

Manna From Heaven
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Analog
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The S'uthlamese armada was sweeping the outskirts of the solar system, moving through the velvet darkness of space with all the stately silent grace of a tiger on the prowl, on an interception course with the *Ark*.

Haviland Tuf sat before his master console, scanning the banks of telescreens and computer monitors with small, careful turns of his head. The fleet angling to meet him appeared more formidable with every passing moment. His instruments reported some fourteen capital ships and swarms of smaller fighters. Nine bulbous silver-white globes, bristling with unfamiliar weaponry, comprised the wings of the formation. Four long black dreadnaughts served as outriders on the flanks of the wedge, their dark hulls crackling with energy. The flagship in the center was a colossal saucer-shaped fort with a diameter Tuf's sensors measured as six kilometers from rim to rim. It was the largest spaceship that Haviland Tuf had seen since the day, more than ten years past, when he had first sighted the derelict *Ark*. Fighters swarmed around the saucer like angry stinging insects.

Tuf's long, pale, hairless face was still and unreadable, but in his lap, Dax made a small sound of disquiet as Tuf pressed his fingertips together.

A flashing light indicated an incoming communication.

Haviland Tuf blinked, reached out with calm deliberation, and took the call.

He had expected a face to materialize on the telescreen in front of him. He was disappointed. The caller's features were hidden by a faceplate of black plasteel, inset into the helmet of a mirror-finish warsuit. A stylized representation of the globe of S'uthlam ornamented the flanged crest upon his forehead. Behind the faceplate, wide-spectra sensors glowed red like two burning eyes. It reminded Haviland Tuf of an unpleasant man he had once known.

"It was unnecessary to dress formally on my account," Tuf said flatly. "Moreover, while the size of the honor guard you have sent to meet me tickles my vanity somewhat, a much smaller and less prepossessing squadron would have been more than sufficient. The present formation is so large and formidable as to give one pause. A man of a less trusting nature than myself might be tempted to misconstrue its purpose and suspect some intent to intimidate."

"This is Wald Ober, commander of the Planetary Defense Flotilla of S'uthlam, Wing Seven," the grim visage on the telescreen announced in a deep, distorted voice.

"Wing Seven," Tuf repeated. "Indeed. This suggests the possibility of at least six other similarly fearsome squadrons. It would seem that S'uthlamese planetary defenses have been augmented somewhat since my last call."

Wald Ober wasn't interested. "Surrender at once, or be destroyed," he said bluntly.

Tuf blinked. "I fear some grievous misunderstanding."

"A state of war exists between the Cybernetic Republic of S'uthlam and the so-called alliance of Vandeen, Jazbo, Henry's World, Skrymir, Roggandor, and the Azure Triune. You have entered a restricted zone. Surrender or be destroyed."

"You misapprehend me, sir," Tuf said. "I am a neutral in this unfortunate confrontation, of which I was unaware until this moment. I am part of no faction, cabal, or alliance, and represent only myself, an

ecological engineer with the most benign of motives. Please do not take alarm at the size of my ship. Surely in the small space of five standard years the esteemed spinnerets and cybertechs of the Port of S'uthlam cannot entirely have forgotten my previous visits to your most interesting world. I am Haviland—”

“We know who you are, Tuf,” said Wald Ober. “We recognized the *Ark* as soon as you shifted out of drive. The alliance doesn't have any dreadnaughts thirty kilometers long, thank life. I have specific orders from the High Council to watch for your appearance.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

“Why do you think the wing is closing on you?” Ober said.

“As a gesture of affectionate welcome, I had hoped,” Tuf said. “As a friendly escort bearing kudos, salutations, and gift baskets of plump, fresh, spiced mushrooms. I see that this assumption was unfounded.”

“This is your third and final warning, Tuf. We'll be in range in less than four standard minutes. Surrender now or be destroyed.”

“Sir,” said Tuf, “before you make a grievous error, please consult with your superiors. I am certain there has been a lamentable communications error.”

“You have been tried in absentia and found guilty of being a criminal, a heretic, and an enemy of the people of S'uthlam.”

“I have been grossly misperceived,” Tuf protested.

“You escaped the flotilla ten years ago, Tuf. Don't think to do it again. S'uthlamese technology does not stand still. Our new weaponry will shred those obsolete defensive shields of yours, I promise you that. Our top historians have researched that ponderous EEC derelict of yours. I supervised the simulations myself. Your welcome is all prepared.”

“I have no wish to seem ungracious, but it was unnecessary to go to such lengths,” said Tuf. He glanced at the banks of telescreens that lined the consoles along both sides of the long, narrow room, and studied the phalanx of S'uthlamese warships rapidly closing upon the *Ark*. “If this unprovoked hostility has its root in my outstanding debt to the Port of S'uthlam, rest assured that I am prepared to render payment in full immediately.”

“Two minutes,” said Wald Ober.

“Furthermore, if S'uthlam is in need of additional ecological engineering, I find myself suddenly inclined to offer you my services at a much reduced price.”

“We've had enough of your solutions. One minute.”

“It would seem I am left with but a single viable option,” said Haviland Tuf.

“Then you surrender?” the commander said suspiciously.

“I think not,” said Haviland Tuf. He reached out, brushed long fingers across a series of holographic keys, and raised the *Ark*'s ancient defensive screens.

Wald Ober's face was hidden, but he managed to get a sneer into his voice. “Fourth generation imperial screens, triple redundancy, frequency overlapping, all shield phasing coordinated by your ship's computers. Duralloy plate armor on your hull. I told you we'd done our research.”

“Your hunger for knowledge is to be commended,” Tuf said.

“The next sarcasm you mouth may be your last, trader, so you had better take care to make it a good one. The point is, we know exactly what you've got, and we know to the fourteenth decimal how much damage an EEC seedship's defenses can absorb. We're prepared to give you more than you can

handle.” He turned his head. “*Prepare to commence fire,*” he snapped at unseen subordinates. When the dark helmeted face swiveled back toward Tuf, Ober added, “We want the *Ark* and you can’t stop us from taking it. Thirty seconds.”

“I beg to differ,” said Tuf calmly.

“They’ll fire at my command,” Ober said. “If you insist, I’ll count down the final seconds of your life. Twenty. Nineteen. Eighteen...”

“Seldom have I heard such vigorous counting,” said Tuf. “Please do not lose track on account of my distressing news.”

“...Fourteen. Thirteen. Twelve.”

Tuf folded his hands atop his stomach.

“Eleven. Ten. Nine.” Ober looked uneasily to one side, then back at the screen.

“Nine,” announced Tuf. “A fine number. It is customarily followed by eight, thence seven.”

“Six,” Ober said. He hesitated. “Five.”

Tuf waited silently.

“Four. Three.” He stopped. “*What distressing news?*” he roared at the screen.

“Sir,” said Tuf, “if you must shout, you will only oblige me to adjust the volume on my communications equipment.” He raised a finger. “The distressing news is that the mere act of breaching the *Ark*’s defensive shields, as I have no doubt you can easily accomplish, will trigger a small thermonuclear device that I have previously secreted within the ship’s cell library, thereby instantaneously destroying the very cloning materials that make the *Ark* unique, invaluable, and widely coveted.”

There was a long silence. The glowing crimson sensors beneath the darkness of Wald Ober’s faceplate seemed to smoulder as they stared into the screen at Tuf’s blank features. “You’re bluffing,” the commander said at last.

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “You have found me out. How foolish to think I might hoodwink a man of your perspicacity with such a blatant and juvenile deception. And now I fear you will fire upon me, rend my poor obsolete defenses, and demonstrate my lie for good and all. Permit me only a moment to make my farewells to my cats.” He folded his hands neatly atop his great paunch, and waited for the commander to reply. The S’uthlamese flotilla, his instruments avowed, was now well within range.

“I’ll do just that, you damned abortion!” Wald Ober swore.

“I wait with sullen resignation,” said Tuf, unmoving.

“You have twenty seconds,” Ober said.

“I fear my news has confused you. The count previously stood at three. Nonetheless, I shall take shameless advantage of your error and savor each instant remaining to me.”

They stared at each other, face to face and screen to screen, for the longest time. Snug in Tuf’s lap, Dax began to purr. Haviland Tuf reached down to stroke the cat’s long black fur. Dax purred even more loudly and began kneading Tuf’s knee with his claws.

“Oh, abort it to hell and gone,” said Wald Ober. He pointed at the screen. “You may have us checked for the moment, but I warn you, Tuf, don’t even *think* about trying to get away. Dead or fled, your cell library would be equally lost to us. And given a choice I’d sooner you be dead.”

“I comprehend your position,” said Haviland Tuf, “though I, of course, would sooner be fled. Yet I do have a debt to pay to the Port of S’uthlam, and therefore could not honorably depart as you fear, so please accept my assurances that you will have every opportunity to ponder my visage, and I your fearsome mask, while we sit locked in this irksome impasse.”

Wald Ober never got the chance to reply. His battle mask vanished abruptly from the screen, and was replaced by a woman's homely features—a broad crooked mouth, a nose that had been broken more than once, hard leathery skin with the deep blue-black cast that comes from lots of exposure to hard radiation and decades of anti-carcinoma pills, pale bright eyes in a nest of squint-folds, all of it surrounded by a lavish halo of coarse gray hair. “So much for getting tough,” she said. “You win, Tuf. Ober, you're now an honor guard. Form up and escort him into the web, damn it.”

“How thoughtful,” said Haviland Tuf. “I am pleased to inform you that I am now prepared to tender the final payment due the Port of S'uthlam for the refitting of the *Ark*.”

“I hope you brought some catfood, too,” Tolly Mune said drily. “That so-called ‘five-year supply’ you left me ran out almost two years ago.” She signed. “I don't suppose you'd care to retire and sell us the *Ark*.”

“Indeed not,” said Tuf.

“I didn't think so. All right, Tuf, break out the beer, I'm coming to talk to you as soon as you reach the web.”

“While I mean no disrespect, I must confess that I am not at the moment in the best frame of mind for entertaining such a distinguished guest as yourself. Commander Ober has recently informed me that I have been adjudged a criminal and heretic, a curious conception, as I am neither a citizen of S'uthlam nor an adherent to its dominant religion, but no less disquieting for all that. I am agog with fear and worry.”

“Oh, that,” she said. “Just an empty formality.”

