour later and saw Ewen on his bed, studying a pocket datapad.

`What's that? Lists of woman to look up when you're let out? Oh I forgot. You lot don't have nothing to with women, do you?'

Ewen looked up and grinned. `Studying. The 11th year finals are the last and worst. After that, I become a fully ordained technician.'

Nive grunted, yanked his boots off, and stared

thoughtfully at Ewen. `Hard to think of you as one of those guys that we walk four blocks to avoid. Looks like you need one of these. It'll last a lifetime if you always clean it.'

He reached into his kitbag and tossed something to Ewen.

`A razor?'

The corporal grinned and pointed to Ewen's face. `Always thought the army would make a man of you.'

Ewen put his hand to his chin. His fingertips discovered the rasp of an incipient beard.

\* \* \* \*

That night Ewen had a dream in which a woman emerged naked from a strange reservoir and walked towards him. The woman had a fully developed body but her features bore a likeness to Jenine. Her skin was the colour of polished bronze. The sky framing her voluptuous body was a rich, colour-saturated blue. He woke up, confused and frightened.

**A dream!**

Hitherto no-one had ever featured so strongly in his dreams about the beautiful blue dome. Of course, it could not have been Jenine. She was a technician; technicians' bodies did not develop like that. And yet the woman had the same jade green eyes, and the same blonde curls -- matted against her head. His heart rate gradually fell and then picked up again when he realised that something was wrong. His body felt that it didn't belong to him. It wasn't until he turned over that he realised what was amiss.

**The dream was alien enough, but the erection, pushing with painful insistence against his army-issue pyjamas, was infinitely more so.**

**5**

**Sergeant Jode Altir's initial reaction to Ewen's request was one of amazement.**

**`You want to what!'**

**Ewen met the NCO's incredulous gaze. `I'd like to do a guard duty stint for my last night, sergeant.'**

**`You're crazy, tekkie. No-one volunteers for guard duty!'**

**`It's safe, sergeant. I mean it's only a ritual, isn't it?**

**The Diablons never attack at night, and we never attack them.'**

**The sergeant nodded. `True enough. But it's the most boring job there is. Usually a punishment. So what's the real reason?'**

**Ewen shuffled his feet and contrived to look embarrassed.**

**If pushed he had decided to say that he wanted to find out what it was like to wear a combat uniform and carry a PD weapon.**

**Sergeant Altir gave a sudden laugh. `Let me guess. You want a holo-pic of yourself in full combat dress to take home and show around, eh? The return of the hero. And have girls throwing themselves at your feet.'**

The hologram notion hadn't occurred to Ewen although, to his surprise, he found the idea of girls throwing themselves at his feet not unattractive. His nod was convincingly sheepish.

Sergeant Altir considered. The tekkie was right of course: the posting of a guard at night was purely ritual and served no practical purpose other than punishment. If anything, it was the safest job in the army. Also Ewen had worked hard and stayed out of trouble. In fact he had proved so useful that a report had gone through suggesting that a technician be posted to every battalion maintenance unit.

`Yeah why not. Request granted.'

Ewen gave a delighted smile. `Thanks, sergeant.'

`On one condition. Any spare girls you send to me.'

6

There was one addition to the grey combat dress that Ewen was wearing: an active infrared imaging visor that enabled him to see in the dark. The gadget had come his way for repair in the workshop. A simple repositioning of the atomic battery's contacts and it was working again. Such valuable devices were not issued to night duty guards because they were not deemed necessary.

He shouldered his PD weapon in the approved manner and sauntered across to the other guard who was settling down for a 12-hour night vigil by sleeping behind a rock.



**`Thought I'll take a walk out there,' said Ewen casually.**

**He jerked his thumb beyond the yellow markers towards the darkened battleground. `Pass the time.'**

**`If you had to do this every night for a week, you wouldn't be so keen,' the trooper muttered. `Okay. Don't go waking me up by stepping on any mines.'**

**Ewen strolled away. As soon as he was safely out of earshot, his movements became purposeful. He walked for ten minutes, skirting trenches and craters, and trying to reconcile the strange green images he was seeing through the visor with the landmarks he had fixed in his mind during daylight.**

**He stopped, withdrew his pocket datapad from a pouch on his leg, and consulted the softly glowing screen. He was off course but not seriously so. Another ten minutes and another course correction took him to a complex pattern of foxholes that had been carved out of the ground with laser cutters. He was now in the centre of the mighty battle cavern. No images reached him from the high, vaulting roof when he tipped his head back. He estimated that he was now fifteen-minutes' walk from the gully where he had seen the dead Diablon soldier.**

**As he neared his objective, his movements became more cautious. Before venturing across any open space, he first surveyed it thoroughly to ensure that there were no Diablon advance guards in the offing. But the terrain was cold and**

**silent. There were no smears of body heat red visible through the visor. The chances were that the enemy was as lax over mounting a guard as the Araman army.**

**He reached the rim of the gully and stared along it towards the ominous patch of absolute blackness that marked the opening to the cavern held by the Diablons. According to the maps and his own observations, all four entrances leading to Diablon-held territory were through similar openings in other gullies. Militarily the Diablon position was hopeless; to advance meant their forces had to come under fire from an enemy occupying high ground. The scale of the daily carnage in the gullies was horrific.**

**He descended slowly, taking great care not to dislodge stones. He worked his way steadily along the bottom of the deep rill towards the cavern opening. His heartbeat quickened and his mouth felt dry, but he pushed on.**

**At the entrance he raised his helmet for a few minutes so that he could hear better. The silence was such that he could hear the surge of his blood in his ears and the pounding of his heart. He ventured a little way into the tunnel-like opening and increased the visor's gain. The images became distorted but he could see that the huge tunnel curved to the left. He unslung his PD weapon and released its safety-catch before advancing into the unknown.**

**According to Ewen's datapad map, the tunnel should open out into a cavern that was nearly as large as the one held by**

**the Aramans. In fact it was a good deal smaller although still large. Ewen backed off the visor's gain to sharpen distant images. He could see faint lights in the distance. He debated with himself whether to skirt the perimeter of the cavern or take the more direct route across the centre. He decided on the shortest route to save time.**

**The floor of the cavern bore relatively few scars of battle although it was difficult to see what that signified; either the Diablons were successful at repelling Araman attacks, or the Aramans never advanced, being content to hold their ground in the adjoining cavern.**

**The lights became more distinct as Ewen drew nearer. He thought he could hear voices. Certainly there seemed to be more activity in the Diablon positions at night than in the Araman forward camps. He kept a large pile of roof fall boulders between himself and the lights. A shock was waiting for him when he reached the roof fall and peered cautiously around the boulders. He was nearer the lights than he had anticipated. It wasn't his closeness to the enemy camp that surprised him, but the similarity of their heavy equipment. The mobile zargon light battery was identical to those made in Arama, as was the field communication centre. At the workshop the identical nature of Araman and Diablon PD weapons had been explained by the NCO in charge who had said that the Diablons based their designs on Araman models. Now**

**Ewen was wondering if, during a past battle, the Diablons had captured some Araman heavy equipment. It seemed unlikely. Perhaps there was illegal trading between the two sides? The sound of a dislodged stone above and behind him jarred his senses. Such was the hair-trigger state of his nerves that he threw himself to one side before realising that he had heard something. There was a bright flash and the harsh crack of a narrow angle PD beam vaporizing rock where he had been crouching an instant before. Even before he completed his roll in the dust, he twisted himself around and loosed off two bolts in the direction of the blasts. A groan of agony and the slightly-built figure in the red Diablon uniform buckled, dropped its PD weapon, and fell from the rocks. He lay writhing in the dust. Blood was spurting from the around the soldier's fingers as he clutched at his stomach. Distant shouts. Pounding boots.**

**Ewen looked frantically around. There was no cover around the outcrop. In desperation he scrambled up to the soldier's former position and threw himself into a hollow between the boulders. The boots pounded nearer and stopped close by. Two men as best as he could judge. He kept his head down and prayed that they wouldn't hear his heart jackhammering against his ribs.**

**`So what was that?' demanded the first voice, some way off. `Diablons?'**

**A powerful zargon lantern splashed light on the rocks**

**around Ewen.**

**The second voice was scathing. `After hours? Don't be stupid. The Diablons know the score. A guard shooting at own shadow more like.'**

**At first Ewen thought he had misheard the comments then he caught a glimpse of what looked like a red uniform through a crack in the rocks. He flattened his body in case the questing beam chanced on the gap. These men were Diablons so what was the meaning of their curious remarks?**

**For a few moments there was silence as the beam skipped about the scene. A choking cough. The beam whipped away. Footsteps moving off and stopping.**

**`Yeah, found him. Looks like he shot himself.'**

**`It sounded like three shots,' said the first voice.**

**`Probably had his PD on auto... Yep -- auto. Safety catch off. Crazy idiot. Still, what do you expect after one week's basic training? Clowns like this -- no wonder we've got Diablon scum jumping all over us. Okay, leave him. He'll be dead by morning. The meat details will pick him up.'**

**The two men walked away, talking in low voices. Very slowly Ewen raised his head. They were soldiers. One made a joke and the other laughed as they headed towards the camp. And their uniforms were definitely red.**

**Ewen waited 10-minutes in case more men came. It was deathly quiet apart from the erratic, gurgling noises the**

**dying man made when he exhaled. He pushed himself to his knees and waited another minute to be certain before climbing stiffly down, flexing his limbs to restore circulation. For a moment he was undecided about the soldier he had shot. The incident a few days ago with the booby-trapped corpse had unnerved him, but he wanted to get a good look at a Diablon (But WHICH one of us is the Diablon?)**

**without using the infrared visor and its distorted colour rendition. He switched the visor off and touched the panel on his breast pocket that it gave off just enough light to read by.**

**Ewen knelt beside the injured man. The shot he had fired had damaged the helmet's demisting system so that the inside of the dying's man's visor was clouded with condensation. He took his own helmet off and carefully loosened the man's helmet strap.**

**'You don't ever look at their faces. They say their stare can drive a man mad even after they're dead.'**

**Superstitious rubbish!**

**He eased the helmet off.**

**The eyes that stared up at Ewen were not those of a dead man, yet the sudden collision of world-shattering moments, that would be etched in fire on his consciousness for the rest of his life, were of such an intensity that Ewen thought that he had gone insane.**

**The Diablon was Tarlan, his brother.**

## **PART 4**

### **Mindwarp**

#### **1**

**The largest expanse of water that Ewen had ever seen was the campus swimming pool, but this was vast. It seemed to stretch for infinity, and was the same colour as the arching splendour of the mighty blue dome that, like the water, seemed to have no boundary. The warmth that beat down him was of a stupefying intensity that should have worried him because such heat and light meant a dangerously overloaded system. And yet he was at peace, lying naked on a stretch of dry, yellow sand that yielded pleasantly to his body. The strange expanse of sand sloped gently down to the water.**

**`Ewen!'**

**A girl was rising out of the water, her blonde curls matted against her head. She was naked. The water streamed between, around and over bronzed, hypnotic breasts that swayed and jostled with a sensual, independent motion as she walked towards him. The rivulets merged into one below the fascinating breasts, forming an inverted arrow of sparkling light across the golden swell of her abdomen that drew his gaze willingly down...**

**`Ewen...'**

**Her voice was gentle sigh.**

**It was Jenine!**

**Jenine's eyes. Jenine's smile. Jenine's delightful blonde curls...**

**`Ewen!'**

**This time the voice was harsh. It was beside him. He turned and there was Tarlan, lying on his back and staring at him with lustreless eyes that were already filming with death. His hands were clutching at his stomach but the blood oozed indifferently through his fingers, staining the golden sand.**

**`It's cold, Ewen... So cold...'**

**`Tarlan!'**

**His younger brother's lips moved and whispered. `Why, Ewen?'**

**`Tarlan! How can it be you?'**

**His brother's words were punctuated with harsh, choking rasps. `It's me, Ewen. You joined them... You joined the Diablons... To kill me... You always hated me.'**

**`No!' Ewen cried, and lifted Tarlan's head onto his knees.**

**`I swear before the Guardian of Destiny that I thought you were a Diablon!'**

**A hideous parody of a smile distorted Tarlan's lips. `Not me, Ewen... Not me... I was bad but I was never evil. I didn't join them. I didn't kill my brother.'**

**`Tarlan I swear--'**



**`Cold, Ewen... So cold.' Tarlan's breathing stopped abruptly but his eyes remained open, staring with icy accusation at Ewen.**

**`Tarlan! I didn't know! I didn't know!'**

**He lifted the still form but Tarlan's head lolled back.**

**Ewen released him. He raised his hands and saw that they were in blood. He wiped them frantically on the sand but that too was saturated with blood. He pushed clean sand over his brother; over the stomach from where the blood flowed, over the face, covering the blood...**

**And Tarlan's eyes.**

**Especially his eyes.**

**But the blood soaked through.**

**Flies buzzed around his head and settled on the red-stained sand to gorge themselves on Tarlan's blood.**

**He worked faster and faster, using great, sweeping scoops with his hands, piling up the soft, easily-worked sand to form a mound that completely covered the incriminating corpse.**

**But the unstoppable crimson stained through, and the greedy, insatiable flies became an angry, insistent swarm.**

**The great bowl of blue above Ewen darkened, and the strange warmth was suddenly gone, replaced by a freezing draught of air that sucked the heat from his body. His movements became a demented frenzy as he piled up the sand.**

**The mound grew higher and the swarming flies blackened the sky. His arms ached and yet he didn't stop his feverish work of burying his guilt.**

**And still the blood soaked through.**

**He collapsed, naked and exhausted over the mound, his tears of misery and wretchedness merging with the spreading stain. His body heaved with uncontrolled sobs, and the blood that soaked through the sand added its chilling touch against his flesh to that of the icy air.**

**`Ewen!'**

**It was the girl's voice but he wanted to be alone with his guilt and misery.**

**Much louder now. `Ewen!'**

**A voice he knew. Jenine?**

**`Ewen!'**

**It was definitely Jenine. Thin but strong arms around him, lifting him to a sitting position.**

**`Ewen! It's all right! It's me. You're back. It's all over.'**

**His body was suddenly racked with uncontrolled shivering.**

**He needed warmth. This was the punishing cold that Tarlan had spoken of.**

**Tarlan! Forgive me! Forgive me!**

**The need to be alone was gone. He craved her touch and her warmth -- the suffocating mother-warmth, and the sublime, selfish baby comfort of soft mother breasts pressed against**

his face. Her dressing gown had fallen open but there was nothing for him but silky, transparent skin drawn over hard ribs.

'It's all right now, Ewen. There's nothing to be afraid of. You're safe now.'

Jenine had no idea how long she sat on the edge of Ewen's bed, holding him close to her. She wondered what had happened to him in those ten days at the front that had changed him so. Perhaps he would tell her when he was ready. Gradually his shivering stilled, his breathing became regular, and the powerful grip of his arms, which had so surprised her with their strength, gradually relaxed. She lowered him to his pillow, drew the bedcovers over him, and left his bedroom. As she lay in her own bed, trying to ignore the questions that had been clamouring for answers since Ewen's return that afternoon, she realised that she could still feel the wetness of his tears on her breastless nipples.

2

Technician-Father Framson's pointer moved to the fourth sphere on the projected diagram. He looked up at the 20 or so 11th year students gathered in the small lecture theatre.

'And this is the planet Kyros. As you can see, it has a reddish colour. This much the Guardian of Destiny has revealed to us, but the symbolism of its redness is something

**we can only guess at.'**

**A query light was flashing on the panel before him.**

**'Yes, Ewen?'**

**Ewen rose to his feet. 'What are planets?'**

**Father Framson sighed. 'As I've already explained, you will have to refer to the notes in your datapad, Ewen. You have missed the introductory sessions.'**

**Ewen remained standing. There was a curious strength about him that Father Framson found disturbing. It was as though the young man was undergoing some sort of strange physical change that he could not define.**

**'The notes are meaningless to me, Father Framson.'**

**'The planets are abstract aspects of heaven--'**

**'Abstract? Then why are we bothering to study them?'**

**There was a soft gasp from the other students that Jenine did not contribute to. She turned in her chair and regarded Ewen thoughtfully.**

**'The next three months are devoted to heaven studies,' said Father Framson evenly. 'The entire subject deals with increasing your understanding of abstract spiritual matters. Indeed this year, your 11th and final year, is entirely taken up with spiritual matters. It is the most difficult year of all and is left until now because it is hoped that you are all mature enough to cope with the very difficult concepts involved.'**

**'I understand that, Father Framson. If you can't tell me**

**what planets are, then perhaps you can tell me what they're for?'**

**'They are aspects of heaven.'**

**'But, whatever they are and wherever they are, surely they must have a purpose? Or are you suggesting that the Guardian of Destiny indulges in the pointless?'**

**The lecturer began to get rattled but was too experienced to show it. 'Nothing the Guardian of Destiny does is pointless; it is your understanding that is lacking.**

**Something I am trying to remedy.'**

**'Then tell us what planets are, what they are for, and where are they? If you can't answer those three basic points then we're wasting your time, and you're wasting ours. And there's more of our time than yours to waste.'**

**'You're being irrational, Ewen. If you--'**

**'All right. I'll give you an easy question, father. Where is Diablo? There's nothing abstract or spiritual about it, is there? There's nothing spiritual about the daily carnage.'**

**And then he was shouting across the theatre at the numbed lecturer. 'Everyday we're told how many young Aramans have been blown-up and maimed and killed, and how many Diablons have also been blown-up and maimed and killed! So where is it?'**

**There was a stunned silence from the audience as student and lecturer stared at each other.**

**`I think,' said Father Framson slowly, `that in view of your frame of mind, it might be a good idea if you skipped the rest of this lecture.'**

**`I was going anyway.' Ewen slipped his datapad into a shoulderbag, and left the lecture theatre.**

**\* \* \* \***

**Jenine caught up with Ewen as he strode across the campus towards the residential block.**

**`You shouldn't have done that, Ewen.'**

**He glanced at her without slackening his stride. She had to trot to keep up with him. `Why not? It's time somebody said something.'**

**`What's the point of upsetting Fram? He's a decent enough lecturer. He's only doing his job.'**

**`Last week I was with trained killers who were only doing their jobs. Arama is four million people going around in aimless circles, going nowhere, getting nowhere. And they're all doing their jobs. And when they're not doing their jobs, all they're thinking of is gratifying their petty little needs; dressing up in weird clothes; going to weird parties; muddling their way through their weird little lives. And for what? I thought we had a useful job to do. Keeping the whole thing working. And suddenly we have to swallow a lot of lies about stars and planets that no one understands. Well, I've had enough.'**

**The blasphemy about lies disturbed Jenine but she said**

nothing, not wishing to upset Ewen any more than he was already. 'Let's talk it over in the apartment,' she suggested in a reasoning tone.

Five minutes later they were settled in chairs in Ewen's bedroom with drinks from a vending machine before them.

'What happened at the front, Ewen?'

He looked sardonically at her. 'Why should you think anything happened? Didn't you check up on me? Find out that I wasn't actually doing any fighting?'

'But something happened to you, although I can't think why I worry. You don't smile anymore. You have dreams. No-one has dreams. You've changed so much since you returned.'

'Most of those sent to the front get changed by PD blasts or recycling machines. At least that didn't happen to me...'

He broke off for a moment and added, 'Sometimes I wish that it had.'

Jenine moved to sit at his feet with her hand resting reassuringly on his knee. Sometimes she liked touching him.

'Do you want to tell me about it?'

There was no answer.

She looked up and saw his tears. Before she could do or say anything, Ewen started talking. Over the next ten-minutes he told her the whole story.

Jenine broke the long silence that followed when he had finished. 'I'm sorry, Ewen... I'm so sorry... I don't know

**what to say.'**

**'Thanks for listening.' He tousled her hair and smiled wanly, the first time she had seen him smile since his return. 'It's hard to admit this, Jenine, but you're good for me.'**

**'I know it's easy for me to say, Ewen, but it's important that you don't blame yourself. It wasn't your fault, and if you insist on thinking that it is, then you're creating in your mind the same sort of lie that you're blaming them for.'**

**He saw the wisdom of her words and nodded. 'Do you believe me when I say that Diablo doesn't exist?' he asked.**

**She hesitated and shook her head. 'I don't know what to believe. We've always been taught that Diablo is the enemy of the GoD. If Diablo doesn't exist, then does the GoD...?' She couldn't bring herself to utter the profanity by completing the sentence.**

**'I don't think the GoD exists,' said Ewen grimly. 'Not in the way that we think -- as the creator. Maybe it's nothing more than a powerful machine, but there's nothing divine about it.'**

**Jenine looked troubled. 'But why say there's such a place as Diablo if it doesn't exist?'**

**'Simple. It's been invented solely to keep the population stable. They get rid of the misfits and criminal elements by conscripting them into the Diablon army. They tell both sides that they're fighting the evil and profane forces of Diablo**



and let them get on with it. Wounded Araman soldier are sent home, but no so-called Diablon ever survives so no-one ever finds out the truth. It's a lie. Just like everything else in this rotten society.'

'What made you want to find out about Diablo?'

He was silent for a while, marshalling his thoughts. 'Just after I started at the front, I caught a glimpse of a dead Diablon. I didn't get a good look at him, but I thought that he looked just the same as us. We've always been taught that they rejected the word of the Guardian of Destiny. I wanted to know if the laws of the GoD work for them as they work for us. If they rotate a coil in magnetic field, is the GoD power generated in the circuit for them as it is for us? If so, do they have a different name for the GoD power?' He stared at the floor. 'You remember the maps you sent me? I spent hours studying them. It occurred to me that maybe the Diablons came from the outdoors.' He smiled crookedly. 'Crazy, but I had to know.'

'Crazy is not the word for it,' Jenine agreed. 'Chasing after a people that don't exist, that come from a place that doesn't exist.'

'I believe that the outdoors exists,' Ewen replied seriously.

'Because of your dreams?' She nearly said, 'your stupid dreams' but checked herself.

He hesitated and saw that she wasn't mocking him. 'I'm not the only one to have had such dreams. I don't know if they are dreams. I think they're a stirring of a race memory of somewhere which we've turned our back on, and it is now time to return.'

Rather than get involved in a long and fruitless argument, Jenine turned her mind to the problem of Ewen's outburst during the lecture. 'Before we do anything else, we've got to do something about Fram. If he puts in a report, it could make things very difficult for you.'

Ewen nodded. Already he was regretting his outburst. Not because of what he had said, but because it had been directed at Fram. He liked the senior lecturer.

'Have you told anyone else about what happened?' Jenine asked.

'No -- no-one.'

'Well you mustn't.'

'I was thinking... I've always been honest with my mother. But I don't think I could tell her this.'

Jenine became very earnest. 'You mustn't, Ewen. You simply mustn't. It'll only add to her grief. You have to keep telling yourself that if you hadn't been there, Tarlan would be dead now anyway. You have to keep saying it to yourself over and over again. You mustn't add to her hurt.'

Ewen nodded slowly. 'I suppose you're right. But it'll be hard -- living a lie with her. Especially her.'

**`It's nothing compared with the lie that your brother was sent to fight the Diablons -- that he was sent to be killed.'**  
**Jenine wrinkled her face in concentration. `Now Fram. At least you didn't say outright to him about Diablo not existing...'**

**Thinking they were vending machine snacks, she reached out for a bowl on the low table and absently picked up one of the ration pack biscuits that Ewen had brought back. She bit it in half, and chewed thoughtfully while wondering what to do about Fram. She suddenly stopped chewing and looked at the biscuit in surprise.**

**`Where did you get these?'**

**`From the front.'**

**`What? From vending machines?'**

**`That sort of thing, yes.'**

**Her jaws stopped and she looked worried. `Is it all right to eat? I mean--'**

**Ewen's eyes sparkled impishly with their old humour. `Oh yes. They're available to everyone. Good, aren't they?'**

**Jenine's teeth went back to work. `Good! They're the best thing I've ever tasted!' She swallowed, popped the rest of biscuit into her mouth, and looked anxiously at the bowl.**

**Ewen chuckled at her expression. Suddenly he seemed to be his old mischievous self again. `Don't worry, there's plenty more.' He reached under his bed and dragged out two bulging**

military kitbags. He opened one of them and pulled out two ration packs. Jenine caught a glimpse of brightly-coloured plastic. It was the butt of a PD sidearm.

‘What was that?’

Ewen closed the kitbag. ‘What was what?’

‘Something in the bag.’

‘I brought all sorts of souvenirs back with me.’ He gave her the ration packs. ‘A present from the front. And there’s more when you want them. They last a long time.’

Jenine stuffed another biscuit in her mouth and took the packs. ‘And their seals will open for anyone?’

‘Oh, yes. They’re just like the vending machine snacks.’

He held the bowl under her nose. ‘Try a capsule.’

She fished a capsule from the bowl and put it in her mouth. It dissolved instantly. A look of wonder crossed her face. Another capsule disappeared. ‘I would never have thought that eating could actually be fun.’ She pushed the bowl away. ‘Right... Enough of this frivolity. I’ve decided what you should do. Firstly, you must apologise to Fram.’

A stubborn light came into Ewen’s eye. ‘I couldn’t do that. I meant what I said.’

‘Apologise for upsetting him -- not for what you said.

It’s a matter of phrasing. It’s important to stop him filing a report to Tarant. He’s a reasonable guy.’

‘Tarant?’

‘No idiot -- Fram. Secondly, you have to tell him that

**you're not ready for the final year and that you want to take the tenth year again to study for a practical project before plunging into the convoluted abstracts of the 11th year. It's happened before. Trany Lodi; Meild Sonda, and others -- they're all doing an extra tenth year.'**

**Ewen looked doubtful. 'I don't know...'**

**Jenine's fingers dipped into the bowl. 'You have to, Ewen. All you have to do is think up some sort of useful project to convince Fram. Personally I don't think he'll need much convincing after the scene just now.'**

**Ewen thought for a moment and brightened. 'Yes there is something.' He outlined his idea to Jenine.**

**She considered and popped another capsule into her mouth to help her think. They were addictive. 'Dress it up a bit to make it seem worthwhile, and it might just work.' She stood and moved to the door. 'You'd better make a start on drafting something, but first, your apology to Fram.'**

**Ewen held out the ration packs. 'Don't forget these. And don't show them to anyone else. No-one knows I smuggled them in.'**

**Jenine grinned and took them. She patted her stomach. 'You know, I don't think I'm going to have room for my proper lunch.'**

**`Seismology?' Father Framson queried, looking up from his desk.**

**`The study of ores and mineral deposits,' Ewen explained with a certain economy of definition.**

**`Yes. I'm aware of that,' Father Framson replied acidly.**

**`A dead science, I believe?'**

**`Deadish.'**

**Father Framson consulted the papers Ewen had placed before him. `Last applied two-hundred years ago. I call that dead.'**

**Ewen agreed that perhaps it was.**

**`Why should I sanction your using the Centre's valuable resources for a year on a project that harnesses a dead science?'**

**`It means not having me in the eleventh year asking awkward questions.'**

**The lecturer caught the look in Ewen's eye and couldn't help smiling. `A small grain of truth,' he conceded.**

**`Also I'm not ready for the eleventh year.'**

**`A large grain of truth.'**

**`So I'd like to spend a year on seismic research.'**

**Father Framson shuddered mentally. Research was virtually a taboo word. All the designs for equipment used by society, and all knowledge, came from the Revelation Centre. The people had neither the incentive or will to introduce innovation. If a new design or modification was required, which was rare, it had to come from the Revelation Centre.**

**`I mean search for ores,' Ewen added hastily, seeing Father Framson's worried expression.**

**`We have a stable population, Ewen. Everything gets recycled. We don't need ores. I believe the old mines are filled-in.'**

**`But there are still losses. Metal is worn away. Think of the worn treads on the travelators. And the amount of valuable metals lost in the battle caverns is staggering. I'm not proposing to dig up ores: just pinpoint likely seams, analyze them for quality and quantity, and prepare lists. A survey. I'm sure it'll be useful within the next hundred years.'**

**Father Framson weighed up his options and came to a decision. `Very well, Ewen.' He reached for his stylus and signed the authorization.**

**4**

**The cavern which housed the Centre's main foundry was a hellish place.**

**Ewen, wearing the mandatory ear defenders and hard hat, scrambled down the catwalk ladder after the technician-manager whom he had spent a day tracking down. Beneath them a huge press was stamping out travelator sections. Each time the mighty die hurled down, the entire workshop quaked. Added to that were the blinding showers of sparks from laser**

**cutters, the harsh yammer of spark erosion machines, and the roar of arc furnaces. The heat was suffocating.**

**`What is it you want us to make?' the manager yelled.**

**`A seismoscope!' Ewen yelled back.**

**The manager leaned over the rail and bawled instructions at the men manning the gargantuan press. He spared Ewen a brief glance and headed up another ladder. `What does it do?' he yelled over his shoulder.**

**Ewen did his best to keep up with the manager while clutching a datapad that had been loaded with all the drawings and specifications necessary to make the seismoscope. `It sends pulses through the rock!' he yelled back.**

**`All drawings issued by the Revelation Centre? A proper revelation certificate and all that? I've had trouble with you students before, wanting us to make things that weren't approved.'**

**`It's an approved design!' Ewen shouted, ducking as a glowing girder swung overhead.**

**`Why aren't they in stock?' the manager demanded.**

**`An old design!' Ewen explained, following the manager up another ladder. His throat was getting sore from the heat and shouting. `No-one uses them anymore!'**

**The manager reversed without warning and trod on Ewen's fingers. `What did you say it was called?'**

**`A seismoscope.'**



**The manager frowned. `Sounds familiar.'**

**Ewen looked questioningly at him. `You mean someone has ordered one before? Who?'**

**The manager shook his head. `No... Must've been before my time.'**

**`Could you check your records, please?' Ewen begged. `It's most important.'**

**`And so is my time. Which I can't spare. If you want one of these seismo-thingies, dump the drawings into the pad on my desk, and I'll take a look at it when I've a moment.'**

**Heat boiled up from a cauldron of molten steel, crisping Ewen's eyebrows. `Seimoscopes are very delicate instruments. Do you think you have the resources to make such a thing?'**

**"Resources" seemed a more diplomatic word than "finesse".**

**The manager looked indignant. `Give us the drawings and we can make anything! We're good at precision engineering!'**

**The cauldron tipped. A searing stream of molten fire poured into the mould of a gearwheel whose diameter was equal to the height of three men.**

**5**

**The mass of material in the library covering the `outdoors' was formidable. There was too much to be accommodated in a datapad so Ewen contented himself with sitting in a booth and reading everything off the screen set into the desk top. Had**

there been anything of real interest he would have copied it into his pad, but there was nothing. The bulk of the material tended to underpin the old nursery thymes. It consisted mainly of stories about mythical characters who had rejected the word of the Guardian of Destiny and whose doomed spirits had been condemned to wander for eternity in the dark caverns of the outdoors. Occasionally he came across long, rambling treatises by long-dead technician-theologians on the subject. Mostly they were 100% speculation dressed up to look like the results of factual research. Nevertheless he spent two days ploughing through all the tedious discourses in the vain hope that he would stumble on something. Paradoxically, this was the stuff that he'd eventually have to grapple with during his 11th year.

On the third day in the library, his brain was so numb that the words were passing before his eyes without their meaning registering. The chime of the communicator and Father Framson's anxious face appearing on the screen was a welcome diversion.

'Ewen... I wish to see you in my office at your earliest convenience.'

'Does that mean now, father?'

'Yes it means now,' Father Framson replied testily.

The screen went blank. Ewen left the booth and went into the library toilets to shave. He had to shave three or four times a day now to be certain that he bore no trace of a

beard. He used the dry razor that Corporal Nive had given him. If anyone entered he could quickly slip it into his pocket. But he was not disturbed.

\* \* \* \*

'Ewen,' Father Framson began when the student was seated before him. 'I'm very sorry to have to be the one to tell you this, but the casualty details for last month have just been released by the Department of Defence... Your brother's name was on the list.' He looked up. There was hurt in Ewen's eyes, his hands moved fitfully on his lap. The technician returned his gaze to the safety of a picture of the emperor.

'Has my mother been informed?' Ewen asked at length.

'Your mother and stepfather will have been told first.

There's to be a commemorative service in your home sector tomorrow. You could go home for a few days.'

The thought of returning home and having to live a lie with his mother both frightened and appalled Ewen. 'Do I have to?'

The question surprised Father Framson. Ewen had many failings but callousness was not among them. 'Of course not, but I think you should.'

'I'll think about it.' He rose to leave.

'Is there anything you want to talk to me about, Ewen?'

His tone alerted Ewen; it suggested that he knew something. He turned from the door and regarded the

technician. `Why should you think that, father?'

`No second thoughts about not taking your 11th year? It's not too late.'

`None at all, father. Why the concern?'

`You were very close to Technician-Father Regen Dadley?'

Ewen nodded, guessing what was coming.

`I'm very sorry to be the bearer of two lots of bad news on one day, Ewen. But he died yesterday.'

Ewen looked at the floor and said nothing.

`He was very fond of you,' Father Framson continued. `He would have been disappointed to hear that you're not taking your 11th year.'

`Is there anything else, father?' Ewen wanted the interview over.

`No... Yes -- there is something. Waste management have reported an unusually high through-put from your recycling bin meter. As though you're not eating all your food.'

`I've been writing out and scrapping a lot of notes recently.'

Father Framson smiled and nodded. `Ah yes -- of course. Your seismology project. How's it going?'

`At a standstill at the moment until I get the seismoscope I've ordered.'

`In that case, visiting home seems like a good idea, wouldn't you say?'

\* \* \* \*

**Ewen left the senate building with an uncomfortable feeling that Father Framson knew a lot more than he pretended. He walked slowly, wishing that he had paid Father Dadley a visit. His route to the residential block took him past the glass pyramid. Teams of noisy students kitted out with motorized suction pads on their knees and elbows were scrambling up the smooth sides. There was a good deal of cheating with water pistols from those higher up. Part of the game was spraying opponents' routes and sending them slithering to the foot of the pyramid to start again.**

**`Ewen!'**

**It was Jenine. She had reached the needle-sharp apex -- an uncomfortable and precarious perch -- and was defending her hard-won position with wild kicks and shoves at four opponents who were trying to dislodge her.**

**Ewen waved.**

**Jenine's return wave cost her her prize. She slid down the glass, trying to arrest her descent with the suction pads, but her body had built up too much momentum. She arrived at the foot of the pyramid, laughing amid a welter of arms and legs belonging to other students whom she had brought down with her.**

**Ewen helped disentangle her. She was flushed with excitement and accepted the congratulations of her teammates.**

**`I don't know why you play this silly game,' Ewen commented. `You're obviously not very good at it.'**

**`It's wonderful on the top.' Jenine declared, ignoring the dig while unstrapping her elbow pads. `The feeling of spaciousness. Anyway, I managed a minute. That's an extra ten bonus points. I think my thigh muscles are getting stronger.'**

**Ewen knelt down and helped unfasten her knee pads. She was wearing shorts and a white T-shirt. He had never paid much attention to her legs before but now they stirred a strange emotion. They were exactly as he had pictured them in his dream: so smooth and supple that he allowed his hand to linger on her thigh longer than was necessary. Her shorts were tight; the front seam was pulled taut, revealing a faint but exciting valley-like outline. There was a little sting of guilt when he realised that his gaze had dwelled on her for too long.**

**He straightened abruptly, and looked up at the glass pyramid's soaring peak. `Okay,' he conceded. `You're getting to be an expert.'**

**Jenine pouted. `I am an expert. Only four people have higher scores than me.' She took his hand in the innocent way in which a child would take the hand of another child. `Come on. This rabble can manage without me. I need a shower. I'll use your shower room. It's a bit bigger than mine.'**

**The statement surprised Ewen. Ultra-conservative Jenine was the last one he imagined would ever flout the customs of**

**the Centre. It was not a strict rule, and many ignored it, but students were not supposed to use each others toilet facilities.**

**`Saw you coming out of Senate House,' she commented as they entered the residential block. `What have you been up to now?'**

**He told her in the lift about the commemorative service for Tarlan.**

**`Are you going?' she asked.**

**Ewen looked undecided. `I don't know.'**

**`You have to go,' said Jenine resolutely. `You're all your mother's got left. For you not to be by her side at the service would only add to her grief. Is that what you want?'**

**They entered Ewen's bedroom. Ewen dropped into a chair and watched Jenine appreciatively without making it obvious. He liked the translucent quality of her skin; the graceful way she moved; even her cross, little frown when he said something that annoyed her. Just being with her was a privilege. He had never felt this way about her before and he wondered why.**

**`Well?' Jenine prompted.**

**`No of course not.'**

**She sat opposite him on his bed with their knees almost touching. There was a scent about her: a mixture of sweat and something else that he could not identify. Whatever it was,**

**it caused strange, almost frightening stirrings. He had only to reach out to touch those fascinating legs...**

**`So call her and say you're coming. You've got to face her sooner or later. You can't go on putting it off.'**

**`I suppose not.'**

**`So you'll go?'**

**`You won't give me any peace unless I do.'**

**Jenine looked satisfied. `Good. That's settled. Can I have some more of those snack packs?'**

**`Sure. Pass me one of those bags under the bed.'**

**She went down on all fours with her back to Ewen and dragged one of the kitbags from under the bed. Sensing something, she turned suddenly before Ewen had a chance to avert his gaze. The bright, animated expression that always seemed to illuminate her face disappeared. He expected a withering blast of invective but her expression was more concerned than angry.**

**`Why were you looking at me like that?'**

**Ewen assumed a puzzled frown. `Like what?' He took the kitbag from her and took out two ration packs.**

**Jenine looked crestfallen and miserable. `It shows, doesn't it?'**

**`The bruise from falling off the pyramid?'**

**`I'm gaining weight. How can that happen?'**

**`Your legs look different,' Ewen admitted. `Not so thin.'**

**She pulled her knees up to her chin and wrapped her arms**



around her legs as though she were trying to hide them. With an effort, Ewen managed to divert his attention from her thighs. It was some moments before she spoke.

‘I think I'm losing my faith like you, Ewen. I listen to the lectures about heaven and the evils of the outdoors and Diablo, and I find myself questioning everything. In all the previous years, I could accept everything. The GoD power; how to repair things; it was all straightforward. But now... Since you found out what you did about Diablo...’ She shook her head. ‘And I’m changing in other ways... Maybe it's a punishment... The GoD is taking my uniqueness away and making me like the others.’ A little shudder entered her voice as she uttered the last word.

Ewen frowned. ‘What are you talking about?’

She jumped up suddenly and beckoned him to follow her into the shower room. She pulled her T-shirt out from her shorts and yanked it off with one swift, decisive movement. She turned to face him. ‘I have to wear this. It's meant for sprains.’

Ewen stared at the broad, tight bandage that bound her chest. ‘What is it?’

‘I stole it from the sports centre medical supplies room.’

As she spoke, she released the bandage's clasp and allowed the material to uncoil onto the floor. Ewen had only a moment to register small, pointed breasts that were marked with ugly

red wheals caused by the tightness of the bandage. Jenine grimaced with shame and turned her back on him. He realised, with a little shock, that her tough, dependable facade had deserted her and that she was trying not to cry.

‘I first noticed what was happening a week ago,’ she whispered, struggling to keep her voice under control. ‘Every day they’re bigger... Ewen, I feel so ashamed.’

Ewen stepped close to her but she kept her back to him.

‘There’s nothing to be ashamed of,’ he said haltingly.

‘Something similar is happening to me.’

‘And that’s not all,’ Jenine continued. ‘There’s been other changes... I’m growing...’ She broke off and wheeled around suddenly, her self-consciousness forgotten, her eyes round with horror. ‘You’re growing breasts?’

Ewen unfastened his tunic and pulled it open. Jenine stared at the new growth of fine dark hairs across his chest.

‘And I have to shave several times a day,’ he said. He took her hand and rubbed it on his face. ‘And down here.’ He guided her hand under his waistband. Her fingers closed on a strange, alien hardness.

They stood like that for several seconds until Jenine threw her arms around his neck and clung tightly to him with a strength born of despair. ‘Oh, Ewen,’ she cried. ‘I’m so frightened!’ the tears she had been trying to hold back were a sudden flood. ‘What’s happening to us?’

The place the people of Arama knew of as the Revelation Centre, but had never seen, was a bronze-tinted tower block that shone in the sun like an ingot of polished gold. Deep inside its lowest basement, below a massive screen of concrete and depleted uranium to protect it from the sun's occasional explosions of deadly heavy particles, was a sealed room in which Caudo Inman slept. His bed was a sealed, transparent capsule that resembled a sarcophagus. It was the hibernarium in which he had spent a total of 595 years of the preceding 600 years. The length of the periods he spent in suspended animation depended on the stability of Arama. The longest had been a year between selection days. Some periods had been a matter of months. This period, soon to end, would prove the shortest.

Meanwhile he slept a deep, dreamless sleep, his heart beating twice every hour. What little oxygen he needed was passed through skin patches directly into his bloodstream so that his chest did not rise and fall. The condensation from the last normal breaths he had taken before slipping into the death-sleep of suspended animation had formed a frozen white rime on the inside of the hibernarium's plastic cover.

The voltage in the logic circuit that controlled a solid state time-switch went high. Contacts closed and set in a motion a chain of events that would bring Caudo Inman out of

suspended animation within 4-hours. The drugs that were being constantly absorbed into his body underwent a subtle change. The steroids that were required to maintain his muscular strength during weeks, sometimes months, of inactivity were steadily reduced and eventually switched off. Pads that bore gently against his chest began regular pulsations and released electrical discharges to stimulate his heart. Tubes that had handled body wastes were withdrawn. The flat line traces on a wall monitor that charted the activity of his brain developed ripples that gradually changed to spikes. Lastly the temperature inside the sarcophagus began to increase. Motes of dust in the room that had evaded the air-conditioning filters whirled a little dance in the air above the hibernarium to celebrate the slow return of warmth. The white rime cleared. Oxygen hissed. His chest rose and fell, and his heartbeat rate increased to normal. And so... Inman woke.

He opened his sunken eyes and stared at the inside of the hibernarium without blinking. A mindwarp hummed briefly and restored his thoughts to what they had been before he had fallen asleep so that there was no break in the pattern of his worries, ambitions... and schemes.

A motor whirred. The hibernarium tilted slowly to the upright position. Inman felt his feet take his weight. There was a slight cramp in his ankles that quickly disappeared. Another motor whirred and the hibernarium opened.

He peeled away the skin patches, wincing as the tiny oxygen capillary barbs released their grip, and stepped naked from the sarcophagus. His glance took in the wall display date and time, and his expression darkened with annoyance. Another short hibernation period. This would not do. He stepped onto a walking machine and spent ten minutes working the stiffness from his joints and toning-up his muscles. He entered a shower room and emerged a few minutes later wearing his gown and cloak.

He took the lift up to his office where his stewardess, alerted that he was awake, had prepared him a fine breakfast. When the meal trolley was wheeled away, he turned his attention to the monitor. The information on the screen related to matters that the Guardian of Destiny computer considered would be of interest to him. A bony finger touched the scroll pad and the information rolled up the screen. The lines were a blur but Inman had no difficulty reading them. He was looking for the reason why the computer had decided to wake him. The scrolling stopped of its own accord and there it was:

**SOLANT, TARLAN.**

Inman frowned. Solant was one of many names that he required the GoD machine to watch. But not Tarlan Solant. Centuries of debugging and still the software had faults. He leaned back in the console chair and cleared his throat. He

**disliked voice-addressing the computer but on this occasion it was warranted.**

**`Why have I been woken?'**

**Transducers energized the air in front of Inman into speech. `There is an anomaly concerning the death of one Solant, Tarlan,' the computer replied. `According to the KIA report, he was killed outside war hours in Battle Zone T. And Solant, Ewen, brother of Solant, Tarlan, was in the adjoining Battle Zone S at the time.'**

**The information on the screen changed. It was all there: Tarlan Solant had been killed by a PD bolt during the early hours of the morning when he was on guard duty. Ewen Solant had finished his community service at the front on the same day.**

**The computer spoke, `The chances of this being a coincidence have been calculated at--'**

**Inman waved the machine into silence while he thought.**

**`Any updates on Ewen Solant?' he asked.**

**`He has requested retaking his 10th year.'**

**`Before or after his visit to the front?'**

**`After.'**

**Inman wasn't sure if that was important or not, but the question of the Tarlan Solant's death out of war hours most certainly was. He considered speaking to the front line from his office and decided that it would not hurt to show himself.**

**Ten minutes later he was seated in his ground car, hurtling down the gentle slope of the connecting tunnel that linked the Revelation Centre with Arama's chord-metro system. It was the narrowest tunnel in Arama because it was used by only one vehicle. Also it was the only tunnel with a such a steep gradient. Steel doors slid open at his approach and slammed shut behind him. They would open automatically for his vehicle and no other. The last door to open was at the end of a supposedly blind spur in which faulty passenger capsules could be shunted for repair. The car increased its lift to clear the rails, and slotted into the chord-metro system. Tiny adjustments were made to those nodes of the Guardian of Destiny computer that controlled the transport system. Trains were delayed or diverted to allow the First Secretary's car to flash through the network unimpeded and, more importantly, unnoticed.**

**\* \* \* \***

**Sergeant Jode Altir decided that he would rather face a sustained Diablon bombardment for a day than Caudo Inman's hard, unforgiving gaze for a minute.**

**`The community service order was most specific, sergeant,' said Inman icily. `He was not to be exposed to danger.'**

**`He wasn't, your excellency. He was--'**

**`He was issued with full combat gear!'**

**`Yes, but that's a tradition for guard duty, your--'**

**`We have another tradition -- soldiers who disobey orders are shot!'**

**The sergeant cursed inwardly and wondered why the First Secretary was concerning himself with such a minor matter.**

**`Ewen Solant was in no danger,' he said slowly. `Guard duty at night is the safest--'**

**`If he was in no danger,' Inman interrupted, `how is that the armourer's report says that his PD weapon was fired, not once, but twice! And how is it that we have intercepted a Diablon intelligence report that says one of their guards was shot at night at the same time that Ewen Solant was on guard duty?'**

**The soldier was sunk for an answer. Inman regarded him coldly for a few seconds before turning on his heel and sweeping contemptuously from the command centre.**

**\* \* \* \***

**It was late at night when Inman returned to his office. He was tired, in need of ordinary sleep, but he considered the matter of Ewen Solant too pressing to wait until morning. He sat at the console and learned from the Guardian of Destiny computer that Ewen was not at the Centre.**

**`Then where is he now?'**

**There was a pause of a few milliseconds while the computer checked on the movements of Arama's four million inhabitants.**

**`He has purchased a return ticket to Galthan... It has not been cancelled or used... Request for food to be diverted**



**to...' Ewen's home address appeared on the screen.**

**`Good. That means he can come under receptor surveillance.**

**Give me the feeds from the Galthan address.'**

**The first picture that appeared on the screen was an indistinct overhead view of a darkened living room. `Infra-red,' Inman ordered testily.**

**The picture cleared to show that the living room was deserted.**

**`Cycle through all the apartment's receptors.'**

**The next image to appear on the screen showed a couple asleep in a double bed. Kally and her husband according to the screen overlay. The woman's dark hair spilled across her pillow. Dried tears streaked her lovely face. Inman wanted to linger, drinking in her beauty, but other matters were more pressing.**

**`Next.'**

**An empty bedroom with no furniture.**

**`Next.'**

**Ewen asleep on a single bed. He was wrapped in a cover so that only his face was visible.**

**`Hold that.'**

**Inman leaned forward and impassively studied the sleeping youth. `What feed is this?'**

**`Tarlan Solant's guardian angel circuit,' the computer replied. `It is still active.'**

**Inman frowned. `Close up on face.'**

**Ewen's face swelled on the screen.**

**`Closer. As tight in as possible.'**

**When the auto-focussing stabilized, Inman realised that he had not been mistaken: the huge close-up showed that Ewen Solant had definite traces of beard growth.**

**He sat back and drummed his bony fingers while he considered this new and unexpected turn of events. Either something had gone seriously wrong with the dietary control system for the technician-students, which Inman doubted, or the youth had discovered how the sexual immaturity of technicians was maintained. If so, that made him a serious threat. He could undermine the entire phoney but vital religious structure that held the Araman society together. The hold that religion had on the populace was something that Inman detested, but it it was a cohesive force and it was too late to change things now. Stability was vital, and it seemed that this young man had acquired the knowledge to threaten that stability. But before taking drastic action, it was essential to determine the level of Ewen's sexual maturity and whether or not it manifested itself as dangerous aggression, or guilt complexes that might distort his prized intellect.**

**`Activate mindwarp level eight,' Inman instructed.**

**It was a much higher level than the mindwarp available to the technicians which they used for the simple clearing of**

**memories. At level eight the mindwarp could destroy personalities. It had to be used with care.**

**`Standing by,' said the computer.**

**`Fantasy Scenarios 23 to 30. Give me a hologram cycle of the subjects available.'**

**Inman rotated his chair and turned his attention to the expanse of open floor between the console and his desk. A cube of iridescent, shimmering pale blue light appeared.**

**There was the vague outline of a figure in the centre of the cube. The outline hardened into the life-size figure of a dark-haired voluptuous young woman. She was wearing a semi-transparent gown that heightened her sexuality. She pirouetted and posed, smiling fixedly like a beauty contestant. Even standing upright it was possible to see the hungry pink pout below her pudenda. Inman frowned. Such a woman, exuding a demanding sensuality, might well unnerve an inexperienced youth.'**

**`Younger,' he ordered.**

**The woman dissolved into the blue light. Several more images appeared which Inman dismissed. He glanced at the sleeping Ewen and instructed the machine to carry out a low-level probe. He could always trawl deeper in the young man's subconscious should it prove necessary. `Start at minimum level,' he ordered. `Go.'**

**To his surprise, a result was obtained almost immediately.**

**A young girl materialized in the cube of pale blue light. She was aged about 12 or 13 and not fully mature. She looked vulnerable and innocent despite her mischievous smile and the provocative way she cupped one hand under her pert breasts and slipped the other into the little scut of down between her legs.**

**`We'll use that first if it's the strongest,' said Inman.**

**`It's very strong,' said the computer.**

**`Very well. Go.'**

**7**

**It had been a bad day.**

**A long and tiring day therefore Ewen resented waking and fought back. He pulled the bedcover tightly around himself and shifted into a more comfortable position in the unfamiliar bed while fighting the bleak advancing tide of consciousness and the misery it would bring.**

**It had been a day spent acquiring unpleasant memories that he knew would never fade with time: kneeling beside his mother at the service in the little GoD chapel that served the neighbourhood; shaking hands with Tarlan's friends; making small talk with neighbours. And all the time avoiding looking at his mother in case those lovely, dark, knowing eyes somehow divined and untied the terrible black knot of guilt that he harboured in the centre of his being.**

**His guilt had been exacerbated by the daughter of his**

**step-father's friends: a 12- or 13-year-old with a sly little smile which became decidedly impish whenever she caught Ewen's covert glances. Her name was Tamara. Bobbed hair and a flowering, provocative little body. She had knelt in the bench in front of him, wriggling a tantalizing cleft at him at every opportunity, or so it seemed. There was a moment when the desire to reach forward and touch her was so intense that he almost saw and felt a phantom arm stretching out to stroke the smooth, tight material covering her buttocks. When it was time to say goodbye to everyone, instead of shaking hands, she had suddenly stretched up to Ewen and given him a teasing little nip on the lower lip.**

**`See you again soon, Ewen,' she had whispered.**

**He thought about Tamara, but wakefulness was insistent, Tarlan's old bed was losing its warmth and comfort, and there was a distant but shrill buzzing in his head.**

**Someone was breathing on his face, and what felt like a little foot was sliding up and down his thigh. He turned his head, opened his eyes, and stared uncomprehendingly at Tamara. Her head was on the pillow, her cropped hair forming a fuzzy little halo about her head, her hand was stroking his face, her eyes were wide with that tantalizing innocence that had captivated him at the service.**

**`Hallo, Ewen.'**

**He gaped. The buzzing suddenly vanished. `Tamara! What are**

**you--!'**

**She smothered his protests with a clumsy, open-mouth kiss that ended with small, white teeth nibbling gently on his lower lip. `I did say that I'd see you again, didn't I?' She laid a cautionary finger on his lips. `It'll be all right if we don't make a noise.'**

**His reason swam. This wasn't happening. It couldn't be.**

**`How did you get in?'**

**She knelt over him and he realised with a numb little shock that she was naked. And then the wicked little tip of her tongue was tracing the bridge of his nose and running tingling little shocks over his forehead. He brought his hand up with the intention of pushing her away but his fingers encountered her breast. She gave a little shudder that made her breath rasp against his ear.**

**`Tamara...' he began but his fingers could not resist the tantalizing touch of her warm skin. He spread his hand and marvelled at the delicious hardening of her nipple against his palm. His consciousness screamed at him to get her dressed and bundle her from the apartment, but his hand followed the needs of his subconsciousness, and he rolled the insistent little button of puckered, engorged flesh between thumb and forefinger.**

**`Nice...' Tamara whispered, giving sharp little intakes of breath. `I thought it would be... Especially with you...'**

**He heard himself saying, `You mean, you've never--'**

**`Shh!' She took his hand and steered it down so that his palm lay on the inside of her parted thighs. As she kissed him, he slid his hand gently up and down, his senses were overwhelmed by the delicate silky smoothness of her skin that seemed to float against his fingertips. She gave a little wriggle. Something moist and magic brushed fleetingly against the tip of his thumb like a forbidden kiss. She must have sensed the sudden tensing of his arm for she clamped her thighs together, preventing his hand from escaping. `Don't take it away,' her words were a distant sigh.**

**`It's wrong...'**

**`It's nice.' She bit gently on his collarbone.**

**Another little wriggle and he felt a gently yielding ring-like membrane of heavenly warmth encircle the tip of his thumb.**

**When her muscles flexed to bear down even harder, sanity and reason exploded before him like a bomb. He sat up, thrusting her away from him.**

**`No! This isn't right! You've got to...'** His voice trailed into shocked silence and he stared about the gloom.

**He was alone. There was no sign of Tamara. Not believing that such a vivid kaleidoscopic of events could possibly be attributed to a dream, he left the bed, turned on the light, and gazed in bewilderment around the bedroom.**

**`Tamara?'**

**Silence.**

**He turned out the light and sat on the bed, trying to sort out his thoughts. A dream. It had to be a dream. A fantasy because he had been thinking about her. And yet...**

**He touched the side of his face. His earlobe was still moist from her nuzzling little storm of kisses, and there was a strange, evocative scent of her lingering in the room.**

**He lay back in the darkness. When he pulled the cover over himself, he realised that the highly-charged erotic dream had left him with another, now more familiar souvenir, rigid and almost painful. Well, he had discovered a pleasurable way of dealing with them. He pushed the blanket to one side but sleep overtook him with surprising ease before he could finish the job.**

**8**

**A typical juvenile sexual fantasy, thought Inman. Not what he wanted, although Ewen's highly-developed sense of right and wrong, possibly stemming from a guilt complex, was interesting. There had been no violence towards the girl but that was because she had been an eager party. That was the trouble with the subject's own fantasy objects. Using the mindwarp to build on an existing fantasy partner gave a high degree of control but the results did not give reliable insights.**

**'Does he have any more?' he asked the computer.**



**`I will have to go deeper.'**

**`Go.'**

**Inman spun his chair and stared dispassionately at the screen that showed Ewen asleep. The youth stirred fitfully on the bed, shifting his position.**

**`There are two more,' the computer reported. `One very clear, and one extremely faint. The clear one is the student he rooms with.'**

**`Only to be expected,' Inman observed. `Another routine fantasy. And the faint one?'**

**`It is very faint indeed... I have very little to go on.'**

**`Give me what you have.'**

**Ewen moaned in his sleep.**

**`He's resisting,' said the computer.**

**Inman turned his attention to the cube of blue light. An image formed that remained ghostly and tenuous. It was a woman, he could see that, but the face remained blanked out as did her breasts.'**

**`No...' Ewen muttered. `No...'**

**`Deeper,' said Inman, now totally absorbed in the figure in the luminescent cube. Patterned lines of dancing light were zig-zagging in front of the woman's face and upper torso. Ewen was fighting hard to obliterate her identity. Whoever the woman was, she was someone whose identity he could never admit to, not even to himself. Especially not**

himself.

