

PROLOGUE

Secession, Ecologic (3647-48)

The war leading to the independence of the Coordinate of Accord [See also Ecologic Rebellion, Accord, Ecolitian Institute] .

During the years 3645-46, Imperial relations with the Fuardian Conglomerate became increasingly strained, and a number of colony systems protested the ad valorem and ad personam taxes levied by the Empire to support the infrastructure necessary to restrain the Conglomerate. Among the discontented colony systems were those of Accord (Imperial Sector Five) and Sligo (Imperial Sector Seven).

Accord used high-technology sabotage and commando tactics to destroy key military fueling and staging bases (Haversol, Cubera, Fonderol) at a time when the majority of Imperial forces were deployed in Sector Two to counter the perceived Fuardian threat. The Accord sabotage limited to an even greater extent the ability of Imperial warcraft to reach Accord's isolated location on the Parthanian Rift.

Unable to deal with potentially extended conflicts on three fronts, the Empire reduced Sligo, where casualties exceeded fifteen million, despite an initially published estimate of only three million [See Lies for the Popular Good]. Following the Empire's destruction of Sligo and all installations in its system, the provisional government of Accord launched a successful ecologic attack on Old Earth in 3647, primarily using the resources of the Ecolitan Institute [See The Black Institute]. The resulting Ecollapse eventually fragmented the terran ecology. The Empire retaliated by sending a full fleet to the Accord system. Innovative and suicidal tactics developed and spearheaded by Ecolitan [later Prime] James Joyson Whaler [See WrightWhaler Controversy] resulted in the total destruction of that Imperial fleet in late 3647.

The Fuardian Conglomerate then unveiled a new series of warships of performance and armament vastly superior to existing Imperial craft [See CX Affair] and seized former Imperial systems in Sector Two (the Three System Bulge).

With the Empire weakened by the increasingly unstable political climate and mounting death toll from the Ecollapse on Old Earth, the potential of further ecological devastation from the Ecolitan Institute, and the clear technological superiority of the Conglomerate, Emperor Jynstin II recognized the independence of Accord and shifted all Imperial forces and battle groups to Sector Two, leading to the Truce of Tierna. Under the Truce, the Conglomerate retained the Three System Bulge, except that the then-undeveloped system of Artos was ceded to New Avalon, and the Empire ceded the undeveloped system of D'Sanya to Chezchos, later the Federated Hegemony.

The perceived failure of the monarchy led to the Senatorial Reformation [See N'Trosia Catalyst] and the political restructuring of the Empire . . .

Dictionary of Imperial History K. J, Peynon
New Augusta 4102

Filled with the faint odors of oil, hot metal, and recycled air, the down-shuttle from Accord orbit control to Harmony was less than half full. In the

left front couch sat a tall sandyhaired man wearing the formal greens of an Ecolitan. On his left uniform collar was a black-and-green lustral pin—a gift from the Emperor of the Hegemony of Light, more commonly known as the Terran Empire. The pin was a contradiction in terms because the substance of the lustral represented a small fortune and the form was a miniature of the crest of the Ecolitan Institute. Beside the Ecolitan sat a dark-haired woman in a blue jumpsuit.

Sylvia glanced sideways at Nathaniel as the Ecolitan fidgeted in the hard passenger seat of the Coordinate shuttle. "Ify approach," he said.

"And yours haven't been?" The slender and dark-haired woman offered a smile. "Mine?"

"Yours." The smile broadened.

"Which kind are you referring to?" he countered, trying not to grin in return. "Any kind, most honorable envoy."

"I'd hope mine, especially in shuttles and needle-boats, were less rocky," he finally said, squelching a frown as the buffering shuttle tossed him against his harness. "Do all pilots find other pilots' approaches questionable?"

"Probably. We hate being passengers."

"It sounds like you're all control addicts." She offered a softer smile.

"That's probably true, too."

"I still wonder." She shook her head. "This is so sudden. I hadn't planned to emigrate so soon. And certainly not to Accord. Your clearance officers on the orbit control station—they barely looked at me. Do all Ecolitans have that kind of power?"

"Hardly." Nathaniel laughed. "It wasn't me, but the Prime Ecolitans access codes."

"Just codes? Could any Ecolitan do that?"

"Not unless the Prime gave him the codes." The sandy-haired man swayed in the seat as the shuttle banked onto what Nathaniel hoped was the final approach.

"They're held tightly."

"Does that happen often?"

Nathaniel shrugged. "Every few years, maybe. This was important to us." Still, he had trouble believing his mission as an agent/official envoy was over, and that he had actually managed to avert what could have been an interstellar war between the Coordinate of Accord and the Empire. Although he'd sweated and worried, especially when it had looked as though the Imperial fleet had been ready to deploy, now it seemed almost too easy. . . and as if he'd missed something. He refrained from shaking his head. At least he'd gotten Sylvia off Old Earth. But did she want off?

"You'd already gotten the trade agreement before you left Old Earth," Sylvia continued. "You didn't need me. Why was I important to your mission? Or afterwards?"

"Because I think so." He grinned. "Because you made it all possible, and because—"

"Please remain in your seats. Shuttle Beta is on final approach to Harmony. Please remain in your seats."

"-you'd be an asset to the Institute."

"They'd take me on your recommendation?"

"Not automatically, but I can't recall when the recommendation of a senior professor was last rejected." He cleared his throat and raised his voice above the roar of the landing engines. "That's because we don't make many, and we're held responsible."

"How many have you made?" Sylvia asked with a smile. "You're the first. I don't know of any professor, or even the Prime, who's made more than three. Some never have."

Her eyes dropped to the green of the bulkhead before them. "You make me sound extraordinarily special, and I'm not."

"You're not? How many people would have had the background, the understanding, and the willingness to help me-and to prevent the deaths of billions of human beings?" And that was just where an interstellar war could have led. "I'm not that special."

"We'll talk about that later, Ms. Ferro-Maine," Nathaniel said as the shuttles tires screeched on the permacrete of Accord and he lurched against the harness. "Way too rough . . ." he murmured more to himself than Sylvia.

Even before the shuttle lurched to a halt, prompting another sour look by Nathaniel, the announcement hissed through the passenger compartment.

"Please pick up your bags or any luggage on the way out of the shuttle. You are responsible for carrying your own luggage unless you have made prior arrangements. Please pick up your luggage on the way out."

"Self-sufficiency begins from the moment you set foot on the planet, I see." After the final lurch, Sylvia eased out other harness and stood, stretching.

Nathaniel watched for a moment, enjoying her grace, still half-amazed that she had not been good enough for a professional dancing career on Old Earth.

"Dancing takes more than grace."

"How did you-"

"You've said it enough, especially every time I stretch." Another warm smile crossed her lips. "Time to become pack animals."

"With what little you brought?"

"I had very little time to choose, as you may recall?"

"Sorry. I'll see that you get a stipend for that." And he would, even if it came out of his pay. "You aren't responsible for everything, dear envoy." No, he thought, we Ecolitans only think we are. One of the uniformed crew members-a woman in olive greens standing behind the baggage racks-looked sharply at the two for a moment as they retrieved their bags, two field packs for Nathaniel and two oblong black synfab cases for Sylvia.

Once they stepped out of the shuttle and into the shuttleway to the port terminal, Nathaniel took a deep breath. "Smells better than ship air."

"It smells like burned hydrocarbons to me," confessed Sylvia. "Professor Whaler?" asked the redheaded young woman in plain greens, waiting by the end of the shuttleway.

"I'm Whaler," Nathaniel acknowledged. "And this is Ms. Ferro-Maine. She's

accompanying me to the Institute."

"Trainee Luren, sirs," offered the youngster, probably a fourth-year trainee, Nathaniel suspected. "The Prime sent a flitter when he got your message." Her rust-colored eyebrows lifted just slightly. "If you would follow me?"

"Thank you. " The Ecolitan did not answer the unasked question. Few Ecolitans got private flitters on returning to Accord. Most carried their own luggage and took the monorail.

As they trailed Luren, Sylvia murmured, "I thought you said we'd have to take the monorail."

"I couldn't count on a flitter . . . didn't want to disappoint you."

"You won't be disappointed that you aren't flying it?" She raised her eyebrows.

"A little, but into each life some rain falls."
"Please..."

Luren paused by a narrow doorway. "We're down the steps and across the permacrete."

Nathaniel squinted as they stepped out into the bright sunlight of Harmony, if a shuttle port nearly twenty kilos south of Harmony could be considered part of the Coordinate capital. "There it is, sirs," said Luren.

Nathaniel glanced toward the green flitter as he eased the field packs through the doorway, then looked back toward Sylvia, whose mouth opened. Scritt! Scritt!

Nathaniel scarcely felt the needles that slammed him around, not after Sylvia threw him behind the slight cover afforded by their bags. For a moment, he just lay there. On Accord? With an Institute flitter less than a hundred meters away? How could an assassination attempt take place? And why? He'd already done his job, and nothing would stop implementation of the trade agreement.

Nathaniel squinted through his sudden dizziness at the sprawled form of the trainee and then toward the flitter.

Thrummmmm. . . thrummm. . . Almost as quickly as the stunner bolts flew from the Institute craft, two figures in greens sprinted from the flitter toward the three sprawled on the permacrete.

Eeeeeee . . . The sirens seemed to waver in and around Nathaniel from a distance as he slowly eased himself into a sitting position.

His entire side was a mass of fire. "Are you all right?" Sylvia asked. "Will be . . . need to get to the Institute." He struggled to stand, then found himself being helped by both Sylvia and a young Ecolitan.

"Whoever it was is gone, professor. We've alerted the Prime, but we're to get you home double speed." The young crewman turned to Sylvia. "You, too, Ms. Ferro-Maine."

Nathaniel forced his legs to carry him toward the still waiting flitter, although it was more of a stagger than a walk. Still, he knew every pace was worth more than antique gold, especially if the needles had carried nerve collapse toxins. He blocked the pain and kept walking, but the permacrete and the flitter began to swirl around him. "Catch him."

The Fuardian officer wearing crimson-trimmed formal grays and a silver hawk on his shoulder tabs stepped inside the spacious office. "Ser?"

"I don't have time to read forty-page reports, colonel. Answer me simply. Are your operations going as planned?" asked the gray-clad officer behind the desk.

"Ah, sub-marshal . . . yes. We had not foreseen the Accord trade negotiations, but the Coordinate's conduct there has sharpened the Grand Admirals concerns. The use of an Ecolitan as a trade negotiator has definitely put the laser on the Rift. The devastation of the synde bean plague on Heraculon has reinforced those Imperial concerns . . ."

"How strongly?"

"The death toll is over four million so far. The Empire has had to divert most of its spare cargo capacity for food concentrates. They've even sent in military power systems from reserve units."

"Good. And?"

"There are still murmurs about Accord. We don't have the analysis yet, but those could be pushed by the trideo initiative. Either way, the laser points directly at Harmony. We've taken some additional steps there as well to point back at the Admiral . . . or others. We had to divert a fast courier, but . . ."

"That's secondary, though, for now. Do we have enough .seed stock for the next phase?"

"Yes, ser, and the next phase will target both the anchovies and the algae. Anarra, the Matriarchy, then Imperial Sector Four. We've established the probable secondary vectors if it were a natural plague, and those will be planted over the next few weeks, using the commercial trade system." The sub-marshal nodded curtly.

"What about the transfer arrangements?" asked the colonel. "Our contacts have asked about that,"

"We do not have to deliver anything-especially warcraft until the Ninth and Eleventh fleets are transferred to the Rift, or two other fleets in the sectors bordering the Three System Bulge are shifted along the Limber line." The senior officer smiled. "When that occurs, the general staff will be more than happy to approve the transfer. More than happy. After we occupy the systems, particularly . . . shall we say . . . those of the priggish Avalonians."

Yes, ser.

"And colonel?"

"Ser?"

"Next time, send a summary with the report. It will save us both time."

Nathaniel looked from his bed at the dark-haired dancer, her left arm in a sling and covered with a nerve regeneration sheathe. "I didn't expect . . . , such a welcome here in Harmony."

"Neither did I." Sylvia offered a wry smile. "It was even more dramatic than your welcome to New Augusta."

"No one seems to want me to go anywhere, even home." He swallowed. "Are you all right?" As close as Sylvia sat on the straight-backed wooden chair, he couldn't miss the dark circles under her eyes. Behind her, through the wide window, he could see the low hills to the west of the Institute, their treed lower slopes a deep green. "You're asking how I am?"

"I know how I'm doing. I'll live, and nothing permanent's damaged."
"On Old Earth, you'd be dead, I think." She frowned. "I

knew the Institute had good medical techniques, but knowing. . . and experiencing"

"This is Accord." He forced a soft laugh, ignoring the wave of pain that the sound sent down his side. "But I wish you hadn't gotten the experience firsthand."

"You are impossible."

"How are-" he asked. "I'm fine. The arm hurts, and the nerves burn all the way to my neck sometimes, but the medtechs say that's normal and there's no lasting damage."

"Good." Nathaniel offered a smile. The last thing he wanted was for her to arrive on Accord and be crippled . . . or worse. But why had someone been after them?

"Has anyone-" He had trouble concentrating, his thoughts skittering from one image to another, reinforced by the tightness in his stomach that kept insisting that something was very wrong.

"Your Prime Ecolitan talked to me, while they were still working on you." Sylvia smiled. "He was more forthright than anyone from the Empire would have been."

"And?" Nathaniel tried to bring up the relaxation techniques to reduce muscular tension and pain, and eased himself back against the pale green sheets-sheets, soft as they were, that felt like hundreds of pins where his bare skin brushed them.

"The needles were Imperial military issue-the ones they use for Special Ops. They're transparent to everything. They found a dead Coordinate trooper, minus his uniform and equipment, just off the Debar base-"

"DeHihns," corrected Nathaniel. "Named after the first planetary chairman."

"They think he'd only been killed a few hours before."

"It couldn't have been an Imperial Special Op." Nathaniel shook his head momentarily, then stopped as a line of fire slashed up his left side. He closed his eyes against the light from the window. Even that seemed to glare.

"I'd agree." Sylvia smiled ironically. "I'd like to know why you think that,

though."

"First," he said slowly, "it's unlikely one could pass the screens, but if he or she did, they'd be good enough that one or both of us would be dead. Second, they'd have had a better opportunity on Old Earth. There, the timing would have been far better . . . easier. . ." He took a slow deep breath, letting the relaxation techniques blunt the pain. Sylvia nodded.

After all, Nathaniel reflected silently, for an Imperial Special Operative to get to Accord before they had in time to set up an assassination attempt meant that it had to have been planned almost before Nathaniel had completed his trade negotiations. "Third . . . its too obvious."

"It was meant to be obvious." But why? That was the question. His vision blurred. Sylvia stood quickly and stepped up beside the bed, touching his forehead with her good hand, with fingers that were cool and soothing. "Just relax . . . you need to rest." He tried to smile, but found blackness looming over him.

IV

As he had the last time he had visited the Institute, Delegate Minister of Interstellar Commerce Restinal paused outside the open door.

"Come on in, Werlin," called the Prime Ecolitans cheerful voice. "Remember, we don't stand on ceremony. We don't even sit on it."

Restinal forced a genial smile and carried his datacase into the lorkin-paneled office, bowing to the silver-haired man who stood by the wide table that served as his desk.

"Take a seat." Without waiting for Restinal to follow the suggestion, Gairloch Pittsway, Prime of the Ecolitan Institute, sat down in the hand-carved armchair behind the table.

Restinal eased into the chair closest to the door, his datacase on his lap. "I wished to convey personally my thanks to you and to the Institute for its willingness to relinquish Ecolitan Whaler to the Ministry. His efforts as Trade Legate to New Augusta were most effective." Restinal smiled again. "Most effective."

"I'm glad you recognize that." "I was sorry to hear that the Empire rather belatedly also recognized his expertise and effectiveness."

"Professor Whaler will be incapacitated for a short while, no longer, and I am sure he will appreciate your concern, Werlin. Even if I did have to force him on you." The Primes smile was faint.

"I bowed to your wisdom then, and I still do."

"Werlin, you only bow to superior force of one type or another, and we both know it." There was a slight pause. "You didn't come all the way out here just to offer congratulations and condolences. What did you have in mind?"

Restinal shifted his weight on the chair, already hard. "I understand that Professor Whaler is a highly regarded expert on development economics, and especially economic infrastructures."

"That is his specialty," acknowledged Pittsway. "We understand that New Avalon may be requesting our assistance with such a matter on Artos." Restinal kept

his voice even. "We are to prepare a report on the economic development structure and possibilities of Artos . . ."

"We? The Coordinate government doesn't have either the expertise or the impartiality. Why did you agree to this before talking with the Institute?" asked Pittsway, his voice equally level.

"We are well aware of the Institutes capabilities, as are the Avalonians."

"Minister Restinal . . . for whom did you agree to do this report, and why?"

"Officially, the report will be prepared for submission to the Commerce Ministries of both New Avalon and the Coordinate."

"I see. And what . . . emphasis . . . do you expect this report to highlight, Werlin?"

"I would like to see the report as factual and impartial as possible," Restinal answered earnestly. "You're aiming this toward Whaler like a point-tailed retriever. Why? The poor bastard deserves a rest. We do have other experts in the Institute."

"The Ministry has gained a great appreciation of Professor Whalers skills, even in dealing with our own bureaucratic structures, and, alas, even we have those . . ."

"Oh?"

"You may not have heard, but he was successful in . . . encouraging a young . . . professional, from the External Affairs Committee staff of the Imperial Senate to return to Accord with him. In some fashion, he obtained clearance from both governments, or documents which represent such a clearance. Especially those endorsed, even indirectly, by the Prime Ecolitan." Restinal shrugged. "It's not exactly politic to question successful Legates, especially those who have outmaneuvered the Empire, on such a relatively minor matter."

"I'm well aware of Ms. Ferro-Maine, and you knew that before you headed out here. You wouldn't be bringing it up, Werlin, if you weren't angling for something. What mess have you got stewing with New Avalon? Is this some involuted scheme Torine designed?"

"You misunderstand me. Prime. It's just that I would scarcely want to have the Institute embarrassed by the arrival of an Imperial citizen who might be linked to the I.I.S."

"Restinal, you are behaving more and more like Torine every day. Or Quaestor and Verlingetti. I understand that Elder Torine has only a thin working majority, and that you Normists wish to retain power. That's politics. The Institute doesn't care for most of your games, but every society and government ends up with political intrigue. What we resent is your attempting to conceal that intrigue when you're asking the Institute for something. So, if you don't start thinking and leveling with the Institute, I'll be forced to suggest that you take your portfolio and place it somewhere very private and very dark." Restinal felt himself flushing. He rose. "Sit down. We, or Ecolitan Whaler, saved your precious posterior. For Torine to send you out here to insist on a dubious study with a clear second purpose and then to threaten either one of us shows little gratitude and less sense. That's particularly true given what Whaler's been through. Further, if I made public

what you just implied, you and Torine would suffer more than the Institute, and you don't have that many seats on your side of the aisle to spare. You'll have even less if Elder Quaestor or Verlingetti or one of the Orthodoxist radicals hear this. Now, what do you really want and why?"

Restinal tried not to clamp his lips together too hard as he reseated himself.

The Prime waited, a half smile upon his lightly tanned and lined face.

"All I can say is that Artos is mentioned in some materials we are not supposed to have. There is also a strong possibility for some agricultural-technology transfer trade."

"Werlin..."

"Honestly, respected Prime. That is all I can say because its all we know."

"There has to be some context," pointed out Pittsway. "Artos appeared in some standard business communiqués from a New Avalon factor with a less than savory reputation. We think the copies were sent to our woman in New Avalon by a Hand of the Mother. The context was merely a listing of cargos and agricultural techpaks destined there."

"Since these are of themselves no value, I presume you brought copies," said the Prime. Restinal nodded slowly.

"Bur you don't feel comfortable turning them over to me unless I agree to send Whaler on this fools errand?" The Prime Ecolitan glanced at the datacase in Restinal's lap. "You know better than that. After we see the communiques, and after Professor Whaler is recovered enough to review the materials . . . if he's interested, he can make that choice. He deserves that after saving your posterior. Agri-tech trade indeed. Do you think Artos is just a pretext? Have you any idea of where this insignificant system is?" Restinal sat silently. "Werlin?"

"It's a fringe system of New Avalon."

"And?"

"Its the closest system to the Three System Bulge."

"My . . ." Pittsway drew out the word. "What a coincidence. The Fuards hold the Three System Bulge, which they took from the Empire during our war of secession, and they're flanked by Artos, held by New Avalon, by the Federated Hegemony, and by the Frankan Union, and by, of course, the Empire. And you blithely suggest that there's nothing beyond some cargo manifests and an economic study?"

Restinal looked at the smoothly finished wood floor. "Didn't you learn anything from the last mess, Werlin? First, if you have those communiques, so does every intelligence service in the Galaxy. Second, whoever it was that leaked them to you knows you'll have to go to the Institute, and they'll be watching. That means someone wants us to do something they cant do, wont do, or want to blame us for. We still have to do this . . . study-and I presume its something you have worked out as a tacit cover that the entire Galaxy will know is a cover. And we'll have to do it well, even while doing your dirty work. Our problem here at the Institute is that we live in the same system as you idiots do, that we have a fondness for Accord, and that, unlike some, we attempt to live up to all our codes-and that means we don't play politics. Not your way." Pittsway smiled. "So . . . do you trust us, or are you going to

take your papers home and fold gliders out of them-which is about what they'll be worth if you leave without giving them to us?"

Restinal held in a sigh. Why was Elder Torine always putting him in such impossible positions?

"Torine puts you in those positions, Werlin, because you're basically honest, and no one else in the Delegate Ministries is both honest and intelligent. You're also expendable because you got the portfolio through expertise and not political capital." Restinal did sigh as he opened the datacase. "You're handing us a mess, Werlin, but its not nearly that bad for you."

Restinal was sure it was worse, far worse, and that his troubles were just beginning. He handed the flimsies across the desk.

V

Nathaniel Firstborne Whaler bowed as he stepped inside the door, ignoring the twinges that intermittently traveled the nerves of his left side. "Prime?"

"Come on in, Nathaniel." The silver-haired Prime Ecolitan stood by the wide table with the single drawer that served as his desk. As usual, the office was free of clutter. Two hard-copy files lay on the corner of the immaculate blond Ecolog-style desktable. The louvered shutters were open, and a cool breeze wafted through the office.

Nathaniel paused between the two carved and high-backed wooden chairs.

"Sit down." Gairloch Pittsways green eyes twinkled. "After your ordeal, I wouldn't keep you standing-not yet, anyway."

Nathaniel took the chair on the left side of the table and waited, his eyes on the older man. "Solid work you did on Old Earth." The Prime took the other carved chair in front of the desk. "Your return proved that."

"Thank you." When the Prime began with a compliment, trouble lay on the course ahead. Nathaniel also didn't like the idea that an attempt on his own life proved his value. That was almost like saying he wouldn't be appreciated until he was dead. That kind of appreciation he could do without.

"Your unvarnished description of Imperial politics was refreshing, if not unexpected. In view of your earlier efforts, you might be interested to know we took steps with regard to the elections on Hernando. The Popular Front had some setbacks in the balloting, and the Conservative Democrats have consolidated their government. They no longer need the Socialist Republicans." The Prime Ecolitan leaned back in his chair. "Would that our own citizens were as perceptive. Or our own honorable representatives."

"What did the House of Delegates do?" Two compliments, reflected Nathaniel, meant real trouble.

"At our prompting, indirectly, of course, they sent a communique to the Imperial Senate strongly suggesting it was in everyone's best interests if Hernando remained independent. The Imperial Secretary of External Affairs sent a reassuring response, and the Elders are patting themselves on the back, conveniently forgetting that the Institute carried everyone's oil. It works better that way." Pittsway grinned. "You did manage to terrify a few of the

Imperials. That was obvious." The Prime glanced toward the green hills framed in the window. "I am not referring to the needle-gun attack."
"I hadn't thought so."

"We'll get to that in a moment. Even on Old Earth, you were obviously overtly formidable."

"The synde bean plague on Heraculon helped." Nathaniel raised his eyebrows and waited. "Probably a great deal."

"Nasty business, there. I've started a team on that." The Prime frowned momentarily. "I suppose you couldn't afford to disclaim it."

"I didn't claim or disclaim it. I didn't think so, but I didn't know."

"Matters would have to degrade considerably for us even to think about a return to ecological weapons with that broad an impact. You know how the Institute feels about ecologic warfare except as a last resort. One of the lesser benefits of the Secession. Besides, we'd have the entire galaxy up in arms if we did. Its perfectly all right to wage wars, manipulate trade and agriculture, and starve or kill millions, but ecological warfare . . . horror of horrors. That's another reason why the Charter and the Iron Rules were codified by the first Whaler. You're some sort of relation, aren't you?"

"You know the answer to that," said Nathaniel with a smile. "About as distant as one can get."

"You ought to read his papers, if you haven't. They're sealed, but the access is in your debrief file. I'd appreciate it if you would at least read through the entries I coded. You might also consider some of his exploits as a basis for revising your contingency plans. You managed the trade negotiations with minimal use of force. You may not have that option on your next assignment, I'm afraid the Fuardas or the Federated Hegemony, or both, are setting up trouble."

Nathaniel refrained from swallowing. References to force and the first Whaler? The one who had a reputation for drastic action? For the Prime to suggest such was definitely a bad sign. "Could I ask why you think so?"

"There are three reasons, or perhaps they're the same. The next request for your services, the attack, and your friend. Or is she more than a friend?"

"I have hopes, but that has to be up to Sylvia. I think she'll be an asset, one way or another."

"I'm sure of that." Pittsway offered a wry grin. "After the way you bent both our system and the Imperials' to get her here, she must be quite a person."
"She is. I wouldn't have been able to do it without her."

"Is that true or a justification?"

"True," Nathaniel admitted. "She provided access and insight." He didn't want to admit out loud that Sylvia's ability to get him inside the Defense Tower on New Augusta had made possible his distribution of the Institute-modified Gersons disease that had forced Admiral Ku-Smythe to accept the trade negotiations. Besides, the details in his report should have told the Prime what he needed to know.

"Hmmm." The Prime nodded. "You have her in the intensive indoctrination courses already."

"We thought that advisable."

"More than advisable, as I'm sure you're beginning to understand, after the past few weeks." Nathaniel waited.

"You know that the needles used on you were military Empire-issue, spiked with a nerve toxin used only by the Empire, and nastier than anything anyone else uses. It was touch and go for a bit, for both of you, and for the trainee."
"Sylvia didn't tell me that."

"That increases my considerable respect for her-and for your choice other." The Prime steepled his fingers briefly. "What do you think about the attack on you being backed by the Imperial military?"

"It couldn't have been. They have to know that, if we revealed the details, that would put the Defense Ministry at direct odds with at least two Imperial Ministries and the Emperor." Nathaniel paused. "That would be an embarrassing situation. It could have theoretically been the work of a lower-level commander who was angry at Admiral Ku-Smythe . . . a set-up to embarrass her and get her removed so that in the future, the next Defense chief would be ready to attack the Coordinate. But I don't see anyone senior enough to order it being that stupid." The sandy-haired Ecolitan cleared his throat. "Or it could be designed to provoke us-or you. Or it could be an Halstani ploy . . ."

"Or an Orknarlian or Fuardian or Federated Hegemony effort-or one by New Avalon," pointed out the Prime. "Or even a subtle move by the Frankan Union. I'd discount that, but not dismiss it."

"New Avalon?"

Pittsway nodded. "While you were recovering, our friend Werlin Restinal paid a visit. You have been requested to visit Arros-in your academic capacity."

"The Delegate Minister of Interstellar Commerce?"

"The same. He requested that you do a study on Artos. It's a recently planofomed colony planet, and he provided some fanciful story about your expertise on infrastructure economics and the possibility of agricultural-technology trade. He also provided some odd shipping manifests, and he looked worried."

That had been where the Prime was leading. Nathaniel wanted to groan.

"You may recall that he's also the shadow minister for Coordinate intelligence, such as it is."

The Ecolitan professor managed not to groan or sigh-barely. "Do we know what the problem is?"

"Torine hasn't told him what the problem is. And Torine isn't about to tell us, if he even knows the details." The Prime shrugged. "Restinal doesn't have any way to get anyone onto Artos. Not anyone he can trust. Everyone knows the Institute can't be bought by the Coordinate government-anyone else from Accord would be automatically suspect, and Artos is three sectors away. Who from here would ever travel that far to a planet barely out of planofoming? Except an Institute economist or a Coordinate intelligence operative? "So why Artos?"

"We don't know, but its on the edge of the Three System Bulge, and we do know that both the Federated Hegemony and the Fuardas, and lately the Frankans, have all been increasing their arsenals, although not there. I find the absence of military activity around the Bulge more disturbing than its presence." The Prime smiled wryly. "We also have a very nervous politician on our hands, and he-or someone-has dummied up a study to get you to Artos. The study has to be real-and first class. And he's got a deal with Camelot, one he won't reveal." "But it's an obvious cover-even to the Avalonians." The Prime nodded.

"How obvious and how nervous was Restinal?"

"Obvious enough that more than a few will know everything about you before you leave. Restinal was nervous enough to mention that Ferro-Maine might be considered an Imperial agent by some, and an embarrassment to the Institute. I told him to take his portfolio and place it somewhere very private and very dark." The Prime smiled. "I'll have to tell her."

"I thought you would. I also thought she might like to accompany you to Artos, but that has to be her choice. She is welcome at the Institute in your absence, and would be accorded full staff privileges. "

"I'll have to ask her." Nathaniel paused. "How does the assassination effort tie into New Avalon?"

"I have this feeling that the Avalonian Commerce Ministry was pressured into requesting the study. Someone doesn't want it done, and Werlin was sent out here to make sure it was . . . and that you were assigned to do it. Someone knew that before Restinal did."

"An infrastructure study? They don't kill people over the allocation of energy and transportation resources." Nathaniel shook his head.

"Unless that allocation ties into something else rather nasty. Then again," said the Prime, "it may all be an elaborate scheme to get you isolated away from Accord."

"I find that hard to believe."

"So do I, but-" the Prime shrugged "-some people take defeats as very, very personal, and you made some very powerful people look very stupid. Right now, we don't know, and by the time we do . . ."

"It could be rather late."

"Exactly. But I feel, as you'll see in the briefing materials, that its much worse than that. Far worse. Possibly far worse than what you just concluded with the Empire."

Nathaniel pursed his lips. He'd hoped for a respite-and the chance to get to know Sylvia better-when he'd returned home. "You don't have to go to Artos."

"I don't know that I'd be any safer here-not if the assassin could penetrate Coordinate security."

"They won't penetrate the Institute."

"And I'm supposed to remain under Institute restraint for months or years? No, thank you. I'd rather go to Artos."

Pittsway smiled wryly. "I thought you might. There's a full briefing package on file for you."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. This is doubtless another one of those insurmountable opportunities that Strongarms memoirs cites."
"I'll remember that."

"And I think you'd better review your contingency portfolio. I've also granted you the full credit and authority of the Institute."

"The full credit?" The younger Ecolitan wanted to whistle. He hadn't even gotten that on his trade mission to New Augusta.

The Prime nodded. "I've also instructed our representative in Camelot that your authority is as mine, not to be questioned or obstructed."
"You suspect . . . ?"

"I suspect everything, and if my suspicions are correct, this will be even nastier than your last effort. And you may not have much time to act if it comes to that. I hope not, but I'm already half-convinced that we're past hoping. As I indicated, the details are under seal in your briefing packet." The Prime rose. "After you review that, if you have further questions, we can talk. I would also suggest that you inform new Ecolitan professor Ferro-Maine that the situation is uncertain, but that it could be quite hazardous, for reasons we can only suspect, and that you would prefer to limit her briefing to the facts in order to get her unvarnished judgment."
"Yes, Prime." Nathaniel stood, belatedly.

VI

The two figures in field greens sat on the bench in the middle of the Institutes formal garden. "You know," offered Whaler, "this garden dates back to the founding of the Institute. And this bench was where the first Whaler fell in love." The sandy-haired Ecolitan grinned, simultaneously being fully aware of the faint orange-trilia fragrance that seemed to emanate from Sylvia. It was already hard to believe that he'd met her over a dose of fidelitrol, trying not to tell the truth, or not too much of it, while she was doing the same. "This very bench?" she asked with a smile. "One like it, I imagine. Even our benches don't last four hundred years. There are other parallels. He was an Imperial Special Operative. She was an Ecolitan field agent, and probably a far better operative than he was. His specialty, according to the material the Prime gave me, was destruction on a large scale."
"You haven't done that badly."

Nathaniel suppressed a wince, thinking about fifty deaths from a mutated virus that was supposed to have a minimal fatal impact. "I wish I hadn't had to do what I did."

"That makes two of us." Sylvia paused. "Sometimes, our choices are only between the lesser of evils."

"That's one thing that worries me about this Artos assignment," the Ecolitan said quickly. "I have a feeling that nothing good is going to come of it, no matter how we handle it. So does the Prime, and he's granted me a lot of authority. Too much. But we're all just speculating."
"Is it real?" she asked thoughtfully.

"The Prime thinks it is. I don't know. But I worry about your coming." He glanced at her, then added, "On your own, you're probably better than I am at

avoiding difficulties. You showed me that on Old Earth."
"Don't humor me."

"I'm not. I couldn't have done it without you." She shook her head, her slate gray eyes momentarily ocean cold. "Fifty-one deaths. Over three hundred people with permanent nerve damage, and you couldn't have done it without me."

"That's not what I meant. I was talking about Artos. If you went somewhere alone. . . , you'd be better off than with me. But they've requested an economist, and a study that has to be good, even if it's a cover. And that means one Nathaniel Whaler. I want to spend time with you, but I don't want to make you a target. I told you that this could be very hazardous."

"You're perfectly willing to be a target, dear Nathaniel. And it appears as though we both already are-again."

"I knew that came with the territory. Has for a long time."

"You don't think I didn't know it came with the territory when I left everything to come to Accord-even before that mess at the port? I think I love you, Nathaniel, but I still won't be a kept woman." Sylvia's slate gray eyes caught Whalers, held them. "I know I can help." She offered a faint smile. "You think you love me? You came all this way . . . and you think . . ." The sandy-haired Ecolitan shook his head.

"You didn't ask me for a contract. You didn't even say you loved me. You provided everything, and I know that . . . I know you care. I had to choose, then. There wasn't a second chance. Was there?" Her lips quirked upward. "There almost wasn't a first chance."

"You could have . . ." He paused. Would the I.I.S. really have let her go, if they'd had time to find out and react? Would the Coordinate authorities have been so lenient if he hadn't just delivered an agreement that slaved off an interstellar war? He pursed his lips, then shook his head. "You're right." "That's one of the many things I can say I love about you." "What?"

"Behind that secret-agent-economist front . . . you actually listen."

Nathaniel wondered. Did he? "You do, and I'm going with you."

"So long as you keep up your lessons on what you don't know about Accord."

"That's another thing I like about this place." She offered the tentative smile that he always found so enchanting. "The lessons?" "People take me at my word."

"Not everyone on Accord does. Ecolitans try to. People in Harmony or on the Peninsula are pretty much the same as in the Empire. Maybe a little more open, but it makes sense to trust people at first. Most of the time, anyway." "That's an odd way of putting it."

"Not really. It's something the Prime emphasizes. I guess every Prime has. It goes with the job. If you distrust people, they pick up on it, and that leads them to distrust you. Since human society is based on trust, and since the greater the reinforced trust, the freer a society can be, it makes sense to create a society where trust is reinforced. That's one of the perpetual conflicts between the Institute and the politicians."

Sylvia raised her eyebrows, gray eyes inquiring. "Politicians want to nail everything down. If there's a murder or a scandal, they immediately want to make another law, conduct another study, do something to prove it isn't their fault. All those laws reduce freedom and trust."

"How does the Institute handle it?"

"We tell the truth. If we don't want to say more, we don't. We try not to mislead."

"That's why you limited my briefing to the actual facts?"

"The Prime was insistent that you not have his speculations or mine. He's worried enough that he wants you as an independent check, and that means that the stakes are high. He's afraid our background may mislead us."

"A definite backhanded compliment." Sylvia's lips quirked. "And what does the Institute do to its own members who violate such high principles?"

"Effectively, either exile or death, depending on the severity of the problem. We impose the same standard on the politicians." Sylvia winced.

"Look, if you want people to trust one another, you have to protect them from those who abuse their trust. Personal profiles indicate most people don't change, and you have to base a society on the most probable patterns. Trying to create formalized exemptions only encourages people to find other ways to abuse trust legally. The Institute has to set and maintain a higher standard. That's part of the reason why we don't engage in politics. That's why an economic study that's a cover still has to be first race."

"The other parts?" she asked.

"No matter what anyone says, politics doesn't work without compromise. Most people aren't strong enough to not be affected by the continuing pressure of daily compromise. Politicians are generally worse than the average person because they need the adulation, and that makes them more susceptible to ethical compromise and abuse of the public trust. The Institute acts as a brake, partly by example, and partly because the politicians know we reserve the right to protect the public interest. That's why we have to follow the Iron Rules. That's the Ecolitan Enigma—the riddle of how to maintain enough power to ensure ethics, yet not to be corrupted by that power."

"You reserve the perpetual right to overthrow the government? That's worse—"

"No. Not the government. Not the form of government. We reserve the right to remove any politician who abuses public trust or who would narrow the institutional freedoms set forth by the Charter."

"That's worse meddling in politics than running for office." Nathaniel shook his head. "Its happened five times in four centuries. The Institute doesn't like to exercise that power, and every Prime who has done so resigned immediately. Two voluntarily exiled themselves."

"The threat of such a power has to be chilling. I don't know."

"It is chilling," Nathaniel admitted. "Its intended to be. The first post-Secession Prime made the point that government must always serve all the people, not just a handful and not the other way around, and that the Institute would guarantee that balance."

"I still don't know." Sylvia shook her head. "You're right to question. I did at first." Nathaniel hesitated, wondering whether to hit her with the rest of it. He swallowed before he spoke. "There's more."
"More?"

"The Institute reserves the right to act first, as we did on Old Earth." He rushed on, wanting to get it over with. "Look, historically, governments and people are reactive. They have to depend on popular consensus of some sort. That means that when a tyrant or a madman or a system looks evil, they have to wait. Its been the same throughout history. There's this feeling that you can't use applied or deadly force to head off a disaster because you can't absolutely prove there will be a disaster. So . . . Accord couldn't act against the Empire in the Secession until the Empire destroyed the entire planet of Sligo and millions of people. In the Marundan rebellion, the Empire couldn't act until after five million Mareks had been slaughtered in Marunda's processing camps. Yet Marunda had published a manifesto detailing his plans. There was already documentation of over fifty thousand deaths. The Imperial Senate refused to act." Nathaniel shrugged.

"You're telling me that you-the Institute-has the almighty wisdom to predict the future?" Her eyebrows rose.

"Not always. Sometimes. We . . . assassinated two dozen radical political operatives being supplied by the Empire on Hernando. It prevented a coup and bloody civil war. The system is regenerating." He shrugged. "It seems to me that doing that was better than military action after thousands were killed."
"That's like playing god."

"Is it? Is it worse to do nothing so that you can claim you are justified to act after thousands or millions die? When even more people die and suffer?"

Sylvia shook her head. "Delusions of grandeur."
"Why do you think the standards are so high for Ecolitans? We don't take it lightly. We're willing to take responsibility for acting before the fact. Sometimes, we're wrong. So is everybody. But if we're wrong, a few people die. Following the traditional course ensures that thousands and millions die."

"I can't believe you're saying this." She glanced out across the flowerbeds. "Governments can't do that. They're designed with checks and balances."

"The Institute isn't a government, and we are a check on governments. The checks on governments are largely designed to preserve their institutional acceptability to the public. That means a government can do anything its people don't actively oppose like massacring millions of dissidents, taking over powerless adjoining systems, and killing any troops chat oppose them."

"You're implying that people are responsible for the actions of their government, no matter how despotic and tyrannical."

"Sylvia, has any government ever stood against a people where a majority were actively willing to fight against it? There isn't an instance in recorded history." He shrugged. "If a people has the means to stop a slaughter, warfare, or whatever . . . and doesn't. . . if they allow the government to carry out atrocities, don't they share in the responsibility?"
"How would they know?"

"There's no legal system anywhere, that I know of, where participation in a

crime is excused out of ignorance."

"Either you're crazy, or I am." Sylvia shook her head. "I don't know."

Nathaniel forced a laugh. "Sorry, I'm too much of an ethical evangelist, and I'm throwing too much at you too quickly. Back to the Artos problem?"

His question got a nod from Sylvia . . . a very tentative nod. She was clearly stunned at his statements, but saying more wouldn't help, not now.

"I can't believe that the Avalonians want an Ecolitan economist, except as a cover, and we don't know what the study is a cover for. Who uses economic studies, anyway?" Nathaniel shifted his weight on the bench, all too conscious of the mixed fragrances of orange and trilia.

"They don't say why they need this study."

"No, they don't. There are several possibilities. First, the government needs an outside evaluation that will be impartial. The Institute's impartiality is recognized, enough that almost fifteen percent of our income is derived from that sort of consulting."

"That much?"

"It's not widely talked about because those who use us don't want to admit they can't trust their own people to be objective and because if we advertised, that would destroy some of the basis of that impartiality." He offered a wry smile. "Second, it's a test for something bigger, to see how good we are and to give them a feel. The Institute hasn't done any projects for New Avalon in more than a century, and there may be some hard feelings from the Trezenian mess."