“Indeed,” Tuf said.

“Puling hell, Tuf, if we're going to steal your ship we need a good legal excuse, don't we? We're a goddamned government. We're *allowed* to steal the things we want as long as we put a shiny legal gloss over it.”

“Seldom in my voyaging have I encountered any political functionary as frank as yourself, it must be admitted. The experience is refreshing. Still, as invigorated as I am, what assurance do I have that you will not continue your efforts to seize the *Ark* once aboard?”

“Who, me?” said Tolly Mune. “Now how could I do a thing like that? Don't worry, I'll come alone.” She smiled. “Well, almost alone. You'd have no objections if I brought a cat, would you?”

“Certainly not,” said Tuf. “I am pleased to learn that the felines I left in your custody have thrived in my absence. I shall eagerly anticipate your arrival, Portmaster Mune.”

“That's First Councillor Mune to you, Tuf,” she said, gruffly, before she wiped the screen.

No one had ever alleged that Haviland Tuf was overly rash; he took up a position twelve kilometers beyond the end of one of the great docking spurs of the orbital community known as the Port of S'uthlam, and he kept his shields up continuously as he waited. Tolly Mune rode out to meet him in the small starship Tuf had given her five years before, on the occasion of his previous visit to S'uthlam.

Tuf opened the shields to let her through, and cracked the great dome on the landing deck so she might set down. *Ark*'s instrumentation indicated her ship was full of lifeforms, only one of which was human; the rest displayed feline parameters. Tuf set out to meet her, driving a three-wheeled cart with balloon tires, and wearing a deep-green mock-velvet suit belted about his ample middle. On his head was a battered green duckbilled cap decorated with the golden theta of the Ecological Engineering Corps. Dax rode with him, an indolent sprawl of black fur draped across Tuf's broad knees.

When the airlock opened, Tuf drove with all deliberate speed through the scrapyards of battered spacecraft that he had somehow accumulated over the years, directly to where Tolly Mune, former

Portmaster of S'uthlam, was thumping down the ramp of her ship.

A cat walked at her side.

Dax was on his feet in an instant, his dark fur bristling as if his huge, furry tail had just been plugged into an electric socket. His customary lethargy was suddenly gone; he leapt from Tuf's lap to the hood of the cart, drew back his ears, and hissed.

"Why, Dax," Tolly Mune said, "is that any way to greet a goddamned relative?" She grinned, and knelt to pet the huge animal by her side.

"I had expected either Ingratitude or Doubt," said Haviland Tuf.

"Oh, they're fine," she said. "And so are all their goddamned offspring. Several generations' worth. I should have figured it when you gave me a pair. A fertile male and female. I've got..." she frowned, and counted quickly on her fingers, once through and then again. "...let's see, sixteen, I think. Yes. And two pregnant." She jerked a thumb at the starship behind her. "My ship has turned into one big cat-house. Most of them don't care any more for gravity than I do. Born and raised in zero gee. I'll never understand how they can be so graceful one moment and so hilariously clumsy the next."

"The feline heritage is rife with contradiction," said Tuf.

"This is Blackjack." She picked him up in her arms and rose to her feet. "Damn, he's *heavy*. You never realize that in zero gee."

Dax stared at the other feline, and hissed.

Blackjack, cradled against the chest of Tolly Mune's old, smelly skinthins, looked down at the huge black tom with disinterested haughtiness.

Haviland Tuf stood two-and-a-half meters tall, with bulk to match, and Dax was just as large, compared to other cats, as Tuf was, compared to other men.

Blackjack was larger.

His hair was long and silky, smoky gray on top, with a lighter silver undercoat. His eyes were silver-gray as well, vast deep pools, serene and somehow eerie. He was the most incredibly beautiful animal ever to dwell in the expanding universe, and he knew it. His manner was that of a princeling born to the royal purple.

Tolly Mune slid awkwardly into the seat beside Tuf. "He's telepathic, too," she said cheerfully, "just like yours."

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf. Dax was stiff and angry in his lap. He hissed again.

"Jack here was the way I saved the other cats," Tolly Mune said. Her homely face took on a look of reproach. "You said you were leaving me five years of catfood."

"For two cats, madam," said Tuf. "Obviously, sixteen animals consume more than Doubt and Ingratitude alone." Dax edged closer, bared his teeth, bristled.

"I had problems when the stuff ran out. Given our food shortfalls, I had to justify wasting calories on vermin."

"Perhaps you might have considered steps to limit your feline reproduction," Tuf said. "Such a strategy would undoubtedly have yielded results. Thus your home could have served as an educational and sobering illustration of S'uthlamese problems, in microcosm as it were, and the solutions thereof."

"Sterilization?" Tolly Mune said. "That's anti-life, Tuf. Out. I had a better idea. I described Dax to certain friends—biotechs, cybertechs, you know—and they made me a familiar of my own, worked up from cells taken from Ingratitude."

"How appropriate," said Tuf.

She smiled. "Blackjack's almost two years old. He's been so useful I've been given a food allowance for the others. He's helped my political career no end, too."

"I have no doubt," said Tuf. "I note that he does not appear discomfited by gravity."

"Not Blackjack. These days they need me downstairs a hell of a lot more than I'd like, and Jack goes with me. Everywhere."

Dax hissed again, and made a low nimbly threatening sound. He darted toward Blackjack, then drew back suddenly and spit disdain at the larger cat.

"You better call him off, Tuf," Tolly Mune said.

"Felines sometimes demonstrate a biological compulsion to battle in order to establish deference rankings," Tuf said. "This is particularly true of tomcats. Dax, undoubtedly aided and abetted by his enhanced psionic capabilities, long ago established his supremacy over Chaos and my other cats. Undoubtedly he now feels his position threatened. It is not a matter for serious concern, First Councillor Mune."

"It is for Dax," she said, as the black tom crept closer. Blackjack, in her lap, looked up at his rival with vast boredom.

"I fail to grasp your point," said Tuf.

"Blackjack has those enhanced psionic capabilities, too," said Tolly Mune. "Plus a few other, ah, advantages. Implanted duralloy claws, sharp as goddamned razors, concealed in special paw sheaths. A subcutaneous net of nonallogenic plasteel mesh that makes him awfully tough to hurt. Reflexes that have been genetically accelerated to make him twice as quick and dextrous as a normal cat. A very high pain threshold. I don't want to be puling crass about it or anything, but if he gets jumped, Blackjack will slice Dax into little bloody hairballs."

Haviland Tuf blinked, and shoved the steering stick over toward Tolly Mune. "Perhaps it might be best if you drove." He reached out, picked up his angry black tomcat by the ruff of the neck, and deposited him, screeching and spitting, in his lap, where he held him very still indeed. "Proceed in that direction," he said, pointing with a long pale finger.

"It appears," said Haviland Tuf, steepling his fingers as he regarded her from the depths of a huge wingback armchair, "that circumstances have altered somewhat since I last came to call upon S'uthlam."

Tolly Mune studied him carefully. His paunch was larger than it had been, and his long face was just as miserly of expression, but without Dax in his lap, Haviland Tuf looked almost naked. Tuf had shut the big black tom up on a lower deck to keep him away from Blackjack. Since the ancient seedship was thirty kilometers long and several of Tuf's other cats roamed the deck in question, Dax would scarcely lack for space or for companionship, but must be baffled and distraught nonetheless. The psionic tomcat had been Tuf's constant and inseparable companion for years, had even ridden in Tuf's ample pockets as a kitten. Tolly Mune felt a little sad about it.

But not *too* sad. Dax had been Tuf's hole card, and she'd trumped him. She smiled and ran her fingers through Blackjack's thick smoke-and-silver fur, eliciting another thunderous purr. "The more things change the more they stay the same," she said in answer to Tuf's comment.

"This is one of those venerable sayings that collapses upon close logical examination," Tuf said, "being obviously self-contradictory on the face of it. If indeed things have changed upon S'uthlam, they obviously cannot have remained the same as well. To myself, coming as I have from a great distance, it is the changes that seem most notable. To wit, this war, and your own elevation to First Councillor, a considerable and unanticipated promotion."

"And a puling awful job," Tolly Mune said with a grimace. "I'd go back to being Portmaster in a blink, if

I could.”

“Your job satisfaction is not the subject under discussion,” Tuf said. He continued. “It must also be noted that my welcome to S’uthlam was distinctly less cordial than on the occasion of my previous visit, much to my chagrin, and notwithstanding the fact that I have twice placed myself squarely between S’uthlam and mass famine, plague, cannibalism, pestilence, social collapse, and other unpleasant and inconvenient events. Moreover, even the most venomously rude races frequently observe a certain rudimentary etiquette toward those who are bringing them eleven million standards, which you recall is the amount of principal remaining on my debt to the Port of S’uthlam. Ergo, I had every reason to expect a welcome of a somewhat different nature.”

“You were wrong,” she said.

“Indeed,” Tuf said. “Now that I have learned that you occupy the highest political office on S’uthlam, rather than a menial position upon a penal farm, I am frankly more mystified than ever as to why the Planetary Defense Flotilla felt it necessary to greet me with fierce bombastic threats, dour warnings, and exclamations of hostility.”

Tolly Mune scratched at Blackjack’s ear. “My orders, Tuf.”

Tuf folded his hands atop his stomach. “I await your explanation.”

“The more things change—” she began.

“Having already been pummeled with this cliché, I believe I grasp the small irony involved in it by now, so there is no need for you to repeat it over and over endlessly, First Councillor Mune. If you would proceed to the essence of the matter I would be deeply appreciative. “

She sighed. “You know our situation.”

“The broad outlines, certainly,” Tuf admitted. “S’uthlam suffers from an excess of humanity, and a paucity of food. Twice I have performed formidable feats of ecological engineering in order to enable the S’uthlamese to forestall the grim specter of famine. The details of your food crisis vary from year to year but I trust that the essence of the situation remains as I have outlined it.”

“The latest projection is the worst yet.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “My recollection is that S’uthlam stood some one hundred nine standard years from mass planetary famine and societal collapse, assuming that my recommendations and suggestions were dutifully implemented.”