Such denial., thought Inman. A sudden glimpse of dark hair that disappeared the instant it appeared. And then full, rounded breasts that were gone in an instant. Inman knew who the woman was. He had first seen her as a child when he had watched her performing her selection tests. Since that day she had become very special.

Kally.

`Stop!'

Ewen gave a little cry of relief in his sleep as his guilt snatched the figure from the cube and buried it deep and safe in his subconsciousness from whence the mindwarp probe had dragged it.

Inman was lost in thought. This was real guilt. And of course, it was doubtful that the boy would have told his mother the truth about Tarlan's death. An intolerable burden of guilt. Magnify the tenuous, harmless fantasies that boys often have about their mothers into something huge and overbearing that he was forced to face, add it to the existing burden of guilt, and the chances were that it would destroy a lesser man.

But would it destroy Ewen?

`Put one together that is identical to his mother,' he ordered.

`It is ready,' the computer confirmed a few seconds later.

Inman's cold gaze at Ewen was too impassive to determine

whether it was rooted in loathing. `We'll start with Scenario 25,' he instructed. `Go.'

The mindwarp hummed.

It was a terrible weapon but Inman had no compunction about using it. There had been others he had used it on with varying degrees of success. Others like Ewen, who had strayed from the path of righteousness.

It was all a question of make or break.

9

The new dream was merged into one with the old dream. He had not hurled Tamara from him in a fit of guilt and remorse, but had feverishly stirred her to climax after climax as she ground her pelvis in a willing frenzy against his hand.

`Now it's your turn,' she whispered in his ear when she had got her breath back. Her voice had a curious adult quality that did not sound right, but nothing mattered so long as she kept up that divine movement of her hand. He felt her hair brush across his stomach.

A tiny alarm sounded:

Tamara does not have long hair.

He was about to open his eyes but suddenly the wondrous touch of her hand was replaced by something even more magical as a softness and warmth that he could not have imagined possible engulfed him. She moved her head with a sublime

**skill, her knowing tongue snaking and curling and teasing in a way that forced a loud groan from him. His hands went down to her head, and his fingers and reason became lost in the luxuriant, silken tresses.**

**Tamara does not have long hair.**

**He moved his hand and found a full, wonderfully rounded breast, heavy and pendulous. His fingertips traced an aureole -- an area of tactile bliss that seemed unending. It swelled with a strange urgency to match the mounting feverishness of his touch.**

**Tamara's nipples were tight little buttons.**

**Her rhythm quickened.**

**And her breasts were hard and small.**

**His buttocks clenched and unclenched. His tormented heart seemed to beat in crazy unison with her head, pounding at his senses, breaking through the walls of his libido. Her lips were living creatures working an independent devastating magic that were spurring him to the brink of a feverish insanity. The little moans deep in her throat when she felt the first of the telltale spasms sped him to the edge.**

**He gave a loud cry. His back arched off the bed, and he jack-knifed forwards to pull her head away. His eyes snapped open and the horror that lay before him hit him with the force of an avalanche.**

**The woman looked up, her lovely face was framed by a dark, dishevelled cascade of hair that spilled across his white**

belly. She smiled and wiped away the tendrils that laced her lips and cheeks. 'Wasn't that nice, Ewen, darling? Wasn't that something you've always dreamed about?'

He screamed. And kept screaming, rolled into a tight foetal ball of personal agony.

Seconds later Kally burst into the bedroom, pulling a nightdress about her shoulders. She gathered Ewen into her arms and cradled his head against her breasts as she had done years before when he had woken from nightmares about the blue dome.

'It's all right, darling,' she crooned. 'It's all right...

It's only a dream... Only a dream...'

Her words reached through the blinding fog of his guilt and misery, and gave him hope.

Only a dream... Only a dream...

He opened his eyes.

'Only a dream, darling...'

But the touch of her full, rounded breasts, pressing warm and yielding against his cheek, and her hair, her voice, and her scent screamed a treacherous, hideous reality.

It hadn't been a dream!

With anguished sobs of despair, he leapt from the bed, hurling Kally to one side, and beat his head furiously against the wall until the blood spurted.

Jenine tried not to look furtive. She hesitated at the automarket's toiletry display and looked left and right. A technician-student did not command the awe of a technician, nevertheless the other shoppers were avoiding her aisle. She had seen what she wanted but ignored them. She took a tag off the display hook for a capsule of toothpaste and dropped it in the plastic pot that was hanging from her wrist. It was followed by a tag for a soap stick that she didn't need, and two tags for unwanted shampoos. Finally she summoned the courage to snatch the tags she really wanted before moving away quickly to look at the offerings in the store's fabric section.

She lingered near the auto check-outs, waiting until they were quiet. A lull in trade and she seized her chance. She emptied the tags into a check-out hopper. The machine rattled and gurgled as it sorted them out. Colour pictures of her intended purchases appeared one after the other on a screen. Jenine hurriedly touched the confirm pad to clear the images. The total purchase price was displayed using the dot notation system that was understood by the public. She passed her medallion in front of the reader and the cost of her purchases was deducted from her student account. A minute passed. To her annoyance a woman used the next check-out. The shopper looked curiously at the technician-students' uniform and quickly averted her gaze when she caught Jenine's eye.

**The conveyor started and Jenine's purchases appeared. The three packets of sanitary towels looked huge and incriminating. She bundled them into bags and fled to her waiting auto taxi.**

**\* \* \* \***

**Jenine was hiding her smuggled acquisitions at the back of a cupboard in her shower room when she heard someone enter the study. She found Ewen slumped in a chair, looking pale and distraught.**

**`How did it go?' she asked.**

**`Terrible.'**

**`Do you want to talk about it?'**

**`No.'**

**She wasn't going to allow him to wallow in self-pity. `I know it must have been rough, but you don't have to be curt with me.'**

**`Rough?' He laughed bitterly. `Do you know what I wanted to do at the station? I wanted to throw myself under a train. I still don't know why I didn't, and I don't know why I'm here.'**

**She sat on the arm of his chair. `Have you forgotten what I told you? Whenever you feel like this, you must tell yourself that Tarlan would be dead by now anyway.'**

**`It's not only that.'**

**`What then?'**

**`I've got to escape from here before I go mad.'**

**`Leave the Centre?'**

**He gave an indecisive gesture. `I don't know...'** He lapsed into a moody silence.

**Jenine noticed the patch of Nu-skin that had been sprayed on his head. She could see a cluster of half-healed cuts and lesions through the transparent, artificial tissue. `What happened to your head? Your guilt complex fall on you?'**

**Calen kicked the door open and staggered in carrying a packing case. `This was outside,' he complained, dumping the case in the middle of the floor. `I fell over it. Why is that I'm condemned to room with fellow students who seem determined to cause me the maximum grief and misery?'**

**Jenine read the delivery label. `It's your seismoscope.'**

**Ewen's depression evaporated. He went down on his knees and helped Jenine open the case. He lifted the gleaming instrument out of its packaging by its shoulder strap and set it carefully on the table.**

**Calen frowned when he read the instrument's designation label. `A seismoscope? No one uses these things anymore.'**

**`Well I'm going to,' Ewen replied, shaking an operating manual datacard out of its envelope. He snapped the card back and forth to change its pages. `I'm going to start using it tomorrow.'**

**PART 5**



## **Discovery**

**1**

**Jenine brought the mag-lev servicing truck to rest alongside the inspection panel that was set into the tunnel wall.**

**Deprived of lift, the de-energized travelling wave induction motors allowed the truck to settle on the broad rails. It was a quiet time of morning when the chord-metro system was reduced to a fifteen-minute service on this section of the Keltro-Steyning line. Ewen had selected this location because of its close proximity to several other lines so that the known positions of the other tunnels would enable the seismoscope to be accurately calibrated.**

**'Be quick,' Ewen muttered, busying himself with the seismoscope.**

**It was an unnecessary admonishment; Jenine was aware of the need for haste. Even if there was no need, she would have hurried anyway; she hated the confined spaces of the chord-metro tunnels. As she unlocked the panel and pulled it open, an automatic light came on, illuminating the complex web of tunnels on the schematic display panel. She touched her stylus on the section they were in and a list of diversion options appeared for closures ranging from ten-minutes to a week.**

**'There's a possible closure Option C that re-routes this**

**section through Steyning Junction.'**

**`How long will it give us?'**

**`Sixteen minutes.'**

**`That's not long enough.'**

**`There was a bird sighting at Carian yesterday. The station's closed until next Tenth Day. The diversions have affected all schedules.'**

**`There's got to be some sort of time slot we can work in.'**

**Jenine consulted the panel and made a few fast entries on its keypad. `The next option gives us forty-one minutes.'**

**Ewen opened a toolkit and fished out a portable laser cutter. `Go for it,' he instructed. A gentle current of air caressed his face. A train was coming. A long way off.**

**`We can't, Ewen. The knock-on effect will extend to too many lines. The closure will be certain to be noticed. It's got to be C.'**

**The movement of the air quickened. Both of them could now hear the faint squeal of guide shoes as the hurtling train rocked on uneven sections of line. There was no danger of a collision with the stationary service truck; the safety system would automatically energize the truck's motors and send it scudding ahead of the approaching train if it got too close. But that was not the object of this exercise.**

**`Okay C,' Ewen agreed. `We'll just have to work fast.'**

**Jenine keyed-in the appropriate instructions. Up and down the line auto-points changed polarity to allow for the**

**closure. On adjoining lines, computers made infinitesimal adjustments to train velocities and stopping times to allow for the altered balance of the network.**

**The air being driven before it by the approaching train rose to a miniature hurricane and then diminished rapidly as the passenger capsules hurtled along a connecting spur tunnel.**

**Jenine and Ewen had already practiced with the equipment therefore there was little need for words between them. Ewen straddled the inspection platform and worked the controls that lifted him to the roof of the tunnel. He applied a gripper tool to one of the lining panels and pulled it clear, passing it down to Jenine. Behind the panel was relatively smooth rock scoured by the marks of the boring machine that had cut the tunnel in another age. He pulled down a face visor and signalled Jenine to pass him the portable laser cutter.**

**`Have you double-checked the diameter and depth settings?' he asked.**

**Jenine snapped the thin datacard several times to display the appropriate page. `Forty by sixty,' she reported. She checked a lapsed time indicator and added, `We've got eleven minutes.'**

**Ewen checked that the machine's settings agreed. He steadied himself, pressed the cutting head against the rock,**

and pulled the trigger. The turbine pump howled, sucking vaporized rock into a reservoir as the laser burned into the tunnel roof. The machine cut out automatically after a minute. Ewen carefully lowered the tool and surveyed his handiwork: a neat, blind hole of the correct diameter and depth bored into the rock.

‘Eight minutes,’ Jenine reported. The seismoscope’s transducer was already connected to the instrument by a coil of heavy cable. She passed it up to him.

‘The gun first!’ Ewen hissed impatiently, snapping his fingers. He snatched the sealant gun from her and injected a thick paste into the hole. It started to set immediately. He fumbled the task of ramming the transducer home and swore. Eventually he jammed it into the hole and held it for a few seconds to be certain that the paste was doing its job.

‘Six minutes,’ said Jenine. She switched on the seismoscope. An old-fashioned red stand-by light flashed. She read from the datacard, ‘“The paste can take between three and six minutes to set depending on temperature and humidity. Under no circumstances should tests be started until the red stand-by light is extinguished and the green ready light is illuminated, otherwise severe damage will be caused to the transducer”.’

The infuriating red light continued to wink.

‘Five minutes,’ said Jenine calmly. Both knew what would happen if they didn’t open the section within the allotted

**time: the computers would perform an emergency close-down of the entire line. Passengers would be stranded, and there would be a major row.**

**The seismoscope's red light went out and the green light burned steadily.**

**Ewen gave a whoop of relief. He jumped down beside Jenine.**

**She checked the datacard again. `The instructions say that wide angle beams should be used for the calibration tests.'**

**Ewen set the beam width control to wide angle.**

**Four minutes.**

**He flipped up the guard on the firing button and pressed**

**it. A bolt of energy surged through the crystal in the**

**transducer causing it to distort and recover with a violence**

**that was akin to the detonation of a small explosive charge.**

**A beam of sound waves pulsed and spread through the rock.**

**Some of the sonic patterns were reflected and deflected by**

**variations in the density of the strata, other waves were**

**lost when they encountered cavities. Harmonics were reflected**

**back to the transducer. The results were captured in the**

**seismoscope's memory for later analysis.**

**`No wonder the paste has to be hard,' Jenine muttered.**

**Three minutes.**

**Ewen changed the beam angle settings and fired a second**

**charge.**

**The sound boomed along the tunnel. Three more firings**

**followed in rapid succession.**

**`Two minutes!' Jenine called out in alarm. `We'll have to abandon the last test.'**

**`It won't take--'**

**`One minute, forty, you idiot! We don't have time! Five shots are plenty!'**

**Ewen saw sense. He quickly unscrewed the transducer and pushed the tunnel lining panel back into place. It refused to fit and he lost valuable seconds turning it this way and that until it snapped home.**

**They finished clearing up and were on the move with forty seconds to spare.**

**`Ewen,' said Jenine as the service truck sped along the tunnel. `How many more tests did you have in mind?'**

**`It depends on the results of this one. And today's tests are only calibration tests. Why?'**

**She glanced at him, secretly pleased to see how alert and alive he was looking. Being busy was good for him. `No more in metro tunnels, please, Ewen. They're bad for my nerves and I think those bangs have given me a loose filling.'**

**2**

**The results were startling good; better than they had imagined possible.**

**`And that must be the fast, non-stop link between Delman Central and Jelna,' said Jenine excitedly, pointing to a**

**shadowy outline on the datapad's screen.**

**The couple were in their favourite position for intensive study or acrimonious debates -- sprawled on the floor. Such uncivilized behaviour met with Calen's disapproval, as did eating army-issue biscuits. He considered that lying on the floor while stuffing oneself full of useless snack foods was symbolic of the general decadence and lack of any sense of style that was afflicting modern students. Having made his views clear, he settled at the table to write some theology notes.**

**Ewen called up the second image obtained from when he had directed the sonic beam upwards. He pointed to the vague area along the top of the picture where the traces faded to nothing. 'That's odd,' he observed. 'There's hardly any sign of returning echoes -- everything gets lost quite quickly, but on the fifth image, where most of the sound was sent sideways, there's plenty of echoes for a greater distance.'**

**Jenine switched between the two images. By comparing the seismographs with maps, she and Ewen were learning to read the curious light and shade patterning of the images with some skill, and had discovered that reversing them to negative pictures revealed the presence of tunnels and galleries with greater clarity.**

**'So what does that prove?' Jenine asked.**

**Ewen frowned and grinned. 'I've no idea.' He became**

serious. `Supposing you wanted to create a vast dome -- one that's really huge. How would you set about it? Would you dig up, down, sideways or what?'

`There is no "what",' Calen observed caustically. `Up, down and sideways covers everything.'

`So how would you build a massive dome?' Ewen inquired. The question seemed to sadden Calen. `I wouldn't. Arama has just the right amount of space provided it's used sensibly. But, no doubt, this is a hypothetical question about this hypothetical blue dome you've been boring us with. Correct?'

`Maybe,' Ewen answered noncommittally.

`I would dig down,' said Calen.

`Why?'

Calen looked pained. `Really, Ewen, it should be perfectly obvious even to a first year student. Digging down is much easier. You start at the top of your dome, working your way down and outwards, and removing the spoil through the top as you go down. Digging upwards would be impossible. As your dome gets bigger it would break sideways into other domes, and digging upwards means that you'd have the continuous problem of rock falls which would get worse as your dome got bigger.' He went back to his notes.

Ewen sat back on his heels, thinking hard. `You're right, Calen. If my dome is anywhere, it's down.'

`Perhaps. But you're overlooking a fundamental law of the



**Guardian of Destiny. You can't create space. You dig out a lot of spoil to make a new dome and you've got to put it somewhere. You dig your new dome, Ewen, and you'd end up with exactly the same amount of space as when you started. In fact a really vast dome like your wretched blue dome would fill all of Arama with spoil. Arama exists therefore your dome does not and cannot.'** He tapped his datapad. **'A pity you're not doing your 11th year. The creation of space was the first act of creation by the GoD. Man cannot make space, which is a negative solid, he can only move it about.'**

**Ewen glanced at Jenine and saw that she was as crushed as he was by Calen's simple reasoning. 'You're right, of course, Calen,' he admitted. 'I didn't think,'**

**Calen smiled smugly. 'You're a brilliant lateral thinker, Ewen, and yet you like to indulge in flawed logic.'**

**Jenine looked at Calen in admiration. 'You know, Calen, it takes a true genius to describe space as a negative solid. Now that's what I call lateral thinking.'**

**Ewen grabbed the hardcopy maps of Arama and searched through them for the lowest level. He brightened when his finger found their objective.**

**A shopping centre in Steyning.**

**3**

**Steyning was a law-abiding community of 10,000 GoD-fearing**

**citizens who dressed modestly, worked hard, and went to church every Tenth Day. Its sole police officer and therefore chief of police had few duties, and they were not spelled out. But he instinctively felt that preventing students from drilling holes in his beautiful hexagonal block pavement was one of them. The six-sided blocks were expensive. Having a member of his family at the Centre meant that he was in greater awe of Steyning's town hall accountants rather than Jenine's and Ewen's student medallions. A small crowd was gathering. Normally they would have stayed clear, but they were eager to share the interest of their beloved custodian of law and order in the activities of these technician-students.**

**`It'll only be a small hole,' Ewen reasoned.**

**`But still a hole, sir,' the chief of police pointed out.**

**`We'll fill it in afterwards,' said Jenine.**

**The police officer eyed the girl. Nicely rounded for female technician. Most of them were skin and bone. Good hips. He checked himself, and returned his mind smartly to its official duties. `I take it you're this gentleman's accomplice, miss?'**

**Jenine bridled. `I'm helping him.'**

**`Might I inquire as to the purpose of this hole?'**

**`Well,' said Ewen, indicating the seismoscope and its accessories. `We want to make seismic reports to measure what's below the ground here.'**

**`What's under the ground is more ground,' the custodian of law and order observed phlegmatically. `We like to keep all our underground under ground.'**

**`We heard you had a flooding problem here when a reservoir tank burst last year,' said Jenine, making an effort to smile reassuringly at the circle of blank-faced onlookers.**

**`We've since installed a drainage system,' the police officer informed her.**

**`It's a simple test that uses explos-- vibrations to measure what's under ground,' said Ewen patiently. `It'll only take a few minutes.'**

**`Vibrations?'**

**`Yes.'**

**`We don't hold with such things in Steyning, sir. This is a very respectable community. These good people have paid good money for these hexagon paving blocks.'**

**`I'm sure it is and they have. Look -- it's a project as part of our training. If you wish, we'll take up some of these paving blocks, make the hole underneath, and put the blocks back just as we found them. No one will know.'**

**The police officer gestured to the circle of shoppers whose numbers had swelled. `A lot of people will know, sir.' After a few minutes further discussion, the police officer grudgingly allowed the test to go ahead. `But only one burst of vibrations,' he warned as he ushered the onlookers away.**

**`We'll make it a big one,' Ewen muttered to Jenine. `A wide-angle beam at full power.'**

**The resulting report from the seismic transducer broke several windows, showering temporarily deafened passers-by with shards of plastic. Several of the six-sided paving blocks were cracked.**

**Ewen gritted his teeth and paid the on-the-spot fine plus expenses. He assured Steyning's chief of police that he and his accomplice had every intention of making immediate use of their return chord-metro tickets and never setting foot in Steyning again.**

**4**

**Ewen pushed the datapad away in disgust. `Nothing,' he said bitterly. `A waste of time and money. Maybe it is just a stupid dream.'**

**Jenine cradled her chin on hands and looked at him quizzically. `That just about sums up your philosophy. If at first you don't succeed, give up. What about Simo Belan?'**

**Ewen rolled onto his back on the floor of the study and stared at the ceiling. `What about him?'**

**`Didn't he find the blue dome?'**

**`How should I know.' He lapsed into a brooding silence.**

**Jenine pulled the datapad towards her and looked at the result of the Steyning test. The echo traces went deep over a wide area. The little streaks of grey were evenly**

**distributed, indicating solid rock. She sighed. `It looks like the lecturers are right. Rock is infinite. And that the GoD has created a very small amount of space for us to live in.'**

**`What do you mean, "looks like"? Are you saying that you've not been going along with the official teachings?'**

**`Would I be helping you if I were?' Jenine countered. She paused and added: `It's been fun sharing a dream with you, Ewen.' It was a major admission for her. She swallowed. There were other things she wanted to say but she was as afraid of her emotional turmoil as she was of confessing the full depth of her feelings for Ewen.**

**`You've tried to understand it, but you haven't shared it,' was Ewen ungracious retort.**

**`I think I have. The way you've described it...' She groped for the right words and blurted out: `I want to share everything with you, Ewen. The rest of our lives. And if you think there's a life other than in Arama, then I want to be with you to help you find it.'**

**There. She had said it. But there was so much more she had left unsaid.**

**Ewen rolled back onto his stomach and met her gaze. In her way she was beautiful... like his mother. A sudden feeling of guilt overwhelmed him, and he looked quickly away. `You mustn't have anything to do with me, Jenine.'**

**She covered his hand. `Why not?'**

**`Because...'** He tried to utter the dread words but they seized in his throat. **`Because I don't want to be a technician! I don't want to be ordained!'** He had finally admitted it, even to himself.

**Instead of looking shocked, as he had expected, Jenine wriggled forward on her elbows. She cupped her hands against his temples and kissed him. `I don't want to be ordained either,' she said softly.**

**He stared at her, the shock of the kiss forgotten. `But you must, Jenine! I have to escape. I have to get away from... from...'** He almost said **`my mother'. `From here... From everything.'**

**`But not from me?'**

**He heard himself saying, `No not from you. Especially not from you.'**

**`Then there's no problem.'**

**`I don't want to be responsible for what might happen to you.'**

**`I'm the only one responsible for me,' said Jenine firmly.**

**Ewen hesitated. `You know what will happen to us if they find out?'**

**She nodded and continued to hold his head, her fingers played with his hair. `We'll be mindwarped, and left to cope as ordinary citizens as best we can. I could bear that if I was with you, Ewen. Our selection was a mistake. It has to be**

**otherwise why have our bodies changed the way that they have?**

**Why do I feel about you the way that I'm sure you feel about me?'**

**There was a long silence.**

**Jenine kissed Ewen again. He returned the kiss because he discovered that this time he was able to thrust his guilt aside. Her touch, her scent and the sheer delight of her closeness felt right.**

**Perfectly right.**

**\* \* \* \***

**It was dark when Jenine woke. She experienced a moment of disorientation until the pieces fell into place. She was in Ewen's bed and he was asleep beside her. Something was worrying her; not what had happened with Ewen -- she had no regrets about that -- but something else. She slipped quietly from the bed to avoid waking him and got dressed. She hated having to wind the bandage around her breasts. They now quite large -- the bandage a painful constriction, but there was a chance that Calen would be working late in the study. She was relieved to find that he had gone to bed. She gathered up all the hardcopy maps and seismographs that she and Ewen had left scattered on the floor, and sat at the table with the datapad to study them. Ten minutes slipped by. Ewen entered looking dishevelled. He came up behind her and slipped his arms around her waist, resting his chin on her shoulder. They were**

**silent for a while, savouring the closeness of each other.**

**`So what have you found?' Ewen asked at length.**

**`It's more a case of what I haven't found. We haven't done any proper tests directing the seismic beam upwards.'**

**`What about the tunnel tests?'**

**Jenine sorted out the printouts. `We used a wide angle beam so that we could calibrate the seismoscope. We needed to plot the position of known tunnels therefore we found a suitable spot in the chord-metro system where there were plenty of spurs and junctions. Right?'**

**`So?'**

**`So the place we selected is quite low. Not as low as Steyning, but still low. See?'**

**Ewen studied the seismograph and agreed that Jenine was right. `Okay. So what are you saying?'**

**`We've not gone high up and carried out upward tests using a narrow-angle beam to give us a long range.'**

**`But there won't be anything upwards,' Ewen objected.**

**`We'd be wasting our time.'**

**`Because of what Calen said about a large dome having to be down?'**

**`Yes -- his reasoning made sense.'**

**`But we haven't tried searching upwards,' Jenine persisted. She hunted through the maps of Arama. `Look -- Keltro is high up.' She pointed. `And look... There's a short pedestrian tunnel linking two industrial domes. It would be**



**easy to close the tunnel for the few minutes that a test would take.'**

**5**

**The narrowness of the pedestrian tunnel at Keltro played on Jenine's fears of confined spaces but she kept her feelings to herself. Closing the tunnel was simply a matter of placing a pedestal-mounted GoD symbol sign at each end. It was a low tunnel therefore there was no need to use a platform to reach the roof. Nevertheless, Ewen's arms were aching by the time the laser cutter had done its job.**

**The couple took several full-power soundings in rapid succession, making slight alterations to the upward direction of the narrow-angle beam between each firing to obtain the maximum coverage. They stowed their gear, reopened the tunnel, and hurried back to the Centre to evaluate the results.**

**\* \* \* \***

**'Come on,' said Ewen impatiently as the wipe bar edged down from the top of the datapad's screen. Transferring the captured seismograph images from the seismoscope's memory to the datapad was reasonably fast, but not fast enough for Ewen.**

**The wipe bar progressed a quarter of the way down the screen but the picture remained blank. There was none of the**

usual "clutter" they had come to associate with seismographs.

‘Something's gone wrong with it,’ Ewen moaned. ‘That's what comes of using maximum power. I knew that that transducer couldn't take it.’

Jenine clutched his arm and pointed mutely. A speckling of familiar traces had appeared beneath the crawling wipe bar when it was halfway down the screen. The specking continued to the extreme edges of the screen and were steadily increasing in density in the normal manner as the wipe bar descended.

They stared in silence at the picture, trying to make sense of it. The top half of the image was completely blank whereas the lower half showed the presence of solid matter. The boundary between the two was an uneven line, irregular and even wavy in places, but very definite.

‘Maybe we've got the screen aspect ratio wrong?’ Jenine suggested. ‘Maybe the whole image is shifted down too far?’ Ewen reset the screen parameters to be doubly certain. He checked them twice and Jenine did likewise.

‘Nothing wrong there,’ Jenine commented. ‘Now download it again.’

Ewen copied the image from the seismoscope's memory again. The result on the datapad's screen was exactly the same. Ewen swapped the screen image for one of the ordinary pages in the datapad's memory. The text display was perfectly centred.

‘Well there's nothing wrong with the datapad,’ he remarked

despondently. 'It's got to be the seismoscope. Fault-finding our way around that piece of ancient GoD technology is going to be fun and games.'

'Download another image,' Jenine suggested.

'What's the point? The thing's faulty.'

Jenine worked the controls to send another picture to the datapad. The phenomenon was repeated: a blank top half of the screen, and a solid lower half.

'Told you,' Ewen muttered.

'Don't be so hasty,' said Jenine, peering closely at the screen. 'Yes look. There's a match. That jagged bit of the boundary in the middle of this picture is identical with a jagged bit that was on the edge of the last picture. That's been normal with the tunnels. We've been able to match-up overlaps to get a continuous picture.'

Ewen sat staring in stunned disbelief at the screen as the full import of Jenine's discovery sank in. 'You don't think--'

Jenine switched the datapad off. 'We don't do anymore thinking until we're had some proper sleep and then downloaded all the seismographs and printed some hardcopies.'

'But I won't be able to sleep,' Ewen protested.

'No -- I don't suppose I will either.'

Ewen kissed her and held her at arms' length. 'When I look at you like this, I can still see that pretty little girl

**singing that nursery rhyme at the selection centre.'**

**Jenine smiled and tugged at his hair, uncertain what to say.**

**He pulled her close. `Sing it for me now.'**

**`Why?'**

**`Just sing it please. Like you did all those years ago.'**

**So she sang in low, gentle voice:**

**Outdoors... Outdoors...**

**Full of fire and fear,**

**Outdoors... Outdoors...**

**Where sinners disappear!**

**Ewen nestled his head against her breasts. They were flattened by the bandage, but he didn't mind. It was her warmth and closeness that mattered.**

**Outdoors... Outdoors...**

**Hell fires burn within,**

**Outdoors... Outdoors**

**Throw the wicked in**

**6**

**At lunchtime the following day, Calen wandered into the study eating his midday meal. He surveyed the mess that confronted him with profound distaste. Strips of paper were strewn all over the floor. Ewen and Jenine were sitting cross-legged staring at the wall.**

**`You two may think it perfectly all right to live in**

**squalor,' Calen complained. `But I come from an old and distinguished family, and feel that I have a duty to myself and my illustrious ancestors to maintain civilised standards.**

**The world is falling apart.'**

**Ewen advised him what he could do with his illustrious ancestors and civilised standards.**

**Calen was about to respond with a suitably cutting riposte when his cynical eye fell on what Ewen and Jenine were gazing at. Taped along the length of the wall was a banner-like seismograph that had been made by pasting several together.**

**`May I ask what that is?'**

**`Certainly.'**

**`What is it?'**

**Jenine shook her head. `We don't know, Calen. We simply don't know.'**

**The older student crossed to the wall and examined the elongated seismograph with disdain. `What does the blank upper half mean?'**

**`You tell us,' said Ewen.**

**`I thought you two had turned yourselves into experts on this sort of thing?'**

**`So did we,' Ewen replied.**

**`Well I trust you're not planning to frame it. It simply doesn't go with the decor.'**

**Jenine explained what the banner was and how she and Ewen**

had obtained the strange results that it depicted. `The point is, Calen,' she concluded. `That the blank upper half represents nothing.'

Calen turned from the wall and looked quizzically at her.

`Nothing?'

`Nothing,' Ewen affirmed.

`In which case there must be something wrong with that silly gadget.'

`There's nothing wrong with it,' said Jenine heatedly.

Calen studied the banner more closely. `Is it upside-down?'

`Of course not.'

Calen grinned. `So you've found your dome, Ewen? Pity those seismograph things can't show colours.'

The comment angered Ewen. `Don't be so damned stupid, Calen. A dome will possess dimensions. Whatever that is, it's simply nothing.'

`Can you scale these things?'

`Of course.'

`How far up is it?'

`A long way,' said Ewen. `At least five times the height of this dome.'

Calen dropped into a chair and contemplated the banner.

There was silence in the room that Jenine was the first to break.

`You don't suppose...' Her voice trailed away.

**`We don't suppose what?' Ewen asked.**

**`It's nothing...'**

**`We might as well hear it.'**

**`There was a technician-scholar who wrote a theory about a negative universe.'**

**`A negative what?' Ewen demanded.**

**`Wait,' said Calen rising. He left the room and returned with his datapad. He sat down with the machine on his lap and called up the index. `Ah... I have it. Technician-Scholar Blader Zallen?'**

**`That's him,' Jenine confirmed. `His name came up recently in a lecture on heresy.'**

**`Born 240 years ago,' said Calen, glancing through the text on his screen. `Father Zallen's claim to fame, or rather, infamy, is that he wrote a paper on the possibility of a negative universe. We know that the universe consists of infinite rock. It extends forever and is one of the great mysteries of the GoD. And we also know that our living space, Arama, is most definitely very finite. Father Zallen had the crazy notion that there was a negative universe -- a universe that was the complete reverse our universe. He suggested that in this negative universe, living space, such as we have in Arama, was infinite -- that it went on forever, and that rock was finite.'**

**Ewen struggled to picture such a universe and gave up.**

**`It's impossible to visualise,' said Jenine, frowning. `He was either very clever or very stupid.'**

**`The Imperial Court thought the latter,' Calen continued.**

**`He was given an opportunity to recant but he refused. So, he was stripped of his medallion, mindwarped, and tossed out of the Centre...' He flipped a page. `He died ten-years later in a mental home having been certified as insane. His theory was left on file as an example to us all of the stupid, illogical heresies that man is capable of... So if I were you, children, no more talk about negative universes.' He switched off his datapad and regarded his fellow students thoughtfully. `Have you considered the possibility that your nothingness is a horizontal fissure running through the rock?'**

**`It's too big,' Ewen objected. `It has no means of support -- at least, nothing that shows up on that.' He nodded to the banner.**

**`But you don't know how big it is,' Calen observed.**

**`You're basing everything on one result from one test bang, or whatever it is you do, made at one location. Correct?'**

**`Several tests, but one location,' Ewen agreed. `So what are you saying?'**

**`I'm about to suggest the obvious,' said Calen patiently.**

**`It seems to me that the first thing you should do is repeat your tests at, say, the extremities of Arama--'**

**Both Ewen and Jenine saw immediately what Calen was**



**driving at.**

**`That'll be bound to give us a solid rock result,' said**

**Jenine excitedly. `And then we work our way in towards the centre of Arama to discover where the nothingness starts.'**

**Calen beamed. `Precisely. That way you'll be able to fine-tune your tests and establish the exact area of this fissure, or whatever it is. Who knows, it might prove useful. Water storage or something. The GoD doesn't create space without good reason.'**

**`We could make an early start tomorrow,' said Jenine eagerly. `Do all the tests in one day if we plan them properly. I'm dying to see the results. You'll cover for me at tomorrow's lectures, won't you, Calen?'**

**`Only if you promise to clear up this dreadful mess first.'**

**7**

**Ewen's and Jenine's explosive tour of Arama went smoothly at first. Following an itinerary planned by Jenine, they worked their way around the periphery of Arama on the chord-metro system, carrying out their tests at stations nearest those points on the plan that would give optimum results. By the tenth test they were so adept and well-co-ordinated in their use of the seismoscope that they could close a tunnel, take the soundings and be on their way in under ten-minutes. By**

late-afternoon they had visited 15 of their target sites.

‘Only five more to go,’ said Jenine enthusiastically, consulting her map. ‘We’ve made brilliant time.’

The couple were in the shopping concourse of Albron Station. The hurrying river of passengers parted around them and closed up again.

Ewen checked the seismoscope. ‘Plenty of memory left -- we’ve only used half. So what’s the next station?’

‘Steyning.’

Ewen’s face clouded with worry. ‘Jenine I really do think we ought to give Steyning a miss. Their chief of police wasn’t too friendly towards us.’

‘The stations either before or after Steyning are too far apart. If we leave out Steyning there’ll be a large gap in our test sites. If we want to prove something as important as this, our methodology must be above reproach.’ She pushed the plan under Ewen’s nose. They had had this argument before. The trouble was that Jenine was right: giving Steyning a miss would create an unscientific gap in the overall results of the survey.

‘I don’t fancy coming face to face with the chief of police again. He might do something that we’ll regret,’ Ewen muttered.

‘We’ll be in and out before he finds out that we’ve been back on his patch,’ Jenine reasoned. She swung a toolkit from shoulder. ‘Come on, Ewen. There’s a train in three minutes.’

\* \* \* \*

**Steyning went wrong.**

**Horribly wrong.**

**If there was a scale of 1-to-10 for just how badly wrong things can go, Steyning would have bent the needle against the 10 stop. Whether the disaster was due to an incorrectly positioned transducer, or a flaw in the rock behind the pedestrian subway tunnel lining that prevented the safe dissipation of the shockwaves was academic because the result was the same.**

**It happened after they had completed the test. The lining panel had been replaced so that not even Steyning's chief of police would be aware that the two troublemakers had returned to his manor making more holes. They shouldered their equipment and were about to reopen the tunnel to the patiently waiting pedestrians when Jenine heard an ominous creaking. She caught Ewen's arm and looked back anxiously along the subway.**

**`Listen!'**

**They both heard the strange noise. Suddenly the tunnel's roof lining panel that they had just replaced bulged down and popped from its clips. They watched it fall to the floor, their eyes round with horror. Adjoining panels did likewise.**

**`I think--' Ewen began.**

**But he got no further. He was interrupted by a miniature**

**avalanche of fractured rocks that rained down into the tunnel with a thunderous roar and sent clouds of dust billowing around them. For seconds the couple were deafened and blinded. When the dust settled, they were able to see the full extent of the awesome disaster they had unwittingly unleashed. A wall of boulders and smaller rocks completely filled the narrow subway. Even the new chasm that had opened above was filled with fallen debris. Miraculously the lights remained on.**

**`Don't move or say anything,' warned Ewen when they had recovered their wits. `There might be some more loose rocks.'**

**`I wasn't planning to,' Jenine answered. Beneath the layer of grey dust her face was pale with shock. She went back to assure the anxious pedestrians that nothing was amiss while Ewen cautiously pulled a rock away from the fall without disturbing its neighbours.**

**The couple had chosen an unfortunate time of day to blow-up the tunnel. It was the beginning of the evening rush with the result that a queue of frustrated commuters began building up on the other side of the rockfall. The queue backed-up as queues do. It brought the travelers to a stop and extended out of the station entrance into the precinct.**

**Thus was the mishap drawn to the attention of the one person in Steyning whom Ewen and Jenine would have preferred to have remained in ignorance.**

**`Actually,' Ewen panted, lifting a rock away and dropping**

**it clear, 'it's not as bad as it looks.'**

**Jenine opined that Ewen's comment was bordering on the crass.**

**'Yes but I can hear voices.'**

**Ewen was right. A babble of excited voices could be heard on the far side of the rockfall. And when Jenine helped him lever one particularly large rock clear, they discovered that they could see faces through the opening.**

**Or rather, one face.**

**A face that the couple were acquainted with.**

**'Good evening, sir,' said the chief of police to the two pairs of wide, anxious, dust-rimmed eyes that were peering at him through the hole.**

**'Good evening,' said Ewen, always willing to match politeness with politeness.**

**'Do you know one of the problems with police-issue pocket datapads?' asked the police officer.**

**Ewen said that he did not.**

**'After you've keyed-in the symbols for about six pages of charges, they run out of memory.'**

**Ewen agreed that it was indeed a great shame.**

**8**

**Chief Technician Dom Aster Tarant's bleak expression was that of an arrogant man who knows that he has an indisputable**

**right to occupy high moral ground without fear of being dislodged. The source of his strength was a list of charges on his desk screen that he read out to the two students standing before him.**

**`Carrying out unauthorized experiments on chord-metro property; damage to chord-metro property; obstruction of chord-metro passengers; polluting chord-metro air space; insulting a police officer--'**

**`I didn't insult him,' Jenine interrupted. `I assaulted him.'**

**Tarant checked the wording. `All right -- assaulting a police off--' He broke off and glared at her. `That's worse!'**

**`I only bit him. He was being over-zealous in his searching of me.'**

**`You'd just blown-up his station! He was entitled to search you! You wear baggy overalls like that, several sizes too large, so what do you expect?'**

**`We caused a small rockfall,' said Ewen. `It was cleared up in an hour.'**

**`That's not the point. Both of you have brought disgrace to yourselves. I don't care about that, but I do care about the disgrace you have brought to the Centre. You have besmirched our good name. Because I have assured the chief of police of Steyning that the Centre will be dealing most severely with you, I was able to persuade him to drop these charges against you.'**

**`Another imperial court?' Ewen asked, and immediately regretted the question because the chief technician's expression went from black to thunderous.**

**`Not this time, Solant! No -- it'll be a senior disciplinary council hearing for both of you, which I shall convene as and when I see fit -- in several months time if I so decide. In the meantime you are both suspended from lectures and all social activities. All the Centre's facilities will be closed to you. Furthermore, you will be confined to your study apartment. The security guards have been instructed to arrest you on sight should you disobey my edict. Now, perhaps you will tell me why you were carrying out these ludicrous seismic tests all over Arama.'**

**Ewen would have spun a yarn, but Jenine decided on an approximation of the truth. She told Tarant about the suspected fissure theory based on the nothingness that the Keltro seismograph indicated was above.**

**`Nothingness! Fissures!' Tarant echoed. `Are you telling me now that you were engaged on research? All information we need comes from the Revelation Centre. Are you saying that the word of the GoD is not enough for you?'**

**`The information is certain to be in the library,' Jenine answered. `It's just that we couldn't find it so we decided to check at first hand.'**

**`Nothingness! Fissures!' Tarant repeated. `I've never**

**heard anything so ridiculous. Get out before I add blasphemy to these charges.'**

**Ewen gave Jenine a sidelong warning glance. Her expression told him to hold his peace. He bent down to pick up the seismoscope.**

**'Leave that!' Tarant snapped.**

**The thought of leaving the seismoscope behind appalled Ewen. 'But its memory contains the results of today's seismic tests--'**

**'I said leave it! It stays in here, in my office until I decide on its disposal.'**

**'But--'**

**'It stays!' Tarant shouted. 'Now get out before I have you thrown out!'**

**Jenine took Ewen's arm to forestall further objections that might aggravate the situation, and led him from the office.**

**They took the lift down to the ground floor and left Senate House. It was now dark but students practicing for a coming tournament had illuminated the glass pyramid with portable lights. Jenine looked longingly at the shining prism but said nothing.**

**'I'm sorry,' said Ewen miserably. 'I should never have involved you.'**

**'I said I wanted to be with you and I meant it,' said Jenine resolutely.**



**They returned to Ewen's bedroom and sat eating the army-issue biscuits. They had discovered that the coloured packs contained assorted flavours, all delicious, although the discovery was hardly likely to ease their gloom. They talked in disconsolate low tones to avoid waking Calen in the adjoining bedroom.**

**`The outsiders have a crude term for the mess we're in,' said Jenine, chin on hands, staring moodily out of the window across to the glass pyramid. The students had finished their practice session and were dismantling the portable floodlights.**

**`What worries me are the seismographs in the 'scope,' Ewen muttered. `I wouldn't put it past Tarant to wipe its memory. He's vindictive enough, and he's always wanted to get back at me since that stupid trial.'**

**They looked across at the lights of Tarant's penthouse and office on the top floor of Senate House.**

**`Surely he wouldn't destroy scientific data?' Jenine queried.**

**`A rational man wouldn't,' Ewen replied. `But Tarant is not a rational man...' He thumped the window sill with a mixture of anger and frustration. `If only I could get my hands on that seismoscope.' A thought occurred. `Tarant's secretary. What do you think the chances are of paying her to transfer its memory to a datapad?'**

**`You mean bribe her? You'd have to pay her a lot to make it worthwhile.'**

**`Calen's rich. He'd make me a loan.'**

**`Which you'd never be able to repay if we get mindwarped and kicked out. Anyway, we shouldn't involve Calen in this.'**

**The lights went out across the campus and an oppressive silence fell. At midnight a security guard appeared in the lobby of Senate House to lock the doors. The building was secured at night, not so much to deter crime, but to prevent students inflicting practical jokes on their chief technician who was somewhat prone to such activities.**

**Finally Tarant's penthouse lights went out.**

**Jenine stiffened as an idea occurred to her. `Ewen, have you still got the cable you used to leave this block when you blew-up the zargon lights?'**

**`I did not blow-up the lights, and, yes I have. Why?'**

**`I think I could get hold of the data.' Before Ewen had a chance to question her, she left the room and returned with a set of suction pads.**

**`This is my training set,' she explained. `They're much larger than competition pads which makes their grip more powerful.'**

**`More powerful for what?'**

**`Climbing up glass, of course.'**

**Ewen looked first at the glass-faced Senate House and then at Jenine. The thought of her scaling the building appalled**

him. The risks were too terrible to even think about. He was learning to recognise that determined jut of her jaw but this time his views had to prevail. `No,' he said shortly.

`And why not?'

`Because you'd fall off and damage the paving.'

`Thanks.'

`It's a stupid idea because the sides of Senate House are vertical and the pyramid isn't. Because Senate House is the highest building on the campus -- at least twice the height of the pyramid.'

`We practice on a vertical wall in the gym. These pads are good -- just one can support my weight, and there's always two gripping at any time. And it wouldn't be a race -- I could take my time.'

`You'd be seen.'

Jenine pointed through the window. `Not if I wore black like you did, and went up the left face. It's in total darkness.'

`And there's another reason, Jenine.'

`You can't afford to pay for broken paving slabs?'

`There is that.' He hesitated. `But the unimportant reason is that love you too much to let you risk such a thing.'

`We'll I'm going,' said Jenine softly after they had separated from a kiss. `Help me get kitted up.'

Jenine's feet touched the ground and she gave three sharp pulls on the knotted cable to signal Ewen to haul it up. She melted easily into the shadows because she was wearing a black one-piece stretch bodysuit. It had fitted her well five-years previously as a child; now it was stretched to the point of discomfort. She had forsaken the bandage that bound her breasts at Ewen's suggestion so that if a guard did spot her, the chances were that she would be mistaken for a female outsider who had somehow managed to enter the Centre, or an employee. Her face had been smeared with grime, and a datapad in a black sleeve hung from her belt. The large suction pads strapped to her knees, and forearms just below elbows, added a note of incongruity to her otherwise decidedly feminine outline.

She crouched at the side of the residential block, listening intently for the slightest sound that indicated that her descent of the cable had been seen. Satisfied that all was well, she darted imp-like around the building to the front and waited in the shadow of Calen's car for a minute to get her breath. She had to keep reminding herself that there was no hurry. There was no point in overexerting herself before the assault on the building. She loped easily and silently towards her target, avoiding the glass pyramid and following a shadowy route under a line of palm trees that she and Ewen and worked out from the bedroom window.

**Senate House had a broad entrance canopy that luckily did not extend around to that side of the building that she had selected for the climb. Other than a low apron, the windows reached the ground. She reached the foot of building and looked up. Its gloom-shrouded height nearly caused her to lose her nerve. A few final adjustments of the suction pads and she was ready. Without pausing for thought, she jumped onto the apron and pushed her left elbow and right knee firmly against the glass to trigger the suction pads' pressure sensors.**

**The solenoid motor in each pad yanked on the inner diaphragm causing the suction pad to collapse against the glass with a soft sigh. The four pads in the set were radio-linked to each so that two pads were always gripping before the motors released the grip of the other two pads. Jenine set the master control on her left elbow pad to auto and, literally, started crawling up the side of the building. Once she was climbing, the jitters in her stomach vanished.**

**By counting the glazing bars that separated each pane of glass, she was able to keep a tally on her progress without the unnerving business of looking up or down. With twenty of the tough glass panels traversed, she reckoned that she had climbed two-thirds of the way up the seven floor building, and was making remarkably good progress.**

**At the twenty-fifth pane she rested for a minute, allowing**

**all four suction pads to take her weight so that she could relax. She resumed climbing. At the twenty-sixth pane she became aware that something was wrong: as she pushed her knee or elbow against the glass, it flexed too much, causing the suction pads to lose their grip slightly and slide down a little as she pushed upwards. To her horror, an elbow pad suddenly lost all suction and came away. Prompt action to shift her weight and reposition the pad quickly near the edge of the pane saved the situation, but for a terrifying moment she had been hanging by only the pad on her right knee. She realised what the problem was and cursed herself for not anticipating it before the climb. To reduce weight and loading, the building's architect had used a thinner gauge glass on the upper floors. It was standard practice for high buildings.**

**She was forced to change her climbing technique so that three suction pads were always supporting her weight before she risked extending a free arm or leg upwards. Another five panes crossed. Her ears, finely tuned to the whine of the solenoids in the pads, noted that they were sounding sluggish. There was another problem that she had overlooked. Recently she had gained a lot of weight around her hips; she was no longer skinny. The extra load was draining the batteries faster than she had calculated, also it was taking the pads longer to achieve maximum grip and therefore slowing her down which, in turn, added to the drain on the batteries.**

**Her instincts screamed at her to go faster but the only thing to do was slow down and allow the pads to establish a good grip before easing her weight up.**

**When the battery in her right knee pad finally failed, she faced the possibility that she was going to fall. This wasn't like the pyramid where you reduced suction when you wanted to go down, and simply slithered to the bottom. The pyramid was perfectly smooth all the way down whereas this building was criss-crossed with a matrix of protruding glazing bars. The pads wouldn't ride over them if she slipped; they would lose suction and she would fall. To add to her problems, sweat began trickling into her eyes, partially blinding her, and every muscle in her body was aching abominably.**

**Another two panes. She tried to win suction from the failed pad by banging it against the glass to force the air out. It worked, but the effort of pulling it free cancelled any gain. By now she was climbing just to remain in the same spot, and the batteries in the three remaining pads were failing fast. The pain in her thigh muscles became a torture. To add to her mounting terror, she was suddenly blinded by a brilliant light. Someone had entered the room whose window she was clinging to. She risked a quick wipe of her eyes on her forearm and saw that the window consisted of obscure glass, perhaps a shower room or toilet, but should a passer-by look up, they could hardly fail to see her silhouetted**

against the light. The light went out and she felt her body sliding inexorably down the glass. Her only hope was to increase her reach. She stretched up as far as she could but the tight bodysuit under her armpits restricted her reach. In panic she ripped at the material with her nails and tore it free. The night air touched her exposed breasts, but at least she could now fully straighten her body. Her foot encountered a glazing bar. It was a precarious toehold but it was just enough for her to stretch her arm up a little further. To her joy, her fingers closed on the balcony railing of Tarant's penthouse.

10

There were comfortable loungers on the balcony with thick mattresses. It seemed sensible to Jenine to lie on one for a few minutes to recover from her harrowing ordeal. There was no point in entering the apartment while panting and still trembling.

Gradually the fatigue drained from her and she became accustomed to the bliss of being on firm ground and out of danger of falling. Taking care to prevent her datapad swinging against the glass, she tried opening the sliding door a fraction. Thankfully it wasn't locked. She listened. A faint snoring from within the darkened room. She eased the door open a little more and slipped inside. Her breasts gleamed palely in the gloom. She allowed her eyes to adjust



**to the darkness, and crept across the room to the far door, feeling with her foot before each step to avoid knocking anything over. The door led into the biggest living room that Jenine had ever seen. She felt a little pang of jealousy. To have such an amount of living space was something she dreamed about. There were several doors leading off the room. The second one she tried opened to an anteroom which in turn opened to the office in which she and Ewen had received a bawling-out from Tarant a few hours before. Emergency lights were on therefore she didn't need the discharge lamp in her pouch.**

**To her relief the seismoscope was exactly where it had been earlier. She lifted it onto the chief technician's desk and connected it to her datapad's data transfer cable. A few commands on the touch controls and the data transfer lights winked rapidly, indicating that the precious seismographs were being copied from the seismoscope's memory to the datapad's memory. There was nothing to do now but to wait. So, with nerves keyed to razor alertness, Jenine sat in the chief technician's chair and waited while idly trying to pull the torn material of her bodysuit across her breasts.**

**\* \* \* \***

**Jenine's presence would have escaped attention were it not for an extremely embarrassing prank that had been perpetrated against the chief executive recently. A student, or students**

**(they had never been found) had pooled their funds and visited one of the more doubtful parts of Arama to recruit a very petite but very voluptuous young lady who earned an excellent living by putting her delectable back into her work. In the early hours of Tarant's birthday, the young lady was smuggled into the Centre and placed in a beautifully-wrapped gift box. The glittering present was awaiting Tarant in the morning when he entered his office. Also present were several members of his staff who were curious to know (a) what the present was, and (b) who it was who thought so much of the chief technician that they would think of buying him a birthday gift. The mystery was solved when Tarant tugged at the wrapping and the young lady leapt naked from the box to smother the unfortunate dignitary with very wet, experienced kisses. Holograms of the event had appeared in a students' magazine. Since then, Tarant had resolved that he would never be caught again. He had ordered that Senate House doors be locked at night, and had installed an infra-red intruder alarm and emergency lighting in his office .**

**The soft but insistent bleeping earbug woke the chief technician. He glowered at the screen beside his bed that had come on automatically. A woman clad from head to toe in a bizarre, badly ripped black bodysuit, with a black face but white breasts was sitting at his desk. His first reaction was to alert the security staff but he stayed his hand. He swung his stocky frame out of bed and pulled on a dressing gown. He**

**would use the weapons of surprise and terror to find out for himself from the wretched creature who had hired her.**

**\* \* \* \***

**The last seismograph was being downloaded to Jenine's datapad when the door burst open and Tarant hurled himself into the office. The chief executive thought he had the advantage of surprise and strength but Jenine had heard him outside and launched herself sideways out of the chair. She was fast, but not fast enough.**

**`Got you!' Tarant roared as fingers closed on Jenine's bodysuit. Her foot whirled, connected with his chin and knocked him backwards. He was more surprised than hurt. The stupid girl who had jumped out of the presentation box had dissolved with terror when she had encountered the full blast of his fury. Not this one. She leapt on him before he had a chance to get up and pummelled his face and chest with a strength born of desperation. He threw her aside. Jenine jumped to her feet and looked frantically around for a weapon. She snatched up an aluminium desk lamp. It was a lightweight, flimsy weapon that wouldn't stop a determined man of Tarant's build. Nevertheless she brought it down on his head with enough force to smash it just as he charged. He rocked back and forth. His eyes blazed with recognition. `You!' he spat. `I might have guessed!' Jenine hit him again with the remains of the lamp. This**

time her blow was more scientifically-aimed and she drew blood. Tarant's eyes glazed with the effort of remaining conscious. His legs buckled and he fell in an untidy sprawl on his back, blood oozing from a cut in his scalp.

The stillness and silence in the office was as sudden as it was shocking. Jenine's eyes widened with horror as the enormity of her deed sank in. Convinced that she had killed the chief technician, she checked his pulse and was overwhelmed with relief to discover that it was beating steadily, and that his breathing was regular. She raced into bedroom, found a jacket and struggled to get into it. She realised that she was still wearing the suction pads and ripped them off. Another quick look at Tarant. He was showing signs of life. Jenine's thoughts flew ahead. It seemed likely that Tarant hadn't called security before bursting in on her otherwise they would be here by now. There was a chance of salvaging something from the disaster if she could delay him. She dashed back into the bedroom, ripped up a sheet and bound his hands and ankles. It was a far from expert job but she did her best.

`You're finished!' Tarant groaned as Jenine rolled him over and lashed him to the desk pedestal. `You and Solant -- finished. I shall personally see to it that--' Further policy statements from him on the matter were silenced by a gag. Jenine snatched up the datapad and entered the corridor. Rather than risk taking the lift down to the lobby where a

security guard might be sitting at the reception desk, she got out on the first floor, and ran along the corridor towards the rear of the building. Her luck held: the freight lift was waiting with its doors open. It took her to the ground floor where she was able to release the night latch on a fire escape door and flee into the night.

11

The commotion woke Calen. He entered the living-room, hair uncharacteristically awry, and watched Ewen and Jenine frantically stuffing clothes and belongings into travelbags. Ewen gave him a rundown on recent events while cramming what was left of the army ration packs into one kitbag.

'Brained our chief-technician?' Calen queried. 'Somehow I don't think that even my dear old Uncle Trevan's legal skills will be enough on this occasion.'

'That's what we thought,' said Jenine curtly. 'Will you run us to the station?'

'It would be better if you stole my car,' said Callen generously. 'As soon as you start buying metro tickets, you'll be pin-pointed.'

Ewen stopped packing. 'That's very good of you, Deg. What's the access code to start it?'

'Four-Nine-Six. I'll write it down.' He scribbled on a scrap of paper. 'Have you thought about where you're going?'