"Accord backed the rebels, rather successfully, I recall."

"No, the Institute did. The Coordinate looked the other way."

"How? Why?"

"The New Avalonian government had imposed an Imperial-style re-education team on the planet. We don't like that, and the local merchants offered to pay us and grant an open-trade agreement to the Institute and Accord. We insisted on a veto power over any provisions of their proposed constitutional charter we thought were too restrictive."

"You do meddle in other people's politics. All the time, it seems."

"Not exactly. We don't insist on copies of our system. Our price is always the same. Freedom of the people to choose their government, but with the unconditional freedom of people to leave."

"That's meddling."

"I suppose so, but we make no secret about it. Those are our terms up front. Anyway, the fact that the New Avalon government would hire us-or even allow us on Artos right now-either means that they have a large economic problem or that they want somehow to use the study against the Institute or that there's an even bigger problem lurking in the background. That's what we suspect, something to do with all the systems bordering the Three System Bulge. But we don't know. Or there's something we haven't figured out yet. Or some combination of the above-all of which pose serious external diseconomies."

"You're sounding like an economist again. But you keep skipping over the other

more personally nasty options."
"Such as?"

"Providing a way to get rid of you permanently. Or setting you up to prove how dangerous Accord really is to the entire human Galaxy. You've just admitted that the Institute is the most dangerous institution in the Galaxy to every single government."

"You think big," he said with a laugh. "But I'm not that important. Even the Institute isn't."

"Its more deadly than I ever imagined, and I'm not exactly sheltered, Nathaniel. If these unknown forces can show that as a symbol . . . symbols move people, and even the Institute couldn't stand against the massed forces of the Empire and its neighbors." "Do all former associates of the I.I.S.?" Sylvia firmly and gently put her forefinger to his lips. "You said my past was past, and you're assuming too much."

"All right," he said as his fingers closed around hers and removed them. "With all these nasty options, do you still want to go to Artos?"

"Of course. I told you I intended to pull my weight. Besides, someone has to go along and put a check on your delusions of grandeur. Finally, you're not used to the subtleties of prolonged intrigue, and this sounds like it's very intriguing."

"Terrible pun."

"Awful, not terrible."

"I did all right on Old Earth."

"After you confused people with a great and excessive amount of applied force." Sylvia forced a grin. He shrugged. "I stand corrected. As usual." Sylvia leaned over and kissed his cheek, almost fraternally. "I like that about you, too. In spite of your misguided ethics."

Nathaniel wanted to kiss her back, more enthusiastically. Instead, he returned the kiss, equally fraternally. Despite her façade of warmth and charm, he'd definitely upset her. But if he didn't let her know, up front, then the eventual disillusionment would be worse, far worse. Once again, which was the lesser of the evils? He'd taken the Ecolitan way, preempting the issues, but would she see it in that light?

VII

Things don't look that much better, even with the Accord mess defused," announced the I.I.S. Director, her eyes flicking around the small circular conference table to each of the three others in turn.

"Why not?" asked the redheaded man whose eyes the Director had caught last.

"We still have the Matriarchy, Orknarii, Olympia, and New Avalon talking about formalizing their informal mutual defense agreements. The Franks and the Federated Hegemony have all but finalized a customs, infotech, and defense union. And the popinjays in Tinhorn haven't changed in four hundred years."

"So whom do you think that the Grand Admiral will push against next?" asked the blond. The Director tapped the terminal plate and waited. "With the simplified assumptions noted in the appendices, the probability of some form

of armed conflict between the Empire and an outsystem coalition within twelve standard calendar months approaches unity." The terminal voice was melodic, yet firm, but the words were coo evenly spaced to be human. "Rank the probabilities," ordered the Director. "Probability of conflict with Halstan-Reformed GraeEnglish systems thirty-seven percent. Probability of conflict with Ro-. manoFrank systems twenty-eight percent. Probability of conflict with Coordinate of Accord twenty-five percent. Probability of conflict with Fuardian Conglomerate twenty-three percent. Other conflictual probabilities, individually are less than five percent."

"I know probabilities aren't additive," said the redhead, "but I get nervous when they total more than a hundred percent. The probability for Accord bothers me. Why is it that high after everything we just went through? Is that the Grand Admirals influence?"

'Admiral Ku-Smythe is an old-style, power-is-everything militarist, but the Admiral has some basic political sense," answered the dark-haired woman. "So long as the Admiral holds the eagles, that will reduce the probability of conflict with Accord."

"The Admiral also has a daughter with more than basic political sense . . . and connections," added the Director. "And they talk."

"The way the younger Ku-Smythe eased out that idiot Rotoller and got him replaced by Fergus was brilliant."

"Envoy Whaler took care of most of that," pointed out the Director. "He also alerted every outsystem to Commerces power play, and strengthened the Emperors hand."

"I don't like the way he manipulated Ferro-Maine into going with him," said the blond.

"That wasn't manipulation. It was love, and more intelligence has been torqued over by hormones than we'd want to integrate. Even the Imperial Intelligence Service can't stop love." The Director's tone was dry. "If she had to go anywhere, better Accord than Halstan."
"Love or not, I don't like it."

"What additional harm can it do?" asked the dark-haired assistant director. "He's a part-time professor, part-time agent who's pulled off a major coup for Accord. She's a former dancer and parttime agent who's wanted to get off Old Earth for nearly a" decade. Good as he is, and much as she knows . . . there's no problem out there that's likely to draw them in. And if there is, who else would you rather have involved? Accord doesn't want war, at least the Institute doesn't-"

"What about the probabilities of the Coordinate government trying to dump the Institute?"

"They're high," admitted the Director. "We can't quantify that, but," she added with a laugh, "the Coordinate politicians have been trying that ever since the Secession. So far, the Institutes outmaneuvered or outpowered them."

"Its scary how much power the Ecolitans wield," said the redhead. "There's no way to touch them?"

"They have the capability to annihilate the ecology of every human world in the Galaxy. Their ships and bases are so small and so dispersed over so many systems and light-years that no one could find them." The Director paused. "Would you care to take them on?" "That just makes them worse."

"Accord would be even scarier without them. That nut Quaestor would hold their House of Delegates and have the whole Rift in conflict. However, I'm more worried about what we don't see." The Director glanced around the table. "Like the Hands of the Matriarch, or the goose-stepping popinjays in Tinhorn, or the separatists in the Federated Hegemony."

"What about Marshal Illydara and his fixation on expanding the Three System Bulge?" asked the blond. "Won't that drag in New Avalon?"

"The Fuardas have been agitating about that since before the Ecologic Rebellion. What else is new? Besides, it's three sectors away," said the assistant director. "I just have a feeling."

The Director gave the slightest of nods, but remained silent. "We can't afford to go on feelings," answered the assistant director.

"We still need to consider the Matriarchy problem first." The Director glanced around the table. "Stats says that infotech traffic between New Avalon and Anarra has increased by nearly fifty percent over the last two years. The traffic between the Fuardian conglomerate and New Avalon is also up, but only about twenty percent."

"Those are big jumps in information technology transfers."

"They are, aren't they?" asked the Director dryly. "Infotech transfer increases of those magnitudes usually go with trouble."

VIII

Nathaniel stepped outside the shuttle flitter into the glare of Artos, automatically slitting his eyes and studying the sun-bleached white permacrete that intensified the nearblinding light. His fingers touched the shoulder strap of the datacase. "Its bright here," said Sylvia.

"Too bright." His eyes slowly adjusting, the Ecolitan took the two steps down off the shuttle and onto the permacrete. Less than a hundred meters away stood the receiving building, white-walled with a vaulted roof. Artos had a bare-bones orbit control station, enough for only four ships, and just a handful of comm-relay satellites, indications of the relative poverty of the system-and another part of the enigma behind the infrastructure study.

Matching Nathaniel's longer strides, Sylvia moved across the permacrete. Both wore the lightweight field greens of the Institute.

He took a deep breath, then another, wondering if he hadn't recovered as thoroughly as he had thought, before he remembered. Sea-level atmospheric pressure on Artos was only eighty-five percent of T-Norm, and oxygen content was a shade over sixteen percent. Carbon dioxide levels were triple those on Accord but well below any concern for acidosis. In short, he and Sylvia shouldn't expect good performance in running marathons.

Behind them came Geoffrey Evanston, the New Avalonian businessman, in a summer

jacket, cravat, and white knee shorts and socks above matching white sandals. After Evanston ambled Jimson Sonderssen, the agricultural-technology factor from the Federated Hegemony, and the half dozen others that had come down from the Elizabeth the Great, former flag of the Wendsor Lines now reduced to outsystem colony traffic.

A light and hot wind blew out of the west, carrying the odors of dust, decaying vegetation, half-burned hydrocarbons of some sort, and an unidentifiable fruity odor. "Pungent, too," Nathaniel added. "The fruit smells like berries."

Not exactly, but Nathaniel couldn't identify it, and his eyes flicked to the building ahead on the edge of the permacrete apron.

A squat man in a white uniformed jacket with silver epaulets, also wearing white shorts and socks and glistening white shoes, stepped forward out of the shade as the two Ecolitans neared the portal under the Receiving and Customs sign. "Professor Whaler?"

"The same," replied Nathaniel in formal English, rather than the more colloquial and divergent Old American of Accord.

"I am Robert Walkerson, the Port Chief here at Artos." He offered a shallow and stiff bow. "Minister Spencer-Hawkes has requested that I do everything possible to assist you in your study."

"Most kind of you." Nathaniel paused. "Minister Spencer-Hawkes? I was under the impression that--"

"Quite right, sir. The Commerce Ministry requisitioned your study, but the coordination of arrangements for an outsystem dignitary falls under Defence Security. Port Authority falls under Defence."

"I am but an economist." Nathaniel belatedly turned to Sylvia. "This is Ms. Ferro-Maine, my assistant. Her specialty is institutional structures." Nathaniel added, "I know. The traditional wisdom is that developing economies have no institutional structures. They do. What they do not have is labels."

"You are also a dignitary, a former Trade Envoy to the Empire, and someone Artos is pleased to welcome." Walkerson offered a perfunctory smile. "If you would please follow me. I must apologize, but Artos is less than a century out of stage two planforming, and rather primitive. Also rather . . . quiet. Very little occurs here."

"It is far more structured than many places I've been," answered Nathaniel. He could use some quiet, but he wondered if they'd actually get it.

"You are too kind. Too kind." Walkerson cleared his throat and stepped through the open doorway.

Inside, out of the glare, Walkerson nodded to the uniformed man and woman behind the inspection consoles. "The Ecolitans are cleared."

Both nodded stiffly as the three walked past the consoles and to the far end of the long room where a moving belt inched along in a circle. Beyond the belt was another set of consoles, each with two uniformed figures, each armed with stunners.

"As soon as your bags arrive, we shall be on our way. You'll be quartered at the Ministry Guest House-much better than at the Blue Lion. That is our local hotel, and not much better than an outback horse station."

"Horses?" asked Sylvia.

"We use them in some regions. They are ever so much more efficient than fuel-burners in certain applications, and there is certainly more than enough fodder here. There will be for centuries to come, although we do hope that you two will be able to pinpoint areas to speed our industrialization process."

"Infrastructure economics does not always promise speed," Nathaniel answered. "We hope to identify optimal resource use patterns and suggest structural change options for developmental alternatives." He shook his head. "I have been in the classroom too long. We will attempt to discern the least expensive manner in which to reach your goals. Not one that is penny-wise and pound-foolish, however."

The Artosan port officer gave a barking laugh. "Quite so. Quite so."

With a thump, a field pack appeared on the black fabric of the belt, followed by a second thump and second bag. The Ecolitans picked up their bags, Nathaniel using his right hand, Sylvia her left.

"If you wouldn't mind just putting the bags under the scanners there . . . ?" ventured Walkerson. "And your cases?"

"Not at all." Nathaniel slipped his pack, then the datacase, under the right hand scanner, as Sylvia did the same under the left.

"Clean, sir," said the woman scanner operator to Walkerson. "Good." The Port Chief nodded toward the old-style glass door behind the scanners and the four security types. "Shall we depart?"

Nathaniel held the door for Sylvia, using the moment to survey the area outside the receiving building. He didn't need a recurrence of his arrivals on Old Earth or Accord. The belt multitector showed no energy concentrations, and he could see nothing apparently out of the ordinary for a landing field-just a cracked permacrete circle of road, flanked with low bushes he didn't recognize, that led out to another highway. A long bus, repainted pale green, and two groundcars were parked in the circle.

The sky was bluish green-greener than that of Old Earth and bluer than that of Accord. Gray clouds piled up over the mountains to the north, and a hot wind blew out of the south, carrying a mildly acrid odor similar to ozone. "The first car," said Walkerson.

The pale green groundcar waited, its engine idling-liquid hydrocarbon-fueled from the smell-the rear doors both open, as was the trunk.

"Your luggage can go in the boot," offered Walkerson. "Thank you." The Ecolitan lifted his field pack into the trunk, or boot, as did Sylvia-not that either had that much luggage datacase and an Ecolitan fieldpack each. He fingered the boot release-a simple lever, without even a lock-then closed it, checking to see if it released at a turn. It did.

He caught the glint in Sylvia's eyes that said, "Suspicious man," more clearly

than words, and answered, "Always."
"Good."

Walkerson smothered a quizzical look. "Then were ready to depart?"

"We are proceeding into Lanceville?" asked Nathaniel, holding the rear door for Sylvia.

She offered a smile and slid across the bench seat to allow Nathaniel to sit without walking around the groundcar.

"Just outside Lanceville." The port official eased himself into the front seat, and nodded to the uniformed driver. "The Guest House, Helverson."
"Yes, sir."

"I'm glad you introduced me relatively early this time," Sylvia murmured.

"An absentminded professor am I, remember," he murmured back in stilted Panglais. "Though I try."
"That won't work here."
"Want to bet?"

Sylvia raised her eyebrows and bent close to his ear. "After he pointedly noted your accomplishments as an envoy to New Augusta?"

She was probably right, Nathaniel decided, but it was still worth a try to lower local expectations. The proverbs would help . . . he hoped. As the driver eased away from the port building, from which none of the other shuttle passengers had yet emerged, Walkerson turned in the front seat to face the two Ecolitans.

"I really don't know what ship time you might be on, whether it's midday or at the end of three sleepless days."

"Near the end of one long day," said Sylvia after the briefest of pauses. "A very long day."

"A long day makes for deep sleep," added Nathaniel. "We won't make it too much longer," promised the Avalonian.

Nathaniel looked out the scratched and tinted window, blotting his forehead and wondering when the groundcars cooling system would kick in, or if it even had one. To the right of the highway was an expanse of low plants, with narrow dark green leaves and clusters of greenish purple globes-synde beans. "Are all your hydrocarbon needs provided from the beans?" he asked. "Or do you supplement them with other organics?"

Walkerson cleared his throat. "You know, professor, I couldn't say. Around the port area, we grow and process a lot of beans. There's a fuel-processing facility southwest of Lanceville, but I don't know what else they process or where it might come from. I just have the groundcar refueled."

"I did not perceive any broadcast power grids." Nathaniel cried again.

"Were still on a local area fusactor system. There are a number of areas not much beyond the oxy-creepers, second tier soil fixing. They say we'll need another ten to twenty years of iron-feeding the seas to stimulate

algalooxygenation."

"You could get too extensive a bloom."

"They talk about that, but so far the basking shark-mods are taking care of that. They are ugly and rather large."

"Rather large?" asked Sylvia. "Is that Avalonian understatement?"

As he blotted his forehead again, Nathaniel continued to smell fuel-raw hydrocarbon. His fingers flicked to his belt. "Stop the car! Out!"

After a quick glance at the Ecolitan, Walkerson nodded to the driver.

Nathaniel jumped out, almost before the groundcar eased to a halt on the highway shoulder, next to a ditch that separated the highway from the synde bean fields. He fumbled open the boot and grabbed the field packs. Almost on the run, he threw the packs behind the car, yanked open the front door, and jerked the Port Chief from the front seat.

"What the-" Walkerson looked more bewildered than angry. Crack! Whooshhh! 'The bonnet erupted into a sheet of flame that flared across the entire front of the vehicle.

Sylvia dashed toward the driver's side, then abruptly darted back. She slipped toward the driver again, then recreated and crossed behind the vehicle, rejoining Whaler and Walkerson and shaking her head. "Dead?" asked Nathaniel.

"Helson is? He couldn't be. That wouldn't be proper," protested the Avalonian. "Not at all."

"I'm afraid he is," Sylvia said. "It looked like shards of something across his neck and chest. There was blood everywhere." She swallowed and looked at the ground.

"It can't be!" Walkerson circled the blazing vehicle and dashed toward the driver's door. . . once, twice, before returning to where the Ecolitans stood by their packs on the shoulder of the road behind the blazing mass of plastic and metal.

"You were right," the Port Chief admitted, "but I don't see how something so awful could have happened like that."

As the rest of the groundcar burned hotter, the three backed away farther, the Ecolitans lifting and carrying their field packs another twenty meters back toward the shuttle port facility. Walkerson circled the groundcar again, then looked back down the highway toward the shuttle port.

"Was it wise to go for the packs?" asked Sylvia in a voice shielded by the crackling of the flames.

"This was an accident. So it had to be a fuel spark of some sort, except that synthoil takes a high jolt. And I prefer my own clothes."

"I think you prefer everything your own way."

"Don't we all?" he asked with a harsh laugh, wondering if he should have pointed that out.

Walkerson rejoined them. "The bus should be along momentarily, It has a comm

unit, and it goes right past the Guest House. I'm most awfully sorry about this. Poor Helverson. How . . ."

"It was certainly not your fault," Nathaniel pointed out. "I am most sorry about your man."

"I just do not . . ." Walkerson shook his head again. "An engine fire . . . but an explosion ...1..." A long green shape appeared on the permacrete. Whhheeeppp!

The bus pulled up, and the driver leaned out. "What happened, chief?"

"Some sort of engine malfunction. The entire front bonnet went to flames. I fear Helverson was killed instantly. We tried, but couldn't get him out. Professor Ferro-Maine tried and so did I, but he was dead on the spot." Walkerson wiped his sooty forehead. "Might I use your comm, N'Trosian?"

"Hop on, I'll drop you at the Guest House, and you can ring ConComm from there."

"Your comm is still malfunctioning?" asked Walkerson. "Still, chief? I've been on you about that for weeks. No spares. No spares ordered." The dark-skinned driver nodded to the Ecolitans. "Folks, best you climb aboard. There's nothing else going your way."

Whaler and Sylvia sank into the narrow plastic-covered seat in the third row, behind Jimson Sonderssen, the Hegemony agritech factor. Nathaniel blotted his still-sweating forehead and looked down at his field pack for a moment. The deeply tanned, tall and lanky factor, whose hair was half blond, half white, turned in the seat and gestured toward the smoldering groundcar wreck that the bus was leaving behind. "Hot enough for you, was it not enough already?"

"It was hot enough." Nathaniel admitted, shaking his head. "Far too hot, and this sort of event we do not welcome or need."

"And you?" Sonderssen inclined his head to Sylvia. "I agree with the professor."

"You see, Professor Whaler, Professor Ferro-Maine, the sad state of our transport infrastructure," offered Geoffrey Evanston from several seats back. "What groundcars we have are few and in poor condition, yet the government will neither ship more nor sanction deep minerals development or asteroid drops to support local manufacture,"

"I will keep your observations in mind."

"All other things being equal?" asked Evanston. "But of course," answered Whaler with a smile. "I am not a one-handed economist."

"Perhaps there should be some." Sylvia smothered a quizzical look with a bright smile. Port Chief Walkerson sat on the seat behind the driver, looking stolidly at the white strip of permacrete ahead, glistening in the afternoon sun as the bus rumbled eastward toward Lanceville.

The Guest House boasted white plastered walls, a pale red tiled roof, and a cooling system, Nathaniel noted with relief as they stepped inside the white-lacquered front doorway.

"This is the Guest House, such as it is," announced Walkerson. "The lounge is to the right, the dining salon to the left. The stairs lead to the quarters. If you don't mind the haste, I'll get you to your rooms, and then leave you

for a bit while I deal with the accident."
"Of course."

They followed the Avalonian official up the antique tiled steps to the second floor and to the far end of the polished tiled floor. Each of the ceramic tiles bore the imprint of a horned beast. "These are rather unique tiles," Nathaniel offered.

"Unicorn tiles, made here on Artos." Walkerson halted between a pair of white-lacquered doors with bronze lever handles. He opened the door on the right and then the left. "Two adjoining rooms, with separate refresher facilities-that was what you requested."

"Exactly," said Nathaniel. "Thank you," added Sylvia.

"I imagine you two would like a chance to refresh and change. Then, I'll join you for tea in the small lounge, and then, shall we say, a briefing on our situation here." Walkerson flashed another perfunctory smile. "I need to report on the accident. Terrible thing. Terrible thing." He turned to Whaler. "You said you smelled fuel?"

"I perceived some odor when we entered the vehicle," Nathaniel said, pulling at his chin thoughtfully. "I considered that it might have been my imagination after all the space travel or that it might have been the vehicle engine. We employ electrovehicles for ground transport, and I am not familiar with fuelburners. After we had proceeded a ways, however, my perceptions become noticeably more distinct. That most assuredly should not have occurred. That was when I suggested that we depart the vehicle. At that point in time, I thought I saw an electrical spark or the equivalent, but I was not absolutely certain. That was when the hood was enveloped in flame." The Ecolitan shrugged.

"Did you see anything else, Ms. Ferro-Maine? Or should I call you Ecolitan Ferro-Maine?"

"Whatever's comfortable, Mr. Walkerson, or is it captain or chief?"

"Most call me Walker or chief."

"Walker, then," Sylvia offered. "I can't add much. There's something in the air here, allergens maybe, and I'm not smelling things very well. I did see a glint of flame or sparks, and I ran up to try to help your man out, but . . . I told you. He was already dead. There was a huge gash in his neck, and . . ."

"I'll have the maintenance team check it out." Walkerson shook his head. "I still can't believe it."

Nathaniel had the sinking feeling that he could, at least to the degree that disaster seemed to be following him. How could he anticipate and act when he still hadn't figured out who was involved? "Until tea, then."

"Until tea," Sylvia confirmed.

Nathaniel stepped into the first room, which contained a large bed with an off-white comforter spread, a table that could double as a desk, two pressed-wood armchairs, and a large window framed in white curtains that matched the comforter. Sliding doors concealed a closet, and an open door showed an old-style fresher room.

He played the belt detector around the room. Surprisingly, the room registered clean, except for the equipment concealed in the sides of his own datacase and Sylvia's. "Adjoining rooms?" Sylvia raised her eyebrows. "Someone told me that she thought she loved me, and I didn't want to rush matters."

"Who said I even wanted adjoining rooms?" A mischievous smile flickered across her lips.

Nathaniel threw up his hands. "A poor struggling professor am I," he said in Panglais, "and arrangements I make the best I can."

"You still might pull that off." The smile vanished, and Sylvia shook her head. "I don't like it."

"No snoops?" She nodded.

"This actually might be what they contracted for." Her eyebrows went up again. "Foolish of me to think that, I suppose?"

"Not foolish, but improbable." In addition to the door from each room to the hallway, an inside door connected the two rooms. Nathaniel stepped toward the interior door.

"I see," said Sylvia, looking pointedly at the interior door that had been left ajar.

"I didn't say a word. Its the polite New Avalonian way of covering all alternatives." Nathaniel momentarily raised his hands in protest as he stepped into the second room with his belt detector, "Clean here, too," he added after a moment. "I like this less and less."

"Maybe it's not the Avalonians," Nathaniel murmured. "The native Artosans here? Or the long arm of the Empire? Or some outsystem?"

The taller Ecolitan shrugged. "As a poor struggling professor must I consider the alternatives."

"A small amount of that dialogue travels a long way."

"Yet journeys of light-years, they begin with but one pace." Sylvia mock-glared. Nathaniel grinned.

"I'm cleaning up, dear Envoy. You may do as you please, but I do not intend to continue to look like a frump." She gestured toward the connecting door.

"The message I have received." He backed away, then stepped through the door, which closed with a distinct thump. The Ecolitan shook his head. The way everything was going, resolving the trade wars between the Coordinate and the Empire and getting Sylvia out of the Empire had been simple. Now, they not only had to worry about conducting a study and resolving the problems behind it, but he had to worry about Sylvia's mindset that morality required millions of dead bodies before drastic action could be taken.

He'd been at the Institute too long. That was the way most people thought, and being reminded of it by someone you cared for was a shock. He pursed his lips.

Or was it that the current unsolved problems always seemed more insurmountable than the past difficulties that had already been resolved? He took a long, slow, deep breath before heading for his own fresher.

Later, with a clean set of greens on, a smooth face, and all the grime removed

by a fresher spray not much more sophisticated than a ancient shower, Nathaniel rapped on the connecting door. "Time to head down to the lounge." "In a moment."

"Let me know." He'd barely seated himself in one of the chairs when Sylvia stepped through the door, carrying her datacase. "I'm ready for high tea. I'm hungry."

"Also am I," he offered in mock seriousness. She rolled her eyes.

Whaler picked up his own case, then opened the door, noting that the room had no external locks. "Trusting types, or they want us to be trusting," said Sylvia. "Colony planets are often that way. They just execute thieves. It has a rather convincing effect on honesty, even if a few innocents pay as well." "Someone always pays."

Their boots echoed on the polished unicorn tiles as they walked toward the steps and down them to the main floor. "The lounge is to the left," he offered. "I recall."

Why was he always putting his field boots in his mouth? Sylvia knew where the lounge was. He'd just been making conversation, and he was coming off as incredibly patronizing.

"I'm sorry," she said softly, reaching out and squeezing his hand. "You didn't mean it that way."

"Thank you." He smiled. "I was trying to fill the awkwardness, and . . . I'm not very good at small talk that's not intellectual, and there . . ." He shook his head. "Unless you're playing a role," she added. "You're good at that,

but I get the feeling you don't enjoy it with people you like."

"Right."

Sylvia knew more about him from a relatively short period of casual observation-or was it casual?-than he'd ever expected.

They stepped through the green-curtained archway into a room that could have been transported from centuries past, with dark wooden tables and matching chairs upholstered in a green velvetlike material. A silver tea service sat upon the wooden cart beside the white-lined circular table, where Robert Walkerson sat facing the doorway. The other tables were vacant.

The port officer rose as they entered the room. "I can see that you two are looking more chipper."

The two Ecolitans took seats on either side of Walkerson, who sat down and gestured toward the tea cart. "Tea or liftea?"

"Liftea," answered Nathaniel. "The same," murmured Sylvia. "It's not the same as real Avalonian tea."

"Nothing, I have heard, quite resembles the tea of New Avalon, nor the effect it has on those who are unused to it." Nathaniel inclined his head.

"Try some of the cakes." Walkerson nodded toward the circular platter in the middle of the table.

"Did you find out how it happened?" Nathaniel glanced at the handful of cakes in the middle of the green-rimmed, offwhite china platter. Two were round and

white, several were dark and square, and one had white icing with green stripes.

"Ryster-Jeeves found what looked to be a leak in the fuel line. With all the damage and the heat, it's hard to tell, but he thinks it was metal fatigue. Our groundcars here aren't new, and you know what it costs to ship them. We don't have that kind of manufacturing up yet."

"There's not much in the way of mining," said Sylvia. "How much of a problem is that?"

"Artos doesn't have satellites and no real hydrocarbons in its

geologic past. Metals mining has to go deep." The Avalonian lifted his cup and inhaled the steam. "We do get some good tea, but it's chancy yet, and it's from under plastic,"

"That looks to be good china. Might it be local?" asked Nathaniel.

"It is. Off the highlands of the back continent. Gheric-Shrews found it, but it's more of a hobby for her than honest commerce."

Nathaniel tried a small brown cake, the one with green-and-white striped icing, forcing himself to eat it slowly, while not gagging on a texture that seemed heavily saturated with a rather raw substitute for rum. "Potent, those are."

"I agree." The Ecolitan took a long sip of liftea. Sylvia tried a white cake, and from her polite and small mouthfuls, Nathaniel suspected her choice had been little better than his.

"Did they determine what occurred to your man?"

"The explosion drove glass fragments through him. Ugly. Very ugly." The Port Chief shook his head. "I can't believe Halverson's dead. He seemed such a nice young fellow, and he was fresh from New Brista."

"Most tragic." Nathaniel shook his head. "All too often, inadequate capital investment is paid for in the currency of human life."

"That would be an odd way of putting it." Walkerson's tone was even, almost flat.

"Governments are fond of chat," Nathaniel answered. "It is often easier to explain away loss of life with greater facility than investment of credits and resources. When they do not wish to provide sufficient capital assets—whether groundcars, flitters, or fusactors—those under pressure to complete the task at hand are put at greater risk. Some die who would not do so otherwise." The Ecolitan shrugged. "All those involved shake their heads sadly, decry the tragedy, and continue to undercapitalize the venture."

"You've seen it before, I see."

"In many places," Nathaniel agreed. "Gold makes honest men thieves."

"Do you share your colleague's cynicism, Ecolitan FerroMaine?" Walkerson turned to Sylvia.

"I'd have to say that Professor Whaler is being extraordinarily polite in his phrasing. Governments prefer to spend lives rather than credits." Sylvia took a sip of her liftea.

"About this survey," ventured Walkerson after the silence had filled the lounge. "Where will you begin?"

"With a quick survey of the transportation infrastructure, the broad infrastructure, and that of energy supplies and distribution."

"Dare you say you won't find anything out of the ordinary for a place just out of planforming. I'd guess it shouldn't take you that long." Walkerson offered a chuckle. "You're high-priced, and I'd wager chat means you'll hurry."

"It can be difficult to estimate a timetable even before the field work begins." Whaler smiled. "With the high cost of interstellar transport, we certainly can take the time necessary for a thorough effort. To do less would not be cost-effective, and as an economist . . ." He offered a shrug, trying to ignore the smothered smile from Sylvia.

"Of course, of course. We wouldn't expect anything less from the Institute and the Coordinate."

A woman in a green-and-maroon tunic appeared in the curtained doorway. "Any time you are ready, dinner is available."

"Old Reeves-Kenn sent over a side for dinner." Walkerson offered a strained grin. "I trust you two won't mind if I join you."

"Not at all." Sylvia returned his grin with a smile. "Not at all." The Port Chief rose and touched the back of Sylvia's chair. She let him slide it away from the table before rising in her dancer's gracefulness.

The dining room was almost the same in layout as the lounge, and as empty—except that the tables were set with antique silver, and more china. A small wilted green salad smothered in oil lay beside each

diner's plate, and on each place was a green napkin. Nathaniel slipped his napkin onto his lap, feeling the slickness of crude polyester fabric. .

The serving woman slipped large china platters before the three, beginning with Sylvia. On each plate were heaped slabs of rare meat and an old white lump that looked like a fallen soufflé.

"Local beef," said Walkerson. "Say it's better than the best even on Olympia. One of the few organics that people will pay to transship, and not much of that."

Nathaniel nodded. "There never was much bulk cargo traffic, and it seems like there's even less these days." He cut a small bite of the beef, and chewed, not that he had to work, since the meat practically melted in his mouth.

"It's all ultra-tech or information technology traffic. We wouldn't have that except jumpshifting's a few hundred years faster than beam traffic."

"Why was Artos planformed in the first place?" asked Sylvia. "The records aren't exactly clear . . ."

Walkerson finished a mouthful of the beef. "Who could say these days? It was started back under the House of Spenser, when there was the hope that the Barna-BarItrop jump generators would allow cheaper travel. They did . . ."

"But not enough," finished Nathaniel. "Then land got so expensive on New Avalon, Hibernia, and the older planets that the agricultural processors pushed for Artos."

"Foods won't pay for planofarming. They can't even be shipped profitably, except as a luxury good, and you can't ship enough beef or anything agricultural to create a fraction of the revenue-" said Sylvia.

"Perhaps it was the way of life," offered Nathaniel, glancing at the Avalonian.

"Right on, professor. The old agricultural types ran the system, and they persuaded the High Council . . . and the rest is history." Walkerson hacked off another chunk of beef and chewed heartily.

"They are not so powerful . . . now?"

"No," mumbled Walkerson. "High-tech interests, like everywhere . . . they hold the High Council now, not that you could prove it."

Nathaniel wanted to nod and shake his head simultaneously. As with everything else he'd ever done for the Institute, the complexity was building faster than his understanding.

"With the current emphasis on direct-data injection," Sylvia said, "I imagine that agricultural concerns on a planet barely postplanofarming take a low priority in Camelot."

"You saw the state of our groundcar," pointed out Walkerson. "It's like that with everything we can't manufacture here. Some of the locals, like Reeves-Kenn, are putting credits into developing more of the infrastructure, but there aren't enough credits in a small economy to do everything that's needed, and Camelot hasn't cared for generations."

Nathaniel nodded and took a last bite of the tender beef. Hungry as he had been, he found himself unable to finish the huge slab of meat on his plate. Sylvia had eaten less than half of hers. Walkerson had left nothing, not even the soggy mass meant to have been a facsimile of ancient York pudding.

"You didn't finish it all. Good beef, Reeves-Kenn has. Right proud of it, he is, and with reason. His grandsire was the first to make it work-started with embryos, he did, and made a fair shilling when there wasn't much else edible but hothouse sawdust and plastieframe soy."

"He sounds very successful," observed Sylvia. "He is. The family owns twenty percent of ConOne here. The hydrocarb facility is mostly theirs, although a bunch of the other growers put up the credits, too."

"I had thought we might look at that facility. It might be a good place to commence." Nathaniel leaned back in his chair, feeling far too full. He'd barely gotten his weight back under control from the beating it had taken on the Old Earth mission, and that probably because of forced starvation in the Institute hospital, and here he was, overeating again.

"As you wish, professors." Walkerson glanced toward the archway.

Nathaniel took the hint. "We must not keep you too long, and we do need to

recuperate ourselves."

"You've been most kind," added Sylvia. "Only my job. Put I should be running along. Madeline will be worrying." The Port Chief smiled and stood.

So did the Ecolitans, and the three walked slowly out of the apparently empty dining room and toward the main entrance.

"The replacement groundcar will be here tomorrow after breakfast. It's at your disposal until you leave, professors." Walkerson bowed. "A pleasure meeting you both, and I would hope to see your report, once it's completed."

"We will ensure you are among the first to see the infrastructure report." Nathaniel inclined his head.

With an overly broad smile, the Avalonian nodded and turned.

After the door closed, Nathaniel turned to Sylvia. "Tired? Ready to get some sleep?"

"Yes and yes."

The two climbed the stairs side by side, not meeting or passing anyone.

"I get the feeling that we're the only guests."

"I'm sure we are," Nathaniel answered. "I don't imagine Artos has that many official government-sanctioned visitors." He paused before opening the unlocked door to Sylvia's room, then held it, ' and stepped into the room behind her. "It was a good meal, better than the tea." He fingered his chin, not quite looking at her in the dimness-the only light diffused into the room from the hall lamps through the half-open door. Sylvia pressed the plate at the base of the lamp on the table, set her datacase down, and turned back toward him. "And?"

"The beef-it shouldn't be that good, but I couldn't say why."

"You're thinking like an economist, trying to quantify everything."

"I am one, you know."

"A very good one, according to the official bio."

"A tired one," he admitted, closing the door to the corridor, sliding the boll to the locked position, and looking toward the half-open door that joined the rooms. "Me, too."

"Leave the door unlocked-the one . . ."

"I know which one you had in mind." She raised her fine, dark eyebrows. "I worry."

Sylvia hugged him, then kissed his cheek. "I know, and you're right, and I wont lock it. But I'm tired, and . . . lets leave it there right now. Please?"

Nathaniel hugged her. "All right." He let go slowly, and her lips brushed his cheek again.

"Living happily ever after doesn't work as easily as the trideos say," she offered with a smile.

"I'm discovering that." He touched her hand, squeezed it briefly.

"Good night." Sylvia's words were warm, but firm. He closed the door between the rooms gently and then groped his way to the light, shaking his head as he

did. Stupid! He was behaving like a love-besotted bull, and it could get him killed. He set down his datacase on the table and looked to the bed where he'd left his field pack.

It had been searched, as he'd expected, and not well. Later, with the lights out, Nathaniel lay back on the too-soft bed, simultaneously appreciating the cool air provided by the antique air conditioning and ignoring the continual whirring.

They'd been on Artos less than a day, and already someone had targeted them, with a well-planned "accident." Unlike the assassination attempt he'd weathered on his first day in New Augusta on Old Earth, which had been half attempt and half warning, the groundcar accident had been no warning. Then, neither had the attempt in Harmony.

Why? What was it that they weren't supposed to find-or see? And how many other accidents were waiting to happen? What could possibly be hidden on a colony planet barely out of planofarming? It couldn't be anything obviously technological or military. EDI concentrations could be spotted from orbit, and would be all too apparent. Besides which, the planet clearly didn't have the industrial basis to support a military establishment, and, even if it did. New Avalon certainly had the right to put military establishments wherever it pleased.

Rebels? That didn't make sense, either. The government wouldn't allow a survey if it were trying to hide a rebellion, and would have asked directly for assistance if it weren't. Then, was there an outside influence that New Avalon couldn't afford to note publicly? That didn't make sense. At least, he didn't feel it did, even if Artos did happen to be the key to controlling the Three System Bulge.

Or were Sylvia and the Prime right? Was someone out to get him? Or the Institute?

He shook his head slowly. He just wasn't that important. Anyone doing the "survey" would have been targeted. Wouldn't they? He blinked, then yawned. Finally, he closed his eyes.

IX

In the morning, another pale green groundcar waited in the shade of the portico of the Guest House, the window of the driver's side open. A round-faced young man, black-haired and clean-shaven, sat behind the wheel, his eyes on the doors.

As the two Ecolitans stepped outside, the driver bounded out of the car and stepped around the bonnet to greet them. "Sirs! I'm Glubb Bagot, and the chief sent me to be your driver." The young man wore the white shorts, socks, and shoes of the port authority, but a .green-and-white striped uniform shirt.

"Nathaniel Whaler, and this is Ecolitan Sylvia Ferro-Maine." Nathaniel tried not to wrinkle his nose at the pungency of the Artosan atmosphere-or was it because the Guest House was downwind of some industrial or agricultural facility?

"The chief said you were in charge, professors. Where do you want to go?" Bagot offered an open smile.

"The synde bean fields, to see some in all stages, and from thence to the processing facility."

"Lots of bean fields, professor. They start over there, and they go for kilos in every direction." The driver gestured out past the portico and in the general westward direction. Between the edge of the road and the field, less than a hundred meters from the west side of the Guest House, two men worked on a fuel-burning tractor in the clear morning light.

Although his eyes followed Bagot's gesture, Nathaniel was well aware that his belt detector pulsed. He and Sylvia exchanged glances. More surveillance, but who . . . and why? Those handling the spying had to be locals; they were too obvious to be anything else, and that meant the Prime had been right about the study not being entirely desired by New Avalon-or by someone.

"Are there more toward Lanceville? Or are the majority farther out?"

"Some in just about every direction, sir." Glubb Bagot offered another guileless smile.

"Start toward Lanceville." Holding his datacase in his right hand, Nathaniel opened the rear door with his left, letting the detector scan the groundcar, but no energy flows beyond the normal registered.

With a bored expression, Sylvia slipped inside, sliding across the worn plastic to seat herself behind the driver and letting her datacase rest on her lap. Nathaniel took the other side of the rear seat, closing the door.

"Toward Lanceville it is, sirs." Glubb Bagot closed his own door and started the antique internal combustion engine. Gray smoke puffed from behind the boot.

The mechanical wheezing from under the bonnet, and the faint hint of air chat was lukewarm as opposed to hot, indicated that the groundcar possessed some rudimentary cooling system. Despite the comparatively lightweight greens, Nathaniel blotted his forehead even before the vehicle was on the permacrete headed eastward.

The low, dark green plants filled roughly half the fields on both sides of the narrow road. In those fields not filled with beans grew falfamut, the legumelike nitrogenand soil-fixing plant that also doubled as animal fodder. The combination provided an effective two-crop rotation that continually strengthened the soil and the atmosphere-provided that the rotation was equal, not something that always happened.

Ahead, Nathaniel could see a low and irregular skyline, shapes in various shades of gray-Lanceville.

"If you would pull over and halt here?" Nathaniel ventured. "Sir?"

"Over by the field side," the sandy-haired Ecolitan said. "You halt the groundcar so I might inspect the beans."

"Yes, sir." A faintly quizzical expression crossed the young drivers face.

Once the car rumbled to a stop, Nathaniel slipped out and walked over to the

row of synde beans, bending and studying the narrow, dark green leaves and clusters of greenish purple globes. The globes seemed the same as those varieties he'd seen at the Institute in his training years. Still, with a quick motion he flicked the tiny vidimager from his sleeve and, as he touched a leaf or two gently, recorded a series of images for future study.

Nathaniel walked back to the car, nodded to Sylvia, and then asked Bagot, "Are they harvesting anywhere?" He took out the large green kerchief and blotted his sweating forehead once more.

"Up near the lower Reeves-Kenn spread, I heard. That's a good hour."

"Fine. That will be fine." The Ecolitan stuffed the overlarge kerchief back in his pocket. "You're in charge." With a quick look up and down the empty permacrete strip, Bagot eased the groundcar one hundred eighty degrees back in the direction that they had come, easing the speed up, enough so that Nathaniel could actually feel a greater flow of cool air from the overworked cooling unit. "How long have you been on Artos, Bagot?" asked Nathaniel.