“They tried, damn it. They did try. The meatbeasts, the pods, the ororos, neptune’s shawl—everything’s in place. But the changeover was only partial. Too many powerful people were unwilling to give up the luxury foodstuffs they preferred, so there are still large tracts of agri-land devoted to raising herds of food animals, entire farms planted with neograss and omni-grain and nanowheat—that sort of thing. Meanwhile, the population curve has continued to rise, faster than ever, and the puling Church of Life Evolving preaches the sanctity of life and the golden role of reproduction in humanity’s evolution to transcendence and godhood.”

“What is the current estimate?” Tuf asked bluntly.

“Twelve years,” said Tolly Mune.

Tuf raised a finger. “To dramatize your plight, perhaps you ought to assign Commander Wald Ober to count down the remaining time over the vidnets. Such a demonstration would have a certain grim urgency that might inspire the S’uthlamese to mend their ways.”

Tolly Mune winced. “Spare me your levity, Tuf. I’m First Councillor now, goddamn it, and I’m staring right into the pimpled ugly face of catastrophe. The war and the food shortages are only part of it. You can’t imagine the problems I’m facing.”

“Perhaps not the fine detail,” said Tuf, “yet the broad outlines are readily discerned. I make no claim to omniscience, but any reasonably intelligent person could observe certain facts and from them draw certain inferences. Perhaps these deductions thus arrived at are wrong. Without Dax, I cannot ascertain the truth of that. Yet somehow I think not.”

“What puling facts? What inferences?”

“Firstly,” said Tuf, “S’uthlam is at war with Vandeen and its allies. Ergo, I can infer that the technocratic faction that once dominated S’uthlamese politics has yielded up power to their rivals, the expansionists.”

“Not quite,” said Tolly Mune, “but you’ve got the right puling idea. The expansionists have gained seats in every election since you left, but we’ve kept them out of power with a series of coalition governments. The allies made it clear years ago that an expansionist government meant war. Hell of it is, we still don’t have an expansionist government, but we got the damned war anyway.” She shook her head. “In the last five years we’ve had nine First Councillors. I’m the latest, probably not the last.”

“The grimness of your current projections suggests that this war has not yet actually touched your populace,” Tuf said.

“Thank life, no,” said Tolly Mune. “We were ready when the allied war fleet came calling. New ships, new weapons systems, everything built in secret. When the allies saw what was waiting for them, they backed off without firing a blast. But they’ll be back, damn it. It’s only a matter of time. We’ve got reports that they’re preparing for a major strike.”

“I might also infer,” said Tuf, “from your general attitude and sense of desperation, that conditions upon S’uthlam itself are already deteriorating rapidly.”

“How the hell do you know that?”

“It is obvious,” said Tuf. “Your projection may indeed indicate mass famine and collapse to be some twelve standard years in the future, but this is hardly to say that S’uthlamese life will remain pleasant and tranquil until that moment, whereupon a bell will ring loudly and your world will fall to pieces. Such an idea is ludicrous. As you are now so close to the brink, it is only to be expected that many of the woes symptomatic of a disintegrating culture will already be upon you.”

“Things are—puling hell, where do I begin?”

“The beginning is frequently a good place,” said Tuf.

“They’re my people, Tuf. That’s my world turning down there. It’s a good world. But lately—if I didn’t know better, I’d think insanity was contagious. Crime is up some two hundred percent since your last call. Murder is up five hundred percent, suicide more than two thousand percent. Service breakdowns become more common daily—blackouts, systems failure, random strikes, vandalism. We’ve had reports of cannibalism deep in the undercities—not isolated instances, but entire puling cannibal gangs. Secret societies of all kinds, in fact. One group seized a food factory, held it for two weeks, and fought a pitched battle with world police.

“Another bunch of crazies have taken to kidnapping pregnant women and...” Tolly Mune scowled; Blackjack hissed. “This is hard to talk about. A woman with child has always been something special to the S’uthlamese, but these...I can hardly even call them people, Tuf. These *creatures* have cultivated a taste for—”

Haviland Tuf raised a hand, palm outward. “Say no more,” he said. “I have grasped the inference. Continue.”

“Lots of solitary maniacs, too,” she said. “Someone dumped highly toxic waste into a food factory holding tank eighteen months ago. More than twelve hundred fatalities. Mass culture—S’uthlam has always been tolerant, but lately there’s a hell of a lot more to be tolerant *of*, if you catch my float. There’s this growing obsession with disfigurement, death, violence. We’ve had massive resistance to our attempts

to re-engineer the ecosystem according to your recommendations. Meatbeasts have been poisoned, blown up, and fields of pods set afire. Organized thrill gangs hunt the goddamned wind-riders with harpoons and high-altitude gliders. It makes no goddamned sense. The religious consensus—all kinds of weird cults have been emerging. And the war! Life only knows how many will die, but it's as popular as—hell, I don't know, it's *more* popular than sex, I think.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “I am unsurprised. I take it the imminence of disaster remains a closely guarded secret of the S’uthlamese High Council, as in years past.”

“Unfortunately, no,” Tolly Mune said. “One of the minority councillors decided she couldn't hold her bladder, so she called in the puling peeps and pissed the news out all over the vidnets. I think she wanted to win a few million more votes. The hell of it is, it worked. It also kicked off another goddamned scandal and forced yet another First Councillor out of office. By then there was no place to look for a new human sacrifice but upstairs. Guess who got grabbed? Our favorite vidshow heroine, controversial bureaucrat, and Ma Spider, that's who.”

“You are obviously referring to yourself,” said Tuf.

“By then nobody hated me much any more. I had a certain reputation for efficiency, the remnants of a popular romantic image, and I was minimally acceptable to most of the big council factions. That was three months ago. So far it's been one hell of a term of office.” Her smile was grim. “The Vandeenis listen to our newsfeeds, too. Simultaneous with my goddamned promotion, they decided S’uthlam was, I quote, a threat to the peace and stability of the sector, end quote, and got together their goddamned allies to try and decide what to do about us. The bunch of them finally gave us an ultimatum: enforce immediate rationing and compulsory birth control, or the alliance would occupy S’uthlam and enforce it for us.”

“A viable solution, but not a tactful one,” Tuf commented. “Thus your present war. Yet all this fails to explain your attitude toward me. I have been able to offer your world succor twice before. Surely you did not feel I would be remiss in my professional duties on this third occasion.”

“I figured you'd do what you could.” She pointed a finger. “But on your own terms, Tuf. Hell, you've helped, yes, but always on your own terms, and all of your solutions have proved unfortunately impermanent.”

“I warned you repeatedly that my efforts were mere stopgaps,” Tuf replied.

“There are no calories in warnings, Tuf. I'm sorry, but we have no choice. This time we can't allow you to clap a stick-on bandage over our hemorrhage and shunt off. The next time you came back to check on how we were faring, you wouldn't find a puling world to come back to. We need the *Ark*, Tuf, and we need it permanently. We're prepared to use it. Ten years ago you said that biotech and ecology were not our areas of expertise, and you were right. Then. But times change. We're one of the most advanced worlds in human civilization, and for a decade we've been devoting most of our educational efforts to training ecologists and biotechs. My predecessors brought in top theorists from Avalon, Newholme, and a dozen other worlds. Brilliant people, geniuses. We even managed to lure some leading genetic wizards off Prometheus.” She stroked her cat and smiled. “They helped with Blackjack here. A lot.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf.

“We're ready to use the *Ark*. No matter how capable you are, Tuf, you're only one puling man. We want to keep your seedship permanently in S’uthlamese orbit, with a full-time staff of two hundred top scientists and genetic technicians, so we can deal with the food crisis *daily*. This ship and its cell library and all the lost data in its computers represents our last, best hope, you can see that. Believe me, Tuf, I didn't give Ober orders to seize your ship without considering every other goddamned option I could think of. I knew you'd never sell, damn it. What choice did I have? We don't want to cheat you. You would have been paid a fair price. I'd have insisted.”

“This assumes I remained alive after the seizure,” pointed out Tuf. “A doubtful proposition at best.”

“You’re alive now, and I’ll still buy the damned ship. You could stay aboard, work with our people. I’m prepared to offer you lifetime employment—name your own salary, anything you want. You want to keep that eleven million standards? It’s yours. You want us to rename the puling planet in your honor? Say the word, and we’ll do it.”

“Planet S’uthlam or Planet Tuf by any name would be as overcrowded,” Haviland Tuf replied. “Should I agree to this proposed purchase, undoubtedly it is your intent to use the *Ark* only in these efforts to increase your caloric productivity and thus feed your starving people.”

“Of course,” said Tolly Mune.

Tuf’s face was blank and serene. “I am pleased to learn that it has never occurred to you or to any of your associates on the High Council that the *Ark* might be employed in its original capacity as an instrument of biological warfare. Sadly, I have lost this refreshing innocence, and find myself prey to uncharitable and cynical visions of the *Ark* being used to wreak ecological havoc upon Vandeen, Skrymir, Jazbo, and the other allied homeworlds, even to the point of genocide, thereby preparing those planets for mass colonization, which I seem to recall is the population policy advocated by your troublesome expansionist faction.”

“That’s quite a goddamned implication,” snapped Tolly Mune. “Life is sacred to the S’uthlamese, Tuf.”

“Indeed. Yet, poisonous cynic that I am, I cannot help but suspect that ultimately the S’uthlamese may decide that some lives are more sacred than others.”

“You know me, Tuf,” she said, her tone crisp and chilly. “I would never allow anything like that.”

“And if any such plan was enacted over your objections, I have no doubt that your letter of resignation would be quite sternly worded,” Tuf said flatly. “I find this insufficiently reassuring, and have a hunch, yes, a hunch, that the allies might share my sentiments on this point.”

Tolly Mune chucked Blackjack under the chin. The cat began to growl deep in his throat. Both of them stared at Tuf. “Tuf,” she said, “millions of lives are at stake, maybe *billions*. There are things I could show you that would curl your hair. If you had any puling hair, that is.”

“As I do not, this is obvious hyperbole,” said Tuf.

“If you’d consent to shuttle in to Spiderhome, we could take the elevators downstairs to the surface of S’uthlam—”

“I think not. It would seem to me to be conspicuously unwise to leave the *Ark* empty and undefended, as it were, in the light of the climate of belligerence and distrust that presently festers upon S’uthlam. Moreover, though you may think me arbitrary and overfastidious, with the passage of years I find I have lost whatever small degree of tolerance I once had for swarming crowds, cacophony, rude stares, unwelcome hands, watery beer, and minuscule portions of tasteless food. As I recall, these are the principal delights to be found upon the surface of S’uthlam.”