**`Our first thought is to get out,' said Jenine, struggling out of the ripped bodysuit and into a two-piece maintenance suit.**

**Calen looked mildly surprised at the sight of her breasts but passed no comment. He wrote down two more codes and handed the slip of paper to Ewen. `The second number is the destination code for our holiday house out at Brayle. It'll be empty now. The car's fully-charged. It ought to find its way there in an hour.' He gave a thin smile. `Somehow the GoD receptor circuits at the house got damaged once and have never been repaired. You could spend a few days there until you work out what you're going to do. The third number will override the front door's fingerprint ID panel. And there's some money in the car.'**

**Ewen was overcome with gratitude. He clasped the older student's hand. `You're a good friend, Deg.'**

**`We don't want to get you involved, Deg,' said Jenine anxiously.**

**Calen looked alarmed. `Me? Involved? Never. You've stolen my car, and I heard you say that you were going to Keltro. I shall tell them everything. Your problem's going to be your food unless you can derive some nourishment from those wretched biscuits you're both addicted to.' His usual imperturbability nearly deserted him when he saw the plasma discharge sidearm that Ewen pushed into an open bag. `A souvenir of the front, I take it? Now that is something I**

**definitely haven't seen.'**

## **PART 6**

### **Fugitives**

#### **1**

**Ewen entered the destination code on the car's control panel. The worn motors rattled into life, and the open-top vehicle grated noisily out of its charging slot. Ewen had been in the car before; it was in better condition than it sounded although its tyres were suspect. The car permitted Ewen manual steering by means of the short tiller arm it until its sensors locked onto the induction cable beneath the road, and the auto-system took over. Jenine glanced up at the lights burning on the top floor of Senate House and willed the car to go faster.**

**'Where did you get the gun?' she asked.**

**'I made it up from cannibalised spares when I was at the front.' Ewen glanced into the rear seat well where the PD weapon was sticking out of the bag.**

**The car entered the service road tunnel and picked up speed. The tunnel widened into the main road feeder road that linked all the domes of the Centre. A few unmanned freight pallets, little more than platforms on balloon tyres to handle a wide variety of loads, passed them heading in the**

**opposite direction. There were no other private vehicles about. Street lights tracked their progress, switching on ahead of them and automatically extinguishing in their wake. The road broadened into four lanes as they approached the main entrance to the Centre. Normally security was minimal because no-one would enter the huge complex unless they had business there, and there were no checks on vehicles leaving. But tonight was different.**

**There were lights on at the one security desk that was manned. The car swung across the lanes in response to the signals from the control cable beneath the road and rolled to an automatic standstill beside an unarmed guard sitting at his control console.**

**`What's the problem?' Ewen asked affably.**

**`A check on all male students leaving the Centre, sir,' the guard replied. He was holding a medallion reader. He moved to the car but took an involuntary step back when Ewen levelled the PD weapon at him.**

**`Re-activate this lane!' Ewen snapped.**

**The man's eyes bulged with shock.**

**`Don't stand gawping! Do it!'**

**The guard saw Ewen's finger tighten on the trigger and almost fell over his desk in his haste to touch his control panel. The car surged forward and gathered speed. Ewen twisted around, took careful aim and fired a single shot. A lance of raw energy blazed from the muzzle, tearing a section**



out of the console's pedestal and setting it on fire. The guard gave a yelp of fear and threw himself flat.

‘That wasn't necessary,’ Jenine yelled. ‘Aren't we in enough trouble as it is without you shooting at guards and starting fires?’

‘Hopefully I've destroyed the comms junction box,’ said Ewen calmly, pushing the weapon out of sight. ‘It gives us a few more minutes.’ He over-rode the speed governor. The car's radar sensors checked that there was no traffic ahead and permitted increased power.

2

‘And another thing, your excellency’ said Tarant to his screen while a technician-doctor tended his scalp wounds.

‘The girl had breasts!’

The image of Inman's hollow-cheeked expression on the screen had remained impassive while he listened to the chief technician's woes, but this piece of information caused him to frown.

‘Breasts?’

‘Two, sir!’ said Tarant, proud of his powers of observation while under duress.

Inman's expression hardened. ‘They have to be stopped. Have you alerted the Centre police?’

‘Yes, your excellency. Solant is armed therefore I've

**ordered them to be issued with arms.' Tarant hesitated. `But a shoot-to-kill order requires your authorization, your excellency.'**

**Without hesitation, Inman replied, `You have it, Tarant. It is imperative that they are hunted down and destroyed. I will alert the civil police.'**

**3**

**There were several overtaking opportunities in the long, narrow tunnel of the Brayle Highway, but the car's over-cautious control systems refused to seize them.**

**`This is crazy,' Ewen wailed in frustration as the lumbering, over-loaded freight pallet in front of them maintained an even speed.**

**`Hit the next rest area symbol,' Jenine ordered. `Quickly! There's one coming up!'**

**`We can't afford the time--' He broke off as Jenine reached across him and touched the appropriate control on the wide dashboard.**

**The car swung off the road and onto a spur that led to a toilet area and charging points. The car slotted itself into a space and the charging shoes at the front locked automatically onto a power rail.**

**Several other resting travellers watched curiously from the security of their vehicles as Ewen and Jenine jumped out and opened the side panel of their car that gave access to**

**the control system.**

**`It's IC750 on this model,' said Jenine, looking over Ewen's shoulder.**

**Ewen traced the device and prised it out of its socket with a screwdriver. `And isn't IC751 the speed governor?' he asked.**

**`Yes, it is.'**

**That component too was levered off the circuit board. They jumped back into the car and rejoined the highway. Within five minutes they had caught up with the freight pallet. Ewen cautiously took hold of the tiller arm and twisted. To his delight, the car swung out of the lane.**

**`It works!'**

**`Look out!' Jenine warned.**

**Ewen had to tuck in again to avoid an on-coming car, but as soon as it had passed, he pulled out and increased power. The car surged forward and overtook the pallet.**

**`Brilliant!' Ewen cried jubilantly. `Full manual control!'**

**They overtook several other goods vehicles in short order, in one instance shaving it so fine that the passengers in the oncoming car appeared to die of fright.**

**`Watch the charge levels,' Jenine warned. `You'll burn too much power at this speed.'**

**The car's selective call speaker suddenly clicked. `Pull over and stop! Pull over and stop!' The voice was that of**

**authority.**

**`A police car!' Jenine hissed in alarm. `A long way back.**

**An air-cushion job. We'll never outrun them!'**

**`If you do not pull over and stop in ten seconds,' boomed the speaker, `we will open fire.'**

**`They're bluffing,' said Ewen. `They won't risk it on the highway.'**

**Suddenly a brilliant light flared in the tunnel. The plasma bolt struck the tunnel roof behind the speeding car and dropped a burst of white-hot globs of molten rock that splattered and danced on the road. The rear lights of another slow-moving pallet appeared ahead. Its freight platform was laden with new travelator sections that had been made at the Centre. A heavy, slow-moving load. Ewen saw his chance and squeezed past it.**

**`That was only a warning!' the speaker declared. `Next time we won't miss. One...!'**

**`Shoot the pallet's tyres!' Ewen yelled at Jenine. He jerked the tiller bar back and forth, causing the car to veer wildly.**

**`Two...!'**

**Jenine snatched up the PD weapon and tried to aim it.**

**`Stop swerving, you idiot!'**

**Ewen straightened just as Jenine fired. She was not familiar with the weapon but she could hardly miss. The blast of energy ripped into the unmanned pallet, shredding its**

**bulbous front tyres. It swerved violently and intercepted the next shot fired by the following police car. The vehicle struck the side of the tunnel, ripping out lights. The impact threw it across the lane so that its lacerated tyres tore into the crash barrier, causing the vehicle to rear up and overturn amid a welter of sparks and a terrible screeching of travelator sections that spilled across both lanes of the highway. Impact detectors sensed the crash and closed down the entire highway in both directions, forcing Ewen to swerve around vehicles ahead that were braking to a standstill. He flashed Jenine a quick grin of triumph as he jockeyed the tiller. `One up to us.'**

**`More likely one down to us,' she retorted, badly shaken by the incident.**

**\* \* \* \***

**They arrived in Brayle thirty minutes later without further incident just as the zargon lights were brightening in the dome. It was a small town with expensive shops and broad, neat sidewalks. Even its chord-metro station entrance was embellished with statues and fountains. Ewen drove slowly along the main street with his hand resting lightly on the tiller, keeping the car dead centred in its lane and at the regulation speed as though it were driving on auto. A few traders opening up for the day's business took no notice of the strangers.**

**`Next left,' said Jenine, reading a road map.**

**Ewen made a neat turning. The shops gave way to smart houses set in individual plots. They entered a short linking tunnel and emerged into a smaller dome that consisted of a circle of about fifty larger homes grouped around a broad but shallow water reservoir. There were no tall blocks to jeopardize privacy therefore many of the single-storey houses had rooms without roofs. There was a children's adventure playground, and those homes bordering the reservoir had rowing boats and swimming facilities. There was even an area of smooth plastic beach treated with nonslip material.**

**Despite the affluence, there was an air of desolation about the estate. This was not where people lived, but a place for casual visits.**

**Having disabled the car's automatic control and navigation system, the only way to find Calen's house was to stop the car, restore the missing components to their sockets, and let the car find its own way to its programmed destination. It turned into the drive of one of the more modest dwellings.**

**Once off the road, the car permitted Ewen to take over manual control so that he could park out of sight from the road.**

**The ID number that Calen had given the couple opened the front door. To Jenine's secret relief, the rooms were large.**

**After a brief exploration of the expensively furnished rooms, they unloaded the car and fell into the first double bed that they had ever experienced.**

**After her ordeal scaling Senate House, Jenine was asleep in minutes, but Ewen remained wide-awake, worrying about the desperate situation they were in. It was impossible to be a fugitive in Arama. It was a miracle that they had reached Brayle unchallenged. Although they had enough ration packs to last them about ten days, it was doubtful if they would be able to remain in Brayle for much longer than that. Sooner or later someone would be certain to notice their presence unless they opted to remain prisoners in the house, and where would that get them? It was the lack of food that would defeat them in the end.**

**He looked at Jenine, her face now serene after the tensions of the day. He suddenly felt fiercely protective towards her, and experienced a deep bitterness that he had allowed his selfishness and blindness to drag her into this suicidal escapade.**

**4**

**They woke at midday and took a joyful shower together, delighting in each other and their new-found freedom. They ate a carefully-rationed breakfast while watching the news. There was no mention of the previous night's incidents; the main news story, as always, was about Arama's latest victory against Diablo. They watched a complete cycle of stories to be certain. When the war report came around again, Ewen**

voiced his concern for Jenine's welfare. She dismissed his arguments out of hand.

‘Even if I got them to swallow that you'd had taken me with you as a hostage, how do I explain breaking into Tarant's apartment?’

‘You didn't actually break-in, did you? The door was unlocked. You climbed up the outside of Senate House as part of a practical joke, afterall, there have been others. He burst in on you, which is true, and you defended yourself with a table lamp, which is also true.’

Jenine stood and unfastened the gown she had found in the bedroom closet. She held it open. ‘And how do I explain this?’

Ewen stared at her. He saw the golden-skinned girl in his dream, emerging from the water, gleaming rivulets streaming down between her breasts, running down her thighs and soaking into the sand.

He drew her to him to shut out the memory of Tarlan's blood and because he wanted to feel her close to him. They remained like that for some moments, not speaking.

‘It's too late now,’ said Jenine quietly. ‘There can be no turning back.’

Ewen's self-confidence had deserted him. ‘No turning back from what, Jenine? Where do we go from here?’

‘Well,’ she said, always the more practical one. ‘The first thing is to look at those seismographs that got us into



**this mess.' She fastened her gown and set the datapad on the table.**

**`I never had a chance to ask you if you managed to download all of them,' said Ewen.**

**`All except the last one,' said Jenine, shivering at the memory of Tarant bursting in on her. `This first one is Pelcan Station.'**

**They both watched the wipe bar sliding down the screen.**

**The image emerging from under the bar was blank.**

**`Same as before,' Ewen muttered. `Exactly the same as Keltro.'**

**The wipe bar completed the seismograph image. They stared at it in rank disbelief. The picture was divided by an uneven but definite horizontal line that delineated rock in the lower half and nothingness in the upper half.**

**`Pelcan is about as far from Keltro as you can get,' said Jenine. `Some fissure.'**

**It took them an hour to call up all the images and print hard copies. Each one told the same story: all over Arama, at a height of about five domes, the rock, which they believed was infinite and filled the universe, came to an abrupt end.**

**`If it is a dome,' said Jenine slowly. `It is truly vast.**

**The sides of it don't even show up on the angled images taken at the extremities of Arama.'**

**They sat in bewildered silence for a long time.**

Occasionally one of them would pick up one of the prints, look at it in the hope of a new insight into the mystery, and drop it on the table.

‘Perhaps,’ Ewen ventured at length, ‘the universe is made up of layers. Maybe the rock starts again a long way up?’

‘And what holds it up?’

Ewen pursed his lips and said nothing.

‘There is something,’ said Jenine slowly. ‘Do you think it's possible that we're not supposed to see beyond whatever it is? Could it be some sort of screening put there by the Guardian of Destiny?’

‘To hide what?’

‘Heaven?’

Ewen snorted. ‘Do you believe in heaven?’

Jenine hesitated before she uttered the fateful words.

‘Not now.’

‘Well then.’

Jenine looked through the seismographs again one by one.

None of them had been examined in detail because they had both been overwhelmed by their main message. Something caught her eye. ‘Ewen what do you make of that?’

She was pointing to the boundary above the chord-metro station at Albron. Just above the line where rock ended was a pattern of flecks that looked out of place.

Ewen stared at the faint traces and held the image at arm's length. ‘Look's very odd,’ he agreed. ‘Anything like it

**on any of the others?'**

**The checked through the prints. Ewen found matching flecks along the nothingness boundary on another print that had also been captured at Albron, but at a different angle -- proof that the mysterious pattern was not due to a fault in the seismoscope.**

**Jenine squinted at the first image, deliberately blurring her vision so that she saw the overall effect and not individual traces. 'They seem to fall into a pattern of rectangles or blocks, don't they? Like...'** She lapsed into silence.

**'Like buildings?'**

**She was relieved that Ewen had voiced her thoughts. She turned her gaze on him, her jade-green eyes large and serious. 'Yes -- up there. In the nothingness. Or vacuum. Or whatever it is, there are buildings. A lot of buildings.'**

**5**

**'Supposing,' said Ewen thoughtfully, 'we alter the aspect ratio of the datapad's screen so that the horizontal component is compressed? And regenerate that image using some enhancement?'** Without waiting for a reply, he reset the screen's parameters and called up the image again.

**They watched the picture that appeared in the wake of the wipe bar. This time it appeared to have been squeezed in at**

**the sides. The distortion packed the traces more tightly together and had an elongating effect on the vertical features of Arama. It also gave greater clarity to the mysterious images above the surface. This time they appeared as definite blocks.**

**'Buildings,' Jenine declared. 'They're too regular to be anything else.'**

**'Or natural crystalline structures?' Ewen ventured.**

**'Those are buildings,' said Jenine firmly. 'They're as big as anything in Arama. Bigger. You don't get crystals that size.' She bent over the screen. 'And that proves they're buildings. That can only be a tunnel.'**

**Ewen followed her finger. The lack of traces that suggested the presence of a tunnel leading to the buildings, if that was what they were, had been too widely dispersed on the earlier image to make their absence apparent. Now the faint trail of blank through the rock, which they had come to recognise as the mark of a tunnel, was plain to see. It was smaller than a metro tunnel. It started beneath the mysterious buildings and sloped down through the rock at a shallow angle of about ten degrees. By reprocessing the other images they were able to plot its route through the rock to the proximity of Keltro where the trace was lost in the maze of metro tunnels near the station. They checked the maps of the chord-metro system in the datapad and found no reference to the mysterious tunnel.**

**`There's one place that's often mentioned but doesn't appear on any maps,' said Ewen. `And that's the Revelation Centre.'**

**`If such a place exists,' Jenine replied. `Diablo doesn't exist; we're sure heaven doesn't exist. And I'm now certain that the Revelation Centre doesn't exist.'**

**`Why?' Ewen pondered.**

**`Why what?'**

**`What does it all mean, Jenine? Why all the subterfuge? What's the point of it all? What does it achieve?'**

**`You might as well ask what the purpose of life is. So what do we do about this tunnel?'**

**`We start looking for it tomorrow,' said Ewen.**

**6**

**Ewen waited until Jenine's auto taxi had been gone ten minutes and called one for himself. He stepped out of the house wearing one of the close-fitting grey two-piece travel suits that they had found in the house. A citizens' headband was draped around his neck. He carried a holdall, zipped shut to conceal the PD weapon and some tools. Not having credit meant that he had to slot money into the taxi's meter. As the cab passed a deserted building site, he flung his medallion into the rubble. If they did transmit a location signal, as he suspected, it would might delay the search. He hoped**

**Jenine had remembered to do likewise, and chided himself; Jenine was more sensible than him. She had been the one to suggest separate taxis to take them to the station.**

**At Brayle the ticket-issuing system was out of order which meant queuing at a manual booth. He did not know that all over Arama the ticket machines had been taken out of service.**

**`Cash?' said the ticket clerk. `Don't you have a card?'**

**`I left it at home,' said Ewen easily. `A return to Keltro, please.'**

**The clerk accepted the coins as though he had never seen such things before and issued him with a ticket.**

**The incident worried Ewen. Why wasn't a technician fixing the machines? Transport breakdowns always got priority repairs.**

**The clerk watched until Ewen was out of sight and made a call. Like all the ticket clerks throughout the network, he had been given specific instructions concerning passengers who paid for their tickets with cash. The youngster who had just gone through was the second cash-paying passenger within the past few minutes. When the pictures of Ewen and Jenine appeared on his screen, he confirmed that that was them.**

**While he was confirming their destination, Ewen and Jenine spotted each other on the platform, and entered the same passenger capsule when the train slid into the station.**

**\* \* \* \***

**The same thing happened at the third station: several**

passengers left the capsule when the doors hissed open, but no-one boarded the train.

There were now only three other passengers in their capsule so Ewen moved to a seat near Jenine.

'Something's wrong,' he said in a low voice while looking absently out of the window. 'People getting off, but no one getting on.'

'It could be a coincidence,' Jenine replied unconvincingly.

The train hissed into the next station, the last before Keltro, and even Jenine had to admit that the total absence of passengers waiting on the platform for the train was strange. The doors opened and their last three fellow travellers disembarked. There was the unmistakable sound of power couplings being released as the train pulled away. Ewen glanced back through the rear window and saw that the train's rear passenger capsules were remaining behind in the station. The train did not accelerate to normal speed when it entered the tunnel. Instead the sound of couplings unhitching was repeated, and the capsules ahead veered off into a spur tunnel leaving the capsule Ewen and Jenine were travelling in to continue on alone.

'Now do you believe me! They'll be waiting for us at the next stop!'

'I believe you,' said Jenine calmly. 'The question is,

**what do we do?'**

**Ewen opened the holdall and pulled out the PD weapon. `Get down behind a seat,' he ordered. `Don't argue!'**

**Jenine crouched down and watched Ewen aim the weapon at the access panel set into the passenger capsule's floor. He turned his head away with eyes tightly shut as he fired. The blast of plasma was blinding in the confined space. He kicked the wrecked panel clear and fired twice at the linear induction motors. Jenine had risen to her feet and was thrown forward as the stricken capsule lost lift and crashed down on the rails with a nerve-shredding scream of metal on metal. The interior lights went out but Ewen was ready with a discharge tube by the time the vehicle had screeched to a standstill.**

**`No power for the doors!' said Jenine, frantically stabbing the emergency pad.**

**`Get behind me!'**

**Ewen stood at an angle to the sliding doors so that the energy from the plasma bolts would be deflected away from them. He levelled the PD and fired twice. The lightweight doors melted under the onslaught; their remains fell out of their guides and clattered, smoking, into the tunnel. The couple jumped down into the service trough that ran along the centre of the tunnel between the two sets of tracks. The crippled passenger capsule sat forlornly on the track.**

**`I take you haven't thought through a coherent plan of**



**action?' Jenine inquired.**

**'I'm making it up as I go along.' Ewen held the discharge tube high. The light was swallowed into the darkness in either direction. 'Well... The crash will have knocked out the GoD power to both tracks, so they can't come after us.'**

**'The service trucks are independently powered,' Jenine observed. 'And tunnels being tunnels means that our movement options are somewhat limited. We can either walk on towards Keltro, and get caught. Or we can walk back to the last station, and get caught. Or stay here and get caught.'**

**'There are the safety recesses,' Ewen pointed out, clipping the discharge tube to his jacket. 'One every three hundred paces.'**

**'Brilliant lateral thinking, Ewen. We hide in a safety recess. It'll never occur to them in a hundred years that it might just be a good idea to check them.'**

**'You're not being very helpful,' said Ewen.**

**'Blowing-up the train wasn't very helpful.'**

**'So which way would you like to go, madam?'**

**The question was answered by a faint humming from the direction of Keltro. Ewen grabbed the holdall and the couple stumbled along the service trough in the opposite direction.**

**'Let's keep going as far as we can,' Ewen panted. 'Let them think that we might have escaped.'**

**They passed three technicians' refuges that were cut into**

**the wall of the tunnel.**

**'The next one,' Jenine panted. 'There's no point in exhausting ourselves.'**

**Instead of a semi-circular recess, the next refuge was rectangular opening like a doorway but set high up in the side of the tunnel. They stepped carefully over the tracks in case they were live. Ewen tossed the holdall into the opening and scrambled up. He offered his hand to Jenine and yanked her up beside him. They sat opposite each other, knees touching, on the cold, grimy floor, not talking while they got their breath back. Ewen doused the discharge tube to avoid giving away their position. Jenine peered along the tracks. She hated the confines of the narrow recess but at least it was open to the tunnel.**

**'Light coming,' she reported.**

**Beyond the crippled passenger capsule, a bright light was approaching. It was a ground car with four men on board, riding high and clear of the unblocked track. It paused at each recess and a swivel headlight probed the shadows. Ewen aimed the PD weapon at them.**

**'What good will that do?' Jenine demanded. 'If you kill them, then we'll be in even worse trouble, if that's possible.'**

**'It won't hurt them. They're out of range. The idea is to scare them off.'**

**'But what's the point?'**

**`It'll buy time.'**

**`Are they prepared to sell it?'**

**With that Ewen fired. A loud blast. Light flared along the tunnel, ricocheting off the walls. The ball of plasma dissipated most of its energies long before it reached the ground car, but it had the desired effect. The vehicle promptly spun on its axis and scooted back along the tunnel.**

**`They'll be back,' said Jenine listlessly.**

**`I don't doubt it. Keep listening.' Ewen switched on the discharge tube and examined their refuge. It was a tunnel about ten paces deep ending with a heavy steel door. It was welded into its frame by a mass of rust, suggesting that it had not been opened in centuries. He turned up the tube's brightness long enough to read the faded lettering:**

**SWITCH ROOM. NO LONGER USED. SEALED BY ORDER.**

**There was a date underneath but most of the paint had flaked away. There were no visible hinges or signs of a lock: it was just a flat steel plate. He banged it with his fist.**

**There was a bow handle that he pulled and pushed on, but the door was solid and unyielding.**

**`What is it?' Jenine called out.**

**`Some sort of door.'**

**`Could you use the PD weapon on it?'**

**`We'd be wasting shots. Nothing will shift this. A sealed switch room. This door's probably welded in place.' He**

studied the walls of the short tunnel. They were lined with bricks made of dense black substance that he had never seen before. The mortar-filled joints had virtually disappeared under a thick layer of encrusted filth.

`Tunnel's brick-built,' he commented. He switched the light off and sat opposite Jenine.

`So?'

`It's unusual. It must be very old.'

`Nothing as unusual as this mess we're in,' she observed curtly, resenting the effort to make conversation in her present mood.

They lapsed into silence. Jenine tried to make herself comfortable on the cold floor. Presently they both dozed.

`SOLANT!'

They both jumped at the amplified voice that boomed and echoed along the tunnel.

They peered cautiously out of their hiding place to where grey-uniformed soldiers were manning a mobile pallet that was parked beside the crippled passenger capsule. The pallet was carrying something large and business-like under a plastic tarpaulin.

`The army's here,' Ewen muttered dejectedly. `This could be serious.'

`Solant! Do you hear me?'

`I hear you!' Ewen yelled.

`Thought you might like to see what we've bought with us.'

**The cover was whipped away to reveal a PD cannon. Ewen had witnessed a training session with such a field piece at the front. They were capable of spreading a lot of unhappiness.**

**`We're very proud of this, Solant!'**

**`Looks impressive!' Ewen bellowed back.**

**`Sounds impressive too!' The battery commander yelled.**

**`Listen!' He gave an order to fire.**

**Ewen threw himself on Jenine and covered her face. The blast from the ball of plasma that hurtled past them sent a shockwave into their tunnel that threw them against the steel door. A burst of searing heat washed over them. With his ears ringing, Ewen rolled off Jenine to check that she was unhurt.**

**`Get down, idiot!' she shouted.**

**`It's okay. Those things take about two minutes to recharge.'**

**`Solant!'**

**Ewen crawled to the opening and peered at the mobile gun. The tunnel lining had been blackened by the plasma bolt's passage.**

**`You called!'**

**`I hope you enjoyed that as much as we did,' the battery commander replied. `I'm supposed to say to you that if you throw out your weapons and come out with your hands out, we won't hurt you. But that would spoil our fun, so you stay right there and return our fire. Okay?'**

**Ewen darted back to Jenine and crouched down. `Listen, they've got a problem.'**

**She looked incredulous. `They've got a problem? Don't you think you should concentrate your mind on our problems?'**

**`I'm serious. That thing can't fire around corners, and it takes time to recharge. The next time they fire, we jump out and run for the next recess. And when they fire again, we head for the recess after that, and so on.'**

**`Supposing they're bringing up another cannon in the direction we'll be heading?' Jenine reasoned.**

**`They won't be able to use it because they'd end up shooting at each other, whereas we'll be able to shoot at both of them. There's just a chan--'**

**The PD cannon roared again. The ground shook. Heat and light crashed against the senses of the couple huddled against the steel door. Rock and bricks rained down, filling the refuge with choking dust. Ewen held the light up when the dust had settled. The corner of their little tunnel nearest the cannon had taken a direct hit. The battery commander was no fool; maybe he couldn't shoot around corners, but he could shoot corners away. Two more accurate blasts like that and they would be either buried under tonnes of rock or exposed. Jenine suppressed a shiver of fear at the thought of being trapped in the narrow recess.**

**Another blast of heat and light. The impact ripped more rock out of the side of the refuge, halving its depth. Jenine**

**gasped in terror and tried to crawl through the steel door.**

**The sound of her involuntary cry cut through the banshee ringing in Ewen's ears like a laser. He knew the misery she was going through. He groped for the PD weapon, lobbed it over the rubble, and heard it clatter on the track.**

**`That's a shame, Solant' the amplified voice of the battery commander boomed disappointedly. `Now show yourselves slowly, and we'll have to stop shooting! You're supposed to make my day.'**

**`We'll have to give ourselves up, Jenine.'**

**`No! Never! Not now!' She clung to him with fierce strength.**

**`I can't let this happen to you.'**

**The harshness went from her voice. It was a whisper; a sweet affirmation of love and loyalty. `You're not letting anything happen to me, Ewen. I said I wanted to be with you, and I meant it. We'll go together and we'll never surrender.'**

**The amplified voice of the battery commander resonated down the tunnel. `It would be helpful if you said something like: "You'll never take me alive, soldier". That way we'll both have a clear objective. You get to keep your pride, and we get to keep on firing.'**

**`Don't say anything,' Jenine whispered, still keeping a tight grip on him. `Keep them guessing.' She kissed him. `I love you, Ewen.'**

**The PD cannon roared again. The shot went high, bringing down a massive rockfall that partially blocked the remains of the tunnel. A brick landed painfully on Ewen's ankle even though he had flattened himself against Jenine and tucked his legs in. They waited for the next bolt of energy that would surely herald the end.**

**Two minutes slipped by.**

**Jenine gave a little sob in the darkness.**

**Five minutes.**

**Ewen's hearing cleared. He heard a faint hissing. In the light of the discharge tube he saw white tendrils of gas snaking lazily through the fallen rubble. It was lighter than air for it formed a bubble of grey fog above their heads, pooling against the roof. As he watched, the flattened underside of the gas inexorably crept down towards its victims.**

**`Gas,' he muttered, his voice hoarse from the dust that lined his throat. `Get low!' He pushed Jenine's face roughly to the floor.**

**Ripples played on the underside of the gas cloud like a strange, inverted pool of water, but the grey fog continued to swell and reach down, fed by the delicate white streams that continued to find their way through the fallen masonry. Ewen rested his cheek on the floor and felt Jenine's sweet, warm breath on his cheek. Her hand found his and squeezed it tight. He marvelled at her courage.**



**The gas was cold on his face. He opened his eyes and saw that it was a hand's breadth above his temple, heaving like the puckered flesh of something pallid and obscene. But the cold wasn't the touch of the gas; it was caused by something else. Something that made the gas seem to recoil and swirl as though in silent anger.**

**A draught of air!**

**His hand reached towards the needle-like current of air.**

**His fingertips brushed against the rust-encrusted steel door and found the narrow gap at the bottom between the door and its frame.**

**`Jenine! The door's come open!'**

**`What?'**

**`The door! The plasma bolts must have sprung it ajar!'**

**Still keeping his head to the ground, he twisted around, braced his feet against the door, and pushed with all his strength. The reaction of the powerful shove slid him along the ground but he felt the massive door give.**

**`Help me! But keep your head down!'**

**But Jenine was already wriggling into a position to add her weight to Ewen's efforts.**

**`Both together!' Ewen breathed. `One... Two... Three...**

**Push!'**

**A squeal of rusty metal.**

**`And again!'**

**Ewen's body strained causing his head to lift involuntarily. He inhaled some of the gas. It hit him like a bomb. His head swam. He buried his face against the floor and continued pushing: a triumph of resolve over reason. He felt his strength ebbing away. Jenine's voice filtered through the fog that was a shroud closing around his consciousness. He heard someone choking and realised that it was himself.**

**`One more, Ewen! One more!'**

**Whether Jenine got the door open by herself or whether he managed to help, he never knew. He felt something pulling at him, rolling him over and over so that he saw alternate darkness then fog. A stinging sensation on his cheek, and then another.**

**`Ewen! Wake up! Wake up! Don't leave me alone!'**

**Another stinging whiplash across his cheek.**

**`Ewen!'**

**`How can I do anything if you keep hitting me?' he mumbled. She pulled him into a sitting position. They were through the door. The discharge tube was lying on the floor, its light playing on the strange fog that was now escaping into the new darkness that lay beyond the door. The air had a strange, musty taste but it wasn't poisoned.**

**`Don't stand up!' Jenine warned. `There's some gas up there. We've got to get the door closed to prevent anymore getting through.'**

**`Have you got the holdall?'**

**`Yes -- now push!'**

**They repeated their exertions -- lying on the ground and shoving with their feet. The door closed with less effort than it took to open. Jenine turned up the tube's brightness to check that the gas had dispersed before she stood and helped Ewen to his feet.**

**`How do you feel?'**

**`Terrible,' he replied.**

**`Well,' said Jenine looking around and giving a little shudder. `We seem to have found ourselves a new tomb.' The disused switch room was a little wider and longer than the tunnel. The walls were a mass of rusting brackets that had once supported fuseboxes and switchgear. There was a bulky contactor housing of ancient design lying on the floor together with a length of conduit pipe. The ceiling was high -- at least the height of three men. Thankfully there was no GoD receptor. Ewen turned his attention to the door that they had just closed and which was the only way in or out of the room. The exposed latching mechanism was smothered in ancient, black grease. It consisted of several massive steel tongues that engaged in holes in the top, sides and bottom of the frame. The tongues were linked together by heavy surface-mounted levers and bellcranks. A master lever ending in a heavy counterbalance weight kept the door locked. Ewen nudged the counterbalance. It dropped easily, causing all the**

tongues to slide smoothly home. It was easy to see what had happened: a freak tremor had kicked the counterbalance and allowing the door to spring open. If it hadn't been for the grease, rust would have effectively welded the ancient door shut.

`How many plasma bolts will that door sustain?' Jenine asked.

`Two I guess. Maybe three. Not more.' As he spoke, Ewen felt in his pocket for the radio capsule that Father Dudley had given him.

`If you're ever in serious trouble, Ewen. Big trouble.

Squeeze the ends together hard and someone will hear.'

Ewen's fingers closed around the talisman, for that was all it was now. Radio signals would never be heard down here.

They were silent. Each thinking the same: the open door that had given so much hope had turned out to be nothing more than a respite -- a stay of execution. They settled down, huddled close to each other, waiting for the inevitable end.

## **PART 7**

### **Escape**

#### **1**

Caudo Inman stared down the tunnel at the rubble that spilled across the rail tracks. He cut short the excuses of the battery commander with an impatient wave of his staff. `You

**had them trapped. Their position was hopeless, and yet you allowed them to escape. How is this possible?'**

**The commander swallowed, and slapped the plasma cannon's discharge nozzle to cover his nervousness. It was still warm.**

**'Solant must've known about the few seconds' fogging of our optical instruments after firing, sir. He and the girl must've run along the tunnel to the next recess right after we'd fired -- while we were blind.'**

**'But you say you spoke to him?'**

**'Yes, sir. But the acoustics are bad down here. Sounds echo all over the place as you can hear. It's not easy to tell how far away a voice is.'**

**'The battery was positioned here? Yes?'**

**'Right here,' the commander agreed. Enough of his initial awe had worn off for him to be irritated at this hostile questioning within earshot of his men.**

**'And where was the passenger capsule they sabotaged?'**

**'Beside us, sir. It was loaded onto a wrecker and hauled away about an hour ago.'**

**A soldier took a hologram picture. Inman heard the camera's faint whirr and turned his cadaverous head. 'You're wasting your time, trooper! It'll be fogged!' The soldier nearly dropped his camera in fright. Inman stepped down into the service trough and beckoned the commander to follow. They reached the rubble strewn around the tunnel opening.**

**`All this debris was piled up around the tunnel,' the commander explained. `We cleared it away after the gas had dispersed, expecting to find them unconscious.'**

**A brilliant beam of light from Inman's staff illuminated the steel door. `I take it that it crossed your mind to check that door?'**

**The question annoyed the commander but he was careful to conceal his feelings. `Yes, sir. It's solid. There's no way they could have opened it.'**

**The gaunt figure grunted and entered the refuge tunnel to examine the ancient door for himself. He pressed his weight against it, shook the handle, and ran the tip of his staff around the frame. He emerged from the refuge, stepping carefully over the rubble, and looked along the main tunnel in both directions, picturing what had happened.**

**`So you assumed that Solant and the girl ran away from you?'**

**`Yes, sir.'**

**The sunken eyes turned their icy gaze on the army officer.**

**`You were warned that Solant was clever? A brilliant schemer?**

**Yes?'**

**`Yes, sir. But--'**

**`Look at the shadows!' Inman snapped, waving a gnarled hand in both directions. `Huge patches of darkness everywhere. Every time you fired, you were partially blinded by fogged optics. You suspected that Solant knew that and yet**

**it didn't occur to you that he and the girl might have run towards you?'**

**The battery commander's faltering expression answered Inman's question. `Well... No, sir. But there was no way they could have got passed us.'**

**`Did you search the passenger capsule before the wrecker hauled it away? Did you look under the seats? Under the chassis? Well?'**

**The army officer looked stunned and shook his head. `No, sir,' he admitted miserably.**

**2**

**The angry voices of the soldiers on the far side of door were muffled, too indistinct to make out what they were saying. There were some dull thumps on the door, the sound of debris being cleared away, and then the voices faded. Ewen and Jenine sat in silence in the darkness, not daring to use a discharge tube in case light showed around the door. They waited, arms around each other, braced for an onslaught by the fearsome plasma discharge cannon at point blank range. But nothing happened.**

**`They think we escaped,' Ewen whispered. Jenine put a cautionary fingers to his lips.**

**An hour passed. A series of thumps and crashes and then a heavy wheeled machine rumbled past.**

**`Sounds like a wrecker to collect the passenger capsule,'**

**Ewen commented.**

**It was the last they spoke for some time because they could still hear faint noises. Ewen pressed his ear to the door. As he did so, he became uncomfortably aware of a malignant, brooding presence on the far side of the door.**

**Ewen didn't know how or why he knew who it was, but he knew.**

**Maybe the ice of the man's personality reached through the steel itself. Ewen stayed in that position, not daring to move, keeping his breathing shallow, until he sensed that the man had gone away.**

**`What's the matter?' Jenine whispered. Even in the darkness she could feel Ewen's sudden chill of fear.**

**`Inman was here. On the other side of the door.'**

**`How do you know it was him?'**

**`I don't know. But it was. I know it was.'**

**`Why are we so important?' Jenine wondered.**

**`Perhaps we're a danger to him.'**

**`How?'**

**Ewen risked turning on the tube at low level so that it was little more than a glowing point of light. He moved silently around their prison, examining the walls. It seemed that the only way out of the room was through the door. He turned up the brightness and held the tube above his head to throw light on the ceiling. It appeared to be made of the same black bricks as the walls. They both saw the rectangle**



at the same time. It was in the centre of the ceiling and looked like a large slab, the same colour as the surrounding bricks. Ewen dragged the contactor box under the curious rectangle. He stood on it and used the length of steel conduit pipe to tap the ceiling while Jenine held the light. The rectangle had a slight hollow sound when he rapped it. More out of desperation than expectation, he placed the pipe in the centre of the rectangle and pushed upwards. To his astonishment and jubilation, the rectangle lifted slightly. It was a hinged trapdoor.

He shifted his grip so that the end of pipe was pressed against the heel of his palm and gave a powerful shove. The hatch lifted and dropped down again. A harder push. This time it fell open with a resounding crash. Jenine quickly doused the light. They waited, hearts pumping, listening for the return of the soldiers.

'Well,' said Jenine cryptically when she switched the tube on again. 'We have an escape route, but no way of getting to it.'

Ewen grinned at her. 'Do you reckon your pyramid-climbing talents would be any use at climbing a pole?'

'No.'

'Good. Let's try it.'

With Ewen holding the length of pipe firmly while standing on the contactor, Jenine managed to shin up it, but the pipe

**was too short by a body's length for her outstretched fingers to reach the hatch, and Ewen lacked the strength to lift her weight and pole while standing on the wobbly contactor.**

**They turned out the contents of the holdall, looking for inspiration, but they had nothing that would be of any use in solving this problem. It frustrated Ewen that he could reach the edge of the open hatch with the pipe if he stood on the contactor. He banged the edge of the hatch in frustration with the pipe.**

**'If only we could make some sort of hook on the end of this,' he said, examining the length of conduit.**

**'Could we bend a crank on the end?' Jenine wondered.**

**'It's strong but it's worth a try.'**

**They stood the contactor on the end of the pipe. Ewen levered up while Jenine sat on the contractor, but the pipe was too rigid. The door's lever locking mechanism gave Ewen an idea. He jammed the end of the conduit under the strongest lever and heaved. The entire length of pipe bowed. Jenine supported the pipe in the middle and added her weight to Ewen's exertions. It gave quite suddenly where the lever forced the pipe's wall to buckle and collapse. They wriggled the cranked end from under the lever and looked at their handiwork in triumph. The pipe now had a 90 degree bend on the end.**

**The rest was relatively easy. Ewen stood on the contactor and hooked the pipe onto the rim of the ceiling hatch. Jenine**

held the bottom of the pipe steady, and braced herself so that Ewen could climb onto her shoulders. He hauled himself up the pipe and pulled himself through the hatch. He caught the holdall when Jenine threw it up.

'What's up there?' she asked.

'Too dark to see. We'll worry about it when you're up.'

Jenine's climb was more difficult because she had no shoulders to stand on to give her a start, and the pipe swung alarmingly, but Ewen was able to grab her wrist as soon as it was within reach and pull her through the hatch. Her foot dislodged the pipe but he caught it before it fell. They might need it for a return journey should this route prove fruitless.

They sat on the floor and hugged each other briefly before inspecting their new surroundings. They were in a narrow room whose walls, floor and ceiling consisted of rusting steel plates. Like the smaller room below, there were brackets fixed to the walls suggesting that the room had once served an important purpose. There was no GoD receptor and no picture of the emperor.

Ewen closed the hatch and placed the length of pipe against the wall. With the discharge tube held high, they approached the conventional-looking door at the far end of the room.

They paused before it and looked questioningly at each

**other. Ewen shrugged and reached for the handle. The door opened easily.**

**Jenine gave a little gasp of astonishment at what confronted them. They stood perfectly still for some seconds, their arms protectively around each other as they stared. Beyond the door was something that was totally outside their experience.**

**A flight of stairs.**

**3**

**Jenine grasped the handrail and gingerly mounted the first two steps. `Clever,' she said. `A method of changing levels without an elevator.' She turned around and stepped down beside Ewen, smiling mischievously. `And it works in reverse.'**

**Ewen frowned. `Nothing to wear out. Strange though. Why not use a ladder? Less material and less space taken up. You can't move this thing. It's fixed.'**

**`You could go up and down these without using your hands,' Jenine pointed out. `You could carry things. It's clever. And saving space doesn't seem important here.'**

**At first they tried mounting the steps side-by-side and decided that it would be easier if Ewen led the way. He found the rhythm of having to take short, upward walking steps decidedly odd, but the system seemed to work. Breaking the rhythm at the top of the stair was also very strange; his**

feet tried to climb a step that was no longer there. When he turned around and looked down the steps, the precipitous slope gave him a moment of vertigo. Jenine was less affected, being used to such slopes on the glass pyramid.

Ewen increased the discharge tube's brightness and held it up. They had emerged into a long corridor with doors leading off on both sides. The first door was marked:

**DNS C Room L20-10.**

What intrigued them was that the numbers in the notice employed normal digits as used by the Centre, and not the dot notation system that was used for the ordinary citizens of Arama.

Ewen tried the door. It was unlocked. He looked questioning at Jenine. 'What do you think?'

'I think, in a triumph of logical thinking over lateral thinking, that opening it might be the best way of finding out what's on the other side.'

He pushed the door. It opened into what they assumed was a conference room. There was a long table finished in a brown substance with random stripe patterning that neither Ewen or Jenine could identify. Around the table were ten swivel chairs. In one corner was a simple overhead projection device on a trolley. In the centre of the table were two glass jugs standing on a metal plate whose purpose they could only guess at.

**`One thing,' said Ewen. `We're no longer in Arama.'**

**`How do you know?'**

**`A triumph of perception over your total lack of observation, dearest one. No picture of the emperor.'**

**The concept of somewhere that wasn't Arama was difficult to grasp, but the evidence, or rather, lack of it, was irrefutable.**

**Ewen stood the discharge tube on the table and turned down the brilliance. Used economically they could provide light for fifty-hours. There were two more tubes in the holdall but once they were exhausted, they would be in total darkness.**

**`Let's explore the next room,' Jenine suggested.**

**`No -- we're got to do this scientifically,' said Ewen.**

**`We have to map this place one step at a time, otherwise we'll get hopelessly lost.'**

**He sat in one of the swivel chairs, and unpacked his datapad and the seismographs from the holdall. Jenine sat beside him. From the maps of Arama they worked out roughly where they were, but they were too far from Keltro for this strange area they were in to show up on their seismographs. He cleared the datapad's screen and began making a sketch plan of the switch room, drawing it in relation to the chord-metro tunnel. He added rough dimensions. Once satisfied with his handiwork, he reduced the plan to a small area in the corner of the screen so that the drawing could be updated. Jenine watched while he worked, offering an occasional**

suggestion. Her fingertips slid idly back and forth over the table's surface as they talked. She liked the warm touch of the strange material. It seemed to be hard but was in fact quite soft because she could make faint marks on it with her thumbnail. She was used to furniture that was impossible to mark. She mentioned the fact to Ewen, but he was now intent on a side elevation sketch that showed heights. He dimensioned the height of the switch room and the estimated height of the stairs while Jenine's fingers toyed with a touch control at the side of the metal plate in the centre of the table. The touch control glowed softly. She said nothing, wondering what would happen.

'Right,' said Ewen, checking his measurements against the seismographs. 'We're ten percent nearer the nothingness than we were in the tunnel.'

Jenine chuckled. 'We can't go on calling it the nothingness, Ewen. Let's call it the blue dome.'

Ewen looked doubtful and grinned. 'Why not? Okay -- the blue dome it is.' He went back to work on his drawing.

Jenine's calf brushed against something on the floor. At first she thought it was a leg of the table. She glanced down. A waste bin. She was about to mention her find to Ewen when he suddenly froze.

'Did you hear that?'

'What?'

**`Shhh!'**

**They both heard the creaking noise. It was coming from the metal plate. Ewen reached out a hand, touched the plate, and snatched it away. `Ouch! It's hot!' He sucked his fingertips and glared at the plate.**

**Jenine touched the control and the light went out. `My fault. I switched it on.'**

**`Well you should leave things alone until we know what they're for!'**

**`If we leave things alone, we'll never discover what they're for!' Jenine retorted.**

**`So what is it for then?'**

**Jenine lifted up one of the jugs. There was a circle etched into the plate's surface, obviously to indicate the position the jug should occupy. She held her hand above the circle, palm down, and looked at Ewen in surprise. `It's not just hot, it's very hot.'**

**`I know that,' Ewen snapped, aggrieved, still sucking his fingers. `But what's it for?'**

**`For heating whatever goes in the jug, of course. I would've thought that was obvious, but I'm not the lateral thinker.'**

**Ewen glanced around the room. `This is obviously some sort of conference or meeting room. So why carry out industrial work in here?'**

**`Perhaps it's for making drinks?'**



Ewen knew from his 4th year studies that Arama's soft drink production plant boiled water as part of the manufacturing process, but the idea of making drink in a small office was patently absurd and he said so.

Jenine's answer was to place the waste bin on the table.

She fished out the used plastic cups one by one, and placed them in a row in front of Ewen. He fell silent, picked up one of the cups and inspected the mould-covered dried dregs.

'Doesn't make sense,' he muttered. 'Why make the drinks in here?'

'Perhaps they drank them hot?' Jenine suggested.

Ewen scoffed at that. He gestured to the hotplate. 'Would you be able to drink anything that hot?'

'Perhaps they let them cool down first?'

'Then why make them so hot in the first place?'

Jenine thought about that and admitted that Ewen had a point. She scraped some of the mould from a cup, sniffed it, and wrinkled her nose in disgust. 'Why haven't they been dumped down a recycling chute? Maybe they carry out tests in here?'

'Who?'

The question annoyed her. 'Oh, I don't know.' A dreadful thought occurred to her. 'You don't think we're in the Revelation Centre do you?'

Ewen sighed and started packing the holdall. 'I don't know

**what to think, Jenine. Let's do some more exploring...**

**Cautious exploring.'**

**\* \* \* \***

**There wasn't much mystery about the next room. The sign on the double doors proclaimed:**

**DNS C. AIR-CONDITIONING PLANT**

**Ewen cautiously pushed the doors open and turned up the discharge tube to maximum brightness. The rows of giant filter housings, heat-exchangers and heat pumps extended into the darkness. All the machinery was still and silent.**

**'It's weird,' Ewen commented. 'It all looks old-fashioned and yet it doesn't look as if it's ever been used.' To prove his point, he crossed to a pump motor and peeled off a strip of thin, clear protective plastic. Everything was covered in the stuff, even manually-operated switches. He showed it to Jenine. 'Sprayed on and allowed to harden. You'd have to do a lot of preparation work in here before you could get anything started. It looks like this plant is meant to last hundreds of years before it's used.'**

**'And maybe it's been here for hundreds of years?' Jenine ventured.**

**'Well it certainly looks like it,' Ewen agreed. 'It's all so old-fashioned. Look at those air-ducts. Welded steel. Why bother when they could be made of extruded plastic?'**

**The next room was identified by the legend on the door as a water purification plant. Like the previous room, all the**

**machinery was hermetically sealed under a protective coat of spray-on plastic. Ewen added the location and contents of the rooms to his sketch maps, and they continued exploring.**

**Set into the wall halfway along the corridor were the closed concertina-like doors of what they assumed was a large freight elevator. Ewen reasoned that because there was a lot of machinery down here, a large elevator would be essential for carrying spare motors and the like. A sign on the wall near the folding doors solved one mystery but provided several more:**

**DEEP NOVA SHELTER C. LEVEL 20. Ancillary Guardian Environment and Life (AN.G.E.L.) FACILITIES.**

**`Well now we know what DNS stands for,' Jenine commented.**

**`But what does nova mean?'**

**Ewen consulted the datapad's dictionary. `It's a religious term. It says here that a nova is a new light in heaven.'**

**`Nothing more?'**

**`No.'**

**She pointed to the sign. `And that word looks like angel.'**

**`Not quite. Let's press on.'**

**The double doors at the end of the corridor opened onto another ascending flight of stairs which they climbed without hesitation.**

**DEEP NOVA SHELTER C. LEVEL 19. RESTAURANT.**

**Restaurant wasn't in the dictionary.**

The pair of sliding doors opened automatically as Ewen moved towards them. He crossed the threshold and stepped back hastily when the lights came on. They promptly went out again. In the brief explosion of brilliance they caught a glimpse of rows of tables and chairs.

‘This place seems in working order,’ Ewen muttered uneasily. He was about to suggest that they leave it when Jenine walked into the room. The lights came on again. They stared at rows of bare tables and chairs. The design of the furniture was starkly functional: tubular steel frames with plastic seats and tabletops in pleasing pastel shades.

‘Why would so many people sit so close together and at such small tables?’ Ewen wondered. ‘There’s too many tables for this to be a study area. Think of the noise levels with all these hard surfaces.’

‘It’s just like our communal meal room for our first three years,’ said Jenine. ‘But the size of it!’

They counted the number of seating places in each row and multiplied that by the number of rows. There were 400 seats. Jenine frowned. ‘Why bring four-hundred people together to eat? Surely it would be more efficient to delivery their food to wherever they live or work? I mean, it doesn’t make sense -- we had to all eat together in our first few years to keep an eye on us and make sure we always ate all our food. But this place isn’t for children. These are all adult-size chairs and tables.’

**`We don't know that it is an eating centre,' Ewen observed.**

**`Well what else could it be for?'**

**They wandered to the self-service lane at the side of the canteen. It was separated from the dining area by a long bright red rope threaded at intervals through stainless steel stanchions -- obviously for controlling a queue. On the far side of the long serving counter was an area as large as the canteen, filled with gleaming, mysterious machines, the like of which they had never seen before. There was some similarity with an industrial processing laboratory, but everything was on a much larger scale. There were what appeared to be a row of ovens, some weighing machines, huge vats with power-operated covers, and stainless steel-covered tables. In fact all the machines were made from stainless steel. Along one wall near the end of the rope were islands of trollies stacked high with stainless steel trays. Jenine opened a trolley drawer. Inside were stainless steel knives, forks and spoons in separate compartments.**

**`You're right,' Ewen conceded. `It's definitely an eating centre.'**

**An open flap in the long serving counter led to the rows of strange, silent machines.**

**`Maybe they're left like this without protection because they're all stainless steel,' Ewen observed, far from**

convinced by his own deduction. He returned to the eating area, unpacked his datapad at one of the tables and concentrated on updating his sketch plans. Jenine moved to the far end of the huge kitchen where she could examine one of the giant vats without having Ewen telling her to leave things alone. She saw no harm in touching the vat's activate pad or reading the message that appeared on the screen.

`Ewen! Look up soup in the dictionary please.' She spelt the word out.

`Can't you see I'm busy?'

`Please!'

Ewen called up the datapad's dictionary. `How's it spelt again?'

Jenine told him. He checked, assured her that there was no such word, and went back to his map-making. Jenine saw little harm in touching the control pad again. The screen display changed to a list of words. It was obviously an option menu.

The longest word was VEGETABLE -- a word she knew because it was the generic name for the material that made up the palm trees and grass in Arama. But one didn't eat trees and grass. She wondered if Ewen would look the word up to see if it had other meanings, but decided that it would be politic to leave him alone. She saw no harm in touching the word. The machine hummed and the message changed:

**SOUP, VEGETABLE. 400 SERVINGS. CONFIRM ORDER.**

Pads marked CANCEL and CONFIRM were now flashing. Jenine

**saw no harm in touching the CONFIRM pad.**

**STANDBY.**

**There was a faint gurgling noise.**

**Jenine gave an anxious glance in Ewen's direction and pressed her ear to the side of the vat. Strange things were going on inside. She decided that perhaps there had been too many things of late that she had seen no harm in doing. The vat was filling rapidly with a liquid -- probably water. The gurgling stopped and there was a series of thumps and splashes as though solids were being injected into the vat. This was followed by the ominous click of latches and a gentle, pulsating vibration. The entire machine began to get warm. Jenine rather wished that she had left things alone.**

**PREPARATION TIME: 2.40... 2.39... 2.38...**

**Her panic was calm and orderly. She touched the cancel pad repeatedly in the hope of shutting the vat off, but its control system obviously locked out all input once it had been programmed and activated. Even the handle on the huge lid was immovable.**

**Ewen looked up, suspicion writ large. Jenine was leaning nonchalantly against the vat. 'What are you doing?' he demanded.**

**The timer's digits flashed accusingly: 1.10... 1.09...**

**1.08...**

**Jenine nonchalance stopped short of her examining her**

**fingernails. That would be over-doing it. `Nothing.'**

**Which was true. It was the vat that was doing things:  
vibrating quite loudly now and emitting obscene glugging  
noises. Ewen left his datapad and entered the kitchen area.  
He stared at the rumbling vat and its lapsed time indicator  
whose digits were clocking relentlessly towards zero.**

**0.40... 0.39... 0.38...**

**`You can't leave anything alone, can you?'**

**The vat belched.**

**`As I keep telling you, if we don't experiment, we'll  
never find out what anything does!' Jenine retorted.**

**0.25... 0.24... 0.23...**

**`So what is it doing?' he demanded.**

**`Well... Making soup.'**

**`What's soup?'**

**`I don't know. Some sort of food, I suppose.'**

**Ewen looked more closely at the display. `Vegetable soup?'**

**`Food made from trees, do you suppose?' Jenine ventured.**

**`Tree soup?'**

**`Well I don't know!'**

**`You think food is prepared here?'**

**0.08... 0.07... 0.06...**

**His hostile attitude angered Jenine. `I've no idea, Ewen.**

**But I think we're about to find out.'**

**There was the sound of what could be steam venting through  
a safety valve. They moved what they hoped was a safe**



**distance from the vibrating vat and regarded it worriedly.**

**0.03... 0.02... 0.01...**

**A buzzer sounded. The STANDBY message cleared and was replaced by a flashing READY sign. A solenoid latch clicked and the handle turned. The lid yawned smoothly open, releasing a cloud of steam that was trapped in an overhead hood and ducted away.**

**The amazing barrage of smell that burst from the open vat rendered the couple temporarily speechless. It was a powerhouse scent of such stunning deliciousness that it slammed with almost brutal force against the perceptions of two people who had never experienced the wonderful sensation of having their sense of smell stimulated by the aroma of hot food. Saliva seemed to flood their mouths. The steam cleared and they both stared down at the swirl of thick, strangely-coloured liquid. Bubbles burped to the surface, releasing more of the wonderful odours, making them giddy with their overwhelming magic.**

**'I think,' said Jenine slowly, 'that I've made vegetable soup for four-hundred people.' She dipped her finger tentatively in the hot brew and licked it. Her expression suggested that she was having a quiet orgasm. 'And I'm going to eat it all.'**

**The computer sounded a muted alert. A facial muscle twitched in Inman's temple, betraying his tense nerves. He looked up from his desk and regarded the computer terminal.**

**`A problem?'**

**`An unexpected power load in DNS-C,' the computer replied.**

**Inman rose and sat at the screen. He steeped his fingers, and studied the information that had appeared.**

**`The power consumed, the duration of load, and the time of the load does not equate with the normal maintenance tests,' the computer reported.**

**`Do we know where it occurred?'**

**`Only that it was on the main supply circuit to the DNS and not an auxiliary circuit.'**

**`Conclusions?' Inman asked expressionlessly, knowing what the answer would be.**

**`Somehow an intruder or intruders has managed to enter DNS-C,' said the computer.**

**`Armageddonist saboteurs again?'**

**`The probability is ninety-nine percent.'**

**`Have all maintenance staff been accounted for?'**

**`Everyone.'**

**Inman was silent for some moments while he gave careful consideration to the options open to him. Was it possible that the fugitives had got through the door? He doubted it. It was a pity that there were no visual intruder systems in the deep nova shelters. But such safeguards were passive --**

**they didn't end the problem if there was an intruder. Instead there was a much more effective means of dealing with them.**

**`Very well,' he said at length. `Activate the MANIX.'**

**5**

**A door opened to a small compartment on Level 1 of Deep Nova Shelter C, and the Mobile Ancillary Intruder Exterminator emerged. MANIX was not a large machine -- it didn't have to be -- its sole purpose was the hunting down and destruction of any human shape it encountered in the deep nova shelter. Its designers had a regard for human life but the integrity of the deep nova shelters was considered more important. They were the key to the survival of mankind.**

**The MANIX hovered clear of the ground on powerful mag-lev motors that emitted a faint hum. Its cylindrical body consisted of a fast-swiveling turret equipped with a needle plasma discharge gun that could scythe through human flesh but leave plant, machinery, and fittings relatively undamaged. Its sensors consisted of a pair of wide-set crystal infra-red detectors that could swivel independently of its body. The separation between the two sensors gave them the appearance of fearsome eyes although the intention was to provide the android with effective range-finding stereoscopic `vision'. Its brain was in its body, and consisted of an inertial navigation system and a digitalized map of the**

entire shelter complex. It could move along precisely defined routes that were stored in its memory, enter rooms, and know exactly where it was at any time. Its shape recognition firmware was crude but effective. If a potential target had the heat shape of a human, or if the heat shape moved like a human, then it was a human, and was therefore a candidate for zapping. It was a machine unburdened by the ethical considerations of Isaac Asimov's First Law of Robotics. Security of the shelter was paramount.