"All my life, sir. Father worked for the Port Authority, too."

"I imagine you've seen a great deal of change."

"Not really, sir. Most of the bare ground is gone . . ."The driver paused as the green bus from the landing field lumbered past and eastward toward Lanceville. "Fewer shuttle drops these days."

"That usually happens when a planet first comes out of planoforming," Sylvia said. "Sure has happened here, miss . . . I mean, professor. Except for a few times a year, like last winter when the new ag stuff came in, it's slow. Most times, its weeks between ships. Sometimes months."

"New seed types?" asked Sylvia, "Or technology-transfer templates?"

"I wouldn't know. Probably seed or clone stuff. We don't have many manufacturing places that can take tech-templates. I heard Chief Walkerson talking about that once."

"They do on New Avalon," Nathaniel prompted. "I would consider it only prudent to invest in a limited capacity on Artos."

"Limited is right, sir. We're most limited here. The ocean fellows-the Evanston family-they've put in a small tech-forming facility in Lanceville, but it's all for ocean farming. Lord, I'm tired of algaeburgers."

"I understand you do not sample the beef of the Reeves-Kenn establishment?" asked Nathaniel.

"Sample? That beef is for them and for the aristos and any outsystem wealthy enough to pay for it."

"But they do not have a tech-transfer facility," mused Sylvia. "Don't want one, to my way of thinking. They still use horses on the wilder parts of their spread. That'd be what Jem is doing right about now."

"Jem?"

"My older brother. He's a rover for George Reeves-Kenn." Bagot shook his head.

For a time, Nathaniel just watched the fields blur past, noting that the vast majority were either synde beans or falfamut, although they did pass fields

of other crops he did not immediately recognize, except for the ripening wheat. Then there were the tall green plants. "Is that corn?"

"Maize? That's the tall stuff. We don't grow a lot of it. According to something I saw, it really upsets the water balance, and you've got to grow falfamut for three years out of four. Most of its for the export beef-Reeves-Kenn outfit."

"Chief Walkerson said there was a lot of that exported."

"Not so much as when my dad worked at the port. I guess transstellar rates have gone up or something. Jem told me that last Boxing Day."

A long groundlorry, its gray metal cab pitted and rusted, rumbled past them, headed back toward Lanceville, three hopper pods on its flat trailer. The car swayed in the rush of air from the ag-carrier.

"Really moving, he is." Bagot shrugged. "Haste, it makes waste," pontificated Whaler. "They think they own the permacrete. I suppose they do. Not many groundcars left."

"Were there many when you were young?" asked Sylvia. "More than now, but I don't guess there were ever a lot. My dad had one, because he was a checker, and he got called at odd hours. Maybe I thought everyone had one."

Nathaniel kept a pleasant smile on his face as they sped westward and as a second lorry whooshed past heading eastward and rocked the car once more.

The dust rising over the fields indicated the harvest efforts long before the groundcar was close enough for the Ecolitans to see the actual machinery. Sicklike blades cut the plants perhaps twenty centimeters above ground. Oil pods and greenery dropped into a hopper-sorter, and from the hopper-sorter dropped a dark powder, the residue of the vegetation, while the pods went into the cargo bin. Behind the harvester-sorter came a cultivatorshredder that turned the soil and shredded the bean roots and

stalks into fragments then reburied them, and seeded the falfamut for the next growing cycle. The machinery looked as ancient as the groundcar from which they observed it.

"Let us travel to those unharvested fields there." Nathaniel gestured to the west.

"We're getting low on fuel, professor. I hadn't thought we'd be traveling this far from Lanceville."

"A little farther, a kilo or so, that will not make much difference, I do not believe."

"Yes, sir."

Another kilo farther west, Nathaniel cleared his throat. "If you would halt again . . . ?" Nathaniel offered a smile. "Of course." Bagot slowed the groundcar gently. Nathaniel stepped out, still carrying the ubiquitous datacase, wishing he could have both hands free. Sylvia followed him as he walked from the shoulder of the road toward the nearest row of synde beans.

The dull thwop thwop thwop of a high-flying flitter drew the Ecolitans eyes from the white permacrete to the eastern sky. Was the flitter tracking them? Why would someone on an energy-poor planoformed globe use a flitter? He shook

his head slowly. Clearly, he hadn't escaped from his indoctrination of paranoia from his months on Old Earth.

Sylvia's eyes followed his, but she smiled faintly. "Its nice to have friends." The word "friends" was gently stressed. Was she right-or even more paranoid than Nathaniel? He bent down and studied the closest row of beans. Were the globes more purple than the varieties he'd seen at the Institute years earlier? Again he slipped out the miniature vidimager and recorded a series of images for comparison and study. "I take it they're not just beans?" murmured Sylvia. "Don't know yet. I have some suspicions." He laughed. "I always do-except about you."

"You had suspicions about me. You just didn't listen to. them-until you realized you could be in deep trouble."

"Good thing you were ethical."

"I wasn't. If I'd been ethical . . . I wouldn't be here."

"Ethical in a deeper sense," he offered. "No. I wasn't that either, dear professor, and I'm glad I wasn't. Even after trying to make sense of your . . . morality . . . I'm not unhappy to be here."

"I am glad of that." Nathaniel fingered the thin, dark green bladed bean leaf a last time, fixing the image in his mind, then straightened. He still felt Sylvia was far more ethical than she credited herself as being, but the continuing questions about his morality bothered him. How many other cultural and background conflicts were likely to surface as they worked together? The two walked back to the groundcar and Bagot. "The hydrocarb processing plant is where we should go next," announced Nathaniel, flourishing the enormous kerchief and blotting his damp brow as he stood in the heat by the open door. "That's back in Lanceville, sir."

"Is there anything of a transport nature here, or around here?" asked the sandy-haired Ecolitan.

"Ah . . . no, sir." Bagot shrugged. "You're in charge, and the chief said not to worry about the fuel bill-but. . . oh, well, they'll comp the tank at the plant."

Bagot almost flew the groundcar back eastward, passing two of the big lorries along the way. With the speed, the cooling system actually reduced the interior temperature to a semblance of comfort, although when Nathaniel touched the window, he could feel the exterior heat.

The synde bean processing plant looked like a processing facility, with windowless and blotched ferrocrete walls. A thin line of steam swirled from one roof pipe, while a grayish mist seemed to wreath the entire building. Although the facility was set in the midst of level ground, fields alternating in synde beans and falfamut with infrequent swatches of maize, the whole facility seemed to descend eastward in blocky steps from the raised western end that appeared to hug an artificial mound.

As Bagot slowed the groundcar, they passed a side road with a small sign bearing a single word: Haulers. Just beyond the permacrete, a groundlorry strained to climb a long inclined ramp toward a series of loading docks that protruded from the elevated west end of the facility.

R-K Fuels-ConOne Facility announced the sign by the main entrance.

"I do not suppose that R-K stands for Reeves-Kenn, does it?" asked Nathaniel.

"It probably does. They own most of ConOne." The driver offered another of his guileless smiles. "Where might you want to go?"

"Wherever the office or supervisor might be. It would be best to inform them."

"As you think best, sir." Bagot eased the groundcar to a halt by a double door at the eastern end of the facility.

"Thinking is far indeed from knowing, and he who knows nothing doubts nothing."

"What?" muttered Sylvia.

"A proverb spoken is a proverb learned." After considering for a moment, Nathaniel finally touched several points on his datacase, then left it on the floor of the rear seat. It would take more than Bagot had to open the case, and the Ecolitan didn't like the idea of entering a strange building without both hands being free. Sylvia frowned momentarily, but followed his example.

Several vehicles were clustered near a smaller side loading dock. One of the men who had been working on the tractor outside the Guest House stood by a small groundlorry, wearing a green deliveryman's jumpsuit. Nathaniel checked his belt multitector. Besides the electronic gear in the equipment belt, the deliveryman carried at least one stunner and a needier, according to the Ecolitan's belt detector.

More interesting was the pseudodeliveryman's focus. "He's not watching us," murmured Sylvia as they walked toward the double door. "He's focused on the plant."

Nathaniel nodded, then held the left door for Sylvia. "Always the gentleman. I could hold it for you, you know."

"You could, but this impression works better." His words were low, and he presented a faint smile. "Seeing an attractive woman first . . ."

"And I thought you cared."

Nathaniel suppressed a wince, stepping inside and waiting a moment for his sun-adjusted vision to readjust to the comparative gloom of the building.

"Sorry. That was a low blow, and . . ." Sylvia stopped as a blocky man in a maroon singlesuit marched down the dingy, half-lit corridor toward the two. The corridor smelled like diesel or some variant.

"Greetings!" called Nathaniel. "We are here on behalf of the Ecolitan Institute. We're doing an economic survey--"

"This is a private facility, and we're not open--where did you say you were from?" A frown crossed the black-haired man's bronze face, and his eyes took in the green uniforms.

"The Ecolitan Institute on Accord. We're doing an infrastructure survey here on Artos. I am Nathaniel Firstborne Whaler, and this is Ecolitan Professor Sylvia Ferro-Maine."

"Marcus Stapleson-Mares, facility shift manager." The dark brows furrowed.

"Don't suppose you'd be here from NewAvalon?"

"We arrived yesterday from Harmony, through a transship or two."
"What do you want?"

"We had hoped for an informal tour of the facility. We are not interested in processes or anything proprietary," said Nathaniel.

"Were detailing energy flows and how they impact the infrastructure economics," added Sylvia.

Stapleson-Mares glanced from one Ecolitan to the other. "Wait . . . follow me, please."

"Of course." Nathaniel inclined his head. They walked silently down the corridor into a small office

with little more than a desk, three utilitarian plastic chairs, and a row of antique filing cabinets that covered the entire outside wall, except for the space for a single narrow floor-to-ceiling flexiplast window. The desk had only a narrow flat screen-blankupon it.

Stapleson-Mares tapped the screen and then several studs on the compact keyboard on the screen frame.

"Yes?" came a crackly voice as an image swirled into place on the screen.

"Boss . . . there's two professors in green here. Claim they're Ecolitans doing some sort of economic survey,"

"Put them in front of the screen, Marcus, if you will." The voice was hoarse, almost raspy.

The shift manager nodded at the Ecolitans, and they stepped in front of the screen.

"Nathaniel Whaler, and this is Sylvia Ferro-Maine." For a moment, the thin gray-haired man studied the two, his eyes flicking sideways several times as if comparing the faces to a flat picture or solideo cube.

"You look like the folks old Walk said were coming, and I can't see as there'd be two sets of you running around in those strange greens. I'm George. What do you want at the facility?"

"If it meets your approval, just a general tour, and some basic figures," answered Nathaniel. "We would like to see the process flow, and how the hydrocarbon feedstocks are fed in, processed, and distributed. A general idea of the energy equivalence of the output would be appreciated, and the general sectoral usages of that output."

"In short, how the facility works, how much raw energy we take in, and how much of the fuel goes where?"

"That would be the general idea," Nathaniel admitted. "Where else might you be visiting?"

"Every significant energy and transport producer and consumer on Artos, as we can. The wider the net, the better the information."

Georges weathered hand touched his chin, and the faint hiss of static mixed with what seemed a sigh. The two in greens waited. "Marcus?"
"Sir?"

"Tell Wystuh-MacDonald and Hensburg-Kewes that the Ecolitans are here, and have Jimmy give them the standard tour the one that he gives the Empees when they come. You can give them the briefing packets. They're in the red folders in the second-"

"Yes, sir. I know."

The green eyes turned back to Nathaniel. "I trust you'll find every number you could possibly desire in the packets, and some you won't." A wintry smile crossed the man's face. "What have you seen on Artos?"

"Little besides the port, the Guest House, and the fields have we viewed thus far." Nathaniel inclined his head. "I take it you haven't seen our spread?"

"Ah . . . unless it constituted some of the fields . . ."

"Why don't you come out here the day after tomorrow? There's more to the economics and infrastructure of Artos than energy and transport." The smile warmed slightly. "Get a flitter trip from Walkerson. Its a lot faster."

"If that would not be a difficulty. . ."

"No difficulty at all. Might save us all some grief. Rather have you get the whole picture. You Ecolitans have a lot of clout with your reports, I know." The green eyes flicked toward Marcus Stapleson-Mares. "Give them the direction sheet, too, the one with the beacon codes."

"Yes, boss."

"Have a good tour."

"Thank you."

"Thank you." Sylvia's words lagged Nathaniel's only fractionally. The flat screen blanked to a dark gray.

"If you'll just wait here, I'll be getting Jimmy." The shift manager glanced toward the door. "Fine. Fine."

Nathaniel studied the office for a time, then watched Sylvia as she slowly walked around the office looking carefully at everything. He enjoyed the grace other movements.

A wiry man hurried into the officer from the corridor. "Jimmy Hensburg-Kewes. Quality control and plant safety. I also get to be the designated tour guide. Marcus told me you're here for the grand tour." A smile crinkled the safety officers face. "We had asked for a general overview," ventured Nathaniel. "It'll be pretty general. Most of the lines after the ovens are closed. You can follow the piping, but all you'll see is the equipment." Sylvia smiled brightly.

Stapleson-Mares reappeared. "You wanted the data packages?"

"Could we get them after the tour?" asked Nathaniel. "Of course, sirs." The shift manager inclined his head. "We'll start at the loading docks," Hensburg-Kewes said, then turned and stepped into the corridor. The Ecolitans followed.

The west end loading docks were just that-docks where the bean pods were dumped into bins that fed them into the shredders and crushers.

"Pretty simple operation," said the safety officer. "The pods are unloaded and shredded. From here they go into the ovens. At the end of the ovens are the

big screens . . ."

Sylvia studied the inclined trough that vibrated just enough to shift both pulp and liquid down its length into metal-clad ovens that radiated heat even through the heavy walls. "How do you heat the ovens?"

"Raw hydrocarb from the stage-two gross filters. It's fed back. We have to use wider nozzles, but it works, and we don't have to worry about conversion losses."

"What is your conversion ratio?"

"We do pretty well. About eighty percent of the pods are usable, but only about half is hydrocarb oil. We get hammered on the stuff that gets reformulated for flitters, but all the lorries run on filtered oil. Fuel economy's half, two-thirds that of fossilized petroleum, but you can't regrow that. 'Sides," added the wiry man with a grin, "we don't have any on Artos."

After the ovens, the raw hydrocarb fluid was carried through two parallel, heavy metal pipes each half a meter in diameter, which climbed at a thirty degree angle. Less than ten meters beyond the ovens, the pipes branched and distributed the feedstock into eight large, apparently identical tanks.

"Second stage filters."

From the base of the tanks the smaller exit pipes merged back into three pipes—two large lines and a smaller one. The smaller line ran back toward the ovens.

Hensburg-Kewes gestured to the right where the two large lines ran down the center of what was essentially a covered walkway. "Now, we go to the filter building—that's where we separate the keroil and base. Centrifuge. Crude, but it works."

The three followed the walkway and pipes for nearly fifty meters. The safety officer opened a heavy door, holding it until Nathaniel and Sylvia had passed through. He closed it with a thud.

Unlike the equipment in the earlier sections of the plant, the filter building appeared newer—and far cleaner. The stainless steel of the four centrifuges glimmered in the indirect light from the fifteen-meter-high ceiling. The permacrete floor was smooth and dustless. Each of the three outside walls had a door set exactly in the middle, and by each door was racked a set of large chemical extinguishers and a heatsuit.

For a moment, the only sound was that of a high-pitched, continuous whine.

Nathaniel walked up to the bright red line on the floor, set almost five meters back from the centrifuge, and studied the equipment, noting the apparent tap levels and separate off-feeds. The safety officer gestured toward the centrifuge. "This is the real heart of the plant."

Behind him, Sylvia appeared to be checking the paint of the outside wall. Nathaniel tightened his lips, stepping back and moving toward Sylvia, who was frowning. "Really watch this, we do, sirs—"

Nathaniel felt, rather than heard, the explosion that slammed across his back like a torch, carrying him toward the wall. He danced sideways against the heat and grabbed Sylvia, holding his breath and trying to cushion the blow as they were dashed against the wall.

Somehow, he managed to struggle along the wall to the exit door, and thrust Sylvia out before him. Crummpptt!

The force of the fire and explosion propelled him after her, and he staggered across the rougher exterior permacrete. They turned.

Flames belched from the open emergency door. A jet of white-hot flame burned through the plastic roofing of the synde bean filter station, and black smoke swirled into the blue-green sky.

The crackling of the flames rose higher. Abruptly, there was a shrilling hiss, and white foam cascaded from the walls. The entire small building was almost instantly enshrouded in a cocoon of foam, although the plumes of greasy smoke spread skyward before diffusing into a haze.

A handful of figures in heatsuits scurried inside the filter building. Shortly, one of them brought out a limp and charred figure into the pitiless sunlight. "Let's see your back," suggested Sylvia abruptly. "I think it's all right."

"Let me see." Nathaniel shrugged.

"Your greens look untouched." A hint of amazement colored her voice.

"Very good fabric." She shook her head. "Was that why you wanted me in greens?"

"One of the reasons."

"And the other?"

"You look good in them."

One of the suited figures pulled back his hood and trudged across the permacrete toward the Ecolitans, sweat and grime streaking his face and dark hair.

"Terribly sorry, sirs." Stapleson-Mares wiped his damp forehead. "Terribly sorry. The heat detectors should have registered sooner." He shook his head. "Poor Jimmy. He took most of the blast."

"He seemed most knowledgeable," Nathaniel answered. "No one knew the system better. It's hard to believe." The shift manager shook his head dolefully. "Hard to believe." He straightened. "Do you have any idea what happened?"

"No," answered Nathaniel. "We had just entered the filtering area, and Mr. Hensburg-Kewes was explaining about the centrifuges. Then . . . I felt a blast of heat . . . I looked for him, but I could not see him."

"You wouldn't have, not the way . . . never mind." The manager shook his head.

"I take it that there are problems with the filter operation?" asked Sylvia.

"Recurring problems?"

"How-yes."

"It's a separate building almost," Sylvia answered the unspoken question, "and you've obviously taken a number of precautions."

"We've still got impurities in the soil, and the beans were genetically designed for

both cleansing and hydrocarbon output. Easier to filter . . . but were using high-speed centrifuges because its faster and a lot cheaper for the speed. Diffusion would be even harder to handle, and this is 'the only facility on ConOne.'" Stapleson-Mares wiped his forehead again with the back of his hand.

The odor of chemicals and ashes drifted across the pavement on the light wind. Nathaniel eased out the large kerchief and blotted his own forehead, then replaced it in his pocket. "There is one on the second continent?"

"No. It's too far south and too cold. ConTrio has a facility, but it's only got a capacity a third of ours." The dark-haired manager glanced at the foam-covered structure. "The fire shouldn't have gotten that far. That's what the alarms and foam systems are for."

A green groundcar eased around the end of the plant and headed toward the group on the permacrete. "Yours?"

"I believe so," answered Nathaniel.

The groundcar drew up beside the three. Bagot peered out the now-open drivers window. "Are you all right, sirs?"

"We have survived," Nathaniel responded, pulling out the large kerchief again and blotting away yet more sweat and soot. "I should have asked. Is there anything we can do? Any information we could supply?"

"If there is, I know where to find you." The shift manager inclined his head. "If you don't mind, I'll have someone bring over those packets later. Right now, I need to talk to George and let Lindy know about Jimmy. They've got three daughters. The oldest is eight."

"I don't envy you," said Sylvia. "Is there anything I could do?" Her voice was gentle.

"No, professor." The shift managers voice softened. "There isn't. Appreciate your asking. We've lost a dozen men over the years here, but it's never easy."

"I am sorry it happened, but I do not know what occurred," added Nathaniel. "One moment we were looking at the centrifuges . . . then . . ." He shrugged.

"It can only take a moment. That's why . . . why . . ." Stapleson-Mares shook his head. "We thought we'd covered everything."

Nathaniel waited. So did Sylvia.

"There's nothing you two can do." The dark-haired man forced a wry expression. "Not good at dealing with this. If you

need anything more, or if you remember something that might help, please let me know."

"We will," promised Sylvia.

Nathaniel turned to the manager. "I fear I am famished. Is there somewhere in Lanceville where the food is recommended?"

"We're not much for gourmets," said Stapleson-Mares coolly. "Elizabeths has good food. Not fancy, but good."

"Thank you." Nathaniel smiled politely. "Thank you."
"Take care," added Sylvia softly.

"Thank you, professor." Stapleson-Mares did not look at Nathaniel, even after the two Ecolitans had entered the groundcar.

"Lanceville," said Nathaniel. "Yes, sir." Bagot's voice was formal.

Nathaniel held back the wince. He'd probably overplayed it . . . unless he happened to be right.

X

The metal-poverty of Artos became more pronounced as the

groundcar neared Lanceville. Every structure was comprised either of stone, brick, or synthetic hydrocarb building sheets-or some combination of the three-and the majority of roofs were of the faded red clay tiles similar to those on the Guest House.

"Where might the road lead?"

"If we took it another kilo, we'd be at the R-K piers, professor."

Nathaniel nodded-Lanceville was a port city, both for sea and space. He gestured toward a large blue building ahead to the left. "What might that be?"

"That's the Blue Lion. Most visitors, except for Empees or folks like you, stay there," offered Bagot. "We'll pass it on the way."

"Empees?" questioned Sylvia. "Members of Parliament . . . from Camelot." Bagot flushed.

Facing west, the Blue Lions facade sported four levels fronted with tinted glass that stretched perhaps one hundred meters. The hotel was half that in depth, and was separated from the street by fifty meters of browning grass. The blue-tinted glass panels of the facade were smeared with dust and rain-splotches. On the north side was a carpark with perhaps a half-dozen vehicles. Scarcely the outback station cited by Walkerson, not unless an outback horse station were a great deal more on Artos than the name implied.

"There are not many visitors at this time of year?" asked Nathaniel.

"Not many at any time anymore, except for the Agricultural Exposition. The Ag Expo's the big thing in the fall. We get people from all over-Halstan, the Fuarda-they look stiff in those gray outfits. You name the system . . . someone's here."

"Even from Accord?"

"I've seen people in greens like yours," Bagot said. "Didn't know where they came from, though."

Nathaniel glanced at the first cross street past the Blue Lion, as wide as the highway from the Guest House and shuttle port. "Where might that go?"

"That's the road out to Gerick."

"What's in Gerick?" prompted Sylvia. "The big fusactor stations there, and the facility where they make all the synthetic panels for building. Some other

stuff, too."

"Other stuff?" Sylvia's tone was gentle, but persistent. "I don't know everything, professor, but there's the permacrete place and a place that makes electrical stuff. That's what the chief said. And a bunch of job shops-plumbing, pipes . . ." Bagot shrugged. As the groundcar squeaked to a stop outside a small freestanding building with small windows and a double door-synthplast treated to look like oak-he added, "Here's Elizabeth's."

Nathaniel slipped out and held the door for Sylvia. He carried his datacase. So did she.

"If it's all right with you, professors, I'll be back in a standard hour." Bagot looked expectantly from the open window.

"Fine that would be," answered Nathaniel. With a nod, Bagot was gone.

"Did you have to be such an ass?" whispered Sylvia as they stepped toward the maroon awning. "That man was killed."

"I'd rather have you be the good person," Nathaniel murmured.

"Why does anyone have to be the bad one?"

"We already are to someone. That means there's no way they'll see us both as nice or acceptable."

"You really can play the ass. If I didn't know better . . . those proverbs-where did you dig them up?"

"The Dictionary of Proverbs. I made some modifications." The hint of a frown crossed her face as Nathaniel opened the door, nodding his head. Yellow polyester cloth covered the eight tables in the brightly lit room. Five tables were filled. The air carried the odor of fresh bread and spices. "Smells good," murmured Sylvia.

He glanced across the small dining area. Three of the tables held couples-neither young nor old. One held three men in the shorts and formal shirts of Avalon, and one held an older man who sported a brush mustache-in a grayish singlesuit. Only the three men looked up at their entry.

A heavysset, gray-haired woman stepped out of the doorway that led to the kitchen and walked forward. "Two for luncheon?"

"Yes, please."

"You look familiar-or your uniforms do, but I can't place them," said the local, looking toward Sylvia.

"The Ecolitan Institute-Accord," said Sylvia, after a quick look at Nathaniel.

"That's a far jump from Artos. Might I ask what brings you here?"

"Were doing an economic study."

"Economists?" The server laughed as she gestured toward the corner table.

"You're almost too graceful to be an economist. You. . . never mind me. I chatter too much." As they seated themselves, she added, "The special today is basking-mod soufflé, and it's a good seafood soufflé. That's five and a half." With a smile, she inclined her head. "I'll get you some water. Would you like me to get you anything else to drink while you are looking over the menu?"

"Have you liftea? While it is not so good as your own, I fear . . ." Nathaniel shrugged,

"We can do liftea—and you're not alone in that, sir. And you?" She looked at Sylvia. "Real tea, if its not steeped quite forever."

"We can do that, too."

After the server left, Nathaniel studied the menu. "What are you having?" asked Sylvia.

"It appears I have a choice between algae protein and reformulated synde bean protein, disguised in some form or another."

"So it does. I'd bet the algae pasta tastes like pasta, though."

"I will throw myself on the mercy of the kitchen." He took out the overlarge kerchief and blotted his forehead.

"They may not have much mercy, especially if—" Sylvia's gray eyes glinted, but she broke off her sentence as the server neared.

The gray-haired woman set the tumblers—real glass—on the table and then the two mugs. "Have you decided?"

"What might be good?" he asked.

"It depends on what you like," answered the waitress. "Most outies like the spice dishes. Liz is good at disguising algae and bean protein. I've even used some of her tricks at home. That's those that don't take forever. The soufflé is good, but it is fish, and some don't like that."

"The special pasta," said Sylvia.

"The soufflé, with an extra side of the special sauce, if that is possible?"

"Its possible, and you won't regret it. Liz does good sauces." With a smile, the server was gone, only to return in moments with a small basket. "I forgot your breads." Nathaniel offered Sylvia the basket.

"They smell good." He hoped they tasted equally good.

The soufflé was fishy, but the extra tomato herb sauce helped disguise it, although he didn't finish everything, unlike Sylvia, who left none of the pasta.

"It was all very good." Nathaniel offered the twenty pound New Avalonian note to the server.

"It usually is," said the gray-haired woman as she made change with the oblong, off-red Avalonian notes and several coins. "We do hope you'll come again."

"Thank you," said Sylvia softly. "Good food is nourishment for the soul," he added. A nod, and the server slipped back toward the kitchen. "You remember what Stapleson-Mares said about Elizabeth's?" he asked, leaving the gratuity. All Avalonian planets retained the antique tradition, except it was more than a tradition, since it really represented the servers pay. "Oh . . . that the food was plain."

"Did this strike you as plain?" He rose. She shook her head with a smile as she slipped gracefully out of the chair.

"Does that mean he didn't want us here?"

"I don't know. I think it meant he was angry at you. Mostly, anyway." Sylvia tilted her head slightly in a pensive gesture.

Nathaniel could accept the anger, but he still wondered, even as his eyes lingered on Sylvia's profile, then toward the street outside.

Thwonkkkk! Nathaniel turned toward the sound of the horn. Bagot waved from where he was parked in the shade across the empty street. "Here, sirs!"

Nathaniel looked both ways out of habit, but the street was empty of traffic. A hundred meters south of Elizabeth's he saw a uniformed figure, or a guard of some sort, in a bright blue uniform, walking briskly around the corner. "What are you thinking?" asked Sylvia.

"Oh, I couldn't say. More of a feeling, but I can't place it. There's something . . ." He shook his head and followed her to the car.

"Might we see the piers?" asked the Ecolitan as he closed the leaf door and settled himself in the back next to Sylvia. "Anywhere you say."

A circular drive fronted the harbor, a drive constructed of heavy-duty permacrete and wide enough for three of the heavy ag-lorries side by side. But the sole vehicle in sight was theirs.

Bagot pulled up the groundcar in an empty carpark lot overlooking the water at the foot of the center pier. The R-K piers were just that-three stone piers jutting out into the gray waters of the harbor. Each pier was less than a hundred meters long and not more than twenty wide.

Nathaniel stepped out into the damp heat and swallowedhard-at the humidity and the acrid odors that swirled around him. He immediately turned and studied the streets behind him.

Three of the wide permacrete highways fanned out away from the harbor drive. As far as he could see, all were empty. Yet the pavement around the harbor bore the signs of hard usage.

Was Artos on a downhill economic slide-or were they missing something? And why had the study been commissioned? He turned back and let his eyes turn toward Sylvia. At the northernmost pier were two long barges. The eastern one, closest to the open sea, appeared half-loaded with plastic crates and containers. For a time Nathaniel studied the synthplast-hulled barges.

Then, Sylvia nodded abruptly and began to walk out on the empty center pier before her, datacase in hand. Nathaniel followed.

She paused at the end of the pier and glanced back north again. "That's heavy equipment of some sort."

"It could be." "

"Look at how high the second one rides compared to the first. Yet the cubage of the cargo isn't that great."

"It could be processing equipment."

"It could be."

"You don't think so."

"No . . . but its only a feeling."
"Let's walk over there."

They got halfway down the north pier before two men bearing antique slug-throwers appeared.

"Hold it, you two!" ordered the shorter man. He wore a maroon singlesuit with a plastic badge on the chest bearing the emblem of a long-horned bull and the initials R-K. "What is the difficulty?" asked Nathaniel. "This pier's closed." The stocky man gestured with the rifle. "We were only observing. We are conducting an economic study--"

"The pier's closed-study .or no study."
"This isn't a public pier?"

"Friend . . . you and your lady better go someplace else. This belongs to R-K. You want to look around-I need an authorization from Sebastion or George. No authorization, no look-see. That's it."

"As you wish." Nathaniel inclined his head and turned to Sylvia. "Shall we depart for more hospitable climes?"

"And none of your fancy words, outie." The Ecolitan glanced at the slug-thrower. While he doubted the stocky man could have stopped either Sylvia or him, there wasn't much point to pressing the issue. So he nodded again.

He could feel the eyes on their backs all the way down the pier.

"Score one or more for your feelings," he murmured. "You were itching to teach him some manners."

"I thought about it-but only for a moment. No percentage in it."

Bagot stood by the groundcar as they returned. "That Gershon-he's a nasty one."

"Gershon? Was he the short one?"

"That's him. Jem took him apart in school. Gershon tried to club him down from behind. Jem didn't take to that." Bagot smiled. "Gershon limped for years."

"Well . . . I can understand your brothers feelings," said Nathaniel, opening the rear door for Sylvia. "We might as well get moving, onto another aspect of infrastructures."

From the piers, they headed out past the Blue Lion toward the industrial facility the driver had mentioned. Both used their datacases for detailed notes.

The area was exactly as described, Nathaniel reflected on the way back to the Guest House-a fusactor power plant, lots of electrical distribution towers, and a dozen fabrication facilities of various shapes and sizes, all housed in structures built of grayed hydrocarb-based plastics.

The highway back to the Guest House was lined with synde bean fields as well, younger plants than those they had seen earlier, and seemingly of the more purple variety. The Ecolitan frowned, but said nothing, just watching until Bagot brought the car to a halt outside the Guest House. "We'll see you in the morning," noted Nathaniel. "Yes, sirs." Bagot nodded.

"You were quiet," Sylvia noted as they walked through the late afternoon heat

toward the Guest House door.

Nathaniel blotted his forehead again with the overlarge kerchief. "I was thinking. I'd really like to study those figures we didn't get-the energy usage ones." "

"They'd only be for transportation."

"But they'd tell a great deal." He paused and looked around the foyer of the Guest House-empty as usual.

Back in his room, after washing away the grime from his face and hands and sweeping the room with the detector, Nathaniel set the datacase on the table.

He slipped the tiny vidimager into the slot in the side of the datacase and called up the images, comparing one set of greenleaved beans to another. Different-subtly different, but different. Was that significant, or just good agricultural practice in having different variants available? The bean plants with the narrower leaves and darker shade seemed smaller. Did that mean they were an older variant? He wanted to shake his head. Instead, he flicked through the other images while appearing to riffle through the flimsies in the case in search of something. There was a rap on the door.

"Yes?" Nathaniel closed the datacase, stood, and walked to the door.

"Professor? There's a linkcall from Chief Walkerson for you." The Ecolitan opened the door.

A sandy-haired woman stood there, holding two red folders. "And these were dropped off for you as well."

"Thank you."

"You'll have to take the call below."

"I'll be right there." He stepped toward the connecting door, rapped, and peered into Sylvia's room.

"What was that?" Sylvia looked up from the table and her datacase.

"There's a call from the Port Chief. I'm headed downstairs to take it. You might look at the . . . material . . . in my case while I'm gone. Also we got folders from the hydrocarb facility." She raised her eyebrows, then nodded.

"I'll look at both."

"Good." He went back to the half-open hallway door, stepped out and closed it behind him, and followed the Artosan woman down to a small room off the front foyer, a room containing little more than a desk and two chairs.

"Right there." She pointed to the utilitarian gray unit on the corner of the desk.

Nathaniel sat and faced the screen where Robert Walkerson waited.

"Ecolitan Whaler. . . I'd heard from Bagot that there had been a little problem at the hydrocarb facility. Are you two all right?"

"We're fine. These things happen." Especially around me. "I was sorry that our escort was killed. Most sorry."

"They've had problems out there before, Ecolitan. I'm sure it had nothing to do with you."

"I would hope not. Still. . . it was most distressing." Nathaniel bobbed his head up and down. "Most distressing."

"I am sure the accident was just that. They've had more than a few at the facility. More than a few." Walkerson flashed a smile across the screen. "How are you doing with your study?"

"Just beginning. A good study is not done in a few days. And then we must cross-check the data and the correlations. Then. . . but you do not wish to hear about academic details."

"You can tell me about them tomorrow, if you wish." Walkerson paused. "There's a small get-together tomorrow night. It might do you and your . . . associate good to meet some of the locals you wouldn't run across otherwise. Nineteen hundred at the Blue Lion-the Unicorn Room. Not too formal."

"The best we have?" asked Nathaniel. "People will understand . . ."

"We have formal greens."

"Good-oh."

"By the way, could you lend us the use of a flitter?" asked Nathaniel. "For the day after tomorrow?"

"The day after tomorrow?"

"We have an invitation to visit the Reeves-Kenn operation."

"You must be special. Not many get those. Well . . . with our little get-together and his invitation, you'll be meeting most of those of import on Artos." Walkerson laughed briefly, then pulled at his whisker-shadowed chin. "I don't have many pilots right now."

"I am qualified in most flitter classes and types."

"Are you . . . I suppose you are, or you wouldn't be here. It's a Welk-Symmons, old model, like the Empires twelve twenties."

"I can handle that, but, if you would feel better I will stop by tomorrow for a check ride with your people."

"That might be better . . . I couldn't say what the differences

might be between our old vibrator and what you've piloted."

"Nine hundred?"

"That would be good. I'll have Jersek expecting you. Do you

need any gear?"

"Helmets, or headsets."

"We can take care of that. Good luck, and let me know-or

let Bagot know. He'll certainly relay any messages."

"Thank you." After the screen blanked, Nathaniel headed back up to his

room. Sylvia sat at his desk, looking through the case. She smiled.

"What did he want?"

"To express his concerns and to see how we were doing." A minute headshake greeted his not-quite-sardonic words. "Also to invite us to show of Four most formal wear at a small party for the local elite tomorrow evening."

"You must have been impressive." Nathaniel shook his head. "He wants us to meet someone."

"But he doesn't want to say so?" Nathaniel nodded. "So I took the opportunity to request a flitter for our trip out to visit George Reeves-Kenn."

"He wasn't too enthusiastic?"

"No. He said he was short of pilots, and I offered my own services for us. I'll have to get a check-out tomorrow morning."

"Is it wise?" she asked.

"Probably not, but I trust me flying more than I trust others."

"We don't have to go . . ." Nathaniel raised his eyebrows. "Not by flitter."

"If anyone's serious, all it would take would be a large lorry running over our groundcar, and no one would notice. Sabotaging a flitter would at least have a higher visibility."

Sylvia nodded slowly, then asked more loudly, "Are you ready to eat?"

His stomach growled. "I think I am." She smiled. "I heard chat."

Except for the serving woman-the same woman who had knocked on the door to tell Nathaniel about the linkcall-and then, the dining area was empty.

"Strange..."

Sylvia nodded. "There's more support for visitors than visitors. Unless its a seasonal thing."

"It could be."

The serving woman in the green-and-maroon tunic bowed slightly as they neared the only cable set for dining. "Beef stew this evening, professors." She straightened, and then inclined her head. "And a good stew it is."

"Thank you."

Nathaniel waited until the server had departed before saying, "Tomorrow, we should eat at the Blue Lion."

"You think the ambience . . . ?"

"I need a better feel. It's lovely here, but we're isolated."

"That's not an accident, either."

The sandy-haired server returned with wilted salads, followed by the stew. Nathaniel had to admit that the stew beef was more tender than some gourmet steaks he had enjoyed in many locales. The local lettuce of the salad tasted more like algae than algae.

They ate quietly, and Nathaniel found his thoughts flitting from one thing to another. Comparatively high-volume roads led to an almost empty port. A largish hotel for a backwater planet had an empty carpark. A relatively modern hydrocarb processing facility had a record of accidents-and one just happened to occur when they visited. A "plain-food" restaurant had anything but plain food. "You're thinking."

"Yes. I'd rather not say . . . yet. I'd like your thoughts after another day or two when we can compare notes. Don't want to influence your opinions."

"That makes sense." Sylvia paused. "The stew was good."

"Far better than the salad." They both laughed softly.

No one was in the front hall or lounge as they walked back upstairs and to their rooms in the dim light of twilight. Nathaniel opened the door to his room, ears alert, but the room was empty, and the detector, as usual, registered no activity.

Sylvia closed the door. "I know we didn't do that much besides look at things and take notes, but I am tired. And you need some rest before you do whatever you need to do with that flitter tomorrow morning."

"It's just a check-out."

"I just need some time to myself. I'll see you in the morning." She paused, her hand on the connecting door to her room.

"All right." He forced a smile. Still . . . she probably did need to be alone. They were spending almost every waking moment together, and there was probably such a thing as too much togetherness.

He flicked on the lights in his room, then sat down in front of the table that held the datacase. Someone had fumbled with it, but not opened it. He nodded, and touched the entry points. He had some reviewing and some thinking to do. Later, much later, Nathaniel slipped through the connecting door and into the bed. "What--"

He covered Sylvia's mouth, and whispered, "Shhh . . . I'm not up to anything nefarious, but we need to talk, and I'm not sure that eavesdropping isn't what's going on, rather than electronic surveillance."

"Oh . . . it strikes me as a convenient . . ."

"Sylvia..."

"I'm just teasing," she murmured. "You are so serious, and this is humorous, if you think about it."

Nathaniel had been too aware of her warmth and desirability to think about too many things simultaneously, but, with her words, he had to laugh softly. He couldn't get close to her romantically, and here he was in her bed.

"We've had two accidents' in as many days," he murmured, "and someone is watching everything we do."

"Are they watching us? Or are they watching for whoever's after us?"

"I don't know, but I think you're right." Nathaniel touched her shoulder, as if to hug her. "Careful..."

"There aren't many groundcars, but they're more fuel efficient than flitters. It's as if the permacrete highways are more like a heavy-duty transport system with all those big ag-lorries, but the numbers of lorries aren't enough to justify the investment," he pointed out softly, almost nuzzling her ear.

"Careful there." Sylvia inched back from him ever so slightly. "You're right about those highways, from what we've seen so far. There are five that come into Lanceville."

"And they have had heavy use."

"Do you think they were loading military equipment on the barge?"

"I don't think so. I'd guess, if I had to, that it was heavy industrial equipment."

"But Bagot was talking about how little real industrial equipment there was on Artos."

"That he had seen . . ."

"Oh... but why?"

"I don't know. There was also something that waitress said that bothered me."

"About the Ecolitan greens? You said it had been a long time--"

"Exactly. Well before her time. But a waitress wouldn't make chat up. It's a big Galaxy. . . but I don't know anywhere else where they wear greens beside Accord."

"I haven't studied uniforms and heraldry, but since the . . . Secession--"

"You almost said 'rebellion.' "

"I'm working on it," she whispered back. "The piers are short, but there are three. Why not-one long one?"

"You think that they're sending military equipment to different locales?" Sylvia asked. "I don't know why. It had crossed my mind."

"Private armies?"

"That could make it nasty."

"Nastier," she added. Nathaniel feared she was right.

"I did have one question," she whispered in his ear, after a silence. "Yes?"

"Where did you get that ridiculous kerchief?" Nathaniel almost choked. "It gives a certain effect."

"You might pull it off here, even. But I don't believe it. Even with those damned proverbs." Sylvia pursed her lips, and shook, holding in what Nathaniel suspected were giggles. "A professor I am and remain."

"Oh . . . please," she whispered. He shook his head, swallowing his laughter.

"Sweetheart," Sylvia said loudly enough for any possible eavesdropper, "you are sweet, but I'm just too tired. I'm sorry."

Slowly, slowly Nathaniel swung himself out of the bed. "Good night." He bent over the bed, as if to kiss her a last time, although there hadn't been a first time.

Her arms went around his neck, and her lips were on his, warm and soft. After a moment, she eased her lips away just enough to whisper, "You are sweet . . . and I appreciate it more than you know." She gave him a last kiss. He tried not to be too enthusiastic in his response.