“I don’t want to threaten you, Tuf—”

“Nonetheless, you are about to.”

“You will not be allowed to depart the system, I’m afraid. Don’t try to hoodwink me like you did Ober. That business with the bomb is a goddamned fabrication and we both know it.”

“You have found me out,” Tuf said expressionlessly.

Blackjack hissed at him.

Tolly Mune looked down at the big cat, startled. “It’s not?” she said in horror. “Oh, damn it to hell.”

Tuf engaged the silver-gray feline in a silent staring contest. Neither of them blinked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Tolly Mune said. “You’re here to stay, Tuf. Resign yourself to it. Our new ships *can*

destroy you, and they will if you try to pull out.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “And for my part, I will destroy the cell library if you attempt to board the *Ark*. It appears we have arrived at a stalemate. Fortunately, it need not be of long duration. S’uthlam has never been far from my thoughts as I voyaged hither and yon across starry space, and during the periods when I was not professionally engaged, I have engaged myself in methodical research in order to devise a true, just, and permanent solution to your difficulties.”

Blackjack sat down and began to purr. “You have?” Tolly Mune said dubiously.

“Twice the S’uthlamese have looked to me for a miraculous salvation from the consequences of their own reproductive folly and the rigidity of their religious beliefs,” Tuf said. “Twice I have been called upon to multiply the loaves and fishes. Yet it occurred to me recently, while engrossed in a study of that book which is the chief repository of the ancient myths from which that anecdote is drawn, that I was being asked to perform the wrong miracle. Mere multiplication is an inadequate reply to an ongoing geometric progression, and loaves and fishes, however plentiful and tasty, must in the final analysis be found insufficient to your needs.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Tolly Mune demanded.

“This time,” Tuf said, “I offer you a lasting answer.”

“What?”

“Manna,” said Tuf.

“Manna,” said Tolly Mune.

“A truly miraculous foodstuff,” said Haviland Tuf. “The details need not concern you. I will reveal all at the proper time.”

The First Councillor and her cat looked at him suspiciously. “The proper time? And when will it be the proper puling time?”

“When my conditions have been met,” Tuf said.

“What conditions?”

“First,” said Tuf, “as the prospect of living out the rest of my life in orbit about S’uthlam is one I find unappealing, it must be agreed that I am free to go after my labors here are completed.”

“I can’t agree to that,” Tolly Mune said, “and if I did, the High Council would vote me out of office in a puling second.”

“Secondly,” Tuf continued, “this war must be terminated. I fear I will be unable to concentrate properly on my work when there is every likelihood of a major space battle breaking out around me at any moment. I am easily distracted by exploding starships, webs of laser fire, and the screams of dying men. Moreover, I see little point in exerting great efforts to make the S’uthlamese ecology balanced and functional once more when the allied fleets threaten to deposit plasma bombs all over my handiwork, and thereby undo my small achievements.”

“I’d end this war if I could,” Tolly Mune said. “It isn’t that damned easy, Tuf. I’m afraid what you ask is impossible.”

“If not a permanent peace, then perhaps at least a small cessation in hostilities,” Tuf said. “You might send an embassy to the allied forces and petition for a short armistice.”

“That might be possible,” Tolly Mune said tentatively. “But why?” Blackjack gave an uneasy meow. “You’re plotting something, damn it.”

“Your salvation,” Tuf admitted. “Pardon me if I deign to interfere with your diligent joint efforts to encourage mutation through radioactivity.”

“We’re defending ourselves! We didn’t want this war!”

“Excellent. In that case, a short delay will not unduly inconvenience you.”

“The allies will never buy it. Neither will the High Council.”

“Regrettable,” said Tuf. “Perhaps we ought to give S’uthlam some time to consider. In twelve years, the surviving S’uthlamese might have more flexible attitudes.”

Tolly Mune reached out and scratched Blackjack behind the ears. Blackjack stared at Tuf, and after a minute uttered a small, strange, peeping sound. When the First Councillor stood abruptly, the huge silver-gray cat leapt nimbly from her lap. “You win, Tuf,” she said. “Lead me to a comm set and I’ll set the damned thing up. You’re prepared to wait forever and I’m not. People are dying every moment we delay.” Her voice was hard, but inside, for the first time in months, Tolly Mune felt hope mingled with her unease. Maybe he *could* end the war and solve the crisis. Maybe there was really a chance. But she let no hint of that creep into her tone. She pointed. “But don’t think you’re going to get away with anything funny.”

“Alas,” said Haviland Tuf, “humor has never been my forte.”

“I’ve got Blackjack, remember. Dax is too freaked out and intimidated to do you any good, and Jack will let me know the instant you start thinking about treachery.”

“Always my best intentions are met with suspicion.”

“Blackjack and me, we’re your puling shadows, Tuf. I’m not leaving this ship until things are settled, and I’m going to look hard at everything you do.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf.

“Just keep a few damned things in mind,” Tolly Mune said. “I’m First Councillor now. Not Josen Rael. Not Cregor Blaxon. Me. Back when I was Portmaster, they liked to call me the Steel Widow. You might pass an hour or two pondering how and why I got that puling name.”

“I shall indeed,” said Tuf, rising. “Is there anything else you would like me to recall, madam?”

“Just one thing,” she said. “A scene from that *Tuf and Mune* vidshow.”

“I have striven diligently to put that unfortunate fiction out of my memory,” Tuf said. “Which particular of it would you force me to recall?”

“The scene where the cat rips the security man to shreds,” Tolly Mune said, with a small, sweet smile. Blackjack rubbed up against her knee, turned his smoky gaze up at Tuf, and rumbled deep in his massive body.

It took almost ten days to arrange the armistice, and another three for the allied ambassadors to make their way to S’uthlam. Tolly Mune spent the time haunting the *Ark*, two steps and a hasty thought behind Tuf, questioning everything he did, peering over his shoulder when he labored at his console, riding by his side when he made the rounds of his cloning vats, helping him feed his cats (and keep a hostile Dax away from Blackjack). He attempted nothing overtly suspicious.

Dozens of calls came through for her daily. She set up an office in the communications room, so she would never be far from Tuf, and handled the problems that could not wait.

Hundreds of calls came through daily for Haviland Tuf. He instructed his computer to refuse all of them.

When the day came, the envoys emerged from their long, luxurious diplomatic shuttle and stood gazing about at the *Ark*’s cavernous landing deck and fleet of derelict starships. They were a colorful and diverse lot. The woman from Jazbo had waistlong blue-black hair that shone with scented iridescent oils; her cheeks were covered with the intricate scars of rank. Skrymir sent a stocky man with a square red

face and hair the color of mountain ice. His eyes were a crystalline blue that matched the color of his scaled metal shirt. The envoy from the Azure Triune moved within a haze of holographic projections, a dim, fractured, shifting shape that spoke in an echoey whisper. Roggandor's cyborg ambassador was as broad as he was tall, made in equal parts of stainless duralloy, dark plasteel, and mottled red-black flesh. A slight, delicate-looking woman in transparent pastel silks represented Henry's World; she had a boyish adolescent body and ageless scarlet eyes. The allied party was led by a large, plump, opulently dressed man from Vandeen. His skin, wrinkled by age, was the color of copper; his long hair fell past his shoulders in thin, delicate braids.

Haviland Tuf, driving a segmented vehicle that glided across the deck like a snake on wheels, stopped directly in front of the ambassadors. The Vandeen stepped forward beaming, reached up and pinched his own full cheek very vigorously, and bowed. "I would offer my hand, but I recall your opinion of that custom," he said. "Do you remember me, fly?"

Haviland Tuf blinked. "I have some vague recollection of encountering you upon the train to the surface of S'uthlam some ten years ago," he said.

"Ratch Norren," the man said. "I'm not what you call a regular diplomat, but the Board of Coordinators figured they'd send somebody who'd met you, and knew the Suthies, too."

"That's an offensive term, Norren," Tolly Mune said bluntly.

"You're an offensive bunch," Ratch Norren replied.

"And dangerous," whispered the envoy from the Azure Triune, from the center of his holographic fog.

"You're the puling aggressors," Tolly Mune started.

"Defensive aggression," boomed the cyborg from Roggandor.

"We recall the last war," said the Jazbot. "This time we decline to wait until your damnable evolutionists burst forth and try to colonize our worlds again."

"We have no such plans," Tolly Mune said.

"*You* don't, spinneret," Ratch Norren said. "But look me in the optics here and tell me your expansionists don't have wet dreams about breeding all over Vandeen."

"And Skrymir."

"Roggandor wants no part of your cast-off human detritus."

"You will never take the Azure Triune."

"Who the hell would *want* the puling Azure Triune?" snapped Tolly Mune. Blackjack purred approval.

"This glimpse into the inner working of high interstellar diplomacy has been most elucidating," Haviland Tuf announced. "Nonetheless, I sense that more pressing business awaits. If the envoys would be so cooperative as to board my vehicle, we might proceed onward to our conference."

Still muttering among themselves, the allied ambassadors did as Tuf bid them. Fully loaded, the vehicle set out across the landing deck, weaving a path between the myriad abandoned starships. An airlock, round and dark as the mouth of a tunnel or the jaws of some insatiable beast, opened at their approach and swallowed them. They entered and stopped; the lock closed behind them, engulfing the party in darkness. Tuf ignored the whispered complaints. Around them came a screeching metallic noise; the floor began to descend. When they had dropped at least two decks, another door opened in front of them. Tuf turned on his headlamps and they drove out into a pitch-black corridor.

They drove through a maze of dark, chilly corridors, past countless closed doors, following a dim indigo trace that flitted before them, a ghost embedded in the dusty floor. The only light was the beam from the train's headlamps, and the faint glow of the instrument panel in front of Tuf. At first the envoys bantered among themselves, but the black depths of the *Ark* were oppressive and claustrophobic, and one by one

the members of the delegation fell silent. Blackjack began to knead Tolly Mune's knees rhythmically with his claws.

After a long time rolling through dust, darkness, and silence, the train approached a towering pair of double doors that hissed open ominously at their approach, and closed with a loud clang of finality behind them. Within, the air was moist and hot. Haviland Tuf stopped, and turned off the headlamps. Total darkness enveloped them.