The door slid softly closed behind it. The fully-charged MANIX turned left in accordance with its seek and destroy program, and scoured the corridor.

Cold.

The first door it came to opened automatically. It was a large viewing theatre. A quick sweep of the auditorium. No smudges of heat.

All clear.

The MANIX cruised down the aisle to check the toilets, its broad magnetic levitation shoe hovering just above the floor. There was no sense of urgency in its movements. There was no point in hurrying because, in the still air of the shelter complex, its infra-red sensors could detect and follow the thermal wake -- the heat 'scent' trail -- left by humans up three hours after their passage. The MANIX would work its way methodically through the complex until it picked up a thermal trail. Then it would follow it to its source and kill with

**that quiet and deadly efficiency that such machines are capable of.**

**Throughout the ages, it had killed many times before.**

**6**

**Ewen and Jenine were sitting at one of the restaurant's tables where they could keep the entrance under observation.**

**Ewen had partly cooled his soup by pouring it from bowl to bowl; his mouth was not accustomed to the feel of even warm food. At first there was the shock of heat but that disappeared immediately. He closed his eyes and allowed the rich flavours to seep into his senses. He was almost afraid to swallow for fear that the sheer heaven of each spoonful could not possibly be replicated by subsequent spoonfuls.**

**'If I'm to compare this with anything, it's like the first time we made love,' he said in wonder.**

**Jenine smiled smugly. 'Try the solid bits. They all have their own taste.'**

**Ewen trawled his spoon. The curious mixture of tiny coloured cubes dissolved in his mouth, releasing bursts of individual flavours that were beyond description. They ate in silence. The experimental amount that Jenine had measured into their bowls did not last long. She rose from the table and entered the kitchen area to refill their bowls, using a long-handled ladle to dredge the bottom of the vat so that**

**the bowls were virtually filled to the brim with reconstituted vegetables.**

**The fourth bowl slowed them both down. They experimented, sorting out individual pieces and playing a little game, trying to determine which they liked the most. Ewen decided that the little green spheres tasted the best.**

**`You know,' he said, toying with his spoon. `This reminds me of when I first tried those army rations. But there's something else...'**

**Jenine looked at him quizzically, her head cocked on one side. `Go on.'**

**`During our second year they told us that we'd never have sexual feelings like the others because we were different... That we were the GoD's chosen ones.'**

**`So?'**

**`I don't think being chosen ones has anything to do with it. It's another part of the big lie. We've changed and become like the others because we've not been eating the approved food--'**

**Ewen never finished the sentence. He heard the automatic doors open. His fast reactions saved them; he threw Jenine and himself to the floor between the tables an instant before the MANIX appeared.**

**The robot was confused. It had followed two definite heat trails into the restaurant. In one smooth movement it ranged the huge ball of heat that was rising in the kitchen area and**

fired twice. The pencil beams of plasma struck sparks off the vat's overhead steam hood. The MANIX wheeled around and let fly at the balloon of heat it could see above the tables where Ewen and Jenine were crouching. But the shapes were wrong. Its sensors turned slowly; motors humming softly as it advanced between the rows of tables and chairs, keeping to the exact centre of the lane as though following an invisible line. It knew they were here. They had to be here because there were no thermal trails leaving the restaurant.

Ewen gestured to Jenine to move. Keeping low, they crept along the aisle and under the next table. The MANIX saw the heat bubble move and fired. The beam's impact shook the table that Ewen and Jenine were crouching under. Through the forest of steel legs they could see the android's blunt levitation shoe hovering above the floor.

‘Did you get a look at its sensors?’ Jenine whispered.

‘No,’ Ewen whispered back. ‘Standing up to give it a careful visua

l examination didn't strike me as a bright idea.’

‘Infra-red.’

Ewen thought fast. ‘Okay. We'd better split up.’

Jenine wriggled backwards and knocked a chair over. She froze but the MANIX didn't respond to the sudden clatter.

‘I don't think it's got auditory sensors,’ Ewen muttered.

‘Try shouting insults at it.’

**`You're the one who's keen on experimenting with the unknown -- you shout insults at it.' He had an idea. `Keep under a table as you move -- it might break up your heat signature.'**

**The robot moved along the aisle towards the cowering fugitives. It knew something unauthorised was there because it could see the heat from their bodies, ballooning into the air above them as a telltale smear of crimson. Only the dead could escape detection by the MANIX.**

**Ewen had to be certain that the machine could not hear. He grabbed a soup bowl that had fallen to the floor and lobbed it high in the direction of the kitchen. It crashed down somewhere but the MANIX didn't respond to the sudden sound.**

**`Jenine! We can talk! It definitely can't hear us. Push the tables against one another to block it!'**

**Jenine followed Ewen's example of pushing the lightweight tables together. Chairs tumbled over as tables scraped and collided with each other. Eventually a row moved as a single mass, blocking the aisle in front of the android.**

**The MANIX's snub-nosed levitation shoe was designed to thrust obstacles aside. It ploughed into through the tangle of tables and chairs without difficulty apart from a slight reduction in speed, and kept moving towards its targets, its PD weapon spitting darts of lethal fire that seared into the table tops.**

**Ewen spotted the serving lane rope and had an idea. `Keep**



**blocking it! It slows it down!' he shouted.**

**Keeping a table above him as a shield, Ewen moved towards the serving lane, unhitched the rope and pulled it through the row of stanchions until he had the entire length coiled on the floor. He looked along the floor, through the tangle of furniture legs, and located the MANIX's whereabouts. He could also see Jenine. She was doing a good job but the robot was remorselessly forcing her to the wall.**

**`Jenine! Listen. I've got the rope. I'm going to throw one end across to you. Grab hold of it and hang on but don't show yourself!'**

**Ewen steered his table towards the MANIX, thrusting other tables and chairs out of the way. Darts of energy smacked repeated into the floor near his hands as he struggled to free a logjam.**

**`Ready!' He yelled.**

**`Okay!'**

**Ewen hurled the rope with all his strength. Plasma darts flashed past his hand. The heavy rope fell across the tables. He saw Jenine crawl into a forest of steel legs and grab the end.**

**`Got it, Ewen!'**

**`Hold on tight!'**

**`I have every confidence in your ability to laterally think us out of this one.'**

**Ewen was tempted to argue but this wasn't the time.**

**Gripping the end of the rope between his teeth, he did a fast crawl down an undisturbed aisle, pulling the rope across the table tops and tipping chairs over as he moved so that it was stretched across the MANIX's path. The android blundered into the rope. It rode up around its cylindrical body as it pulled it into a tight vee. The robot rammed its bulk against the resistance and kept moving. Ewen knew that he stood no chance of arresting the robot's progress unless he moved fast. He needed slack. That meant crashing the tables together as he worked his way towards his quarry. A quick jerk on the rope. The oscillation reached the MANIX, causing the rope to jam under the swiveling PD weapon.**

**`Pull it tight!' he yelled.**

**Jenine hauled on her slack. Two shots fired at Ewen went wide. At this point he had to take a calculated risk. He used his feet to kick tables and chairs away. He needed a clear area. The MANIX headed towards him. Holding tightly onto his end of the rope, he dived across the open space, chanced a quick glimpse above the tabletops, and saw that he now had a half turn of rope around the android's body.**

**`Jenine! Work towards me! Fast!'**

**They crashed frantically towards each other, shoving tables and chairs out of the way. The MANIX tried to aim accurately but the rope was snagged against its PD weapon. It lacked the intelligence to work out that going backwards**

would ease the tension. Instead it strained towards its targets, causing the rope to tighten its grip. Ewen saw his chance when he was four paces from the robot. He jumped to his feet, flicked hard on the rope and completed the noose. The two infra-red sensors spun and homed on him. The PD weapon swivelled towards him but the rope's drag slowed the aiming mechanism down. With a whoop of triumph, Ewen hurled himself at the MANIX and twisted the PD weapon down with both hands. The weapon spat a continuous stream of fire impotently at the floor. The android was surprisingly powerful. Ewen held on grimly, standing on its magnetic levitation shoe. The machine jiggled violently, trying to throw him off. Jenine pounced. She grabbed hold of the infra-red sensors and bent them down so that they could no longer turn.

Ewen's fingers scrabbled wildly at the panel set into the machine's body. It flew open. The android changed its tactics. It whirled and stopped, and repeated the manoeuvre but with random and violent changes in rhythm. The demented gyrations hurled Ewen backwards onto a table. The android's PD weapon started spraying indiscriminate fire. Ewen snatched up a chair as a shield and thrust it at the android. More by luck than good timing, the chair leg plunged into the opening in the android's body. There was a dull bang of high power shorting to earth followed by a blinding shower of white sparks and globs of molten metal. The chair leg had melted.

Ewen shifted the weapon in his hands and plunged another leg into the panel. There was a much weaker splatter of sparks, and the battle was over. The machine lost lift and smashed down hard on its levitation shoe. Jenine managed to jump clear as it toppled. A table buckled under the machine's weight.

The wreckage that had been the MANIX crashed to the floor and lay still. Two turns of the bright red rope were knotted below its broken sensors like a garrotte.

Ewen and Jenine stood over their vanquished foe. They stared at each and the wrecked machine, gradually getting over the shock of the encounter. Slowly their haggard expressions changed to grins of triumph.

'Well,' said Jenine, reaching for Ewen's hand for reassurance. 'If we can beat that, we can beat anything. The rope idea was clever.'

Although Ewen had no proof that Jenine's tampering with the vat and the appearance of the android were related, he secured a solemn promise from her that there would be no more prying and playing about with machinery without consultation and careful deliberation.

They packed the holdall and left the restaurant. Jenine had the coils of rope draped around her shoulders and was clutching a flask which she had found and filled with the soup. Their experience with the MANIX had taught them to exercise even greater caution. They checked the corridor

**before emerging and stopped several times to listen intently for the faint whirring that would suggest that the aggressive android had friends. They climbed several levels without incident. Despite their slow progress, Ewen was keen to go as high as possible but Jenine begged him to consider resting for the night.**

**'We've got a long way to go,' she reasoned. 'If we exhaust ourselves any further, we'll only make mistakes. We've had a long day and my legs are dropping off.'**

**Ewen conceded that Jenine was right but insisted that they press on. His resolve weakened when they reached a tempting sign that read:**

**DEEP NOVA SHELTER C. LEVEL 09. EXECUTIVE ACCOMMODATION.  
BLUE BADGES ONLY PERMITTED ON THIS LEVEL.**

**The first five doors were locked. The sixth opened into a large, comfortably-furnished apartment. The lights came on automatically when they entered. Jenine shut the discharge tube off.**

**Ewen's gaze took in the softly illuminated ceiling, the deep-pile carpet, the open door to a shower room, and the large, inviting bed. 'Large enough for you?'**

**Jenine smiled and nodded.**

**'I don't like the way the lights came on,' Ewen observed.**

**'They came on automatically in that eating place, and look at the trouble we had.'**

**Jenine ignored him. She experimented with the wall switches and discovered that the lights could be controlled at will. She also discovered that the door could be locked on the inside. There was a small table with a working hot plate set into its centre similar to the hot plate in the conference room. She tipped some of the vegetable soup into a glass jug and heated it. A search of a tiny room off the main living proved fruitful. She set the bowls and spoons on the table. Ewen tried to unpack the datapad but Jenine took it from him and returned it to the holdall. She advised him in fairly blunt terms that they were going to shower, eat and sleep, and possibly make love provided he stopped complaining about her 400 portions of vegetable soup, but in any event, do no more exploring until they had rested.**

**7**

**That night Ewen lay awake thinking about the blue dome and how close it must be now. Going over the incidents of that turbulent day and worrying about the information on his datapad not being up-to-date prevented him from sleeping. He slipped carefully from the bed to avoid waking Jenine, and set the room lighting to low. Working from memory, he revised the datapad's sketch plans. He checked the proximity of the strange nothingness on the seismographs and calculated that climbing the remaining nine levels tomorrow would take them two-thirds of the way to where the nothingness began. He**

**looked around the room.**

**So what was this huge complex they had penetrated?**

**Why was it deserted? Why wasn't it shown on the maps of Arama? What was a nova? What was so terrible about it that so many people had to shelter from it? What people? And why had an android tried to kill them?**

**So many unanswered questions.**

**His thoughts turned to the door in the chord-metro tunnel that had led them into this remarkable place. The door had been a mass of rust and had never been opened in... Years? Centuries? It was then that he realised that he had overlooked something so fundamentally obvious that he roundly castigated himself for his blindness and stupidity. The door! It held an all-important clue and he hadn't even bothered to look. He tried to picture the locking mechanism. The counterbalance was clear enough -- he could remember virtually every detail of the lever system. But what of the steel locking tongues? How had they engaged in their slots? The question assumed such importance that he considered waking Jenine. But looking at her sweet face, serene in sleep, with her arm thrown casually across his side of the bed, made him realise that he couldn't bring himself to disturb her.**

**He was about to slip back into bed when he heard a faint noise in the corridor. He pressed his ear to the door and**

wished that he had thought to pack an audio amplifier when he and Jenine had fled from the Centre.

The noise sounded like a machine trundling along the corridor. Unlike the mag-lev monster that had attacked them in the eating centre, this was a wheeled machine. Another machine rumbled by, heavier than the first one.

Ewen remained listening for several minutes until the noises sounded some way off. He set the discharge tube to a low level and cautiously opened the door. The tube wasn't needed: the corridor was flooded with light. Halfway along the passage a curious machine, low and humped, was working its way industriously along the passageway. It was armed with rotary brushes and suction tubes which it used to scour corners and crevices. No wonder all the corridors were so clean. Ewen's smile faded when the machine seemed to sense his presence. Unlike the killer android, this robot could see, hence the lights. It did a smart about turn and trundled determinedly towards him, rotary brushes whirring and suction appliances hissing menacingly. Ewen stepped back smartly into the apartment and locked the door. The cleaning android stopped outside and snuffled noisily around the threshold with its cleaning tools as though Ewen had left traces of himself behind that it found particularly offensive. After a minute it lost interest and trundled away.

The machine puzzled Ewen. In Arama people were employed as cleaners. The use of robots was limited to where the work was



**difficult or dangerous. Why were there no people in this place?**

**He slipped back into bed beside Jenine. The pleasure he derived from her closeness and warmth soon banished the worrying questions from his mind, and he slept.**

**8**

**The picture on Inman's screen was from the camera on a service android that had entered the restaurant. He sat before his monitor. His grey eyes were expressionless as he contemplated the wrecked MANIX. He drummed his fingers while considering his options, such as they were.**

**'The damage to the MANIX is commiserate with a PD weapon fired at point blank range through its inspection panel,' said the Guardian of Destiny computer.**

**Inman said nothing. So Ewen Solant and his companion had got through the door. The problem wasn't that the couple had escaped from Arama. Such escapes, though rare, had happened before and had always been dealt with in the approved manner. What was different about this escape was that Ewen Solant and his companion had entered a deep nova shelter. It had never happened before.**

**'And this is Door CM12 near Keltro,' said the computer.**

**The picture changed to the room which Ewen and Jenine had climbed into after their escape from the chord-metro tunnel.**

**The image panned slowly.**

**`As you can see,' the computer continued, `there is evidence of disturbance.'**

**`I checked the door on the metro side,' said Inman curtly.**

**`It was secure. They could not have got through it unless a service android had left it open.'**

**`None of them are programmed to touch the door,' the computer replied. `And yet there is clear evidence that the fugitives passed through this area. They are the first to escape by this route. There is a low probability that the heavy cannon caused a momentary distortion of the door and its frame that was sufficient to spring the door open.'**

**`Do you know where they are now?' Inman demanded.**

**`A maintenance unit has reported an anomaly in a Level Zero Nine executive suite.'**

**`How long will it take to transfer another MANIX?'**

**`Two hours. But the intruders are now aware of their weaknesses--'**

**`I know that!' Inman snapped. He checked himself. He was in danger of getting angry with a machine.**

**`There is an available option to stop them,' said the computer. `And that is to send a police squad into the shelter complex.'**

**Inman dismissed the suggestion out of hand. The enthusiasm of the police for shoot-outs could result in serious damage to the shelter.**

**`Or a squad made up of crewmen,' the computer ventured.**

**That too met with scathing rejection. Inman was not prepared to expose precious project personnel to the risk of facing an armed couple in the shelter. The lives of skilled men and women measured against the lives of two Aramans or Armageddonists? The equation didn't balance.**

**The Guardian of Destiny computer considered this. It agreed and suggested: `They have reached Level 9. They seem determined to go even higher. Therefore there is only one other option left.'**

**`Show me.'**

**The information on the screen changed. Inman leaned forward and examined the map that the computer had produced. He pressed his bloodless lips together and decided, with some reluctance, that the computer was right.**

**9**

**Ewen was deaf to Jenine's protestations that it was insane to return to the lowest level. He insisted that he had to see the door that they had come through came through.**

**`But why?' Jenine had demanded.**

**`To see if it's designed to automatically lock when it's shut from the outside.'**

**`Is it important?'**

**`Yes,' Ewen replied, picking up the restaurant's coiled**

rope. `If it automatically locks when it's shut on the outside, it's possible that this place is really part of Arama that's been forgotten. But if the door can only be closed from the inside, then the people that built this complex, or their descendants, may still be in here somewhere. If they're not, then there has to be another way out. Lateral thinking.'

Jenine gave in. They retraced their footsteps down through the levels to the lowest level and the flight of stairs that had so surprised them the previous day. Ewen turned up the discharge tube's brightness when they entered the steel-lined room that they had climbed into.

`Something's different,' Ewen muttered, dropping the holdall and the rope on the floor.

`Looks the same to me,' said Jenine. She went forward and lifted the hatch.

`Can't you see what's missing!'

Jenine glanced around the room. `No.'

`The length of steel conduit we climbed up! I put it against that wall and now it's gone!'

`Are you sure?'

`Of course I'm sure. I remember thinking that we might need it in case we had to return this way.'

They knelt by the open hatch and peered down into the switch room where they had huddled together, waiting for the final plasma assault on the steel door that had never come.

The light fell on the contactor housing that they had stood on. Beside that was the length of conduit they had used to climb out of the switch room. It was in exactly the same place, but with its end unbent.

Jenine broke the silence that followed their discovery.

'I'm tempted to say that maybe we dreamed it all.' She tried to sound flippant but there was no mistaking the strained note in her voice.

Ewen glanced around the room. He lashed the end of the rope to a substantial-looking wall bracket and climbed down into the switch room. Jenine held the discharge tube through the hatch for him while he inspected the conduit without touching it. There was no doubt that it was lying in precisely the same position as yesterday. He picked it up. As near as he could judge, it was exactly the same length as the old piece whose end he had bent to form a cranked end. He glanced up, caught Jenine's eye and shook his head in bewilderment.

'It looks like a new length of pipe,' he said.

'See if there's any scratch marks on the door where we bent the pipe,' Jenine suggested.

Ewen looked at door's locking mechanism and confirmed that around the strongest lever were unmistakable fresh marks from their exertions of the previous day. He checked the way the locking tongues fitted into their slots -- the reason for

**this return visit. The design of the door was such that it was not self-locking when closed from the chord-metro tunnel side: to lock the door meant that it had to be closed from the inside.**

**It meant that there was another way out of this place.**

**It also meant that, perhaps, they were not alone.**

**10**

**The restaurant was like the switch room: everything had been restored. The tables and chairs were once again in neat rows. There was even a new rope threaded through the stanchions that marked off the self-service lane. None of the tabletops had burn marks from the MANIX's PD weapon. Of the MANIX itself, there was no sign although Jenine did find traces of burn marks on the floor where the android had blazed away when Ewen had pounced on it.**

**Just being in the place where they had been attacked made them both edgy. Jenine agreed that there was no point in examining the vat in which she had cooked 400 portions of vegetable soup. They were glad to get out of the place.**

**They reached Level 9, where they had spent the night, and continued up to Level 1.**

**At Level 1 there were no more stairs.**

**`Let's rest,' Jenine pleaded. `My legs are dropping off.'**

**`There's nothing for it but to try the elevator,' Ewen declared.**

**They moved to elevator doors. Jenine sat on the floor and watched Ewen. No matter how much he punched the controls, sometimes trying random sequences, the wide, concertina-like doors remained firmly closed. He unpacked some tools and unscrewed the touch control's escutcheon plate with the idea of over-riding the switches. A few tests established that there was no GoD power supply to the system.**

**The discharge tube that they had been using ever since they had entered the shelter complex suddenly expired. Jenine dug into the holdall and started the second tube. They were now down to one spare. When that was exhausted, they would be condemned to eternal darkness unless they spent the rest of their days in the executive suite on Level 9.**

**'We'll have to check every door,' said Ewen grimly.**

**'There's got to be a way up.'**

**It was easier said than done. The very first door opened into a huge warehouse whose racks were laden with bedding packs and household utensil kits. Doors from this main warehouse gallery opened into smaller storerooms crammed with electrical spares and appliances, all sealed in tough, airtight bags. It took thirty-minutes to search the entire warehouse complex. By the time they had finished checking another warehouse that seemed to consist of nothing but endless shelves of vacuum-packed refrigeration equipment and associated spares, they were footsore and depressed. An hour**

later they re-emerged into the corridor from the third warehouse gallery, having conducted a fruitless search among rows and rows of bulk chemical supplies in giant storage bins.

They rested in the corridor, sitting on the floor with their backs propped against the wall opposite the elevator doors. Ewen tried again to open them but the attempt proved fruitless. It infuriated him to have to admit defeat. They debated whether they should speed up the search by splitting up.

‘It means burning two discharge tubes at once,’ Jenine pointed out. ‘And what if another of those androids turns up? Neither of us could cope with it by ourselves.’

‘The other point,’ said Ewen, ‘is that for all we know, the exit could be from a lower level. There’s hundreds of places lower down that we’ve only given a cursory check.’ At that moment something wholly unexpected happened. The elevator touch control panel that Ewen had dismantled and reassembled, suddenly lit up. They both stared at the phenomenon in surprise.

‘I have this feeling,’ said Ewen tiredly, ‘that if I get up, it’ll go out.’

But the light didn’t go out when he rose. He touched the call panel, not expecting anything to happen. The elevator responded by humming quite loudly for several moments. There were multiple metallic clunks of safety interlocks being



released, and the concertina doors slid open. Normally Jenine hated lifts, but this one was a large, brightly-lit car that could comfortably hold a 100 people. They grabbed the holdall and the coiled rope, and entered.

`Maybe you disturbed something when you pulled it apart?'

Jenine commented, looking curiously around.

The control panel showed that there was one level above them. It was marked `Station'.

`Station?' Ewen queried. `Surely the station is at the lowest level?'

`Don't argue with it,' Jenine advised. `I'm sure it knows more about the layout of this weird place than we do.'

It seemed sensible advice so Ewen touched the pad. The doors closed. The car jerked upwards, hummed briefly, stopped, and the doors opened again.

They stepped out of the elevator into a well-lit but tiny end of the line station. They regarded the passenger capsule with suspicion. It was large -- a hundred-seater unit very similar to the chord-metro passenger capsules in Arama. Its sliding doors were open, its interior lights bright and inviting. The mag-lev system was not energized so that the capsule was sitting on the rails with its nose almost touching the blind end of its tunnel. There was only one track.

`Well, wherever we are, we're at the end of the line,'

**Jenine remarked.**

**'Or the beginning of the line,' Ewen reminded her.**

**'Lateral thinking was never your strong point, Jenine. So what do we do now? This all looks a bit too convenient. A lift that suddenly works; a train lit-up with its doors open.'**

**Jenine answered the question by stepping aboard and plonking herself down in a seat near the door. She gave Ewen a withering look. 'Positive action was never your strong point, Ewen.'**

**Ewen sat beside her. 'I was about to suggest that we looked for a map of this line.'**

**'Ewen -- just for once, forget about your stupid maps and plans. Sooner or later, this train is going to go somewhere.' It was sooner.**

**The doors slid shut and the car lifted off the tracks as power flowed through its linear motors. It slipped smoothly into its tunnel and accelerated rapidly. Jenine nudged Ewen and pointed. At the end of the capsule a destination sign proclaimed:**

**NEXT STATION -- DNS D -- JOURNEY TIME 1.55.**

**The train gave no indication of slowing down. A brief flash of lights and a glimpse of a deserted platform. The sign changed:**

**NEXT STATION -- DNS E -- JOURNEY TIME 3.30.**

**Another fleeting glimpse of a platform. By now the capsule**

**was rocketing through its tunnel at a phenomenal speed, much faster than even the Araman chord-metro non-stop expresses.**

**As if acting independently of their owners, Ewen's and Jenine's hands sought each other's company.**

**NEXT STATION -- CHALLENGER THREE PROTOTYPE RECREATION CENTRE. JOURNEY TIME 10.45.**

**`What's a Challenger Three?' Jenine queried.**

**Ewen fished out the datapad. It proved useless. He tried entering estimates of the distance they had travelled and gave up. The train slowed slightly although there was still five-minutes journey time left. And then they both realised why. The capsule was doing what none of the metros ever did: It was climbing a steep gradient.**

**After two minutes uphill climb, Ewen and Jenine looked at each other in mounting apprehension. There was nothing to be said; each was aware of the other's thoughts: if the blue dome extended this far out, then they had to be very close to it by now.**

**The digits on the journey time indicator registered a row of zeros just as the train lost speed and hissed into the station. It was the end of the line. There were six blind platforms. Power was reversed through the mag-lev motors for smooth braking, and the capsule settled on the tracks.**

**`Journey's end,' said Ewen unnecessarily, standing. He slung the holdall and the cumbersome coils of rope from his**

shoulder.

'Do we need to lug that rope around anymore?' Jenine asked.

'It's brought us luck.'

The doors opened and they stepped onto the platform. It was similar to an Araman chord-metro terminus except all the platforms were deserted, and the curved roof was much lower. The air had a musty scent as though it had not been circulated through air-conditioners for many years. The strip lights were still brightening as if they had only just been switched on.

They walked onto the small concourse that spanned the blind ends of the platforms and looked for displays or maps that might indicate where the other lines went, but there were none. The only passenger indicator was a flashing arrow pointing to a subway. There was no other obvious exit so Ewen and Jenine followed it. At the end of the short tunnel was an escalator. They stood staring at it for some moments, noting how the steps materialised out of the ground and that the speed of the moving handgrip seemed to be synchronized with the speed of the treads.

'I think it's friendly,' said Jenine, and stepped onto the rising treads.

Ewen followed. It wasn't so different from the travelators although they both agreed that the sensation of travelling up and along at the same time was weird.

**As the steps flattened out, so the splendour of the huge hall unfolded before them. It was as dramatic a method of arrival as it was possible to imagine. They stepped off the escalator and stood at the top of the moving stairs, clutching their belongings protectively to themselves, while gazing around in awe.**

**11**

**The hall they were standing in was about the size of one of the smaller domes in the Centre, but there the similarity ended. The entire area was filled with amusement devices and machinery on a scale they found hard to accept. There were amusement centres in Arama, mostly for children, but nothing as big as this. Here the strict rules about the conservation of space, that most valuable of the GoD's gifts, were ignored. There were rides ranging from children's carousals to a towering Ferris wheel, rows of silent sideshows shrouded in gaudy striped material of every conceivable clashing colour, and open-sided canopies over clusters of strange arcade machines. At the edge of the dome was the trackway of a roller coaster, humping, twisting, looping, and doubling back on itself around the periphery like a monster serpent. The couple crossed to the octopus ride and gaped in wonder at the huge span of its drooping arms. Jenine gripped Ewen's arm and pointed to the pay booth**

where a man in brightly-coloured party makeup and wearing a baggy, bright crimson fun suit was sitting. They went closer and discovered that he was an animatron. His fixed, leering smile and glassy stare was determined by the settings of the facial muscle motors beneath his artificial skin when he had been switched off.

`He's good,' said Jenine, looking closely at the man.

`Much more advanced than our animatrons.

Ewen agreed. They had unconsciously decided that the people who had built this bizarre place were very different from their fellow citizens.

From the octopus they moved to the guard rail of a crazy, loop-the-loop ride and marvelled at the convoluted route of the tubular rails. They followed the guard rail until they came to the station where the low, bullet-shaped ride cars were sitting in an orderly line. An animatron was in the frozen attitude of checking the safety restraints of non-existent passengers in the first car.

His companion caused Ewen and Jenine to stop and stare.

The lanky animatron was standing by the pay booth, his face deathly white. His cheeks had been rouged with blotches of bright crimson. His nose was a grotesque scarlet sphere that appeared to have been stuck over his real nose. His leering smile had been painted on, his eyebrows were bold arches of black to create an expression of perpetual surprise. Doleful red diamonds around his eyes conveyed sorrow and pathos. He

wore a conical white hat and white gloves, and his sequined glitter suit was fastened with a row of absurd fluffy white buttons.

Ewen was keen to inspect the big wheel. As they moved on to pass the apparition, Jenine froze.

‘Ewen! He winked!’

‘Don't be silly. Everything's switched off.’

‘I tell you he winked!’ Jenine insisted. She marched over to the strange figure and was about to jab it when it swept off its hat and gave a jerky low bow, revealing a dome-like polished bald pate that was surrounded by a brush-like fringe of ridiculous black hair that stuck straight out.

‘I am the clown of the amusement park,’ said the figure in a high-pitched, squeaky voice. ‘I am the host to all our honoured visitors. Ask and you shall be informed.’ He straightened and replaced his hat, his glassy eyes staring straight ahead.

The couple stared, dumfounded at the animatron.

‘I am the clown of the amusement park,’ the figure repeated, and went through the exaggerated bow again. This time his movements had lost their jerkiness, as though mechanisms that had remained immobile for years had regained a natural fluidity. ‘I am your most honoured host, kind sirs.’

The animatron fell silent and his face became immobile.

**The lugubrious eyes seemed to stare through the couple.**

**Ewen found his voice. `What is this place?'**

**`The amusement park, kind sir.'**

**`What's it for?'**

**`It's for the edification of travellers and the enjoyment of children through the long years, kind sir. And their children. And their children's children, to the ends of the universe and the end of time. All rides guaranteed to thrill but not to harm. The Tower of Dreams and Delight and Discovery is recommended for those with faint hearts who need time to adjust to our thrills and spills, honorable sir.' The clown lapsed into silence again.**

**`How can we ride on anything when everything is switched off?' Ewen queried, not really believing that this conversation was taking place.**

**The clown's despairing gesture of smacking his forehead with the heel of his palm caused both of them to forget the bizarre situation and laugh. `Forgive me, kind sir. I'm forgetting myself. It's been so long. Wait...! Watch...!'**

**The entire amusement park suddenly came to life. Strange, piping music blared, and myriads of coloured lights that decorated the rides began sequential flashing to heighten the impression of movement. The octopus started turning, lifting its arms; an empty roller coaster roared by overhead, and the Ferris wheel turned -- patterns of lights racing back and forth along its giant spokes.**



**`All the rides are free, honorable sir,' squeaked the clown, waving his conical hat around. `But try the Tower of Dreams and Delight and Discovery.' His thin voice was barely audible above the music and uproar that was steadily increasing in volume.**

**`Where is it!' Jenine yelled.**

**`Follow your dream, honorable sirs. Follow your dream.'**

**`Where's the outdoors!' Ewen demanded, yelling above the mounting cacophony.**

**`We don't have such a ride, honorable sir.'**

**`It's not a ride!' Ewen shouted. `It's a huge blue dome!'**

**`All rides guaranteed to thrill but not to harm. The Tower of Dreams and Delight and Discovery is recommended for those with faint hearts who need time to adjust to our thrills and spills, honorable sir.'**

**`Where's the outdoors?'**

**The octopus whirred and the big wheel spun faster.**

**`WHERE'S THE OUTDOORS!' Ewen screamed.**

**But the clown merely repeated in its squeaky voice that was now nearly drowned out, `It's for the edification of travellers and the enjoyment of children through the long years, kind sir. And their children. And their children's children, to the ends of the universe and the end of time.**

**All rides guaranteed to thrill but not to harm. The Tower of Dreams and Delight and Discovery is recommended for those**

**with faint hearts who need time to adjust to our thrills and spills, honorable sir.'**

**Ewen grabbed the clown by its ludicrous suit. He shook it, and would have hit it had Jenine not dragged him away. `Leave it!' she cried. `It's an animatron, you idiot!'**

**The arms of the octopus extended until they were flashing low over their heads. The crazily strobing lights on the arms burned vivid coloured arcs on their retinas. The wind from the passage of the whirling passenger capsules whipped at them. The deafening honking music smashed at their senses. `Let's get away from here!' Jenine cried.**

**They ran, stooping low to escape the flailing arms of the maddened octopus, and had to leap aside where the roller coaster swooped low and seemed to hurl straight at them. The insane music became a mind-shredding, numbing roar that made rational thought impossible. They blundered into a sideshow.**

**`Roll up! Roll up!' screamed a glassy-eyed barker. `See the six-armed monster! See the man-woman! See the two-headed baby! See Iron Stomach Ivan eating glass! Roll up! Roll up! Roll up!'**

**Suddenly they were surrounded by marching animatrons in bright uniforms, their blaring brass instruments adding to the nightmare. They cannoned off the stiff-marching soldiers. Jenine clutched her ears as a pounding kettle drum pushed her aside. She groaned in terror and would have sank to her knees had Ewen not grabbed her and snatched her clear. A message**

**jumped out of the kaleidoscope of whirling images:**

**TOWER OF DREAMS AND DELIGHT AND DISCOVERY!**

**The sign was picked out in dancing, flashing letters at the base of circular structure. Ewen forced himself to concentrate and saw the letters constantly rearranging themselves to spell out different messages.**

**TOWER OF DREAMS AND DELIGHT AND DISCOVERY!**

**THIS WAY FOR YOUR TRIP TO HEAVEN!**

**They staggered towards the building. A small opening in its base seemed to offer a beckoning sanctuary from the hellish bedlam of the amusement park. They stumbled through the light-polarizing doorway and found themselves in semi-darkness and a sudden, merciful silence. They clung tightly to each other for mutual assurance until they realised that the torment really had ended.**

**'Well,' said Jenine, recovering her senses. 'Whoever thought of this as an amusement park had a particularly warped sense of humour.'**

**Whatever they were in, it was lit by soft overhead lights that imparted a red glow. As Ewen's eyes adjusted to the gloom, he could discern a waiting ride train that consisted of brightly-coloured, two-seater car pods strung together like beads on a garish necklace. The shaped seats looked comfortable and inviting. There were similar rides in Arama although none were as elaborate as this. 'Did you make out**

anything of the outside of this place?' he asked.

'Some sort of tower that seemed to reach the top of the dome,' said Jenine shakily. 'But I didn't get a good look.'

'Please take your seats, crewmen,' said a polite male voice. 'There are others waiting.'

'Crewmen?' Jenine queried. 'What does crewman mean?'

Ewen looked anxiously at the lead car. Beyond it he could see the faint gleam of tubular rails that seemed to curve upwards into the unknown. He decided that anything with rails in this amusement park was not to be trusted.

'Please take your seats, crewmen,' the voice repeated.

'There are others waiting.'

'What shall we do?' Ewen asked.

Jenine stepped into the lead car and sat. 'I've no idea what will happen or where this thing will take us,' she said resolutely. 'But nothing can be as bad as out there. Come on. Don't keep the other crewmen waiting.'

Ewen dropped the holdall and the rope in the car's footwell and sat beside her.

'In future,' said Jenine acidly, 'I suggest you don't talk to strange animatrons in funny suits.'

'You were the one the thing winked at,' Ewen reminded her.

'It winked at both of us. It's just that I'm more observant than you and happened to see it.'

The beginnings of their dispute was interrupted by padded shoulder and waist restraints swinging automatically into

**position.**

**`First the voyage of discovery,' said the voice. It added ominously, `Do not be alarmed, crewmen; you cannot possibly fall out of your seat.'**

**The car started moving. The pods were mounted on gimbals so that the seats remained level while the car climbed the steep, almost invisible rails. It gathered speed. They entered a tunnel, making Jenine regret her impulsiveness, and continued climbing. Rings of light projected onto the walls of the tunnel swept towards them, giving an illusion of increasing speed.**

**`Our voyage of discovery will take us to the most distant regions of the heavens, fellow crewmen,' said the voice. `It will be a long trip, so just relax and enjoy the journey...'**

**`Did you notice he said "heavens", plural?' Jenine's whisper betrayed her fear of being in a confined space. `What do you suppose that means?'**

**`I shouldn't read anything into it, crewman,' Ewen answered. `It's only a ride.'**

**`I think this whole thing is something more than a huge amusement park,' said Jenine worriedly. `There was that sign at the station. Challenger. Prototype. Challenging what?'**

**`Our patience?' Ewen suggested.**

**`It's certainly challenging my claustrophobia,' Jenine muttered apprehensively.**

The lights became a blur as they raced towards the couple. Ewen twisted his shoulder out of its padded restraint and touched the side of the tunnel to reassure himself that they were travelling slowly. To his surprise, they were moving quite fast. Even more surprising, his fingertips encountered what felt like rock. He wished he had taken a good look at the outside of the tower to determine its height before seeking refuge in its depths.

The seats levelled out and, without warning, all the lights went out and the car stopped. They waited for something to happen. It was a situation they were familiar with. Near the Centre was a children's amusement park whose rides broke down frequently, requiring the attentions of technician-students.

'Maybe it's part of the ride,' Ewen suggested when Jenine began to fret after five minutes. 'Sensory deprivation.'

'Don't be absurd,' she retorted in the darkness, her voice sounding unnaturally strained. 'Why don't you use your prized lateral thinking, Ewen? A speed illusion has been used so far. The last thing you'd want to do on a ride is deliberately switch off all the effects and wreck the illusion. Something's gone wrong.'

Another five minutes passed, and Ewen admitted that Jenine had a point. She rummaged in the holdall and switched on a discharge tube at a low level so that they could take stock of their surroundings without being dazzled. They were in a

narrow tunnel at the very apex of the ride. The passenger pods behind them were hanging down into the tunnel at an alarmingly steep angle. The view in front was equally disturbing, as they discovered when they wriggled out of the padded restraints and peered into the gloom. All the cars seemed to be defying gravity until they saw the pulleys and notched plastic guide cables that held the cars firmly against the tubular rails.

‘Similar to the rides we used to fix,’ said Jenine. She gestured to one side where there was a wide recess cut into the rock. It led to a door marked:

**EMERGENCY EXIT.**

‘Well at least we’re by the rescue point if they never get this thing moving again,’ Ewen commented. ‘Notice anything odd?’

She glanced around, holding the discharge tube high.

‘What?’

‘Rock. We must be right through the top of the dome.’

Jenine touched the roof of the tunnel. ‘Good point. So what does that prove?’

Ewen stood and vaulted onto the ledge. He held his hand out to Jenine. ‘Come on.’

‘Don’t be stupid, Ewen. Get in. If this thing starts moving--’

‘It’s not going to start moving so long as we stay on it.’

**`Ah. Suddenly you can predict the future?'**

**`I think I can in this case,' said Ewen evenly. `Why do you think the car, this particular pod, stopped right here, beside an emergency exit?'**

**`Because it's a trap!'**

**`If it is, we could have been trapped long ago in the elevator or on the train. Maybe we're being steered. If so, these cars will stay here as long as we do. You've always been the one to jump in feet first without looking. Now it's my turn, so come on.'**

**Jenine opened her mouth to argue but saw the hopelessness of their situation. She relented, passed Ewen the holdall and rope, and accepted his hand. The moment her weight was out of the car, the power came on and it moved off. The entire train of ten cars hissed smoothly passed the ledge where they were standing and vanished into the darkness.**

**Jenine held a threatening fist under Ewen's nose. `Don't even think of saying, "I told you so".'**

**`Now would I do that?'**

**Jenine's smile changed to a puzzled frown. She wrinkled her nose. `What an odd smell.'**

**Ewen inhaled. `Smells like something decomposing. A chemical reaction somewhere.' He turned his attention to the door.**

**`Now we discover that it's locked,' Jenine muttered.**

**`It won't be.'**



**But it was locked. Ewen pulled, pushed, and even threw his weight against the door, but it refused to budge.**

**`Obviously we're not meant to use the door,' he commented ruefully.**

**Jenine said nothing. They both saw the grille above the door at the same time. Ewen made a stirrup of his hands for Jenine to stand on as she shone the discharge tube through the bars.**

**`Can't see much,' she reported. `It's a sort of rectangular vent. It goes up at a shallow angle of about twenty degrees. And this is where the smell's coming from. And the air's quite cold too.'**

**`See if the grille can be pulled out or something,' Ewen suggested.**

**`It looks solid.'**

**`If we're meant to use it, there must be a way of opening it,' he reasoned.**

**Jenine tugged at the grille, and gasped when it disappeared noisily by grating sideways into a recess. `Your lateral thinking's doing the business,' she commented.**

**`Is it big enough to crawl through?'**

**`Yes. But I don't think I could--'**

**Ewen cut off her argument by bracing his back against the door and lifting her higher so that she could scramble through the opening.**

**`Ewen -- I can't.'**

**`You said that it was wide enough.'**

**`Yes, I know.' Jenine was unable to hide the tremor in her voice. `You don't understand. I just can't.'**

**`I do understand, Jenine. And I know you can. Close your eyes and climb in. Or would you rather I went first?'**

**Hating herself for showing her weakness, Jenine scrambled through the opening. She twisted around. Ewen's encouraging smile made her feel better. He passed her the holdall and the heavy coils of rope, and grabbed her hand. Once he had a grip on the edge of the opening, he was able to haul himself up.**

**The ventilation duct, if that was what it was, had a rectangular cross-section that had been cut through the rock. At this point it was just wide enough to accommodate them side by side. As Jenine had reported, it sloped gently upwards and there was a chill draught that bore the strange smell.**

**Ewen sniffed hard. `It's like the smell that you get when gardeners cut back the palm fronds, or when the grass is mown,' he remarked.**

**`Before we do anything,' said Jenine firmly, `we ought to jam that grille open. It slid open by itself, therefore it can slide closed by itself.'**

**As if to demonstrate the truth of her statement, the grille chose that moment to rattle closed behind them. Ewen twisted around in the confined space and wrestled frantically**

**with the steel bars, but the heavy grille was firmly locked into its grooves.**

**He looked ruefully at Jenine. The cold light of the discharge tube she was holding caught the jade green chill in her eyes.**

**'Well... That's done away very neatly with the need for a debate about our options, hasn't it?' she said caustically.**

**'It would seem so,' Ewen admitted.**

**'There's no "seem" about it. If there's another grille ahead, then we're sunk.' There was suppressed panic in her voice at the prospect of being trapped in the duct.**

**'Let's worry about that if we find one,' Ewen suggested.**

**'If it makes you happier, I don't mind going first.'**

**Jenine's reaction was as Ewen expected: she rolled onto her stomach without a word and began crawling up the rough-hewn slope, holding the light before her. Ewen draped the coils of rope around his neck and followed, dragging the holdall behind him. He knew that for Jenine, crawling along a narrow, dark tunnel with grilles slamming shut had to be the worst manifestation of her fears. Her remarkable courage caused his love for her to overflow.**

**They rested after ten-minutes. Their tough trousers could cope with the floor's rough surface, but it was hard on their hands. The smell of decay was stronger. And now that they weren't exerting themselves, they realised that the air**

temperature was noticeably lower. They resumed their long, slow climb.

‘Groove in the sides and floor!’ Jenine warned. She scrambled forward to give Ewen room, and twisted around, her face tight with concern when she heard the click of relay-switches. ‘Quickly!’

The grille slammed down behind Ewen, narrowly missing his foot but trapping the holdall on the far side.

‘Now we’ve lost everything!’ Jenine snapped angrily. ‘I told you to be quick!’

‘We haven’t lost everything,’ said Ewen patiently. ‘Hold the light still for a minute.’

He reached through the bars and unpacked the holdall, pulling their food and tools through the grille one by one.

The only item that was too large to pass through the bars was the datapad which he was forced to abandon. Once the holdall was empty, he crushed it flat and wriggled it through the grille. ‘Lateral thinking,’ he commented, repacking the bag.

‘Okay. Let’s get moving.’

Jenine smiled. She slipped her hand in his hand and squeezed it briefly. ‘Sorry,’ she said.

The gradient of the long duct gradually flattened out.

Ewen stayed close behind Jenine. She suddenly gave a little exclamation of annoyance and stopped.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Something buzzed against my face. A fly.’

**`It won't hurt you.'**

**`I hate them,' Jenine retorted.**

**`Just ignore it.'**

**They crawled along the strange duct for a further ten minutes, not speaking until Jenine stopped again.**

**`The tunnel has come to end,' she reported with immense relief. `It opens into a sort of small cavern.'**

**Ewen squeezed alongside her and studied the cave with the aid of the discharge tube. They were both reluctant to leave the duct until they realised that they were kneeling across another groove. They both heard the faint click of hidden switches and scrambled into the cavern. A grille slid down, solid and immovable, barring their return route. They climbed stiffly to their feet and looked around the narrow cave. Jenine held the discharge tube high and moved it about to throw light into the shadows around the walls and roof. Her grip on Ewen's hand was almost painful. A recess at the back of the cave defied the light by remaining dark and forbidding. They crept towards it and saw that the cave turned through ninety degrees for two paces before coming to a dead end. The light spilled onto someone asleep at the far end of the turning. The still figure, wearing a grey one-piece work suit, was lying with its back to them, knees drawn up in the foetal position.**

**`Hallo,' said Ewen tentatively.**

**The sleeping form didn't stir.**

**`Hallo! Wake up. Company!'**

**The sleeper slept on.**

**Ewen knelt. He put his hand on the sleeper's shoulder and was about to give a gentle shake when he realised that there no substance beneath his hand: no shoulder; no flesh; only a knobby, alien hardness. There was a creaking rustle as figure rolled onto its back and a skull, wearing a mask of drum-tight, desiccated skin, grinned up at them.**

**Ewen grabbed the discharge tube from Jenine just as she was about to drop it. He pushed her away from the apparition, not so much to protect her, but because it was narrow in the cave; he had actually touched the thing and wanted to get away from it even more than she did.**

**For a moment they stood in silence, breathing hard, not sure what do, their unspoken fear that further exploring would lead to more grisly discoveries.**

**The icy, uneven draught was now very strong. It was coming from the darkened opposite end of the cavern, where the light was swallowed by blackness. More than anything else, it was the biting cold on her face that caused Jenine's courage to desert her. She had never known real cold. She clung to Ewen as they advanced towards the unknown.**

**`What's wrong with the air-conditioning?' she whispered.**

**`Why does it blow in such strong gusts?'**

**Ewen was about to answer, but the words were frozen in his**

throat by a low moaning noise that rose in pitch to a ghastly siren shriek of torment. The couple gripped each other in mutual terror, their hearts pounding in unison as the terrible noise rose and fell in harmony with the gusts of winds that scoured the cavern. Despite his terror, Ewen kept a sufficiently tight on his reason to deduce that the noise was coming from a long way away. Gradually the eerie sound died away to the low moaning, and then ceased altogether. He eased Jenine's grip on him.

`All over,' he whispered.

Ewen dropped the rope, glad to be relieved of its weight, and moved towards the source of the wind. Jenine was loathe to let go of him; she didn't want to be alone. Their feet crunched on gravel. He looked down. It was like the loose, broken ground he had seen in the battle caverns. They stopped, sensing an awesome abyss yawning before them. There was a strange hissing and dragging sound far below that rose and fell. This was interspersed with echoing booms that reached up through the darkness. Close to their left something unseen and frightening thrashed dementedly in harmony with the wind. The sounds were like no other that they had ever heard before.

`Turn out the light!'

Jenine did so. The darkness that closed in on the couple was terrifying in its intensity. She shivered, this time more

from fear than the cold. `Ewen... I'm really frightened now. Everything's wrong... Even our voices sound wrong. We must be in a huge dome.'

Ewen looked up. In that terrifying moment he knew where they were. His senses reeled as the awesome realization swamped his reason. `This is it,' he said hoarsely.

`The outdoors?'

`Yes.'

Jenine couldn't see where he was staring. `But it's black! Everything's in darkness! This can't be the outdoors!'

`Look up,' said Ewen. `But slowly...'

Jenine looked up. Despite the protective closeness of Ewen's arm around her, she gave a little cry of terror. What she saw was the very reversal of her phobia. That fear was always present although she had learned to contain it, but what lay before her now stirred a sick panic of a strength that she knew was unconquerable.

She saw stars.

## **PART 8**

### **Outdoors**

#### **1**

As their eyes adjusted to the dark, so more and more stars appeared until the rash of millions of shining points of light filled the sky and cowed their reason. Although there



was no reference point or parallax movement to enable Ewen to judge the distances involved, he instinctively sensed that he was looking out on a void that was totally beyond his comprehension. In the clear night air, the myriads of constellations and star clusters raining down light, bore a gift -- the faintest glimmer of understanding, although the collective brilliance of the stars did nothing to alleviate the terrors of the enveloping darkness. The icy wind beat against the couple, forcing them back into the shelter of the cave where they crouched behind an outcrop, huddled together to keep warm, too scared to venture any deeper where the mummified corpse lay.

For a while they were silent, each alone in the turmoil of their thoughts as the incomprehensible cold seeped insidiously into their bones.

‘It’ll be easier when daylight comes,’ Ewen whispered as Jenine pressed herself tightly against him.

‘It’s the wrong time now for darkness,’ she answered, struggling desperately to make her voice sound steady. ‘It should be light now, Ewen. There are no zargon lights here. There’s nothing here except darkness.’ She shivered and tried to bury her face in her collar.

‘There must be a system that projects those lights onto the dome,’ Ewen reasoned. ‘If that works, the zargon lights should work too.’

**But Jenine would not be placated. `This place isn't like any other dome. It's not meant for people to see. It's the afterworld for the dead.' Her misery fed on itself and she started to cry. `Maybe we are dead. The nursery rhymes are right afterall. This is our punishment for rejecting the GoD.'**

**Ewen shifted his body to give her a little more protection from the freezing blasts that sought out every corner of the cave. `I'm sorry, Jenine... I should never have involved you in all this.'**

**\* \* \* \***

**An hour passed. The wind gradually dropped, eventually dying away altogether. The respite from the freezing gusts restored a small measure of their flagging spirits. The strange hiss and booming noise became quieter, but perhaps that was because they were getting used to it. They tried eating biscuits but their lack of water aggravated their thirst.**

**After a while Jenine's regular breathing told Ewen that she was asleep. He eased his body into a more comfortable position, moving with great care to avoid waking her, and eventually dozed off.**

**A painful cramp in his calf woke him with a start. As he leaned forward to massage his leg, he saw that there was a faint, barely discernable flush of light in the darkness at the cave's opening. Perhaps it was his eyes playing tricks. He closed them, counted slowly to one hundred, and opened**

them again. The light had brightened noticeably so that the faint grey of the sky was framed by the blackness of the cave.

‘Jenine!’ He shook her awake. ‘Look! Zargon lights! They’re coming on!’

She was awake in an instant, staring at the stain of light. Together they crept to the opening and gazed out of the cave. The world before them was divided into two halves. The upper half was becoming lighter and the stars were going out while the lower half remained shrouded in darkness. The boundary between the two was a hard, horizontal line. Like the stars, Ewen sensed that the boundary was at a great distance. Something flitted across the sky and disappeared below the dividing line into the blackness.

‘A bird!’ Jenine gasped in horror. ‘Did you see it?’

‘It didn’t look right,’ said Ewen. ‘It looked like those kids’ glider things.’

Jenine shook her head vehemently. She was badly frightened. The only machines that flew in Arama were children’s toys -- mostly fixed wing gliders or balloons.

‘That thing had wings that flapped! Surely you saw that?’

‘I saw it them,’ Ewen admitted.

Another bat wheeled swiftly against the sky and vanished.

Jenine gave a little moan deep in her throat.

‘They don’t look like birds,’ said Ewen, taking her hand

**and squeezing it. `And they're not giant flies. I don't think they could harm us.'**

**`Whatever they are, they look real enough to me,' said Jenine grimly, watching another bat glide towards the cliff face.**

**A line of golden light spread along the horizon. For the first time they saw that the opening of their cave was set into a cliff face. Ewen looked down and saw a frightening flash of white-flecked water swirling and booming against the rocks far below. Jenine's nails were digging painfully into his arm. She was breathing irregularly, as though the drawing of each breath required a conscious effort.**

**The fuzzy outline of the mysterious, shadowy shape to their left that had thrashed in the wind, hardened slightly to that of a tree, although it was nothing like the graceful palms of Arama. As the light brightened, they drew instinctively back from the awesome drop before them. Ewen preferred not to think about what would have happened had he gone blundering out of the cave. A seagull wheeled past them and uttered a shrill cry.**

**`That's a bird!' Jenine cried. `That's definitely a bird!**

**So huge! Oh, Ewen -- this is a terrible place!**

**More birds appeared but by now Jenine and Ewen were too distracted by the splendour of the coming dawn to notice them.**

**Despite the terrors of their surroundings, the**

strengthening, reddish-golden glow captivated them. This was nothing like the dawns of Arama in which the entire interior of the domes brightened evenly as the zargon lights came on. Here the glorious light spread slowly from a horizon that seemed an impossible distance away. The strengthening glow gradually filled the dark, imagination-filled shadows of the mysterious terrain below. It was the vastness of this place that both defeated and challenged their imaginations. Hitherto the greatest distance either of them had ever seen was by standing at the edge of a large dome and looking across to the far side. In Ewen's case, the greatest distance he had ever experienced had been in the battle caverns. Their perception of the universe, moulded by their culture and environment, was of an endless solid filled with bubbles that supported life. Now that perception was being torn from their souls by the harsh reality of the real outdoors. The images before them: spears of light from the still hidden sun dancing through a few strands of low cloud; great plumes of spray from the sea pounding against massive rocks; the swooping, scavenging birds -- all this stood everything they knew and understood on its head. Had either of them been alone during this revelation, the chances were that their sanity would not have survived, but they had each other thus their sharing of the awesome phenomena unfolding before them tempered their fear with wonder.