Nathaniel shook his head as he left the door between rooms slightly ajar and headed for his own cool sheets. He was missing more than a few things, both with Sylvia and their ever-stranger

consulting assignment, but he was having trouble focusing on anything more than how warm Sylvia's kiss had been. He'd been around the Galaxy, and more than a handful of women had found him attractive-in and out of bed-yet he was almost trembling-not a good sign. Definitely not a good sign.

XI

At the faint beep, the Grand Admiral touched the stud. An image formed on the small shielded screen, an image coming over a secure Defense Ministry scrambled line.

"You called?" The screen held the image of a sandy-haired woman.

"I did. How do you feel about Accord now, Marcella?"

"You mean the algae and anchovy kills on Squamish? Why would they change anything?" asked the Special Assistant to the Imperial Minister of Commerce.

"They've also appeared on Anaria. The Matriarch sent a query to us and to the Coordinate. Of course, the Coordinate denied everything . . . but who else has that kind of biological capability?"

"It's too obvious, especially this soon after the trade talks. Accord isn't stupid."

"Unless they're counting on everyone thinking chat," pointed out the Grand Admiral.

"They've shown a better grasp of politics than that." The Special Assistant's eyes narrowed. "They also have issued a warning every time before they've employed ecological tactics."

"That may be, but the Senate is already debating investigating and sending the Eleventh Fleet to Sector Five." The Admirals voice was almost flat. "They also haven't shown that courtesy when they've undertaken more conventional covert action."

"Is the Senate really that stupid?" The Special Assistant shook her head. "Are you going along with it?"

"Politics, Marcella. Politics. If half the Empire wants to blame Accord, and wants action, that's where the eagles have to go. I can't oppose the wishes of the Senate."

"Even if they're based on images in cheap trideo that show Ecolitans as devils without horns. Even if half the human Galaxy ends up an ecologic or radioactive or nova-seared waste? Is your position worth that?"

"It shouldn't come to that." The Grand Admiral smiled. "It shouldn't?"

"Accord might be persuaded to stand aside on Hernando."

"You've already lost Hernando."

"No loss is permanent."

"What are you really planning?" asked the Special Assistant. "What do you want?"

"You've already provided it. You've confirmed that you don't believe Accord is behind this covert ecological warfare."

"Couldn't you have just asked? They aren't."

"Then who is, Marcella? According to both Defense intelligence and the I.I.S., no one else in the human Galaxy has that kind of capability."

"That's not quite true. No one else has ever demonstrated that kind of capability, and they certainly wouldn't, not while they can keep the laser aimed at Accord and the Empire."

"Fine. Who is it? The Fuards? Olympia? Halstan? The Federated Hegemony? Orknarii? The Frankan League? New Avalon? Every one of them would like to see Accord and the Empire at each others throats again."

"The Franks probably wouldn't, and New Avalon is too . . . traditional . . . to keep anything like that secret."

"That leaves quite a few-and you're assuming Accord is innocent." The Grand Admiral frowned. "Most senators will quickly point out that only Accord has ever employed large-scale ecological warfare."

"That argument cuts both ways. It makes a perfect case of why it wouldn't be Accord. Also, as I pointed out, they've always delivered a warning, and its been after we've done something. We haven't acted against them, and there's been no warning."

"You may be right, but I cannot oppose the Imperial Senate, not if it decides to send the eagles against the Coordinate. Not without any proof. Do you have any?"

"You know I don't."

"Then contact your tame envoy and ask him . . . if you can find him. You might also ask why he barely returned to Harmony before they sent him off to Artos-that's a colony of New Avalon, recently planoformed." The Admiral smiled politely. "I'd appreciate it if you would think about it."

"I will. I always do."

"I know."

The Admirals smile did not vanish until the screen blanked. Then she frowned, pursing her lips.

XIII

Your flutter check-out was uneventful?" Sylvia's gaze crossed the expanse of blue that was the dining room of the Blue Lion-blue table cloths, blue carpet) and blue-tinted light from the blued glass windows. The linens and the carpet were new; the blue-upholstered chairs were not. The china was also new, as was the blue fabric covering the interior walls, but images seen through the facade panes had the slightly indistinct appearance created by aged glass.

"Very uneventful-thankfully. It must have been one of the first Welk-Symmons built, and from its pristine condition, it was shipped by slow-cargo asteroid in a high sublight transit." Nathaniel took a sip of the vinegar that passed for wine, then cleared his throat. "Jesting I am not." He pulled forth the big kerchief and blotted his brow. Sylvia winced. "How many of those do you have?"

"Enough, dear lady. Enough. One even matches my formal greens."

Sylvia winced again. "Why do you like to play the eccentric professor, the buffoon, almost?"

"I am eccentric. That you should know. Besides, eccentric is regarded as

dense, and that helps. I need all the assistance I can get." He cleared his throat. "I also tried to get a tour of the R-K marine establishments. I used the comm units in Port Chief Walkersons offices."
"And?"

"Most regretfully, professor, we are undergoing rebuilding and maintenance, and such a tour will not be possible for at least several months. I will send you the documentary background we have supplied to Camelot and to all interested parties." Nathaniel smiled wryly. "That was the honorable Sebastian Reeves-Kenn himself."

"You pointed out you were from Accord?"
"He was still politely firm."
"Interesting . . ." mused Sylvia.

"Very interesting, I thought. I wonder if Chief Walkerson has any orbit photos or scans. We'll have to ask about some."
"I wonder what they're hiding."

"Anything and everything." With a glance around the half-filled dining room of the Blue Lion-and the three dozen or so other diners-Nathaniel glanced at the antique paper check again, less than six pounds for lunch for the two of them. He showed it to Sylvia.

"I know why Stapleson-Mares sent us to Elizabeth's," she said with a laugh.

"Why? Because its the most expensive restaurant in Lanceville, and because he thought Ecolitan economists had to be stingy?"

"It might be. It does shows a restrained sense of humor . . . or something."
"You're probably right." The sandy-haired Ecolitan raised his hand as the short-haired, graying waiter passed, then pressed eight pounds into the man's hand. "A good day to you."

"Thank you, sir." The waiter bowed just slightly, then continued on past the table.

The two Ecolitans rose, and Nathaniel said, "I think he expected more than twenty percent."
"Probably."

"The service wasn't worth it." Nathaniel stepped out of the Blue Room into the main lobby-also blue, from the recently ground and re-polished blue synthstone floor to the glittering blue vaulted ceiling to the pale blue lion that crouched in the frieze above the concierges semikiosk. "More power lines?" asked Sylvia.

He nodded, his eyes going to the pair of security guards by the door, each in smart, brilliant blue uniforms, each short-haired, and each with a holstered stunner.

"You got all those power figures from the manager at the fusactor station, but you still feel we have to travel every road on ConOne?"

"Not every road-but enough to get a feel." Were the Security Guard uniforms the same as the one he had seen the other day near Elizabeth's? "A feel?"

"If you just rely on numbers you'll get it wrong. You need . . . well . . . I need a feel, and numbers alone don't provide that. Besides, using numbers assumes a certain accuracy, and I'm not sure about local figures. Our informal survey should either confirm the figures or suggest we look further," Nathaniel added as they stepped back into the midday, midsummer heat. "Even so, you're right. The fusactor plant figures are probably far more accurate than any rough estimates we could come up with."

"But you worry?" she pressed.

"I couldn't even tell you why," he admitted. "I just feel that way."

"You're not particularly trusting." The gray-eyed woman smiled.

"From what you've seen, should we be?"

"They don't look any less trustworthy than anyone else."

"That means I should be skeptical." Sylvia laughed.

Glubb Bagot stood beside the groundcar in the carpark, a resigned smile fixed upon his face.

Nathaniel wondered if the resignation were because of all the synde bean fields, the power relay units, and the highway measurements they'd taken after his check-out stint at the shuttleport. The Ecolitan shook his head, not wanting to think about all the other quantifications they had left to do.

"Where to, sirs?"

"To the piers, and then we will follow the south highway for

a time."

"Yes, sir."

Nathaniel closed the door for Sylvia and circled the groundcar as Bagot started the engine and the exhaust belched partly burned hydrocarbons. The Ecolitan could hardly wait to tally more power lines and highways and industrial facilities.

XIII

Back into the blue world," said Nathaniel as they crossed the lobby of the Blue Lion.

People used to write songs about blue; the ancients did," answered Sylvia.

"They must have been awful."

"They were."

As the two Ecolitans stepped toward the open door, above which was a synthstone frieze of a blue unicorn, Robert Walkerson stepped forward, his bald spot glistening in the light and the short jacket and formal shoes making him appear even more squat.

"You look stunning, Professor Ferro-Maine." Walkerson bowed to both Ecolitans, but his eyes were on Sylvia. "Thank you. A uniform is a uniform, formal or not."

"It becomes you."

"It does indeed," added Nathaniel, "I've said so, but the opin

ion of a colleague counts for less than that of someone less involved in such matters."

"Your colleague is correct," responded Walkerson. "But let me introduce you to a few people who had hoped to meet you." He gestured toward the door, leading them inside the Unicorn Room, where perhaps two dozen people stood talking in small groups. Half turned as the Ecolitans entered.

On the left wall was a long table, covered in white linen, and bearing trays of various foodstuffs.

"The wine table is on the other side. Local-but I'd recommend the Kenward. It's rather like Sperlin, if sweeter."

"Thank you," murmured Sylvia, as Nathaniel nodded. "You may recall Mr. Evanston." Nathaniel inclined his head slightly.

"Good to see you," offered Geoffrey Evanston, lifting a wineglass. He wore black shoes and long formal socks and shorts. The short evening jacket was white with green piping, and a green bow tie matched the piping. "Might I present my wife? This is Ecolitan Whaler, Vivienne, and this is Ecolitan Professor Ferro-Maine. Hard to believe, isn't it, but they're economists."

"Economists? How charming! That is so much more . . . appropriate than agricultural factors and scientists, or marine agronomists, or whatever they're called." The slender blond woman pursed her lips. "I do hope you are not agricultural economists."

"No," said Nathaniel. "Infrastructure economists-transportation, power systems-those sorts of matters."

"You did not bring Madeline, Walker?" asked Evanston. "She is a little under the weather."

"Ah . . . terribly sorry. Perhaps next time. She has such a delicious wit." Evanston nodded.

"Indeed she does. And she is so forthright," added Vivienne, turning toward Nathaniel. "An economist? You look more like an athlete, even with that slight graying at the temples."

"We do a great deal of walking in infrastructure economics, and in conducting studies, one must always walk before running, so to speak."

Sylvia looked at the blue carpet underfoot. "You are both in excellent condition, I see," continued Vivienne.

"Were not quite adjusted to the atmosphere yet," protested Nathaniel. "One would scarcely guess that."

"If you will excuse us, Geoffrey . . . Vivienne?" said Walkerson. "I'll let them return shortly."

"But of course."

"I do hope we can talk," said Vivienne, leaning slightly toward Sylvia. "I do, too."

Walkerson plowed toward a taller man-also in formal jacket and shorts who stood momentarily alone.

"Governor General Eden-Danby. He's my ultimate superior." Walkerson nodded. "Governor General, might I present the Ecolitan professors? Nathaniel Whaler

and Sylvia Ferro-Maine."

"Delighted!" The round-faced official sported neatly trimmed gray hair. Almost as tall as Nathaniels 191 centimeters, he rocked forward onto the balls of his feet. "Delighted! We don't get scholars from so far. I hear you're studying our infrastructure. What have you found so far?"

"A state-of-the-art hydrocarbon conversion facility and a great number of well-built transport highways," offered Nathaniel cheerfully. "Also a good restaurant and an impressive harbor."

"A warm welcome," added Sylvia.

"With our summer, it is warm indeed, yes indeed." The Governor General coughed. "Well . . . I'm sure it will be a good study. Its good to see you. I certainly hope you enjoy your stay on Artos. Don't let me keep you." With a chuckle and a vague gesture, General Eden-Danby dismissed the Ecolitans. "Is that the wine table?" Nathaniel turned to Sylvia. "Would you like some?"

"Please."

The Ecolitan eased around two men in gray jackets talking in low voices.

". . . beastly heat-worse than last year . . ."

". . . still say that George is diverting too much of the runoff. . ."

". . . how else can he get the credits for tech-templates?" A blue-jacketed attendant turned to the Ecolitan. "Your pleasure, sir?"

"Two glasses of the . . . is it Kendall?" Nathaniel cried to pick up the rest of the conversation between the two men in gray jackets.

"Kenward? The sparkling white?"

"That's it."

"A moment."

The Ecolitan carried the two crystal wine glasses slowly, more slowly than necessary, toward Sylvia and Walkerson, easing behind the two men, who glanced toward Sylvia. ". . . more to Artos than beans, beef, and basking mods . . ."

"You forgot algae." A laugh followed. ". . . so I did . . . seen the guests?"

". . . she's beautiful . . . other one . . . here somewhere . . . looks too military for my taste . . ."

"Still think R-K would have . . ." An elbow in the ribs stopped the conversation. Nathaniel nodded politely and eased up to Sylvia, presenting her with a glass. "The Kenward." He turned to Walkerson. "Might you know the two gentlemen in gray behind me?"

"Ah. . . I believe the taller is one of the Hailshams-Durward,

I think."

"Who are the Hailshams?" Sylvia sipped the sparkling white wine. "A trace sweet, but good."

Nathaniel took a sip of his own-far too sweet for his taste. Then Sylvia was probably being diplomatic. "Durward . . . hmmm . . . I do believe he handles the permacrete business-mostly highway construction, that sort of thing."

"You make it sound like the Hailshams have a commercial empire."

"They do have some ties there."

Nathaniel smiled, then turned abruptly and stepped back over to Durward Hailsham. "I say. I'm Nathaniel Whaler, from Accord, you know. Chief Walkerson was telling me that you must be the local construction magnate."

Hailsham swallowed. "Scarcely a magnate, professor. Artos is barely large enough for a small permacrete facility and the equipment to lay it."

"We're looking into infrastructure economics—you might have heard about our study—and permacrete supports highways, which are infrastructure."

"I suppose they are." Hailsham eased back a step. Nathaniel stepped forward, just into the edge of Hailshams personal space. "You produce permacrete for other things?" Hailsham looked at Nathaniel blankly. "There isn't much other use," admitted the square-faced second man. "I'm Keiffer DeSain." He chuckled. "If Durward is a permacrete magnate, then I'm . . . I guess you'd have to call me the local piping magnate."

"Do you produce large diameter piping for water? I'd imagine you must, with so little ground water," pressed the Ecolitan.

"We have worked with Durward to produce some two-meter permacrete conduit for the Jier Project, but its mostly water piping—some for commercial uses here and on ConTrio. You don't realize how big even a small continent is until you get contracts for hundreds of kilos of pipe for houses or irrigation projects." DeSain laughed. "I'll dream about pipes until I die, even if I never extrude another one."

Nathaniel turned back to Hailsham. "You have heavy equipment?"

"Not enough. And what I have is ancient. Making perma

crete's the easy part. Transporting and laying and fusing it is where the problems are. You need tech-template equipment and metal . . . and we're always short of that."

"Always . . . there is something in short supply. Economics is the study of such shortages. There is an old saying—whatever be not there is rare." Nathaniel turned back to DeSain. "The piping—do you use Sir Hailsham's permacrete for other than huge water conduits?"

"No. Its too heavy for most applications. We mostly use hydrocarbon synthetics."

"You make your own feedstocks—or purchase them from the facility?"

"I wish I had my own feedstocks." DeSain shrugged. "But that takes credits and grower contracts—or fertile land—which also takes credits. We purchase from R-K and make do." He offered a tight smile. "That's all anyone can da anywhere. I'd guess."

"So it is. So it is." Nathaniel offered his own smile. "If you would not mind, gentlemen, we would very much like to discuss your contributions to the infrastructure of Artos and what you see as the planets future needs. Perhaps Professor Ferro-Maine and I might visit you at your facilities in the days

ahead?"

"Ah . . . ," began Durward Hailsham.

"Fine with me," said Keiffer DeSain with a short laugh. "I'll tell you more than you ever wanted to know about piping."

"Thank you both for your patience and forbearance." Nathaniel bowed, and eased away, to catch Walkerson blotting his forehead. The Ecolitan suppressed a grin and pulled out another of his overlarge kerchiefs. "Ah . . . it is warm, and I see I am not the only one who finds it so." He could sense Sylvia's concealed amusement and refrained from looking directly at her.

"A bit warm. A bit warm," conceded the port official. "Over there is Detsen Oconnor." Walkerson lifted his left hand toward a clean-shaven, brown-haired man in a dark blue jacket and shorts. "He's fond of you folks from Accord."

"And he is?" asked Sylvia.

"The head of the government biomonitoring laboratory. Very important, you understand. Were not that far out of planofarming."

"Of course."

Oconnor turned even before the three reached him. "Ecolitans. I recognized the uniforms. Good to see you."

"We're pleased to meet you, sir," said Sylvia. "Fine work you people do. I keep abreast of all the journals out of Accord. I even did a seasonal residency at the Institute after I got my doctorate. Years ago . . . too many years ago, but I do my best to keep in touch. Dr. Hiense and I still trade abstracts, and he was most helpful when . . . oh, he's been helpful so many times. I'd be foolish to single out one instance." Oconnor beamed over his long nose at Sylvia. "Are you as good economists as your ecologists are?"

"Probably not," said Sylvia with a grin, "but we try. Professor Whaler is well known for his infrastructure work. I'm not."

"Ah , . . it all ties together. You cannot have a working economy without a working ecology, and there's a deplorable tendency to avoid biodiversity in post-planofarming situations. I keep pushing for it, but the growers keep telling me output, Detsen, output.' " The monitoring official snorted. "Output-as if they'd have any output at all with a monoculture approach--"

"Mostly synde beans for the hydrocarbon plants?" asked Nathaniel.

"First, it was luxury beef, and then there was the furor over the albaclams because the algae detritus--"

"Fascinating, I'm sure, Detsen," interjected Walkerson. "Would you mind terribly, however, if I spirited the Ecolitans away for a moment? I'll bring them back later . . . but a number of people . . ."

"Quite so." Oconnor smiled warmly at Sylvia and then at Nathaniel. "You must send me a copy of your study. I'm asking

now, because I always forget. Hazards of the profession, you understand. So much to watch, and so little time. You wont forget, will you?"

"You'll get a copy," promised Whaler. "So good of you." Oconnor bowed. "I'm in

the harbor building of the ministry."

The Ecolitans followed Walkerson back in the direction of the food table, and Nathaniel paused to take another small sip of the too-sweet Kenward.

"Ah, the Ecolitans!" exclaimed a blond-and-white haired, lanky figure. Beside Jimson Sonderssen, a thin-faced man in long gray trousers and a matching formal cutaway, piped in red, bowed from the waist.

"You will not mind that we . . . intruded upon your , . . occasion, Port Authority Chief?"

"Your expertise in such matters is well known," said Walkerson stiffly.

"Let us not be too curt, especially before the lovely Professor Ferro-Maine." Sonderssen bowed again.

"The noted agricultural technology factor from the Federated Hegemony, Jimson Sonderssen." The Port Chief inclined his head but barely.

"My thanks." Sonderssen smiled, and turned. "My friend, Fridrik VonHaIsne, my counterpart in the Conglomerate," announced Sonderssen. "He says little, at least in any of the Anglo-derived tongues."

"Pleased am I to meet you," said Nathaniel ponderously in Fuardian.

For a moment, VonHaIsne did not speak. Finally, he replied in Fuardian, "You have the better of me. Not many on Artos speak Fuard."

"Not from Artos am I. Do you claim Tinhorn as home?" Sylvia's eyes flicked from Whaler to Sonderssen. Beside her, Walkerson smothered a frown. "No. I was born on Perugonia, although I live, when I'm not in the field, on the outskirts of Tinhorn." The Fuard inclined his head. "You are far from Accord."

"Where our studies take us . . . that is where we must go. What is your expertise-that of hydrocarbon plants? Or grains?"

"I . . . must attend to all those."

"Especially the beans and the legumes, would I not imagine," said Nathaniel, more slowly than he could have responded.

"Fridrik knows them all," said Sonderssen in English with a laugh. "If it grows, he knows it."

"My friend, Jimson, he knows far more than I," protested the Fuard in his own language.

"You both know a great deal," interposed Walkerson. "And I am sure that you will have more time to display that knowledge to the Ecolitans in the future. This is a social occasion tonight."

"But of course." Jimson Sonderssen bowed. "A pleasure to see you both again." He extended a card. "It has my local office." Nathaniel pocketed the card.

The Fuard bowed silently, and both agricultural factors eased away.

"No sense of propriety, those two. None at all." Walkerson straightened his

formal jacket.

"Robert," said Vivienne Evanston, appearing at Sylvia's elbow, "you must let me insist. I promised to introduce the Ecolitans to Kennis." The blond woman with the sparkling eyes and animated face turned to Sylvia. "That's Kennis Landis-Nicarchos. Kennis, you know, owns most of Lanceville, even the Blue Lion and the fusactor power concession," offered Vivienne, leading them toward the tall, slender red-haired man dressed in a deep blue outfit of formal jacket and shorts, with a pale blue ruffled shirt. "He is one of our leading lights."

"Great lights cast often equally great shadows." From his first glance, Nathaniel didn't care for the industrialist, not that he could have said why, but he'd come to trust his feelings. About people, intuition was often far better than reason, probably because it was based on whole-body intangibles and not just facts.

"You, too, have a forthright wit," said Vivienne with a bright smile, "and a discerning eye."

Nathaniel shook his head. "Not I. I am a man with a blunt wedge for wit."

"You are too modest, professor." Vivienne turned. "The Ecolitans, Kennis. You said you wanted to meet them." Vivienne offered a smile and a head-bow.

"Kennis Landis-Nicarchos, at your service." The local industrialist, taller than Nathaniel, bowed deeply to Sylvia. "Enchanted." Sylvia smiled politely.

"I am the enchanted one. I had no idea that such attractive Ecolitan professors existed, and an economist yet."

"Nathaniel Firstborne Whaler, and I am most pleased to meet you, Sir Nichos-Landarchos." Nathaniel offered a deep bow. "You must be most fond of blue."

"A failing, I must admit." Kennis turned back to Sylvia. "I could easily become fond of gray."

Nathaniel suppressed the simultaneous urges to grin and break the redhead's knees. "Gray is most becoming, especially upon the discerning."

"How did you become an economist?" the industrialist asked Sylvia. "Such a prosaic title . . ."

"I found that there was far more substance in economics than met the eye," said Sylvia. "A woman of imperial substance. That I like."

"Kennis always knows what to say," added Vivienne. "And he is so charming. Everyone finds him delightful."

Nathaniel refrained from differing. The term "imperial" hadn't been lost on him, or the message. He glanced around the Unicorn Room, noting that the numbers had slowly shrunk. The two men in gray had vanished, as had Sonderssen and the Fuard and the Governor General.

"Now. . . Kennis . . . you'll have to relinquish your attentions for now," suggested Walkerson. "The professor has others to meet."

"I hear and obey." The industrialist bowed, then flashed a white-toothed smile

at Sylvia. "'Until we meet again . . . and we will."

Walkerson guided them away from both Kennis and Vivienne. "Next you should say a few words to Laurence, there. He manages the Artos operations of the Bank of Camelot."

The three stopped before a round-faced man with a short white goatee.

"Professors Whaler and Ferro-Maine, Laurence. The Ecolitan infrastructure specialists."

"Laurence Karl-Abbe, pleased to meet you." The banker smiled, "We actually have some numbers, and if you'd like to stop by in the next few days, perhaps I could assist your study."

"You're most gracious," offered Nathaniel. "I should be. We share a common plight. No one is totally comfortable with either economists or bankers. Do you know why we turn off the climate control in the bank after customer hours? Because reptiles don't need it." He gave a belly laugh.

"Do you know why losing a hand represents total disability for an economist?" countered Nathaniel. "Because he can't say, 'On the one hand . . .' " "Enough . . ." said Sylvia with a forced laugh. Walkerson shook his head sadly.

Nathaniel barely managed to retain the last names and faces as they circled the room and spoke and made small talk. Abruptly, he found himself clutching an empty wineglass and looking around a nearly deserted Unicorn Room.

"There," said Walkerson, in a self-satisfied tone. "I've gotten you properly introduced to almost everyone who is anyone in Lanceville, and your jaunt tomorrow should take care of the rest."

"I take it that this was the creme de la creme?" asked Sylvia. "Precisely."

"Thank you. It's not the sort of thing we could have managed," Nathaniel said. "My pleasure." Walkerson bowed. "My pleasure."

Nathaniel managed to avoid rolling his eyes, at least until they were outside the Blue Lion.

Bagot had the groundcar waiting for them. "The Guest House, sirs?"

"Please," offered Nathaniel, his eyes and detector scanning the area and both coming up empty.

He slumped into the rear seat beside Sylvia, shaking his head. "Receptions are worse than interviews."

"Because no one says much? And tiptoes around everything?"

"Putting together a study is a puzzle. You need numbers, but the numbers you get aren't usually the right ones. So you have to combine and analyze, and then everyone faults your methods. The people you talk to come in two kinds: those who are in charge and they either don't know the details or won't say—and those who aren't, and they're afraid to tell you anything. So we dance around asking questions designed so that any answer will provide some information, and they dance around trying to provide as little as possible, unless they have an axe to grind, and that means the data is skewed, and we have to figure out how before we can use it."

"You are cynical." He sighed. "Sometimes." The foyer of the Guest House was

vacant. "Do you have this feeling that people are avoiding us?" asked Sylvia as she started up the stairs. "It's as though we have to be acknowledged, but that we're not people, not really."

"The way I felt in my audience with the Emperor when I first arrived on Old Earth."

"Was it that bad?" He nodded. "You never mentioned that."

"Outsiders are treated that way most places. Its nothing new." He opened the door to his room, but heard or saw nothing unusual. The bed was turned back, the draperies drawn, and the light on the bedside table on.

Nathaniel closed the door and paced across the room, noting that, once again, his case was not precisely where he had left it and that the closet door was fractionally ajar. "More surveillance?" murmured Sylvia. "To be expected."

"What did you think of Walkersons little gathering?"

"Two things of interest," mused Nathaniel. "The gathering was almost a teaser of sorts, and those present were mostly male, and Chief Walkerson did not have his wife with him-or a feminine companion."

"Neither did Kennis."

"I noticed."

"Are you jealous?"

"I could be very jealous . . . except you're free to make your own choices and you didn't seem terribly interested in him-as interested as he was in you." He paused. "I also enjoyed your comment about a warm welcome. Interestingly, there was no reaction."

"Kennis wasn't really interested in me. He also didn't seem to notice when you scrambled his name. For most men, that would merit at least a quiet correction. He was more interested in delivering that message that said he knew who I was and feeling out whether I'd be interested in him."

"Another indication that we're part of a setup, but no indication of who actually created it."

"You don't have any idea?"

"He's not in any of the background material. He's not Avalonian, and not Imperial. We can ask around." Nathaniel frowned. "I didn't like him, even before he started flirting."

"He doesn't feel quite right. His come-on was too strong, and that bothered me."

"Good."

"Oh, Nathaniel . . ." Her lips brushed his cheek, then touched his lips, and her arms were around his neck. After a long kiss, she eased back. "You offer so much more than he does."

"He owns most of Lanceville," responded Nathaniel with a

wry tone. "I own the clothes on my back, some few securities, and a little in savings."

"I'm not after possessions. You should know that." Sylvia frowned. "You said the gathering was a teaser."

"I didn't expect much more. The political heads of organizations seldom reveal much. You have to look at numbers, or count traffic or power lines. There were always hints about things here and there, but Walkerson was clever enough to let the hints surface, but never to let us hear the rest. And his forthright wife. . . ?" The sandy-haired Ecolitan spread his hands.

"They have wives—a rather hidebound and traditional society, I gather. But she wasn't there."

"Exactly." Nathaniel glanced toward the connecting door, still ajar. "We'd better check your room."

"You won't find anything."

"Probably not . . . just like we're not finding anything with our study." He slipped through the door to find her room a mirror of his—empty, the bed covers turned, draperies closed, and bedside light on.

He looked up from the detector as Sylvia eased back beside him. Her fingers squeezed his free left hand.

"I much prefer you." Then her arms went back around his neck.

XIV

A high haze covered most of the sky, and the hot wind, bearing fine grit and bringing the odor of hydrocarb fuel and dust, blew out of the south. Nathaniel studied the waiting flitter.

"You forget how small these are," Sylvia said. "Small? This must mass eight tonnes. Some things I've flown . . ." he shook his head, and unlatched the turbine cover. "I need to preflight this. You can get settled on that side." Sylvia nodded and slid open the copilots door. Nathaniel just looked at the craft for a long moment, then moved toward the port turbine where he undid the catches. "Sir?"

Nathaniel turned his attention from the uncovered port turbine to the approaching pilot. "Yes, Jersek?"

Jersek fingered his trimmed salt-and-pepper beard. "Well . . . I just wanted to tell you. I would have been out here when you

came, but the factor and his friend stopped by, wanting to know about heavy lift flitters." The Port Authority pilot shook his head. "With all this flat land, we need to think about those? Anyway, wanted to tell you I had the tanks topped off this morning. If you're headed straight out and back, you've got enough for that with a good margin. You do sight-seeing around Georges place, and you'll want to top off there. Use the good stuff—there's a tank buried by the windsock, and I'd let the pump run a moment before you put any in the tanks." Jersek paused. "You know about the stub tanks?"

"Right—they won't draw if the mains are below thirty."

"She's a good old bird, sir. Seen me through a lot."

"And she'll see you through more." The Ecolitan forced a grin. The Port Authority pilot and maintenance chief nodded, then turned and ambled toward the building that held his office and Walkerson's.

Nathaniel methodically scanned the turbine, then fastened the cover, checking

the catches. He repeated the process with the starboard turbine, and then used the pull-out steps to get to the rotor deck.

Sylvia had long since been strapped in by the time Nathaniel returned to the cockpit and began the checklist, murmuring the items to himself as he went through them. "Sequencers . . . check. . ."

"Diffusor . . . check . . ."

"Igniters . . . check . . ." He slipped on the helmet. "Intercom . . . can you hear me?" Sylvia nodded, and her helmet bobbed. "The red button there—press it when you want to talk."

"I hear you."

"Good. Comm freqs . . . set . . ." Finally, he touched the port ignitor. Wuuittffff. . . eeeeeee. . .

Once the port turbine was up and in the green, he started the starboard one, completed the checklist, then released the rotor brake. The flitter swayed as the heavy rotors began to turn. "Rotors . . . engaged."

He checked the instruments one last time, then triggered the comm. "Artos main, this is Port Angel two, ready to lift."

"Angel two, cleared to the southwest, radian two eight five. Report the river on departure."

"Stet. Two here, lifting this time. Will report the river." Nathaniel eased power to the thrusters, and the flitter slipped onto the air cushion. He air-taxied slowly until he had the old Welk clear of the Port Authority hangar. The Ecolitan swallowed back a touch of bile—the unburned exhaust gases weren't wonderful for his digestion. With spacecraft you smelled ozone and hot metal, but not exhaust fumes.

From the copilot's seat Sylvia studied the patched permacrete and the hangar walls that were an alternating pattern of old and new synthetic hydrocarbon building sheets.

Once past the hangar, Whaler added power to the thrusters and lowered the nose slightly, keeping the flitter on its air cushion as the speed built up. At one hundred fifty klicks, he eased the stick back and let the flitter climb.

From the air, the shuttle port looked like a permacrete X imposed on different-sized squares of varied green, across which ran the tan lines of the shuttle landing strips. To the east was the gray line of the ocean, a darker gray blot that was Lanceville, and the tiny blue dot that was the Blue Lion.

"Tower, Angel two, clearing the river this time."

"Stet, two. Report the river inbound on return. Same freq."

"Stet, tower." Nathaniel eased the flitter onto the outbound two nine five radial and continued to climb, scanning the instruments. The heads-up display had long since ceased working—as was the case with most of the older Welk-Symmons.

"How far is the Reeves-Kenn spread?" Sylvia's voice crackled through the earsets of the helmet.

"Two hundred fifty kilos, give or take a few—almost due southwest." He inclined his helmet slightly.

Once past the river, the ground beneath began to slope upward, and to dry out, showing traces of grayish sand that grew more prominent with every kilo. "The midplateau desert, according to the maps." His voice sounded scratchy in his own earset, and he hoped it was just the set. "Badlands . . . mostly," "They didn't planiform it, so close to Lanceville?" "It's mostly lava of some sort-I don't know the term, but it's the stuff that you get on hotcore worlds with no oxygen and no way to reduce it. Give it a few thousand years, and it'll be fine. Right now it isn't worth the trouble." "People won't wait that long,"

"Probably not, but it takes money, and that's something in short supply here on Artos."

The terrain below had become one of rough stone hills, joined by sweeps of gray sand. Nothing grew in the ocean of stone and sand where the only movement was that of wind-swept silica particles, not anything large enough to see from the flitter cockpit. "Desolate," Sylvia said after a time. "Gives an idea of what Artos was like centuries ago." The sky was clear-and empty-like the desert beneath. "Do you have any better idea why were doing this study?" asked Sylvia after a long silence.

"No. It's getting clearer that the government in New Avalon wants something from it, probably for us to reveal something that they can't afford to disclose and need an impartial source for. Either that or support for some program. They want to be able to say that it was Accords-or the Institutes-idea. That means politics, and trouble. But I don't know what they want, only that someone doesn't want us to find it, whatever it may be. I'm hoping this little trip will shed some light." "You don't sound certain it will." "I'm always a skeptic when you get to politics."

His words drew a laugh, and he smiled to himself, even as the silence drew out and as he checked the nav screens. "On course . . . beacons clear."

After another stretch of silence, he cross-checked the ground beacon readings. Supposedly their destination was less than twenty kilos ahead. With that reminder, he re-checked the main tanksdown twenty percent-and switched the fuel transfer pumps on. Later Welk flitters didn't have that problem. They had others, generally harder to resolve because they used more microtronics, and higher technology wasn't always suited to conditions of high mechanical stress. Flitters incorporated high mechanical stress, and always would, at least until antigrav units were finally developed that would work planetside.

To the southwest, beyond the gray and tan of sand and rock appeared a hazy line of grayish green that grew more distinct. Nathaniel kept his scan moving-instruments, horizon, ground ahead-as the flitter carried them toward the green, absently flicking off the transfer pumps when the main tanks registered full. He doubted that the automatic cutoffs worked, or worked well.

Beyond desert came the first flush of green, interspersed with gray sand, then the river, still flat and wide and smooth, and then more green. A long strip of permacrete road ran northwest from the cluster of hilltop buildings until it intersected a long arrowstraight section of the wide permacrete main road that presumably made its way back to Lanceville. "Kenn base. Port Angel two inbound." Sylvia jerked in her seat. Had she been dozing? Nathaniel didn't blame her. The flight had been anything but intriguing, and he personally hadn't been that scintillating. Then, pilots with sparkling personalities in

the cockpit, like bold pilots, usually didn't live to be that old.

The Ecolitan waited, then triggered the transmitter again. "Kenn base, Port Angel two inbound."

"That you, Jersek, still flying that antique?"

"Negative. Ecolitans Whaler and Ferro-Maine, inbound to see George Reeves-Kenn."

"Stet. Do you have the strip and the wind indicator?"

"That's affirmative."

"Set her down there. See you after couchdown."

"Not the most formal place," Nathaniel said. "After last night?" she asked.

"That gathering was so formal everyone creaked. And you and all those proverbs . . ."

"I've got several hundred more . . ."

"No..."

"You see . . . they're working." He eased off power from the turbines and brought the nose back as he eased the flitter into a left-hand turn to bring it into the wind, then past the fluorescent green windsock and onto the cleared claylike strip that ran the length of the low ridge. He settled the craft into a hover and airtaxied toward the spot where a single figure waited by a small shed a hundred meters or so east of a long low stone house. "You make that look easy," said Sylvia. "I've had some practice," he admitted. When he stepped from the flitter, Nathaniel's hands were empty, since he'd reluctantly decided to leave his datacase in the Guest House—not that there was any information that wasn't available one way or another to New Avalonian intelligence, or the Federated Hegemony, or whoever. Sylvia slipped the strap of her case over her shoulder and closed the transparent permaglass door on the copilots side of the flitter. They walked toward the waiting man. "George Reeves-Kenn." He was rail thin with a tanned and leathery face. The green eyes were hard, and the white-gray hair was short. "Nathaniel Whaler."

"Sylvia Ferro-Maine."

"Welcome to Connaught. Understand you two wanted a look-see at how our operation runs. That's what old Walk said, anyway." Reeves-Kenn waited.

"Thought economists just looked

at numbers and paper." He frowned. "Can't say as you look like an economist—more like a trooper. Guess you Ecolitan types are always part military."

"We've been called that," Nathaniel said. "I can send you a copy of my latest monograph, if you'd like, The Unrecognized Diseconomies of Decentralized Metals Refining. "

"In plain talk . . . what was it?"

Nathaniel shrugged. "In basic terms, it's an exposition that quantifies how much more asteroid mining costs than people recognized. But it sounds more impressive to academics if all the title words are long."

Reeves-Kenn smiled, briefly, and turned to Sylvia. "And you look more like a dancer . . ."

"I was, once, before I found happiness in economics." She gave the beef grower a warm smile.

"Best we get started. It'll all make more sense if you take a ride first." Reeves-Kenn began to walk toward the corral just below the landing strip. Adjoining the corral was a barn. The Ecolitans exchanged glances and followed. Reeves-Kenn halted at a fence post made of formed plastic and gestured toward the black horse on the other side of the plastic composite "wire."
"This is Wild Will."

Nathaniel looked at the horse. The horse looked at Nathaniel. The Ecolitan glanced toward Sylvia, who seemed to share his reaction.

"You not familiar with horses?" asked Reeves-Kenn. "Not really," admitted the Ecolitan. "I've ridden a few times, but I'm certainly no expert." Sylvia just shook her head.

"We've got gentle mounts." The rancher gestured toward a figure on the shaded north side of the barn. "Jem?"

"Sir?" Jem ambled out of the shade of the shed. He was darkhaired, clean-shaven, wearing long trousers and half-calf boots, brown and scarred.

"Our guests are Ecolitans—they're economists, not rovers. Professor Whaler and Professor Ferro-Maine." Jem bowed. "Pleased to meet you."

"Jem here—he's one of my lead rovers, and he'll be happy to show you around." George Reeves-Kenn smiled. "Get them mounts—Happy and Pokey—and give them the short tour, and then we'll have a late lunch at the house." The rancher turned to the Ecolitans. "Screen-work and bureaucracy—we still have too much here, and I need to catch up on it." He nodded, grinned at Jem, and departed with long strides, back toward the house.

"If you'll wait here," said the rover, "I'll bring out your mounts."

"You don't look happy about the horses," said Sylvia. "I worry about riding something that has its own mind and masses five to ten times what I do." Nathaniel glanced toward the barn and the wide door, through which Jem led two saddled horses.

"Five times," said Sylvia absently.

"That's enough." He grinned. "You think all the time, and she that thinks seldom finds ease."

"No more . . ."

"Here you go—Happy and Pokey, gentle as you'd ever want."

"Do you have a brother who works for the Port Authority?" asked Sylvia.

"GB? He works for Chief Walkerson." With deft movements, Jem tied the reins to the sole hitching rail—also heavy plastic outside the corral gate. "All he rides is a groundcar. I could never stand being cooped up in a pile of metal, or a building, not me. Now, professor. Happy likes ladies better." He gestured toward the dark chestnut. "And I get Pokey?" asked Nathaniel.

"He's not that slow. He just doesn't like to gallop." The rover hurried back to the barn, returning riding a gray. "What's in the red pack?" asked Sylvia, pointing at the circular object behind her saddle. There was one behind Nathaniel's saddle as well.

"That's a desert kit. . . survival kit, in case you get stranded. We all carry them." Jem reined up, waiting. "Artos is still wild in places." The rover cleared his throat and looked at the two Ecolitans and their mounts.

Nathaniel got the message and untied Pokey, then climbed into the saddle, and watched as Sylvia did the same—more gracefully, he suspected.

"We'll head out to the end of the ridge," announced Jem, turning the gray to the southeast.

Sylvia lifted her reins, and lurched in the saddle as Happy slow-trotted after the rover. Nathaniel gingerly flicked the brown horse's reins, and Pokey lumbered after the other two, losing ground with every step.

Jem reined up and waited with Sylvia until Nathaniel's gelding carried the Ecolitan to the end of the rise. Grass-covered hills stretched southward, and a line of trees to the west of the ridge that held the house and buildings outlined the course of the river.

"The spread runs another two hundred kays south along the river. Most is like this, grass and hills, but we got a couple stands of woods, and a few more set. 'Course, it'll take another thirty years before they're much."

Horned cattle—nearly a hundred—grazed beside the pond below.

"What kind of animals are those?" asked Sylvia. "Cattle—modified Tee-type longhorns. They did something to their genes—George told me, but I don't recall. It allows them to digest the grass better. They're tamer, too. Don't have big predators here." Jem started the gray downhill toward the cattle.

Around the pond, the grass had been churned into a muddy mass, an area that Jem gave a wide berth. Nathaniel suppressed a frown. "What feeds the pond?" "It's pumped from the river. We've got ponds across the

spread. That way, we can rotate where they graze. Got a bunch of herds. Someday, we'll get natural ponds. Till then . . ."

Up close, the cattle were larger than they had seemed—monsters whose shoulders were level with Nathaniel's waist on horseback and whose horns spread more than two meters.

"You're certain that they're tame?" the Ecolitan asked, noting the pointed horn tips.