"Where *are* we?" Tolly Mune demanded. Her voice rang off some distant ceiling, although the echo seemed strangely muffled. Though black as a pit, the room was obviously cavernous. Blackjack hissed uneasily, sniffed the air, and made a tiny, uncertain mewling sound.

She heard footsteps, and a small light flicked on two meters away. Tuf was bent over an instrument console, watching a monitor panel. He pressed one key in a luminescent keyboard, and turned. A padded wingback floater chair came whispering out of the warm darkness. Tuf climbed into it like a king ascending a throne, and touched a control on the arm. The chair lit up with a feint violet phosphorescence. "Kindly follow," Tuf announced. The floater swiveled in the air and began to drift off.

"Puling hell," Tolly Mune muttered. She climbed out of her seat hastily, cradling Blackjack, and scrambled after Tuf's retreating throne. The allied ambassadors followed en masse, whining and complaining every step of the way. She could hear the cyborg's massive footsteps behind her. Tuf's floater was the only spot of light in an enveloping sea of darkness. As she rushed after him, she stepped on something.

The sudden feline yowl made her recoil, bumping into the cyborg's armored chest. Confused, Tolly Mune knelt and reached out a tentative hand, holding Blackjack awkwardly in the crook of her arm; her fingers brushed soft fur. The cat rubbed up against her furiously, purring loudly. She could barely make out its shape—a small shorthair, hardly more than a kitten. It rolled over so she could scratch its belly. The Jazbot almost stumbled over her as she knelt there. And then suddenly Blackjack had leaped free and was sniffing around the new cat. It returned the favor briefly, then whirled, and in a blink it had vanished into the darkness. Blackjack hesitated, then howled and bounded after it. "Goddamn it," Tolly Mune shouted. "Goddamn it, Jack, get your puling ass back here!" Her voice echoed, but her cat did not return. The rest of the party was growing more distant. Tolly Mune swore and hurried to catch up.

An island of light appeared ahead of her. When she arrived, the others were settling into seats arrayed along one side of a long metal table. Haviland Tuf, in the thronelike floater, was on the other side of the table, his face expressionless, his white hands folded atop his stomach.

Dax was stalking back and forth across his shoulders, purring.

Tolly Mune stopped, glared, swore. "Damn you to hell," she said to Tuf. She turned around. "*Blackjack!*" she screamed at the top of her lungs. The echoes seemed swaddled in thick cloth, curiously indistinct. "*Jack!*" Nothing.

"I hope we have not come all this way simply to listen to the First Councillor of S'uthlam practice animal calls," the envoy from Skrymir said.

"Indeed not," said Tuf. "First Councillor Mune, if you will kindly take your seat, we may proceed at once."

She scowled, and sank down into the only vacant chair. "Where the hell is Blackjack?"

"I can hardly venture an opinion on that subject," said Tuf flatly. "He is, after all, your cat."

"He ran off after one of yours," Tolly Mune snapped.

"Indeed," said Tuf. "Interesting. At the moment it so happens that I have a young female who has recently gone into heat. Perhaps that explains his actions. I have no doubt that he remains quite safe, First Councillor."

“I want him back for this puling conference!” she said.

“Alas,” said Tuf, “the *Ark* is a large ship and they might be sporting in any of a thousand places, and in any case, to interfere with their sexual congress would be unconscionably anti-life by S’uthlamese standards. I would hesitate to do such violence to your cultural mores. Moreover, you have stressed to me repeatedly that time is of the essence, as many human lives are at stake. Ergo, I think it best we proceed with all due haste.”

Tuf moved his hand slightly, touched a control. A section of the long table sank out of sight. A moment later, a plant rose from within, directly in front of Tolly Mune. “Behold,” said Tuf. “Manna.”

It grew from a low bedding pan, a tangle of pale green vines almost a meter high, a living gordian knot, tendrils weaving back and forth on themselves and edging over the lip of the container. All along the vines were thick clusters of leaves, as tiny as fingernails, their waxy green surface shot through with a delicate tracery of black veins. Tolly Mune reached out and touched the nearest leaf, and discovered that its underside was covered with a dusting of fine powder that came off on the tips of her fingers. Between the clusters of leaves, the branching vines were swollen with clusters of fat white carbuncles, larger and more pustulent-looking in toward the central tangle of growth. She saw one palp, half concealed under a canopy of leaves, that had grown as big as a man’s hand.

“Ugly looking weed,” opined Ratch Norren.

“I fail to understand why it was necessary to declare an armistice and travel all this way to behold some festering hothouse monstrosity,” said the man from Skrymir.

“The Azure Triune grows impatient,” whispered their envoy.

“There’s some puling motive in this madness,” Tolly Mune said to Tuf. “Get on with it. Manna, you said. So what?”

“It will feed the S’uthlamese,” said Tuf. Dax was purring.

“For how many days?” asked the woman from Henry’s World, in a sweet voice that dripped sarcasm.

“First Councillor, if you would be so kind as to break off one of the larger paps, you will find the flesh delectably succulent and quite nutritious,” Tuf said.

Tolly Mune leaned forward, grimacing. She wrapped her fingers around the largest fruit. It felt soft and pulpy to her touch. She tugged, and it came off the vine easily. She broke it apart with her fingers. The flesh tore like fresh bread. Deep within its secret center was a sac of dark, viscous liquid that flowed with seductive slowness. A marvelous smell filled her nostrils, and she began to salivate. She hesitated for an instant, but it smelled too good. Quickly, she took a bite. She chewed, swallowed, took another bite, and another. In four bites it was all gone, and she was licking the stickiness off her fingers.

“Milkbread,” she said, “and honey. Rich, but tasty.”

“Nor will the taste pall,” Tuf announced. “The secretions in the heart of each palp are mildly narcotic. They are individual with each specimen of the manna plant, its distinct and subtle flavors a factor of the chemical composition of the soil in which the plant has taken root and the genetic heritage of the plant itself. The range of tastes is quite broad, and can be further expanded through cross-breeding.”

“Hold on,” Ratch Norren said loudly. He tugged at his cheek and frowned. “So this damned bread-and-honey fruit tastes just swell, sure, sure. So what? So the Suthies have something tasty to snack on after they make some more little Suthies. A nice treat to relieve the tedium of conquering Vandeen and breeding all over it. Pardon, folks, but Ratch don’t feel like applauding right now.”

Tolly Mune frowned. “He’s rude,” she said, “but he’s right. You’ve given us miracle plants before, Tuf. Omni-grain, remember? Neptune’s shawl. Jersee-pods. How’s manna going to be any different?”

“In several respects,” said Haviland Tuf. “Firstly, my previous efforts have been directed at making your

ecology more efficient, to increasing the caloric output from the finite areas of S'uthlam given over to agriculture, to getting more from less, as it were. Unfortunately, I did not adequately account for the perversity of the human species. As you yourself have reported, the S'uthlamese food chain is still far from maximum efficiency. Though you have meatbeasts to provide protein, you persist in raising and feeding wasteful herd animals, simply because some of your wealthier carnivores prefer the taste of such flesh to a slice of a meatbeast. Similarly, you continue to grow omni-grain and nanowheat for reasons of flavor and culinary variety, where jersee-pods would yield you more calories per square meter. Succinctly put, the S'uthlamese still persist in choosing hedonism over rationality. So be it. Manna's addictive properties and flavors are unique. Once the S'uthlamese have eaten of it, you will encounter no resistance on the grounds of taste."

"Maybe," Tolly Mune said doubtfully, "but still—"

"Secondmost," Tuf continued, "manna grows swiftly. Extreme difficulties demand extreme solutions. Manna represents such a solution. It is an artificial hybrid, a genetic quilt sewn together with DNA strands from a dozen worlds, its natural ancestors including the bread-bush of Hafeer, insinuating nightweed from Noctos, Gulliverian sugarsacs, and a specially enhanced variety of kudzu, from Old Earth itself. You will find it hardy and fast-spreading, in need of scant care, and capable of transforming an ecosystem with astonishing swiftness."

"How astonishing?" Tolly Mune demanded bluntly.

Tuf's finger moved slightly, pressed down on a glowing key set within the arm of his floater. Dax purred.

The lights came on.

Tolly Mune blinked in the sudden glare.

They sat in the center of a huge circular room a good half-kilometer across, its domed ceiling curving a hundred meters above their heads. Behind Tuf a dozen towering plasteel ecospheres emerged from the walls, each open at the top and full of soil. There were a dozen different types of soil, representing a dozen different habitats—powdery white sand, rich black loam, thick red clay, blue crystalline gravel, gray-green swamp mud, tundra frozen hard as ice. From each ecosphere a manna plant grew.

And grew.

And grew.

And grew.

The central plants were five meters high; their questing vines had long since crawled over the tops of their habitats. The tendrils snaked halfway across the floor, to within a half-meter of Tuf, winding together, branching and rebranching. Manna vines covered the walls three-quarters of the way around the room. Manna vines clung precariously to the smooth white plasteel ceiling, half-eclipsing the light panels, so the illumination drifted down to the floor in shadow patterns of incredible intricacy. The filtered light seemed greenish. Everywhere the manna fruit bloomed, white pods the size of a man's head drooping from the vines overhead and pushing through the tangle of growth. As they watched, one pod fell to the floor with a soft liquid *plop*. Now she understood why the echoes had sounded so curiously muted.

"These particular specimens," Haviland Tuf announced in an expressionless voice, "were begun from spores some fourteen days ago, shortly before my first meeting with the estimable First Councillor. A single spore in each habitat was all that was required; I have neither watered nor fertilized in the interim. Had I done so, the plants would not be nearly so small and stunted as these poor examples you see before you."

Tolly Mune got to her feet. She had lived for years in zero gee, so it was a strain to stand under full gravity, but there was a tightness in her chest and a bad taste deep in the back of her mouth, and she felt she had to grasp for every psychological advantage, even one as small and obvious as standing when the

rest of them were seated. Tuf had taken her breath away with his manna-from-the-hat trick, she was outnumbered, and Blackjack was life-knows-where while Dax sat by Tuf's ear, purring complacently and regarding her with large golden eyes that saw right through every puling artifice. "Very impressive," she said.

"I am pleased you think so," Tuf said, stroking Dax.

"Exactly what are you proposing?"