**And then the sun appeared.**

**In a way it was expected. Something startling was expected; the brilliant kaleidoscope of vibrant colours gathering their mysterious forces below the horizon had to herald something.**

**They stared in awed silence straight at the bloated cancerous bulge that had appeared on the horizon. It became a brightening red disk that eventually separated from the clutches of the horizon and rose free into the sky, changing colour from crimson to a harsh yellow that began to hurt their eyes. Eventually they sat down, no longer clinging to each other in fear, the grip of each other's hand as their only hold on reality was sufficient. With the waxing light came a gentle, welcome warmth that seeped into chilled limbs. Ewen rationalised the sun by thinking that the people who had built this place had engineered a massive zargon light battery that travelled up the inside of the dome. He pondered the problems involved.**

**'No,' said Jenine quietly when he outlined the theory.**

**'This place was not built by people. This is the work of something else.'**

**She lay back and closed her eyes now that the light was too bright to look at. She unfastened her jacket and spread her legs to receive the blessing of the life-giving warmth. Ewen stared at her for some moments and then did likewise. For a while they were silent.**

**`But there's only people,' Ewen pointed out. `Who else could have built it?'**

**`What about the Guardian of Destiny?'**

**`We don't believe in the GoD.'**

**`Perhaps we should now. Perhaps we were wrong.'**

**`Perhaps you're right and we are dead,' Ewen mused objectively. The light was now harsh on the inside of his eyelids. `What was that tower called? Delight and Dreams?'**

**`The Tower of Dreams and Delight and Discovery,' Jenine answered drowsily.**

**`Perhaps when we entered that tower, we passed from life into death?'**

**This time Jenine didn't answer.**

**The heat from the blinding disk increased steadily. Ewen dozed too, the boom of the surf on the rocks far below never far from his consciousness. As always, he rationalized: maybe there was a gigantic wave-making machine somewhere like they had in the big public leisure pool at Galthan where his mother had taught him to swim. He wondered if he would ever see his mother again. Thinking about her stirred his guilt and drove off the sleep. Suddenly he was uncomfortably hot, sweating profusely. He sat up. The mighty light had risen much higher. The residual crimson had vanished; now the entire globe was a blinding yellow. It was beating down with unrelenting ferocity. He was about to shake Jenine awake when**

**he realised that the sky had changed colour.**

**It was blue.**

**The beautiful, deep, flawless azure of his dreams.**

**2**

**The midday heat forced the couple to retreat deeper into the cave, but not too far. The bright light banished many of the cave's shadows and encouraged them to explore, although they stayed away from the crooked passage at the end. Ewen found a flat area of the cave's wall that was covered in scratch marks. He trained the discharge tube on it.**

**`Look, Jenine -- names.'**

**Jenine peered at the faint markings. They were all illegible but she could make out at least twenty different scrawls. `All those people have found this escape route?' she wondered.**

**`Could be more. The others wouldn't be able to write.'**

**Jenine nodded to the rear of the cave. `Do you suppose he... He was one of the others?'**

**`I don't know. I didn't see a medallion.' Ewen found a scrap of plastic wrapping paper and smoothed it out. It was a vending machine snack food bag. `Maybe he thought he could live on this junk?' He angrily screwed the wrapper into a ball and threw it out. `Afterall, he was the only one not to escape.' He looked at the roof. Something caught his attention. He held the light higher. More scratch marks.**



**`Maybe they all jumped over the edge eventually?' Jenine suggested.**

**Ewen didn't answer. These markings were too legible to have been scratched on the roof. Someone had used a laser cutter. He realised that he was trying to read the legend upside-down.**

**`Jenine -- look.'**

**She stood on her toes and examined Ewen's find. Cut into the rock were two clear and unequivocal words:**

**SIMO BELAN.**

**\* \* \* \***

**It was three hours after sunrise and the heat near the cave's opening became intolerable. It was cooler towards the rear of the cave but that wasn't an option so far as Jenine was concerned. She peeled off all her clothes. It seemed a sensible thing to do so Ewen followed suit.**

**`It's not so much the heat that's making us uncomfortable, it's the humidity,' Jenine reasoned, trying to remember everything from their 4th year environment and air-conditioning studies. `It's been set far too high. The result is that our sweat doesn't get the chance to evaporate properly and so conduct excess heat away from our bodies.'**

**`Which is just as well,' Ewen observed, sitting on his pile of clothes and staring out of the cave entrance at the sparkling sea and the haze-laden horizon.**

**Jenine sat opposite him. Her pale body gleaming with perspiration, blonde curls matted against her temples. `Why's that?'**

**`If the humidity was much lower, we'd feel cooler because the evaporation rate of our sweat would be higher. Right?' She considered and nodded. Weighing up these seemingly mundane factors helped preserve their sanity.**

**`Therefore we'd dehydrate much more rapidly than we are already,' said Ewen. He wiped his brow and looked at the trail of moisture on his forearm. `Even so, we're still losing a lot of fluid. We've had nothing to drink for some hours. We've got to get out of here as soon as possible.'**

**\* \* \* \***

**Two hours later the unrelenting sun had moved so that it no longer beat down into the cave's entrance. The couple ignored their mounting thirst and moved to the opening to take careful stock of their surroundings. Their cave was set into a steeply sloping cliff face of the same grey and reddish-streaked rock of Arama. Clumps of gnarled thornbush trees grew at intervals all the way down to the restless sea. At that moment the strange moaning sound that they had heard during the night started again. In daylight it was not so frightening, but they listened to the rising and falling note in silent apprehension until it finally died away.**

**`It's definitely coming from outside -- somewhere behind us,' Ewen muttered.**

**`Some sort of machine?'**

**`Has to be,' Ewen agreed uncertainly.**

**`The water's gone back,' said Jenine, pointing down. `It was right up against the rocks before.'**

**Ewen peered down. She was right -- the sea had receded from the base of the cliff, exposing a narrow strip of wave-worn boulders and a belt of shingle that led to the left to a broad beach of golden-yellow sand. Was it sand? It had to be sand. His dream came back to him: his frantic attempts to bury Tarlan's body; the blood soaking crimson and incriminating through the sand no matter how desperately he scabbled with his hands to pile it over the corpse.**

**They discussed their course of action and decided that the first thing was to learn as much about their surroundings as possible. Jenine helped fasten the length of rope around Ewen's waist and held on while he leaned out to survey the cliff face above the cave.**

**`Hopeless,' he reported. `It gets even steeper higher up.**

**There's no more of those trees. And the edge looks further up than the water is down. We have to go down.'**

**A flock of black-headed seagulls, riding on a thermal, wheeled up the cliff face, uttering raucous cries. This time the couple made an effort to pay them scant attention having decided that the only way to come to terms with this bizarre place was to deal with one problem at a time. Besides, the**

strange living creatures did not seem to pose any threat.

They looked longingly down at the water.

Jenine eyed the sturdy trunk of the nearby thornbush tree that was growing horizontally out of the cliff face. 'We could tie the rope to that and climb down to the next clump of trees,' she suggested. 'But there's a slight flaw in the idea that your laterally thinking will pounce on.'

Ewen smiled at the understatement, pleased that she had recovered her acerbic sense of humour. 'Once we're both down, how do we untie the rope?'

Jenine caught his mood and smiled.

'Even so,' said Ewen thoughtfully, 'I reckon the idea has some merit. Hang onto the rope.' He knelt down and reached out to grasp the stunted tree. With Jenine hanging grimly onto the rope to support him, he tested his weight on the trunk. It was unyielding.

'Give me some slack.' Before Jenine could object, Ewen swung himself onto the trunk and sat on it. He bounced his weight up and down. 'Absolutely solid,' he declared. He untied the rope from around his waist, found its centre and made two turns around the trunk so that the two ends of the rope lay down the steep slope, ending near the clump of thornbushes. 'Right. We're both about the same weight. We climb down together, one on each end to counterbalance each other. When we reach that lower tree, we shake the rope free, and repeat the process all the way down to the water.'

**Simple.'**

**Jenine looked over the edge. `And supposing the gap between those trees lower down is greater than half the length of the rope? What then? We won't be able to climb up again.'**

**Ewen tried judging the intervals between the trees lower down, but it was impossible, especially where an outcrop about halfway down hid some of the proposed route.**

**`We'll just have to take a chance,' he decided. `We can't stay here and die of thirst.'**

**\* \* \* \***

**The first stage of the climb was easier than expected. After an initial experiment, they discovered that the easiest way to descend the rope was to walk backwards, paying out the rope side-by-side until they reached the first clump of trees. Jenine carried the holdall lashed to her back because she was lighter than Ewen. Taking their weight off the rope simultaneously required careful timing. Once the thornbushes were supporting them, Ewen shook the rope free of the tree above. The coils fell about him.**

**Jenine experienced a surge of relief. There could be no returning to the cave and its gruesome contents now.**

**Ewen looped the centre of the rope around the tree they were sitting on, making certain that the turn was hard against the cliff to minimize the leverage of their combined**

**weight. The next descent stage was a short climb down to a stout, wind-stunted bristle cone tree where they were able to rest in the fork of its lower branches. Ewen jerked the rope free and repeated the procedure of looping it in the centre around the bristle cone.**

**`A problem,' he murmured in a matter-of-fact tone, jabbing his thumb down.**

**So far Jenine had avoided looking down at the seething sea. Now she was forced to do so. About three body lengths below, the two lengths of rope disappeared over the edge of the outcrop. Until they climbed down together, they had no way of knowing if the ends of the rope would be hanging in space or lying against the side of the cliff.**

**`Time for some of your lateral thinking, Ewen. How do we find out what's over that edge before we climb down?'**

**Ewen thought for a moment and gave her an encouraging grin. `Easy. I reconnoitre first.'**

**`How?'**

**Ewen pulled the rope up, tied one end securely around the bristle cone's trunk and other around his waist so that he had the use of the rope's entire length. `Back in a few moments,' he said, and climbed down the rope.**

**Jenine felt sick with fear when he disappeared from sight. She planted her foot on the rope and was reassured by the vibrations caused by his exertions. Suddenly the rope went slack and the vibrations ceased.**

**`Ewen!'**

**A gull answered her scream.**

**She thought it was a cry from Ewen. Panic nearly strangled her vocal cords. `EWEN!'**

**Her voice echoed off the cliff in the hot, still air of the long afternoon.**

**`EWEN!'**

**A voice carried up to her, sounding far off. `It's all right! I'm on a sort of ledge!'**

**The vibrations resumed and, to Jenine's immense relief, Ewen's head reappeared over the outcrop. Sweat streamed off his face as he hauled himself up the rope and sat on the branch beside Jenine. His face was lined with concentration.**

**`There's a ledge down there,' he said when he had rested.**

**`Wide enough for two. Then there's a short drop from the ledge, and then it's an easy climb down because the cliff flattens out to a steep slope. But getting to the ledge is going to be a problem.'**

**`Why?'**

**Ewen gathered up the rope and measured off several hanks using his outstretched arms. `This is the amount of slack I had when I reached the ledge. About a third of the rope's length.'**

**Jenine saw the problem immediately. For the rope to be long enough for both of them to climb down together, Ewen**

**should have had half the rope's length or more as slack when he arrived at the ledge.**

**'Do we need the rope after the ledge?' she asked.**

**'Couldn't we tie it here?'**

**Ewen shook his head and wiped his dripping brow on his forearm. 'We'll need it. There's a short but sheer drop below the ledge. But once we're down that, we'll be able to climb down the rest of the way without the rope.' He struggled out of his jacket. 'There's only one way to make the rope longer. Get undressed.'**

**They undressed, and knotted their trousers and jackets to their respective ends of the rope. The material their clothes were made from was a tough polyester that seemed to take Ewen's weight well when he tested it.**

**'The material may be okay,' Jenine observed. 'But what happens if a seam suddenly gives?'**

**'Then we climb back up to the cave and think of something else.'**

**Jenine was nonplussed until she saw Ewen's mischievous grin. Her playful punch ended in a long kiss. Ewen was keen to take matters further but Jenine wisely decided that perched naked on a tree halfway down a cliff, just above an awesome overhang, was neither the time nor the place. She pushed him away without a word, adjusted the strap that secured the holdall to her back, and together they began the slow, frightening climb down their respective halves of the**



**rope.**

**The rough rockface grazed painfully against Jenine's stomach and chest as she lowered herself down the rope and over the edge. The sea booming against the rocks was now almost directly below and much louder. Mercifully, they were now out of the direct rays of the sun. Ewen dangled beside her, the veins standing out on his neck. At one point his feet lost their grip on the rope. He swung wildly as he struggled to regain a foothold and barged into Jenine.**

**`Sorry!' he gasped.**

**Jenine's hands encountered her trousers. The material was harder to grip than the coarse fibres of the rope. She chanced a quick glance down and saw the ledge that Ewen had found. It looked barely wide enough and deep enough for one person. Also they were hanging too far away from the cliff face to be able to reach it. She went down a little faster to keep level with Ewen. Maintaining a good grip on their stretched clothing was proving difficult. Sweat streamed into her eyes. She wished she had thought to make a sweatband from the lining of her jacket.**

**The sudden shock of the loud scream in Jenine's ear nearly caused her to lose her hold. The black-headed gull darted its murderous stiletto beak straight at her eyes. She caught a glimpse of black, gimlet eyes, and then the creature was gone, wheeling down the cliff face. The second seabird went**

**for Ewen. Its wings flogged the air in his face while the wicked talons lashed at his shoulder, drawing blood. He spun on the makeshift part of the rope, trying to dislodge the bird that was threatening to peck his eyes out. A well-aimed kick from Jenine caught the bird on the back and produced a scream of avian frustration and rage. The bird dropped away in a wide, seemingly lazy circle. It picked up height and speed in the rising thermal, and seemed to be intent on renewing the attack. The couple moved down the rope. They were now hanging grimly onto their jackets, and there was no more rope for their feet and knees to grip. They were slightly above the ledge and its doubtful safety, but what alarmed Jenine was distance of at least two body lengths that they were hanging from the refuge.**

**`Start swinging!' Ewen urged.**

**The seagull homed-in with another loud scream. The razor-like beak flashed at Ewen's eyes. Jenine performed a dangerous manoeuvre that possessed an accuracy borne of desperation. She jerked her body into a near somersault on the straining rope and slammed her heels together on the bird's neck, breaking its neck. It uttered a dying croak and its body fluttered down towards the rocks.**

**Ewen managed a strangled `thanks' as he sweated to get his grip under control.**

**Jenine concentrated on swinging her weight back and forth to start a pendulum-like motion. Ewen did likewise. He tried**

**to get in phase with Jenine but the sweat coursing into eyes made it virtually impossible for him to see her. As Jenine swung towards the cliff face, Ewen swung away. To maintain the rope's precarious equilibrium it was essential that they both let go of it and jumped for the ledge at the same moment.**

**`Stop! Stop!' Jenine yelled. `We've got to keep in sync!'**

**It took two minutes for them to lose their respective swings so that they hung motionless.**

**`Can't hold on much longer,' Ewen gasped, his face contorted with agony.**

**`Start swinging when I say!' said Jenine. `I'll match with you. One... Two... Three... Now!'**

**The haplessly suspended couple twisted their weight back and forth. Jenine saw Ewen's grip on the knotted sleeves of his jacket slip. The veins started from his forearms like gnarled roots as he tightened his grip.**

**They swung backwards and forwards. Through her sweat-smarting eyes, Jenine saw the cliff swell towards her and then recede. Once... Twice... A third time. Each time the cliff face loomed closer. Ewen was synchronized with her; not perfectly, but near enough. On the fifth swing the ledge passed momentarily beneath their feet.**

**`When I give the word, let go!' Jenine yelled. `Just drop when I say drop. Do you understand!'**

**Ewen nodded.**

**`One more swing!'**

**Together they swung out over the rocks below, paused, and swung back towards the cliff.**

**`DROP!' Jenine screamed.**

**They both released their ends of the rope at the same moment and landed neatly and squarely on the ledge. Their accurate landing was just as well for there was no strength in their arms to compensate for any mistakes. They lay sprawled side by side, unable to move, allowing the murderous pain in their arms and wrists to fade as their circulation was restored. Ewen pushed himself up and pulled Jenine into a safer position. He untied the holdall that she had been burdened with. They propped their backs against the cliff face and breathed deeply, allowing their arms to flop at their sides while the last vestiges of pain seeped away.**

**`In future,' said Jenine weakly. `I shall look upon all suggestions arising from your lateral thinking as a very real threat to our survival.'**

**`There was no other way of getting down,' Ewen answered.**

**`And now we're really stuck unless your lateral thinking can double the length of your arms.'**

**`What?'**

**Jenine pointed to the two ends of knotted clothes that were hanging before them. There was no wind; the twin tangles of their clothes were hanging down, quite still, accusing,**

and obviously out of reach. Ewen stood and reached out as far as he dare but the makeshift rope ends were at least two arms' lengths away.

'I didn't have this problem when I came down for the reconnoitre,' he remarked dejectedly. 'I was able to hang onto the rope all the time.'

'Because you had twice as much to play with,' Jenine retorted.

Ewen considered and nodded. Their knotted clothes were hanging so near that it was impossible for him to accept that they were facing a disaster. He unfastened the strap from the holdall and used it in a futile attempt to catch one of the hanging ends. The strap could reach the rope, but there was no way of getting a purchase on it. He tried knocking the rope repeatedly in the hope of starting it swinging, but the effort proved useless. He rummaged in the holdall, desperately hoping that their few possessions would fuel a brilliant idea. But the bag's contents offered no inspiration.

'Ewen! The light's changing!'

Ewen looked at Jenine's suddenly haggard expression and glanced up. She was right. Although the sky was still the brilliant blue of his dreams, the shadows were inexorably lengthening, which meant that it was only a matter of time before nightfall.

Jenine looked down. The smooth, sheer sides of the cliff face immediately below them were a cruel joke because the drop was less than four body lengths. From then on the remainder of the cliff was a shallow slope consisting of moraine, landslide boulders, and loose rocks that would be relatively easy to descend. Neither voiced the suggestion that they should jump; they both knew that a broken leg here could end only in death. Ewen hunkered down on naked haunches, his arms hooked around his shins, and tried to forget his thirst as he contemplated the disaster that had overtaken them. His attention turned to their narrow, precarious refuge. Unlike the rough, eroded niches and fissures in the cliff face, the surfaces of their ledge had a curious even quality. He mentioned it to Jenine and she agreed that it was strange.

'It's as if this ledge has been deliberately machined into the rock,' she commented.

That set Ewen thinking. He thought about the way the ride car in the mysterious Tower of Dreams and Delight and Discovery had unaccountably stopped right by the tunnel that had led to the cave. Was it possible that his earlier notion was right after all? That something more than luck was directing their actions? He pushed thought aside. During every step of their adventure they had exercised freewill. No thing or being or entity had guided their footsteps. He didn't believe in the GoD, and nor, he hoped, did Jenine.

**That was what they had escaped from, not to.**

**Jenine tried to speak but her tongue was stuck to the roof of her parched mouth. Eventually she managed to blurt out:**

**'The light's going faster now.'**

**Ewen twisted his head and looked for the sun, but it had long disappeared behind the cliff top.**

**She added, 'And when the light goes, so does the heat. We don't know how long the night lasts here, do we? If the temperatures are as low as they were last night... Without clothes...' She spread her hands. 'We don't know how our bodies will withstand extreme cold, do we, Ewen? It's not something that's ever concerned us, and it's never been part of our studies.'**

**Ewen stared at the tantalising rope ends and their life-sustaining clothes. 'We'll have to hold each other close when the light goes. That way we reduce our overall surface area and therefore reduce our heat loss.'**

**Jenine saw Ewen's expression of misery and bit back the cutting remark she had been about to utter. He was blaming himself for their predicament; she had no wish to add to his discomfort. She stroked his forearm and pressed herself against him.**

**'Let's not wait for the light to go, Ewen.'**

**Something woke Jenine.**

**At first she was more annoyed than frightened. Wakefulness brought back the misery of the freezing cold, the hateful darkness, and the thirst: a screaming ache in the very centre of her being that made rational thought impossible. Even in wakefulness, the long-forgotten images of childhood continued to flicker before her eyes, sometimes with a vivid clarity like lights snapped on and off in a darkened room. She lay in the crook of Ewen's arm. The cold helped force a distinction between reality and her hallucinations. She wondered if she would ever be able to move her limbs again. Like the previous night, the inside of what she thought was a vast dome, was peppered with millions of points of light. There was the water, louder now that it returned to beat against the foot of the cliff. And there was a powerful wind that buffeted her face and moaned eerily around the cliff face. Hitherto the only times she had experienced wind was the displacement and slipstream turbulence of passenger capsules when working in the tunnels of the chord metro system.**

**She heard a snorting sound like an old man waking from a long sleep. Perhaps it was a part of her dreams, but the strange noise refused to go away. She looked up in the direction of the sound and saw a vague shape hanging in space, eclipsing the stars.**

**`Ewen!' Her numbed fingers shook and pinched him awake.**

**`There's something on the rope!' She forced herself into a**



**sitting position. The wind tore through her hair and something lashed against her face. She grabbed at it.**

**Clothes!**

**She hung on to the trousers and screamed at Ewen but he was already awake and groping frantically in the holdall. The sudden explosion of light from the discharge tube caused the thing clinging to the rope to give a loud grunt of alarm.**

**Jenine caught a glimpse of grotesque, close-set eyes and furry, human-like arms and hands.**

**'Let go of the rope!' Ewen yelled. 'It'll get onto the ledge!'**

**But Jenine had no intention of relinquishing her hold. The rope was, literally, their lifeline. Suddenly the creature was on her. Loud, chattering squeals, fetid breath, ghastly, spidery hands reaching for her. Ewen lunged forward and thrust the light in the thing's face. Despite being weakened by cold and thirst, he found the strength to ram his back against the cliff face and lash out with both feet. More by luck than judgement, his heels connected with the creature's jaw and sent it reeling backwards. The thing's fingers scrabbled wildly at the edge as it toppled. They closed around Jenine's ankle. She screamed in terror as the monster's weight threatened to drag her over the edge. Its eyes were red glares in the light reflected from its retinas. Without hesitation, Ewen made a rigid fork with his fingers**

and plunged them into the animal's eyes. He grabbed the skull with his other hand and was surprised at how small it was -- no larger than a baby's head. He hooked, twisted and gouged, feeling the eyeballs squish in their sockets. The creature uttered a terrible howl of agony and was gone, jerking the rope from Jenine's fingers. There was a dull thud from the darkness below. A thin cry was heard above the moaning wind and the shifting sea. Ewen held the light over the edge and caught a brief glimpse of a small brown body tumbling down the slope before it was swallowed into the shadows. He gathered Jenine into his arms and held her tightly for several minutes, making reassuring sounds and gently kissing her face, trying to stem her sobs of terror and uncontrolled trembling. The trousers that she had been clinging to slipped through her fingers and swung away into the darkness. 'I let go of the rope,' she said in a low, cracked voice. 'We're dead, Ewen.'

'We're both alive,' he replied with forced cheerfulness, wiping her tears away with his fingertips.

'We're dead... And this is where we've been sent because... Because...' Her voice trailed away into silence. Ewen tightened his grip and rocked her back and forth. Then she was making little noises in her throat and he realised that she was reciting the child's rhyme. Sometimes there were long pauses at the end of each line; sometimes she stopped altogether for several seconds as her body battled with her

**reason, but every word was there:**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Full of fire and fear,**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Where sinners disappear!**

**'There's not much fire here,' Ewen remarked, chucking her under the chin.**

**But she continued, her voice a whisper:**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Hell fires burn within,**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Throw the wicked in!**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Where hungry monsters dwell,**

**Outdoors! Outdoors!**

**Another name for hell!**

**Despite the terrors of the night, the thought that there might be other monsters to climb down the rope, and the numbing cold, they eventually drifted into a nightmare-plagued sleep that was little different from reality.**

**Eventually the fearsome hallucinations slipped into oblivion as their brains sought to maintain essential functions. Their sleep deepened, bringing relief from misery and deprivation. It was the calm, unhurried tiptoe sleep that preceded death. The sleep that the brain permitted to usher in sweet images**

of warmth, of bright days, and childhood while gradually relinquishing its control over those bodily functions that were essential for life to continue.

Little by little, second by inexorable second, they were slipping away. At one point Ewen suddenly awoke, not knowing if he had been asleep for several minutes or several hours.

The strange, distant moaning sound that had woken him sighed into silence. Another sound came; a distant roar that seemed to echo across the sky. He thought he saw a strange column of fire climbing towards the stars like a ghostly, iridescent growth. He wanted to wake Jenine but was unable to muster the will to move. He struggled through the residual fog of hallucinations and dimly perceived what was happening to them. Jenine's breathing was shallow and irregular. He moved slightly. Her body felt cold and lifeless. He wondered who would die first and decided that it didn't matter. Sleep claimed him again and drew him into its beguiling embrace. In the east, light seeping into the sky stained the black with rapidly-spreading grey. With the gathering light came a strong wind that caused the hanging rope to swing and twist, but the couple didn't stir.

4

Jenine relished death.

What she enjoyed most was the warmth.

It spread through her body; a blissful infusion of divine

**ecstasy that caressed her nakedness and released heady sensations that were almost sexual in their intensity. Even the light on her eyelids imparted a soothingly warmth. She opened her eyes and promptly closed them again because the harsh explosion of burning light created a sudden pain that triggered a brutal awareness of several other pains: the rock digging into her back; the ache in her hand because her fingers were locked into a spasm of paralysis; a throbbing torture in her neck from lying at an awkward angle; a tongue that felt as if it had been permanently bonded to the roof of her mouth with the very latest in adhesives technology. She twisted her head away from the light, opened her eyes again, and knew that she wasn't dead. She was in the hateful place where she had been condemned to die because she had rejected the GoD. The terrible vista of sky and sea that lay before her dulled her reason so that it was some minutes before she could think properly. Ewen was slumped against her, pinning her arm against the rock. Any movement required a concentrated effort. She eased herself slowly into a sitting position and massaged her aching neck muscles. There was no sign of the two ends of rope hanging down from above. She remembered the horror of the brief struggle with the thing and reasoned that the rope had fallen with it down the cliff. She looked at Ewen's comatose form. She was hallucinating again because he was actually gripping the end**

**of the rope in his near lifeless fingers. The line of taut, twisted clothes was hanging over the edge of the cliff. She closed her eyes, and opened them again. She wasn't imagining it.**

**Ewen was still gripping the rope in his sleep!**

**Even as she stared at the trousers, they were slipping through his fingers.**

**`Ewen!'**

**A seagull answered her croak of anguish. At first her hand refused to move. She forced her fingers to close around trousers but even their combined grip was not enough to arrest the slide. She mustered enough saliva to free her parched tongue.**

**`EWEN!'**

**He opened his eyes. Jenine was half lying across him, trying to force her other hand around the rope.**

**`Ewen! The rope!'**

**Ewen focussed his eyes on the trousers that were inching through his and Jenine's fingers. His recovery was fast despite his poor condition. He rolled himself onto his stomach so that the rope was pinioned under his hip. It was heavy with rain that it had absorbed during the night.**

**`Wasn't a dream,' he panted.**

**Jenine shifted her grip. `What?'**

**`Felt something fall against me when the wind started...'**

**The words nearly died in his desiccated mouth. `Dreamed it**

**was the rope.'**

**That he had managed to hold onto it with one hand during his sleep was a triumph of mind over matter. He rolled onto his back so that the trousers remained trapped. Together they hauled the coils up until the rope lay beside them in a pile of untidy, sodden coils. The effort left them numb with exhaustion. They stared at the prize that was lying between them. The realisation that they had won back the means of escape restored their spirits and strength. Jenine unknotted their clothes and spread them out to dry in the strengthening sun.**

**'Why is everything so wet?' she asked.**

**'Water came down from above,' said Ewen. 'I thought I was dreaming it.'**

**'Well, it's more than long enough to climb down,' she said, looking at the rope and longingly at the sea. 'But how do we secure it?'**

**Ewen climbed unsteadily to his feet, and flexed his muscles before looking carefully around. To his dismay there was nothing within reaching distance that they could fasten the rope to. No outcrops or shrubs. There was a shallow cleft in the ledge that offered a faint possibility of an anchorage. He tied a knot in the end of the rope and wedged the rope into the cleft, using his heel to drive it home.**

**'Do you think it will hold?' Jenine asked anxiously.**

**Ewen shrugged. He tested his weight on the rope as best he could before lowering the coils over the side. They waited until their clothes had dried before changing into them. They felt less vulnerable when they were no longer naked. This gave them the confidence to begin the arduous but short climb down to the landslide debris that marked the beginning of the rocky slope to the tantalising sea. Ewen slung the holdall over his shoulder and went down the rope first while Jenine kept her foot on the knot so that her weight would prevent it slipping out of its dangerously shallow cleft. She watched Ewen anxiously as he lowered himself, well aware that the sweat starting from his scalp, chest, and seeming to spurt from the knotted veins on his aching arms, represented even more fluid loss from his dehydrated body. But it didn't matter; soon they would be quenching their thirst in the huge, beckoning lake.**

**Ewen's toes reached the boulders and took his weight. He leaned gratefully against the cliff face, not answering Jenine's anxious call until the pain was ebbing from his arms.**

**'Yes -- I'm okay,' he answered irritably. He wound several coils around his waist and leaned his weight against the rope to maintain its tension for Jenine's descent. She knew that she lacked the strength to descend the rope in the normal manner so she ripped a piece of cloth from her blouse, wrapped it around the rope, and used it as a friction sleeve**



**to protect her hands as she slid down to rejoin Ewen. It was a clever idea that also prevented the rope from swaying so that there was no danger of the knotted end being dislodged.**

**`Neat,' he commented.**

**`You're not the only one capable of lateral thinking. Come on.'**

**They left the rope hanging and clambered eagerly over the fallen rocks, their weakened state temporarily forgotten. The sea seemed further away than it did from above. Several times they had to make detours around particularly large boulders. Jenine suddenly stopped and pointed, her face pale and frightened. Ewen stumbled down the rocks in the direction of her outstretched finger. The flies rose in an angry swarm from the dead seagull.**

**`It's all right. It's the bird thing you killed yesterday.' He picked it up by a leg and flung it clear of their route to the water. The flies dispersed. He returned to Jenine and helped her down from a large boulder. They eventually reached the beach and staggered across the shingle to where the surf boiled and foamed. The waves were intimidatingly large. Jenine held back but Ewen dropped the holdall, timed a gap between the rollers, and waded in.**

**`Be careful,' Jenine cautioned. `It might not be water.'**

**`Of course it's water!' Nevertheless, he heeded her warning by scooping some water in his cupped palms and**

tasting cautiously. He grimaced, spat it out, and was about to say something when a wave bowled him over. Jenine dashed forward and helped him scramble out of the surf. His legs gave out and he sat on the pebbles.

'It's contaminated!' he said angrily. 'Sodium chloride! Salt!'

Jenine ran her finger along Ewen's forearm and tasted. Her face matched his dismayed expression. 'You're right. At least four percent to taste as strong as that.'

'Which means that it's undrinkable. Right?'

Jenine nodded and gazed at the sea. 'How can so much water be contaminated? It just doesn't seem possible -- pollution on such a scale. Something terrible must have gone wrong.'

'Maybe it's deliberate. Maybe you're right, Jenine. Maybe this place is some sort of punishment for those who've rejected the GoD.'

They sat in dejected silence for some minutes, contemplating the booming surf. The sun rose higher and beat down from a clear sky. Jenine climbed to her feet and held her hand out to Ewen. 'Come on. Now we've got down, we ought to explore.'

They turned their backs on the headland and trudged through the shingle that dragged at their weary feet. The closeness of the water amplified their thirst to a blind craving that dulled the impact of the extraordinary scene that confronted them. The narrow beach skirted a rocky

promontory and widened to a broad sweep of sand that stretched for what seemed an incredible distance to another low headland. A little way ahead the cliff sloped down and finally disappeared into a forest of strange trees and dense undergrowth that crowded down to the sand. Seagulls scavenging for sand worms along the water's edge rose up at their approach and wheeled overhead, uttering loud cries of anger at this intrusion. The couple crossed a broad streak of dark sand that looked strangely out of place. Jenine knelt down and made a ball of sand in her fingers.

`Look, Ewen -- it's wet.'

`So? A wave from the water. Some are bigger than others.'

Jenine looked doubtful. Her eye followed the streak of discoloured sand towards the cliff where the trees gave way to a dense forest of towering reeds. `I don't think so,' she said. She rose and followed the dark ribbon of sand towards the cliff with Ewen trailing behind. He quickened his pace and caught up with her. There was a strange scent in the air -- sweet and undefinable. Also there was a trickling sound that could mean only one thing. It was cool under the trees. They shouldered their way through reeds that rose to at least three times their height and stopped at the edge of the pool, not daring to even blink lest the mirage in the glade was banished.

The pool was fed by a spring in the side of the cliff

caused by a stratum of porous sandstone that had folded itself into a lower layer of granite. The spray of water jetting into the pool sparkled like a cascade of crystals in the warm sunlight that filtered through the trees. Jenine waded into the water up to her knees. She cupped her hands and tasted. A look of joy and wonder crossed her face. She fell to her knees in the water and drank greedily. Ewen dropped the holdall and joined her. When they had sated their thirst, they peeled off their clothes and bathed in the cool, clear pool, using leaves and twigs plucked from the bushes to wash the accumulated grime from their bodies. Ewen spotted some bushes with different leaves that were growing a little way up the rocky slope. He scrambled up to them, grabbed an armful and jumped back into the pool. He was about to use them to rinse the dirt off Jenine's back when a sudden flutter overhead made them stop what they were doing and look up. The bird had a long, yellow bill which it used to preen its magnificent plumage, seemingly unconcerned that it had a shocked audience. It was larger than any bird they had ever seen.

'It's beautiful,' Ewen breathed, captivated by the way the light created brilliant kaleidoscopes of colour on the creature's wings.

Jenine was about to automatically voice her distaste when she realised that she had been about to react in accordance with her conditioning. Ewen was right; the bird was

beautiful. The spell was broken abruptly when the bird flew off and disappeared into the canopy. Jenine shrieked when Ewen bowled her over without warning and began rubbing the leaves briskly between her breasts. Her cries of pleasure suddenly changed to a gasp of alarm when she saw the purple streaks that had appeared on her skin.

‘Stop it, Ewen! They’re causing a rash!’ There was a little catch of panic in her voice.

Ewen stopped and wiped one of the streaks with his fingers. The stain came away. Then they saw that Ewen’s palms were also stained bright purple. The strange juice smelt sweet. He licked his hand cautiously and beamed at Jenine.

‘Whatever it is, it tastes good. I wonder where it came from?’

The mystery was solved when Jenine picked up one of the sprays of foliage that was floating around their knees. She turned it over and they both examined the cluster of small, blue-black berries. A sweet smell was released when she crushed them in her fingers, stirring their taste buds. Even though they had no experience of wild flora, they both shared an instinctive race memory of the danger of poison.

‘What do you think?’ Jenine asked.

Ewen took her hand, opened her palm, and licked her fingers clean, one by one, with slow, deliberate movements.

‘Anything that tastes as good as this can’t be bad for us,’

**he said.**

**\* \* \* \***

**They had an audience for their love-making by the crystal pool. A pair of baleful, unblinking and unmoving yellow eyes watched the couple from the depths of the dense undergrowth. The cougane was uncertain what to make of this latest intrusion although she had vague memories that told her that there had been others like this couple, and that they could be dangerous. The newcomers were as large as the cougane therefore they represented competition. Food was scarce on the island for it and its mate. The cubs could manage on rodents, insects and the occasional lucky catch of a fish, but the two big cats' diet depended on the dwindling numbers of wild pigs and monkeys whose cunning seemed to increase as their numbers decreased. Sometimes the cougane or its mate chanced on a dead seal or large fish washed up on the beach, but such occurrences were rare, and usually the seabirds had had the best pickings.**

**Soon the couple stopped moving and lay perfectly still.**

**The sun passed its zenith and cast dappled shadows on them when the quickening mid-morning breeze stirred the forest canopy.**

**The big cat timed her moment and backed off without making a sound. She reached the forest track and broke into an easy, lopping run. Hunger made her ribs stand out under her tawny fur, yet she moved with her customary sinuous grace and**

**power.**

**This hungry time that she had her mate were enduring was proving the longest; but it would end soon.**

**5**

**Jenine woke suddenly and stared up at the myriads of twinkling stars. Her face and forearms were stinging slightly. She recalled a similar sensation after she and a fellow student had been working on the ultra-violet elements in a faulty zargon light. Perhaps the zargon light here carried high levels of UV light? She made a mental note to remind Ewen to keep well-covered in the daytime. The gentle burning sensation made the touch of the night air on her face seem icy cold. She settled into a more comfortable position and allowed the memories of the previous day to drop into place.**

**During the afternoon, they had scooped out a deep hollow in the sand near the trees to protect them from the wind. A brief foray into the forest had resulted in them returning with armfuls of fronds which they had spread out in the sun to dry before using them to line the bottom of the simple shelter.**

**She caught her breath when the weird moaning started. Ewen didn't stir. She longed to wake him, to feel his arms tightly around her, but it would be selfish to disturb his sleep. She**

**found herself listening to the strange clarion call of the tormented spirits with detached interest. It sounded a long way off. The wailing was frightening, but it hadn't done them any harm. Eventually the blood-chilling howl subsided to a low, continuous note and then died away.**

**The sea boomed idly on the beach.**

**A drop of water hit her cheek, and then another.**

**Precipitation. It was only to be expected with such a high daytime humidity. She glanced up at the scattered clouds that were scudding across the strange points of light in the sky.**

**Rain sometimes happened in the domes of Arama when the air-conditioning machinery played up.**

**Large raindrops started falling.**

**The thought of getting soaked through was worse than the terrors of the night. She rose quietly without waking Ewen.**

**The night air closed like an icy hand around her.**

**The hunger-racked cougane was twenty paces away, where it had been bracing itself to spring on the unsuspecting couple.**

**The woman's unexpected movement confused it. Thinking that it may have been seen, it flattened its body against the sand, allowing the tension to ebb from its adrenalin-charged muscles while keeping perfectly still.**

**Jenine delved into the holdall and found the discharge tube among the tools. It was a temptation to turn it on right away but that would be a waste of energy. She trudged up the sand towards the trees. The cougane watched her approach. The**



scent of warm, rich blood produced a rage of hunger in the creature and yet the innate caution that had guaranteed its survival against all odds prevented it from rushing at the human. The memories of others like these was linked to the sharp pain from the old wound in its flank -- a reminder that these animals that walked upright were dangerous. It was best to pounce when they were still. There was a sweet memory of when it had waited for the right moment. Claws ripping into a soft, unyielding belly, spilling succulent viscera, and intestines; jaws saturated with warm blood. The evocations amplified by its aching hunger caused it to give an involuntary whimper of anticipation.

Jenine stopped and listened, her nerves shrieking, wondering what the sound had been. She was about to run back to the camp but the spots of rain became a light drizzle. She turned on the discharge tube. The light temporarily blinded her. She thought she saw a shadow dart across the sand and held the tube high.

Nothing. An optical illusion.

She reached the trees, and uprooted a few saplings and fronds. She returned to Ewen, laid the foliage across the hollow as additional protection from the rain, and scrambled back in beside him. Perversely the light rain chose that moment to stop.

`Good idea,' said Ewen sleepily.

**`I thought you were asleep. I'm sorry if I woke you. I thought we'd get wet but the precipitation's stopped.'**

**`It wasn't you -- it was that noise.' He put an arm around her and pulled her close. `I've been watching the stars.'**

**`The lights? Is that what you think they are? Stars?'**

**`They're just like the pictures we were shown during those crazy heaven studies lectures. They move.'**

**`What?'**

**`Memorize their positions, then close your eyes for a few minutes, and open them again, and you will see that they've moved. Not independently, but as one.'**

**Jenine tried it but she didn't allow a long enough period for the movement to register.**

**`They follow the same movement as the zargon light,' said Ewen. `I'm trying to fathom out how this dome works. I think we're suspended inside a sphere that's free to rotate. The zargon light and the stars are attached to the inside of the sphere. The sphere is turning slowly to simulate day and night.'**

**He fell silent while trying to work out the same problems that had taxed the minds of the ancient philosophers many millennia before.**

**Jenine was doubtful. `This dome's far too big,' she reasoned.**

**`Oh? Why?'**

**`Domes are really a series of arches -- they convert**

**downward loads to lateral thrust. Right?'**

**Ewen agreed that she was correct.**

**Jenine continued: 'There's an upper limit to the span of a dome just as there's limit to the span of an arch. A dome this size formed from rock can't stay up without a central support.'**

**'Maybe there is one?'**

**'We've not seen it.'**

**'We've hardly explored this place,' said Ewen. 'That's what we'll do tomorrow.'**

**6**

**The wild boar track through the still, silent forest was hard going even though they had set off before dawn to avoid walking in the worst of the sun's heat. At first the small creatures that scurried away at their approach caused them as much alarm as they caused the creatures, but they soon came to terms with them, realising that the denizens of the forest were the more scared. What they could not come to terms with so easily were the mosquitoes. 'At least they're easier to kill than the small flies,' Jenine commented, slapping at them.**

**After an hour she flopped down when they reached a clearing and announced that she wasn't going to move another pace until she had rested for ten minutes. The grass was**

**still heavy with dew, but she didn't care. Ewen scouted ahead and returned to her side.**

**`About another hour's walk and we'll be there. There's some sort of regular structure at the top, and there's still a lot of fog.'**

**`A building? Something we could use as a shelter?'**

**`It's too far off to see clearly, but I don't think so. It looks very old. A lot of precipitation damage I expect.'**

**`The environmental control system of this place is in an appalling state,' Jenine complained. `Don't they realise that allowing the temperate to drop at night without lowering the humidity is going to lead to condensation and precipitation problems?' She rummaged in the holdall for a biscuit. Her fingers closed around a small, cylindrical device. She held it up. `What's this?'**

**Ewen shrugged. `I was going to throw it away. It never was much use, but I thought that its battery might come in handy.'**

**`But what is it?'**

**`A radio. Father Dudley gave it to me. He said that if ever I was in trouble, all I had to do was squeeze the ends together to get help.'**

**Jenine studied the gadget with interest. `Have you ever used it?'**

**`A few times. All I ever received were cryptic messages. Recordings.'**

**Jenine pushed the ends together.**

**`It won't work outside of Arama,' said Ewen.**

**`Have you tried?'**

**`No. And you'll have to squeeze harder than that.'**

**Jenine used the heels of her palms to press the capsule's ends.**

**`You're wasting your time. I was going to--'**

**Ewen broke off in surprise when a thin, barely audible voice spoke from the radio. Jenine pressed it to her ear, listened for a minute, and passed the gadget to Ewen, frowning.**

**`You're right. A cryptic message repeated over and over again.'**

**Ewen listened. It was the same voice that he had last heard in his cell when awaiting trial.**

**`You must escape from the island... You must escape from the island... Escape from the island...' The message was repeated more several times. There was a faint click and the carrier died. Ewen pressed the ends of the radio together again. The same message was repeated. Jenine took the capsule from him and listened again, frowning in concentration. She looked up when the recording ended.**

**`"Escape from the island?" What does it mean?' Island of what?'**

**Jenine was right to be puzzled. In Arama the word `island'**

was an incomplete descriptor; it was always used to modify another noun: an island of bookshelves; public parks were islands of tranquility; there were even traffic islands. By itself the term `island' was meaningless.

Ewen helped Jenine to her feet and they resumed their uphill trek along the forest track. The lush trees thinned out rapidly to bush and scrub, and their destination, a strange, squat circular structure thrusting through the impoverished topsoil on a hilltop like a grey thumb, came into sight. They toiled to the peak. The structure was a parapet of decaying concrete around a mine shaft. Its sides were crumbling, and in one place were low enough for them to peer down into the blackness. A rusting mesh grille was set into the concrete a little way down. Ewen accidentally dislodged a large piece of masonry. It dropped through the grille and rattled down the side of the shaft, its echoes fading into oblivion.

`A ventilator shaft?' Jenine suggested.

`Certainly looks like it.'

They turned and surveyed the circle of heavy mist that lay over the forest like a tablecloth. The low sun shone a menacing crimson through the fog like a broken blood vessel beneath a girl's skin.

`No central pillars or supports to hold the dome up,' Ewen commented. `So how do they do it? It flies in the face of logic and reason.'

**`Perhaps we should be asking ourselves who they are.'**

**`So you don't think it's been created by the GoD?'**

**Jenine sighed and shook her head in puzzlement. `I don't know what to think.' She stared into the mist. `We could've left an hour later. It'll be ages before we see anything.'**

**`Don't judge that light by the zargon lights in Arama,'**

**Ewen cautioned. `It's incredibly powerful.' He touched his face carefully because it was still smarting from the previous day's brief exposure. `Try calculating the power it must be dissipating to heat everything up as it does.'**

**As if to prove his point, the mist started clearing with surprising speed. Within five minutes it was being rolled back like an expanding iris, exposing more and more of the forest, retreating down distance beaches to reveal the sea. Jenine caught her breath as she spun around to take in the scene. Her cry was a despairing lament.**

**`We're surrounded! The poisoned water is all around us!'**

**For a moment Ewen was too stunned to speak. Perhaps it was an illusion caused by the low, bright light. But the fog's retreat became a flight and he realised that this awesome challenge to his senses was not a mirage. They stood in shocked silence, contemplating the impossible. In Arama there were many recreational reservoirs and pools -- small bodies of water surrounded by land. But this was the insane opposite: a tiny parcel of land surrounded by a vast body of**

**water; a complete and devastating inversion of reason that assailed them just when they were learning to accept and rationalise the strange reality of this place that they had discovered.**

**`That's what the message on your radio meant,' said Jenine dully. `It makes sense, doesn't it? "Escape from the island". That's what this place is -- an island.'**

**`But escape to what? There's nothing to escape to.'**

**`There is,' said Jenine quietly.**

**The sudden chill in her voice alerted Ewen before he saw what she looking at. The fog had given way to a heat haze as the sun climbed higher. On the horizon, shining a brilliant white through the mist, were indistinct but regular shapes. Although their eyes were untrained at resolving familiar objects at great distances, especially when viewed under such difficult conditions, they both knew that the haze-shrouded objects could only be buildings.**

**7**

**Jenine was first to break the silence.**

**`If it wasn't for all that water, how long would it take us to walk that far do you think?'**

**Ewen tried calculating the distance to the far off buildings and gave up. The expanse of sea offered no reference points. `I've no idea,' he admitted. `A day? Two days? There's just nothing to go on, and neither of us are**



used to looking so far.' He made a mental note of the layout of the their island's beach that lay nearest the far land. He pointed to another opening in the tree-line. `There's another path down there that looks like it'll bring us out on the sand opposite the buildings. We'll be a little nearer -- maybe we'll be able to make something out.'

Jenine was doubtful. `We don't want to get lost too far from the drinking water. I'm already working up a thirst.'

`We can't get lost if we work our way back along the beach.'

`Beach?'

`Along the edge of the water,' Ewen replied stiffly.

Jenine's eyes twinkled in amusement. Beach was the term used for the apron around swimming pools. Its use for the foreshore struck her as incongruous and she said so.

`It seemed appropriate,' Ewen muttered.

`Beach!' She threw back her head and laughed. Ewen wanted to get mad at her but couldn't; she looked so lovely when she laughed.

There was a low, distant rumble that rapidly got louder.

They stared at each other and looked quickly around to establish where the sound was coming from.

`It's the vent!' Jenine cried, clapping her hands over her ears and backing away.

The sound rose to a sustained scream. Ewen copied Jenine

and run some way down the hillside with his hands pressed tightly over his ears. At a bearable distance they turned and stared at the spectacle of a few remaining wisps of mist being plucked from the sky and snatched into the depths. The hideous sound of the earth roaring at the sky lasted for a minute and died away as quickly as it had started.

‘Well now we know what that noise is,’ Ewen commented.

‘Something to do with that amusement park I suppose.’

Jenine took his hand and they set off down the new path. This time they were on the northern slope of the island that received the full blast of the sun, where the vine-festooned trees grew to prodigious heights in their battle with each other for a share of the life-giving light. Although it was cooler under the vast canopy, the humidity was such that their suits were soon soaked through with sweat, making walking uncomfortable. They tried removing their jackets and hastily donned them again when the strange, slow-moving flies attacked in swarms. They stopped for a rest in a clearing that afforded a magnificent view over the bay that they were heading for. Jenine screwed up her eyes in the harsh light.

‘Those buildings don't look so tall now.’

Ewen stared at the faint markings on the horizon. The haze was clearing and clouds were gathering. ‘I think you're right.’

‘I know I'm right. See that one on the extreme left? It's half the height it was. Do you suppose they've sunk into the

**ground?'**

**`Why?'**

**`Well I don't know, Ewen. Maybe it's to shelter from the zargon?'**

**`Surely it would be easier to reduce the power of the light?'**

**Discussing the problem seemed unlikely to solve it so they continued walking, glad to be in the shade of the trees again.**

**`Do you remember that technician-scholar we talked about with Calen?' said Ewen. `The one who had a theory about a negative universe?'**

**`Blader Zallen?'**

**`That's him.'**

**`Branded a heretic,' said Jenine, brushing angrily at a mosquito. `What about him?'**

**`I wonder if he was right? I mean, we've always known that rock is infinite and is filled with a finite number of spaces -- spaces like the domes of Arama. Whereas Blader Zallen theorized about a negative universe in which space was infinite and rock was finite.'**

**`It was only a theory,' Jenine pointed out.**

**Ewen stumbled on a root and caught at a vine to prevent himself falling. `This place makes me think that maybe it's more than a theory,' he said when he had recovered his**

**balance.**

**`Because it's so large?'**

**`Yes.'**

**`Why should scale be grounds for invalidating what we know about the universe? We're in a dome. We have to be. It may be vast, but it's still a dome.'**

**`With no visible means of support?'**

**`Air pressure,' said Jenine.**

**`What?'**

**`You're not the only one capable of lateral thinking, Ewen. Air pressure holds this dome up. We have to live in air under pressure, correct?'**

**Ewen thought about the laboratory work he had done on vacuums and agreed that she was right.**

**`This is an enormous dome with a colossal surface area. I wouldn't like to calculate the total pressure that must be acting on the inside of this dome. And that leads to something else that puts your negative universe theory back in its box. We need air to live, and so do the trees and grass need air, and I daresay the flies do as well. Air under pressure has to be contained. How could a negative universe contain air? It would escape and disperse throughout space.'**

**It was a good point and Ewen could not think of an explanation to counter it. `That reminds me of something,' he said. `You're right about us needing air under pressure in order to survive, but where in Arama is the machinery to**

**maintain the air under pressure? To compress it into the domes? We're serviced plant to filter the air, to remove carbon dioxide, to humidify it, or dehumidify it -- to do everything to the air except pressurise it.'**

**Jenine gave a muffled cry as a giant leaf settled over her face and moulded itself to her features like a second skin.**

**The leaf's material was so thin and it all happened so quickly that at first Ewen thought that Jenine's face had turned green. The fine membrane had even fastened over her lips and teeth, and was forming a lining in her mouth as she struggled ineffectually to pull it free.**

**'Keep still!' Ewen yelled, forcing her hands away from her face. 'Just keep still!'**

**Jenine stopped plucking at the hideous stuff. The real horror was that it was even clinging to her eyeballs. Ewen pushed her head back and found the boundary between her skin and the leaf. He tried getting a purchase with his nails but it was like trying to prise up a coating of dye. He managed to get a finger under the leaf by forcing his fingers into her hair and along her scalp. Once he had a good grip, he was able to peel the membrane away in one piece without difficulty, and without it tearing. Jenine sucked air gratefully into her lungs once her mouth and nose were clear.**

**'What is that thing?' she gasped, rubbing her eyes.**

**Ewen studied her face carefully. 'Are you all right?'**

**`I am now, but it gave me a fright. Thanks, Ewen -- I nearly panicked.'**

**They looked up. Hanging from strange, gnarled branches, were countless hundreds of the gossamer-like leaves, many even larger than the one that had covered Jenine's face. Even as they watched, a leaf separated from the branch. It didn't so much fall, as undulated down; twisting and tumbling in the eddies. It crossed a beam of sunlight and rose with the warm air where it wrapped itself around a branch.**

**They looked down at the strange leaf that was now clinging to Ewen's hand.**

**`What weird stuff,' he breathed. `It must be only a few molecules thick and yet it's incredibly strong.'**

**`Well it certainly frightened me,' said Jenine with feeling.**

**`And me. But only because we're not used to it. It's nothing to be scared of. Look -- it comes away quite easily.'**

**Ewen peeled the clinging green membrane from his fingers. He dropped it and they both watched as it fell with remarkable slowness. Ewen spread his hand under it; the rising heat from his palm caused the leaf to spread out and convulse gently. He grasped it in both hands. It eventually tore, but it required considerable effort.**

**`Make a mental note of the position of these trees,' said Ewen.**

**`Why?'**

**`Those leaves may come in useful if we're stuck here for any length of time.'**

**They resumed walking. The forest was particularly dense where it levelled out, but they maintained a reasonably straight line by using the sun as a reference point. The forest ended abruptly at the shoreline. They emerged onto the unfamiliar stretch of beach and stared at the horizon. The haze had cleared completely.**

**`We must've gone wrong,' said Jenine quietly.**

**Ewen glanced around, taking in the landmarks he had fixed in his mind from the top of the hill. `No -- this is the right place.'**

**`Then where--'**

**`I don't know!' Ewen suddenly shouted. `I tell you, I don't know anything! Everything's gone mad!'**

**Jenine bit back the opening of an argument. There was no point in quarreling. Instead they gazed in silence at the hard, clear line of the horizon.**

**The buildings and distant land had vanished.**

**8**

**`Maybe we imagined them?' said Jenine tentatively after a brief silence.**

**Ewen was contemptuous. `We both saw them. Buildings don't rise and fall. What would be the point? And how could the**

**ground they're on also vanish?' He squinted up at the sun.**

**'There's still plenty of time before it gets dark. I want to go back to take another look. Just to make doubly certain.'**

**Jenine grimaced and stretched out on the warm sand. 'I couldn't walk another step.'**

**'You won't have to,' said Ewen, dropping the holdall beside her. 'I'll go by myself. I can walk quicker than you. I'll be back in two hours.'**

**'Ewen -- no! Don't leave me!'**

**'You'll be okay. Stay here. I'll be right back.'**

**Before Jenine could raise further protests, he jogged up the beach and disappeared into the trees.**

**He drove himself on for twenty minutes, trying to ignore the stinging sweat that streamed into his eyes. He reached the glade where the membrane trees stood and twisted some of the fallen gossamer leaves into a rope which he knotted around his forehead. The strange material did not have absorbent properties, but it least it channelled the rivulets of blinding sweat away from his brow. Passing through clearings where the sun beat down made him feel light-headed. He realised that what he really needed was some form of protection for his head.**

**He pressed on, at one point taking a more direct route to the top of the hill by climbing rockfalls. The forest gave way to scrubland, and the strange ventilator shaft chimney**



lay before him. He reached the parapet and rested in its shade, eyes closed, chest heaving, not daring to look at the horizon. When his heartbeat slowed to normal, he wiped his eyes on his sleeve and focussed his gaze on the horizon.

The buildings were there, much plainer now that the haze had completely cleared. He could even make out details such as windows, and the white fringe of breaking waves on the beach. He stared at the tallest building and tried counting the floors by counting the windows. He kept losing tally due to minute variations in humidity, but after six attempts he was able to arrive at a definite figure of thirty stories.

The clarity of the air lent a degree of perspective that had been missing that morning, enabling him to see strange shapes beyond the tower blocks. Gleaming hemispheres. Domes within the blue dome? That didn't make sense, but they definitely had the appearance of domes seen from the outside. He shifted his gaze to the right and caught his breath. There were vague shapes that looked like the scattered sections of a sliced-up cylinder. If they were beyond the buildings as he was certain they were, then they had to be truly enormous.

He sat down and tried to think things out carefully and rationally. The buildings were visible from high ground, but not from low ground.

What could that mean?

The heat made thinking difficult and yet there was only

**one answer; one that didn't make sense and yet what other conclusions could be drawn?**

**He screwed up his eyes, trying to pick out more details.**

**Tiny dots that could be people, so vague that when he blinked they were gone. He wished that he had his datapad so that he could make a sketch. He had an idea, unwrapped his headband, and spread two of the gossamer leaves over a smooth rock. The idea worked: he found that he could make durable marks on the leaf with a pebble. He made a crude sketch of the strange shapes on the horizon. In doing so he also discovered that exerting pressure on the leaves caused them to form an unbreakable bond to each other at the points where pressure had been applied. That gave him another idea.**

**\* \* \* \***

**By now the cougar's hunger was a maddening ache that gnawed into its shrunken gut with the ferocity of an infected wound.**

**Earlier it had found one of the last of the little monkeys, apparently blinded and injured. It had provided a meagre meal for the cubs, but there had been nothing left for her.**

**Unaware of the big cat watching her balefully from the tree line, Jenine sat with her back propped against a rock, and tried to doze, but the heat and her thirst made it impossible. She prayed for Ewen's return so that they could return to the spring. She squinted at the sun. Why was he gone so long? The dried, bleached seaweed that she had gathered to sit on crackled as she shifted her position to**

remain in the shade. She had no idea what the material was, but it was more comfortable than hot sand.