"So long as you don't whack their nostrils. Even then, they'd just knock you aside."

Just being knocked aside by something that weighed nearly a tonne would be painful, if not worse. "We'll ride out to the river, if you can hang on that long."

"As long as we don't gallop," said Sylvia. "No hurry. This beats riding fences or herding strays out of the sand. Gets hotter out there."

Nathaniel felt for the big kerchief blotting his forehead. "Rather hot here already."

"This is cool compared to that." Jem laughed. "We can't go too far into the desert anyway."

"Is that because of the heat?"

"The heat's part of it, but the ground's unstable, too. George or Terril could explain that better than me. I'm just a dumb rover."

The three rode abreast across the flat expanse of grass, leaving the herd behind.

"No beans-that sort of thing?" asked Whaler. "Got to have some hydrocarb source, I guess, but George says that it won't be on this spread, not ever. Feels strong, he does. Even the maize for fattening the steers comes from the boss's commercial lands closer to Lanceville."

A series of flies buzzed around the horses and riders as they neared the river, but Nathaniel would have bet that the planofarming had left out mosquitoes.

The river was about a hundred meters wide, smooth-flowing dark gray water, bounded by willowlike trees and taller grasses on either side.

"Marsh grasses," said Nathaniel, glad to recognize something that fit ecologically.

"Yeah . . . George doesn't like it much, but he says we got to leave the grass and trees. Dr. Oconnor says we'd have the river ripping up all the grasslands without them. Used to be straighter, I'm told, but it'll find its own path over time, and there's no good way to change that." Jem turned in the saddle. "You're ecologic folks. That true?"

"Pretty much," admitted Whaler. "The optimum is to work with natural flows and not to combat them." He managed not to wince at the pedantry of the words.

"Got some fish in there, but we can't catch 'em yet. Too many heavy metals to eat. Some day, they say." The two Ecolitans nodded.

"Seen enough?" asked Jem. "We ought to head back." Sylvia and Nathaniel exchanged glances. He nodded. "Fine with us."

As they rode back toward the rise that held the ranch house and the flitter, Nathaniel studied the cropped grass, noting the absence of bushes and competing vegetation, trying not to shake his head.

The air was still, and the sun hotter yet. Nathaniel blotted his forehead several times more as Pokey followed the other two mounts back.

"I haven't seen anything like a cattle processing plant." The Ecolitan glanced at the stone walls of the ranch house and then at the long stone barn that finally appeared above them. "Is that in Lanceville?"

"Hardly. George doesn't like things outside the spread, not unless it's crops."

"But..."

"George likes his views." Jem laughed. "Everyone knows that. Not much to the plant, but I can show you. We'll go this way." He turned his mount westward.

The three circled the base of the rise that held the main house

until they entered a swale between the long ridgelike rise and a much smaller hill.

"That's it." Jem gestured to his left and grinned. A permacrete strip, wide enough for a lorry, if not much wider, ran down from the top of the rise and through the swale where Jem had reined up and then to a heavy lorry dock set in the side of the lower hill. "Under the hill?" asked Nathaniel.

"It makes sense," said Sylvia. "George likes his views. So he built the processing plant under an artificial hill."

"Not just the plant, professor," Jem added. "The slaughterhouse and everything."

Sylvia grasped the antique saddle horn, leaned toward Nathaniel, and murmured. "Not another word about underground stuff."
"All right," he said amiably.

She lurched in the saddle for a moment before managing to straighten up.

"Careful there, miss . . . I mean, professor." Jem shrugged. "That's pretty much it. I mean, the grasslands go forever, but all you'll see is more grass and more steers and the river. 'Sides, I need to get you back to the main house." The rover flicked the grays reins.

After a moment, with a last look at the hill that concealed a processing plant, the two Ecolitans followed.

George Reeves-Kenn was waiting as the three rode up to the barn area from where they had started.

Nathaniel eased himself out of the saddle, wondering if he might not have been in better shape if he'd walked or run. Sylvia descended with more grace and less obvious stiffness. "How did you like it?" Reeves-Kenn grinned. "Its awesome," admitted Sylvia.

"Impressive. Most impressive," added Nathaniel, massaging his backside slightly. "Most impressive is the skill to ride horses."
"It takes some doing, but you can learn. Jem there-he'd never seen a horse up close, and he rides like he was born to it." The rancher nodded. "Ready to eat?"
"I could manage chat," said Sylvia. "I also,"

The dining room was at one end of the long stone house, with the entire north wall comprised of tinted glass. A single table was set for three people, all three places on one side, facing northward and looking out.

Reeves-Kenn nodded toward the center place. "The rose between two thorns."

"Sometimes I feel thorny . . . but thank you." Sylvia took the center place, and all three sat.

"We don't get outworlders here at Connaught that often. They take a look at Lanceville, the fusactor system, the harbor, and the hydrocarb processing plant, maybe Sebastions marine farms and assimilators, and they think they've

seen Artos." The white-haired rancher handed the basket of still-warm bread to Sylvia. "This is Artos." He gestured toward the hillside below the expansive glass windows, toward the grass-covered ground, and the river, and the desert in the distance to the northeast.

"It's beautiful in a stark way." Sylvia took a chunk of bread and passed the basket to Whaler.

"Your family had much to do with creating Artos as it is now, I understand," offered Nathaniel, breaking off a chunk of the crusty bread.

"Most folks choose to forget that, Ecolitan. Were just inconvenient leftovers now that the synde beans and the marine projects have taken off. Blood-mare! It was the credits from luxury beef that kept us going. Now, they talk as if beef. . ." George shook his head. "They don't know what sort of gene-tinkering it took. Too much arsenic and other stuff in the land and grass. How do you get steers that can ingest it and still produce edible beef?"

"It took some doing. I'm sure," Nathaniel offered, taking some of the warm bread. He had the feeling he was going to be sunburned, maybe brightly burned. He reached for the water.

"Doing? The gene-plan alone was more than ten million." An older woman stepped across the dining room with a green platter that she eased onto the center of the green linen. "Thank you, Estelle." Estelle nodded.

"Try these. Marinated beef. Guarantee you've never tasted better-even if I raised the steers."

Nathaniel waited for Sylvia, then helped himself. He cut a piece, then chewed slowly. If anything, the marinated beef scrips were even more tender and tasty than the steaks and stew served at the Guest House. "They represent the best I have tasted."

"Me, too."

"Told you so. Cant raise this in a tank." The rancher took another mouthful before speaking. "What did you think of the Unformed Desert?"

Nathaniel looked at Reeves-Kenns weathered face. "That's what they call the badlands between here and Lanceville." The grower shook his head. "My grandsire-he said he could recall when most of Artos looked like that."

Nathaniel thought the rancher was stretching. Planoforming was a far longer and more arduous process. But he nodded. "It makes you think."

"Think? No one thinks anymore." The rancher snorted. "The environauts in Camelot think that ranching takes too much land, and that all of this should be left and allowed to develop naturally. Naturally-there's not a damned thing natural about any of it. We built it. The redistributionists think we're dinosaurs, and want us to become extinct quietly, so they can give every soul in the commonwealth his thirty hectares. No one remembers that we're the ones whose fathers and forefathers lived in domes and choked on ammonia and . . ." He stopped and offered a sheepish grin. "I get too upset about this. I'm sure you don't want to hear a diatribe."

"It's interesting, and part of Artos," Sylvia answered. The three ace quiety for a time, the only interruption that of

Estelle replacing the empty basket with another one-again full of hot and fresh bread.

"According to your rover, you have a well-integrated facility here," said Nathaniel. "It appears most modern, yet there are those who find you less than enthused about technology."

"Folks think that technology means change, that you have to do something just because you can or because its a shade cheaper." Reeves-Kenn shook his head. "Look at Jem. He's a first-class rover, and a horse is better than any flitter or scooter for what he does. But we put high-tech survival packs on every horse, and we use the latest technology in slaughtering and packing. I believe in being the master of technology, not its slave. Those idiots in Camelot-all they want to know is what sort of tech-transfers you can develop and what kind of transstellar credit you can develop. I was talking about Jem. He rides a horse, and his brother pilots flitters and groundcars. Ought to be room for both, but you cant have both if you break up the big spreads."

"Why not?" asked Sylvia. "Doesn't everyone say you can?"

"They don't know what they're talking about. Smaller bean growers-take them-they have to share mechs, pool transportall that means more technology. That means a bigger tech base. To support a bigger tech base means growing more hydrocarb sources and more tech-transfers. More hydrocarb crops means plowing under the grasslands, because no one wants to go through what my grandfather did-they just want to take the results. They'll do that over my dead body." The rancher snorted. "Not that it will come to that. But all those tech-transfers mean more metal drops, or deep coring, and those cost. To pay those off requires more emphasis on technology-and then Artos'll be trapped, just like New Avalon is. Once you get on that spiral, you never get off."

"Such has occurred on more than a few planets-that the Institute has seen." Nathaniel sipped the cold water, realizing that he'd effectively stuffed himself, and pushed back his plate fractionally, to remind himself not to eat more than anything. He probably felt stuffed because there hadn't been any vegetables or greens either.

"How did you folks escape that?" George refilled his water glass.

"Luck-and isolation-and a war that left most systems reluctant to trade high-tech concepts." The Ecolitan shrugged. "We had to limit technology to interstellar transport and the directly related infrastructure. By the time we escaped that need, the cultural patterns were established."

"We haven't had that kind of luck. Doesn't look like we will, but I guess were the type of folks that have always had to make their own." He paused. "Would you like some tea?"

"No, thank you," said Whaler. "Not another item could I eat. It was all delicious . . . but . . ."

. "Absolutely," added Sylvia. "If I ate like this every day, I'd look like your steers."

"Never, professor. Never." The ranchers leathery face cracked in a grin.

"I think not either," said Nathaniel.

Sylvia shook her head. "You're both kind, but I know better."

"I suppose you need to go, and I need to get back to checking on a few things." The rancher glanced at Sylvia, then rose. So did the Ecolitans.

"Lovely view," said Sylvia as they walked from the dining room. "It is. I'd like to keep it."

"Do you think changes are occurring that rapidly?" asked Whaler.

"Quicker than that. That Landis-Nicarchos fellow is buying up Lanceville faster than folks can sell, and they're moving to ConTrio. But what will they do there when their money runs out? Come back and work in whatever tech-slavery he's got set up? Or push for more welfare? That means you run a tech surplus, and you can't do that without metals mining and more hydrocarb growth." The rancher shook his head as he held the outside door.

"That amount of credits has to come from somewhere," pointed out Sylvia.

"They do. No ones said, but some come from Camelot, some from the Federated Hegemony, and he's promising the politicians in Camelot that he'll buy out the low-interest long-term development bonds in return for concessions."

"Is there any. . . documentation," asked Nathaniel, stepping around a small water pigot that fed a low trough.

"Of course not. He's too smart for that, but its what he's doing."

"Without some form . . ."

"I know. I know." A note of weariness crept into ReevesKenns voice. "Other than that . . . how will this visit affect your report?"

"Everything affects our report." Nathaniel laughed. "Everything," added Sylvia, "including outstanding marinated beef."

"I hope so. Hate to lose all this. Hate to see my grandchildren lose it and have Artos turn into a miniature of the rodentmill in Camelot."

Nathaniel picked up one of the red survival kits beside the shed. "Might we borrow this?"

"You can have it. We can spare that." Reeves-Kenn grinned. "Call it a souvenir. Call it a reminder that you have to master technology, not let it master you."

Nathaniel nodded. He agreed with the beef grower's points, but felt that there was more left unsaid—a great deal more.

As Sylvia strapped herself in place, Whaler walked around the flitter, then pulled out the step brackets and climbed up to check the gearbox and rotor-and the control links. From what he could tell nothing had been touched.

He opened the turbine cover, trying not to shake his head. He couldn't see that anything was out of place, but that, unfortunately, didn't mean much. While he knew spacecraft systems from at least a cursory maintenance point of view, his under

standing of internal combustion turbine systems was more limited.

The ducts to the antitorque difusor were clear-a malfunction there would be great fun!

The remainder of the crafts preflight seemed normal, and he strapped himself in and began the preignition checks. After he finished them, he lit off the first turbine. The power system registered normal. Then he brought the rotors on line, and, after a wave toward Reeves-Kenn, lifted the flitter into a hover, checking all the indicators and systems again before beginning a true liftoff run.

As the craft swept over the cattle herd and eased into a climbing turn to the northeast. Whalers eyes went to the permacrete highway to the north, the stretch that was arrow-straight for nearly four kilos and twice as wide as any other stretch.

Then he swallowed. Because of the hills, the prevailing winds would almost always be out of the south. The damned highway was nothing but a shuttle runway-or it could be. Was he getting too suspicious?

He took another look, first at the artificial hill that held the processing plant. He swallowed and took the flitter into a wide circle of the main complex. "Sylvia . . . look at the hills around the house."

"I'm looking." After a moment, she added, "I'm not a geologist, but that pattern doesn't look normal. He's got a lot hidden there, and I thought he might, if you recall . . ."

"You were right. But what?" He eased out the vidimager and took a series of shots. They'd probably end up blurred, but he had to try.

"It could be anything. Supplies, a tech-transfer facility, an armory . . . who knows?"

Ac the end of the single circle, he straightened the flitter on a heading of one zero five, not quite a reciprocal of the outbound course line, then leveled off. "What did you think about George Reeves-Kenn?"

"Gracious . . . defensive about being a beef-grower . . . or rancher . . . very handsome. I'd bet, when he was younger. A good host, even for an Avalonian."

"The more handsome the host, the dearer the reckoning. . ."

"Cynical. If you react like that . . . I won't tell you." He turned his helmet toward the copiloc's seat, then grinned back as he saw the smile beneath the tinted face shield.

Beneath the flitter, the Unformed Desert scrolled past, the same wasteland of unchanging rock and sand, rock and sand.

Even as he checked airspace, orientation, and instruments, Nathaniel could feel all sorts of inchoate thoughts swirling through his mind. Reeves-Kenn seemed both straightforward and somehow deceptive, but the Ecolitan couldn't quite put his finger on anything specific, only on a feeling-and he hated relying just on feelings, especially when they had to produce a hard-copy report.

Abruptly, the pilot cocked his head, listening. Thwop, thwop . . . thwop, thwop, thwop . . . The rotors sounded normal, but the faintest screeching had

surfaced beneath the roaring whine of the turbines. His eyes went to the antique engine instruments, catching the slow rise in EGT and the fractional power loss off the left turbine. He kept listening.

A second faint screeching added its supra-audible noise to the first, and the second EGT began to inch upward, matching that of the first turbine. A quick or casual scan of the instruments would reveal neither-not for a while.

He looked out across the midplateau desert-they were nearly seventy kilos from the Reeves-Kenn spread, with another sixty to go before they reached the river by the shuttle port. He began to ease slightly more power into the rotors, trying to calculate the trade-offs. If the damage were calculated, he'd need the altitude.

There was no way they'd be able to cross forty or fifty kilos of desert in midsummer-assuming that they could walk away from the wreck that was about to occur.

Should he set it down? He shook his head. The rotors were fine, and so were the control links. Sabotaging those would have been too obvious, and too easily detected by the most cursory of preflights. So that meant a fire on touchdown or flare.

He wasn't sure about the form of the sabotage, but he had an idea that the turbines would seize rather abruptly, and the key to their survival lay in his shutting them down just before they seized-and not being in the driest part of the badlands.

From what he recalled . . . he eased the craft into a gentle turn to bring it onto a west-northwest heading. "Isn't Lanceville that way?" asked Sylvia. "We may be having some mechanical trouble, and, if we do, I don't want to set down in the middle of this wasteland."

"Accidental trouble, or assisted trouble?"

"If it's accidental, it's all too convenient." He cocked his ears again, straining. Was the abrasive whine louder? He shook his head. How could he tell? "Lock your harness. Were going to lose power, and when we do, we're going down fast."

"Locked."

"Good." He scanned the terrain below, noting each possible landing site, hoping for hard and flat rock. Sand was too uncertain, and could conceal too much, though he'd take sand over sharp rocks.

"We'll need to clear the cockpit as soon as the rotors stop. Can you make sure you take that desert kit?"

"I've got it here."

The Ecolitan kept scanning the instruments and looking westward toward what he hoped was a darker gray-the river and the planofomed lands that bordered it. The flutter continued to gain altitude slowly, as Nathaniel tried to calculate the strain and altitude trade-offs, as the river neared imperceptibly.

An almost subsonic vibration began to shake the fuselage, but not the rotors-a sure sign that the vibration was coming from the turbines. Abruptly, the EGTs pegged, and a sheering sound lashed through the cockpit. Even before the sound vanished, along with the sound of the turbines, Nathaniel had dumped all the pitch off the rotors, and dropped the nose, aiming due west-for a slightly

inclined sheet of what seemed to be rock.

As the flitter dropped abreast of his hoped-for landing site, he eased the craft into a slight bank, trying to keep the flitter in balance to stretch every meter of altitude.

"Too fast," he muttered to himself. "Slow. . . ease it back. . . check the altitude."

Two more red lights blazed on the panel-fire lights. "Easy..."

At a hundred meters, he leveled the nose, and at thirty, brought back the nose and pulled full pitch, then flattened the flare as the flitters sickening drop slowed. ". . . tail straight . . ."

The ground still seemed to rise too quickly, and he could see small jagged edges in the rocky plain. The smell of hot metal and smoke was seeping into the cockpit as he pulled full collective, trying to milk the last bit of lift from the slowing rotors. ThuMdddd. . . Clumkkkkk. . .

As the flitter swayed on the uneven, rocky ground, one hand went to the overhead rotor brake, while the other slashed along the electrical switches.

He unfastened his own harness, and when he could see the front blade quiver to a halt, he slid back the door and grabbed the kit from under the scat, not knowing what was in it.

"Run? Straight ahead! Get behind that hump!" His feet were pumping as he stumbled out of the cockpit. Sylvia was in front of him and opening space between them. They both half-crouched, half-skidded behind the low line of boulders, Sylvia first. Whwoshhh!

Even from behind the small outcropping, he could feel the heat wash across the air above them, but he just lay on his back gasping. "Out of shape . . . can't believe . . ."

"Give . . . me . . . some . . . credit . . ." She gasped back. "Lots . . . wasn't talking about you."

As he lay there, he opened the kit he'd pulled from beneath the seat, reading the label. "Emergency pilot supplies . . ." he murmured, "New Avalon military issue," He looked through the items. A plastic flask of water-that would help, as would the floppy sun hat. He set the desalinization kit aside and pocketed the three-shot miniature stunner, as well as the pencil flare set. That might have other uses.

Finally, he rolled over and peered out. The flitters incense initial fireburst had subsided to a mere roaring fire. "Are you up to a short fifteen kilo walk?"

Sylvia sat up and brushed the short dark hair off her damp forehead. "I assume it's necessary?"

He gestured back at the burning wreckage. "I doubt that the locator beacon is operating, and there isn't a satellite surveillance system. Besides, do we wish to accept the hospitality of those most likely to find us?"

"When you phrase it that way . . . which direction?"

"That way." He pointed west.

. "Isn't Lanceville in the other direction?" She shook her head. "I'm an idiot. So is a lot of sand."

"Fifty kilos, give or take a few."

"And you figure how many going west?" asked Sylvia. "Ten in the sand, four or five beyond that."

"I was getting out of shape anyway. I would complain about eating too much." She adjusted the desert kit into its pack form and shouldered it.

Nathaniel did the same with the supply kit. The hills weren't that high or steep, not to the eye, but they had crossed only half a dozen before Sylvia stopped, panting. "My legs ache already."

"Mine, too. More CO2 in the air. System has a harder time flushing out wastes," said Nathaniel in between deep, heaving breaths.

They looked back to where a thin line of smoke circled into the cloudless green-blue sky. "No one is looking yet." "Not yet. They wouldn't want to find survivors. That would be embarrassing."

"Then we'd better keep moving."

"Try to avoid the sand . . . takes too much effort."

"Fine with me," Sylvia answered over her shoulder, as Nathaniel struggled to catch up.

Having more mass also had its disadvantages, he reflected as he finally drew even with her, trying to keep his feet from sinking into the deeper sand.

That was the pattern—three or four small hills and a rest, then three or four more.

After several dozen hills, Nathaniel found himself squinting—because the sun was hanging just above the western horizon. "Where . . . did . . . the . . . day . . . go?"

"Happens , . . when . . . you're having . . . a good . . . time." Sylvia panted as she stopped at the hill crest.

He offered her his water bottle, taking out the kerchief and blotting his forehead. Forest lord, late afternoon or not it was hot! The sun hat helped, but not a lot. "Why . . . the . . . the flutter?"

"Because," Nathaniel glanced at the low hill beyond the one where they stood, "they were doing double duty—crippling Walkersons' resources and getting us."

"Who? The smaller growers? Kennis What's-his-name? Or. . . it isn't the Empire . . ."

"Probably not, but who knows?" He laughed, and the sound was harsh because his throat was dry, despite the water. "It's almost as complex as New Augusta. Lets go. We need to reach the river. They've got boats there. Maybe we can get a ride to Lanceville."

"How far to the river?"

"Another eight kays—that's a guess."

A faint thwop-thwop-thwop echoed across the stillness of the Unformed Desert.

Both turned back east, toward the dark spot in the sky.

Sylvia took a deep breath. "We'd better get moving." Nathaniel nodded. "They shouldn't see us from here, but we'd better keep an eye-and ear-out for them."

By the time he finished and took a deep breath, he had to hurry to catch up with Sylvia.

XV

Now what?" asked Sylvia, water dripping down her face, a face Nathaniel knew was red like his, although seeing the sunburn was difficult in the late twilight as they knelt by the edge of the river.

He splashed his face again, with water that smelled slightly medicinal. Iodine in the water, or some other trace? The background infopaks had said the waters were fishable and swimmable, but how fishable and swimmable? Jem had said the fish weren't edible. He shrugged. "The road's on the other side, and I don't see any bridges. We could rest, and then swim across."

"It's deeper than it looks."

"Any other ideas?"

"We could follow it for a while. We certainly won't die of thirst or dehydration now."

"We can rest for a bit," he said, walking toward one of the

larger of the small willow trees and sitting down with his back against the trunk.

"I could . . . stand a rest." Sylvia sat down almost beside him. After a moment, she asked, "Is it always like this with you?"

"What . . . like the flutter? No . . . sometimes it's dull. I remember one time when all I did was sit in an orbit station and scan screens and dump data into a matrix to determine technology-transfer trade patterns." He laughed.

"For two standard months."

"Were most of your 'consulting' assignments like that?"

"No. Most are like this. We never get the easy ones. The Institute charges too much. So . . ." He shrugged. "I'm tired."

"Me, too."

From the darkness and quiet came the sound of insects, and the gurgle of the river, and even the rumbling of a groundlorry on the distant highway.

Nathaniel jerked awake, realizing he must have dozed off. A set of reddish lights seemed to float on the river. He squinted, trying to make out the shapes, then staggered up, putting a hand out and steadying himself on the willow trunk. Every muscle in his body seemed to protest as he touched Sylvia's shoulder and made his way toward the most solid section of the bank.

"Hello . . . the riverboat , . . ." The lights veered slightly toward the shore. "Can you give some stranded travelers a lift?" he yelled, "If you can get aboard, you're welcome to the ride," came back a scratchy voice. "I'll slow the pack, but that's all I can do."

The two Ecolitans dashed through the knee-deep water, splashing in all

directions, then bounced through the deeper water, and finally swam to the dark hulk of the barge, feeling their way along the hull until they found a ladder. Sylvia half-vaulted, half-climbed onto the barge, while Nathaniel levered himself up after her, scraping his forearm in the process.

"Just walk along the catwalk there. It'll take you back to the cross-plank," called the gravelly voice from the dark shape of what seemed a pilot house. "You all on board?"

"Were on," said Nathaniel, dripping and glad for the first time that it was summer and not cold.

The barge bucked slightly, and the sound of the engines dropped to a purr.

Sylvia led the way aft, across the catwalk, and then up to a raised and covered pilot house. A handful of instruments glowed in reddish light.

"Anna-Marie FitzReilly," said the square-faced, gray-haired woman at the wheel. "Guess I qualify as the master or whatever of this putt-boat and barge assembly." Her eyes never left the river or the instruments. "You two look like soaked muskrats. There's stuff in the locker, if you want to change till yours dries. Won't take long, not in summer."

"Thank you. I'm Sylvia Ferro-Maine, and this is Nathaniel Whaler. We're from Accord, and were doing an economic study--"

"On that side of the river?"

"We walked out of the desert."

"The desert? Walking out of the desert? Not much economics in that, is there?"

"We had a little trouble with our flitter," Nathaniel said. "Good thing you didn't get caught too far in. Lots of suckholes there."

"Suckholes?" Nathaniel felt stupid, as though he were offbalance and reacting too late. Then . . . wasn't he?

"Suckholes. . . big holes covered with powdery sand. You step on the edge and down it all does, sucks you down so far no one ever find you. There are little ones, too, I hear, but folks don't worry about those."

"You were right about the sand," said Sylvia. "How about lucky?"

"You still didn't say what you were doing out there. New Avalon send you?" FitzReillys eyes narrowed.

"No. We're professors at the Ecolitan Institute. The Institute is being paid to do the study, and we were the lucky ones chosen."

"What's to study?" snorted the boat pilot, easing the wheel slightly to starboard, her eyes remaining on the river.

"Infrastructure, things like power sources, highways, harbors . . . barges, I suppose, except nothing we had on background mentioned barges." Nathaniel cleared his throat. "You don't have a comm set of some sort, do you?"

"Me? You got to be kidding, professor. This is a low-budget operation. Besides, just what could a set do? In a real emergency, someone could get here

with a groundcar or a flitter--most of the time the roads within a few kilos of the river, sometimes closer."

Nathaniel looked at the covered bins in the barge. Then he grinned. "Well . . . you're part of the transport infrastructure. Mind if we hitch a ride back to the Lanceville area and interview you along the way?"

"I'm not going anywhere. Just stop talking when I tell you. There's a tricky part of the big bend in a while." She eased the wheel slightly. "What do you carry?"

"Beans--synde beans. What else is there on Artos? Falfamut is fodder or plowed under. Maize is for the aristos. Lorry garden stuff--there's not enough."

"It seems that all the big groundlorries carry beans," ventured Sylvia.

"We do the little growers," growled FitzReilly. "They got a co-op thing, store their crops until they get a barge full. Synde beans don't spoil that quick, but it's usually only a few days anyway. Most live way south of that aristo plaything they call a spread or a ranch or whatever. Barging is cheaper than selling to the freelance haulers, and R-K costs more than that 'cause they want to drive out the smaller ones. My husband and me--we sell to R-K, and they're pretty fair--that's because we haul all their precious beef--the live ones--down to the harbor. Guess groundlorries upset their digestion."

"You don't hear much about the smaller growers." Nathaniel stifled a yawn.

"Why would you? No one cares for them. The Reeves-Kenn people are scared they'll find some way to take their spread. Rumor is they won't let them near the place. The tech-transfer crowd doesn't bother them, but doesn't see much future for 'em."

"What about the marine farms?"

"That's a black hole. Always promising cheap protein, but its mostly algae. Personally, I think old George Reeves-Kenn just shovels credits at his little brother so as to keep Sebascion off his cattle lands. Quiet now . . . wait till we get round the bend." FitzReilly turned the wheel deftly, checking the riverbanks, a dim set of green-and-red lights, and the instruments. Her left hand flicked across the throttles, and the purr of the engines rose to a muted roar, then dropped back to a louder purring.

Nathaniel glanced around the pilot house--stark plastic, utilitarian, with nothing in it but the basic instruments, and the high-back stool behind the wheel where FitzReilly sat.

Once the barge and push boat straightened out below the bend, the pilot nodded in the red-lit dimness. "So what else you want to know?"

"What's the capacity of the barge?"

"Close to six hundred tonnes, but that's mass, not cubage. A load of beans like this runs maybe four hundred tonnes, and that's all I'd want to take most limes with the draft. Big harvest times, we'll run both barges."

Nathaniel tried to wrestle with the numbers mentally--perhaps the equivalent of well over 150,000 litres in hydrocarb fuel equivalents, or had he misplaced a decimal? He rubbed his forehead. "How long does the run take?"

"Two to three days. Josh and I alternate, 'cause one of us has to run the depot."

"Three runs a week."

"Sometimes."

"All beans?"

"Except for a beef run or two. They pay all right, but we do that to keep R-K off our backs."

Nathaniel wanted to shake his head. The small growers were shipping the equivalent of more than half a million litres of synde bean oil feedstock a standard week. Then . . . it really wasn't that much if the oil were the energy supply basis for everything except fusactor-powered electricity. Even with all its alternative power sources. Accord used something like a half-million barrels of hydrocarb feedstocks a day. "You're carrying a lot of value for them."

"They're supposed to trust R-K or the gouging haulers?"

"Any of this ever come to violence?"

"Not so far, but it's gotten uglier in the last few years. Attacks on the growers' small hauling van. Some of the small growers got stunners and slug-throwers-smuggled in somehow, and they're not cheap."

"You think George Reeves-Kenn knows that?"

"He has to. He knows damn near everything. More high-tech stuff hidden in that simple ranch house of his than in most of Lanceville, and he plays at being a poor dumb grower trying to hang on to his heritage." The pilot snorted.

"You're not painting a cheerful picture."

"What is . . . chat's what is. Were trying to make a living and make Artos a better place, but sometimes you got to wonder."

"You mean," said Sylvia, "why people always think that the other side won't bring in heavy weapons, too."

"Haven't seen any of those, but I wouldn't bet against it if this keeps up."

Nathaniel took a deep breath. "I've talked too much, and you look beat, professor."

"He's had a long, hard day," said Sylvia. "Get some rest. The blankets are in the locker over there, I'm not going anywhere. You have more questions when you feel better, you know where to find me." FitzReilly laughed. "Be midday before we get to the dock at Lanceville, and you won't sleep that long once the suns up."

Sylvia tugged at Nathaniels elbow. He just stood there, trying to concentrate.

She went to the locker and pulled out two blankets, then returned. "We need some rest. Now."

"Be more comfortable below here in front," suggested the boat captain. "Use the pallets hung there."

"Thank you," offered Sylvia, taking Nathaniels hand. He followed her down the short ladder to the main deck. The two Ecolitans sat on the two pallets, wrapped in rough synthfibre blankets, listening to the gurgle of the water past the hull, and the hissing chirps of some unknown insects. "Tired . . ." mumbled Sylvia. "'So am I."

"This whole business is exhausting. I thought Impies were unpopular, but Ecolitans seems even less welcome. Around here anyway."

"Around anywhere. Were pretty impartial, and no one likes that." Nathaniel yawned again, "In fact, its hard to figure why anyone really wants this study. It's almost like . . . I don't know..."

"As though people were using it to flush out everyone else?" suggested Sylvia.

"Something like that . . . I guess." He yawned. "We'll think about it later." Sylvia blinked her eyes, then stretched out.

"As if we had much choice," he muttered to himself, letting his eyes close, knowing he'd missed more than a few questions and hoping he could dig them up when he was rested and could think.

XVI

Nathaniels chin was stubbly, and his greens smelled of smoke, oil, sweat, and the faintly medicinal odor of the Green Knight River. Sylvia didn't smell much better. The two paused in the corridor of the Port Authority building outside the door with the sign saying Port Authority Office of the Chief of Port.

"Will the receptionist or whatever let you in?" Sylvia asked. "I think so."

They entered the main office, and Bagot looked up from the console, his jaw dropping slowly.

Nathaniels hand slashed across the console, knocking the man's hands away, even as he moved around the console and yanked the driver back from the gear. "Easy, Bagot. I just want a word with the Port Chief." Without looking at Sylvia, he asked, "Would you keep Bagot company, and ensure he stays quiet? I'd rather not be interrupted."

"Don't get too violent." She grinned at Nathaniel. "Me, violent?" Nathaniel picked up the smaller man and set him on one of the straight-backed plastic chairs.

"It has been known to happen." Sylvia turned to Bagot, miniature dart gun in hand. "We're not very happy at the moment. You'd better just sit there quietly." Bagot opened his mouth.

"No." Sylvia's single word was like liquid nitrogen, and Bagot seemed to shrivel in the seat.

Nathaniel nodded, then opened the door to the back office and stepped inside. "Good morning. Port Chief."

Walkerson jerked upright at the console. "Whaler! Where. . . they said you were killed in the flutter crash." His eyes narrowed at the small stunner in the Ecolitans hand. "Ah . . ."

"I'm not too trusting at the moment. I do hope you understand. And who said we were killed in the flutter crash? They weren't very observant. We left ten kays of tracks across the Unformed Desert." The Ecolitan leaned forward. "Just who are 'they? You seemed to have someone in mind." Walkerson's hand wandered

toward the console. Thrum!

The Port Chief winced and looked down at his numb, temporarily lifeless hand. "Whaler . . . I don't care who you are. You cant do this sort of thing."

The Ecolitan smiled. "I strongly suggest that you not tell any Ecolitan what he or she can or cannot do. Especially one who's had a flitter sabotaged under him."

"What?" Walkerson massaged his hand. "Now . . . who are they?" pressed Whaler. "Sabotage?"

"We'll get to that later. Who are the people who suggested we were dead?"

"When you didn't come back, Jersek took out the second flitter. The smoke was still obvious. He called Reeves-Kenn, and they

sent a team out. This morning they confirmed that there appeared to be no survivors."

"The reports of our death are somewhat exaggerated." Nathaniel paused. "Jersek has a maintenance certificate, does he not?"

"He has to, but he inspects. He doesn't do the repairs. You can't do both. That's for safety reasons." Nathaniel nodded. "You aren't suggesting . . . ?"

"I suggest nothing. Deeds are the grain, words the chaff."

"How did you get back?" Walkerson ventured. "We had to take a boat ride to get back from the Reeves-Kenn spread. Much safer it was. Rivers run, even planoformed ones, as rivers run."

"You didn't have to do this." The Port Chief kept massaging his hand. "I'm on your side."

"Sorry. Wouldn't you be a little jumpy? We had your groundcar explode on us and your flitter fail. That doesn't count the processing plant explosion. That's three attempts to murder us in four days."

"The groundcar was a mechanical failure."

"Enough of a failure to explode glass into the driver?"

"I'd have to say that is a trace strange, but its also getting a bit embarrassing. Whaler. First, the groundcar and now our best flitter. You said you were a qualified pilot."

"I am. If I weren't we'd be dead, which is what someone wanted."

"I am willing to accept some things, but that seems a. bit farfetched just to avoid . . ."

"Taking blame?" Nathaniel shook his head. "No. I've got some vidimager shots of the instruments. I thought they might come in handy. Show the EGT temps identical and equal at max. They also show a few other things." He shrugged. "They're not conclusive, but they'd be enough to convince most aero engineers. Now, I understand your problems. Port Chief, but I really don't think that sabotage comes under pilot error."

"There isn't any way to prove that . . ."

"All you have to do is check the turbines. They're spot welded in place. The crash fire wont have changed that. It will have destroyed the liquid metal

injector they used-or whatever."
"You knew this and took the flitter?"

"No. I deduced what was happening when it had already started in the middle of the damned desert and after I blew the turbines to put us someplace besides where they wanted us to be."

Walkerson cleared his throat. "Whaler. You have every right to be upset and, as you put it, chap, jumpy. But would you listen to some reason?" The Ecolitan waited.

"First, we've got exactly two working flitters. It will be years before we get a replacement for the one that crashed."

"It didn't crash. I landed it in the Unformed Desert. It caught fire after that-and the fires were planned, and not by me."

"Why would either Jersek or I make our own life even harder? I have to strain to make ends meet here, and everyone snipes at the Port Authority."

"All right." Nathaniel kept his voice even and the smile off his face. "Then who would benefit by hurting you-and saddling you with our deaths? If you're right, that's the game."

"Unfortunately, a very great number of people." Walkerson took a deep breath. "Could you point that somewhere else?"

"I'm listening. Who would benefit most?" The Port Chief massaged his limp right hand with his left. "Sebastian Reeves-Kenn for one. He'd address three problems his brother, me, and your study."

"Go on."

"Your study should show that his marine enterprises add very little to Artos. The Counter Tories would use that as an impartial analysis to cut the subsidies he's been getting." Walkerson licked

his lips. "George has been reluctant to keep pouring credits into R-K Marine, but, if/our murder were pinned on George-or the finger pointed in that direction, at the least, George would have other more pressing problems than Sebastian, and at the most, Sebastian would take over all of R-K."

"And you?"

"Were required to submit an annual report to Camelot, assessing the use of the port and the probabilities for growth and future utilization. The last report was quietly critical of R-K Marine, not, you understand, even in direct words, but in suggesting that the export of luxury goods would remain stable, and that significant future growth toward full self-sufficiency would have to be based on greater tech-transfer and industrial infrastructure."

"So . . . essentially, we're here to validate or refute your report?"

"I was never told. Only that I should provide all support and assistance within our abilities." Walkerson touched his chin with his good hand. "I assume there is some connection."

"Do you have orbit scan photos of Artos-recent ones?"

"The last set is a year old. Orbit control is in a geocentric station."

"I'd like a set."

"Ah . . . after this?"

"That"-Whaler pointed to the Port Chiefs limp hand "wouldn't have happened if

you'd been a little more forthcoming. I apologize for the misunderstanding, but, as the saying goes, few days pass without clouds."

"You Ecolitans aren't the most likeable folks."

"Probably not. But remember, your people wanted us to do something that was difficult and nasty. It's hard to survive and be likeable after three attempts at murder." Nathaniel forced a smile. "I mean, would you be in the best of moods?"

"I guess not," admitted Walkerson. "Now . . . who else would like to see us disappear?"

"Kennis Landis-Nicarchos. Your death would probably cause a lot of instability. Property values on Artos are already declining since the Commons decided to cut the colony subsidies, and more uncertainty would depress values."

"Is that stretching? I don't like the man, based on one meeting, but..."

"He's a lizard." Walkerson laughed. "He'd kill his mother, except he probably already has, to shave an additional five percent off the cost of a chunk of property, I'm assuming that your report would show that Artos has too many roads, too great an investment in marine development, but that its basically sound. Kennis wouldn't like that. It would encourage people to bargain or hang on. Artos doesn't have a bad trade location-its near the Three System Bulge, and we can trade with the Frankan Union, the Hegemony, the Empire, and the Conglomerate. That makes for a good long-term investment." Walkerson rubbed his hand. "Some feeling coming back."

"Who else?"

"Any number of outsystem reps-Sonderssen for one. They can live high here-the suites in the Blue Lion cost less than a small conapt on Nieustron. If Artos develops, they lose that luxury."

"Rather petty motivation, I would think."

"I was on Trezenia, Whaler, before your bloody Institute got involved, and I saw the locals sell their daughters-or little boysfor a whiff of Elysium, or for the price of a wooden hut. Don't tell me that Sonderssen wouldn't be above arranging a murder to keep living high on the steer. He's in the Blue Room-or Elizabeth's-every night."

"And the Fuards?"

"Obvious, isn't it? Tactically a good locale, but they're not usually that devious. I'd expect them to show up with a small fleet and just annex us."

The Ecolitan slipped the stunner into his belt. "So, what do you recommend?"

"Not stunning your allies." Walkerson shook his hand. "Bloody hurts."

"You hadn't shown you were an ally. I won't do it again."

"I wish I had more confidence in that."

"Oh, you do. How else can we get off-planet?" Walkerson grinned, then laughed ruefully. "I see your point." Then he frowned. "I can't say much-except I'd be certain to have a talk with Karl-Abbe."

"I'd planned on that. And how do we avoid more accidents'?" Walkerson took another deep breath. "I truly don't know. Can you believe that I wanted to lose a groundcar and our best flitter?" He paused. "Or a driver. Do you know how much difficulty that will create for our operations and budget? Were I after you, likeable chap that you are, I would scarcely employ ways that slit

my own gullet. And I had no intention of letting anyone else abuse our equipment. Jersek checked that flitter twice that morning. I looked once, and I do know something about them."

"Well . . . I certainly don't do emergency landings in the middle of unknown deserts for the joy of it."

"All I can say. Professor Whaler, is that I will be careful, and you should be careful. And I will let you know anything that bears on this. I would hope you will do the same."

"What about the small growers? I heard that they were getting upset with R-K Enterprises. Would they be desperate enough to try to frame George Kenn-Reeves?"

"Some of the younger hotheads might. I don't know how they'd get access to the flitter . . ."

"Perhaps they didn't. We've assumed that all of these were from the same person or group."

"I do hope things are not that bad, Whaler. That is a horrifying thought."

"Just crossed my mind. As the saying goes, it's best not to look for a golden life in an iron age." He looked down at his stained, rumpled greens. "Could we prevail upon Bagot to take us to the Guest House? We could use some cleaning up."

"We?"

"Professor Ferro-Maine is outside, entertaining Bagot. She's been with me every step of the way-often in front."

"I see." Walkerson shook his head slowly from side to side. "You two are rather formidable. Well . . . if Bagot is willing . . ."

"I think he should drive us everywhere. He is from Artos."

"That wouldn't stop some."

"Any port in a storm . . . and I definitely sense heavy weather."

"I still don't think you're all that likeable a fellow."

"It's hard to be likeable when people are trying to kill you." Nathaniel offered a patently false smile and gestured for the Port Chief to rise.

"Perhaps you should explain this to Bagot."

"I suppose so."

Bagot glanced up expectantly as Walkerson and Whaler entered the outer office. Sylvia stepped back so that she could use the dart gun on either Avalonian.