"My proposition is thus: we will immediately commence seeding S'uthlam with manna. Delivery may be effected through use of the *Ark*'s shuttlecraft. I have already taken the liberty of stocking the shuttle bays with explosive air-pods, each containing manna spores. Released into the atmosphere in a certain predetermined pattern that I have devised, the spores will ride upon the winds and distribute themselves about S'uthlam. Growth will commence immediately. No further effort will be required from the S'uthlamese but that they pick and eat." His long still face turned away from Tolly Mune, toward the envoys from the allied worlds. "Sirs," he said, "I suspect that you are presently wondering as to your own part in this."

Ratch Norren pinched his cheek and spoke for them all. "Right," he said. He looked around uneasily. "Comes back to what I said before. So this weed feeds all the Suthies. So what, that's nothing to us."

"I would think the consequences obvious," said Tuf. "S'uthlam is a threat to the allied worlds only because the S'uthlamese population is perpetually threatening to outstrip the S'uthlamese food supply. This renders S'uthlam, an otherwise peaceful and civilized world, inherently unstable. While the technocrats remained in power and kept the equation in an approximate balance, S'uthlam has been the most cooperative of neighbors, but this balancing, however virtuoso, must eventually fail, and with that failure inevitably the expansionists rise to power and the S'uthlamese become dangerous aggressors."

"I'm no puling expansionist!" Tolly Mune said hotly.

"Such was not my implication," said Tuf. "Neither are you First Councillor for life, despite your obvious qualifications. War is already at hand, albeit a defensive war. When you fall, should an expansionist replace you, the struggle will become a war of aggression. In circumstances such as those the S'uthlamese have created for themselves, war is as utterly certain as famine, and no single leader, however well-intentioned and competent, can possibly avoid it."

"Exactly," the boyish young woman from Henry's World said in a precise voice. Her eyes had a shrewdness in them that belied her adolescent body. "And if war is inevitable, we had just as well fight it out now, and solve the problem once and for all."

"The Azure Triune must agree," came a whispered second.

"True," said Tuf, "granting your premise that war must come inevitably."

"You just told us the bloody expansionists would start a war inevitably, Tuffer," Batch Norren complained.

Tuf soothed the black tomcat with a large white hand. "Incorrect, sir. My statements as to the inevitability of war and famine were predicated upon the collapse of the unstable balance between the S'uthlamese population and S'uthlamese food supplies. Should this tenuous equation be brought back into alignment, S'uthlam is no threat whatsoever to the other worlds in this sector. Under these conditions, war is both unnecessary and morally unconscionable, I would think."

"And you avow this pestilential pop-weed of yours will be the thing to do the job?" the woman from Jazbo said contemptuously.

"Indeed," said Tuf.

The ambassador from Skrymir shook his head. "No. A valid effort, Tuf, and I respect your dedication, but I think not. I speak for all the allies when I say that we cannot put our faith in yet another

breakthrough. S'uthlam has had its greenings and flowerings and blossomings and ecological revolutions before. In the end, nothing changes. We must conclude this matter once and for all."

"Far be it from me to interfere with your suicidal folly," said Tuf. He scratched Dax behind an ear.

"Suicidal folly?" Batch Norren said. "What's that mean?"

Tolly Mune had been listening to it all. She turned to face the allies. "That means you lose, Norren," she said.

The envoys laughed—a polite chuckle from the Henry, a guffaw from the Jazbot, a booming thunder from the cyborg. "The arrogance of the S'uthlamese never ceases to amaze me," said the man from Skrymir. "Don't be misled by this temporary stalemate, First Councillor. We are six worlds united as one. Even with your new flotilla, we outnumber you and outgun you. We defeated you once before, you might recall. We'll do it again."

"You will not," said Haviland Tuf.

As one, the envoys looked at him.

"In recent days I have taken the liberty of doing some small research. Certain facts have become obvious. Firstly, the last local war was fought centuries ago. S'uthlam suffered an undeniable defeat, yet the allies are still recovering from their victory. S'uthlam, however, with its greater population base and more voracious technology, has long since left all effects of that struggle behind. Meanwhile, S'uthlamese science has advanced as swiftly as manna, if I may be permitted a colorful metaphor, while the allied worlds owe what small advances they claim to knowledge and techniques imported from S'uthlam. Undeniably, the combined allied fleets are significantly more numerous than the S'uthlamese Planetary Defense Flotilla, yet most of the allied armada is functionally obsolete in the face of the sophisticated weaponry and technology embodied in the new S'uthlamese ships. Moreover, it is grossly inaccurate to say the allies outnumber S'uthlam in any real sense. You comprise six worlds against one, correct, but the combined population of Vandeen, Henry's World, Jazbo, Roggandor, Skrymir, and the Azure Triune totals scarcely four billion—less than one-tenth the population of S'uthlam alone."

"One-tenth?" the Jazbot croaked. "That's wrong. Isn't it? It must be."

"The Azure Triune has been given to understand that their numbers are barely six times our own."

"Two-thirds of them are women and children," the envoy from Skrymir was quick to point out.

"Our women fight," Tolly Mune snapped.

"When they can find the time between litters," commented Ratch Norren. "Tuf, they can't have *ten times* our population. There are a lot of 'em, agreed, sure, but our best estimates—"

"Sir," said Tuf, "your best estimates are in error. Contain your chagrin. The secret is well kept, and when one is counting such multitudes, one can easily misplace a billion here or a billion there. Nonetheless, the facts are as I have stated them. At the moment, a delicate martial balance holds sway—the allied ships are more numerous, the S'uthlamese flotilla more advanced and better armed. This is obviously impermanent, as the S'uthlamese technology enables them to produce war fleets far more swiftly than any of the allies. I would venture to guess that just such an effort is currently underway." Tuf looked at Tolly Mune.

"No," she said.

But Dax was looking at her, too. "Yes," Tuf announced to the envoys. He raised a single finger.

"Therefore, I propose you take advantage of this present rough equality to capitalize on the opportunity I am offering you to solve the problem posed by S'uthlam without resort to nuclear bombardment and similar unpleasanties. Extend this armistice for one standard year, and allow me to seed S'uthlam with manna. At the end of that time, if you feel that S'uthlam still constitutes a threat to your homeworlds, feel free to resume hostilities."

“Neg, trader,” the cyborg from Roggandor said heavily. “You are impossibly naive. Give them a year, you say, and let you do your tricks. How many new fleets will they build in a year?”

“We’ll agree to a moratorium on new arms-building if your worlds will do the same,” Tolly Mune said.

“So you say. I suppose we should trust you?” Ratch Norren sneered. “To hell with that. You Suthies proved how trustworthy you were when you rearmed secretly, in express violation of the treaty. Talk about bad faith!”

“Oh, sure, you’d have preferred it if we were helpless when you came to occupy us. Puling hell, what a damned hypocrite!” Tolly Mune responded in disgust.

“It’s too late for pacts,” declared the Jazbot.

“You said it yourself, Tuf,” the Skrymirian said. “The longer we delay, the worse our situation becomes. Therefore, we have no choice but an immediate all-out strike at S’uthlam itself. The odds will never get any better.”

Dax hissed at him.

Haviland Tuf blinked, and folded his hands neatly on his stomach. “Perhaps you would reconsider if I appealed to your love of peace, your horror of war and destruction, and your common humanity?”

Ratch Norren made a contemptuous noise. One by one, the other members of the delegation looked away, demurring.

“In that case,” said Tuf, “you leave me no choice.” He stood up.

The Vandeeni frowned. “Hey, where are you going?”

Tuf gave a ponderous shrug. “Most immediately to a sanitary facility,” he replied, “and afterwards to my control chamber. Please accept my assurances that no personal animosity of any sort is intended toward any of you. Nonetheless it appears, unfortunately, that I must now go forth and destroy your respective worlds. Perhaps you would like to draw straws, to determine where I might best start.”

The woman from Jazbo choked and sputtered.

Deep inside his haze of blurred holograms, the envoy from the Azure Triune cleared his throat, a sound as small and dry as an insect scuttling across a sheet of paper.

“You would not dare,” boomed the cyborg from Roggandor.

The Skrymirian folded his arms in a chilly silence.

“Ah,” said Ratch Norren. “You. Ah. That is. You won’t. Yes, but surely. Ah.”

Tolly Mune laughed at them all. “Oh, he means it,” she said, though she was no less astonished than the rest of them. “And he can do it, too. Or the *Ark* can, rather. Commander Ober will be sure he gets an armed escort, too.”

“There is no need for haste,” the woman from Henry’s World said in precise, measured tones. “Perhaps we might reconsider.”

“Excellent,” said Haviland Tuf. He sat back down. “We will proceed with all deliberate haste,” he said. “A one year armistice will go into effect, as I have outlined, and I shall seed S’uthlam with manna immediately. “

“Not so fast,” Tolly Mune interjected. She felt giddy and triumphant. Somehow the war had just ended—Tuf had done it, S’uthlam was safe for at least a year. But relief did not make her entirely lightheaded. “All this sounds fine, but we’ll have to run some studies on this manna plant of yours before you start dropping spores all over S’uthlam. Our own biotechs and ecologists will want to examine the damn thing, and the High Council will want to run a few projections. A month ought to do. And of course, Tuf, what I said before still goes—you’re not just dumping your manna on us and leaving. You’ll

stay this time, for the duration of the armistice, and maybe longer, until we have a good idea of how this latest miracle of yours is going to work.”

“Alas,” said Tuf, “I fear I have pressing engagements elsewhere in the galaxy. A sojourn of a standard year or more is inconvenient and unacceptable, as is a delay of a month before commencing my seeding program.”

“Wait just one puling second!” Tolly Mune began. “You can t just—”

“I can indeed,” said Tuf. He looked from her to the envoys, significantly, and then back again. “First Councillor Mune, allow me to point out the obvious. A rough balance of military force now exists between S’uthlam and its adversaries. The *Ark* is a formidable instrument of destruction, capable of wasting worlds. Just as it is possible for me to throw in with your forces and destroy any of the allied planets, so the converse is also within the realm of possibility.”

Tolly Mune suddenly felt as though she’d been assaulted. Her mouth gaped open. “Are you...Tuf, are you threatening us? I don’t believe it. Are you threatening to use the *Ark* against S’uthlam?”

“I am merely bringing certain possibilities to your attention,” said Haviland Tuf, his voice as flat as ever.

Dax must have sensed her rage; he hissed. Tolly Mune stood helplessly, bewildered. Her hands balled into fists.