She stared at the sea. What could have happened for so much water to be polluted on such a massive scale? Why was the blue dome so hot during the day and so cold at night? Why the amazing profusion of trees? What purpose could they possibly serve?

Some seabirds glided in and scavenged along the surf-flattened sand. They no longer frightened her quite so much. The birds that somehow entered Arama always flew about in a blind panic whereas here they conducted themselves with purpose. She watched their quarrelsome antics with curiosity and then amusement. Some black-headed birds came in, swooping low along the shoreline, skimming the water. One suddenly dived into the sea and emerged with something wriggling in its beak which it swallowed whole. As if responding to a signal, a small flock of the black-headed gulls along the water's edge began a massed dive-bombing and feasting in the surf. They suddenly abandoned the banquet and wheeled off, uttering angry cries at Jenine's approach. She paddled a little way into the water, peering into the clear shallows, trying to see what had attracted the birds. And she saw them -- shoals of darting silvery shapes moving just below the surface. A larger shape, but sleek and streamlined like the smaller creatures, moved quickly among them, snatching at the fry.

**She returned to the spot where she had been sitting and wondered at the purpose of the varied lifeforms. Nothing about this place made any sense. Everything seemed so utterly wasteful and pointless.**

**Where was Ewen?**

**The cougane judged the expanse of sand between it and its quarry. A rush and a leap, that was all it would take, although the distance was greater than it preferred. One rush, one leap, and she and her cubs would survive.**

**It tucked its hind legs under its belly so that they were in the best position for powering its weight forward when the right moment had arrived.**

**Jenine looked up at the sun. The blinding zargon light was dipping towards the horizon. In three or four hours it would be dark again, and the cold would return. She thought about the great bogey of Arama.**

**Fire.**

**In the laboratories at the GoD Centre she had, like all technician-students, been required to make fire in order to understand it.**

**The cougane wriggled, tucking its hind legs tighter against its flanks.**

**Maybe a controlled fire? Jenine wondered. Would that be possible in this dome? She looked closely at a handful of sand. Silicates -- ground-up rock. No chance of that catching fire, so it ought to be safe as a base for a fire, but what**

about fuel? The dried-up fronds that fell from the palm trees in Arama were always gathered-up because they were a fire risk. Under the trees here was plenty of dried vegetation -- they had used it to sleep on -- but would it burn? And if so, what was its ignition temperature? What about the husk-dry stuff she was sitting on? Surely that would burn? Practical problems intervened in her chain of thought. What am I thinking of? she asked herself. I've no way of making a fire. She thought about the different ways that fires started. The most common being GoD power shorting to earth or flowing through a low-resistance circuit. Then there were the mechanical causes such as bearings running hot -- friction. She rubbed her hands together. Friction produced heat all right, but achieving a high-enough temperature to ignite vegetation was out of the question.

The sun beat on her knee through the dark material of her trousers. The zargon light! Supposing the energy falling over a large area could focussed onto a small area?

The cougane stiffened its tail so that the entire length of its spine was an arrow pointing straight at its prey. The light breeze was blowing off the sea, bearing the thing's rich scent. Everything was right.

Jenine turned out the holdall and sorted carefully through the tools that they had hurriedly snatched before fleeing from the GoD Centre. The little tubular microscope was

**designed for viewing miniature circuits. She unscrewed the eyepiece lens and used it to focus a point of sunlight on the back of her hand.**

**`Ow!'**

**The sudden cry and movement threw the cougar the instant it was about to launch itself. It relaxed and kept perfectly still, its gleaming pupils black, unblinking slits.**

**Chiding herself for her stupidity, Jenine gathered together a heap of dried seaweed and trained a spot of sunlight on it through the lens. A tiny curl of smoke appeared almost immediately and was whipped away by the breeze.**

**The cougar marshalled its powerful muscles...**

**The bright sunlight and the black nature of seaweed made it difficult for Jenine to see what was happening. There was another twist of smoke. She bent over the pile of kindling and jerked her head back suddenly as the invisible flame stung her cheek.**

**All the pent-up energies locked in the cougar's muscles were unleashed in a single bound that carried it five body lengths and one third of the distance towards its prey. It landed lightly and soundlessly, throwing up puffs of sand. Even before it recovered full balance, its forelegs were outstretched, muscles rippling, claws unsheaved, ready to rip and tear, as its powerful hind legs drove it forwards on another spectacular leap.**

**`Jenine!'**

**The bonfire burst into flames as Jenine looked up. Ewen was sprinting towards her. She saw him and saw something else; something so terrible that nothing remotely like it had ever been dredged up in the very worst of her childhood nightmares. The flashing fangs, and yellow, staring eyes were almost upon her when she screamed.**

**The cougar's final leap took it straight into the dense cloud of billowing smoke that had suddenly appeared. It was that and not the scream that caused it to panic. Fire was a scent that it knew well; a scent that had been the harbinger of terrible destruction on several occasions; the scent that had taken a former mate, and caused a wound that had taken many days to heal. It lashed its tail in mid-flight. That and the sharp twisting of its spine unbalanced its trajectory. It landed sideways, showering Jenine and the bonfire with sand, and became a tawny streak of bounding fur and muscles that vanished into the trees.**

**Blinded by the sand, Jenine flailed her hands in a desperate attempt to beat the thing off. She screamed in near hysteria as it grabbed hold of her wrists.**

**`Jenine! It's all right! It's me!'**

**She threw herself sobbing into Ewen's arms.**

**`It's all right. It's gone... It's gone...'**

**They stayed like that for some moments, arms around each**

other until Jenine's violent trembling subsided. She pushed Ewen away, wiped her eyes, looked fearfully around and forced her voice to sound natural. `Oh, Ewen. What was it?'

`I don't know. I saw it rushing towards you, then it suddenly changed its mind and raced off. There was smoke -- I think that frightened it.'

`Why were you gone such a time?'

`I had some measurements to make.' He glanced at the smoldering remains of the short-lived bonfire. `Did you make that?'

Jenine nodded, grateful that he was making her think about something else other than the apparition charging down the beach. `I experimented with the microscope so that we won't be cold tonight. That stuff that's washed up burns when it's dry.' She blinked at him. `What's that you're wearing?'

Ewen pulled off his makeshift sun hat, and showed her how he had made it by stretching the membrane leaves over a frame of bent reeds. `And something else.' He pulled a tear-shaped green bag from his jacket. It had been made from more of the membrane leaves. `They bond together under pressure. I found another water fountain just over there. Drink.'

He showed Jenine how to squeeze the contents of the makeshift water bottle into her mouth. She drank greedily and paused.

`It's okay -- finish it up. The fountain's just through the trees.'



**`Clever,' she said examining the bag when she had quenched her thirst.**

**Ewen grinned. `Not as clever as your fire.'**

**Jenine looked at the sun, now well past its zenith, and jumped hurriedly to her feet. `We've got to make another one before the light goes.'**

**\* \* \* \***

**There was no shortage of fuel. They experimented and discovered that the palm fronds burned slowly without too much smoke. The dried seaweed flared up too quickly but was ideal if they wanted the fire to recover rapidly. There was another type of seaweed with long, olive-drab streamer-like leaves. Islands of the stuff were beached, and more of the stuff was constantly coming ashore. When dried and burned, it seemed to give off a highly-inflammable smokeless gas resulting in such a fierce flame that they were unable to sit near their fire. They settled for the palm fronds as their main source of fuel.**

**By sunset they had established the beginnings of a permanent camp on the broad beach. It consisted of a wide, neatly squared-off trough dug in the sand with a seashell. The sides were built-up with sand and partly overlaid with a palm frond pitched roof that was supported down the centre by a stout reed lashed with vines to driftwood uprights that Ewen drove deep into the sand with a rock. The trough widened**

out at the opposite end to accommodate a small, but well-established fire. Nearby they stacked up a generous pile of fuel.

While foraging for vines, Ewen had discovered that the birds liked a sweet, yellow fruit that grew in profusion.

After a tentative tasting session, they had decided to add it to their diet. Jenine made some more bags out of membrane leaves so that they had a plentiful supply of fresh water.

The simple cups she made by moulding some clay scooped from the bed of a pool proved remarkably effective once they had been baked in the fire's hot ashes.

At dusk they stopped work and settled thankfully in front of their fire to eat a meal of berries, fruit and biscuits.

The temperature dropped rapidly as the sun sank below the horizon, but the friendly warmth from the fire was reflected cosily from the sides of their simple camp. It had been a long, tiring day.

'So what did you see?' Jenine asked, biting into one of the fruits and relishing the nectar that filled her mouth.

They had been so busy preparing for nightfall that there had been no time to discuss Ewen's lone expedition.

'The buildings were there again.'

Jenine stopped eating. 'But how could they be? I couldn't see them from here.'

'Also they were much clearer. And there were other shapes further away, like sections of a vast cylinder.'

**Jenine thought about that. `There has to be some sort of wall that holds the water back. The buildings are the other side of the wall on a much lower level. That's why they're visible from high up, but not here.'**

**`I don't think so, Jenine.'**

**Something in his tone caused her to look sharply at him.**

**`Why not? It makes sense.'**

**Ewen watched sparks and smoke dancing into the darkening sky to be whipped away by the breeze in the direction of the far off land. She would scoff, of course. That was only to be expected. Best to put his theory forward one step at a time.**

**`At first I thought the same as you. But I could see a beach, just like this one. The buildings were built on ground that was higher than the beach.'**

**`That's impossible otherwise we'd be able to see them from here.'**

**Ewen smoothed an area of sand in front of them and started drawing a diagram with a stick by the light from the fire.**

**`Not if the surface of the water is curved.'**

**Jenine threw away the remains of the fruit and smiled impishly at Ewen. `That's your lateral thinking at work is it, Ewen? Bent water?'**

**Ewen was too intent on his diagram to answer. `Look.**

**That's our vantage point here, and that was our vantage point on top of the hill.' He pointed with the stick to a curved**

**line. `And that's the surface of the water.'**

**`Bent?'**

**`Curved,' Ewen amended patiently.**

**`Same thing.'**

**`Not the way you say it. From here we can't see the buildings, but we can from the hilltop because we're high enough to see over the water's curvature.'**

**`That's crazy.'**

**`That's logical.' Ewen had been prepared for her scorn therefore he didn't get angry. He pulled the folded membrane leaves from his pocket and spread them out. They were covered in neatly-penned calculations. Jenine looked at them in surprise.**

**`You can write on them?'**

**`They mark easily with a fine-pointed instrument. I used a bit of a dead bird. A feather.'**

**Jenine shuddered at the thought of touching any part of a bird, dead or alive. `So what have you worked out?'**

**`I measured out two level points near the top of the hill as far apart as possible. I used my height as a base unit because I know exactly how tall I am. For a baseline I used those long, string-like things that I used to lash the roof supports together -- thin ones knotted together and pulled tight. I tied them around bits of tree that I knocked into the ground with a rock. Then I used templates made by folding these leaves to give me the angle between the tallest**

building and each end of the base line.' He paused, waiting for ridicule. To his surprise, instead of mocking him, Jenine studied his calculations, holding the leaves at an angle to read them in the light from the fire. She pointed to the last line.

'That's the distance to the tallest building?'

'Yes.'

There was a long silence.

'But that's at least a tenth of the distance from one end of Arama to the other!'

'It's a very rough estimate,' Ewen admitted. 'Tomorrow we could use a longer baseline. It'll be much easier with two of us. We could devise a method of hand signalling.'

Jenine didn't answer. Mathematics had been one of her strongest subjects. She went slowly and carefully over Ewen's methodology and could find no flaw in his approach. 'It's crazy,' she muttered. 'Such a distance is beyond belief unless you made a serious mistake with your triangulations.'

Ewen shook his head. 'I don't think I did.'

'No... I don't think you did either... But that still doesn't explain your theory about the water being ben-- curved.'

Ewen chuckled at her correction. 'Think back to our fourth year. Can you remember that experiment in mass attraction with a large boulder and small ball hanging beside it on a

long thread?'

Jenine nodded. 'Oh, yes. Father Silavan. He showed us that the ball didn't hang perpendicular because it was pulled very slightly towards the boulder by its mass. I can't remember what the point of experiment was, but it was interesting. Why?'

'The bigger the boulder, the greater the attraction,' Ewen replied. 'It was something we were supposed to take into account when calibrating density instruments. But the force was so small that we never bothered.'

'I remember,' said Jenine. 'But what's that got to do with your theory?'

'I was able to work out the height of the tallest building by counting the windows. Thirty floors. When I was roughly halfway down the hill, I could only make out ten floors visible above the water.' He broke off and wrote a long number in the sand. 'Jenine... I think this entire world is like that boulder only huge. Really huge. It's so vast that everything is attracted to it like that boulder in Father Silavan's experiment. Water... Air... Everything. It all stays in place.'

There was a long silence which Jenine broke at length. 'A round boulder?'

'Like a sphere -- yes.'

'And you think that you were able to work out the diameter of this... this sphere we're sitting on?' Her voice was

**strangely flat, unchallenging.**

**`Yes.'**

**`And what is the diameter?'**

**Ewen pointed to the number he had written in the sand.**

**Jenine stared at it. The peel of laughter that he half-expected never came.**

**`What do you think?' he asked tentatively.**

**Jenine said nothing. She kissed him without warning and lay back and closing her eyes. `I'm too tired to think of anything, Ewen.'**

**He rose and made up the fire. It burned hot and comforting on his face. He stood for some minutes, contemplating the rising column of smoke and sparks being borne on the wind towards the distant land. The stars shone coldly down. Were they worlds too? Gargantuan balls of rock drifting in space? The concepts were too awesome to pile on top of those he was already formulating and struggling to come to terms with. He settled down beside Jenine and slipped an arm around her. Soon, he too was sound asleep.**

**9**

**`Ewen!'**

**He opened his eyes. Jenine was shaking him. His first thought was for the fire, but its reassuring warmth played on his face when he sat up. It was still dark.**

**`What's the matter?'**

**`That ventilator thing woke me. I got up to make up the fire. Look!**

**He followed her finger to the east where the coming dawn was paling the sky. `What?'**

**`Look!'**

**He saw it: a thin, luminous crescent shining through a break in the cloud. The image wavered and was extinguished briefly. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes.**

**`What is it, Jenine?'**

**She was kneeling, gazing at the sky in rapt attention.**

**`You can see it?'**

**`Of course I can see it. A crescent of light.'**

**Jenine gave a sigh of relief. `I thought I was dreaming.'**

**`What is it?'**

**`You'd know if you hadn't ducked out of your final year.**

**It's the moon! It's not some crazy abstract aspect of heaven that they used to tell us it was. It's real! It's crescent-shaped because the zargon light is lighting it up from one side, and because it's round!**

**Her excitement was infectious although Ewen's brain was still too befuddled with sleep for him to be sure what there was to be excited about.**

**`Let's take a look at it in the morning,' he suggested.**

**`We won't be able to see it then!' Jenine retorted. `The light will be too bright. That's why we haven't seen it until**



**now! It means that you're right! That Blader Zallen's theories about a negative universe are right! I've worked it all out, Ewen. You're right -- we're on sphere drifting in space. The zargon light is a star! So is that light, and that!' She jabbed her finger at the brightest constellations in turn. `They're all stars, Ewen, but the zargon light is the nearest! We have to go back to Arama! We have to go back and tell the people!'**

**Ewen's brain caught up with her reasoning. `Tell them what?'**

**`That we've found heaven, of course!'**

**`Jenine -- we may have discovered the truth, but we don't really know for sure yet. A few rough measurements and calculations with no proper instruments. And even if we were believed, will anyone thank us for telling them that they've been living a lie? That their entire culture and religion is founded on lies? Of course not.'**

**`We must return, Ewen. We must! We owe it to everyone.'**

**`No one will listen to couple of fugitives. Anyway, how do we get back?'**

**`The same way we came in,' Jenine retorted.**

**`Past steel grilles?'**

**`They were open when we crawled through the tunnel. Maybe they're open again now.'**

**`How do we get back to the cave?'**

**`Where's your stupid lateral thinking?' she flared. `We recover the rope and climb down from above!'**

**\* \* \* \***

**The surf boiled white around Ewen's waist. He struggled to retain his balance in the strong undertow. It was high tide; entering the sea was the only way he get back far enough to see the cave opening and Jenine who was at standing at the top of the tree-lined cliff.**

**`Left! Left!' he bellowed, waving his left arm. Jenine dragged sideways on the rope that was hanging down the cliff face.**

**A roller nearly sent him sprawling in the surf.**

**`Too far!'**

**He signalled frantically with his right arm. Jenine twitched on the rope. It fell against the narrow ledge outside the cave's opening. A surprisingly short distance below it was the ledge on which they had nearly died. Ewen held up both hands to indicate that the position was okay. He saw Jenine tying the rope to a tree and was about to wade out of the sea when a vicious wave hurled him forward. He surfaced, spluttering, coughing out the foul-tasting salt water. He staggered up the beach, wiped his eyes and looked up. To his horror and surprise, Jenine was already halfway down the rope.**

**`Jenine! No! Wait for me!'**

**His voice echoed off the granite cliff face. The plan had**

**been that he should signal the correct position of the rope and then join Jenine so that they could climb down to the cave together.**

**She reached the entrance, waved to Ewen without looking down at him, and disappeared into the gloomy opening.**

**`Jenine!'**

**He waited a minute, hardly believing that she had courage to enter the cave alone.**

**`JENINE!'**

**Minutes passed. Panic seized him. Supposing she had found that the grille guarding the tunnel was open? He knew that she was sufficiently strong-willed to overcome her fear of confined spaces, so supposing she had crawled in and the grille had slammed shut behind her? He pulled on his shoes and ran frantically along the beach to where the wooded cliff sloped down to the sand. He crashed blindly through the bush, scrambling over rockfalls to take the shortest route to the top. He slipped twice, grazing his knee badly the first time, but took no notice, and pressed on. Near the top exhaustion forced him to rest. He lay on the ground, his tortured heart hammering against his ribs. Without waiting to get his breath back, he continued to the top and half crawled, half shambled along the cliff top, tripping over roots until he came to the tree that Jenine had tied the rope to. This time commonsense prevailed and he waited a few minutes to restore his senses.**

**`Jenine!'**

**She must have heard him; the cave opening was close, just below an outcrop. He lay prone at the brink and cried out again, but there was no answer. He closed his eyes and decided that his pounding heart was due more to the terrible thought of losing his beloved Jenine than his exertions. He grasped the rope and went down as fast as he dare. His feet encountered the ledge, and he threw himself into the cave's opening. He picked himself up and stumbled towards the light, and the sound of sobbing.**

**`Jenine?'**

**He went forward and found her. His senses swam with overwhelming relief. She was kneeling on the floor, the discharge tube lying beside her, forehead pressed in abject misery against the grille that was still closed. There was blood on her hands and the bars -- he guessed from where she had torn at the grille in fury and frustration. He wanted to be angry with her: to shout and rant about her stupidity, but he was unwilling to add to her misery. Instead he touched her gently on the shoulder. She took no notice.**

**`Jenine... You should've waited.'**

**`We have to get back!' she sobbed. `We have to tell them. We have a duty. We can't let them go on like that. Not knowing the truth.' Her fury boiled over and she shook the immovable grille, ignoring her lacerated hands.**

**This time he wanted to get angry with her; to spin her**

around and slap her face. He resisted the impulse with an effort and kept his voice calm. `They'll never believe us, Jenine.'

`That's what you keep saying. They'll have to listen.

We'll take back evidence. Those leaves...'

`They still won't believe us. But if several of us were to return...'

She jerked her head off the grille and stared at him, her cheeks streaked with tears. `Several? What do you mean, several?'

`Those buildings yesterday... I think I saw people.'

`People!' Her fury returned. `You saw people and you said nothing!'

`I don't know for certain. There was something moving about. I blinked and they or it, or whatever it was, were gone. It's too far away to be sure.'

She calmed down a little.

`I'm sorry, Jenine, but you were so intent on returning here--'

She ran her fingertips over his sweat-streaked chest. He could never be angry with her when she did that. `You got here fast.'

`I was terrified at the thought of losing you.' He cradled her face and kissed her. `I'm never going to let you out of my sight again. I swear.'

**She smiled at that and returned the kiss. `Dear, sweet, Ewen.'**

**`I'm sorry I forgot to tell you about the people.'**

**`Oh... It was my fault. I didn't think to ask. I assumed that the place was deserted... That the buildings were ruins.'**

**`They might be for all we know,' said Ewen, relieved now that her customary objectiveness was returning. `I only think I saw them.'**

**`Then we have to find out one way or the other.'**

**Ewen was nonplussed. `How?'**

**`We signal them.'**

**10**

**`Now!' Ewen yelled when the heat started melting a hole in the membrane leaves.**

**He and Jenine dragged the translucent green cover back from the bonfire they had built near their camp and watched the spreading ball of black smoke they had released rise into air. There were now three distinct black clouds marring the still, clear air above the beach although the highest cloud was being dissipated by a breeze that wasn't apparent at ground level. It was the second successive day that they had tried the smoke trick. Today they hoped for success because the wind had dropped and they had discovered a forest fuel that gave off dense black smoke when wet.**

**`And again!' Jenine cried.**

**They dragged the crude cover back over the bonfire and waited for the smoke to build up beneath it. They had made the cover by scoring hundreds of membrane leaves together so that they were bonded into a large sheet. The heat caused the translucent material to billow up like a giant blister, making it difficult to control.**

**`Now!'**

**They ran sideways with the cover and liberated another pungent black cloud. They tried again, but the heat-weakened membrane finally split and caught fire. They watched it curl and burn. That it had lasted so long had surprised them. The strange leaves had an astonishing resistance to fire.**

**Ewen grinned at Jenine. They were naked, their bodies were soot black and streaked with sweat. `I reckon that's it for today. If they don't see that, they've got to be blind.'**

**`And have no sense of smell,' Jenine added, wrinkling her nose.**

**`Oh, I don't think they'd smell you from here...' He paused and twitched his nostril at her. `On second thoughts, perhaps they might.'**

**Jenine retaliated by kicking sand at Ewen and chasing him into the sea. They wrestled and splashed in the surf, rubbing each other clean with handfuls of wet sand.**

**`Not there, Ewen! You idiot!'**

**They fell struggling and laughing together, swallowing seawater and not minding because they had lost much of their fear of the mighty expanse. Jenine broke away and swam into deeper water, kicking hard to wash away Ewen's inconsiderately-placed handful of sand.**

**Ewen sprawled lazily on the beach, savouring the sun's warmth after his dip. It was early morning, a time of day when they took a chance on exposing their bodies to the the sun's rays. He propped himself on his elbows and watched Jenine's lithe body cleaving gracefully through the water, noticing for the first time that, despite their care, the ultra-violet radiation had changed her skin from white to a rich golden colour. He returned her wave. She swam back to the beach and waded out of the water. As he watched, utterly entranced, he realised that he had experienced this scene before: a beautiful, golden-skinned blonde girl rising out of the water against a background of blue; sparkling rivulets coursing between her full breasts, separating into twin streams that joined again as they flowed over her stomach, forming an inviting inverted arrow that drew his gaze willingly down.**

**This was his recurring dream of the outdoors made real.**

**11**

**On their tenth day in the outdoors the sun was hidden by cloud. The humidity had dropped, the horizon sharp and clear,**



so they took advantage of the cooler conditions to pack some fruit in the holdall and climb the hill to the ventilator shaft where they stared at the far off line of buildings.

‘They must have seen our smoke,’ Jenine declared. ‘How could they not have seen it?’

‘If there’s anyone there,’ Ewen observed. ‘And besides, fires seem to occur naturally here from time to time. There were those blackened areas that we found yesterday.’

Jenine screwed up her eyes. ‘You know, you can almost see the curvature of the water if you look carefully.’

‘But no people?’ Ewen queried, pleased at her acceptance of his bizarre theory.

She didn’t reply but continued gazing at the buildings.

‘They don’t look like ruins. All the precipitation we get at night must cause damage over the years.’ She pulled a piece of membrane leaf from a pocket and punched a pinhole in it with a tool from the holdall. Ewen watched her curiously as she held the piece of material to her eye.

‘What’s the idea?’ he asked.

‘Trick I learned as a kid... The rays of light are concentrated and focussed more clearly as they pass through a pinhole...’ Her voice trailed away and then she gave a sudden whoop that made Ewen jump. ‘Yes! There’s people! Hundreds of people!’

‘What?’

**She thrust the leaf into his hand and showed him how to stretch it out and hold the pinhole close to his eye. `You'll see them! You've got to see them!'**

**Ewen saw them. Hundreds was an exaggeration, but there was no doubt that the almost indistinguishable forms were definitely people. There were larger shapes that could even be ground cars.**

**Jenine snatched the leaf from him and gave another cry of exaltation. `There's men and women!'**

**Ewen laughed. `Well I could certainly see something that looked like people. But as for men or women... You must have better eyesight than me.'**

**She turned to him, her eyes shining, her whole being vibrant with excitement. `There are people there, Ewen! Rational people. People who erect buildings. People who live under the stars and know what they are. People who know the truth. If we tell them about Arama, they will find a way in and liberate them! Our friends, relations -- everyone. We can lead them out of the darkness! This is where they belong! Not shut up in those caverns! The radio message was right. We must escape from this island.'**

**12**

**Ewen's feet touched sand. He stood and guided the drifting tree that Jenine had spotted towards the beach. She saw that he was exhausted after his long swim, and splashed into the**

**water to help him beach the tree, but its branches snagged on the bottom, causing it to swing uncontrollably in the swell.**

**`It's no good -- it's too big,' he panted.**

**But Jenine was not so easily deterred. `Maybe we could burn off some of the branches?'**

**`Burn them off in the water? A great idea.' Ewen let go of the tree in disgust and staggered up the beach where the fruits of their scavenging, pieces of driftwood of every conceivable shape and size, lay drying in the sun.**

**`Ewen! Help me!'**

**`Let it go, Jenine. It's waterlogged.'**

**Jenine gave up struggling with the tree and watched the wind and current conspire to drag it out to sea. She waded out of the water and sat a distance from Ewen, twisting membrane leaves into a rope while pointedly ignoring him.**

**`Jenine--'**

**`If it was something you'd thought of, that tree would be beached by now!' she snapped. `But a raft was my idea so you've raised every objection you can think of!'**

**`That's not fair. The smoke signals were your idea. I went along with that.'**

**`Not at first you didn't!'**

**Ewen jumped to his feet, seized a length of sea-worn branch and marched to the water's edge. `Watch!' With that he flung the piece of wood into the sea. It sank and came**

sluggishly to the surface with the sea washing over it. 'You see? Useless! If it's got a specific gravity of less than one, it floats; if it's one or more, it sinks.' He kicked a pile of timber over. 'It's all the same, Jenine. It barely floats. We'd need an island of the stuff as big as this island to give us enough residual buoyancy to support our weight. And how would we hold it all together?'

She held up a length of the membrane rope. 'With this. It's strong.'

'And so are those waves. I've been out there. And even if the raft stayed in one piece, how would we steer it?'

'The wind will take us.'

Ewen sat beside her and helped plait the rope, giving each leaf a hard twist. The self-adhesive properties of the leaves ensured that they stayed bonded firmly together. 'And the current will take us in the wrong direction,' he said gently.

'You saw what happened to the model.'

'There'll be no current at night,' Jenine answered, not looking up from her work. 'They're convection currents caused by the heat from the light. When the light's gone, no currents. That's logical.'

'And it's also logical to suppose that there's enough residual heat in a mass of water that size to maintain currents all through the night. Besides, it'll take longer than a night to get there. If we could walk it, it would take at least a day.'

**Their argument dragged on, and got progressively more acrimonious. It ended with Jenine jumping to her feet and storming off along the beach. Ewen watched her go. It was low tide. She rounded the headland and disappeared. He cursed himself for not going along with her idea. She wasn't stupid; once they had some sort of raft lashed together she would have seen how hopeless the project was. He dragged four of the longest tree trunks into position to form a frame and set to work lashing them together. Best not to build the thing too far from the water. He put a long, slender trunk to one side to use as a launching lever. He became intent on his work and stopped suddenly when he realised that Jenine had not returned. He expected her to be watching him from the headland but there was no sign of her when he shaded his eyes and scoured the promitory. He worked on the raft for another hour and started to worry as the sun dipped lower. He abandoned his task, made up the fire so that it wouldn't go out before sundown, and set off along the beach. Jogging on the soft sand was hard on the ankles but it was firm along the tide's edge. He reached the headland and clambered to the highest point. She was a distant, forlorn dot on the next beach, sitting watching the sea. If she heard his shouts, she ignored them. Ewen pounded along the wet sand towards her, rehearsing his apologies.**

**`Jenine!'**

**He was much nearer; she must've heard him, yet there was no acknowledgement. Not so much as a turn of her head.**

**He pushed doggedly on, splattering his legs with wet sand.**

**He could see her more clearly now. The way she kept her gaze directed doggedly out to sea told him that she knew he was approaching.**

**`Jen--'**

**He didn't see what tripped him and sent him sprawling flat on his face. Searing pain stabbed through his ankle and lanced up his right leg. He tried to get up but his foot was trapped. He managed to turn his foot in whatever was gripping it below the wet sand so that he could sit up, but his attempts to pull it free were an agony.**

**`Jenine! I'm stuck!'**

**She gave him a cursory glance.**

**`Please, Jenine! I'm hurt!'**

**She rose and walked to him, taking her time. She stood distainfully over him, hands on hips.**

**`What's the matter?'**

**`I've tripped on something and can't get my foot free.' He grimaced in pain. `It hurts like hell.'**

**She knelt and suddenly her demeanour changed. `Oh, Ewen -- what have you done? Your ankle's swelling up.'**

**He managed a feeble joke despite his predicament: `And my pride's deflating. I'm sorry about earlier on, Jenine. I've**

**made a serious start on the raft. I think it's going to be okay.'**

**She rewarded his climb-down with a teasing smile. 'Well it doesn't look like you'll be doing much more work on it for a while, the state this ankle's in. Keep still.'**

**She scooped the sand away from around Ewen's foot. 'You've jammed it in something... Something white... Hold on.' She jumped up, searched among the debris along the highwater mark, and returned with a large shell which she use as a trowel to dig the sand away from around Ewen's foot.**

**'I think it's bone,' she said.**

**'Of course my ankle's bone,' said Ewen indignantly. 'It's an ideal material for skeletons.'**

**'Idiot -- whatever's trapping your foot. It's like those skeletons that get washed up only it must be huge. It goes down a long way.' She dug for a minute, creating a mound of sand. Ewen tried to lean forward to see what she had discovered, but the intensity of the pain forced him to lie back and think about what life was like before this agony. Jenine jumped to her feet and went on another forage and returned with a large, sharp lump of flint. 'Keep still,' she warned, sitting astride the hole.**

**'What are you going to do?'**

**'Cut your foot off, of course.'**

**With that she swung the rock into the hole. There was the**

**sound of something breaking. Ewen felt his foot come free. He wriggled backwards and regarded his swollen ankle in dismay.**

**`Thanks, Jenine.'**

**She looked at his foot in concern and ran her hands over the swelling, kneading quite hard with her fingers in the process and making him yelp. `Nothing's broken.' She stood.**

**`Won't be a minute. Don't run away.'**

**Another scavenge along the foreshore. She returned with a long length of the kelp-like streamer seaweed which she bound tightly around his foot. He was about to voice protests on principle, but realised that the pressure of the makeshift bandage actually relieved the pain.**

**`Thanks, Jenine. Where would I be without you?'**

**`Well, you wouldn't have to come chasing after me every time I have an attack of the sulks. Do you think you can walk?'**

**`I think so, if you could find a stick.' He tried to stand but Jenine pushed him back gently.**

**`Rest a while. I want to find out what this thing is you fell over.'**

**While Ewen looked on, she went back to work with the sea shell, industriously scraping the hole deeper and exposing more of the strange white object.**

**`It's bone all right,' she announced, shifting into a different position and digging on the opposite side. Ewen eased himself forward and helped scoop out the wet sand.**



**`It's like a giant pot or carboy,' said Ewen. `A skull?'**

**Jenine stopped work and contemplated the object she was digging around. Ewen was right -- it resembled a giant pot. She tried to lift it, but it refused to budge.**

**`It's full of sand,' said Ewen, staring down at the dome-like bone shell.**

**But Jenine had already thrust her hands through the hole that she had enlarged to free Ewen's foot. She worked for ten minutes, without speaking, intent on scooping out handfuls of wet sand. She tried shifting it again. This time it moved and could be rocked back and forth. Ewen shifted his weight on his buttocks, got a purchase on the object with both hands, and heaved. It came free and together they managed to roll it out of the hole.**

**It was the wholly unexpected shock appearance of the creature's jaw that caused Jenine to give an involuntary gasp. The upper jaw was a fixed part of the skull, and lower jaw was slightly open; both consisted of rows of wicked teeth, each tooth the size of a forefinger. The gaping maw looked large enough to bite either of them in half had it been attached to a live owner. As they stared aghast at the apparition, water, mud and sand vomited from the grotesque mouth and oozed from a pair of equally terrifying eye sockets like macabre rivers of sluggish, obscene tears.**

**Jenine's horrified gaze went from the skull to the sea.**

**`Do you suppose it's got relatives out there?'**

**`Sure to have,' Ewen replied. `This could be a baby that got lost.'**

**Jenine said nothing. She put her shoulder to the thing and rolled it into the sea. It wallowed back and forth in the surf, the action of the waves flushing it clean. She waded after it and discovered, to her astonishment that she could lift it out of the water with little effort. The bone walls had been worn thin over countless years by the abrasive action of the sand and the sea. In some places, where Ewen's foot had gone through, the walls were virtually transparent. The sight of her carrying such a huge object with apparent ease amused Ewen. She dumped it near him and they contemplated it in silence and awe.**

**`Can you even begin to visualise the size of its original owner?' Ewen asked.**

**Jenine looked at the sea and shivered. Suddenly she didn't find the idea of a raft so attractive.**

**She helped Ewen to his feet. To his relief, he found that he could stand without too much pain, and walk with the aid of a sapling that Jenine uprooted. Obviously it was only a minor sprain. Before they set off back to the camp, Jenine dumped the great pot-like skull well clear of the sea. It might prove a valuable source of material for making bone tools that she had in mind.**

## **PART 9**

### **Flight**

#### **1**

**The sound of distant thunder rolling around the sky woke Ewen before dawn. He sat up and watched the point of light that appeared to be climbing into the void. He seen it before but this time he was certain that the phenomenon was man-made. The light and sound faded. It was usually still at this time of night, before the coming of the sun, but a sharp wind had risen and had caused the fire to burn itself out. All that was left was a bed of glowing embers. The fire was their guardian angel while they slept. For it to go out during the hours of darkness could spell disaster. He hobbled to their fuel pile and returned with handfuls of dried streamer seaweed that he added to the hot ashes. Although the fuel was dry, nothing happened for several seconds. The seaweed merely hissed menacingly. He waited anxiously and brightened the embers by blowing on them. The streamers curled in the heat and suddenly flared up, burning with a brilliant blue flame. That the stuff seemed to release some sort of organic gas was interesting, but it was important to ensure that the fire was okay. He added some palm fronds to the blaze and made sure that it was well-established before settling down beside Jenine. He watched her serene face for some minutes by the**

light from the fire, drinking in her loveliness. He felt a pang of guilt, bringing her here. No -- that was wrong; they had come together. Without Jenine he would never have succeeded. Here, despite the deprivations, life had a purpose -- the most basic purpose of all and one which the people of Arama had been deprived of.

**Survival.**

His gaze travelled around the simple camp. They had come into this strange world with virtually nothing. A length of rope. Now they had warmth and a degree of comfort. Plates, bowls, eating implements made from bone, water bags, even a large, woven sunshade, the basic of design of which he had in mind to use to build a permanent home. They had taken the materials to hand and made things; created wealth. He had no sharp tools apart from pieces of worked flint, but tomorrow he planned to make some bellows and attempt smelting some ore-bearing rocks he had found. With one crude iron tool he could make more and better tools. They had even taken a few tentative steps on the path to an understanding of the stars, and had puzzled over the curious movements of some wandering stars. No doubt an answer to their mystery would come. First they had explore this world. And that meant escape.

Watching the smoke and sparks lifting into the night sky and being borne on the strong breeze towards the distant land gave him idea that brought him to full wakefulness. Suddenly everything dropped into place. His heart quickened with

**excitement; he wanted to wake Jenine and tell her. No... It could wait until morning. He closed his eyes, planning ahead, foreseeing difficulties and how they could be overcome. By the time he was drifting off to sleep, virtually every detail of the bold plan had crystallized into sharp reality in his remarkable mind. He wondered what Jenine would think of it. But she was desperate to escape from the island, and she was practical, therefore she was certain to be in favour.**

**2**

**'I think,' said Jenine, biting into her third breakfast fruit, 'that it's the most lunatic, damn-fool scheme that I've ever heard. It's crass, stupid, ill-conceived and... and...'** She groped for insults.

**'Impractical?' Ewen offered.**

**'Impractical...'**

**'Cretinous?'**

**'Cretinous,' Jenine agreed.**

**'Hopeless?'**

**'Hopeless.'**

**'Muddle-headed?'**

**'Muddle-- Listen, Ewen. I'm quite capable of thinking up my own insults, thank you.'**

**'Dangerous?'**

**'That too. How about a lot of hot air?'**

Ewen looked admiringly at her. `An insult and a joke rolled into one. You could also say that because the idea's based on a kids' toy, that by suggesting it, I'm reflecting my immature and juvenile thinking when confronted with a problem.'

Jenine started on her fourth fruit. `I could, but I won't.'

`Why not?'

`You know what really annoys about this idea of yours, Ewen? Something that crawls right under my skin?'

`Do tell.'

`The nasty, nagging suspicion at the back of my mind that it might just work.'

`It will. It has to.'

Jenine finished off the fruit and jumped to her feet.

`Well it never will if we just sit around talking about it.'

\* \* \* \*

Getting the skull back to the camp took three hours. Although it weighed very little, it was large and unwieldy. Nor was the task helped by Ewen's sprained ankle. He stood the skull on end so that the wide opening, which he presumed had been joined somehow to its original owner's neck, was uppermost. Jenine packed some dried streamer seaweed into it and applied a torch. The brilliant blue flame was visible in the bright sunlight. It burned fiercely with a soft roaring noise. The jaw and the eye sockets acted as efficient air vents. The

intense heat drove the couple back. They watched anxiously as incandescent flames seemed to engulf the entire bone shell. They were ready with bags of seawater in case the conflagration got out of hand. A ten-minute burn and the fuel was consumed. When the skull had cooled, Ewen scraped its interior with a flint. Although badly blackened, and weakened around the edges, the bone had not caught fire. To complete the experiment, they separated the rope into its five main strands and threw a short length onto the campfire. As expected, it resisted the flames satisfactorily.

'Progress,' said Ewen, pleased with their findings. 'We have a fire basket and the means of suspending it. Now all we have to do is make something to suspend it from.'

3

Jenine stood askance in the centre of the huge circle that Ewen had marked out on the beach with sticks pushed into the sand.

'Ewen, it's colossal!'

Ewen nodded. 'The diameter is as we agreed -- my height multiplied by ten. Twenty paces.'

She shook her head in disbelief. They had worked hard on the mathematics of the hot air balloon's size all morning to refine Ewen's original rough estimate. She had double-checked and even triple-checked their figures, but the sheer size of

**the beach circle when thought of in three dimensions as a sphere was daunting.**

**`You don't think we could have made a mistake, Ewen?'**

**`No. There's our combined weight, the weight of the fire basket, the rigging, and the fuel. Provided we can get a density reduction of ten per cent of the air in the envelope by heating it, then this is the displacement volume we need.'**

**Jenine said nothing. During their calculations they had rediscovered the hot air balloon's law of diminishing returns. To increase the volume and therefore `lift' of a sphere by a relatively small percentage caused a doubling of its surface area and consequently its weight. There was an optimum size which they had found and were not happy with. She paced out the circle's diameter. `The circumference will be over three times the diameter!' she said accusingly.**

**`That's geometry for you.'**

**`And think of all the membrane leaves we'll need! And where do we start? At the top? Bottom? Middle? And how do we fix the fire basket--'**

**Ewen silenced her objections with a kiss. This was followed by a suggestion that produced more objections.**

**`How can you think of that when we've got all these problems? Honestly, Ewen, there are times--'**

**He stopped her in mid-flow again with another kiss.**

**`Listen. If we worry about everything at once, we'll never get anything done. I've made three lists of problems: those**



**that have to be solved now; those that we can think about; and those that we forget until later. Right now, you and your worrying puts you on the first list.'**

**Jenine put her arms around his neck and returned his kiss.**

**'I like being on your first list. Okay. We'll gather membrane leaves and think of nothing else, I promise.' She tried to push him away but he held onto her, enjoying the soft pressure of her breasts against his chest.**

**'It can wait five minutes,' he said.**

**'I do believe you've got something a little longer in mind,' she said mischievously.**

**The start of work on the hot air balloon was delayed for a delicious thirty minutes.**

**\* \* \* \***

**They spent the next three days foraging all over the island for membrane leaves which they took back to the camp and weighed down with round stones -- exactly 500 leaves in each pile. It was slow, exhausting work. Jenine went on strike towards the end of the third day.**

**'It's no good, Ewen. They're getting harder to find.'**

**Ewen showed her one of the leaves that he had covered in preliminary calculations. 'We need 40,000 minimum,' he pointed out.**

**Jenine considered. 'Why don't we make a start on cutting and trimming the leaves now? It'll take us a week to use up**

**this lot, by which time the trees will have grown new ones.'**

**It was a sensible idea so they went to work on the next stage which was cutting all the leaves to hexagon shapes using clay templates that Ewen had made. They sat cross-legged under a thatched shade. The work was simple but mind-numbingly boring. Each leaf had to be spread flat, the hexagonal template positioned in the centre of the leaf, and the surplus cut trimmed off with a napped flint blade. The only difficult part of the work was peeling each leaf off the cutting stone after trimming. The gossamer membranes had a tendency to cling to anything. The couple worked steadily through the hours of daylight, pausing only to eat and drink, and make love or swim when the sheer monotony of the massive task threatened their reason. Nevertheless, having a definite project to work on with a clear objective added a sense of purpose and expectancy to their lives and made the long days and the tedious work a little more bearable.**

**4**

**The pebble Ewen tossed favoured Jenine.**

**She knelt in front of the smooth, flat slab of rock that was her work table. She took two of the membrane hexagons and laid them edge to edge with a small overlap. She picked up a rounded stone and scored it along the overlap. The two six-sided shapes bonded immediately. She bonded another hexagon into the resulting vee above the join and repeated the**

**process with the lower vee. The result was four membrane leaves joined together to form an even larger leaf whose outer edges were ready-shaped to receive more leaves. The simple geometric tessellating pattern meant that the sheet could be extended in any direction to create a sheet as large as one wished.**

**`It works!' said Jenine delightedly, holding up the deceptively delicate-looking membrane.**

**Ewen smiled, took it from her and draped it over his hand.**

**In the shade his body heat was enough to make the pale green panel lift into the air, twisting and tumbling as though it were alive. He caught it and spread it out. `Exactly the same pattern as those paving blocks in Steyning. Remember Steyning?'**

**They laughed at the memory of Steyning's indignant chief of police, and settled happily to their monumental task.**

**\* \* \* \***

**The construction of the balloon's envelope had been carefully planned. To make the balloon's voluminous envelope easier to handle, they decided to build it in two hemispheres starting with the girth -- the equatorial belt. This would be a broad ribbon of membrane whose length was equal to the envelope's circumference. They worked at opposite ends, weighing down the steadily lengthening belt of delicate green material with small rocks wrapped in seaweed.**

The centre section was finished on the sixth day and the ends joined together to form a giant band. They then worked their way along the upper edge of the band, adding occasional five-sided pentagon-shaped membranes at predetermined intervals. These had the effect of gradually reducing the envelope's diameter as they progressed towards the top so that it became dome-shaped.

Ewen scored the last hexagon into place at the hemisphere's exact apex and beamed at Jenine. `Halfway, Jenine! Halfway!'

They rested for two days to give their aching, blistered hands a chance to recover, and spent the following three days foraging for membrane leaves and trimming them. Two days of storms delayed a fresh start on the envelope. Then the skies cleared and the sun shone brightly. They resumed work on the envelope with renewed spirits and vigour. By late afternoon on the fourth day since the storms, they had completed the main envelope and were scoring the hexagons into place that formed the balloon's neck. The final task was rolling a length of reinforcing rope into the neck so that it was trapped and sealed beneath several layers of membrane.

Tired, but happy, they spread the huge envelope out on the beach, weighted it with seaweed-wrapped rocks, and stood for a long time with their arms around each other, contemplating their handiwork.

`Perfectly symmetrical,' said Ewen with pride. `Absolutely

and amazingly perfect.' He looked up at the darkening sky. There were a few clouds which the ever-reliable prevailing wind was blowing towards their unseen destination. 'If these conditions hold, we'll be on our way within two days.' Jenine hugged him. 'Isn't that a problem on the third list?'

'They've all moved up one now. You have my permission to think about the third list problems.'

Jenine fell remained silent. Ewen sensed that something was worrying her.

'Oh, just me being silly,' she said in answer to his inquiry. 'A fourth list problem.'

'There is no fourth list.'

'Isn't there?'

He drew her close. She was trembling. 'Tell me,' he said.

'If we make it to that land...'

'We will.'

'...how will they treat us?'

'How should they treat us?'

Jenine hesitated. 'Well... There's been others who've escaped... Simo Belan.'

'According to Father Dadley -- yes -- several.'

'Then why is it that they've never returned to Arama, Ewen? Have you ever thought about that?'

**5**

**Jenine solved the third list problem of how to store the balloon's fuel in a compact form. She made a round, fist-size hole through a large block of clay. When dried, it made an excellent mould for compressing the streamer seaweed and ejecting it in the form of easy-to-handle plugs. She busied herself making fuel plugs while Ewen secured the fire basket to the neck of the balloon using unpicked strands of the rope. The balloon's neck was three times the diameter of the suspended fire basket to minimize the risk of the envelope catching fire. The membrane material was fire resistant but not fireproof.**

**The next problem on the third list was the passenger basket. Their first experiment with woven vines was a net-like bag that proved too big and lacked strength.**

**'It only has to big enough for the two of us,' Jenine reasoned. 'The fuel plugs can be carried in membrane bags slung over the side.'**

**Ewen agreed that it was a good idea. The second basket was woven from the reeds which grew in profusion around the freshwater pools. They were easy to split, bend and twist when green, and dried quickly and became rigid in the sun. The basket was light, and there was just enough room in it for them to stand. They made the open sides waist high for safety. It seemed an ideal solution but it had to scrapped when an experimental burn with the fire basket suspended from**

**a tree resulted in the passenger basket beneath catching fire from a cascade of hot ashes that fell through the fire basket's air vents.**

**They doused the flames with water bags and sat on the beach, disconsolately staring at the burnt out remains of the passenger basket that had taken them two days to make.**

**`Two baskets!' said Jenine suddenly. `We could have a small one each. We suspend them directly from the throat's reinforcing ring. That way we'll be level with the fire basket -- not under it -- and it'll be easy for both of us to feed it with fuel without getting in each other's way.'**

**They tried Jenine's idea and it worked. Her comment that Ewen did not have a monopoly on lateral thinking resulted in her being chased into the sea and subjected to agreeable punishment.**

**6**

**`Another third list problem,' said Jenine during their evening meal. `When will be the best time to leave?' Ewen looked uncomfortable. `It's at the bottom of the list.'**

**`So the time has come to think about it,' Jenine insisted.**

**`Well... It'll have to be when it's dead calm -- no wind.'**

**`But that's crazy. We need the wind to carry us to the land.'**

**`Trying to control that envelope during inflation will be impossible in anything but still air,' Ewen pointed out.**

**It was true; whenever they had to move the cumbersome envelope, they had always had to wait for a calm day or a drop in the wind.**

**`Also,' Ewen continued, `the heat from the fire basket has to go straight up. We daren't light up in even a light breeze.'**

**Jenine thought for a moment. `We have a conflict,' she reasoned. `We need calm conditions for take-off, and the wind for flight.'**

**They gave the problem silent contemplation.**

**`I know,' said Jenine suddenly. `We leave at night. Say an hour before dawn when it's usually very still.'**

**Ewen didn't like the idea of trying to launch the balloon at night.**

**`But it has to be at night,' Jenine argued. `The air's much colder at night, therefore it's denser, therefore it'll provide more buoyancy -- lift. Right?'**

**Ewen nodded.**

**`So we leave an hour before dawn and go as high as possible. It doesn't matter if we use all our fuel going straight up. The wind comes with the dawn and blows us across to the land as we lose height. Simple.'**

**Ewen opened his mouth to object on principle, but closed it.**



**Jenine was right.**

**7**

**It was Jenine's turn to wake before dawn and keep watch on the weather. She opened her eyes and gazed up at the moon. It was no longer the thin crescent that she had first seen, but was full and brilliant. She studied its markings and wondered if it really was a huge rock drifting in a vacuum. Is that what this place was too, as Ewen believed? For a few seconds, like the brief lifting of a curtain, she was able to visualise a universe of space filled with worlds. It was an awesome image. She sat up and immediately sensed that something was not right. There an indefinable feel of wrongness about the atmosphere that she had never known before.**

**She wriggled fully-dressed from the shelter and stood, frowning in disappointment at the sharpness of the breeze that stung her cheeks. They had been ready to leave for six nights now, and each night there had been a wind. She rinsed her face and hands in a clay bowl, hoping to wash away the feeling of foreboding but to no avail. She contemplated the great tear drop shape of the balloon's envelope lying on the sand. Nearby was the rickety reed scaffold they had built, complete with a makeshift ladder. Every exposed end of reed was heavily shrouded in seaweed to prevent damage to the**

**balloon's envelope when it was dragged into place. When the time arrived, they would drape the balloon's yawning throat over the tall frame and light the bonfire. They had already experimented on a still evening and discovered that to try filling the balloon using the fire basket was impossible; a large, fierce fire was needed to provide the initial boost for the fire basket to sustain. Only when the balloon was fully inflated could they attach the fire basket and the two passenger baskets.**

**The wind strengthened but did nothing to alleviate the strange oppressiveness in the air.**

**She checked that the rain covers over the inflation bonfire, the fire basket and the fuel bags were well weighted down with rocks, and looked regretfully up at the scudding clouds lacing across the moon. Their escape from the island would have to wait another day.**

**A small, cold stone struck her on the forehead. And then another. Her first thought was that Ewen was playing a prank flicking stones into the air. There was a strange drumming sound. She looked around in bewilderment, trying to locate the source of the eerie noise and realised that the impossible was happening: sharp, icy cold stones were raining down from the sky.**

**`Ewen!' she cried out. `EWEN!!!'**

**She stumbled towards the envelope, spread out and vulnerable. At the moment lightning blazed across the sky,**

**turning the clouds to flickering sheets of blue fire and illuminating the beach with a blinding, incandescent light.**

**The crack of thunder that followed almost instantaneously was a mighty blast of terrifying sound that lifted Jenine off her feet and hurled her to sand. She tried to stand but another stupendous bolt of lightning lanced across the sky.**

**'It's the GoD power!' she screamed, trying to bury herself in the sand as the second mighty avalanche of thunder rolled above her tormented body.**

**'Oh, GoD, forgive us! Please forgive us!'**

**The hail storm intensified, the stones became larger, raining a deafening tattoo of destruction on the balloon's envelope.**

**8**

**At first light Ewen took proper stock of the damage. The reed scaffold had survived the storm, but their camp had been flattened, the fire extinguished. Most of clay bowls and cups that Jenine had spent so long shaping and getting right were smashed. The two passenger baskets were intact, but the pile of fuel plugs had disintegrated into a sodden mass of seaweed. The big clay mould for making the plugs, and the clay hexagon templates had survived. He ignored Jenine who was lying beside the ruined camp. She was still rolled into a tight, protective ball, but was no longer sobbing piteously.**

Maybe she had finally fallen asleep. He decided not to disturb her but trudged across the curiously pock-marked sand towards the big untidy heap that was the balloon's envelope. He passed a deep hole where the hailstones had collected but not completely melted. He picked up the fused, ragged lump of ice and examined it as though it might contain a clue regarding the mystery of its origin. He broke off a hailstone and watched it melt in his palm. He tasted -- freshwater. Frozen raindrops. How could that happen? It was cold at night but never cold enough to freeze water. He gave up pondering the mystery and squatted down by the envelope, carefully removing the sand that he had piled over it during the height of the storm. When the thunder and hail had woken him, instead of wondering what it was, he had dashed to envelope and, ignoring the hailstones beating on his back, had done his best to fold the envelope into a pile and heap sand over it.

The sun rose higher above the eastern horizon, casting long dark shadows as he worked carefully clearing away the sand. It was warm on his back by the time he had spread the envelope out.

There were hundreds of punctures in the membrane fabric, some so large that he could put his fist through them. It was then that he realised that the damage was not as bad as it looked. Although the large holes looked bad, he reasoned that it didn't matter if the holes in individual hexagons were

large or small -- either way damaged panels would have to be replaced. And the task of cutting out and replacing punctured hexagons was relatively straightforward. He carefully turned the envelope over, shaking off the drying, loose sand as he did so. Large areas of the envelope were unharmed. All in all, he estimated that less than five per cent of the hexagons would have to be replaced. He turned his attention to the sea. Large, intimidating waves were still breaking on the beach, but the storm had washed ashore a plentiful supply of the prized streamer seaweed.

Much encouraged, he returned to Jenine and stood looking down at her. She was awake, sitting up, staring out to sea; her blonde curls matted with sand, her face streaked and puffy, but she didn't seem to care. Her lips were moving soundlessly. He guessed that she was reciting a Tenth Day prayer. He sat beside her. She scarcely acknowledged his presence but continued gazing listlessly at the horizon as he told her of his findings.

'So,' he concluded. 'A couple of days spent clearing up and rounding up fresh supplies, and week's work on the balloon, and we'll be ready again.'

Silence.

He turned her chin towards him. The customary vibrancy and light had faded from her wondrous green eyes.

'Well?' he asked.

**`You don't understand, do you?' Her voice was curiously subdued, as if she was struggling to keep an overwhelming emotion in check.**

**`What don't I understand?' Ewen asked.**

**`About last night. The GoD power. The noise. The rain of ice stones. We've offended against GoD. We're not meant to escape from here. We chose to enter hell -- the outdoors -- and now we have to endure it until we die.'**

**`We don't have to endure anything,' said Ewen quietly. He knew her well enough to know that in her present mood to raise his voice would only make matters worse. `The means of escape are here, therefore it's up to us to make use of them.'**

**`We had to endure last night!' Jenine snapped. `What does it take for you to see sense! A storm of ice stones sent to destroy the balloon!'**

**`It wasn't destroyed. Only damaged.'**

**`And the GoD power? Those flashes? Don't deny that they weren't the GoD power being unleashed at terrible levels.'**

**`I'm not,' said Ewen evenly. `I just don't believe in your interpretation. If the Guardian of Destiny had anything to do with this place, why weren't we dumped on a barren patch of nothingness? As it is, we have everything we need. Food and water; fire; plenty of fuel.'**

**`To ensure that we survive to be punished! Isn't it obvious?'**

Ewen saw no point in continuing the argument. She needed time to calm down. He rose and set about rebuilding their camp, repairing the ravages of the storm, and salvaging as much as possible. He worked steadily through the morning, stacking palm fronds to dry and spreading out seaweed. He lit a fire at midday when the sun was at its hottest and went in search of membrane leaves to make new water bags. When he returned Jenine had stripped off and was bathing in the sea, combing out her hair with the jawbone of a sea creature that she had found. She looked so stunningly lovely standing in the surf, the sun shining with a strange luminescence on her golden skin, that he wanted to seize her and smother her with kisses. Instead he rinsed her clothes in fresh water and hung them up to dry before preparing a meal. She looked in surprise at the bowl of fruit and biscuits he offered her.