"Bagot . . . it appears as though we and the Ecolitans are on the same side, and the other fellows are getting rather rough. I'd like to have you serve as the permanent driver and aide to them until they leave."

"Yes, sir. Whatever you feel is best." Bagot did not look extraordinarily pleased.

Then, reflected Nathaniel, he didn't look horrified either. "So . . . were friends and allies, now?" said Sylvia in a low voice as they followed Bagot out to the carpark.

"Allies, for now. He needs us, and our survey, and we need to finish and get out of here while he still does-before we release our results." Nathaniel answered in a lower voice, then added, "I can't wait to get cleaned up."
"Me, too."

"And then we need to visit a few people." Sylvia nodded.

XVII

We need to talk to this banker, Karl-Abbe, and then maybe you can loosen up the piping magnate and that permacrete supplier." Nathaniel reloaded the vidimager, then slipped it into the sleeve harness of his second pair of greens. The first was being washed by the Guest House staff, along with Sylvia's. He touched his face, reddened and warm to the touch. "You've got a better touch with people."

"I'm glad you find that useful."

The Ecolitan frowned at the coolness of her voice. "Let me go downstairs and use the comm to see what I can arrange. Then I'll see what we can fit in for the rest of the day."

"All right. Let me know when you have everything arranged." Sylvia eased to her feet from the straight-backed chair and slipped through the connecting door into her own room.

Nathaniel closed the datacase, then frowned again, and opened the connecting door to see Sylvia disappear into the corridor. He hurried after her, finally catching her at the top of the stairs. "Where are you going?"

"For a walk." She did not turn, but continued down the steps, each foot precisely placed. "Can I come?"

"I don't know." She jerked her head toward the side of the foyer, where Bagot had risen expectantly. "You'd better talk to Bagot."

Nathaniel turned to the driver. "It's going to be a little while, Bagot. Something's come up."

The driver's eyes followed Sylvia through the front door, and his face blanked. "Sir?"

"If you wouldn't mind waiting. . ."

"No, sir. Its cool here." Bagot looked toward the door as a puff of warm air drifted into the foyer.

"Thank you." Nathaniel nodded and walked quickly through the door and after Sylvia, his eyes watering against the bright sun. He stumbled on the edge of the drive before his vision adjusted to the afternoon sun.

Sylvia had reached the edge of the fields behind the Guest House and was striding up one of the wider rows between the low synde bean planes by the time Nathaniel again caught up. She did not turn. "You're angry."

"How did you ever guess?"

"What did I do?"

That got no answer, except for Sylvia to increase her pace. Both were

breathing hard. "Forest lord! What do you want from me?"

"I don't know." Her pace increased again, almost to a jog. "Whatever I did . . . I'm sorry."

Finally, at the end of the row, a good six hundred meters long, she stopped, almost panting, and turned.

"I said I was sorry. Even if I don't know why." She took several deep breaths, then fixed his eyes with hers, cold and gray. "Nathaniel . . . I don't know why you even asked me to come-except to be a decorative side piece. And I don't know why I agreed. You're used to doing things your way. Oh, occasionally I'm useful-for an insight, to cover your back. But that's not my idea of either life or a relationship-personal or professional." She shook her head. "I should have known. That was the way it started, and why would things change?"

Nathaniel looked at the low bean plants-still in the hot and windless air-and wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. He'd left the kerchief behind, "I'm sorry. I didn't think."

"I'm not blaming you. Not much. In your line of work-this part of it anyway-you don't have much time to think." He swallowed. "Maybe I should."

She turned to him and smiled faintly. "Why? You've gotten results."

"First, because you've saved my life and neck a couple of times. Second, because I want to, but have trouble figuring out how, and third, because what I'm doing hasn't really gotten results." He pursed his lips. "People are still trying to kill us, and we don't know who or why,"

"You-we're-still alive. Most people wouldn't be. You're good at surviving."

"I want more than that."

"So do I."

For some reason, he thought of the scent of orange and trilia, and his throat and guts tightened, and he looked down at the dark ground between the plants. "What would you do next?" he finally asked. "Don't humor me."

"I'm not. I'm at a loss. Oh, we need to talk to that banker, but even if he has every banking number on Artos, what will that tell us?" He waited.

"Do you honestly want an answer?"

"Yes."

Sylvia was silent. She glanced out at the low bean plants for a time. When she finally spoke, her voice was low, and Nathaniel had to strain to hear.

"People aren't numbers. I'm not an economist, but numbers can Justify anything. We've looked at power plants and roads and harbors. We've looked at hydrocarbon production and conversion. We've been introduced to almost everyone who is anyone." She shrugged. "What do we know about the people, beyond their positions and statistics?"

"Not much," admitted Nathaniel. "Where have we learned the most?"

"Probably from George Reeves-Kenn and FitzReilly, the boat pilot."

Sylvia stopped and glanced out over the rows of beans. "Doesn't that tell you

something? People have dreams, desires. The only people whose dreams we know are George Reeves-Kenn and Anna-Marie. Why did I go with you to Accord?"

"Dreams . . ." Nathaniel nodded, "I'm sorry."

"I should have talked to you. But, I'm not an agent . . . not this kind. I don't know how to land an exploding flitter. Or drop onto a strange planet and pretend to know everything about its economy."

"You know people, better than I do."

"You're just saying that. You did fine on Old Earth."

"No, I made a lot of mistakes, and people died. I was lucky, and I found you. And now . . . now . . . I think I'm in over my head."

"You . . . over?" Sylvia shook her head. "I was going to be unfair."

"I've been the unfair one."

"Nathaniel . . . we can't fight. Not and get through this."

"I . . . don't want to fight."

"Neither do I."

"But you don't . . . I think I understand." He swallowed. Sylvia touched his wrist. "It's all right." After a moment, he swallowed again. "So we need to get people to talk more about who they are and what they want?"

"That's one thing." She turned to him and put a hand on his shoulder, lightly, before dropping it. "I'm overreacting. The numbers are important, too. It takes both. You can't change things without resources, and the numbers should show where those are."

"But," Nathaniel said slowly, "if there's no reason for change..."

"It doesn't happen."

"I think." He took a deep breath. "I think its time you decided what we do next. I've managed to get people stirred up enough to try to kill us three times, and we don't know much more than when we landed."

"We do. . . except we don't know what we know." She paused. "No. We don't know how what we do know fits."

"Because we don't know enough about peoples motivations ..."

"Exactly."

"So where should we start?"

"The banker, and Vivienne Evanston. She knows people." Sylvia turned. "We ought to head back. Poor Bagot is probably confused."

Not as confused as he'd been, thought Nathaniel, not nearly. He wanted to shake his head. Sylvia had every right to be upset. She was intelligent and competent . . . and he was far too used to operating alone. He needed to change, and that wasn't going to be easy-not at all.

They walked back toward the Guest House slowly. "I'll try to do better," he said in a low voice as they stepped into the shadows of the portico and up beside the empty ground

"So will I." She squeezed his hand momentarily. "You call the banker."

"And you call Vivienne." They exchanged smiles.

XVIII

I hope you don't mind," ventured Sylvia. "It works out better this way. Karl-Abbe said it would give him some time." Nathaniel glanced up as Bagot turned the groundcar onto a long drive that wound out along a ridge bordered by water on both sides. From the midsection of the ridge, below the manicured, grassed, and gardened grounds around the house, and above the rocks that bordered the gray water, grew trees—one of the few forests that the Ecolitans had seen.

"You couldn't find a locale like this on Old Earth," she murmured.

"There aren't many left on Accord, either. Not unless you are very well off," he answered, studying the flowers and plants that bordered the permacrete drive.

"This is the place, sirs." Bagot eased the groundcar under the high-roofed extension that shaded the entry to the house. The Evanston house was a two-story copy of something from pre-Ecollapse Old Earth. At least, reflected Nathaniel, that was what it looked like, with stone columns, and a blue tile roof, a balcony overlooking the ocean and what seemed to be a closed courtyard on the landward side. The long structure sat on a small promontory north of Lanceville.

As he got out of the groundcar, Nathaniel glanced toward the flat gray water, nodding to himself. Without a moon, and without strong winds, there wasn't likely to be much in the way of waves. Were some of Sebastian Reeves-Kenns problems linked to a form of oceanic stagnation? Could they find out from the monitoring official? Nathaniel couldn't remember his name. Did it matter? As Sylvia had pointed out, if Sebastian thought he had a problem . . . he did. Still, it would be nice to confirm it. He refrained from shaking his head. There he was, going after hard facts again.

"Nathaniel? Are we going in?"

"Sorry. I was thinking."

Vivienne Evanston stood outside the double front doors, her slender form concealed by a loose-fitting short-sleeved tunic and matching pale green trousers. "It's so good to see you both."

"Its good to see you," offered Sylvia. Nathaniel smiled and half-bowed.

"The balcony is lovely today. Why don't we sit there?" Without waiting for an answer, the blond woman turned and opened the ornately carved wooden door.

The Ecolitans followed her through a high-ceilinged foyer with an inlaid parquet floor and down a wide corridor which separated a formal dining room from a large salon. At the end of the corridor was another set of double doors that opened onto the covered balcony.

Three chairs were spaced around a table covered with cream linen. On the side table were a tea service and a tray of pastries and small sandwiches. "I do hope you don't mind if I took the liberty of having tea. I also have liftea. That's in the gold-rimmed pot."

"You're very thoughtful," said Sylvia. "It is most kind of you," added Nathaniel. "Here . . . you two take the chairs that face the ocean. I can

enjoy the view all the time. Too much, some times."

Nathaniel touched the back of Vivienne's chair, then eased it into place as she sat. "Thank you."

He turned to Sylvia, but she had already seated herself. She smiled at Nathaniel. As he eased around the table to seat himself, he realized that the angled balcony was visible from the covered portico and that he could see a servant carrying a tray out to Bagot. He nodded, not surprised. Vivienne Evanston was the perfect hostess.

"It was so nice of you to remember that I did want to chat with you. Geoffrey will be jealous, to say the very least. He's out on ConTrio today, Salisville, I think."

"You're kind to see us," said Sylvia.

"Oh, you're kind to visit me. We see so few offworlders, and I know you both must be so very busy, with . . . whatever you are doing."

"Its an economic study." Sylvia smiled warmly. "But that wasn't why we came."

"Gracious. I would think not. I know nothing of economics. Not much anyway, although I did take a few courses at the university, but that was years and years ago." Vivienne paused. "Would you like tea or liftea? The tea is the milder Grawer, not at all like that awful stuff at the Blue Lion."

"Tea, please." Sylvia smiled again.

"I will try the tea." Nathaniel hoped it would be mild, but he was following Sylvia's lead.

"You are brave." Vivienne Evanston laughed melodically, and filled three china cups, transferring them from the serving table to the linen. Then she set the silver tray of pastries and miniature sandwiches in the middle of the table.

"There . . . please do help yourself, or I will be forced to eat them all, and I will bulge out all over the place, and Geoffrey will not be pleased at all."

"Somehow," ventured Nathaniel, "I think not. I cannot imagine you being one who would bulge."

"You don't know my weakness for sweets, professor."

"I imagine it can get lonely this far out of Lanceville," observed Sylvia.

"It can be lonely here, at times, but I like the quiet. I work with the flowers, and three days a week, I assist at the public clinic. Years ago, I was a practicing physical therapist, and this keeps my registration current. Geoffrey laughs at me, but I could support myself if I had to. Gracious, not on this scale, but . . . I think it's practical, and besides, who would they have without me?"

"If Lanceville cannot afford a therapist . . . it is really small, isn't it?" said Sylvia. "Did you come here from Camelot?"

"Not from Camelot. I went to school on New Avalon, but on Sofsex. The University of Pierce. That's in Exton, and then I went to work at the Medical Centre hospital. That's where I met Geoffrey. He'd been in a flitter accident. Silly way to meet your husband, I suppose . . ."

Sylvia darted a grin at Nathaniel, who almost choked, considering that he and

Sylvia had met over drugged sparkling wine.

'Exton isn't that big," continued Vivienne, apparently unaware of the byplay, "but that corner of Sofssex has more people than all of Artos."

"That's hard to believe."

"When we came here, Geoffrey was so confident that Lanceville would grow." Vivienne laughed softly. "Like Kennis is now."

"Kennis does seem rather confident," replied Sylvia, "but from what everyone says, he has done a lot. The Blue Lion is being refurbished."

"In blue. He favors far too much blue," offered Vivienne. "Even his security force—those bright blue uniforms—they look more like soldiers. Security forces. . . we scarcely need those here. If dear Kennis feels they are so necessary, they should be clothed in something . . . less obtrusive. He won't, chough." She laughed. "He's an overgrown boy, almost playing at soldiers."

Nathaniel listened, trying to pick up something from the way the Avalonian woman spoke. There was something . . . he wanted to shake his head.

"You've scarcely said a word. Professor Whaler. I do hope we're not boring you."

Nathaniel smiled and shook his head. "No . . . an economist by trade am I, and most likely the boring one. It is good to listen to something besides external diseconomies or the cross-subsidies of interlocked transport, or the marginal disutility of heavy highway lorries." He shrugged. "People are far more interesting." He sipped the tea, carefully—far stronger than liftea, and the Grawer was considered mild.

"Professor Whaler, you are so cautious with your tea."

"Beverages are milder on Accord. But this is good."

"In small doses, I think you mean." Vivienne smiled indulgently.

"The more precious the taste, the slower the drink," he answered. Both women smiled. "You sound like an economist." Whaler hoped so.

"Can I ask what use your study might provide?" Vivienne rose and refilled her cup, looking toward Sylvia. "More, dear?"

"Please." Sylvia looked to Nathaniel.

"Precisely, I could not say, dear lady. We do not create the reasons for studies. Usually, however, studies such as ours are used to plan."

"That worries Geoffrey, you know. So much of what happens here on Artos is dictated elsewhere. Geoffrey is worried that the Commons will cut the colony subsidies again."

"And you think our study might provide a rationale?" asked Sylvia. "Politics . . . I could not say."

"If anything," Nathaniel injected, "I would say that, on a preliminary basis, a very preliminary basis, you understand, there needs to be more emphasis on infrastructure diversification. And more trees."

"That has a lovely sound, infrastructure diversification. So do trees, but

Geoffrey once explained that to me. Something about the more immediate needs, except where nothing else will grow, as on the rocks here." Vivienne gestured vaguely in the direction of the sea and then to the silver tray. "Please have one. They absolutely won't keep, and then I will feel obliged to eat more than I should."

"Could you give Vivienne an idea of what you mean?" Sylvia paused to sip her tea. "I mean about how diversification would affect the subsidy."

"That is difficult to predict. I would say we will submit a good study, but," he laughed, "fair words feed but pride, and pride goes before a fall. Now, here on Artos, the infrastructure is solid, but narrow. Transport is by land, and the permacrete highways are wide and well built. Energy comes from one fusactor complex here on ConOne and from the hydrocarbon processing plant, and the feedstocks are synde beans." He paused, concealing a shiver as the full import of what he had said struck him, but adding a shrug. "All these are tested and common. But there is no provision for alternatives. An earthquake, and how good are the highways? An major accident at the processing plant or the complex?"

"You make it sound as though such disasters could happen easily," said Vivienne.

Nathaniel shook his head. "They happen seldom, but economists are paid to outline what might go wrong, and to quantify the trade-offs." He straightened in the chair. "To ship in more flitters, and big cargo flitters, would ensure transport under more conditions, but shipping and building such is expensive. Growing other feedstocks-that is possible, but none are so costeffective as the synde bean. Governments do not like to spend resources far from the majority of those who vote, but they also do not wish to be blamed for troubles. So . . . they will take Ginreport and read it, and decide whether keeping the subsidies and increasing the infrastructure will measurably reduce the possibility of troubles without increasing the taxes on those who are close."

"You make it sound so cold, but then, I do suppose it is." The blonde set her cup on the saucer with a faint clink.

"Politicians do not care for warmth, except as an impression. In the end, the politicians look after self-interest, while pretending to be warm," said Nathaniel.

"Most people pretend to be warm, and some are," said Sylvia. "Geoffrey seems like a warm person."

"Beneath that courteous businesslike exterior, he is very warm. He is not always the best politician. Kennis, as I am sure you noted, has a very warm presence. He is also a very good politician, I am told. Me-I would be lost in politics, and I have told Geoffrey that." Vivienne offered a warm laugh. "Are you sure you will not have a pastry?"

Nathaniel had to grin, and he leaned forward and took a small cake. "My arm has been gently twisted, ladies." He lifted the cake dramatically, then ate it in two bites. "Excellent." He took a sip of tea. "I may have another, if you would not mind."

"Mind? Please, please do. And you, professor . . . could I call you Sylvia?"

Wouldn't you . . . ?"

"Sylvia is fine. I'm not nearly so senior as my colleague." Sylvia opted for one of the tea cookies.

Nathaniel barely managed to keep from choking on the Grawer he was sipping. "Geoffrey will be so pleased . . ."

Nathaniel continued to listen, and make a few comments, as the conversation drifted more toward shopping, the lack of amenities, and the proliferation of synthcloth.

Sylvia finally straightened. "I do fear we've taken too much of your time, but you've been so very gracious."

"I've taken your time, and you were so delightful to come all the way out here. As I said, Geoffrey would have liked to have been here. I'm sure, but I'll certainly pass along your words." Vivienne rose gracefully, not quite so gracefully as Sylvia, Nathaniel thought, and the Ecolitans followed her example.

The three walked back through the house and to the front portico.

"It has been an interesting conversation, and I hope we will see each other again, if not on this trip to Artos, then in the future." Vivienne offered a slight bow as Nathaniel opened the groundcar door for Sylvia. "We'll look forward to that." Sylvia smiled. Vivienne waved as the car pulled away, and Sylvia waved back.

"Did you have something to eat?" Nathaniel asked Bagot. "I should have asked before we left."

"Yes, sir. Quite a lot, actually, and it was very good. I know Anne-Leslie, too. We talked for a bit." Bagot cleared his throat. "Ah. . . where to, sirs?"
"The Bank of Camelot office in Lanceville."
"Yes, sir."

"Gracious lady, she is," offered Nathaniel. "Very much so," agreed Sylvia.

"I imagine Geoffrey Evanston is also quite a gentleman." He looked at Bagot. "Does he have a solid reputation?"

"Yes, sir. The family's been here for a long time. They treat their people fair, they do. Started out as cotton factors, I heard, but cotton didn't do well. They've got a small manufactory that makes cookware and electrical supplies and some other stuff. . . probably a lot of things I don't know."

"Never do we know everything," said Nathaniel, taking out his large kerchief and blotting his forehead. Sylvia covered her mouth and her grin. The Lanceville office of the Bank of Camelot looked like the caricature of an ancient Old Earth bank—small windows, thick stone walls.

"I can't imagine there have been any bank robberies here," offered Sylvia with a look toward Glubb Bagot.

"Not since I was a boy." The driver paused. "Should I wait? Or come back later?"

"Wait, I think. This will not be long, and then we will retire to the Guest House and ponder." Nathaniel slipped out, but Sylvania had her door open before he could get around the vehicle. "I'll be in the shade across the way." The two Ecolitans stepped into the dimness of the bank. "May I help you?" asked a square-faced, white-haired woman. "Ecolitans Ferro-Maine and Whaler. We're here to see Laurence Karl-Abbe,"

"He's expecting you."

As she spoke, the head banker strode from a door at the back of the main office. "Professors!"

"It's good of you to see us on such short notice."

"Nonsense . . . nonsense. This way, if you will."

"This looks like a fortress." Nathaniel stepped into the office behind Sylvania. A broad, old dark wooden desk commanded one end of the long, rectangular office. Behind it was a tall maroon reclining chair, and on the desk was a modern compact console. In front of the desk were three straight-backed plastic armchairs, upholstered in maroon matching the recliner.

"It was one of the first buildings in Lanceville—the walls are over two hundred years old. The winds and weather were more severe then." The banker's eyes twinkled as he closed the door to the office. "We have updated the interior. It's only a century old. Please have a seat."

"We really didn't have much of a chance to talk the other night," began Nathaniel.

"It's just as well." Karl-Abbe offered a faintly twisted smile. "I'm sure Kennis has every word on solideo or the latest technology whose name I don't even know."

"He seemed rather charming, in a cool way," said Sylvania. "He is charming, and cool. And very calculating. He got his immigration permit as a major investor, you know. He's Argentithat part of the Hegemony really has never accepted the Federation."

"He never spoke to Sonderssen the other night," said Sylvania. "They have different views."

"One the industrialist, the other the agriculturalist?"

"There is that," said Karl-Abbe. "I was actually thinking more about their employers. Kennis works for himself; Sonderssen, for all that he works for AgriTech Galactic, works for the Hegemony, and partly for Tinhorn."

"Tinhorn?" asked Nathaniel, surprised in spite of himself. "AgriTech is technically an equal partner, joint venture between Agricultural Specialties—that's the big Hegemony agricultural technology supplier—and Technical Agronomics—they're a big seed and DNA template firm based in Tinhorn." The banker snorted. "I know their funds patterns. So do the politicians in Camelot. They lose credits—big credits—every year."

Nathaniel nodded. "But no one says anything because it amounts to a subsidy of Artos?"

"I couldn't speculate on political motivations. Bankers cannot afford to speculate, but . . ." Sylvania and Nathaniel exchanged glances. "You said you had numbers." Nathaniel waited. "What kind of numbers?"

"Mostly bankers' numbers, but a few others. We have to do economic projections

for headquarters—probably nothing compared to your sophistication, but we manage. Average monthly pay, deposits, savings, all for the past twenty years."

"Those have to be hard to come by," said Sylvia. "Honestly, yes," answered Karl-Abbe with his round-faced smile. "But statistics aren't honest, and neither are we. We can tag pay deposits and then separate out the total and average them. Likewise, we can estimate savings, and the changes, from average monthly balances. We do most of the nonmajors' construction financing—I couldn't tell you what R-K built, or what's on George Reeves-Kenns spread, but their stuff is big enough that a comparison of any good satellite holos would show that sort of construction."

"Confidentiality?" murmured the sandy-haired Ecolitan. "Oh, these are all aggregated figures. There's nothing in them that would reveal anything at variance with the New Avalon commercial code. So . . . here you go." Karl-Abbe handed the hardcopy report across the desk. "There's also a console disk inside the cover, but I didn't know whether you had access to a console—the Guest House is more private and discreet, but it lacks some amenities."

"Discretion is useful," said Nathaniel. "Very useful, but it's not exactly something that one can count on in our modern age, or for that matter, even in older times, such as those represented by the Guest House." The banker sat back in his chair. "I don't know as I can provide any more hard data than you have there. And I certainly am in no position to speculate."

"You're being very helpful." Nathaniel understood. Karl-Abbe had said what he was going to say, and his numbers would say even more.

"What do you hope to accomplish with your study?" Nathaniel smiled faintly. "That would depend on others. I suppose those who benefit will cry to use it, and those who do not will attempt to have the findings set aside. And if it changes nothing . . . then everyone will applaud with relief and call it a wonderful study."

"You are cynical beyond your face and years, professor."

"What do you think the study should accomplish?" asked Sylvia.

"I am a banker. I would like to see the study show the need for more capital investment in Artos, and the promise that such investment will be repaid."

"Artos has become your home."

"After thirty years and three children and a grandchild, it has." Karl-Abbe smiled sadly. "I make no secret of it, and that makes my judgment suspect to my superiors in Camelot. And I worry about the future of Artos, because politicians and bankers are attempting to make decisions on numbers, and numbers, no matter how good they may be, never reveal everything."

"No," agreed Sylvia. "They don't show dreams or determination, or hatred and hostility."

"Or the ambition of outsiders," added the banker. "Or the temptations placed before outworld systems. Depressing, isn't it?" His lips curled into an ironic smile, and he stood. "You'd best go, before I really get on my antique soapbox and depress you both. It also might bias your study if anyone found out that you spent long hours with such a hidebound financial antiquity."

"Thank you." Nathaniel stood, as did Sylvia. The ride back to the Guest House was quiet, and Bagot left them with a promise to return the next morning—a

smile on his face. Nathaniel suspected that the driver and the groundcar just might be visiting a young lady named Anne-Leslie.

"After we unload this stuff and wash up, let's take a walk," Nathaniel suggested. "A walk?"

"I'd like to talk to you, without . . ."
"In a moment." Sylvia smiled.

After completing their respective ablutions, they walked down the empty stairs and through the empty foyer, across the empty pavement to the empty fields, where they followed the path through the bean plants again.

"He wanted us to have these numbers, almost desperately," said Nathaniel. "But he didn't want to say much. Except about the joint intelligence operation that AgriTech apparently is."

"Our briefing materials didn't show that."

"I know, and that bothers me. I have to wonder what else others think is common knowledge that we don't know."

"That's why we're here," she reminded him. "You Ecolitanswe Ecolitans, I guess-cant know everything in advance."

"He cut off the interview pretty sharply," mused Nathaniel. "He did. He said that discretion wasn't possible even in the most antique of surroundings. What is more antique than that bank building?"

"Everywhere, the walls have ears."

"And eyes."

"The more we learn, the worse it gets." Nathaniel stopped, turned, and looked back toward the Guest House, but nothing moved, not even on the permacrete highway south of the bean field. "Someone wants us dead, and someone else wants our report, badly enough to ensure we get numbers that would be impossible to get elsewhere. I'd guess they're accurate numbers, too."

"They're accurate," affirmed Sylvia, "and that's going to cause trouble."

"Someone could charge the numbers are cooked. How would we know? In gross terms, we can provide cross-checks, but for some things . . ." he shrugged.

"Who else would know? I doubt that the Bank of Camelot on New Avalon would fully approve."

"They might-if the numbers showed Artos could become independent."

"That's true-because they could cut the subsidy and retain the ties, eventually ask for support for the defense forces . . . whatever."

"Then there was Vivienne's parting message," mused Sylvia. "I missed that."

"She as much as said that we shouldn't meet again."

"Odd.. ."

"Not really. She told us a lot, but visiting her again would draw too much attention. Did you notice that the tea table was placed where Bagot could see us?"

"I hadn't thought about that either. That is interesting."

Nathaniel blotted his damp forehead. "Nothing like working up a sweat just to

get a private talk."
"They could use directionals."

He glanced around the empty fields. "Even the I.I.S. would have trouble here, I think."

"Especially the I.I.S. Its charter is restricted to the Empire, and the eagles make sure of that."

"I suppose we should head back. We can split up the data, see what we can find, and then trade."

The dark-haired serving woman--was she the entire staff of the Guest House--greeted them at the door. "Port Chief Walkerson wanted you to call him, sirs. He said it was urgent. The codes are on the pad by the unit."

"You come, too." He nodded at Sylvia. Sylvia sat out of sight of the screen while Nathaniel inputted the codes. Walkerson was waiting for Nathaniel.

"Whaler . . . have you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"George Reeves--Kenn--he was out riding this afternoon, and someone killed him. I thought you might like to know."

"Forest lord! No . . . we didn't know. That's not good," mused Nathaniel. "Not good at all. Does anyone know who did it?"

"Long-range military needle. Looks Imperial."

"That means it's not."

"I know that, and so do you, but most people don't, and even if they do, that only leaves local dissidents, business rivals, and about four major outsystems that flank our starspace." Walkerson cleared his throat. "I don't expect you to do anything. Whaler. I hope you won't. But you also deserve to know. I hope you can wind up your study before long."

"We are progressing, and we may be able to do that in another week."

"A week?" Walkerson's face sobered. "Perhaps longer. We will do as we can."

"Do that. I need to go."

As the screen blanked, the Ecolitans looked at each other. "Not a dull moment," he said slowly. "Around you, no."

They both glanced toward the foyer and stood, silently. "We should get ready for dinner."

XIX

The I.I.S. Director surveyed those around the conference

table before gesturing at the hard-copy reports before each person. "This is a report on an attempted murder on New Avalon. It bears on our problem with the Coordinate and the Empire. This trade factor Bannon took a needle through the lungs, a second one through the shoulder, and a third along the side of his skull. Enough blood to make anyone think he was dead."

"What kind of needles?" asked the dark-haired assistant director.

"Imperial military issue, of course," answered the Director. "The same kind that was used on Whaler?"

"You have to ask?" The Directors eyebrows rose. "Who wants to pin the blame on Defense? And why?"

"Only about half the known Galaxy." The Directors voice was dry. "The pictures getting clearer. Every intelligence service knows we'-the Empire, that is- tried to assassinate the Accord nego

riaior who made a fool of us, and to kill the Imperial agent he seduced."

"We didn't, though," pointed out the redhead leaning back in the chair across the table. "Neither did Defense, even if the Admiral would have liked to."

"Everyone also knows this Accord agent vanished on some other mission, along with the Imperial agent. In the meantime, this synde bean plague is rampaging across almost all the planoformed Imperial planets, and anchovy kills are beginning as well. Both are spilling into other systems. The Matriarchy is marshalling a fleet, and we've gotten a stiff note from Orknarli, The Senate is talking about sending the Eleventh Fleet to Sector Five. What's the impression?"

"That Accord and the Empire are teetering on the fringe of an all-out war." That came from the blond who sat beside the redhead.

"Right. We know that. We've been fighting that impression for weeks," said the assistant director, "but why did you bring up this report on a minor importer/fixer from New Avalon? Why would anyone want him dead? And how do we know? We don't even have any firm links there."

The Director held up a thick envelope. "We have this. I think it came from F.U.I.-Frankan Union Intelligence. It's a complete file on New Avalon and Artos, a recently planoformed colony planet. Whaler and Ferro-Maine are doing an economic infrastructure study on Artos, by the way."

"The Frankans-they wouldn't share solid information with us"

"Not with D.I., but occasionally we do share material. We didn't ask for this. I've been able to verily some of the material independently, and it seems genuine."

"Oh . . ." murmured the redheaded man. The Director nodded. "They see trouble. Enough trouble chat they'll contact the I.I.S. That means they know the Empires being manipulated."

"Doesn't that solve the problem?" asked the blond. "If we know and they know . . ."

At the sounds from the others in the conference roomsnorts, guffaws, and a bitter chuckle-the blond flushed.

"The Admiral knows," pointed out the Director, "but she'll still have to send the eagles where the Senate demands. The Senate Intelligence Committee knows, but with starvation and energy shortages on two dozen planets, they have to do something, and that something may well be military action against Accord. What else can they do politically, with over five million dead on Heraculon? The Matriarch knows, but she's got problems with all the fish kills and hungry people and economic unrest, and that means Halstan will jump to whichever side

is advantageous."

"That still doesn't say why the Frankans alerted us to an attempted murder in Camelot." The Director leaned back in her chair. "And, according to these background reports, about half of New Avalon would weep crocodile tears if Flash Bannon died."

"It doesn't make sense. This Bannon has to be more than a minor importer," mused the dark-haired woman.

"He is. He's almost interstellar class as a keyboardist, either directlink or manual. He's got a doctorate in infrastructure economics from ChicLandan University, and he owns the seediest Cuberan pub in Camelot. He's also the head of both a trade factoring firm and a consulting firm."

"That makes him hated? Or a target?"

"Besides the fact that he's big, belligerent, and nasty to anyone he doesn't like, and doesn't like anyone for more than a standard week? He uses his consulting firm--and that's an economic consulting firm in only the broadest sense--as an intelligence brokerage. Except we can't call it that. He knows everything about everyone."

"What about the factoring business?"

"That seems legitimate. So legitimate that what exists in his consulting firm is probably fine rice compared to the trade business. He has tech and ag transfer lines with all the major outsystems from Tinhorn to Accord, from Orknarli to Anarra."

"Agriculture?"

"Interesting, isn't it?" asked the Director. "That seems to be the common thread. Even to the Federated Hegemony."

"You think Bannon became a target because of agriculture?"

"That's the implication. He either knows something or shipped something or both."

"His firm ships everything. . . ."

"Makes it difficult. I've asked stats to analyze the cargo manifests we got earlier, but I wanted you all to think about it. We'll meet later."

"New Avalon--they're pretty repressed there. They make the Halstani matriarchs look like extroverts."

"This is getting nasty," added the redheaded man. The Director held up the hard copy of the file. "This just might be the reason why--if we can figure it out. Except we don't have ships and outsystem operatives."

Sylvia? "She's committed to the Institute. Let's hope she can help them."

Several heads nodded. "Or we'll be facing a bigger mess than the Secession. Even the Grand Admiral would wish it were just the Secession."

XX

Nathaniel and Sylvia walked slowly toward the front doors of the Guest House.

"I still worry . . . especially after yesterday," said Nathaniel quietly. "The flitter accident?"

"I meant Reeves-Kenn's murder. That means, I think, that someone decided since they couldn't set George up for a fall, they needed him out of the way. I wish we knew who . . . or why." Nathaniel looked around. "You be careful." Sylvia nodded. "I'll be careful. You, too."

"I will." For some reason, one he couldn't put a finger on, he worried more about her, and it wasn't just male protectiveness. At least, he didn't think so.

"DeSain seemed willing enough to see me . . ."

"I would hope so. Ravishing you look." Nathaniel mockleered at her as he held the door. "And smell."

"And he hinted at having lunch."

"I don't know. Perhaps you should go now." Nathaniel frowned, then shrugged.

"I still worry."

"So do I, but we can't find out things without going out."

"No," he agreed.

"It is nice to hear you care." She touched his arm as they walked toward the groundcar. "Hailsham begged off seeing me. He pleaded the press of an ongoing urgent project."

"I probably upset him too much. Too pushy for a reserved Avalonian." Nathaniel glanced toward the east and the advancing gray clouds. Even the light wind was cooler, for once, and a hint of dampness and the vaguely metallic scent associated with water on Artos drifted across the permacrete drive.

Glubb Bagot hopped from the vehicle, and Nathaniel couldn't help wondering if the chipperness arose from the young lady at the Evanstons. Lucky man, he thought, except the finding of the special lady was the easy part. Keeping her was much harder. That he was discovering.

"What are you going to do?" asked Sylvia. "While I see DeSain, I meant."

"Walk. Walk the streets and roads of Lanceville. I need a better feel." He grinned momentarily. "I might even discover something."

"Like the time you cruised the Defense Ministry Plaza?" Sylvia shifted her grip on Nathaniel's datacase, hers for use in her interviews, since her own had perished in the flutter crash.

"You weren't supposed to know about that." He gave a dramatic sigh as he opened the groundcar door for Sylvia. "Even then, I had no secrets."

"You had enough, dear envoy."

Bagot looked momentarily puzzled at the reference to Nathaniel's previous assignment, but then smoothed his face and reseated himself behind the wheel, waiting. "Drop me by the piers, Bagot, and then take Professor FerroMaine where she needs to go. I'll meet you two back at the Guest House. There are taxi services of some sort?"

"Yes, sir." Bagot grinned. "Pyotr's. But you'd better plan to wait a while. They don't hurry."

"I'll keep that in mind." The Ecolitans bounced as the vehicle lurched out toward the main highway. "Sorry, sirs."

"That's all right," said Sylvia.

Outside of scattered trees, all planted near residences, Nathaniel again was reminded how few he had seen, except for a handful of small wood lots, all with trees that had to have been less than fifty years old. He wanted to shake his head. The more he looked, the more he realized how unbalanced the later stages of planofarming had been—a sure sign of stinginess or lack of funds from New Avalon.

"Unbalanced planofarming," he murmured to Sylvia. "I wondered, but I'm not an expert. It seems like there's a lot missing."

More than a lot was missing. Could Dr. Oconnor shed some light on that? Oconnor was another contact he'd failed to follow upon.

"Has anyone ever talked about the problems of planofarming Artos?" Nathaniel asked Bagot.

"There's been talk since . . . ever since I can remember. The big things were trees and predators. R-K stopped the big predators. They said that luxury beef was all that kept Artos going, and they didn't need anything that killed cattle. The trees . . . I don't know. They just talked about it."

"Was there anything else?" prompted Sylvia. "Water . . . there's always something on the vidfax about water. It gets so you don't pay any attention." Bagot put both hands on the wheel, but the groundcar still shivered as another big lorry whipped by them, headed away from Lanceville.

Water? Jem had mentioned the water table. Probably there hadn't been free water on Artos long enough to build that, not

when aquifers and the like took thousands of years to charge and recharge on most T-type planets. Whaler took a deep, slow breath, trying to sort out all the miscellaneous facts that ought to have told him more—and hadn't.

He still hadn't any more answers when Bagot pulled up by the harbor piers. "This do, sir?"

"Fine. Thank you." He turned to Sylvia, bent toward her, and said, "Be careful."

"I'll be fine." She squeezed his hand warmly. As the groundcar rumbled off, the Ecolitan turned and studied the harbor. All three wharfs were empty, and low waves barely lapped at the stone columns that served as both supports and bollards.

Dust swirled off the harbor drive, carried by the ocean wind, and the only sound besides the whisper of the wind was the scraping of a small section of plastic sheeting as it twisted along the permacrete.

Nathaniel edged over toward the white-and-red square of plastic. Then he had to run as a sudden gust of wind lifted the sheeting past his extended arm. He finally grabbed the errant plastic in the middle of the deserted highway, a good thirty meters west from where Bagot had let him off. The plastic looked to be a fragment of heavy-duty shrinkwrap, the kind that was proof against the cold of space, and bore a part of a logo—the stylized initials SAI, and, underneath the initials, some jagged points of black running from one ripped edge.

"SAI?" The initials sounded vaguely familiar, but he couldn't place them. So he folded the roughly oblong sheeting into a small packet and slipped it into the hip pocket of his greens, checking the hidden loops in his belt that held the dart gun and the miniature stunner. Then he walked back across the permacrete highway, clearing it just before a small lorry with the name "Evanston Electric" rolled past in the general direction of the Blue Lion. As he neared the center piers again, he walked past a small square building with barred windows and two locked roll-up doors for tractors or loaders or the like, and then strolled down the empty central pier, past the empty kiosklike watch post and the sign that read, "No Entry Without Permission. R-K Ocean Enterprises."

Black marks on the permacrete slabs that comprised the top of the piers testified to the recent presence of some vehicles, probably loaders.

At the seaward end of the pier, the Ecolitan looked for a time at the ocean with but a trace of whitecaps and waves, despite the darkening clouds that filled more and more of the eastern sky. The sea breeze smelled faintly metallic.

Finally, he turned and surveyed the waterfront and Lanceville beyond. Outside of the blue rectangle to the north that was the Blue Lion, the buildings that fanned out along the main highways that converged on the harbor were all low. And all were sand colored or brown, with generally the same red tile roofs. Not more than a handful of trees even reached much above the equivalent of two stories.

The Ecolitan took a deep breath and began to walk back in from the end of the pier toward the southernmost highway empty except for a few vehicles moving there intermittently.

Immediately back from the harbor drive, the grayish ground was bare for almost a hundred meters. Nathaniel lengthened his stride, but found himself breathing heavily even before he reached the first set of buildings, a line of windowless bricked structures with heavy synthplast doors large enough to accommodate trucks and loaders-warehouses of a sort. But the Ecolitan did not discern many traces of recent use.

With a shrug, and a few deep breaths, he continued following the southern highway, past another line of unused warehouses and an empty cross street. He looked both ways, watching as the light breeze skittered sandy dust across the permacrete.

The next cross street contained a half-dozen squat houses. A bent old man sat on the steps of the second, perhaps seventy

yards from the Ecolitan, and stared at him. The windows on the nearest house were open a crack, to let in the breeze, but Nathaniel could hear nothing from within.

The next cross street contained a larger building, what seemed to be a small market. A twenty-passenger electrobus was pulled up by the entrance, just beyond a bicycle rack that held nearly twenty bikes. A woman pushed a wheeled plastic basket-cart down the street away from the Ecolitan. An ancient electrocar whined jerkily into the carpark.

Nathaniel kept walking, and, slowly, the structures he passed became better kempt and larger, but he saw very few people about-except for the playground of the school where the shouts and calls of more than a hundred children echoed through the cloudy afternoon.

In time, he reached a solid, three-story structure on the cor. ner of another cross street. He paused, taking several deep breaths, trying to flush the carbon dioxide from his system while he studied the building. It was almost as far south from the highway that led from the shuttle port and split the town as the Blue Lion was to the north. Although the structure was clearly new, it was built in the same fashion as the Bank of Camelot-stone and solid, with barred, small windows. The glittering plaque on the left side of the covered, arched entryway bore the intertwined letters LN. That and the two guards uniformed in bright blue told him more than enough-Landis-Nicarchos. Without looking back toward the building and the guards, he crossed the broad street after waiting for a single battered groundcar to pass. On the other side was a series of smaller shops. The first, on the corner, held a small bakery. The name "Aimee's" was stenciled on the wide glass. A faint smell of pastries seeped outside. Nathaniel found his mouth watering, and he checked the time-actually past noon. How far had he walked? He turned and looked back-probably three or four kilos. The second shop was vacant, with off-green plastic sheeting covering the windows. The third was a small eating establishment. "Jerrys Grub" was burned into the plastic simulated-wood sign which swung slightly on plastic brackets outside the scarred door. The Ecolitan stepped off the street and into the dim room. "Drink or grub?" The warm voice came from a hard-faced woman in a brown singlesuit, her white-streaked red hair in a tight bun.

"Grub, mostly."

. "Any of the empty tables on the wall. Menu's posted. Keep away from the rockfish."

"Thank you." The Ecolitan took a small table for two covered with a clean but faded blue synthcloth, next to the larger vacant table in the back corner. He squinted for a few moments while his eyes readjusted and he could read the single-sheet menu.

"What would you like?" The trim older woman in brown stood by the cable.