“I will charge no fee for my labors as mediator and ecological engineer,” Tuf announced. “Yet I will require certain safeguards and concessions from both parties to our agreement. The allied worlds will furnish me with a bodyguard, so to speak—a small fleet of warships, sufficient in number and weaponry to stave off any attacks upon the *Ark* from the Planetary Defense Flotilla of S’uthlam and to escort me safely out of the system when my task here is done. The S’uthlamese, for their part, will agree to allow this allied fleet into their home system in order that my fears may be laid to rest. Should either side initiate hostilities during the period of the armistice, they will do so in full knowledge that this will surely provoke me to a most awful fit of wrath. I am not overly excitable, but when my anger is indeed aroused, I oftentimes frighten even myself. Once a standard year has passed, I shall be long departed and you may feel yourself free to resume your mutual slaughter, if you so choose. Yet it is my hope, and my prediction, that this time the steps I am initiating will prove so efficacious that none of you will feel compelled to resume hostilities.” He stroked Dax’s thick black fur, and the tomcat regarded each of them in turn with his huge golden eyes, seeing, weighing.

Tolly Mune felt cold all over. “You are imposing peace on us,” she said.

“Albeit temporarily,” said Tuf.

“And you are imposing this solution, whether we want it or not,” she said.

Tuf looked at her, but did not reply.

“*Just who the goddamned puling hell do you think you are?*” she screamed at him, unleashing the fury that had been swelling inside her.

“I am Haviland Tuf,” he said evenly, “and I have run out of patience with S’uthlam and the S’uthlamese, madam.”

After the conference was over, Tuf drove the ambassadors back to their diplomatic shuttle, but Tolly Mune refused to go along.

For long hours, she roamed the *Ark* alone, cold, tired, yet relentless. She called out as she went.

“Blackjack!” she shouted, from the top of the moving staircases. “Here, Blacky, here,” she sang as she strode through the corridors. “Jack!” she cried when she heard a noise around a corner, but it was only a door opening or closing, the whirr of some machine repairing itself, or perhaps the scurrying of some

stranger cat, some familiar of Tuf's. "Blaaaaaackjaaaaaaaack!" she shouted at intersections where a dozen corridors crossed, and her voice boomed and rattled off his distant walls and echoed back at her.

But she did not find her cat.

Finally her wanderings took her up several decks, and she emerged in the dimly lit central shaft that cored the vast seedship—towering, echoing immensity thirty kilometers long, its ceiling lost in shadows, its wall lined by cloning vats large and small. She chose a direction at random and walked, and walked, and walked, calling out Blackjack's name.

From somewhere ahead she heard a small, uncertain meow.

"Blackjack?" she called. "Where are you?"

Again she heard it. Up there, ahead. She took two hurried steps forward, and began to run.

Haviland Tuf stepped out from beneath the shadow of a plasteel tank twenty meters high; Blackjack was cradled in his arms, purring.

Tolly Mune stopped dead.

"I have located your cat," said Tuf.

"I can see that," she said coldly.

Tuf handed the huge gray tomcat to her gently, his hands brushing against her arms as he made the transfer. "You will find him none the worse for his wanderings," Tuf declared. "I took the liberty of giving him a full medi-probe, to ascertain that he had suffered no misadventures, and determined that he is in the best of health. Imagine my surprise when I also chanced to discover that all the various bionic augmentations of which you informed me have somehow mysteriously and inexplicably vanished. I am at a loss to explain it."

Tolly Mune hugged the cat to her chest. "So I lied," she said. "He's telepathic, like Dax. Maybe not as powerful. But that's all. I couldn't risk him fighting with Dax. Maybe he'd have won, maybe not. I didn't want him cowed." She grimaced. "So you got him laid instead. Where's he been?"

"Having left the manna chamber by a secondary entrance in pursuit of the object of his affections, he subsequently discovered that the doors were programmed to deny him readmittance. Therefore, he has spent the intervening hours roaming through the *Ark* and making the acquaintance of various other feline members of my ship's company."

"How many cats do you have?" she asked.

"Fewer than you," Tuf said, "yet this is not entirely unanticipated. You are S'uthlamese, after all."

Blackjack was warm and reassuring in her arms, and all at once Tolly Mune was struck by the fact that Dax was no longer in evidence. She had the edge again. She scratched Jack behind an ear; he turned his limpid silver-gray eyes upon Tuf. "You don't fool me," she said.

"I thought it unlikely that I could," Tuf admitted.

"The manna," she said. "It's some kind of a trap, isn't it? You fed us a batch of lies, admit it."

"Everything I have told you of the manna is the truth."

Blackjack uttered a peep. "The truth," said Tolly Mune, "oh, the puling truth. That means there are things you haven't told us about the manna."

"The universe abounds in knowledge. Ultimately, there are more facts to be known than humans to know them, an astonishing realization considering that populous S'uthlam is included in humanity's tally. I could scarcely hope to tell you everything concerning any subject, however limited."

She gave a snort. "What are you going to do to us, Tuf?"

"I am going to resolve your food crisis," he said, his voice as flat and cold as still water, and as full of secret depths.

"Blackjack's purring," she said, "so you're telling the truth. But how, Tuf, *how*?"

"The manna is my instrument."

"Bladder bloat," she said. "I don't give a puling wart how tasty and addictive the manna fruit is, or how fast the damned things grow, no plant is going to solve our population crisis. You've tried all that. We've been around those coordinates with omni-grain and the pods and the wind-riders and the mushroom farms. You're holding something back. Come on, piss it out."

Haviland Tuf regarded her in silence for well over a minute. His eyes locked with hers, and it seemed briefly as though he were looking deep inside her, as if Tuf too were a mind reader.

Perhaps it was something else he read; finally, he answered. "Once the plant has been sown, it will never be entirely eradicated, regardless of how diligently you may attempt to do so. It will spread with inexorable rapidity, within certain parameters of climate. Manna will not thrive everywhere; frost kills it, and cold is inimical to its growth, but it shall indeed spread to cover the tropical and subtropical regions of S'uthlam, and that will be enough."

"Enough for *what*?"

"The manna fruit is extremely nutritious. During the first few years, it will do much to relieve the pressures of your present caloric shortfalls and thereby improve conditions upon S'uthlam. Eventually, having exhausted the soil in its vigorous spread, the plants will expire and decay, and you will of necessity be forced to employ crop rotation for a few years before those particular plots are capable of sustaining manna once again. Yet, meanwhile, the manna shall have completed its real work, First Councillor Mune. The dust that collects upon the underside of each leaf is in actuality a symbiotic microorganism, vital to manna pollination, yet with certain other properties. Borne upon the wind, carried by vermin and human alike, it shall touch every cranny and nook upon the surface of your globe."

"The dust," she said. She had gotten it on her fingertips when she touched the manna plant...

Blackjack's growl was so low she felt it more than heard it..

Haviland Tuf folded his hands. "One might consider manna dust as an organic prophylactic of sorts," he said. "Your biotechs will discover that it interferes powerfully, and permanently, with libido in the human male and fertility in the human female. The mechanisms need not concern you."

Tolly Mune stared at him, opened her mouth, closed it, blinked to hold back tears. Tears of despair, tears of rage? She could not say. Not tears of joy. She would not let them be tears of joy. "Deferred genocide," she said, forcing out the words. Her voice was hoarse and raw.

"Scarcely," Tuf said. "Some of your S'uthlamese will display a natural immunity to the effects of the dust. My projections indicate that somewhere between point oh-seven and point one-one percent of your base population will be unaffected. They will reproduce, of course, and thus the immunity will be passed on and grow more prevalent in successive generations. Yet a population implosion of considerable magnitude will commence upon S'uthlam this year, as the birth curve ceases its upward thrust and starts a precipitous descent."

"You have no right," said Tolly Mune slowly.

"The nature of the S'uthlamese problem is such so as to admit but one lasting and effectual solution," Tuf said, "as I have told you from the very beginning."

"Maybe," she said. "But so what? What about freedom, Tuf? What about individual choice? My people may be selfish and short-sighted fools, but they're still *people*, just like you. They have the right to decide if they're going to have children, and how many children. Who the hell gave you the authority to make that decision for them? Who the hell told you to go ahead and sterilize our world?" She was growing

angrier with every word. “You’re no better than we are. You’re only human, Tuf. A puling peculiar human, I’ll give you that, but only human—no more and no less. What gives you the goddamned *right* to play god with our world and our lives?”

“The *Ark*,” Haviland Tuf said, simply.

Blackjack squirmed in her arms, suddenly restless, uneasy. Tolly Mune let him jump to the ground, never taking her eyes off Tuf’s blank white face. Suddenly she wanted to strike him, hurt him, wound that mask of indifference and complacency, mark him. “I warned you, Tuf,” she said. “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, remember?”

“My memory is unimpaired.”

“Too bad I can’t say the same thing about your goddamned morality,” said Tolly Mune. Her tone was acid. Blackjack growled counterpoint at her feet. “Why the hell did I ever help you keep this goddamned ship? What a damned *fool* I was! You’ve been alone in a power fantasy too damn long, Tuf. Do you think somebody just appointed you god, is that it?”

“Bureaucrats are appointed,” said Tuf. “Gods, insofar as they exist at all, are chosen by other procedures. I make no claims to godhood in the mythological sense. Yet I submit that I do indeed wield the power of a god, a truth that I believe you recognized long ago, when you first turned to me for loaves and fishes.” When she began to reply, he raised a hand, palm outward. “No, kindly do not interrupt. I will endeavor to be brief. You and I are not so different, Tolly Mune—”

“We’re *nothing* alike, damn you!” she shrieked at him.

“We are not so different,” Tuf repeated calmly, firmly. “You once confessed that you were not a religious woman; nor am I one to worship myths. I began as a trader, yet having come upon this ship called *Ark*, I began to find myself dogged at every step by gods, prophets, and demons. Noah and the flood, Moses and his plagues, loaves and fishes, manna, pillars of fire, wives of salt—I must needs have become acquainted with all. You challenge me to declare myself a god. I make no such claim. And yet, it must be said, my first act upon this ship, so many years ago, was to raise the dead.” He pointed ponderously at a work station a few meters away. “There is the very spot at which I performed that first miracle, Tolly Mune. Moreover, I do indeed wield godlike powers and traffic in the life and death of worlds. Enjoying as I do these godlike abilities, can I rightfully decline the accompanying responsibility, the equally awesome burden of moral authority? I think not.”