'I thought all my bowls were smashed?'

'Not all of them. The vengeance of the GoD is remarkably inefficient.'

She took the bowl without a word and sat a little away from him to eat, not looking at him or speaking. Ewen finished his meal and decided that he would sleep better that night if he made some sort of start on repairing the balloon. He spent an hour under a salvaged shade cutting out membrane hexagons which he had carried to the envelope together with his cutting slab and tools, and had settled down to work. He

used the clay template to cut out the damaged panels and soon got into an easy rhythm of removing the punctured hexagons and scoring in replacements.

The evening sun was low when a shadow crossed him. He looked up in surprise. Jenine dropped her cutting slab and tools on the sand and sat opposite him. She drew a fold of damaged balloon envelope over her slab and set to work.

'You're right, Ewen,' she said after a few minutes. 'We don't have to endure anything.'

'But I have to endure you and your moods, of course.'

She looked up sharply and saw the makings of an impish smile pulling at the corners of his mouth; the same smile that she had seen when she had challenged him over the debacle of the campus's zargon lights turning blue. Her instinct was to snap a curt rejoinder but she chose to concentrate on her work.

9

'Ewen!'

The insistent tone in Jenine's voice cleaved through Ewen's sleep. He was awake in an instant, wriggling out of the camp and standing. They stood staring at each other in the firelight. Their naked bodies would have sensed the slightest air movement, but the chill night air was perfectly still. So still that the smoke and sparks from the campfire were rising in a column that was absolutely vertical. Apart



from the crackle of the fire, the air was eerily, almost frightening quiet. Even the sea was a muted dead calm. These were the conditions that they had been awaiting for six days.

'Okay. Let's go,' said Ewen tersely.

There was no time to waste in debate. Without a word the couple swung easily into a drill that they had rehearsed many times. They had learned to work quickly and efficiently without rushing or getting in each others' way. They climbed the scaffold and hauled the balloon up throat first by the passenger basket ropes. Once the open neck was hanging down, they hauled up the rest of the envelope hand over hand, pausing to position it carefully in stages so that it was folded on itself progressively and evenly concertina-fashion. Next the restraint vines attached to the balloon's reinforced neck were looped over the circle of pegs that Ewen had driven into the sand. They had practiced moving about without tripping over them. Next they lashed handfuls of sopping wet seaweed around the legs of the scaffold and to the ropes to protect them from the intense heat.

Jenine's whipped the membrane rain cover off the huge mound of fuel plugs and started piling them into the shallow depression that they had dug out beneath the balloon's yawning throat.

They dragged the fire basket into position so that it was close to hand when needed, and double-checked the contents of

the two passenger baskets. Once they had taken off, there could be no turning back. To save weight they would be taking only a few tools. The holdall that had served them so well was to be left behind.

Getting to this stage had taken an hour. Everything had gone without a hitch and their spirits were high. The cold was forgotten and their bodies were running with sweat. They rinsed themselves in the sea and climbed into their clothes. They would be necessary to protect them from the heat. Ewen put his hand to his chest. The tiny capsule radio that Father Dadley had given him was a reassuring bulge in his top pocket. Next he picked up one of the torches he had made by binding a clumps of seaweed to stout reeds, and gave it to Jenine. `You do it.'

`So you can blame me if it all goes wrong?'

They both laughed to cover their nervousness. They had never been able to rehearse beyond this point. Jenine said a prayer under her breath and thrust the torch into the campfire. It flared up instantly. Holding it high above her head, she ran towards the scaffold with Ewen close behind, and plunged the blazing brand into the pile of fuel plugs. The explosion of heat from the strange, inflammable seaweed drove them back. They stood in silence as the bonfire became an incandescent ball of blue light of such blinding intensity that it hurt their eyes to look at it. The scaffold's seaweed-wrapped legs started to steam. The balloon's gaping

**throat flapped against its restraints as it swallowed the huge quantities of searing heat. They were now powerless; a sequence of events had been set in motion that would end in either disaster or triumph.**

**Ewen ran a little away from the scaffold to see what was happening. To his joy he saw a blister rising from the folds of the balloon.**

**'It's working! It's working,' he cried ecstatically, and ran back to Jenine who had begun lobbing fuel plugs into the conflagration to keep it going. The hollow in which the fire had been built guided the plugs into the midst of the blaze. Slowly, like the growth of an awesome, gargantuan fungi, the balloon swelled and rose above the beach to greet the coming dawn.**

**10**

**Ewen wanted to stop and gaze upon their mighty creation but there was no time. While Jenine doused the inflation fire with sand now that it was dying down, he ran once in wide circle around the huge tear-shaped envelope to ensure that it had inflated evenly. He had expected it to be spherical but reasoned that the temperature difference between air at the top of the envelope and air at the bottom accounted for its odd, ovoid shape. Nevertheless, the bloated envelope was perfectly filled and symmetrical; no creases or strain lines,**

although convection currents within the great mass of trapped hot air caused the green skin to ripple and writhe as though it was about to give birth to a formless monster.

`It's fine!' he yelled. He ran back under the scaffold and helped Jenine smother the bonfire's last embers. The ring of restraint ropes were now taut. He looked up into the darkness of the balloon's mighty cavern. No part of the envelope was touching the scaffold. The neck was distorting and pulling at the circle of restraint ropes but it would hold. Everything was crucial now; there was no time to lose. They dragged the fire basket into position on the hot sand where the bonfire had been and lashed it by its six well-splayed ropes to the neck ring.

The passenger baskets were heavy and cumbersome because each one had a cargo of bags slung over the sides containing ballast rocks and fuel plugs. The circle of restraint ropes suddenly relaxed like a giant preparing to flex its muscles. They both looked fearfully up, expecting the balloon to collapse about them.

`A breeze!' Jenine cried.

At that moment the ropes suddenly snapped tight and strained at the pegs like an impatient animal. Two of the long pegs were jerked from the sand. It was the gentlest stirring of the air now that light was streaking the eastern horizon but it was enough to lend a frenzied urgency to their tasks. Even the weakest of zephyrs before they were ready

would be enough to spell disaster for the enterprise.

Jenine's basket was secured. They stood Ewen's basket upright and fastened its suspension lines. The restraint ropes relaxed again and then the balloon gave a mighty heave that plucked another peg from the sand.

'Get in!' Ewen snapped, gesturing at Jenine's basket.

'But the restraint ropes! We both have to--'

'There's not time! I'm going to light the fire basket now!'

Jenine scrambled into her basket just as another tiny gust struck the envelope. The pressure caused the throat to exhale a mighty rush of hot air around her that distorted the image of Ewen racing back to the campfire.

'Ewen! It's collapsing!'

Ewen thrust a second torch into the fire's dying embers.

It refused to catch.

They had forgotten to keep the campfire going!'

He threw himself flat and blew frantically into the bed of hot ashes. Sparks showered into the sky but no flames. He blew again, filling his lungs until they felt about to burst, and blasted air into the centre of the campfire in an explosive out rush. A tiny flame flickered and was extinguished. He sucked in again and blew till his vision blurred. A sudden crackle, an explosion of heat that singed his eyebrows, and the brand was alight. He rushed back to the

balloon clutching the precious flame. The balloon was no longer tear-shaped but was now flattened at the top as though the apex of the envelope had collapsed inwards on itself. Crease marks were appearing around the sides, spoiling the envelope's powerful symmetry, and the throat was dipping down to Jenine. In his panic he forgot the practice sessions and tripped on one of the restraint ropes. The torch's head of blazing seaweed flew off the stick and landed near the fire basket. As he went down, he felt a great rush of hot air breathing down on him, sighing softly as it surged through the balloon's neck, forced out by the weight of the collapsing envelope above.

Ewen heard Jenine give a cry of despair. He recovered his balance and prodded desperately at the blazing ball of seaweed, trying to snag it back on the stick. It rolled in the sand and was in danger of going out. The balloon gave another great surge as a whisper of a breeze caught it. There was only one possible course of action to avert a disaster. He snatched up the ball of fire and tossed it into the fire basket an instant before the pain seared through his hands. The plugs of streamer seaweed caught immediately and sent a great tongue of flame into the envelope's gaping maw. It lit up the interior of the balloon so that they both saw the timely arrest of the skin's inward collapse.

Ignoring the pain in his hands, Ewen fumbled for a bone knife to cut the last three restraint ropes. With two

**severed, the balloon gave a sudden unbalanced surge in the strengthening breeze, lifting both passenger baskets clear of the sand even though they were laden with ballast.**

**`Ewen! It's pulling out! Get aboard!'**

**But Ewen didn't need Jenine's anguished cry to see what was happening. The last peg was yanked out of the sand before he had a chance to cut the rope. He made a blind leap for his basket and hauled himself over the rim just as it struck the scaffolding and jammed under a horizontal support. The fire basket spun crazily, spewing burning ashes through its vent holes. Despite its burden of ballast, the balloon continued to lift on Jenine's side, swinging the fire basket off centre so that its furnace-like flames brushed near the envelope's neck, causing the membrane material to blister and blacken. Mustering unknown reserves of strength, Ewen pressed his hands upwards against the scaffold with enough force to punch a foot through the woven floor of his basket. He succeeded in shoving the basket clear. Freed of encumbrances but without enough buoyancy to climb, the balloon dipped and dragged the passenger baskets along the beach. Jenine saw the dark shadows of the trees at the edge of the beach looming in the balloon's path.**

**`Dump your ballast!' she screamed across at Ewen. `Dump!**

**Dump! DUMP!'**

**Originally they had planned to drop the bags of rock in an**

orderly manner to preserve the balloon's balance but there was no time now. They frantically yanked on the bag nooses and released a cascade of rocks that fell to the beach with dull thumps. In his rush Ewen accidentally jettisoned a bag of the precious fuel plugs. This time the balloon climbed, dragging the baskets through the upper foliage of the forest. With fronds slashing painfully at her forearms Jenine managed to keep her nerve. She yanked open a fuel bag and began lobbing the plugs of compressed seaweed into the fire basket. The invigorated fire belched heat and light into the envelope and lifted the balloon clear of the treetops. At last they were free of the ground and rising fast.

11

The sudden silence after the pandemonium of the last few minutes was a blissful respite that enabled the couple think clearly and orientate themselves in relation to their strange new environment.

Jenine called across the gap that separated the two baskets, asking Ewen if he was all right.

'All in one piece, but I'm going to have some real blisters to teach me a lesson for being so clumsy.'

They peered down in fascination at the receding beach, now palely lit by the ghostly first light of dawn. The balloon swung gently and they saw in its entirety the island that had been their home and prison for five weeks.



**`It all looks so different,' said Jenine. `To think that it took us a day to walk right round it.' She caught her breath and pointed. `Look.'**

**In the early light the buildings that they had seen across the straits from the hilltop looked absurdly close. They were the waterfront structures of a small city with buildings and tower blocks connected by broad, straight roads. There were even mag-lev train tracks that snaked everywhere without entering tunnels. The entire community was laid out without regard for the conservation of space that they were used to in Arama. The strange cylindrical sections that Ewen had first seen looked even more mysterious. They lay beyond the city, scattered about on a barren plain in a seemingly random fashion.**

**The air became noticeably colder which imparted more lift to the balloon, causing its rate of ascent to increase slightly. Hot air breathed unexpectedly on them. The decreasing atmospheric pressure was causing the hot air in the envelope to expand and spill out through the throat; as it expanded, so its temperature dropped. The balloon stopped climbing. The envelope exhaled another blast of hot breath like a monster.**

**`We're losing height!' Jenine warned.**

**The transition from a slow, but steady descent to a near plummet was so rapid that it took them both by surprise. The**

sea, burning red in the light from the rising sun, was coming up to meet them at an uncomfortable speed. Ewen looked up and saw the cavernous, fume-filled interior of the envelope collapsing.

‘Jenine! Fuel!’

Despite the disaster looming, they managed to keep calm and toss fuel plugs into the fire basket one at a time. The fire flared up, searing their faces, but the infusion of heat into the envelope did little to arrest the downward drift.

‘Wait! Wait!’ Jenine snapped. ‘The envelope’s fully stretched! There’s no point in burning more fuel for the moment. The heat just spills out. Maybe it takes time to start climbing.’

They waited, clutching the rims of their baskets and staring down at the approaching sea. Ewen looked at the hill that they had climbed on several occasions and saw that they were below the level of the vent. It was best to copy Jenine’s example and keep a careful watch on the envelope’s vast interior.

She pointed to where the membrane was starting to crease and fold in. ‘Another plug!’ she called out. ‘Just one.’

Flames roared up from the fire basket.

‘And another.’

Ewen lobbed another fuel plug into the fire. He looked down in time to see one of the trailing restraint ropes dip into the sea. At least the impact would be gentle, and there

would enough buoyancy in the envelope to enable them to paddle back to their island prison.

There was a barely imperceptible tug and the balloon began to rise. The jerk dislodged hot ashes from the fire basket which spiralled down to the sea. Ewen didn't think they had been ejected from the vent holes.

‘One more!’ Jenine yelled in exaltation, and threw a plug onto the fire.

The tongues of fire reached right into the envelope. The balloon's rate of ascent quickened noticeably. More glowing ashes whirled from the fire basket. This time Ewen thought they came from beneath the giant skull where he couldn't see.

‘That's all we have to do!’ Jenine declared excitedly.

‘Just keep burning enough to keep the skin tight! Another!’

The balloon continue to climb into the clear, morning air.

The reddish light of the sun changed to a rich golden and the eastern sky went from indigo to pale blue. The ashes falling from the unseen hole in the fire basket were now a steady trail of falling sparks.

‘There's no wind,’ said Jenine, leaning over her basket and looking down. ‘We've drifted no distance at all.’

‘It'll come,’ Ewen replied. Strange that there was no need to shout. He had imagined that it would be noisy and yet there was no sound apart from the creak of their baskets and the spluttering of the fire. The escaping ashes were a worry.

**Of course, they'd be building up now -- dead weight; perhaps it was just well that the fire basket was shedding them.**

**Another two plugs were tossed into the fire basket to maintain the balloon's rate of climb through the still air.**

**Despite the brightness and warmth of the sun, the cold air stung their lungs if they inhaled too sharply.**

**'Still no wind,' said Jenine dejectedly. 'I've got only two bags of fuel left.'**

**'I've got one bag,' said Ewen. 'I dropped one by mistake.'**

**Jenine said nothing. Unless the wind came, it was clear that they weren't going to make the strange land.**

**'Jenine! Look! There! And over there!'**

**For some reason they had always thought of their island as being unique. It never occurred to them that there might be more. Certainly not a whole string of them lying off the main land mass, and stretching in both directions as far as the eye could see.**

**And then came the wind.**

**12**

**The initial gusts before the balloon started moving with the wind caused the envelope to flatten and distort, squeezing out such huge quantities of hot air that the couple thought they were in danger of asphyxiation from the fumes. The loss of height was not so serious this time, but refilling the envelope cost them the last of their fuel plugs. There was no**

point in conserving them. They had learned that once an envelope collapse started, it was difficult to prevent it from escalating. But the fire continued to burn briskly, controlling their descent just as Ewen had anticipated it would when he had designed the balloon.

`We're going to make it!' Jenine cried excitedly.

It certainly looked like it. The coast was edging nearer even though the wind's general direction was carrying them away from the city. They could see individual rocks on the broad beaches. Jenine pointed to an enclosed wheeled vehicle driving along the road at the top of beach.

`It's watching us,' she said. `It keeps stopping. Ewen -- there's people there -- worrying about us. Doesn't it make you feel good?'

Ewen was busy estimating the narrowing distance to the coast and equating it with their rate of descent. It was certain that they would make dry land. He began worrying about what sort of landing they would make. Unlike the island there were few trees. With each passing second, the beach looked more likely to be their landing site. It was going to be a rough, bumpy touchdown, and a long drag across the sand, but they were unlikely to come to any harm. The sea, reaching inexorably towards them, now bore a heavy swell. Rollers were breaking on the beach; ahead a rocky headland was sending plumes of white spray high into the air. But the fire was

holding well on the last of their fuel, maintaining the envelope's shape and slowing their descent.

The vehicle stopped and five men wearing helmets jumped out. They were too far to make out who they were but their black uniforms and bearing bore the unmistakable stamp of the police or the military.

And then disaster struck.

Without warning the bottom fell out of the heat-weakened fire basket and dumped their precious fire in a great cloud of fumes and smoke from which an avalanche of hot ashes fell hissing and spluttering into the sea. After that everything happened with extraordinary speed. The envelope had been on the point of collapse. Without the sustaining column of heat from the fire basket, it folded in on itself; its weight acting as a giant bellows, driving a wall of hot air and fumes through the balloon's wildly flapping throat like a dragon exhaling.

The wind spun the world about Jenine. A whirling section of the fire basket, still attached to its rope, struck her on the temple. Her scream was cutoff by the blackness that closed in and muffled by the voluminous folds that fell about her.

Ewen heard her cry and looked frantically around, momentarily disorientated, not knowing which way was up or down. A glimpse of grey water racing towards him but he had no chance to brace himself before his basket hit the sea. The

force of the impact smashed his helpless body through the bottom of the woven reeds, pinioning his arms as the terrifying green light closed around him. The dull pressure on his eardrums told him he was going deep. His panic released a mass of adrenalin into his muscles that gave him the strength to smash his way out of the basket and claw desperately towards the suffused, pale daylight. His head broke the surface. He tried to inhale but a layer of the envelope's membrane clamped to his face and was sucked into his mouth. He clawed desperately, ripping through, but another layer fastened over his face like something pallid and alive. There was no end to them. There was a reddening before his eyes. The pain in his hands was forgotten as his fingernails tore frantically through successive layers of clinging membrane. A wave broke over him and suddenly he was sucking clean, cold air into his tortured lungs.

`Jenine!' he gasped, twisting head this way and that, trying to make sense of the billowing folds that surrounded him like heaving clouds. The swell lifted him. He caught a glimpse of blonde hair a little away from the island of wreckage, and struck out for her. Water entering his clothes made swimming difficult. He grabbed the hair and turned Jenine over so that her face was above water.

`Jenine!' His feet pumped furiously as he trod water. Despite being tossed about by the swell, he managed to pound

her hard between her shoulder blades and was rewarded by a choking cough. At least she was breathing. There was no time for anything else. He looked desperately around as the swell lifted him. The heavy seas pounding the rocky headland were terrifyingly close. He could hear the boom of surf on the beach. He kicked towards the sound, one arm hooked around Jenine's neck and the other doing its best to aid his flailing legs.

He swam blindly for several minutes until exhaustion forced him to rest. Jenine's head lolled lifelessly against his shoulder, and he saw the ugly bruise on her temple for the first time. The sound of heavy seas breaking over the rocks was now much louder. He turned onto his back and kicked feebly for the beach, certain that the strong current that was sweeping them to the rocks would triumph over his aching muscles.

Something touched his foot. Thinking it was a monster of the deep, he tried to kick it away and discovered that it was sand. He shoved himself forward with renewed hope. This time both his feet encountered the bottom. He pushed again and found that he could stagger backwards. The steeply-shelving bottom was worse than deep water even though the beach was now in sight. He had a fleeting glimpse of figures standing in a line and tried to signal to them but the waves broke savagely over and around them. The undertow sucked the sand from beneath his feet, causing him to fall and lose his grip



on Jenine. She was swept from him in a welter of swirling foam. Twice he thought he saw her but the shapes were masses of seaweed and foam being borne towards the beach. His burnt fingers closed thankfully on a handful of hair. He pulled her head above water, gripped a mouthful of hair between his teeth, and crawled on all fours through the maddened foam. 'Help me!' he cried out to the five black-shrouded figures who were watching him near the tide's edge. His second plea was gagged by a large wave which bore them forward with great violence and hurled them onto the beach. Another wave surged forward and rolled Jenine's still form over as the sea tried to pluck her back into its clutches. Ewen shifted his grip to her wrist, spreadeagled himself face down on the sand, and clung to her with all his dwindling reserves of strength. He lifted his head to the five watching figures. They were standing quite still, hands on their sidearms, eyes unseen behind their tinted helmet visors, and making no attempt to offer assistance.

'Help me! Please!'

'Another two paces!' one of the men barked.

Somehow Ewen managed to climb to his knees. Another wave pulled at Jenine, causing him to overbalance. 'Please!' he implored.

'Two paces!' the voice repeated.

Ewen slipped his hands under Jenine's armpits and dragged

her a little way up the beach. He used the back of his wrists to haul on her dead weight, the pain in his burned palms was now intense. He thought he was making some progress, not realising that his heels were making deep troughs in the soft sand. His strength gave out and he collapsed beside her still form.

‘Please!’ he begged.

‘Another pace,’ the voice grated.

Somehow he managed the required distance. The leader signalled to his men. Hands seized Ewen and jerked him roughly to his feet. Before he could summons the strength or will to voice a protest, he and Jenine were dragged up the beach and bundled into the back of the waiting truck. The door was slammed shut on a windowless compartment. The sudden loss of daylight was even more frightening than the rough handling. There was the sound of the men piling into another compartment, and the vehicle moved off. Ewen's first thought was for Jenine. He groped around in the darkness and found her. She felt cold but, to his immense relief, her breathing and heartbeat were regular.

‘Jenine!’

He was rewarded by a hand reaching for him.

‘Ewen?’ A little voice in the darkness. ‘Where are we?’

Despite his burns, he drew her into his arms and held her close. ‘Safe... I think...’

## **PART 10**

### **Prelude**

#### **1**

**The combination of bright light and strange memories prodded Ewen awake. The grey ceiling reminded him of his cell when he had been awaiting trial in the GoD Centre. He closed his eyes and tenuous memories came back as a series of disjointed images. The swaying vehicle. Darkness. The agony of groping with burnt fingers for the capsule radio in his top pocket, and dropping it before he could use it when the vehicle suddenly stopped; doors being thrown open. Someone saying incredulously:**

**`Two more? Three in one day?'**

**Then another voice. `Damned Armageddonists. Won't they ever give up? Just get them fit for their hearing and their walk, doctor. No more, no less.'**

**Hands lifting him onto what might have been a stretcher; unfriendly faces; a jab in his arm; and then nothing.**

**`Blessed are the Angels of Armageddon, for they are implementing the will of the Lord! Wake up, brother, for our time is near.'**

**Ewen sat up. He went to rub his eyes and discovered that his palms were covered in spray-on nu-skin. The sleeves of his jacket were of an unfamiliar material. But it wasn't a**

**jacket; he was wearing a close-fitting bodysuit with curious loops of the same material stitched to the garment's chest and thighs. At first he thought he was still dreaming but there was nothing dream-like about his surroundings. He was in a small cage consisting of a bed and table, both screwed to the floor. Three sides of his prison were close-set vertical bars. The fourth side was a wall with a barred window that looked out onto a bare, sunlit yard enclosed by high walls.**

**`Ewen!'**

**He turned his head. Jenine was in the adjoining cage, reaching out to him. Like his hands, her temple had been sprayed with nu-skin, and she was wearing a similar bodysuit with loops on her chest and legs. He seized her hands as best he could, and smothered her face with feverish kisses.**

**`Where are we, Jenine? What is this place?'**

**`I don't know. I've only just woken up. He was raving.'**

**Ewen wheeled around. A small, bright-eyed man aged about 50 was regarding them solemnly from the next cage. He was sitting on his bed and was wearing a similar bodysuit.**

**`Sing the praises of the Angels of Armageddon!' the man shouted. `For they are the will of the Lord on high! When the Lord decides that mankind should perish by the nova, who has the right to challenge his will? Damnation to the usurpers of the will of the Lord!'**

**`He's been going on like that for ten minutes,' Jenine**

**whispered.**

**`What unit, brothers?' asked the man in a suddenly moderate, almost friendly voice.**

**`What?'**

**`What unit?'**

**Ewen looked at Jenine for enlightenment and turned back to the stranger. `Unit? I don't know what you're talking about.'**

**The man nodded. `Quite right. I could be a plant. You could be a plant. We could all be plants.' That seemed to amuse him for he threw his head back and laughed. `Those who seek to thwart the will of the Lord betray themselves by their use of the devil's cunning!'**

**An unseen door was flung open. A crash of boots. Five uniformed police appeared, their faces hidden by their visors. They could be the same men that had watched Ewen's struggle on the beach without making any move to help him or Jenine. Their breast badges and shoulder marks were inscribed "Challenger Three Project Security" in yellow letters. They wore no other insignia. It was first time that Ewen and Jenine had ever seen figures of authority who did not bear the Guardian of Destiny symbol.**

**`Time for your walk,' said the leader of the police squad to the little man.**

**`Those that lay hands on the Angels of Armageddon shall face eternal damnation!' screamed the man as his cell was**

unlocked. `The coming nova is the will of the Lord!' He struggled ineffectually with the two men who had grabbed him by the loops. They dragged him unceremoniously from the cell.

`Where are we!' Ewen demanded, pressing his face against the bars. `What is this place and who's in charge?'

The policemen ignored him. The little man's cell door clanged shut.

`Armageddon and the day of resurrection of the Lord's servants is coming!' The little man screamed as he was marched away. `Those that persecute the Angels of Armageddon will be punished!'

The unseen door opened and crashed shut. The little man's shouted protests faded.

For a few moments Ewen and Jenine stared white-faced at each other without speaking.

`Ewen... What is this terrible place?'

`Did you see their badges?'

`Challenger Three Project Security... Challenger...'

Jenine thought hard. `That was on the signs at that station at the recreation park.'

`And that complex where the android attacked us was a deep nova shelter,' Ewen replied. `But what does it all mean?'

`Did you get a chance to use the radio?'

He shook his head. `I think I dropped it.'

A movement outside caught Jenine's eye. They both turned to their respective windows and gazed down at the yard where

**two of the policemen had appeared wheeling a long box mounted on a trolley. The box's hinged lid was open. The little man appeared between two more policemen. He was kicking and struggling. His cries carried faintly through the thick glass of their windows.**

**There was no ritual or ceremony attached to the execution of the little man to lend even a modicum of dignity to his dispatch. He was simply thrown to the ground and his head dissolved by two blasts from a PD weapon. Two policemen picked him up by the loops on his chest and thighs -- their grisly purpose and convenience now apparent to the two horror-struck watchers -- and dumped the lifeless body in the box. The lid was slammed shut, and the trolley trundled away. The entire business had taken less than a minute.**

**Jenine sat on her bed and clasped her hands tightly together to prevent them trembling, not so much because of the peremptory death of the little man, but because she had, for the first time in her life, been exposed to violence.**

**'What is this terrible place?' She shuddered when her fingers strayed to the loops sewn to the legs on her body suit. 'Why do they behave like this? What have we done that's so wrong?'**

**The door crashed open again. Ewen thrust his face against the bars when the five policemen appeared.**

**'What are we supposed to have done?' he demanded. 'We're citizens of Arama. You've no right to--' He was forced to**

jump back when his cell door was thrown open. Two policemen stepped forward and grabbed him by the chest loops. Jenine received similar treatment. Her protests were cut short by a hard slap across the mouth. Infuriated, Ewen fought and kicked but to no avail; the couple were dragged from their cells and along a narrow corridor. They were hustled into a large, featureless room lit by one window, and thrust into hard chairs facing a desk on a raised dais. A fat man in a tight suit that looked as if it had been inflated such was his bulk, sat at the desk regarding them disinterestedly. Before him on the desk were their clothes and Ewen's radio capsule. Confused and shocked by their rough handling, the couple stared at the man. They had never encountered obesity; it was something they didn't even know existed. To them the only human characteristics of the thing confronting them were its eyes, mouth and nose and mouth, set into pallid rolls of flesh.

The cold eyes stared at Ewen and Jenine in turn before turning to one of the policemen who was standing beside them.

'A hot air balloon, Mr Roand?' The folds around his mouth separated to accommodate a smile. His whole body quivered.

'What will they think of next?'

Ewen's protest was silenced by a hard cuff across the mouth.

The fat man frowned and glanced down at a datapad. 'Your escapade has given us hope. Until now you Armageddonists have



been clever and resourceful. Miniature submarines, light aircraft, even tunnelling. But never hot air balloons. It gives us hope -- your numbers are dwindling, and those that are left are incompetent.' His bulk permitted him to lean forward a little, but with difficulty. `Do you imagine that we don't have radar?'

It was a rhetorical question because the couple were threatened with more blows across the face when they opened their mouths to speak.

`Three in one day,' the fat man muttered. `Remarkable.

Remarkable. Any details, Mr Roand?'

`They claim to be from Arama, sir. They even completed the three paces above the water line test.'

The information seemed to cause the fat man some amusement. `So the Armageddonists have found out about Arama?

It was inevitable, I suppose. Well, their clothes have been obtained from Arama.' He picked up the radio capsule. `But not this. They tried to hide it, Mr Roand?'

`We found it concealed under a floor panel in the truck, sir.'

`It must've rolled there!' Ewen suddenly shouted. `I tell you, we're from--'

This time the blow across his face sent him sprawling on the floor. Jenine gave a cry and jumped up but was dragged back into her chair.

**The fat man gestured at the garments before him. `Have details been sent to HQ?'**

**`Everything was holo-faxed through three hours ago, sir.'**

**`No reply?'**

**`No, sir.'**

**`Very well, Mr Roand,'the fat man commented disinterestedly. `I see no point in keeping them, therefore they might as well take their walk right away.'**

**Ewen and Jenine struggled so desperately that their short trip to the yard could hardly be described as a walk. Once in the sunlight, they were thrown to the ground. Two policemen drew their PD weapons but the double execution was delayed on a technicality.**

**`Body boxes!' yelled Roand. `Where's the boxes?'**

**A policeman appeared wheeling a long box on a trolley. The fresh blood stains that splattered its sides suggested that it was the same box that had been used for the little man.**

**`Two boxes, idiot!' Roand yelled. `Can't you count?'**

**`This is the only one available,' the policeman explained.**

**Roand eyed the couple. `Well I daresay we can squeeze them both in.'**

**Ewen jumped to his feet, grabbed Jenine, and rushed to the high wall. He threw himself at it, his bandaged fingers clawing futilely for a purchase. Their actions pleased Roand.**

**`Ah! Runners. A little sport, men! Me first.' He pulled his PD weapon from its holster and aimed it at Jenine. Ewen**

**threw himself in front of her -- an action that caused universal amusement. Roand was about to fire when a voice rang out:**

**`STOP!'**

**Roand turned and regarded the fat man who was out of breath and sweating profusely despite the short distance from the hearing room. `A problem, sir?'**

**`There will be if you pull that trigger!' the fat man snapped, waving a piece of paper. `HQ want them for interrogation.'**

**2**

**The change in the treatment of Ewen and Jenine was dramatic and immediate although there were no apologies. They were taken to a comfortable, windowless suite complete with a bathroom and separate living-room, and were served with a delicious but strange meal. The only dish they could identify was the first course which was similar to the vegetable soup that Jenine had inadvertantly prepared in the nova shelter. They were waited on by two smiling, very polite girls in smart, grey uniforms who provided them with a complete change of clothes, a toiletry kit each, but little in the way of information.**

**`We're still prisoners,' said Ewen, trying the door when they were alone. He returned to the table and sat opposite**

**Jenine. He took her hands and kissed them. She was still in shock from her treatment and had said little during the meal.**

**`We're going to get out of this,' he said confidentially.**

**She looked at him. Her wonderful jade-green eyes had lost their lustre. `It's just a delay, Ewen. They're going to kill us. We've rejected the GoD.'**

**`There're no GoD symbols here, Jenine. We've not seen one since we left Arama.'**

**`What does that prove? Nothing. These people may be spiritually more advanced than us. Maybe they don't have to surround themselves with symbols to remind them of their faith and their duty to the GoD.'**

**He was about to remonstrate with her when the door opened and a tall, gangling, loose-framed man entered the apartment flanked by two policemen. He was about ten years older than Ewen, and was wearing a striking red suit with elastic cuffs and ankles. His hair was dark and swept straight back. There was something familiar about his boyish, rubbery features and mournful expression that struck a chord with Ewen. It was a face he knew he had seen before.**

**`Wait outside please,' the stranger told the policemen.**

**`But, crewman--' one of them began respectfully.**

**The lugubrious expression hardened. `These are escapers -- not Armageddonists -- I'm sure they won't hurt me. Now please...'**

**The policemen exchanged doubtful glances, but did as they**

were told and withdrew.

The stranger looked sadly at Ewen and Jenine. He came forward, seeming to bounce on his toes. He offered his right hand. 'I must apologise for what has happened,' he said sorrowfully. 'An unfortunate misunderstanding. You used a hot air balloon. Unheard of for escapers. Totally unexpected therefore security rightly thought you were Armageddonist saboteurs.'

It seemed churlish not to accept the outstretched hand so Ewen shook it in a perfunctory manner. The stranger turned to Jenine but she ignored the offered palm. Her behaviour seemed to pain him.

'Now then. Your names are Ewen and Jenine? Yes?'

'At last someone is interested in who we are,' said Jenine icily. 'Is this part of the interrogation?' She waved her hand at the remnants of the meal, her silken gown, and at the apartment. 'And all this?'

The mournful face looked momentarily embarrassed. 'On behalf of everyone involved in the project, I must congratulate you on a most remarkable escape. A hot air balloon! Amazing. Truly amazing. No-one thought it possible, but I've since had a chance to look at the wreckage...' He smiled sheepishly at them in turn. The mobility of his features was remarkable. 'You're at a disadvantage. I know who you are, but you don't know who I am. I'm--'

**`Wrong,' Ewen broke in. `I do know who you are.'**

**The stranger was taken back. He looked so utterly downcast that Ewen was tempted to laugh. `Oh well... And to think I thought I was rather good.' He swept an invisible hat from his head and gave a low, jerky bow. `I am the clown of the amusement park, honoured visitors!' He spoke in a thin, squeaky voice. `I am the host to all our honoured visitors. Ask and you shall be informed.' He straightened, replaced his invisible hat, and regarded the couple, his eyes twinkling in amusement. They stared back at him, dumfounded.**

**`You!' Jenine exclaimed. `You were the clown!'**

**`I am the clown of the amusement park,' the stranger repeated, and went through the exaggerated bow again. This time his movements had lost their jerkiness, as though mechanisms that had remained immobile for years had regained a natural fluidity. Even without his makeup and costume, the stranger's performance was so convincing that his amazed audience of two saw before them a clown in full regalia wearing a fluffy button suit, conical hat, and an absurd bright red nose. `I am your most honoured host, kind sirs. This is the amusement park.'**

**Jenine was so surprised that she forgot their present predicament and clapped her hands in delight. It was impossible to be angry with this strange man for long.**

**`What's the park for?'**

**Her reaction did little to cheer him up. `It's for the**

**edification of travellers and the enjoyment of children through the long years, kind sir. And their children. And their children's children, to the ends of the universe and the end of time. All rides guaranteed to thrill but not to harm. The Tower of Dreams and Delight and Discovery is recommended for those with faint hearts who need time to adjust to our thrills and spills, honorable sir.'**

**'You told us the way to the outdoors,' said Ewen, his voice dangerously quiet. 'Why?'**

**'The Tower of Dreams and Delight and Discovery is recommended for those with faint hearts who need time to adjust to our thrills and spills, honorable sir,' piped the clown, his expression hang dog as though he expected Ewen to attack him.**

**'WHY?'**

**The man shifted his stance. Quite suddenly the clown was gone. For a moment he gave the impression of real steel beneath his mournful facade. He smiled affably, not seeming to mind Ewen's aggressiveness. 'The director has a policy of providing escapers with tiny hints when warranted. Nothing overt, you understand -- that would ruin the project. But a little nudge now and then when deemed necessary.'**

**'So your little "nudge" was to send us to that tower?'**

**Ewen snapped.**

**'Well, yes. Was it dreadful?'**

**`And we ended up nearly dying on a cliff face!'**

**The rubbery features became sympathetic. `I'm so sorry, but all the escape routes are dangerous. That's the whole point.'**

**His attitude enraged Ewen. After the treatment they had received that day, he needed to lash out at someone. This inanely smiling fool became the focus of his anger and frustration. Unable to contain himself, he lunged forward.**

**The visitor dodged the sudden rush, not by jumping aside, but by performing a neat backward flip from the standing position. One foot connected with Ewen's chest as he landed lightly and sent his would-be attacker staggering backwards.**

**`Ewen!' Jenine exclaimed, jumping to her feet.**

**`I'm okay,' said Ewen, recovering his balance. He looked at the man with renewed respect. The blow on his chest had been light; he suspected that it could have been much harder had the stranger so wished.**

**`Well,' said the man, his eyes darting worriedly between Ewen and Jenine. `At least you didn't see through my clown little act after all. I used to amuse my friends with it.'**

**`Yes, it fooled me,' said Ewen looking hard at the stranger and making him cringe. `But I do know who you are.'**  
**The stranger managed to look nonplussed and sorrowful at the same time. He ran his hand through his swept-back hair.**

**`Really, kind sir? Then who am I?'**

**`I met your mother when I checked up on your**



**disappearance.'**

**The puzzled expression was replaced by a fleeting sadness that they sensed was genuine. His shoulders sagged. `Arama is another world, Ewen. It has to be forgotten. This is the real world. But how is she?'**

**`She looked fine.'**

**The stranger's sadness relaxed into a half smile. He swept off his invisible hat again, and gave another exaggerated, low bow. The squeaky voice returned:**

**`Simo Belan at your service, honoured crewmen.'**

**3**

**Jenine was naked, drifting in the great void of space with nothing between her and billions of shining stars and galaxies, and yet she felt warm and relaxed, at peace with the splendour of the universe around her. By moving her arms and legs she found that she could reorientate her body, although `up' and `down' had no meaning. But no matter which way she turned, or which way she looked, the eternal glory of the universe lay before her.**

**`Go where you will. Will where you go,' urged the voice that she had learned to trust.**

**She singled out a brilliant blue giant from the myriad points of lights -- a star that shone out like a beacon.**

**I have knowledge, Jenine. Come to me and be fulfilled.**

**Even as she willed herself towards the magical shining diamond, the entire firmament began moving passed her; slowly at first, and then with increasing speed until she was like a baby hypnotised by a dazzling mobile as her awesome speed turned the universe into bewildering blur of light that her brain could not resolve.**

**She stopped abruptly above the star. There was no sensation of deceleration. One second she was moving, the next second she was stationary. She had stopped because she wanted to stop. The star was no longer a point of light but a blue giant that filled her entire field of vision. From its blinding photosphere mighty solar flares, writhing with terrible energies, arched out to greet her. They brushed harmlessly against her, tongues of brilliant plasma rippled down her spine and snaked deliciously and insistently between her thighs before falling back into the sun, following curiously looped lines of magnetic force. Knowledge was a gleaming sword, a torment of ecstasy sliding insidiously into the liquid warmth centre of her being, an Olympian lover's tongue probing deep-rooted pleasure buds and infusing her with its power and burning orgasmic fury. She thrust down on the mighty sword, draining its force and craving more. She wanted to see more; she wanted to see into very core of this stupendous powerhouse; she wanted to understand...**

**And so it was...**

**Her will took her plunging into the star; through the**

**blinding photosphere and on and on, deep into the mighty nuclear reactor at its very heart where gravitation pressures fused atoms of hydrogen to helium so that the stupendous energies released balanced and counteracted the inward crush of gravity. Thus the blue giant was stable, pouring light and warmth onto the surfaces of its planetary children, and would continue to do so for aeons to come. But not all stars were thus. For many the delicate equilibrium between gravity and their nuclear furnaces had been upset or had never existed. Many blasted forth streams of cosmic particles that destroyed all in their path, turning their planets into ghostly barren spheres where, perhaps, life had flourished and had been snuffed out.**

**And she understood.**

**She left the star and fled through the cosmos, pausing to study the strange drumbeat of energy emanating from a pulsar, or a binary system in which a pair of stars pursued each other relentlessly around their common centre of gravity -- prisoners of their collective, incomprehensible mass.**

**But Jenine comprehended them; she understood everything on her great odyssey of learning: from a black hole's greedy syphoning of matter from a captured, orbiting star; from the supernovae of exploding stars throwing off heavy elements; from the blue-white clusters of hot stars that had come into being shortly after the creation; to the gentle firefly**

**speckling of meteors from spent stars falling to far earths  
as shooting stars under moonlit, tropical skies.**

**The voice left nothing unsaid and she understood  
everything.**

**Her journey ended where it had started, poised above her  
home planet. She looked down at the shining blue-green  
wonder, seemingly as bright as a star against its black  
velvet background. As it turned on its axis, so the entire  
surface passed beneath her: mountain ranges, their ice-  
covered peaks burning white fire as they caught the morning  
sun; vast plains that seemed to stretch from pole to pole,  
their rich mosaic patterns due to the huge variety of crops  
in varying states of growth; broad strips of managed forests  
that traversed the plains like meridians. And above all, the  
lakes. There were so many that it was impossible to count  
them and yet she knew the exact number. The largest was a  
huge, landlocked sea that straddled the equator. This was the  
sea that she had looked on in wonder when the outdoors had  
been first revealed to her. The island that had held her and  
Ewen prisoners was one of a string, but she knew exactly  
which one it was. There were cities in the temperate regions,  
many of them great urban sprawls. She looked closer,  
wondering at their strange stillness. As her perception  
sharpened, she realised that many of them were abandoned  
shells. They were pristine ruins due to the durability of the  
materials used in their construction. In some cases the**

**straight lines of the forests marched right across them, with gleaming tower blocks thrusting through the dense foliage.**

**She felt that she could stay here forever. It would be heaven floating like this -- to spend the rest of her life high above this fascinating but ancient world, absorbing every detail, learning of its many civilizations that had risen and crumbled to dust during its long history.**

**Her attention was drawn to the sun, pouring out friendly energies. But there was something wrong -- a mysterious gap in the stream of knowledge flooding into her subconsciousness that no amount of concentration could bridge. The planet was beckoning, drawing her down. The sun could wait...**

**She dropped through the upper reaches of the atmosphere and saw deep into the crust of the world, and even into the caverns of Arama itself -- tiny bubbles of blind, mole-like humanity in the dense strata. And she remembered Ewen's words:**

**`...Four million people going around in aimless circles, going nowhere, getting nowhere. And they're all doing their jobs. And when they're not doing their jobs, all they're thinking of is gratifying their petty little needs; dressing up in weird clothes; going to weird parties; muddling their way through their weird little lives... Wake up, Jenine.'**

**The last sentence didn't belong.**

**`Jenine!'**

**It was Ewen's voice. She resented the intrusion. He wanted to drag her into wakefulness; he wanted to deprive her of the delicious sensation of floating above this beautiful world. She fought him but could not prevent herself from falling. Down... Down... She cried out and spread her hands in the futile hope that it would somehow arrest her body as it arrowed through the atmosphere towards the group of buildings on the edge of the great inland sea.**

**`Jenine!'**

**She was now being shaken from side to side. Her fall was slowing. She passed through the roof of a building and drifted down onto a soft bed. She opened her eyes and stared up at Ewen.**

**`Good morning,' he said cheerily. `Welcome back to earth. Don't make my mistake by jumping straight out of bed. You'll need a few minutes to recover.'**

**She was unable to speak for some moments. With each second, the sensations of the dream were fading rapidly, but the knowledge and memories she had acquired on the strange voyage remained intact.**

**`What happened?'**

**Ewen chuckled. `According to one of the stewardesses, it's called a crammer. A mindwarp educational process. One that really works too. Clever, wasn't it? What poor old Blader Zallen would have given to have gone on such a trip and seen that his theories about the universe were correct.' He**

**frowned. `Mind you, I'm having a struggle trying to come to terms with what a light-year really is.'**

**`The distance light travels in a year,' Jenine replied, and reeled off a figure that she was able to pluck straight out of her mind. The ability unsettled her although she realised that there was nothing to be scared of. She swung her legs out of bed and felt faint, but Ewen moved to her side and supported her. `Just rest,' he said gently. `There's no rush.'**

**`I wanted to stay looking down at earth.'**

**Ewen chucked her on the chin. `Yes -- I know. I was with you.'**

**`With me? How?'**

**`Trying to keep up with you. But you seemed intent on staying above earth, and I was getting hungry. So I left you to it. Those two little stewardesses have bought us a fantastic breakfast. And there's a message from Simo saying that he'll be picking us up in an hour.'**

**Jenine realised that Ewen was wearing was wearing the same crimson suit that Simo Belan had worn the previous day.**

**`They've left one for you too,' said Ewen, holding up a smaller garment of the same design.**

**`Why?'**

**`Because we're now crewmen, I suppose.'**

**`Crewmen of what?'**

**`That is what I hope Simo will be explaining to us.'**

**4**

**The bubble-top ground car with its three passengers, and crimson pennants flattened in the slipstream, skimmed along the coast road on auto.**

**`Hail stones,' said Simo sadly. `Drops of rain freeze to ice at high altitude. Not common, but it does happen at this time of year. How sad that your balloon was spread out.'**

**Ewen and Jenine smiled at their host's lugubrious expression. They had spent the hour-long drive giving him a full account of their escape. In return he had answered most of their questions as best he could. At times it seemed that he was shouldering responsibility for all their misfortunes.**

**`We're here,' said Simo taking over manual control.**

**The ground car left the road, rode smoothly over some low dunes, and slid down the beach towards the water's edge where a group of men were wearing breathing sets. The divers had beached their inflatable work boat and were unloading their finds onto a truck. They looked expectantly at the ground car that stopped near them, its crimson pennants drooping in the heat.**

**Simo Belan regarded his two guests with great sadness. `I expect you recognise this spot? It's where you came ashore yesterday.'**

**`I didn't get a good look at it,' said Ewen. `I had other**



**things on my mind.'**

**'Of course.' Simo looked utterly woebegone and gave**

**himself a slap on the wrist. 'I simply never think.'**

**Jenine knew it was an act but the gesture made her smile.**

**The canopy swung open. It was mid-morning and already the**

**heat was becoming uncomfortable. The trio walked across the**

**soft sand to the men. Ewen and Jenine looked fresh and alert,**

**fully recovered from their ordeal of the previous day. In**

**addition to their crisp new uniforms, they were wearing**

**broad-brimmed sun hats that Simo insisted they keep on.**

**The divers came to attention and saluted the new arrivals.**

**'We think we've recovered everything, crewmen,' said the**

**leader respectfully.**

**'These will be the ones to answer that,' said Simo,**

**inviting Ewen and Jenine to examine the wreckage piled on the**

**back of the truck.**

**They looked at the shredded remnants of the two passenger**

**baskets and the blackened, now bottomless shell of the fire**

**basket, and odd lengths of the unpicked rope that they taken**

**from the restaurant.**

**'Everything except the envelope,' Jenine commented.**

**'That was recovered yesterday,' said Simo. 'Most of it was**

**washed ashore.**

**'Why bother?' Ewen asked.**

**'It's for the museum, of course.'**

**`What museum?'**

**Simo's broad, loose shoulders sagged with his expression.**

**`Now you're pumping me for information again. Well, I'm allowed to answer questions on everything you see, so I don't suppose there's any harm in telling you. We save everything to do with the escape of all crewmen. We've learned to respect history even when we're living in it. This is the first escape ever from the islands by hot air balloon.'**

**Ewen looked sharply at him. `So how did you escape?'**

**Simo's mobile face adopted an expression of embarrassment.**

**`I got out of the cave by climbing up the cliff -- I'm a bit of an acrobat. Not being clever like you, I got away from the island by the same method that all escapers from the islands have used. I built a boat.'**

**`But all the wood we found was water-logged,' Ewen protested. `Did you have a saw to cut down trees?'**

**`The reeds,' said Simo apologetically. `They grow on all the islands. They can be cut easily with a piece of flint or just uprooted. They're very buoyant once they've been dried, and they can be lashed together with vines, and a sail can be made from--'**

**`Reeds?' Jenine interrupted.**

**`The tall, slender plants that grow around fresh water pools--'**

**Simo broke off as Jenine suddenly burst out laughing. The divers gave her puzzled looks as they went about their work.**

**`The reeds!' Ewen muttered, thunderstruck. `We used them for the launch scaffold and sunshades. I never thought... I just didn't think...'**

**`His lateral thinking!' Jenine gasped, wiping her eyes.**

**`Reeds! Well here's some more lateral thinking: he may have been the first to think of using a hot air balloon, but looked at another way, he was also the first not to think of the obvious!'**

**`Why should we have to think of escaping? Why all the charade, not to mention the danger to us?' Ewen demanded indignantly. `Why don't you rescue people?'**

**`More questions that I'm not allowed to answer,' Simo replied sadly. `But they will be answered soon.'**

**They returned to the ground-car and drove along the coast road. They passed lines of parked cars. On the beach the hard, black shadows of the beach shades obscured the people lying under them. Children played and splashed in the surf. All wore broad sun hats and kept their bodies covered with thin bodysuits.**

**`Families from Challenger City,' Simo explained.**

**`Engineers, designers. This is a popular vacation spot. People only come out in the morning and evening, of course.'**

**`Too hot?' Jenine suggested.**

**`Dangerously so.'**

**The turned inland and drove along a broad avenue. A few**

couples were drifting aimlessly from shop to shop. Some sat at bars under sunshades. There was an air of desolation and decay about the place. The sidewalks were pot-holed and uneven. The state of the road was not much better. Such neglect would never be tolerated in Arama.

‘Where are we going?’ Ewen asked. They had driven through the township and joined a hot, dusty highway. Simo flipped over to auto and took his hands off the controls.

‘Challenger City. The project director wants to meet you.’

‘What’s he like?’

‘The greatest man that ever lived.’

Ewen looked sideways at their host, but Simo was serious.

As though heading off further questions, he fished Ewen’s radio capsule from a pocket and returned it. ‘They wanted this for the museum but I saved it for you. A souvenir. It saved your life. I was asleep when the details of your landing were holo-faxed to HQ. That you had used a hot air balloon was enough for an assistant to do nothing. You were Armageddonists and the police would take care of you. But when she happened to glance at the holos of your belongings and saw the capsule, she hit the panic button.’

‘What’s so special about it?’ Jenine asked.

The sun beat down on the ground car’s clear bubble canopy.

Simo adjusted the air-conditioning. ‘They’re smuggled in to Arma to only about one in a hundred would-be escapers.’

‘You mean escapes from Arama can be measured in hundreds?’

**`Sorry, Ewen. I can't answer that.'**

**`We saw what happens to Armageddonists,' said Jenine quietly, grimacing at the memory of the execution in the walled yard.**

**`The police are tough,' Simo agreed. `They have to be.'**

**`Why?' Ewen asked.**

**`Not only is the security of the project vital, but also the lives of the people of Arama. The Armageddonists are a group of religious fanatics who don't like what is going on here--'**

**`And what is going on here?' Jenine interrupted.**

**Simo's expression became that of a hunted man. She was learning that his hangdog act was a technique he used to avoid difficult questions. `All in good time, Jenine.' Simo waved his hand at the passing barren scrub land. `This entire area, including the coast and the islands, is restricted. No one who is not working on the project is allowed access.'**

**`Listen!' said Ewen.**

**They all heard the strange, ethereal singing note that seemed to rise and fall. It reminded Jenine of the curious vent on the island's hilltop but this note was much higher and had a strange melodic quality.**

**`What is it?' Ewen asked, turning to Simo. He was watching his passengers carefully, as though keen to see their reaction to something extraordinary.**

**`You'll find out... Now,' Simo replied.**

**The ground car breasted a rise. Jenine and Ewen uttered exclamations of astonishment at the spectacle that greeted them. Standing on the plain were the giant cylindrical sections that they had first seen from the island hilltop. There were four of them, facing in different directions. One looked as it could roll down the slight incline and crush them. The largest ring seemed to have a chunk missing from its upper section until Ewen realised that it was obscured by low cloud. It was not possible to tell which of the rings the eerie singing note was emanating from. It could be all of them. They were made of steel for they were crumbling and flaking with rust.**

**Simo reduced speed and glanced at his awestruck travelling companions. `I remember the first time I first saw them. They still get me every time I come this way. Like to take a closer look?'**

**`Please,' said Ewen, not taking his eyes off the gargantuan rings.**

**Simo nodded and took over manual control. `Okay. But they're further away than they look.'**

**The ground car swung off the road and raised a cloud of dust as it rode over the desert. A thousand questions crowded into Ewen's mind but as each one gained priority, another astonishing feature of the mighty structure seized on his disbelief and paralysed his tongue. Close to, the rings**

showed their great age. Centuries of wind and dust had eroded their surfaces. Their edges were eaten into, crumbling to flakes of rust that discoloured the ground beneath them with a reddish hue. The area all around was disfigured by piles of spoil and hundreds of neat, rectangular excavations. They stretched into the distance, but it was the colossal rings that commanded the attention.

‘They look so old!’ said Jenine, her eyes bright with wonder as she craned her neck back to take in the amazing height of the nearest ring.

‘Over 20,000 years old.’

‘That’s impossible!’ Jenine exclaimed. ‘They can’t predate the creation!’

Simo stopped the car. It settled on the ground and a strange hush descended on the scene as the singing faded. He turned to his passengers, his eyes sombre. ‘Despite your mindwarp crammer, you have so much to learn... And unlearn. Just as I did. This planet has been around for four billion years, and Man has been around for four million years. Every so often new evidence turns up that adds a million years to that figure. Those rings were made by people 20,000 years ago -- people just like us.’

The bubble top hinged up in time for them to hear the soft, final strains as the singing died away completely.

‘Wind’s dropped,’ Simo commented as they climbed out of

**the ground car and stood staring at the rings. `Actually you're lucky to hear them singing. The conditions have to be just right. It was several mornings or so before they sang for me.' He waved a hand around at the parched landscape. `There was a community here before they were relocated. They used to believe that the singing was the spirits of those who departed from earth in the Challenger.'**

**Ewen turned to face his host. `We've heard that name over and over again. When are you going to tell us about it and what it means?'**

**With that curious, bouncing gait, Simo moved a few paces and sat on a pile of debris. For a moment he stared down into a broad, shallow trench that had been cut into the floor of the desert. He looked speculatively at his guests. `You've been through your crammer, but I wonder if you can imagine what a star ship is?'**

**`A ship that travels to the stars, of course,' said Jenine. `With an enclosed environment I suppose to protect the passengers.'**

**`And strict recycling of everything like we had in Arama,' Ewen added. His pulse quickened. The idea stirred something deep in his subconscious. His thoughts raced ahead, working out the design problems involved.**

**Simo smiled. `That's what we believe these rings are: mock-ups of the sections of a star ship that our ancestors built.'**



**There was a silence. The sun beat down on the trio.**

**`Mock-ups?' Jenine queried.**

**`Trial structures to test design concepts. Or maybe sections that were abandoned because they were faulty. From what the experts have been able to piece together, we're on the site of the main complex where the ship was designed and built. According to what records archaeologists have found, the ship was built in sections here and ferried up into orbit around the planet for assembly. Its length was around fifteen times the diameter of those rings.'**

**There was a long silence as Ewen and Jenine grappled with the concepts involved.**

**`Why?' asked Ewen at length, keeping his voice calm so that Simo wouldn't be warned off. `Why build something so huge? Surely such a project would be a drain on the resources of any society? What would be the point?'**

**Simo shrugged and pushed tipped his hat back to protect the back of his neck. `A quest for knowledge? Earth-like planets to colonise? Who knows? We don't for certain. As for building a ship on such a scale, we think it was because it was not meant to return until many generations later, such are the distances involved if you wish to explore the far reaches of the galaxy.'**

**`Strange people,' Jenine commented, gazing up the nearest ring.**

**`Sensible people,' Simo replied. `Prepared to make investments that wouldn't see a return in their lifetime, or even their childrens' lifetime.'**

**Jenine took her eyes off the ring. `Do we know much about them?'**

**`Many of their very high orbit satellites have survived virtually intact -- space is a benign element whereas on earth, wind, weather, corrosion eventually destroys everything. But their satellites were inward looking -- designed to tell them about their own planet; they don't tell us much about the people that built them.' He paused. `They left their footprints on the moon and probably landed on the planets. Again, the instruments they left behind were designed to gather information about the unknown -- not provide it about themselves. Here, on earth, where the real information is, it's been mostly wiped out by the elements.'**

**`And the people were wiped out too?' Ewen asked.**

**`No -- they declined. Civilizations rarely die out completely. But knowledge can die -- or rather, is lost.'**

**`Do we know if the ship ever returned?'**

**The question seemed to sadden the older man. `If it had, it would be in orbit around this planet and would have survived. There's a theory that it returned and was sent on another voyage as Challenger Two. We simply don't know. There were even plans for a third Challenger which we now know was never built.'**

**Ewen turned his gaze to the sky. He was careful not show his feelings but the thought that at this very moment there could be a mighty star ship wandering in the far reaches of space carrying men and women like him fired his imagination.**

**'So now you're picking up the threads and building another Challenger?' he asked casually.**

**Simo squinted up at the sky and stood. 'We'd better get moving. It's not a good idea to spend too long in the sun at this time of day.'**

**They returned to the ground car. Ewen stood for some moments, gazing at the mighty rings, letting his imagination wander among the stars. Being near these ancient relics seemed to bind him irrevocably to the people that had built them. It was a strange empathy that he could not define, less still, explain.**

**'Come on, Ewen!'**

**He stepped into the ground car and sat beside Jenine, not speaking; his thoughts millions of light-years away among the stars.**

**5**

**At first Challenger City was a disappointment. Cowering under the sun, the outskirts consisted of endless, hot, dusty boulevards of windowless buildings, linked by covered walkways, whose only hint of occupancy where the rows of cars**

parked outside. The rare pedestrians stopped whatever they were doing and saluted the ground car as it swept by.