"What would you recommend?" he asked. "The meat pie. There was a big to-do over at the Lion, and Jerry got a quarter of the good beef."

"Fine. I'll try the Grawer."

"You're new here." A smile traced itself on her lips. "The Grawers that bad?"

She laughed gently. "No. Best brew we have, but I know everyone, just about. Lived here for . . . let's say long enough. I'm Eina, short for Elinor."

"I'm Nathaniel. No one ever shortened it, and you're right. I'm new. I was walking around, feeling things out."

"Sooner or later, everyone comes here." Another quick smile flitted across her lips. "Eina!"

"I'll get your brew." In three long strides, Eina stood by the table where a white-haired, balding man held up a teapot.

The Ecolitan studied the room. Besides the older man, the various heavy-formed plastic tables held a young couple, two men

in grease-spattered blue singlesuits, a mid-aged man in Avalonian dress shorts and high socks, two graying women, and three blueclad security guards.

"Here's the brew." Eina set the teapot and a mug before him. "Thank you."

"Be a bit for the pie. It's worth the wait." The three blue-uniformed guards sat at the front corner table. One continually looked toward the LN building. Nathaniel listened.

". . . think we were real groundpounders . . ."

". . . Girhard . . . says. . . doesn't want. . . empty uniforms . . . do what he wants . . ."

". . . been sore for weeks . . . training never ends . . ."

". . . better pay than in the marine pens . . . bastard Sebastian . . . bleed dry . . ."

". . . say we're . . . heavy weapons . . ."

". . . careful . . . careful . . ."

"All right. Swarzee . . . really marry Elise?"

". . . figured she'd get someone . . ."

The three laughed, then stopped as one rose. "Greener's car . . . let's go . . . take a bit for him . . ."

The three were still laughing as they left Avalonian notes on the table and hurried out, talking, without even a look in the Ecolitans direction, striding quickly toward the heavy-walled building.

The beef pie was worth the wait, almost as good as the marinated beef at George Reeves-Kenns, and the heavy sconelike biscuits were hot.

Nathaniel discovered how hungry he was only after he looked at the empty plates. "Need any more, Nathaniel?"

"No. I probably ate too much, but it was good."

"Isn't always, but I told you." Eina smiled, then left the paper check on the table. "Come again."

"Thank you." He didn't want to promise too much, but he did leave a hefty tip—the Artosans had kept that Avalonian custom. Then he used the public comm to call the taxi. He waited for a time even for the comm to be answered, but was assured Pyotr was on the way.

The Ecolitan burped, as quietly as possible, as he stood outside Jerry's, waiting for Pyotr's taxi, ignoring the mistlike rain that intermittently fell. On the far corner, one of the security guards in bright blue studied Nathaniel for a time before retreating back . into the two-story building.

The multicolored, multipatched groundcar that growled up to the restaurant sported a hand-painted starburst in the center of which were scrawled orange letters spelling out a ragged "Pyotr."

"You the fellow who called?"

"That's me. The Guest House."

"The Guest House—the one on the highway to the shuttle port?"

Nathaniel slipped into the plastic-covered rear seat. "That's it."

"That's five."

"Fine."

"You're the chief." That was all the driver said, and the Ecolitan left the window open, out of self-defense against the odor of rancid spices emanating from the driver and ill-burned hydrocarbons from the engine.

Back at the Guest House, for a time he sat in his room, going back over the figures from the conversion plant, then taking those from Karl-Abbe and running some correlations and drafting some rough tables.

He rubbed his forehead and studied the hand-drawn tables again. He'd have Sylvia look at them, to make sure, but even from the outdated published figures on Artos, from the plant numbers, from the Bank's financial assessment, and from what they'd seen, the ConOne hydrocarbon facility not only had the capacity to process double its current output, but current output was some

where well above current Artosan fuel needs-unless the ag sector on the outcontinents were disproportionately large-and the facility on ConTrio was supposed to handle such needs.

He shrugged. Right now, the figures were too rough to be absolutely conclusive in the economists' sense. But no manager/ owner anywhere ever overstated capacity or output-especially to government overseers. So that meant that the numbers were conservative, that they had been exaggerated for other reasons, or that he and Sylvia had gotten cooked numbers.

The banking figures were worse. Free credit balances were building, even as average wages were almost stagnating. And where had Karl-Abbe gotten the import duty figures? Was the bank the holder? Someone was importing a lot of something, but the aggregations didn't say what.

He blinked and rubbed his forehead. He'd seen enough. Every number looked worse, and they all felt like they were in the right sector-and that gave him a uneasy feeling. All of Artos gave him a very uneasy feeling.

He snorted. How much of that was because someone had tried to kill them three times? He stood and checked the time. Fifteen hundred. Sylvia should have been back earlier.

Finally, he stacked up folders and papers and went down to the empty foyer. No Sylvia. No messages on the comm unit. He called Detsen Oconnor at the New Avalon Monitoring Laboratory and got his assistant, but managed to set up an appointment for the next morning. After he broke the connection, he wanted to shake his head. He should have done that earlier. He should have tried to understand Sylvia earlier. It was hard to remember that she came from a far more repressed background than he did, and one where everything was involuted and convoluted. Add to that his own reserve. He shook his head. He should have done a lot of things earlier-that seemed to be life. After pacing the foyer for a good fifteen units, he went outside under the portico and watched the misting clouds drift landward over Lanceville. Still no Sylvia.

When studying the rain palled, he went back and checked the comm unit. No

messages.

He went back outside and watched more rain and clouds, until the rain dropped out to a trace of mist, and even less, and the clouds thinned.

A distant purr-rumble pricked his ears. Finally, out of the mist rising from the permacrete, the green groundcar lumbered in under the portico.

Sylvia smiled as he opened the door for her. "I Was getting a little worried."
"I'm fine. Keiffer DeSain is talkative." Nathaniel nodded and stepped up to the groundcar window. "Bagot?"
"Sir?"

"Wheres a good place to eat? Not as fancy as Elizabeth's and not as crowded as the Blue Lion? Someplace you'd like to go."

"Well . . . there aren't many places. The Old Tower used to be my favorite, but old lady Tuer died last spring, and they closed. Jerry's is all right for lunch, but they close early. Faros, I'd guess."

"Well . . . you're our guest for dinner, and, if you like, you can invite a friend, as well."
"Sir . . . I wouldn't . . ."

"You've been very kind, and very helpful, and it's the least we can do."

The driver looked toward Sylvia. She smiled. "It's little enough."

"And you can tell the chief that we insisted."
"Sir.. ."

"Anyone you'd like-brother, friend, lady-and we'll see you at eighteen forty."
"Yes, sir." Bagot grinned. "Yes, sir."

"A walk?" Nathaniel asked as the groundcar roared off and as they stood before the Guest House doors.

"It's a little damp, but we don't have much choice, do we?"
"Not really."

As they stepped out from the covered portico, a light breeze ruffled the summer-weight greens.

"It won't be bad." He glanced toward the west, where the heavier clouds that had passed the Guest House earlier had almost reached the horizon.

"That was nice of you, to ask Bagot, even if your motives arent totally altruistic."

"Thank you. But they're partly altruistic."
"And the rest?"

"I just want to hear him talk. Sometimes, we don't listen to the right people." Sylvia nodded. "You still surprise me."
"Me?"

"You." She leaned closer, then kissed his cheek, before stepping aside and

into the row between the lines of bean plants.

He bent to check the ground at the edge of the field-barely damp despite the earlier light rain-and looked at the plants more closely. "Most of the young ones are this variety." He straightened. "But I wouldn't know why they'd grow one variety as opposed to another."

"Such an Ecolitan."

"I'm an economist, not an agronomist. What did you find out from the piping magnate?"

"DeSain seems like a likeable enough person, and he works hard, I think. He showed me the facility. It's pretty simple. They've got a small tech-template module that can turn the synde bean feedstock into a couple of different plastics. They're all handled by a small continuous extrusion mill, which is adjustable for pipe diameter. Simply sophisticated, I guess I'd call it."

"See anything interesting?"

"They've expanded recently. He showed me the addition. It's not that big."

"So . . . some growth, but not of the magnitude you'd expect at this stage of postplanoforming, if he's as good a businessman as he seems and you think."

"My thoughts as well." Sylvia brushed a strand of dark hair back off her forehead and tucked it behind her ear. "He's worried. He didn't say anything, but I could tell, and I don't think its about business."

"Did he mention our good friend Kennis?"

"No. Why?"

"The good businessman has what looks like a fortified headquarters on the south side of Lanceville, and more than a handful of those blue-uniformed guards. I ate lunch at their hangout. One mentioned heavy weapons and intensive training and got hushed up."

"Private army-that confirms what Vivienne was telling us." Sylvia frowned.

"Have you heard anything more about George Reeves-Kenn?"

"No. I didn't talk to Walkerson. The people at the monitoring laboratory-were going to see them tomorrow morning didn't say anything. There's not a vidfax at the Guest House."

"Karl-Abbe was right about the minimal amenities. I wonder if that's to keep official visitors isolated?"

"Could be. I don't like Reeves-Kenn's death, either, not that I like any death, but right now, I don't know what to do . . . or what we could do. There's a lot boiling around under the placid surface of Artos. Too much."

"You think that's why we were sent?"

"Probably-but I still can't figure why the House of Delegates has any interest in what's beginning to look like civil unrest on a colony planet three sectors away. I can see everyone else's potential interests . . . and there are so many."

"Too many," Sylvia said wryly.

"Then, the piers were empty, but there are marks there, heavy black marks. A lot of heavy stuff has been loaded or unloaded recently." Nathaniel shook his

head. "Did you find out anything else?"

She lifted the datacase. "I've got some numbers on piping. You might be able to fit them into the puzzle. I also got him to say a few words about your other friend-Durward Hailsham."

"And?"

"Durward is as dense as he seems. The business was founded by his father. The older Hailsham made a lot building the road system, and he built well enough and big enough that his son is struggling and doesn't know why. Basically, Hailsham Enterprises is doing private surfacing, mostly for R-K Enterprises, and for some others."

"He probably built the LN building-or the armory beneath it." Nathaniel cleared his throat. "I'm guessing about the armory."

"LN building?"

"Kenniss headquarters."

"Oh . . . anything else?"

"Ever hear of an outfit called SAI?" He unfolded the red-and-white sheeting and handed it to her. "The chimes familiar, but I can't identify the melody."

"SAI . . . I should know that." She frowned. "That's shrinkwrap for heavy equipment. I couldn't say what. It could be tech-transfer machinery, ocean processing gear, armaments, or just tanks of hydrocarbon feedstock."

"Armaments . . . SAI. Maybe . . ."

"Maybe what?" he asked.

"Sasaki Armaments, Interstellar . . . you've heard of them, haven't you?"

"They're in the Nippon sector of the Orknarlian Union, I think."

"And they're the biggest manufacturer of armaments outside the Empire. They'll supply anyone-but you have to supply the shipping."

He took the fragment of shrinkwrap sheeting back from her and looked at it again. "SAI . . . could it be the same . . . or just coincidence, some other little outfit with the same acronym?"

"Unlikely, but it could be. I don't know their logo or their de. sign, but isn't that the edge of a multipointed star?" They both shrugged. "We've got a little problem."

"A little problem?" Sylvia raised her eyebrows.

XXI

The sandy-haired special assistant pursed her lips tightly. Her green eyes were dark, and she waited for the blank screen to clear. Cling!

The image of a uniformed admiral of the fleets filled the screen, square-faced, with dark-circled green eyes and black hair shot with silver. "Yes, Marcella?"

"Thank you," said the special assistant. "I had hoped you, or your staff, had a chance to review the materials we sent."

"We reviewed the materials very closely, and I personally found them persuasive. So did the D.I. staff."

"Yet you're going to transfer the Eleventh Fleet out to Sector Five, as well as pull the Third Fleet from Sector Two?"

"I cannot comment on that, Marcella, even on a secure line."

The Grand Admiral met the special assistant's eyes.

"I understand. Has it crossed anyone's mind in the great and glorious Imperial Senate that Sector Two contains the Three System Bulge? And that, even though both the Conglomerate and the Hegemony have not increased their presence there, the total resource investment in defense has increased steadily over the past decade?"

"I have been informed that the First Fleet remains there, and that it has been some four centuries since there has been an armed conflict in Sector Two."

"In short, the starvation, the fish kills, and the spread of the bean plague have pushed the Senate absolutely to require a show of force in the Rift? Or is it worse than that?"

"You know I can't comment on that, Marcella,"

"I sent you a complete analysis of the economics. Accord isn't gearing for war. They're at the lowest level of war footing in centuries. The science analysis shows that the gene structures in the bean plague aren't typical of Accord-structured types . . ."

"You are suggesting that the Imperial Senate is misguided?" The Grand Admiral's tone was ironic. "Have you seen the latest polls about Accord? According to UGI's latest survey, Accord is rated as an immediate and deadly danger to the Empire by fiftyone percent of the population."

"That's a trideo creation. Like those ridiculous shows that portray Ecolitans as green-coated evil monsters assisted by dancing fluffheads."

"Those trideo viewers vote, Marcella, and those they elect control the Senate. And the Senate dictates where the eagles go, even over the Emperor."

"You know it's a mistake."

"I am required to carry out the orders of the Senate. These fleet shifts are resource-intensive, as you know, however, and it may take several weeks, or longer. If matters should change, or some absolute documentation should arise in the meantime . . ."

The special assistant's shoulders dropped. "I understand."

"Until later, Marcella."

The special assistant looked at the blank screen, her lips tightening.

XXII

The dark-haired young woman in the front seat turned as Nathaniel and Sylvia settled into the back of the groundcar.

"Anne-Leslie, these are the professors," said Bagot, turning as well. "This is Anne-Leslie Hume."

"Nathaniel Whaler, and this is Sylvia Ferro-Maine."

"It's nice to meet you," offered Sylvia. "I saw you at Madame Evanston's, but .

. . I was busy, and I did want to make sure GB got something to eat."

As Bagot eased the groundcar out onto the highway toward Lanceville, a groundlorry rumbled by in the twilight headed westward.

"He's in a rush," observed Bagot. "Probably wants to get home." Nathaniel wondered. "What's Faros like?" asked Sylvia.

"It's nice." Anne-Leslie wore a dark green jumpsuit and a white scarf. "I've been there once or twice-with the family. You can get things besides fish and algae, and Faro has his own still, where he makes his own stout and beer-his brother is a small grower way south. They say that he makes more by growing barley for Faro than what the big growers pay for beans." She looked at Sylvia, almost asking if she'd said too much.

"What have you eaten there that you liked?" asked Sylvia. "Is there anything especially good?"

"I don't know as there's . . . well . . . they say that the pork changa is good, and I liked it."

Nathaniel laughed good-naturedly. "I cannot say I've ever heard of pork changa. This sounds like an adventure. Might you enlighten me?"

"Stop sounding like an economist," teased Sylvia. "But that is what-"

"Not tonight." Sylvia smiled indulgently and looked at AnneLeslie. "I haven't heard of it either, but it sounds good."

"It is. It's all wrapped up in a crust, covered with real cream sauce, and filled with just about everything-peppers and seasoned pork and onions . . ."

As they entered Lanceville, a second lorry roared by, once more shivering the old groundcar.

"Can you drive by the piers on the way to Faros?" asked Nathaniel. "Not stop. Just drive by?"

"Sure, professor. That will only take an extra couple of units. Lancevilles not exactly huge." After a moment, Bagot added, "If I might ask, sir . . . ?"

"I wonder whether something's being unloaded at the port." The two in the front exchanged glances, but neither spoke. "Can't you ever stop the economics?" asked Sylvia, squeezing Nathaniels hand reassuringly, even as she let out a long sigh. "I will try. After the harbor, I will try."

"Try harder," suggested Sylvia in a wry tone. A faint smile creased Anne-Leslies lips.

"How about desserts?" asked Sylvia. "I like their chocolate rum tort," said Bagot. Anne-Leslie shook her head. "You would."

"That means it is strong and large," suggested Nathaniel. The young woman in the front seat nodded emphatically. Bagot turned onto the harbor drive and slowed the groundcar. "Do you need me to stop?"

All three harbor piers were lit, and two held tugs and barges. A third tug, pushing a high-riding barge, appeared to be steaming seaward. On the two piers, loaders lifted a variety of crates onto waiting groundlorries. Four

other lorries waited at the foot of the empty center pier.

"No. That will do. They do what they do, and-"

"Enough," said Sylvia firmly, a glint in her eye. "Thank you, Bagot. Lets go eat."

"Thank you, honored economist and professor," said Sylvia. Faros was less than a kilo from the harbor-in what looked to be a converted store. The windows were blocked with dark, louvered interior shutters, and the floor was a polished gray stone.

After stepping into an atmosphere of muted incense, spices, and cooking oil, the four waited a moment. Most of the nearly twenty tables were taken.

A heavysset woman wearing a floor-length full maroon skirt and an orange blouse scurried toward them. "Four? We have a large booth . . ."

"That's fine," said Nathaniel.

The booth was lit, dimly, by a hanging ceramic oil lamp that shed almost as much smoke as light. The two Ecolitans took the seats with their backs to the wall.

After checking the menu, and tentatively deciding on the pork changa, Nathaniel turned to Bagot. "You grew up here, and your father worked for the Port Authority. My father was a datamanager, and the last thing I ever wanted to do was manage data. How did you end up at the same place?"

"I guess I never thought about it that way."

"What would you gentles like to drink?" asked the server, a slightly thinner version of the hostess. "A glass of Kenward," said Sylvia. "I'll try that," added Anne-Leslie. "Stout," said Bagot. "Grawer."

"Soon as I get those, I'll take your order." With a snap other head she was gone.

"That's . . . you know . . . ?" offered Anne-Leslie. Bagot frowned. "Susanna . . . the one . . ."

"Right oh. I didn't recognize her."

"I'll bet you were one of those boys who drooled after her." Bagot flushed.

"Be easy on him," said Nathaniel. "We all make mistakes."

"Like that blond one in New Augusta?" asked Sylvia with a broad smile.

Nathaniel winced. Anne-Leslie and Bagot laughed.

"Here you are." Susanna set two wineglasses, a tumbler, and a mug down on the brown synthcloth. "And what would you like tonight? The special's sea-grilled baskmod."

"Would you suggest the pork changa or the house pie?" asked Sylvia.

"They're both good. Depends on how spicy you like things. The porks pretty spicy."

"The house pie."

"Pork changa" came from Anne-Leslie, and then Bagot. "The same," added Nathaniel.

"You were saying how you ended up at the Port Authority," prompted Sylvia, after a moment of silence following the servers departure.

"Jem wanted me to be a rover, said he could get me on at R-K. It never grabbed me. There was talk about opening a branch of the University of Camelot here, but it didn't happen. Pa said the growers were against it . . ." The younger man looked at the glass of stout, then sipped it.

The Ecolitan refrained from wincing at the thought of drinking anything alcoholic and warm.

Susanna dropped a longish basket of bread on the table, barely hesitating as she passed, and Nathaniel offered it to Sylvia, then to Anne-Leslie.

"I imagine growing up here was difficult," said Sylvia, looking toward the younger woman.

"We were pretty lucky, I guess. Better off than some." AnneLeslie sipped the Kenward. "Its better now, a little anyway. I can remember the year everything came out of plasticpaks."

"After the tox-rain?" Bagot shook his head and looked down at his stout, then took a quick swallow, almost draining it. "I'm sorry," apologized the younger woman. "It happened. Can't change that." Nathaniel and Sylvia exchanged quick glances. "I walked by the school the other day. Was that the one you attended?" asked the older Ecolitan.

"Same one. Both Anne-Leslie and I went there. That's the only one there is, really, here on ConOne. Never got away with much, not after Ma started working there." Bagot laughed.

"It sounds like your mother didn't let you get away with much anywhere."

"She still works there, and she still doesn't."

"So . . . you went to school there, and then you went to work at the port."

"They owed him that, what with his father," interjected AnneLeslie.

"How did your father end up with the Port Authority?" asked Sylvia gently.

Bagot looked at Anne-Leslie, then at Nathaniel, who sipped the too-strong Grawer.

"He was with the Fusiliers, the Green and Tans. That's what Ma says, anyway. Pa never would talk about it. After New Avalon

took Hibemia, they offered him . . . 'cause he was such a good pilot, I guess, they offered him a job anywhere he wanted except Hibernia." Bagot hurried another swallow of stout.

Nathaniel had the feeling that someone other than Bagot would be driving the groundcar.

"Here you go, gentles, and a good go it is!" Susanna spread the plates around the table, then set a small dish at each plate filled with a scoop of something. "And there's your pinko." She looked at Bagots empty glass. The

younger man nodded.

"What might be pinko?" asked Nathaniel after the server left. "It's a kind of local sherbet, some mutated raspberries, and it tastes pretty good." Bagot snorted. "One of the few things besides cattle that taste good, and pinko's the only one that's cheap."

In the lull after Susanna provided another glass of stout to Bagot and as they began to eat, Nathaniel picked up fragments of conversation at the adjoining table.

". . . sure he's the young fellow from the port . . . other one might be his brother . . ."

"Too tall . . . Bagots are short . . ."

". . . new to me . . ."

The pork changa was mild, and the Ecolitan wondered. "Is the house pie . . . lightly seasoned?"

"Bland," murmured Sylvia. He offered her some of the pork. "That's good," she murmured after eating a mouthful. He took a small spoonful of the pink sherbet and had another. "The changas quite good, and so is the pinko," he announced loudly. "A good recommendation." He nodded to Anne-Leslie. "A good recommendation." The young woman flushed slightly.

"How do you find working for the Evanstons?" asked Sylvia quickly.

"Madame Evanston is easy to work for. She tells me what she wants, how she wants it done, and, if I don't know, how to do it."

Anne-Leslie smiled. "The best parts are that unless I mess up, she leaves me alone, and the food is good and free, and there's plenty. Sometimes, she'll even send some home with me. And clothes for the little ones."

Sylvia looked at the younger woman inquiringly. "Martha-Elizabeth and Laura-Olivia. . . they're the youngest. Clothes out of anything but synthcloth are still hard to come by."

"The big growers don't like sheep. I heard tell that there's a small herd on ConTrio, but chat wool doesn't get here." Bagot took another swallow of the stout and finished the second glass, holding it up for a refill. "Nothing gets here."

"Another?" asked Susanna, sweeping by and taking the glass. "Another."

Anne-Leslie glanced at Bagot, but the younger man avoided her eyes.

"It seems like things are improving somewhat," began Nathaniel. "The Blue Lion is being redecorated and refurbished."

"It looks nice," said Anne-Leslie, "but they don't pay very well."

"Your stout," announced the server, setting it in front of Bagot. "Would anyone like dessert?"

"The rum cake," said Bagot. "The nut cake," added Anne-Leslie. "I think I'll pass," said Sylvia.

"I also." Nathaniel knew, again, that too much food was tightening his trousers.

"I still cant believe you drooled after her," commented AnneLeslie after the server disappeared into the kitchen area.

"It was . . . a long time . . . ago." Bagot took another hefty swallow of the warm stout.

"You were saying that the Blue Lion does not pay well," prompted Nathaniel, recalling the disappointed waiter there. "No. I looked there."

"No one pays well on Artos, 'cept the Port Authority," added Bagot.

"They only hire men." Anne-Leslie's eyes glinted. Bagot looked down into his half-full glass. Susanna dropped the two deserts before the two younger diners. "Need anything else?"

"Just the bill, if you wouldn't mind," said Nathaniel quietly. The server nodded, then slipped the paper oblong onto the table.

After she left, Nathaniel asked, "Did you know Helverson very well?"

Bagot swallowed a large mouthful of the dark cake before answering. "Didn't know him. . . mush . . . at all. The chief. . . said he was a former grenadier, special services . . ." Bagot looked up and offered a wide and sloppy grin. "Just for you . . ." The grin slowly faded.

Anne-Leslie's hand went to her mouth. "That's all right," said Sylvia. "We thought that might be the case. He's one of the few not born here on Artos, right?"

"Thass . . . right. You . . . win the prize, professor." Bagot slowly ate another bite. "Good . . . cake . . . good . . . food . . ."

Abruptly, Bagot grinned even wider, and then put his head on the table, right beside the remnants of the chocolate rum cake. "GB . . . oh, GB."
"Perhaps we should go." Nathaniel rose. Sylvia nodded.

After paying the check and including enough fora tip, Nathaniel simply lifted the slight form of Bagot right out of his chair and carted him to the groundcar.

"What will happen to him?" asked Anne-Leslie as Whaler eased the limp figure into the backseat beside her.

"Not a thing. Because he didn't say anything at all. Not that I heard," said Nathaniel.

"You planned this." The young woman looked from one Ecolitan to the other.
"No. He only had three glasses of stout. I had no idea he was that sensitive to alcohol. The only thing we planned was to get him to talk about Artos."
"That doesn't make sense."

"Yes, it does," said Sylvia while Nathaniel shut the door and slipped behind the wheel. "People who live someplace take their world for granted. You need stories about friends, family, little things that happen to get a better view."

"That's what Madame Evanston says . . . but you're professors."

Nathaniel wanted to slam his forehead. The term "madame" finally registered, and he knew what his subconscious had been trying to tell him about Vivienne Evanston. She had to be Frankan.

"We have a study to do," said Sylvia. "In the end, economics is about people, and the numbers don't make sense without knowing about people. Professor Whaler spent most of a day just walking through Lanceville, looking and listening."

"Oh..."

Nathaniel eased the car into the street. "Where should we drop you off?"

"No," said Sylvia. "I think we should drop GB off first-if Anne-Leslie can show us where."

Nathaniel nodded. "Fine. GB first." That made sense, especially given how worried the young woman was.

"We don't live that far apart, really. GB still lives with his family. So do I."

"In town here?"

"Yes. Three streets ahead, turn left."

"That's a long bicycle ride out to Madame Evanstons. I assume you ride," said Nathaniel.

"I do, but its flat and easy, and in the morning it's cool. If they have a big party or something, I stay there for the night."

"It's another five long blocks to his house." Anne-Leslie turned in the seat and glanced down at Glubb Bagot. "Are you sure he'll be all right?"

"He'll be fine." Sylvia reached back and touched her shoulder. "Except for a splitting headache."

Nathaniel concentrated on driving the heavy antique, following Anne-Leslies intermittent directions.

The small boxy house was like all the others on the street, brick with a red tile roof and a small stone stoop.

Nathaniel lifted the snoring form from the rear seat and headed up the low step.

"Oh . . . what happened? Is he all right?" The gray-haired woman with the lined face wore faded trousers and a shirtclean-that was gray from too many washings.

"He should be fine, except for a headache. He drank three glasses of stout too quickly," explained Nathaniel, as he followed Bagot's mother into the front room. "Best you put him on the sofa there."

"Tell him I'm sorry, but I'll bring the groundcar to the Port Authority in the morning,"

"The Port Authority in the morning?" The Ecolitan nodded, then stepped outside

and walked swiftly back to the groundcar. "And now you, young woman."
"Turn left at the corner."

Bagots dinner partner lived just south of the main highway that bisected Lanceville.

"Thank you for dinner," said Anne-Leslie as Nathaniel pulled up outside another square brick dwelling. "I'm sorry . . . about GB. Its just that . . ."

"Were sorry," said Sylvia. "We certainly didn't mean . . ."

"No . . . you wouldn't know. I didn't know." She flashed a warm smile. "I'll check on him on the way to work." With that, she slipped from the groundcar and walked swiftly to the darkened door of the house and inside.

"So . . . what have we found out?" asked Sylvia as they pulled away from the boxy brick house where they had left Anne-Leslie. "Helsonson was there to protect us, and Walkerson was probably ordered to ensure we finished our study. Walkersons ambivalent about it, because he's worried that Helverson might be checking on him as well."

"Do we really know that?"

"No. That's a guess, but Walkerson was more upset about the lost equipment than about Helverson, and Helverson was one of the few recent arrivals from New Avalon-if not the only one."

"Sebastions moving heavy equipment out to the ranch-military stuff?" asked Sylvia.

"That's a guess, but it's probably either that or construction equipment that could be used as such." Nathaniel turned the groundcar back to the south at the next cross street. "Ah..."

"I want to drive by Kennis's armory. Or what I think is an armory."

"You are worried."

"Yes."

Nathaniel let his breath out slowly when he saw that, except for the entry, the LN building was dark. "We've got some time."

"How much?"

"I don't know. Days at least. Maybe weeks."

"What are we going to do?"

"Stop a Galactic war . . . somehow."

"From a backwater colony planet? With an economic study?"

"Not just from here. Tomorrow we need to plan when to leave for New Avalon. We don't want to be on an Avalonian ship or a Fuardian one, and I'd really not want to travel on a Halstani vessel either."

"My . . . aren't we picky."

"Picky?" Nathaniel eased the groundcar back onto the main highway heading for the Guest House.

"I'm sorry. But you're doing it again. This is like New Augusta. You spew forth all of this and expect me to follow along."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, but I suppose it sounds that way." He took a

deep breath. "All right. There's a civil war-or a rebellion-brewing. Everything points that way. I can't prove it, but

I'd bet on it." He laughed harshly. "In fact, I am. Our lives probably. Artos can't produce the resources necessary to fight such a war, nor enough productive equipment, but I'd guess they're here somewhere, and they didn't come from New Avalon. They also have an oversized bean conversion facility that produces too much liquid fuel, but prices remain high, and that doesn't happen if there's a true surplus."

"Fuel, and energy for combat vehicles?"

"That's another guess. And someone has been shipping them in, probably to both Kennis and the R-K bunch."

"I see." Sylvia's voice was low in the darkened car. "That means some outside interest wants to create a civil war, and then use it as a pretext to take Artos. New Avalon has been feeling the pinch for a long time and doesn't want to plough any more capital investment into Artos, and because they don't, that's created the opportunity."

"I'm guessing, but that's what I see. Oh . . . and I'd bet that Vivienne is Frankan, and that she's still got ties there. That just dawned on me."

"You didn't realize that?"

"No."

"So who's behind this civil war?"

"I wish I knew. We've seen traces of the Federated Hegemony, the Frankan Union, and the Conglomerate." Nathaniel shrugged. "I don't know. I'd bet it isn't the Franks, but I couldn't say why. Then, my guesses aren't doing that well now. I do know that we have to get to New Avalon before it blows. Am I being too obscure?"

"No. Although, for an economist, dear, you certainly get involved in some interesting situations." That wasn't the half of it, not even half, he feared.

XXIII

Nathaniel eased the groundcar away from the portico of the Guest House, then turned west toward the shuttle port. "Sebastian was transferring a lot of equipment and gear last night, and the more I think about it, the more I'd bet there are weapons involved, a great number of them."

"I wouldn't bet." Sylvia laughed softly, but not gently, "You think they're building for a showdown with the small growers?"

"I don't know. That's certainly what comes to mind first, especially after Georges murder. But the fact that Sebastian is moving equipment seems to mean that he has a lot to do to take over the establishment at the ranch. I wonder just what's in those underground installations."

"Enough to make everyone unhappy," predicted Sylvia. "Especially if its a setup by Kennis, to play the large and small growers off" against each other."

"That's true," admitted the sandy-haired Ecolitan, "but I

would have expected more activity around Kennis's headquarters last night."

"Unless he's really as devious as he seems," pointed out Sylvia. "Or unless someone else has the same idea. This is at least a three-way power struggle."

"Did you have any luck with the transport center?" she asked. "There's a Frankan ship due some time in the next few days probably the day after tomorrow. The Fuard cargoboot has three spaces, and the Wendsor liner won't be back for another week."

"You wanted a Frankan ship, anyway, didn't you?" asked Sylvia.

"Better than anything else, although an Orknarlian or an Imperial vessel would have been better." Nathaniel eased the groundcar onto the drive to the shuttle port. "Imperial?"

"Very tightly run."

"I'm glad you approve of something Imperial."

"I approve of other Imperial . . . items." He grinned. "You're still impossible."

"Absolutely."

As Nathaniel drove up to the Port Authority building, both Walkerson and Bagot came out to meet the Ecolitans.

"Hoped we'd have a moment to chat," said the Port Chief. • "We can do that while Bagot gets the beast here serviced."

"We're here," said Nathaniel.

Bagot didn't look at either Ecolitan and kept his eyes averted as he slipped behind the wheel of the groundcar and eased it toward the maintenance building several hundred meters south of where the three stood.

"Its like this . . ." began Walkerson. "The hoops are getting tight. The constabulary, such as it is, has no idea who killed George Reeves-Kenn. We don't either." Walkerson's eyes went from one Ecolitan to the other. "I suppose I should ask where you were on the afternoon of the day before yesterday."

"As I am sure Bagot has told you, we visited Madame

Evanston and then the Bank of Camelot." Nathaniel smiled pleasantly.

"I know. That's a formality, but had to ask. Now . . . you've seen a number of people over the last few days, and some rather strange happenings have taken place. Do you have any ideas who might have murdered George?"

"No," said Nathaniel.

Walkerson's eyes shifted to Sylvia. "And you, professor?" Sylvia shook her head, then added. "From what little we have seen, a number of people would have some potential reasons. Isn't that so?"

Walkerson coughed and looked at the permacrete underfoot for a moment.

"Unfortunately . . . you have the right of it. I was hoping you might shed some light."

"Every light brings shadows, sometimes more shadow than illumination."

"That seems to be the case here."

"Tell me, Chief Walkerson," continued Nathaniel, "everyone talks about the smaller growers, but never have we heard a name. We have heard about the larger growers by name, the bankers, the scientists, the traders . . ."

"That's another problem. We know all the small growers. There are maybe two hundred. But none of them are leaders. No one ever steps forward. They come to some meetings, and they all protest the tax levies." Walkerson shrugged. "But I couldn't call a single one a leader."

"Does that mean they have none, or that they protect whoever is their leader?"

"If I could find that out . . ."

"You'd know," suggested Sylvia.

"Exactly." Walkerson smiled as the groundcar pulled up. "Thank you. I do hope that you'll let me know if you should chance across something."

"Of course." Both Ecolitans smiled politely. Walkerson watched impassively as they seated themselves in

the rear seat of the groundcar. The Port Chief was still watching when Bagot drove by the main entry building and the groundcar passed out of Walkersons sight.

"Bagot," said Nathaniel, "don't worry about last night. I don't think Chief Walkersons that upset, and we aren't."

"Don't know what came over me, sirs."

"Good food, good drink, and good company," suggested the sandy-haired Ecolitan. "And probably not a very high tolerance for alcohol. Some of us have to be careful." He paused. "AnneLeslie was worried about you. She seems like a nice young woman."

"She is. Came by early this morning." The driver cleared his throat. "I'd forgotten how nice she is."

"I'd do something special for her," suggested Nathaniel. "Special women are hard to find." He squeezed Sylvia's knee slightly. "Yes, sir."

"That's not an order." Nathaniel laughed. "Where to, sir?" Bagot slowed as the vehicle neared the main highway.

"The biomonitoring station-Dr. Oconnor's operation?"

"That'll be on the south side." Bagot turned right and headed east.

Even more ancient than the Bank of Camelot, the thickwalled biomonitoring laboratory squatted on the low bluff on the north side of where the river entered the ocean, scarcely a kilo south of the harbor piers.

Bagot glanced at the Ecolitans. "I'll just park on the shady side and take a nap, if you don't mind." Nathaniel suppressed a smile. "That's fine." Oconnor was waiting for them. "Professors, professors. Ah, let us use the lounge, such as it is."

The short corridor he led them down was plain brick and aged, and the stone floor bore thin traceries of cracks.

"Sit down. Sit down." Oconnor gestured to the threadbare couch under the two high narrow windows. Without waiting, he perched on the plastic stool opposite it. "What can I do for you? It seems silly to be asking that."

"I had hoped you could brief us on the ecologic status of Artos."

Oconnor pushed a longish lock of brown hair back off his forehead. "I don't

know as I could tell you anything you don't already know. You Ecolitans wrote the books on ecology."

"Some Ecolitans did." Nathaniel smiled. "We are economists, however, and we are investigating the interrelations between ecological development and the infrastructure of the economy of Artos."

"You are wise enough to see what you see," said Oconnor. "That the job was never really finished," suggested Sylvia when Nathaniel did not answer.

"The atmosphere is correct and improving," answered Oconnor, his voice neutral.

"Was it lack of funds or the political pressure of the old age interests?" asked Nathaniel.

"I'm not one to speculate, and I'm not in a position to," said the biomonitoring official.

"All right. Then perhaps some ecological questions. What is the largest predator on Artos?"

"I'd have to say the wild dog. Some escaped early on, but the ranchers shoot them on sight."

"And after that?"

"There is a juaranda cat-maximum of eight kilograms-but its principal prey classes are all rodents."

"No snakes? No large mammalian or reptilian predators?"

"No." Oconnor smiled under the long straight nose. "What about plant diversity?"

"Above the microbic level, the diversity drops off more than in the normal pyramidal distribution."

"I've also noticed almost a monoculture in terms of major crops, a heavy emphasis on synde beans."

"Four crop families, if you will, comprise about eighty per

cent of all cultured areas. Tops are the synde beans, but that's to be expected on any planet at this stage, both for the energy requirements and for the supplemental soil scavenging and the oxygen enhancement properties."

"Grass and food crops-maize and wheat."

"Zima grass, and the others are as you observed." Oconnor touched his chin.

"To reduce the coverage of those eighty percent in a balanced fashion to a more normal distribution would require an annual investment of close to a billion credits for at least a decade. The large growers have been subsidizing forestation at a level of nearly fifty million, but . . ." The monitoring chief lowered his shoulders.

"Its not enough, and it appears unlikely that they can continue that level of investment. You mentioned earlier, an emphasis on 'output' by the growers."

"That's their favorite word. 'Output, Detsen, output.' Given the constraints they face, I must give them credit for the ecological contributions they have supported."

"Anything extensive besides the forestation?"

"G-H Factoring has begun a small rain forest effort on ConTrio. That's very promising."

"Is there anything else?" asked Sylvia.

"This is a large planet." Oconnor chuckled. "Even a small planet is large, ecologically speaking. It takes time." He hopped off the stool.

"Have you talked to any of the outsystem agricultural factors recently?" asked Nathaniel quickly. "Sonderssen or the Fuard?"

"I talk to all of them at one time or another," responded Oconnor after a pause.

Nathaniel wanted to nod, but asked instead, "How do you think the ecological development, ideally speaking, ought to go from here?"

"More forestation, diverse forestation. I'd like to see a stronger base in the marshlands. You gee good solid marshlands, integrated properly, and established marine diversity, and an ecology can take a great deal of disruption."

"You've made that point forcefully enough," said Nathaniel with a chuckle. "Even George Reeves-Kenns rovers know it by heart."

"I'm glad someone does." Oconnor glanced toward the closed door. "I shouldn't keep you any longer, but I'm glad you stopped by. If you run across Professor Hiense, please give him my best."

"We will," promised Sylvia.

Outside, some scattered cumulus clouds were forming out over the eastern ocean, but the sun remained bright. Nathaniel blotted his forehead. "Not that again." Sylvia laughed.

"Yes, this again." He put away the overlarge kerchief. "He's not as forthcoming here as he was at a totally snooped party. Interesting."

"He doesn't worry about Kennis. Here . . . he worries."

"You think the Avalonian government has put a thumb on him?"

"Someone has."

"One of the factors?" asked Nathaniel. Sylvia lifted her eyebrows. "You'd rather not speculate?"

"You aren't," she pointed out.

"I can't. It can't be his superiors--there haven't been any Wendsor ships since the reception, and that means no messages or messengers. Local, then, and probably commercial, and some form of personal pressure, but I can't figure out why."

"Neither can I." Sylvia frowned. Nathaniel rapped on the side of the groundcar. "Wha . . . ? Oh, sirs!" Bagot rubbed his eyes and sat up. "Do you know where the trade factors have their offices or warehouses?" asked Nathaniel.

"Yes, sir. All of them are at the shuttle port. They have to have one there, anyway. That's a Port Authority requirement."

"Back to the shuttle port, then."

Bagot dropped them outside a door in a long building. Beside the door was a blue-and-red plaque: AgriTech Galactic, Sonderssen & Company, Representatives, licensed factors.

Jimson Sonderssen stood from behind a small console as the Ecolitans stepped into the comparatively dimly lit room. "The Ecolitan economists . . . I do believe." The lanky man bowed from the waist. "And you were lucky, if that is the word, to find me actually here. In what might I be of service?"

"I find myself somewhat confused," began Nathaniel. "You are an agricultural factor, but trade in agriculture is usually unprofitable between star systems, except for new species or breeds of agricultural animals. Is this not so?"

"The basics you have correctly, professor," answered Sonderssen.

"And you have been a factor here for several years?"

"That is correct. Eight, almost to the day."

"Ecologically, Artos is less advanced than some planets still in planofarming, and agricultural diversity is low."

"Also true."

"Yet diversity is necessary for trade."

"That is an accepted fact." Sonderssen bowed slightly. "I understand you've recently been talking to the biomonitoring office."

"Recently? That is so." Sonderssen offered a dazzling smile. "I often consult with them. Who else could advise this poor factor?"

"Do you handle the luxury beef for the Hegemony?" Sonderssen spread his hands. "You can certainly surmise that I do. There is no one else accredited to the Hegemony."

"Yet the beef trade has been falling off."

"You would like to know what a poor factor such as I might do to justify his existence in economic terms?"

"You're obviously prosperous," pointed out Sylvia. "Good I might be at appearances."

"Neither the Hegemony nor its merchants reward appearances," suggested Nathaniel.