She wanted to reply, but the words would not come. *He’s insane*, Tolly Mune thought to herself.

“Furthermore,” Tuf said, “the nature of the crisis on S’uthlam was such that it admitted to a solution only by godlike intervention. Let us suppose briefly that I consented to sell you the *Ark*, as you desired. Do you truly suppose that any staff of ecologists and biotechs, however expert and dedicated, could have devised a lasting answer? It is my belief that you are too intelligent to entertain such a fallacy. I have no doubt that, with all the resources of this seedship at their beck and call, these men and women—geniuses with intellects and training far superior to my own—could and would undoubtedly have devised numerous ingenious stopgaps to allow the S’uthlamese to continue breeding for another century, perhaps two, perhaps even three or four. Yet ultimately, their answers too would have proven insufficient, as did my own small attempts five years ago, and five years before that, and all the breakthroughs your technocrats engineered in centuries past. Tolly Mune, there is no rational, equitable, scientific, technological, or human answer to the dilemma of a population increasing in an insane geometric progression. It admits to answering only with miracles—loaves and fishes, manna from heaven, and the like. Twice I failed as ecological engineer. Now I propose to succeed as the god that S’uthlam requires. Should I approach the problem as human a third time, I would assuredly fail a third time, and then your difficulties would be resolved by gods crueler than myself, by the four mammal-riders of ancient legend who are known as pestilence, famine, war, and death. Therefore, I must set aside my humanity, and act as god.” He paused, looking at her, blinking.

“You set aside your damned humanity a hell of a long time ago,” she raged at him. “But you’re no god, Tuf. A demon, maybe. A puling megalomaniac, certainly. Maybe a monster—yes, a puling abortion. A *monster*, but no god.”

“A monster,” said Tuf. “Indeed.” He blinked. “I had hoped that one of your undoubted intellectual prowess and competence might display better understanding.” He blinked again. Twice, three times. His long white face was as still as ever, but there was something strange in Tuf’s voice that she had never heard before, something that frightened her, that bewildered her and disturbed her, something that sounded almost like emotion. “You slander me grievously, Tolly,” he protested.

Blackjack made a thin, plaintive meow.

“Your cat displays a keener grasp of the cold equations of the reality confronting us,” Tuf said. “Perhaps I ought to explain again from the beginning.”

“Monster,” she said.

Tuf blinked. “My efforts are eternally unappreciated and met only with undeserved calumny.”

“Monster,” she repeated.

His right hand briefly curled into a fist, uncurled slowly and deliberately. “It appears some cerebral tic has dramatically reduced your vocabulary, First Councillor.”

“No,” she said, “but that’s the only word that applies to you, damn it.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “In that case, being a monster, it behooves me to act monstrously. Consider that, if you will, as you grapple with your decision, First Councillor.”

Blackjack jerked his head up suddenly and stared at Tuf as if something unseen were flitting about that long white face. He began to hiss; his thick silver-gray fur rose up slowly as he backed off. Tolly Mune bent and picked him up. The cat trembled in her arms, and hissed again. “What?” she said in a distracted voice. “What decision? You’ve made all the damned decisions. What the hell are you talking about?”

“Permit me to point out that, as of this moment, not a single manna spore has been released into the atmosphere of S’uthlam,” Haviland Tuf said.

She snorted. “So? You’ve made your damned deal. I have no way of stopping you.”

“Indeed. Regrettable. Perhaps one will occur to you, however. Meanwhile, I suggest that we repair to my quarters. Dax is waiting for his evening meal. I have prepared an excellent cream-of-mushroom bisque for our own repast, and there is chilled great-beer from Moghoun, a beverage sufficiently heady to please either gods or monsters. And, of course, my communications equipment is at your disposal, should you find you have something to say to your government.”

Tolly Mune opened her mouth for a cutting reply, then closed it again in astonishment. “Do you mean what I think you mean?” she said.

“This is difficult to say,” Tuf replied. “You are the one holding a psionic cat, madam.”

It was an endless silent walk and an eternal awkward meal.

They took their dinner in a corner of the long, narrow communications room, surrounded by consoles, telescreens, and cats. Tuf sat with Dax across his lap, and spooned up his dinner with methodical care. On the other side of the table, Tolly Mune ate without tasting the food. She had no appetite. She felt old and dizzy. And afraid.

Blackjack reflected her confusion; his serenity gone, he huddled in her lap, infrequently lifting his head above the table to growl a warning at Dax.

And finally the moment arrived, as she had known it would: a buzz and a flashing blue light signaled an incoming communication. Tolly Mune started at the sound, scraping her chair backwards against the

deck and swinging around sharply in her seat. Blackjack leapt off in alarm. She started to rise, and froze in indecision.

“I have programmed in strict instructions that I am on no account to be disturbed while dining,” Tuf announced. “Ergo, that call is for you, by the process of elimination.”

The blue pinpoint flashed off, and on, and off, and on.

“You’re no puling god,” Tolly Mune said. “Neither am I, damn it. I don’t want this goddamned burden, Tuf.”

The light was flashing.

“Perhaps it is Commander Wald Ober,” Tuf suggested. “I suggest you take his call before he begins counting backwards.”

“No one has the right, Tuf,” she said. “Not you, not me.”

He gave a ponderous shrug.

The light flashed.

Blackjack yowled.

Tolly Mune took two steps toward the console, stopped, turned back toward Tuf. “Creation is part of godhood,” she said with suddenly certainty. “You can destroy, Tuf, but you cannot create. That’s what makes you a monster instead of a god.”

“The creation of life in the cloning tanks is an everyday and commonplace element of my profession,” Tuf said.

The light flashed on, went out, flashed on again.

“No,” she said, “you replicate life there, but you don’t *create* it. It has to have existed already, somewhere in time and space, and you have to have a cell sample, a fossil record—something—or you’re helpless. Puling hell, yes! Oh, you have the power of creation all right. The same goddamned power that I have, and that every man and woman down in the undercity has. Procreation, Tuf. There’s your awesome power, there’s the only miracle there is—the one thing humans have that makes us like gods, and the very thing *you* propose to take away from ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the people on S’uthlam. The hell! You’re no creator, you’re no god.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf, expressionlessly.

“So you don’t have the right to make godlike decisions,” she said. “And neither do I, damn it.” She moved to the console in three long, confident strides, touched a control. A telescreen ran with colors, resolving into a mirror-finish battle helmet emblazoned with a stylized globe insignia. Twin sensors burned crimson behind a dark plasteel faceplate. “Commander Ober,” she said.

“First Councillor Mune,” Wald Ober said. “I was concerned. The allied ambassadors are saying all kinds of wild things to the newsfeeds. A peace treaty, a new flowering. Can you confirm? What’s going on? Is there trouble there?”

“Yes,” she said. “Listen to me, Ober, and—”

“Tolly Mune,” Tuf said.

She whirled on him. “*What?*”

“If procreation is the mark of godhood,” Tuf said, “then cats are gods, too, it would seem to follow. They, too, reproduce themselves. Permit me to point out that, in a very short time, we have arrived at a situation whereby you have more cats than I do, though you started with but a single pair.”

She scowled. “What are you saying?” She punched off the sound, so Tuf’s words would not transmit.

Wald Ober gestured in sudden silence.

Haviland Tuf pressed the tips of his fingers together. "I am merely pointing out that, as much as I relish the properties of the feline, I nonetheless take steps to control their breeding. I reached this decision after careful consideration, and the weighing of all the alternatives. Ultimately, as you yourself will discover, there are but two fundamental options. You must either reconcile yourself to inhibiting the fertility of your cats, entirely without their consent, I might add, or, failing that, some day most assuredly you will find yourself about to cycle a bag full of newborn kittens out your airlock into the cold vacuum of space. Make no choice, and you have chosen. Failure to decide, because you lack the right, is itself a decision, First Councillor. In abstaining, you vote."

"Tuf," she said, her voice agonized, "*don't!* I don't *want* this damned power."

Dax jumped up on the table, and turned his golden eyes upon her. "Godhood is a profession even more demanding than ecology," Tuf said, "though it might be said that I knew the job to be hazardous when I accepted its burdens."

"It's not," she started. "You can't say," she fumbled. "Kittens and babies aren't," she tried. "They're people, they, they have the power of, that is, minds, minds and hearts as well as gonads. They're rational, it's their choice—theirs, not mine. I can't possibly make it for them—the millions, the billions."

"Indeed," said Tuf. "I had forgotten about the good people of S'uthlam and their long history of rational choice. Undoubtedly they will look in the face of war, of famine, and of plague, and then in billions they will change their ways and deftly avert the shadow that threatens to engulf S'uthlam and its proud towers. How strange that I failed to see this."

They stared at each other.

Dax began to purr. Then he looked away, and began to lap up cream-of-mushroom bisque from Tuf's bowl. Blackjack rubbed up against her leg, keeping a wary eye on Dax as he stalked across the room.

Tolly Mune turned back to the console very slowly; it took her a day to make that turn—a week, a year, a lifetime. It took her forty billion lifetimes, but when she had completed that turn, it had only taken an instant, and those lives were gone as if they had never been.

She looked at the cold silent mask confronting her over the comm link, and in that dark shiny plastic she saw reflected all the faceless horror of war, and behind it burned the grim, fevered eyes of starvation and disease. She turned the sound transmission back up.

"What's going on there?" Wald Ober was demanding, over and over. "First Councillor, I can't hear you. What are your orders, do you hear me? What's going on there?"

"Commander Ober," Tolly Mune said. She forced a broad smile.

"What's wrong?"

She swallowed. "Wrong? Nothing. Nothing at all. Puling hell, everything is incredibly right. The war's over and so's the crisis, Commander."

"Are you under coercion?" Wald Ober barked.

"No," she said quickly. "Why do you say that?"

"Tears," he replied. "I see tears, First Councillor."

"Of joy, Commander. Tears of joy. Manna, Ober, that's what he calls it. Manna from heaven." She laughed lightly. "Food from the stars. Tuf's a genius. Sometimes..." She bit her lip, hard. "Sometimes I even think he might be..."

"What?"

"...a god," she said. She touched a button: the screen went dark.

Her name was Tolly Mune, but in the histories they call her all sorts of things.