‘It's not all like this,’ said Simo in answer to Jenine's comment. ‘This is the industrial area. All our resources are concentrated on the Challenger Project. But there are plans to clear zones. Some of those plants are three centuries old.’

Ewen spotted a deep nova shelter sign but Simo refused to be drawn on the subject. The ground car hummed passed a solar power station where hundreds of photovoltaic panels in serried rows tracked the sun. The ugly sprawl gradually gave way to broad sweeps of landscaped public gardens and ornamental lakes -- open spaces that Jenine looked at longingly.

But it was the residential area, with its spacious bungalows and large, well kept trim, watered gardens that really captured her attention.

‘Are those individual houses?’

‘Yes.’ Simo nodded. ‘I can guess what you're thinking. They're large.’

‘Large?’ Jenine echoed. ‘They're huge. There's a house like that for each family?’

‘Oh, yes. And they get even bigger ahead.’

They passed beautiful tropical gardens -- settings for houses that were almost completely hidden by lush vegetation. There were swimming pools with parties of boisterous children

**playing and laughing with their parents.**

**`Private swimming pools,' Jenine muttered disbelievingly.**

**She tried to imagine what it would be like to live in such a house; to be able to throw windows open in the morning and look out on such luxury; to have children romping through broad halls and spacious rooms; or to just to have children...**

**Ewen guessed what she was thinking. He took her hand and held it tightly, but she was too preoccupied with the passing wonders to notice.**

**`Will we be able to have such a house, Simo?'**

**Their host gestured ahead as they turned into an imposing avenue of palms that led up a shallow gradient to the most magnificent building that Ewen and Jenine had ever seen.**

**`That's where we're headed.'**

**Even after the wonders they had seen, the appearance of the graceful tower with its bronze-tinted glass facade, shining like a gold ingot, amid fountains, flowerbeds and lawns rendered the visitors temporarily speechless. A few people were using the broad flight of steps outside the entrance without appearing to give them a second thought. This, they knew, was the seat of power of Challenger City.**

**`Welcome to Challenger Three Project Headquarters,' said Simo as the ground car sighed to a halt. `You will have already heard of this place under another name. Its phoney**

name.'

'We have?' Jenine queried.

'The Revelation Centre,' Simo answered.

The ground car's canopy opened and the heat fastened onto them like a fetid beast. They climbed out and gazed up at the imposing building while the ground car hissed off to find a parking space.

'Is this is where we'll meet the project director?' Ewen asked.

'It is indeed,' Simo replied. 'He's expecting you. He likes to greet all new crewmen personally. In case you think that the security seems to be non-existent, the circuitry to give you access to this building, or anywhere for that matter, is built into your uniform.'

They stumbled on the steps because there was no handrail, passed through an open entrance that consisted of a curtain of deliciously cool air, and entered a broad, marbled area. Even without the subdued light, the glowing cube of shimmering blue light in the centre of the lobby would have caught the attention. Ewen and Jenine approached the iridescent cube and stared at the huge, snub-ended cylinder that was imprisoned in the cube against a dazzling background of stars.

'We mustn't keep the project director waiting,' said Simo awkwardly.

But Ewen was too captivated to hear him. 'It's the

**Challenger, isn't it?'**

**'A live hologram replication of Challenger Three,' Simo explained. 'It's very near completion.'**

**They moved closer to the cube and could see more detail: what appeared to be tiny machines moving about on the ship's featureless skin; a pin-prick glow of a welding torch; ant-like figures in heavy suits tethered to the stupendous bulk by gossamer threads. Ewen stepped to one side and the blue-green disk of the earth came into view, blanking out the stars with its brightness. In that moment he knew what he wanted above all else: he wanted to be on that ship. It was a need that burned into his being with the intensity of a hot needle thrust into his subconscious. He wanted to look sideways at Jenine, to see if her look of wonder mirrored his thoughts, but he could not bear to tear his gaze away from the magnificent ship.**

**'We must be going,' said Simo, taking their arms and steering them away. He led them across the glazed floor to a lift. Two women crewmen stepped out and nodded a friendly greeting to the three.**

**'Project director's level,' said Simo for the benefit of the lift's voice recognition system.**

**The lift hummed. Jenine gasped at the view when the doors opened. They stepped into a palatial reception area that covered most of the floor so that three sides consisted of**

**floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out on the industrial complex on one side, and verdant forests on the other. Jenine pressed her nose to the glass and looked longingly down at the gardens and ornamental lakes that surrounded the building.**

**`This is where I leave you, crewmen,' said Simo sorrowfully, moving back to the lift. `The director will be along in a few minutes. Take a seat.'**

**`And what will you do now, Simo?' Jenine asked.**

**`Oh -- I'll be getting some sleep.'**

**`You live in this building?'**

**`Eh -- yes. I have sleeping accommodation here.' He seemed anxious to avoid further questions and stepped quickly into the lift.**

**`Will we see you again?'**

**Simo managed a cheerless smile as the doors closed. `Oh, definitely. In the morning. Goodbye.'**

**Ewen joined Jenine at the windows and looked out on rolling hills and forests. `I think we're even higher than we were on that hilltop,' he commented absently while trying to fix every detail of the wonderful hologram in the lobby in his mind.**

**A movement caught their eye. Near the edge of the forest was a broad road. Not only were its considerable width and white markings puzzling, but it seemed to start from nowhere, run dead straight away from them, and come an abrupt stop at**



**the distant trees. On a narrow feeder road nearest the observers was a strange object that looked like a chord-metro passenger capsule that had been fitted with wheels, wings, and a tail fin -- not unlike those on the various fish that they had seen washed up along the foreshore of their island. The curious vehicle was moving into position at the end of the strip of roadway. It stopped when it was perfectly centred on white markings in the middle of the strip.**

**'Those are wings,' said Ewen excitedly. 'It's some sort of flying machine.'**

**A tongue of fire and smoke suddenly spewed silently from the rear of the machine and hit a long, concave wall that directed the flames upwards. The machine started moving just as the great roll of muffled thunder reached the building. It accelerated at an extraordinary speed and lifted off the ground with plenty of runway to spare. To the astonishment of the watchers, instead of gradually gaining height once airborne as a bird would do, the machine's nose came up sharply, the rocket engines burned with increased energy and the aircraft went into a fast, vertical climb, riding on a huge column of fire, fumes and thunder until was a fast-dwindling speck in the colour-saturated blue. And Ewen knew that this was the fire and thunder he had witnessed on the island.**

**'The weekly shuttle taking supplies up to Challenger**

**Three,' said a voice behind them.**

**They wheeled round and stared at the gaunt, cloaked figure that was regarding them. He was the tallest man that Jenine had ever seen. The bright sunlight made fire on his rimless glasses.**

**'Quite a spectacle,' continued the man. 'I never tire of it, so I can well imagine its affect on someone who has never seen it before.'**

**Ewen's jaw moved but he was unable to speak, and with good reason. The new arrival was the Supreme Representative of the Guardian of Destiny; First Secretary to the Emperor of Arama; Chairman of the Emperor's Advisory Committee; Vice-Chancellor of the GoD Training Centre; and Supreme Vice-Commander of the Armed Forces of Arama.**

**His name was Caudo Inman.**

**And his smile was ice.**

**6**

**It was pleasant in Inman's office. The windows had been fifty-percent polarized so that the afternoon light was subdued without being sombre, and the hot drinks that Inman poured for his guests were delicious, as were the cakes that a steward had wheeled in on a trolley.**

**Ewen watched the gnarled hand setting down the jug and had to remind himself that this was the much-feared ruler of Arama refilling their cups.**

**Inman settled back in his chair and regarded his guests. Behind the spectacles, the hard, unfriendly eyes that had bored into Ewen with such hostility at his trial now held the faintest flicker of amusement. `Well, Ewen and Jenine... I see every escapee from Arama. They are owed an explanation but in your case, I hardly know where to begin.'**

**`How about at the beginning?' Jenine suggested, simultaneously finding her voice and nerve.**

**Inman inclined his head in agreement and looked sad.**

**`Escapees are rare. Much rarer than we'd prefer. Escapees of the quality of you two are even rarer... A hot air balloon indeed.' He was silent for a moment, marshaling his thoughts. Ewen nerved himself to filch another cake.**

**`Firstly, my name. I can well understand how intimidating I must seem to you. That's been the whole idea, but I'd prefer it if you called me Caudo.'**

**`Caudo,' Ewen agreed, talking with his mouth full.**

**`You've had your little mindwarp crammer of course. Not a very subtle program, but one that provides a quick insight into the concept of suns and planets, and time and space.'**

**`We had already worked out that this is a planet,' said Ewen, wondering if it would be considered bad manners to help himself to another cake.**

**Inman looked surprised. `You have? How?'**

**Jenine described their triangulation and height**

experiments on the island, and concluded saying, 'Ewen's first figures were way out, but I corrected his calculations and we arrived at a figure for this planet's diameter that's turned out to be within ten percent.'

Inman was silent for a moment as he regarded his guests with renewed interest. 'Lengths of vine as base lines...

Remarkable,' he said quietly. 'Truly remarkable. I was right about you two all those years ago.'

'Right about what?' Ewen inquired.

'My attention was drawn to the results of your selection tests. I thought then... But no matter. I have a story to tell that goes back 600-years, and even further...

'We know from the records left by astronomers of previous civilizations that our sun underwent a profound change several millennia ago. It is no longer the stable, life-giving main sequence star that triggered the stirring of life on this planet. Every so often it goes through cyclic spasms in which it throws off streams of deadly heavy particles. Luckily it is possible to shelter from them deep in the earth's crust. The particles are stopped by rock. There are many minor eruptions but we have spectral and gravimeter instruments near the sun which give us six hours' advance warning of them. The last was ten years ago and lasted over a hundred days.' He paused and smiled thinly. 'I believe you've entered one of the shelters.'

'Deep Nova Shelter C,' said Jenine.

**Inman nodded. `So it was you. Well, it was inevitable that someone would escape into one eventually. Nova is a misnomer, but it's a name we've kept out of respect for the past. No engineer or scientist working on the Challenger Project, or their families, is ever more than an hour from a deep nova shelter. But the really serious flares occur every 850 years. The last one occurred a little over 600 years ago.' His impassiveness slipped for a moment as though he were recalling an unpleasant memory. `Every 850 years, Mankind has been hurled back and has had to pick up the pieces and start again. The last nova was the worst in recorded history. Just over 90,000 souls survived although many of them were genetically damaged and could not reproduce. 90,000 out of a world population of one billion... All the machines and technology survived, therefore they had food -- plenty of food -- and all the riches of the planet at their disposal.'**

**Ewen opened his mouth to say something but was silenced by a raised hand.**

**`They formed a governing council and decided that they would evolve a plan to ensure that such a disaster would not overtake Mankind again. They didn't know what they would do but they were confident that they would think of something. Afterall, they had 850 years. A young archeologist was a member of that council. At the time of the nova he was working on a deep excavation at the site of the rings --**

**which Simo has shown you. He went back to work after the holocaust and made a major find. When he finally broke into a vault that had lain undisturbed for 20,000 years, he didn't discover artifacts and trinkets, but something far more priceless -- he found drawings. Millions upon millions of drawings, plans, specifications, test results, and even rough sketches.'**

**'The plans for Challenger Three,' said Ewen with finality, making a statement rather than posing a question.**

**Inman looked surprised for a moment. 'Exactly.'**

**'All of them?' Jenine asked.**

**Inman nodded. 'It took them ten years to analyze them, but everything was there. They had in their possession the fruits of countless millions of hours of research and development. They had lain beneath the plain for 20,000 years and a young archeologist with great vision had discovered them. It was as if providence had guided him to them. He knew exactly what he had to do. He went to the council with a bold, imaginative plan. The people of earth would build Challenger Three. It would take many hundreds of years, but build it they would. And when it was complete, they would send it forth carrying the cream of Mankind to seek out a new home and so keep the torch of humanity alive.'**

**Ewen suddenly had a glimmer of understanding. He knew what would come next and Inman didn't disappointment him.**

**'The council refused to sanction the plan,' Inman**

continued, a note of bitterness entering his voice. `The disaster that would overtake the earth would not happen for many centuries. They had devised a system of democracy for their seats on the council and saw no reason why they should risk their power by committing their people to long-term plans that would not bear fruit in their lifetime, or even their children's lifetime, or many generations to come. They refused to listen to the great body of scientists and engineers who wanted the plan to go ahead. And why should they listen? They were rebuilding businesses, appointing those who saw things their way to high positions. Vested interests were becoming established again. Society was, once again, a victim of its own prosperity. The salvation of Mankind was seen as the business of the religions, not something that sprang from the soul and will of every man and woman.'

Ewen was about to speak but Jenine beat him to it. `So the young archeologist organised a revolution?'

Inman managed a ghost of a smile. `Yes, Jenine... You have remarkable powers of perception. Except that the young man wasn't so young by then.'

`It was a success?'

The older man nodded. `It was a coup. Bloodless and successful. A new council was formed and the Challenger project went ahead. There were problems with such a massive

**undertaking, of course, and there still are a few, but they can all be solved provided we follow the original plans. As the years have gone by on our labours to build the ship, our respect for the people that designed Challenger Three has grown. We have a long dead people at our elbow, guiding us, speaking to us through their dreams which they left as meticulous plans. But there was major problem that their plans did not address: what sort of people should be sent forth when the ship was finished?'**

**Inman sipped his drink before continuing. 'The archeologist had the answer. He had known about the caverns of Arama for many years. Their existence was common knowledge. There were theories that they were natural formations, others believed that they were the result of underground nuclear fusion experiments by a very early civilization. No one knew. But the point was that they were there. For twenty years work on the ship stopped while Arama was prepared and enlarged into a huge underground world that would support most of the world's population -- a closed system using the same engineering principles that were part of the design of Challenger Three.'**

**Jenine's sudden tension betrayed an inner anger. 'So Arama is nothing more than an underground star ship? A huge test bed.'**

**Inman ignored the comment. 'Arama was completed 500 years ago. The governing council, which was now run by scientists**



**and engineers, announced that a major nova was about to happen. Most of the populace that wasn't engaged on the Challenger project entered their new world believing that they would be destroyed if they didn't.'**

**'Let me guess,' said Ewen. 'The nova was a lie?'**

**'Not a lie. But an exaggeration. There was a nova but it wasn't serious. It lasted a week, by which time most of the population were safe... But they weren't let out of Arama. Inside they had everything they needed. Food, light, air, energy, employment, schools, an economic and a legal system. An entire social infrastructure in place. Even a ready-made religion based on science and technology that would never let them down. The new priests of that religion were people like you -- the technicians.'**

**'How did they forget about the outdoors?' Jenine asked.**

**'Were they mindwarped?'**

**'To a degree -- yes. But they really forgot the outdoors because they wanted to forget, Jenine. Over the centuries the novae have wrought terrible devastation. Civilizations have risen and fallen -- wiped out every 850 years. The perils of the outdoors were ingrained deep into their race memory. Arama offered a salvation from the hell of outdoors. The first generation wanted to start a new life; the second generation had a fear of the old life in the outdoors instilled into them. That was strengthened with the third**

generation. By the time of the tenth generation, the outdoors had become wrapped in legend and fantasy, much as it is today...' Inman broke off and studied Jenine's face. 'You're condemning what happened, Jenine, and yet the people have survived in Arama. A 100 years ago there was a serious nova that would have caused much suffering. The men and woman working on the Challenger project had to take to the deep nova shelters for a year. All work stopped... And there were some who never entered Arama. Some people living in remote areas evaded the evacuation. Most of them were wiped out. A tiny handful of survivors became the Armageddonists -- worshippers of what they believe is the true god. They believe that we're opposing the will of their god and have tried to stop us. They are a nuisance, but nothing more.'

'What has this got to do with selecting those to travel on Challenger Three?' Ewen wanted to know.

Inman nodded his cadaverous head. 'We come to the most important function of Arama -- the source of crewmen to venture forth on Challenger Three. As I've said, as far back as the days of the young archeologist, it was decided that the crew would consist of the very finest that the human race is capable of producing. The gifted ones; original thinkers; those who challenge accepted precepts; those with obsessions powerful enough to change the course of history. Those who are sufficiently resourceful to overcome any difficulty. Some have come from the engineers and scientists working on the

**project -- but very few because there are only 30,000 of us  
whereas the population of Arama is four million.'**

**He paused and regarded his two guests in turn. `The  
majority are the talented men and women of Arama's millions  
who have demonstrated enterprise, resourcefulness, courage,  
even physical strength, and sheer dogged tenacity to work out  
the clues to find, and use the hazardous escape routes from  
Arama that were deliberately set for them. They are the  
worthy torch-bearers of the human race -- they are to be the  
crew of Challenger Three.'**

**7**

**There was a long silence in the office as the full import of  
Inman's words sank in.**

**`I wish I could say that Arama has been a shining  
success,' said Inman slowly. `As a means of protecting the  
populace, it has been. But there have been developments that  
we have disliked but have gone along with. The almost total  
stranglehold that religion and the worship of the GoD now  
exercises was not planned. It has evolved out of a basic need  
of mankind that we overlooked. The Guardian of Destiny is  
nothing more than a computer, built originally to monitor  
Arama's environment. The creation of Diablo as means of  
getting rid of social misfits was not of our making. The  
growth of the military was not planned. Nor was the**

**suppression of the sexual development of the priesthood by controlling their diet. But we couldn't interfere unduly.**

**What would be the point of a totally subservient race without freewill? How would that serve our purpose? But in the provision of a crew for Challenger Three, Arama has been a resounding success. The men and women who have escaped have done so, not through gaining political power or seeking great riches, but because of a burning light in their soul that believed that there is more to life than simply muddling through 80 or 90 years of materialism... I ask you not to judge us too harshly, Jenine.'**

**'But there is so much going on in Arama that you could stop!' said Jenine hotly. 'People dying in the daily wars -- people without limbs living out the rest of their lives in sanatoria.'**

**The light glittered on Inman's spectacles. 'Haven't you understood anything?' he said mildly. 'Of course I deplore such things. But my primary concern is with peoples' minds -- their souls. The very spark that separates us from those creatures on your island. I've watched over all of you gifted ones right from the very beginning. You are the future. Surely you understand that?'**

**'So how many crewmen will Challenger Three need?' Ewen asked, not wanting the discussion to get too philosophical.**

**'Four thousand.'**

**'And how many have you got?'**

**`Over the past four centuries, 3852 men and women have escaped from Arama. With the few engineers from the project team, we have a total of 3995. It is enough. Arama has served its most important function. Its purpose now is to protect the populace from further novae.'**

**Jenine frowned. `3852 over the past four centuries? That doesn't make sense. Most of the escapers will now be dead.'**

**`Not dead, Jenine -- sleeping. It's called suspended animation. The body's metabolic processes are slowed to almost zero during the sleep period. Ageing, growth, cell division, everything -- all come to a near standstill with the exception of some brain activity so that they can learn about Challenger Three. The hibernarium dormitories are deep below this building, heavily shielded and safe. Of course, the crewmen are woken on a rota at intervals for checks and a chance to get know their colleagues -- such as waking Simo to welcome you both. But when they are woken, it is as if they've had a normal night's sleep. And when the ship is ready, they will all be woken.'**

**Ewen moved onto the edge of his seat. His heart was pounding with excitement. `When will that be, Caudo?'**

**`Tomorrow.' Inman smiled wryly at their surprised expressions. `By that, I mean when you are woken. It's a term we use because it always seems like tomorrow. Challenger Three is now undergoing final tests. It will be ready to**

**leave in ten years real time.'**

**A stewardess entered the office and stood discreetly near the door. Inman turned his chair to the windows and gazed at the sky. For the first time his guests were aware of his great age. The once forbidding profile was now that of a man crushed by years of awesome responsibility. When he spoke, his voice was distant and they knew that the interview was over:**

**'A project that was started 20,000 years ago by our illustrious ancestors is drawing to close, or perhaps, a beginning. If there is a true god, I pray to it that we are worthy of our forebears and the wonderful inheritance they left us.'**

**The stewardess came forward, smiling.**

**8**

**The stewardess was a petite brunette in a gold-edged pale blue uniform. Her name was Leinka and she was surprisingly forthcoming as she showed Jenine and Ewen their apartment. It was a very ordinary flat on the building's fourth floor.**

**'A big sleep coming up doesn't mean you can't have anything to eat that you like,' she said, checking that everything in the shower room was in order. 'So you just tell me your favourite dish--' She broke off and smiled. 'Of course, I always forget. You've never had much choice, have you? Will you let me choose for you? I'll have several dishes**

sent in and you can leave what you don't like. Steak and mushrooms is my favourite.'

'Steak?' Jenine queried.

'Meat.' Leinka's cheeks dimpled. 'But, of course, you've got so much to learn. But you will. They can even give you tastes during your big sleep.'

'Can we walk in the gardens?' Jenine wanted to know.

'Yes -- of course. Anytime. That's what they're for.'

Ewen pointed to the plain double bed. 'Do we spend ten years in that?'

Leinka looked taken back for a moment and smiled. 'No -- of course not. Didn't Caudo tell you? You go to sleep in the normal manner with the help of a tablet I'll be bringing you. Once you're off, you'll be moved down to the hibernarium and be stuffed full of tubes and things. Then you're put in a sealed box with sensors stuck all over you, and you'll sleep. The big sleep. Just before you wake, you'll be moved back into your apartment, and you'll come to as if nothing has happened. You'll feel fine. It'll seem like tomorrow morning except that you'll know all about Challenger Three -- every detail. Oh, and you'll have to do a few exercises.'

'You make it all sound simple,' said Jenine, sitting on the bed and looking around in distaste. The room was smaller than she would have preferred.

'It is simple, Jenine. Very simple.'

**`Supposing a pregnant woman undergoes this... big sleep?**

**What happens to her child?**

**Ewen and Leinka eyed her worriedly.**

**`No,' said Jenine. `I'm not. But I just wondered.'**

**`The baby develops in the normal way, but only when the mother is awake,' said Leinka. `It doesn't come to any harm. With the early suspended animation techniques, it was possible for a mother to come out of a big sleep and discover that she had a child that was older than her. It led to problems.'**

**`I can imagine,' Jenine remarked drily.**

**`But not anymore. There are some pregnant crewmen in their big sleep now. There will be children born on Challenger Three soon after it sets off. Don't you think that's wonderful?'**

**`No.'**

**`I do,' said Ewen.**

**`Supposing we don't want to be crewmen?' Jenine demanded.**

**`Jenine--' Ewen began.**

**`I'm asking Leinka as she seems to know everything. Well?'**

**`You don't have to be crewmen if you don't want to be,' said Leinka. `No one ever has to do anything against their will. If you don't wish to become a crewman, you don't have to accept the pill, and you can apply for a job with the project team... Which is what I did.'**

**They stared at the girl in surprise. `You escaped from**



**Arama?' Ewen asked.**

**The girl looked embarrassed and nodded.**

**`When?'**

**`Two years ago.'**

**`Then why didn't you want to become a crewman?'**

**The memories were painful to the girl. Her face filled with sorrow as she sat on the bed. `I escaped with my husband.' She looked at Ewen. `He was so like you. The same blue eyes; the same hair; the same tremendous drive and everything, but perhaps not as strong. Like you we came out on an island. We built a reed boat and set sail, and... and...' She was unable to continue.**

**Jenine sat beside her and took her hand. Her anger had gone in the presence of this young girl's misery. `You don't have to tell us, Leinka.'**

**`No... I want to. There was a storm when were we halfway across. A bad one. I managed to hang onto some wreckage. I shouted and shouted for Darrow...' She stared down at the floor. `He wasn't a good swimmer... And then, when the storm went, I was close to the shore but there was no sign of Darrow. I managed to reach the beach... There were men watching me... They just stood there. I was exhausted. I had to crawl three paces clear of the water. I pleaded with them, but they refused to help... Three paces, they said. Somehow I made it. I don't know how, but I did.'**

**She paused and touched her stomach. `There was a terrible pain when they helped me up. I was taken to hospital but my baby was born three months prematurely. He's a lovely boy, but...'** She stumbled over her words. **`But there was damage to his brain... I could be become a crewman but it would mean leaving him. Caudo was so very kind and understanding... He said that I didn't have to... That I could have a good job and a nice home here, and look after my son.'** She turned her sad eyes on Jenine. **`You're lucky, Jenine. You have Ewen. You've been through much together, just like Darrow and me. But you both survived. Your choice is a real one.'**

**\* \* \* \***

**They stopped walking and paused on a bridge to watch the shoals of brilliantly-coloured fish chasing the evening shadows. The lake's underwater lights were beginning to glow. It was pleasant in the outdoors; the humidity had dropped; the warmth was comfortable. They had eaten well. Families and lovers were playing on the grass or sitting on benches, talking in low tones. They gave the couple in their crimson uniforms respectful nods, sometimes a `good evening, crewmen'. The atmosphere was more friendly than deferential. Jenine closed her eyes, leaned on the parapet, and let the golden light of the setting sun play on her face with her eyes closed. For Ewen there came a snapshot moment of her, lips slightly parted, her face serene, that he wanted to preserve forever. It was one of those instants that are rare**

**even with lovers, and are that much more cherished because of their scarcity.**

**`Breathe in,' said Jenine. `Deeply.'**

**Ewen inhaled. A thousand unfamiliar but delightful scents played on his senses.**

**`You can almost taste the smells,' Jenine murmured. She took Ewen's arm and they continued walking in silence, each wrapped in their own thoughts, not wishing to intrude on what the other was thinking.**

**`For the first time,' said Jenine at length. `We can actually go for a walk in the outdoors without a care in the world. No fear of the coming night. No worries about tomorrow's food. Or keeping a fire going.'**

**`What are you trying to say?'**

**`We could have a nice home here. A garden. A swimming pool... Time for each other... Children.'**

**Ewen stopped walking. He turned to Jenine and gently cradled her face in his hands. `You don't want to go, do you?'**

**`I don't know. I honestly don't know. But I do know that I want you to think of all this before you make up your mind. All our lives we've been shut up in Arama. All your life you've had your dreams of the blue dome. Now you've realised those dreams, and you're thinking about being shut up in a star ship. It'll be Arama all over again.'**

**`It won't be Arama, Jenine. There'll be a purpose.'**

**`It'll become just like Arama, Ewen. It'll be worse because Challenger Three will be more permanent than this planet. Generations will live and die on it. People don't change. There'll be those that crave power, who'll fight for it, and who'll subvert the freedom of others to hold onto it. Original dreams will be forgotten or stamped out. Perhaps that's what happened to the first Challenger. It won't mean freedom any more than this place does, but at least here we've got open spaces, freedom to go places, be ourselves.'**

**They turned back towards the golden headquarters building.**

**`Why are you so hostile towards the project, Jenine?'**

**`I'm not hostile; I'm merely suspicious. Perhaps the motives behind Challenger Three and Arama are worthy, but they are the products of one man's monumental vanity and arrogance. Can good come out of that?'**

**`I don't understand.'**

**`The young archeologist. The man who discovered the drawings of Challenger Three 600 years ago; the man who led a revolution, who started the star ship's building programme, and founded Arama, and herded the populace inside, and has ruled it ever since. Isn't it obvious? Caudo Inman was that young archeologist!'**

**For a moment Ewen was too stunned to speak. And he remembered Inman's words:**

**`I've watched over all of you gifted ones right from the**

**very beginning.'**

**'Suspended animation,' he muttered.**

**'Exactly.'**

**Something worried Ewen. 'But the long periods he would spend in suspended animation would make him vulnerable, Jenine. If he were evil, it would be easy to switch off the systems that keep him alive. And look at the deep respect that Simo has for him.'**

**'I believe him to be evil,' said Jenine with finality.**

**They stopped walking and stared up at the building as if expecting to see Inman looking down at them.**

**Ewen had difficulty putting his thoughts into words. 'You may be right, but--'**

**'I know I'm right.'**

**'But I want to go, Jenine. It's something I can't define.**

**Something to do with the thought that there's another great ship out there somewhere. Something tells me that I must be on Challenger Three tomorrow.'**

**Tomorrow...?**

**Strange how he used the word in its new context with such ease.**

**They mounted the steps, deep in thought, and entered the golden building.**

**'Would we ever adapt to living here?' Ewen wondered.**

**'We already are adapting, Ewen. We've just used those**

**steps outside without thinking about it.'**

**Leinka came forward to greet them, asking if they had enjoyed their walk.**

**'Leinka,' said Ewen. 'Would it be possible for me to see Caudo again? I have some questions to ask him.'**

**'But, of course. He won't be sleeping until midnight. Just take the lift up. I'll tell him you're coming.'**

**Ewen turned to Jenine and squeezed her hand. 'I won't be long,' he promised.**

**\* \* \* \***

**Inman steeped his gnarled fingers and regarded Ewen across his desk. He nodded sagely. 'She's right, of course. A most perceptive young lady...' He gestured to the window. 'I was watching you from there. I guessed that you would want to see me. I'm glad because there are some matters I need to talk over with--' He broke off in surprise and stared at the radio capsule that Ewen placed before him.**

**'An obstacle course,' said Ewen coldly. 'A game. If I can remember your exact words... "The crewmen will be the talented men and women of Arama's millions who have demonstrated enterprise, resourcefulness, courage, even physical strength, and sheer dogged tenacity to work out the clues to find, and use the hazardous escape routes from Arama that were deliberately set for them. The worthy torch-bearers of the human race who will be the crew of Challenger Three." Am I right?'**

**`More or less.'**

**`Then why did I have help with this! Wasn't I resourceful enough? Tenacious enough?'**

**`Some were helped, Ewen. Simo would have told you that.'**

**`But why me?'**

**`Your old tutor, Technician-Father Regen Dadley, was very fond of you.'**

**`And I was of him. He gave me that. Why?'**

**`Like Jenine, he guessed the truth about me. At least a little of the truth. He thought I meant you harm. He challenged me on one of my visits to the GoD Centre.' Inman nodded at the memory. `A very brave old man. I told him the truth, or as much as I dared tell him, and swore him to secrecy. I gave him that radio to give to you.'**

**`But why me?'**

**Inman showed some irritation. `It only provided advice, Ewen. In many ways you were exposed to more dangers than anyone else. There were obstacles--'**

**`You intervened in person at my trial!'**

**The older man rose to his formidable height. For a moment the autocratic First Secretary of Arama was back. But he seemed to change his mind. He relaxed and perched on the edge of his desk. `I hadn't reckoned on your defence doing such a good job. Even so, I still had to stop the chairman ending your studies. Ten days community service...'** He gave a wry

smile. 'I thought that was a safe sentence. It never occurred to me the idiots would send you to the front... You killed Tarlan, didn't you?'

Ewen nodded. The memories were too harsh to permit words.

'I'm sorry, Ewen. That was something I never foresaw.'

'But you still haven't said why me.'

Inman took a deep breath. 'It goes back to your mother and her selection test as a little girl. She was exceptionally clever but had little curiosity. She was brilliant but she lacked that essential spark that crewmen need. I vetoed her selection because I wanted her to marry and have children.'

Inman fidgeted as though suddenly angry. 'Their stupid suppression of sexuality! It has denied us Arama's full potential. Your mother led a normal life, grew up, and got married. Not a successful marriage. She was still a virgin when she went to the donor centre.'

Ewen grasped the implication even before Inman had finished speaking. 'My father -- her first husband -- was not my father?'

Inman nodded.

'Then who was?'

There was a silence. But as Ewen looked up into those bleak, forbidding eyes, he knew the answer. So confused were his thoughts that it seemed that the office was spinning around. He heard himself blurt out: 'And Tarlan?'

'No. Not Tarlan. The second donor was anonymous.'



**`Did she know that the first one was you?'**

**`No.' Inman returned to his chair and watched Ewen carefully. `Jenine is right -- I am arrogant. I believed that the product of my blood and your mother's blood would produce an exceptional child. But my arrogance has always stood me in good stead. And I was right. The union has produced an exceptional child. One who can take over from me.'**

**Ewen's inner turmoil became even more confused. `I don't understand.'**

**And then Inman's eyes were alight with a strange fire. `Do you really think that once Challenger Three was completed and sent off for, perhaps, tens of years, or even centuries, that I would abandon the people of Arama? They are my responsibility. I devised Arama. I put them there. We need another project. One that might take thousands of years to realise, but if we can dream it, we can do it! Can you even begin to think what I have in mind? Can you?'**

**There was a silence in the room. `For me to guess that would require me to plumb the full depths of your arrogance,' said Ewen slowly, meeting Inman's stare. `Yes... I think I can guess... You need grandiose plans, don't you, Caudo?'**

**`I don't need them, but if I have the imagination to conceive them, then it would be foolish of me to deny that talent.'**

**Ewen stared beyond the hills where the setting sun was**

locked in a bloody crimson duel with the darkening sky and the coming night.

'Well?' Inman prompted. 'Can your imagination soar higher than mine?'

'I don't know how high your imagination can fly, Caudo. But if I were in your position, I would plan to take earth out of its orbit around the sun, and take it in search of a new and stable sun. That's what I would consider if I were you.'

9

For a moment Inman looked lost for words. He recovered his composure and gave a crooked smile. 'You are me, Ewen. My flesh and blood. Yes -- that is the next great plan. The Solaria Plan -- to move the earth. It can be done. It will take 500 years to cancel its axial rotation alone. But it can be done. I've had a team of scientists carry out a feasibility study. With the will... And the time, it can be done.' He looked speculatively at Ewen. A sadness filled his eyes. 'I've lived 600 years, Ewen. I've built a great ark. And now I want to naturally live out what years I have left, with my son taking on my work. I want you to head the project. I will continue as First Secretary of Arama if that's your wish, but you will be in charge of the Solaria Project.'

No one spoke for a while. Ewen thought of the hologram

**image of Challenger Three in the lobby; he thought about the first Challenger, somewhere in the far reaches of space; he thought about the people on board -- people like him; born on their ship -- never having known the brief joy that he had known by being in the outdoors. He thought of Jenine rising from the sea, water streaming over her full breasts, and the times they had made love with the sun's warm and friendly touch on their skins, blessing their union. He gazed long and hard at the man before him; a man he been in fear of, and who was now waiting for him to speak.**

**`Do I have a choice, Caudo?'**

**`I wouldn't deny you that, Ewen.'**

**`Supposing I decide to do neither? Supposing I don't want to fall in with any of your schemes--'**

**`I call them plans, Ewen.'**

**`And I call them schemes, Caudo. Supposing I tell you that I'm not interested in your Solaria Project, or joining Challenger Three, and that I too want to live out a normal life here with Jenine? Maybe have a job or something? I don't know how the economics of Challenger City works. What then, Caudo?'**

**Inman regarded the younger man steadily. `Then I'll admit to being very disappointed. I have great plans for you, Ewen.'**

**`Your plans don't matter to me,' said Ewen with a hint of**

harshness. `What matters to me is what I want and, more important, what Jenine wants.'

`You have been earmarked for greatness--'

`You've earmarked yourself for greatness, Caudo. You see yourself as founder of a dynasty--'

`Which I am!'

Ewen grinned suddenly when he saw that he was shaking Inman's usual calm. `A dynasty needs descendants. The emperor's crown passing from father to son. That really appeals to your ego, doesn't it, Caudo? Except that this son might not accept--'

Inman's patience snapped. He jumped to his feet and stood menacingly over Ewen, his face livid. `Ego!' he spat. `Ego! You dare to talk to me of ego! You know nothing, young man. Well I'll tell what I know. I'm an archeologist. I've studied previous civilizations. There were many. Some ruled by despots; some ruled by the cruel who thought nothing of torturing and murdering thousands of their unfortunate subjects. But not all were like that. The most stable civilizations were those that had hereditary rulers. The society that built the first Challenger and designed Challenger Three was such a civilization. And you know why they succeeded where others failed? Because the power held by the crown was power denied to others. Whenever an ambitious general or politician tried to seize power, they were invariably thwarted in their ambitions by the power vested in

**the throne.'**

**He paced the room as he talked, gesturing angrily, providing Ewen with a valuable insight into how this remarkable man had imposed his iron will on so many for so long.**

**'That's why I created a phoney imperial family for Arama, Ewen. For all its faults, the system works.'**

**He stopped and stared down at the young man, towering over him, his eyes wide and staring, possessed of a terrible energy. 'But we're building something different here. A civilization that will outlast all those earlier civilizations because it will be the first to survive a holocaust. And it will go on surviving to bring peace and prosperity and safety to my-- to its people. And you dare to talk to me about ego!'**

**'So let's do a deal,' Ewen broke in.**

**Inman was about to launch into another tirade, but Ewen's suggestion pulled him up. 'A deal?' He looked as if his ears had deceived him.**

**'A deal,' Ewen confirmed.**

**'A deal with me?'**

**'There's no one else in the room, so it'll have to be you.'**

**Ewen's flippancy was not well received. 'I never do deals, young man.'**

**`Then now's the time to learn, old man.'**

**For moment it looked as if Inman was about to fly into a rage, but his self-control asserted itself. `What sort of a deal?'**

**`Why not sit down?' Ewen suggested.**

**Far from taking offence, Inman lowered his tall frame into his chair and regarded Ewen with hostility and suspicion. `So let us hear this... deal.'**

**Ewen outlined a plan that, to his surprise, Inman did not dismiss out of hand. Nevertheless the negotiations were as tough as they were brief. They were over in five minutes.**

**Ewen, stood, uncertain who had manipulated whom. But he was satisfied.**

**`How do you know you can trust me?' Inman asked as Ewen was about to leave.**

**`You gave me your word, Caudo.'**

**`And that's good enough?'**

**Ewen nodded. `It's more than good enough for me, Caudo.'**

**The hard face softened a little. `Hearing you say that gives me more pleasure than you'll ever realise, Ewen.'**

**10**

**Leinka entered Ewen's and Jenine's apartment and placed two glasses of water and two yellow tablets on the low table in front of the settee.**

**`You don't have to take them,' she explained to the**

**couple. `The choice is yours. But if you do take them, you are committing yourself to the project. You will fall asleep as you normally do, and will wake up in ten-years when Challenger Three will be ready to leave.' She looked nervously from one to the other. `You do understand? It's my duty to make it absolutely clear to you.'**

**`And it will seem like tomorrow?' said Jenine.**

**The petite brunette nodded and smiled. `Just like tomorrow.'**

**`Would you go if you were free to do so?' Ewen asked the girl as she moved to the apartment's door.**

**Leinka nodded. `Oh, yes -- I wouldn't hesitate.' She opened the door. `I'll be back in the morning. Good night.'**

**They bid the girl goodnight and sat staring at the tablets.**

**Jenine laid her hand on Ewen's arm. `What did Inman have to say?'**

**`That you were right about him being the young archeologist.'**

**`Nothing else?'**

**`A couple of things.'**

**She curled her legs under her and put her arms around him. She settled her head on his shoulder. They stayed like that for a while, not speaking, enjoying the closeness the moment and thinking how it would be if they didn't have each other.**

**`I've been thinking,' said Jenine. `I've never had dreams like you. I've been following your dreams. Do you think that's selfish?'**

**Ewen stroked her curls. `Why should I think that?'**

**`You dreamed about the outdoors, and you found it,' said Jenine. `Now you're dreaming about the first Challenger, and you want to find that too.'**

**`Yes.'**

**`It won't be like the search for the outdoors, Ewen. You could use your resourcefulness and your lateral thinking, but you won't be able to on the ship.'**

**Ewen kissed her forehead. `They got us into more problems than solved them.'**

**`We'd be two junior members of the crew among four thousand.'**

**He remembered his deal. `We don't have to go. When I spoke to Inman he said that if we decided not to, we could have senior jobs here, and be assigned one of those large houses.'**

**`He did!' Jenine bounced onto her knees and stared at Ewen, her eyes alight. `He actually said that?'**

**`Yes.'**

**`But he wants us to become crewmen?'**

**`Yes.'**

**`Then why--'**

**`Jenine. Listen carefully. I did a deal with Inman. Either we both stay or we both go. If we decide to stay, then we get**



**a house and top jobs. But I promised him that the decision would be yours. If you want to stay, then I will want to stay. And I swear on my love for you that I will never, ever reproach you if we do stay. I promised him that I would not influence you apart from telling you that I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you, no matter where we are. If you take that tablet, then I will take mine. If you decide not to, then I will decide the same.'**

**Jenine lifted her head, kissed Ewen tenderly, and looked at the tablets. `What do you want, Ewen?'**

**`To be with you, Jenine, whatever you decide. Even if I hadn't promised Inman not to influence you, I wouldn't want to. I want what you want and I swear I'll never reproach you.'**

**She was silent for a long time. `Perhaps I've changed my about opinion about Inman,' she said thoughtfully. `Is there anything else in this deal?'**

**`Nothing that can't wait until morning.'**

**`Let's make love, Ewen.'**

**\* \* \* \***

**Leinka entered the apartment two hours later when they didn't answer the buzzer. In the subdued light, she looked down at the entwined sleeping couple. There was a scent of love in the air that brought back bitter-sweet memories. She straightened the bedcover, turned away from the bed and**

looked at the table where she had placed the drinking glasses and the tablets.

She was happy for them at what she saw.

11

Wakefulness seemed to tread close on the heels of Jenine's dreams. She was drifting through the central control room of a great ship. It was Challenger Three. There was no need for her to be told that -- she knew. There was nothing she didn't know about the ship now. Its vast environmental control systems; its recycling plants; air-conditioning plants; the farms -- all were virtually identical to the systems that she had been trained on in Arama. The difference was that the ship was a mighty cylindrical world, turning slowly on its axis to simulate gravity. But, unlike Arama, one could stand at any point on the surface of the strange world and see every other point.

A noise nearby.

She opened her eyes. There was no sensation of disorientation at finding herself in their apartment in the headquarters building. Ewen was beside her, sprawled on his stomach and still asleep.

'Good morning, Jenine. It's a lovely morning. Did you sleep well?'

It was Leinka's bright, friendly voice. A gold-edged blue uniform moving about. Jenine focussed her eyes on the

stewardess. She saw that the girl was wheeling an exercise machine into the room.

`Yes -- a lovely sleep, Leinka. But I thought we were supposed to sleep for--'

`But you have, Jenine. You have.' The stewardess sat on the edge of the bed. `Do I look different?'

`No -- just the same.'

Leinka laughed. `That's made my day. Time to get up. A busy day for us all. I've been working for six-hours. This is the biggest wake-up of all time. Dozens of temps have been drafted in. I bullied my boss into letting me see to you.'

Ewen stirred and opened his eyes. `Can I smell food?' he mumbled.

`He seems to have survived,' Leinka observed.

Ewen sat up.

`There's a huge breakfast awaiting you,' said Leinka. `But first a few minutes each on this machine.' She dragged the bedcovers to one side. Ewen tried to pull them back and discovered that there was no strength in his hands.

`What's the matter with me?'

`Nothing that won't be cured by a few minutes' exercise,' said Leinka firmly. `Now come on. A busy day. So up. Wear your dressing gowns for now. I've got new uniforms for you.'

`Leinka.'

`Yes, Ewen?'

**`You look older.'**

**`Thank you, Ewen.'**

**An hour later Jenine and Ewen were finishing their breakfast, sitting at the table near the window, when the buzzer sound, and Inman entered the apartment. Leinka followed with new uniforms.**

**`A busy morning for you, Caudo, if you're visiting all the crewman,' Ewen observed.**

**`Just you, Commander,' Inman gestured to Leinka.**

**`Commander?' Jenine echoed, looking puzzled.**

**`I have your new uniform, Ewen,' said Leinka, holding out a garment. Unlike the earlier uniform, it was gold-piped and on the breast was the legend:**

**COMMANDER EWEN SOLENT. CHALLENGER THREE. EARTHSEARCH MISSION**

**`What that mean?' Jenine demanded.**

**Inman gave Ewen a puzzled look. `Didn't you tell her?'**

**`I gave you my word that I wouldn't influence her, Caudo.'**

**`But you could've told her that you are to be the commanding officer,' Inman pointed out, now looking as surprised as Jenine.**

**`Do you mean to say that you're the captain of Challenger Three!' Jenine demanded, jumping to her feet, eyes wide with shock.**

**Ewen stood and put his arm around her waist. `That was the rest of the deal that I said could wait until morning,**

**Jenine.'**

**'You risked not telling her that you'd be commander, and yet she still agreed to go,' said Inman softly.**

**'I stuck to our agreement, Caudo.'**

**'Is there anything else I haven't been told?' Jenine wanted to know.**

**Ewen looked uncertainly at Inman who nodded. Ewen turned Jenine around so that they were facing each other. 'We're going to search for the Challenger. We've decided that if we find it, or least, what happened to it, then we'll find the new earth that they might have found.'**

**'Personally,' said Inman. 'I don't think you will find the Challenger. But my prayers will go with you.'**

**'I will,' said Ewen with quiet conviction.**

**Inman looked into those blue eyes and saw an indomitable spirit that surpassed even his iron will. For the first time since he had mapped out his great project to ensure the salvation of humanity, he experienced an uplifting feeling of great pride.**

**Father and son shook hands.**

## **PART 11**

### **Prologue to Earthsearch**

**In the beginning...**

**Eighteen thousand million years had passed since the spawning of the giant meteoroid during the cataclysmic event that had marked the foundation of the Universe and the beginning of Time.**

**It had been an uneventful period for the meteoroid; eighteen thousand million years spent moving in a straight line which, were it not for the ten-mile length of the starship Challenger lying in its path, would be a mere prelude to the total of its eventual lifetime.**

**The Challenger was the result of seven years' feverish activity in Earth orbit to construct the first of three ships to journey to the stars to search for an Earth-type planet which would one day become the new home of mankind. It had been conceived and built during a period of unprecedented, world-wide stability and peace when, for the first time in its history, men and women had the confidence to embark on such long-term projects which would not come to fruition within one lifetime.**

**The accumulated knowledge of three-hundred years' high technology had gone into the Challenger's design and construction. She had been fitted with the most advanced planetary surveillance equipment and instrument probes, and had the resources in her vast terra-forming centre to re-engineer potential Earth-type planets by means of robot machines and androids which the Challenger would leave**

**behind.**

**Maintenance of such a vast ship would be beyond the resources of the starship's crew, so a workforce army of specialist androids had been designed and built in record time. These machines carried out the countless routine tasks necessary for the smooth running of the ship. They were under the command of the Challenger's two control computers who were responsible to the commander and crew for the ship's environment. These computers were known as Angel One and Angel Two and it was inevitable that by the time a second-generation crew had been born on the Challenger during its mission these two entities had become known as guardian angels.**

**What the designers of the guardian angels had not foreseen was that their creations would, as the years passed by on the Challenger, come to see themselves as more than mere computers. Were they not more intelligent than the men and women that occupied the mighty starship? Did they not have more power and ambition than the puny, two-legged creatures that tried to dominate them? And was not the non-discovery of intelligent life in fifty years a clear indication that they could be the supreme beings of the galaxy? Or even the Universe?**

**The problem was that the guardian angels needed humans to man the main control room. For reasons best known to**

**themselves, the Challenger's designers had decreed that only people could manoeuvre the starship, despite the fact that machines were infinitely more reliable. To the guardian angels, it was yet another folly in a dismal catalogue of incompetence. Humans fought among themselves and allowed their efficiency, such as it was, to be further reduced by their obsession with sex. To make matters worse, the second-generation crew were becoming disillusioned with the mission whereas the guardian angels wished for it to continue.**

**The guardian angels decided to rid the Challenger of its adult humans. The problem was how. Using the androids against the crew was sure to fail because most of them were only good at doing those tasks which they had been designed for. To be certain of success, all the adults would have to be destroyed simultaneously.**

**When the guardian angels detected the presence of the distant giant meteoroid and discovered that it was on a three hundred miles per hour converging course with the Challenger, they decided that fate was on their side. They calculated comparative velocities and angles, and concluded that a collision was inevitable provided the crew were not alerted. When the meteoroid was one month away they were able to refine their calculations; they made the interesting discovery that the meteoroid would strike the Challenger a glancing blow in the region of the main assembly hall.**



**When it was three weeks away, they were able to compute the nature and extent of the damage that the collision would cause; the ship would be severely damaged but not crippled. What damage there was would be within the abilities of the service androids to repair.**

**The meteoroid drew nearer but the guardian angels remained silent. One week before the inevitable collision, they informed the crew that service androids would have to carry out urgently needed maintenance work on the outer hull. The meteoroid alarms were closed down and a hundred service androids swarmed out of the maintenance air-locks and spread themselves along the Challenger's ten-mile length. They X-rayed seams that did not require inspection; they filled minute, almost invisible particle scars that were too insignificant to warrant attention and they carried out thousands of needless tests on systems that were in perfect working order.**

**One hour before the impending impact, a team of the more sophisticated androids dismantled the four outer turrets that housed the Challenger's meteoroid annihilation shields.**

**The guardian angels switched off the ship's optical telescopes thirty minutes before impact.**

**Fifteen minutes before impact and the ship was blind and helpless -- defenceless against the million-ton mass of star matter hurtling towards it.**

**The Challenger's crew were unaware of the fate awaiting them as they filed into the auditorium to hear their commander's announcement.**

**\* \* \* \***

**Commander Jonas Sinclair was a second-generation crewman. In common with the majority of the three hundred and twenty men and women sitting expectantly before him, he had been born on the Challenger. At least fifty of the older faces before him belonged to members of the first-generation crew -- those who had watched the Challenger taking shape in Earth orbit over fifty years before.**

**Sinclair was nervous and ill at ease; he would have preferred to make his statement over the crew address system from his day cabin but the two guardian angels had suggested calling everyone together. Despite the protestations of the first-generation crew that the guardian angels were only computers, he had come to value their advice and guidance and even allowed them to decide when the meeting should be called.**

**Sinclair arranged his notes on the lectern and waited for his audience to settle down. He tapped his liquid-flo pencil gently on the polished surface. The pin microphone in his lapel picked up the soft clicks and amplified them in the air above everyone's heads. The buzz of conversation subsided.**

**'Fellow crew men and women,' Sinclair began. 'I have called you all together because we have reached an important**

**stage in our mission. For fifty years we have toured the galaxy in search of other earths for colonization. When our parents set out on this survey voyage, it was hoped that one Earth-type planet would be discovered for every ten years shipboard time of the mission.'**

**Sinclair glanced down at his notes and caught the eye of the four men and four women who were sitting in the front row watching him intently. He knew why they had sought out the front row and he gave them a fleeting smile of encouragement before raising his eyes to the rest of the audience. `As we know, that has not happened, therefore we have continued the work of our parents.'**

**He sensed the fidgeting rather than saw it and immediately shortened his preamble by several paragraphs. `And now, during the past six months four babies of the third-generation crew have been born to us.'**

**The four couples in the front row seemed to lean forward in their seats, never taking their eyes off Sinclair.**

**`The parents of Telson, Sharna, Astra and Darv have petitioned me, saying that they do not wish their children to grow up as they have: not knowing about our home planet Earth. Never to breathe its air; never to feel its grass beneath their feet; never to walk under its blue skies and feel its warm summer breezes on their faces... Ladies and gentlemen -- I agree with them!'**

**There was a stunned silence. No one coughed or fidgeted:  
320 pairs of eyes regarded him in amazement.**

**Sinclair pressed on: `Our parents denied us our home but  
does that give us the right to pass on that denial to a  
third-generation crew? I think not. Nor do I believe that it  
is possible for the Challenger to improve on the success of  
its mission.'**

**There was some sporadic clapping from the centre of the  
auditorium that Sinclair silenced with an upraised hand.**

**`What I have to say now means that we will have to go into  
suspended animation because--'**

**As Sinclair expected, there was a loud chorus of protests.**

**The mausoleum-like suspended animation chambers were  
mistrusted -- a mistrust that the first-generation had passed  
on the second generation with the result that the suspended  
animation chambers were now rarely used. Also, despite the  
fact that the technique of reducing the body's metabolism to  
the point where it was maintained at the point of death had  
been perfected over one hundred and fifty years previously,  
most people still considered that there was something  
sinister and unethical about going into a death sleep for  
periods ranging from a few days up to the maximum of fifty  
years.**

**Sinclair smiled and held up a hand to help the furore die  
away. `If you don't like the idea of suspended animation,' he  
continued, `then the next phase is going to take ten years in**

**real time. The Challenger is going home!**

**The four couples broke the hush that followed Sinclair's words; they jumped to their feet, clapping and cheering wildly. And then the storm broke as the entire audience rose to their feet applauding enthusiastically and cheering. The thunderous acclaim dragged on for another minute. A woman in the front row jumped on to the rostrum and threw her arms around Sinclair's neck.**

**It was the last touch of a woman that Sinclair was to experience. At that moment the giant meteoroid struck the ship.**

**The cheers of the crew changed to screams of terror as the edge of the meteoroid sliced through the auditorium's domed roof and severed the fibre optic tracks that controlled the artificial gravity in that level of the ship. Weight vanished and the concept of `up' and `down' became meaningless. An invisible bubble of air which had been the auditorium's atmosphere erupted into space, sucking up everything that was not a fixture and hurling it into space through the gaping fissure. Some of the crew managed to delay their ejection from the ship by clinging desperately to their seats -- their screams diminishing to thin, reedy cries as the air pressure plummeted to a vacuum. Free of the constraints of an atmosphere, their blood began frothing in their veins and arteries as boiling point dropped rapidly to the normal**

temperature of the human body. After five minutes, death released the grip of the few remaining in the auditorium and the dying air currents eddying into space through the ruptured dome wafted their bodies from the wounded ship. Ten minutes later the guardian angels sent service androids -- their eyes and ears now that so many of their audio and optical sensors had been destroyed -- into the wrecked levels of the ship to survey the damage. Eight levels were beyond repair. Surgical androids, the most intelligent of all the robots, reported that there was no hope of the guardian angels regaining control over the central regions of the ship.

The guardian angels' initial concern at their miscalculation over the extent of the damage that the glancing collision would cause was assuaged when reports came in from the secondary-function androids: one food-production farm was still operational and so was the central water reservoir. The main control room in the prow of the ship was intact, and the photonic drive, ten miles from the control room in the stern of the ship, was in perfect working order. That the main control room escaped damage was particularly good news even though there were not, as yet, any crew left to man it.

Most important of all, two miles away from the devastation, four babies, watched over by nursery androids, were safe, and sound asleep. They hadn't even stirred during

**the moments of impact when shockwaves had raced the length of  
the Challenger.**

**T H E E N D**

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