"A wit you have, professor." Sonderssen smiled. "And that is rare among Ecolitans and economists."

"You seem very close to the Fuardian factor, Fridrik . . ." Nathaniel could see Sonderssen would only say what he wished to say. "VonHaIsne. Yes."

"He wears an informal dress uniform."

"So do you, professor. All Fuardas in sefaiofficial capacities outside the Conglomerate are representatives of the state. For sure, is that not known to all?" Sonderssen smiled. "And why am I close to him, when our governments are, shall we say, less than perfect friends? Because I adhere to an ancient maxim. It is better to hug your enemies closer than your friends, for it is difficult to lift a blade when held tightly."

"You're also good with the words." Sylvia's laugh was almost bell-like.

"Is your friend Fridrik around somewhere?"

"His office is the third down, but he is not there. I believe he has returned

to Clava for several weeks." Sonderssen looked at the door. "It has been pleasant seeing you once more."
"And you, too," lied Nathaniel.

Sylvia offered a slight bow, which the trade factor returned. Fridrik VonHaIsne was not only absent, his office was closed and locked. "Not good," murmured Sylvia.

"Not at all. So . . . was it Sonderssen or Sebastian or Kennis that put the touch on Oconnor?"
"What do you think?"

"Sebastian. I think he told Oconnor that he'd never see another cent from the growers or the big ag interests if he said a single meaningful word to us. That's only a guess."
"I'd have to second that, but it's only feel."
"What a pair! Guesses and feelings, and the sky's about to fall."

"At least we know that." They exchanged wry smiles.

Port Chief Walkerson was waiting by the groundcar when the Ecolitans returned. "Things are getting nasty. Whaler. You didn't catch your boat ride with one of the FitzReiUys, did you?"
"As a matter of fact, we did. Why?"

"Someone just fired their barge this morning while they were loading. They were both killed, and it's a flaming mess-raw synde oil in the river, a grass fire . . ." He shook his head. "Sebastian Reeves-Kenn denies being involved, but he claims that it's a blessing in disguise, that the pods carried this synde bean plague. He says it's been ravaging the Imperial planets, and even Halstan. You know anything about that?"

Nathaniel pursed his lips. Synde bean plague on Artos? How had it ever gotten across four sectors? "You look like you know something."
"Oh . . . I do. There's been a bean plague in the EmpireHeraculon, as I recall-but I couldn't figure how it could get here, and none of the plants I saw looked diseased, although I Wouldn't know one plant disease from another."

"Well. . . Sebastian wants me to set Oconnor on it, and quarantine the small growers' fields. He was almost screaming." Nathaniel shook his head. Now what?
"And by the way, old chap, just for the record, where have you been today?"

"We spent most of the morning at the biomonitoring station-or going to it and returning. We had a long discussion with Dr. Oconnor." Whaler didn't mention the visit to Sonderssen's small office, or the attempt to see VonHaIsne, although Walkerson could certainly see where they had been.

"Good. Good. Terrible business, this. Do you two know anything more about this?"

"The FitzReilly woman told us that they carried cargoes for both the small growers and beef for R-K Enterprises. She said that the larger haulers overcharged the small growers."

"That's all?"

"We got a lot of information on barge traffic patterns and capacities."

"Port Chief," added Sylvia, "you might remember that we had walked some fifteen kays before we found the barge, and it was the end of a long day. We collapsed and slept most of the trip back to Lanceville."

"Right . . . forgot about that. Well . . . let me know if you think of anything." He paused. "Are you sure you don't know more about this bean plague thing?"

"Walker," said Nathaniel tiredly, "I told you. I'm an economist. I wouldn't know one plant disease from another."

"Well, I had to ask." The Ecolitan just nodded.

"Now what?" asked Sylvia, as Walkerson marched back toward his office.

"We might as well get something to eat. Bagot needs it, and so do we." They needed more than that, but a solid late lunch was a start.

XXIV

Nathaniel slipped into the bed in the darkness. "Not again," whispered Sylvia. "We talked over everything before."

"You know I think we need to get out of here while it's still relatively safe and possible. Do you think I'm overreacting?" He

touched her shoulder.

"Yes, but you're male." Then she giggled and whispered, "I'm sorry. I couldn't resist, and I don't mean that the way you think."

"How did . . . do--"

"After four attempts on our lives, is anywhere safe?"

"New Avalon is likely to be safer than it will be here, once

open fighting breaks out."

"You don't think this is really a fight between the large and small growers, do you?" She twisted, and her lips brushed his ear.

"Really?" He tried not to shiver, and forced himself to concentrate on

his words, not her warmth and closeness. "It is, but they haven't all the resources they need. Sebastions as worried about Kennis as he is the small growers. I think the outsystem types who do have the resources don't want to complicate things at the moment. They'd rather pick up the pieces. That's what I'm gambling on. Things will have to gee messy. New Avalon won't want to spend the credits . . . so they'll get messier."

"And then someone will step in with their snow-white ships of mercy, so to speak?" Her hand massaged the back of his neck, and he tried to resist the impulse to draw her closer.

"I believe that's the agenda. So the sooner-and safer-we can get to New Avalon, the better our chances to head this off."

"I thought you-we-were here to do a study. Not in my bed, either,"

"I'm sorry. I couldn't sleep, and I wanted to talk this over."
"That's not all you want."

"No. But I'm not asking or insisting on anything else." He took a long slow, quiet breath. "Stop puffing in my ear."

"Sorry." He swallowed. "We will do the study, but . . . we're also here to stop what could turn into a mess, with the Institute being blamed for it all."

"You're stretching." Sylvia shook her head, close enough to his face that he could smell the trillia . . . and her. "Just how does this impact Accord and the Institute?"

"Someone wants the study. We show up. A revolt or something starts. The bodies of two Institute members are found. One has a nasty reputation, and the other is a former I.I.S. agent. Whoever's behind this then accuses New Avalon of throwing in with the ecologic butchers of Accord and the Empire, and uses that to justify liberating the poor oppressed small folks."

"You really think people will fall for that?"

"Smart people won't, but there aren't many of them in any society, and politicians live by the numbers." He found his hand massaging her shoulder and moving downward. "Besides, rationality is usually only used to develop logical arguments to support existing beliefs and prejudices."

"You are cynical."

"Realistic," he whispered. "About some things."

"We'll also not tell Walkerson until we have to."

"That's realistic," she conceded. "Very realistic."

Her fingers ran along his cheek. "Things are going to get worse."

"Probably."

"I think so, too." Then her lips were on his.

XXV

At the rapping on the door, Nathaniel crossed the room from the fresher wearing his greens but still barefoot. "Who's that?" Sylvia peered through the connecting door. She was already fully dressed, so efficient that he felt sluggish. He shrugged and said in a low voice, "I don't know." Then he raised his voice: "Yes?"

"A call for you from the Port Authority, sir."

"I'll be right there." He sat in the chair and yanked on socks and boots.

"The Port Chief said it was urgent."

"Just a moment," whispered Sylvia. "Hold it a moment." She vanished through the door.

He frowned, but waited, then stepped to the side of the door, before starting to edge it open.

Thrummm! A line of fire seared his lower right arm. Even as he kicked the door shut, he could hear another dull

thump, then quiet. Waves of pain radiated up his right arm, and he paused to

take a deep breath before easing back toward the door.

"You can open it now." Sylvia's voice came through the heavy wood clearly. "I got her."

With his left hand, he pushed the lever handle down and opened the door. Sylvia stood above the limp figure of the serving woman in green-and-maroon tunic and green trousers. The dark-haired Ecolitan lifted a stunner and smiled at Nathaniel. "It's Imperial issue, set pretty far up."

"I know." He massaged his lower right arm with his left for a moment. "Let's get her inside."

"Good idea." Sylvia slipped the stunner into her waistband, and they dragged the woman into Nathaniel's room and laid her flat on the floor.

He watched closely as Sylvia locked the doors of both their rooms, but the woman still seemed unconscious. He began to search the woman, starting with the bulge in a capacious hip pocket.

He lifted the small, flat slug-thrower. "Another toy."
"Stunners work better through doors or at odd angles."
"And this was meant to finish the job."
"Maybe..."

He straightened. The woman carried nothing else of import, except the groundcar placard that he set on the table. Somehow he couldn't see a weapon being concealed in the tube of lip gloss or the package of tissues.

"Quite a wake-up call," Sylvia observed, settling into one of the straight-backed chairs.

Nathaniel set the slug-thrower on the table next to the placard, sat on the edge of his bed, and looked down at the Artosan woman, then at Sylvia. He massaged his throbbing right arm. "Forest lord-I should have seen."

"You were meant not to. Who pays any attention to servants, especially in a GraeAnglo culture? Especially to women servants.

And she figured you'd probably be less alert this morning." Sylvia's lips tightened. "I don't like voyeurs."
"I'm sorry."

"That's not your fault." Her expression softened momentarily. "I don't regret last night. If anything, this just shows I was right. But I don't have to like people watching." She paused and glanced toward the door. "The question is, now what do we do with her?"

"I can handle that." The older Ecolitan fumbled out the miniature dart gun. "Murder-that's not-even for this."

"No." Nathaniel said. "The darts have a mild nerve toxinmimics some forms of influenza, the violent ones. You may recall these. She'll have seizures and a pretty significant memory loss for today and maybe yesterday."

"This isn't another case of 'trust me,' is it?" He winced. "I deserve that. No. All the ones I used darts on while I was on New Augusta recovered-except for several days of memories." He paused. "We must be close to something. I

just wish I could see it."

"We really still haven't discovered anything. We don't know for sure who's behind the attempts on our lives, or why everyone's so threatened by this stupid study, or why there's an arms buildup and civil unrest on a planet with nothing on it."

For a moment, he just sat there, thinking about four attempts on their lives. Thinking about the fact that he'd walked around Lanceville totally exposed, that he'd been exposed when he'd gone to find Sylvia just before he'd left New Augusta, thinking about the dark-metalled slug-thrower on the table.

"Oh . . . no." How could he have missed it? How could he have been so self-centered? He wanted to pound his head. He swallowed and looked at Sylvia. While he knew she wasn't, that she was tougher in many ways than he was, she looked somehow . . . vulnerable.

"What?" Her eyebrows lifted in a gesture of annoyance and amusement.

"I'm sorry."

"If you're going to apologize for last night again . . . I told you--"

He shook his head. "I think you and I have misjudged all of this. Or I have. I really did. Kennis Whats-his-name was the key, but I should have seen it sooner."

"Seen what?"

"Someone's after you. They have been all along, but I was included so that we wouldn't realize that. Ecolitans like me are dangerous, but we don't really know anything. You're knowledgeable, and you still presumably have access to Imperial sources, and someone definitely doesn't want you to use them. I'm just a target to cover the fact that they're after you."

"That doesn't make sense. I don't know that much."

"You do. You have to, because . . . I can't explain it totally logically, but they're after you. That's why the stunner. A message for you wouldn't have been plausible."

"Maybe it does make sense."

"It makes very good sense, and so many people could want us out of the way that it'll be hard to eliminate suspects. We need to get out of here even faster. Confined as it is, orbit control would be better because whoever it is won't want to take out a whole station . . . yet."

He lifted the dart gun and fired into the slumped figure. "What . . . ?"

"I've been telling you my speculations, and I don't want her remembering it, even subconsciously. I'll tell you as we pack."

"You're serious."

"Yes." Trying to ignore the throbbing in his arm, as well as the voice in his head that kept reminding him that he'd been stupid, he managed to lay out his field pack on the bed and slowly fold his clothes.

Sylvia dumped all her clothing on the other side of his bed, then brought in her own field pack and the datacase.

"Oooohh . . ." The serving woman moaned, and then twitched. Sylvia glanced down.

"I didn't say it was painless, but neither is my arm."

"You can move it?"

"It hurts."

She shook her head. "Most people couldn't function with that kind of nerve pain."

"I don't have much choice." He rubbed his forehead damp-and then resumed folding his clothes, slowly. "What's the event horizon?" Sylvia asked. "The real issue?"

"Its got to be the Three System Bulge. It belonged to the Empire until the Secession, and then the Fuardas took it and fortified it, but its a dagger at the side of the Empire. If Artos falls to the Empire, then that flanks the bulge, and the Fuardas are paranoid anyway. Artos is on the end of the Avalonian drift, and not much use to Camelot, but would strengthen either the Hegemony's position or the Unions. And to complicate matters more, the Empire doesn't want any of the three to have Artos, I'm sure. So . . . if our study and investigations reveal that Camelot is effectively capital-starving Artos, the Arch Tories-or someone, because I'm guessing at the internal politics-are going to suffer because the Empire will put the screws on New Avalon to beef up Artos to keep it strong and inside New Avalon. That's where you come in. You could ensure the report gets to the right people, and that they believe it. More important, from your point of view and safety, someone believes you're here to ensure the Empires interests."

"It could look that way." Sylvia paused. "If they think that were a joint Imperial/Accord team . . ."

"They want us removed. Exactly."

"You're convinced that most Avalonian politicians would quietly let Artos go?" Sylvia closed her pack, and then stepped up beside Nathaniel, folding his remaining set of greens. "I can do this faster."

"No. They'd wail and wring their hands and moan and com

plain loudly-but can you imagine them going to war over a single colony outsystem against the Hegemony, the Conglomerate, or even the Frankan Union? So . . . unless I'm missing something, and unless we can be very successful on New Avalon, there's going to be a disaster here. Invasion, starvation, plague, rebellion, a declaration of 'independence' backed by Kennis's private army, or all of the above."

"And we can't do anything here?"

He shook his head. "With what? Either of us could assassinate Kennis. That would just allow Sebastion to do the same thing, and he would, and then the small growers would really revolt. If we removed Sebastion, then . . ."

"Kennis takes over with his private army and fights it out with them, and then the Federated Hegemony, the Union, or the Fuardas bring in fleets and light up the sky."

"And what will the Grand Admiral do at that point?" Sylvia winced.

"Add to that two dead Ecolitans, one tied to the I.I.S., and the Empire is effectively neutralized-at least long enough for Artos to fall."

"It could be worse than that," mused Sylvia as Nathaniel closed his field pack.

"Oh?" He rubbed his forehead, then reached out and pocketed the ignition placard for the groundcar. "The fish kills and the synde bean plague—that screams to the Galaxy that Accord is trying to weaken the Empire on all fronts, even using an economic study to foment rebellion in another area that would weaken the Empire. Without you and me around to get the real message across, what will the Senate do? What can they do but bring some sort of force against Accord?"

"Which means they won't have forces near New Avalon and Artos."

"Which will make an outside takeover of Artos rather easy." Sylvia gestured toward the door. "I suppose we're going to steal a groundcar?"

"I prefer the term 'borrow.'" The sandy-haired Ecolitan shouldered his field pack. "Anyway, all this leaves one nagging question. Why in creation did the Institute and Accord ever get sucked into doing the study? What did New Avalon promise the House of Delegates? Or vice versa?"

"That's one reason—"

"We're going to Camelot. You've got it." He paused. "I'm sorry. Do you know why? I cut you off."

"No . . . and thank you." She leaned closer to him and kissed his cheek.

Nathaniel opened the door gingerly. The corridor was empty, but his pack was over his right shoulder, and the dart gun back in his left hand. Sometimes it was a real advantage to be lefthanded, although he was as close to ambidextrous as training could make him.

"You're going to leave her?" Sylvia glanced back at the slightly twitching figure on the rug. "And the slug-thrower?"

"Why not? Even if no one finds her, she'll be all right. Besides, my arm hurts. And we couldn't get a metal weapon through the detectors."

As they passed the foyer, Nathaniel nodded to the room to the left. "Would you duck in there and call Vivienne? Suggest that the weathers likely to be cold and that she and Geoffrey should consider a short vacation at some warm place—off Artos—without saying it directly? Would you mind?"

"No, I wouldn't mind, and that makes sense. Just a moment." Nathaniel scanned the area, ears alert as well, but no one appeared until Sylvia popped out of the small office.

"She was most gracious, and said that they had considered such a vacation, perhaps on one of the tropical islands on Altours." Sylvia opened the front Guest House door for Nathaniel.

"Frankan . . . that figures. The groundcar ought to be on the side. Can you drive?"

"Of course."

"Good."

The mottled gray groundcar tucked up beside a nondescript

bush made Pyotr's taxi look like a luxury model. "You can pick transport." Sylvia laughed. "At least we're driving, or you are." The field packs went in the flat space behind the front bench

seat—there was no rear seat, just a flat slab of stained blue plastic. Clouds of dark gray smoke billowed from the rattling engine

as Sylvia eased the vehicle onto the lane out to the main highway,

and the entire body of the groundcar shuddered. Another heavy-cargo lorry rumbled past, empty and heading

for Lanceville. "More equipment being unloaded?" Sylvia turned right and headed west for the shuttle port. "Probably."

"You're sure there'll be a shuttle today?" asked Sylvia. "There's a Hegemony vessel due today, and a Frankan one late

tomorrow. That's a little strange, too. Bagot was talking about how few ships there usually are."

"More than a few things are a little strange."

"How true," mused Nathaniel. Sylvia stopped the borrowed groundcar right at the entrance

to the Port Authority offices. "We can leave this here?"

"Of course. Chief Walkerson will certainly know what to do with it."

They both laughed, even as their eyes scanned the area before they entered the building. Bagot looked up as the two, field packs on shoulders, entered

the outer office. "Is Chief Walkerson in, Bagot?"

"Ah . . . yes."

"Good. He put in a call for us, so I'm sure he'll be expecting us."

Furrowed brows revealed the driver's puzzlement, but by then Nathaniel had his hand on the inner office door.

Sylvia bestowed a dazzling smile on the driver. "Take good care of Anne-Leslie, and listen to her. She has good judgment." She entered the inner office and clicked the door closed behind her.

"What are—" began the Port Chief.

"We're returning your call of this morning in person," Nathaniel announced.

"Ah . . . my call?"

"Perhaps we were mistaken, but we got a message that you'd called. Then one of the staff started firing a stunner at me." Nathaniel offered a broad and false smile. "So we decided to return the call in person."

"Stunners? That's preposterous."

Sylvia held up the weapon. "Its even Imperial issue. We left the slug-thrower

behind on the table. I'd bet it's Imperial issue, too."

"It's amazing," added the other Ecolitan. "Artos is so techpoor, cant even manufacture its own groundcars, yet all these weapons keep showing up. And there's not an Imperial on the planet, but all the weapons come from the Empire."

"I'm quite afraid I don't understand," protested Walkerson. "You don't have to," declared Sylvia. "Were just going to keep you company for a time, Port Chief, at least until the next shuttle to orbit control arrives later this morning."

"You're leaving so soon?"

"Let's just say that we've completed as much of the study research as we can while here on Artos," replied Nathaniel. "The next phase will take place on New Avalon."

"You're going to Camelot?" asked Walkerson. "That's the idea," said Sylvia sweetly. "But why?"

"I think you know why." Nathaniel smiled, ignoring the throbbing in his arm.

"Why do you think were going?"

"I couldn't say . . . after all, you are the Ecolitans."

"In technical terms, then, you can tell everyone that too much

of Artos' infrastructure is tied up with that of New Avalon." Nathaniel's voice went cold. "While we can certainly point out areas where improvement is necessary, even vital, it makes no sense to recommend remedies that are mere technical exercises and cannot be implemented politically." He smiled politely. "As you may recall, the Institute is known for its emphasis on practical solutions, and we are going to be working very hard for a practical solution. Not that there seems to be much interest on Artos in a practical solution, since everyone seems quietly bent on setting up to destroy the other fellow, in order to ensure that you all lose."

"You've totally lost me. Whaler. You've gone absolutely batty."

"Me? The infrastructure economist and diplomat selected for the high-profile fall? Dragging down Professor Ferro-Maine in the process?" Walkerson turned to Sylvia.

Her gray eyes were like cold stone. "I don't care much for men who declare they have a duty when they ignore what is really happening."

"I do have work to do . . ." Walkerson looked helplessly at the office door.

"The most important business you have," said Sylvia, "is to stay with us until the shuttle leaves. Otherwise . . ."

"Also, once we leave," added Nathaniel, "you might want to check up on your help at the Guest House. They've gotten into rather nasty habits lately."

Walkerson swallowed. His forehead dampened visibly. "Now I know," continued Nathaniel, "that our arrival placed everyone in a rather tense situation. After all, it would be most embarrassing to New Avalon to have a civil war-or was it going to be a war of independence-break out while we were here."

"I am afraid I don't understand, old chap."

"You understand. Port Chief Walkerson," said Sylvia. "That's why we're going to be very close together until the next shuttle lifts. Very close." She smiled. Walkerson swallowed.

Nathaniel walked on Walkerson's right, Sylvia on his left, as the three headed across the permacrete of the ramp to the waiting orbit shuttle.

"It has been an interesting time. Port Chief, especially for a place that you called quiet when we arrived."

"So quiet that there have only been four attempts on our lives--just about one every other day." This time Sylvia smiled. The smile was not pleasant.

"You had a little time to think." Nathaniel studied the hangars to the south where the two remaining Port Authority flitters were hangared. "In view of everything that's occurred, is there anyone you would suggest we contact while we are in Camelot?"

"I couldn't tell you who would help with your study."

"Walker!" snapped Whaler. "Can't you get it through your thick Avalonian skull that your usefulness to just about everyone is limited? If New Avalon manages to hang onto Artos, you'll be

the scapegoat, along with us, probably, because we brought an unpleasant mess to everyone's attention when they wished it would go away. If not, how many people are going to be happy with the lead representative of New Avalon's Defence Ministry?"

"You really are serious, aren't you, old chap?" Nathaniel wanted to roll his eyes. Instead, he glanced at Sylvia. "Some men are particularly dense." She emphasized "men" just slightly.

Walkerson swallowed. "Not that I believe you--I think you're overreacting Terribly--but you might pay a call on Minister Spencer-Hawkes or his Deputy, that's Alston-Welles. AlstonWelles might be better, really."

"We will make the contact." Whaler smiled. "Of course, there's no guarantee they'll want to take this seriously, either. But there are others that will." I hope, he added mentally.

Nathaniel and Sylvia paused at the ramp to the orbit shuttle, where Nathaniel handed the two datablocs to the crewrep who waited.

"Well . . . , professors, it has been . . . enlightening. I'd like to see a copy of your report when it's finished. I would be quite interested to see your conclusions and recommendations." Walkerson offered a nervous smile. "And the supporting documentation."

"It has been enlightening." Nathaniel nodded, taking the datablocs back from the crewrep.

"And you'll have a great deal of proof even before then, I think." Sylvia offered a cold smile. "You'd better hope you don't, but I'm not terribly optimistic, Port Chief." Both Ecolitans nodded, and then stepped up the ramp. Walkerson looked dumbly after them, then shook his head, finally wiping his sweating forehead as he turned and walked back toward his office. The ramp swung up, and the shuttle engines began to whine.

I just hope this Frankan ship arrives on time." Sylvia lurched slightly with the gravity fluctuation as she stepped through the open reinforced arches that joined two sections of Artos orbit control, past the concealed pressure doors, and into section two, distinguished from section one by a darker gray shade of the plastic spray chat coated the bulkheads.

Even alerted by Sylvia's lurch, Nathaniel still found himself staggering through the slight change in gravity. He shook his head-just another example of slow decay. Grav-field generators were comparatively large, expensive, and needed constant maintenance, power, and tuning-and the closer they operated to a planetary field, the more they needed of all three, one reason why they weren't practical for atmospheric use. "We slept better-" he began.

"Safer, not better." Sylvia rubbed her neck. "I still feel like a pretzel."

"I stand corrected." His own shoulders were tight, but how much of that was from uneasy sleep and how much from constant surveillance of their surroundings was another question.

They passed a flat expanse of plastic on the outboard side of the corridor, thin enough that Nathaniel could make out the outlines of what had once apparently been a ship docking area. At the edge of the comparatively newer plastic were large globules of gray.

Did the panels beneath his feet flex more than they should? The Ecolitan wasn't sure. Once he started doubting, he got skeptical of everything, and they had plenty to be skeptical of at the moment.

His eyes flicked ahead to the sign that read Lock 3. Lock three was empty, with seal-tite across the access doors to the lock itself. The handful of plastic benches were scarred and darkened with age.

They passed under a ventilator that puffed warm metallic air at them with intermittent wheezes. "What are we looking for?" asked Sylvia. "More indirect evidence, although I suspect we've already seen enough."

"As someone once told me, by the time the evidence is solid, you'll be too late to do anything." She flashed a brief smile. "I wonder who said that?" "I wonder who."

He paused as they passed two older, hard-faced women in Halstani singlesuits. Both were nearly as tall and muscular as Nathaniel.

After the women had passed, Sylvia turned and raised her eyebrows. "Hands of the Mother?" "Probably former Hands. They train some as pilots. No one shipjacks a Matriarch vessel."

"I wonder why." Sylvia laughed harshly, then frowned as they passed another blank expanse that might once have held a receiving lock. "The whole stations pretty run-down."

"Not exactly the picture of an up-and-coming colony planet about to become prosperous and independent." Nathaniels tone was low and wry. "No."

"Ready to return to Clyde's Cafe?"

'Since I'm hungry, and since we've got a few more hours to kill, and since there's nowhere else to eat . . . why not?' Sylvia flashed a bright smile that showed too much tooth. "It's a bit safer here."
"Except from maintenance failures." They both grinned.

XXVIII

Nathaniel slipped the pocket tools from his field pack and

fastened them to his belt, then glanced around the three-by-four-meter cube that qualified as a standard cabin on the Omnia Gallia.

"I thought a Frankan ship was going to be safer." Sylvia glanced at the tools.

"I thought so, too. But you said the head steward recognized us somehow, or showed some sign of recognition."

"I said I thought he did."

"That's good enough for me. I'll trust your instincts any day." Nathaniel grinned at the dark-haired former dancer and agent. "Don't blame this—"

"I'm not blaming. I'd do it anyway, but your senses are solid confirmation."

Sylvia smiled, briefly. "I can see why a lot of people don't like Ecolitans. You don't spend time presenting logic and facts."

"That's a good way to get killed. You have to be prepared a long time in advance."

"You brought those tools, planning this?"

"Not exactly. The tools are there to carry out a number of contingency plans, I've also got a mental listing and their specs, in case I'd lost these."

"I still don't know. . . I have trouble with the Institute's act-first philosophy."

"Most of the Galaxy does. People would rather see a lot of people hurt and a lot of damage before taking drastic action. That way they can rise in righteous revenge and be justified."

"If everyone has that much trouble with the Institute, why are you all still here?"

"Because our resources are dispersed, and because we do act faster than our opponents. If someone decides to gather a fleet, the entire universe knows, and they know that we know, and they also know that we wouldn't hesitate to destroy their entire ecology." Nathaniel laughed. "Of course, we haven't done anything that drastic in four hundred years, but they all fear we could. So they don't."

"That just could be what caused this mess," suggested Sylvia. He nodded. "I'd wondered about that—covertly dragging the Empire and Accord into war to avoid facing the Institute and its sanctions. It's clever, and unless we can do something, it just might succeed."

A hiss of something came over the small speaker above the plastic cabin door. "We will be approaching the first jump point in approximately thirty units. Passengers have ten units to return to their cabins. Passengers have ten units

to return to their cabins."

Nathaniel smiled briefly and glanced at the narrow door. "We'll wait about two or three units."

"And . . . ?"

"We'll find the chief steward. Or he'll find us, and somehow,

I'll bet he's wearing a stunner. They're not supposed to, but most do."

After the scurrying in the corridor subsided, the two Ecolitans slipped out of the minuscule cabin. "Which way?" asked Sylvia. "Aft . . . there."

"I know which way--"

"Sorry."

"The blue-clad steward hurried forward to meet them, his shoulders squaring as he neared. Nathaniel waited.

"Ecolitan . . . I must insist that you both return to your cabin." The stewards hand dropped toward the stunner even before he finished speaking.

Nathaniels leg and foot were faster. As the big man doubled over, the Ecolitans knee caught his chin, but the stewards hand still clutched the butt of the stunner, and his body turned sideways.

"The steward slumped. Nathaniel looked up to see Sylvia massaging the side of her hand. "Out of shape for this."

"Thank you." Nathaniel wrestled the stunner from the stew. ards hand and reversed it. Thrumm!

"That should hold him." He extended the stunner to Sylvia. "Cover me. Stun anyone who looks this way, even if it's the pilot or an officer."

"I suppose you could pilot this, too." Sylvia glanced up the empty corridor.

"Yes. So don't worry if you put someone under. What we have to worry about is the mess down underneath." He knelt on the rubberized mat, looking for the releases.

"You're sure there's a mess there? I don't want to even think about what they'll do to us if you're wrong."

"I'll find someone to blame it on."

"You just might."

"Not really. You get a feel for these things, and when we both feel the same way . . ." He shook his head, then inched back up the corridor toward the ship's stem, mumbling, "Hope this is a standard design." He felt the mat, then jerked. The access plate to the ventilator was there. In quick motions with the hex wrench he unfastened the plate, then laid it aside. He felt the smooth sides of the ventilator tube, then nodded and sheathed the wrench, coming up with the cutter. Five quick motions, and he held a plastic oblong, grinning. "Keep guarding."

Another set of motions, and he had a second oblong, and an opening into the drive section.

"What . . ." Despite her comment, Sylvia's eyes remained on the passageway, stunner ready.

"I'm going into the drive section-this is modeled on an old corvette design." Nathaniel slipped his legs through the hole he had cut and eased his way into the dim light below, careful to stay to his left. The last thing he needed to do was bruise one of the supercon lines . . . or get fried if someone else already had.

The lines were clear, gleaming dusty silver in the dim light of the drive section. First came the converters, with no obvious goodies attached or out of place. Then he turned to the lines from the firin cells-also unbruised silver. Thrummm!

At the sound of the stunner, he called, "You all right?"

"I'm fine. Another steward. Just do what you have to."

"That's what. . . I'm doing." The Ecolitan turned to the various field generators, hoping no one had tampered with the gravsystems. They seemed fine, with no gratuitous hardware, and his eyes flicked to the shields. What looked to be a cutout switch had been attached to the controller. He nodded to himself-easy and standard. But dropping the shields alone meant nothing. He followed

the spider thin line to the inner hull plates where it split. Each section disappeared into an off-color circle, presumably running to the outer hull plates as well. What else?

The seal on the emergency signal generator had been replaced, badly.

Nathaniel eased around the generators to the backup, sealed drive controls, ripping the plastic off the intercom. He tapped the square red stud. "Captain, this is Ecolitan Whaler, I'm down here . in your drive section, and I've found some rather interesting equipment here. My associate is guarding the corridor, but I'd suggest you trigger the exterior locks on the passenger compartments."

The return squawk was almost unintelligible. Whaler shook his head and repeated the message in Frankan. "What? How are we supposed to believe you? We'll be at the jump point in less than five standard units."

"If you jumpshift, you'll emerge with no atmosphere and no shields. Needless to say, I'll stop you if you try it-at least until you send the engineer down. Oh, and I suspect you'll find a deep space suit in the lead steward's quarters. I just don't know who else might be with him. Don't worry about him, though. We already took care of that problem."

"You . . . Ecolitans . . . you think you know everything, do you not?"

"Hardly, Captain. I thought a Frankan ship would be safe." Nathaniel eased toward the silvered apparatus beside the supercon line to the converter. Beyond them, looking at an angle, he could still see where the two hull plates had been altered. "Are you going to pull the jump-generators off-line, or have me do it? lean read the backup indicators as well as any engineer."

An exasperated sigh came over the intercom. The green lights on the small board went to amber. Nathaniel took a deep breath. He had at least ten units, because it would take that long for the repowering sequence.

"Sylvia! One engineer should be headed our way. Just one. Stand back and let him come down here. If he tries anything else, stun him, too."
"Stet!"

While he waited, the Ecolitan cut away the seals and wires locking the drive backups. "You don't trust anyone, do you?" he murmured to himself. "As if you should, these days."

"Easy. . ." Sylvia's voice drifted down to Nathaniel. Nathaniel watched as a large pair of shipboots filled the narrow opening in the ventilator. The bearded young Frankan officer swallowed as he saw the dart gun.

"They don't register on detectors. Pardon me if I'm a little suspicious these days. I'd like you to look at the device under the emergency signal plate. It doesn't look like any signal generator I've seen. You might also check the plate just abaft frame forty." Nathaniel eased back.

The Frankan opened the plate cover. He swallowed, and his eyes went to the plate. He swallowed again.

"Now, look at that handy-dandy cutout switch on the shield generators."

The bearded man studied the cutout, laboriously tracing the microfilament line to the hull plates. He stiffened, then looked at the Ecolitan. "Might I, *sieur*, might I call the captain?"

"Be my guest. That's a good place to start." A ham-sized hand depressed the red stud. "*Sieur*. . . the Ecolitan . . . he is correct. There is a strange device--"

"Shaped charge," Nathaniel murmured. "A shaped charge . . . in the signal generator."

"Put him on, Faquar." The engineer stepped back.

Nathaniel gestured with the dart gun. "Over there." The engineer eased away from the Ecolitan. "Whaler here. You want to believe me, now?"

"It is my ship . . . might I change positions with my engineer?"

"I'll send him right up. That way, he'll be able to report with

out coercion." Nathaniel nodded at the engineer. "Go on back to the control room."

"Go?"

"Of course. I'm as interested in you are in getting to New Avalon in one piece. Maybe more interested." He raised his voice. "Sylvia! One engineer coming up."

"Stet."

The engineer glanced from Nathaniel to the opening cut in the ventilator, then struggled up and out of sight.

"The captain appeared, seemingly almost immediately, scanning the drives and generators before turning to the Ecolitan. "Claude Muerotte, Captain of the *Omnia Gallia*. "

"Nathaniel Whaler, Ecolitan Institute." Captain Muerotte glanced at the signal generator and then shook his head. "Why me?"

"Because I'm on your ship. Now . . . I can defuse that . . . if I can have the manual. The polarities differ depending on the installation, and I'd rather not guess."

"If I might?" Muerotte gestured toward the intercom. "Be my guest." The Ecolitan lowered but did not put away the dart gun as he stepped back.

"Faquar? Send down the manuals. Number three, I believe; with the blue band, which deals with the signal system . . ."

"Captain . . ." began another, lighter voice. "There was space armor in LaTours room . . . what about energy loss . . . were past--"

"Bousie, just cut back on the drives to headway, and deliver the manuals." Muerotte stepped back, glancing warily at Nathaniel.

"As I told your engineer, I have a great interest in arriving at the New Avalon orbit control station in one piece. There are those who don't share that interest, including those who bought off your steward. Of course, they didn't intend for him to live either." Nathaniel inclined his head toward the signal generator.

"Captain," a voice called through the hole in the deck, "could we open the main hatch?"

Nathaniel shrugged sheepishly. . . A faint smile cracked the captain's lips.

Light flooded over the standby drive controls, and the engineer stood above the ladder. Nathaniel caught a glimpse of Sylvia, standing well back, stunner trained on the bearded engineer.

"You get the manuals," said Nathaniel, "and find the schematic for the generator." He added. "And could you have the engineer tie up the two stewards?"

Muerotte stiffened, then shrugged. Nathaniel could sympathize. Captains didn't like being ordered around on their own ships. But they liked the idea of losing the ship even less. "Paquar. . . tie them up."

"First the signal generator . . ." murmured Nathaniel after tracing the schematic and turning to the colored circuit lines. "Like so."

He took a deep breath. "One down." Muerotte moved aside as the Ecolitan went back to the shield generators and the cutout switch.

"HMMMM . . . could be simple . . . and it might not . . . still . . ."

Nathaniel removed the cover with the tiny long-bladed hexdriver. "Double bypass. So. . . there." He took a second breath, then moved back to the backup drive controls, and flicked the overrides back to the cockpit, then rewired the shutouts. "Let's head upstairs."

Muerotte cleared his throat. "I appreciate this . . . assistance . . . but . . ."

"You're not in the clear yet. Captain. We need to reroute your jumps." Nathaniel gestured to the ladder.

"There's no way, not without going into Conglomerate space."

Nathaniel took a deep breath. "What if we increase the power to the jump generators? Cut out the grav-draw?"

"Do you know what the passengers will do once we dock?"

"Do you know what the Fuards or the Hegemony will do if you come out anywhere close to your normal jump points?" countered the Ecolitan.

"But we have a transspace agreement with . . ."

"Whoever it is will blame the other-or Accord or the Empire." Nathaniel's eyes turned cold. "I really must insist. Captain. You can file protests with anyone you want, but I'd like to have us all get there so that you can." He paused.

"You head up. I'm going to enable the cross-connects. Tell the second that's what I'm doing. Otherwise those amber lights on the board will upset her."

Muerotte pressed the intercom stud. "Bousie, the interlock safeties are coming on. It's not a failure. Just stand by."

"Yes, Captain." The resignation carried above the slight crackle of the intercom speaker.

Muerotte picked up the thin manual, then looked at the Ecolitan. "Why did they select the Gallia?" He started up the ladder.

When Nathaniel stood in the low-grav of the corridor, he answered. "Because we selected your ship, and that means someone wants two Ecolitans to disappear along with an entire Frankan craft." He paused. "Since we're all going to be in the cockpit. Captain, I'd suggest these hatches be closed." He extended the hex wrench from his belt to Faquar. "This will handle the nuts for the access plate." Muerotte nodded to the engineer.

"You wait," said Nathaniel to Sylvia. "In case anyone gets any ideas . . . just stun all of us. The ship will hold until I wake up. When the engineers done, you take the rear position in the cockpit." She nodded.

"You trust few, I see," observed Muerotte as Nathaniel followed the captain forward.

"So far, this makes the fifth or sixth attempt on us in the last two standard weeks. That might explain why I'm somewhat skeptical."

"You must know something very dangerous." Muerotte laughed harshly.

"That's the strange part. I'm an economist." Muerotte shook his head again, then punched the cockpit access stud and the combination.

"Leave it open until the engineer and Sylvia rejoin us."

"As you wish." Muerotte dropped into the vacant pilot's couch.

Nathaniel nodded toward the seconds position. "Move aside, Bousie," ordered Muerotte. The redheaded second pilot glanced from the captain to the Ecolitan in greens, then eased aside.

"Over there," suggested Nathaniel. He didn't want anyone behind him. Bousie complied, if with aslight frown. "If I might . . ." offered Muerotte.

"Go ahead." Nathaniel slid into the second pilot's seat, scanning the instruments and holding the input set, watching both the second and the engineer.

Two other figures entered the cockpit, Sylvia the last, stunner still in hand. The cockpit hatch closed with a dull thunkk.

"The Ecolitan discovered a rather elaborate set of devices in the drive chambers. They could not have been placed there since he boarded at Artos. I suspect the maintenance crew, but that is not the, question. He has suggested certain precautions. I agree, but I will cross-check his implementation of those precautions." The captain raised his eyebrows. "I am presuming neither you nor Faquar had any part in this, since you would have been in the cockpit when we lost all atmosphere and shields."

Bousie swallowed. Faquar shook his head. Behind them, Sylvia kept the stunner pointed at the second pilot.

"Now that we have it understood," Nathaniel said, "I'd like to start on getting us to New Avalon." He slipped on the online input set. The ship scanned clean.

The jump calculations took another ten units and five for Muerotte to confirm with a brusque nod.

"Would you announce to the passengers that they should strap in for low grav and jump?"

"Bousie," ordered the captain. "From the engineer's station." The second bent toward the small console behind the captain's position.

"We will be approaching the first jump point in less than five units. We will be going to low-gravity just before jump. Passengers should be firmly strapped in at this time. Passengers should be firmly strapped in at this time."
"Good," murmured Muerotte.

"Cutting gravs . . . brace yourself. Five to jump." As his guts floated into his throat as the gravity dropped to near nothing, Nathaniel kept talking. "We can do this in two jumps. . . instead of three. . . and we'll arrive two stans plus ahead of schedule. That should also offset any welcoming arrangements."

Muerotte nodded, slowly. So did Sylvia, braced against the closed hatch that led to the passenger section, her stunner still on Bousie.

"Lets do it." The Ecolitan swallowed. "Countdown to jump . . . four, three, two, one . . . jump."

As he touched the jump stud and sent the impulse through the input set, the entire ship turned inside out, and white was black, and black white . . . for that eternal moment that seemed endless and yet was over before it began. A slight shiver, and the Gallia was back in norm space. The screens showed a solar system, with the normal EDI indications of a technological and populated area. "Czechos?"

"It checks." Nathaniel avoided wincing at the inadvertent pun, and began inputting the figures for the second jump while the power built up.

"EDI buildup at two eight zero," noted Muerotte. "Class two patroller, insystem only. Probably a lot of power with a fusactor system." That meant no jumpshifting systems and a lot of torps. He checked the range and closure. "We'll be clear."

"The Union . . . alliance . . ." the low words came from either Bousie or Faquar.

"Alliances are only for brief periods of convenience," said Sylvia dryly from where she was tucked against the closed hatch.

Nathaniel wiped his sweating forehead with the overlarge kerchief, since the dampness beaded all over his face in null-gee, then rechecked the systems and power buildup. "Better announce another jump, so that some passenger doesn't start wandering around."

"Bousie, go ahead," ordered Muerotte. "Less than five units."

"We will be approaching the second jump point in less than five units. We will remain in low-gravity until after all jumps are complete. Passengers should remain firmly strapped in at this rime. Passengers should remain firmly strapped in at this time. Do not unstrap until ship gravity returns to normal. Do not unstrap until ship gravity returns to normal."

"Good," said Muerotte. "Log that, too. Heavens forbid, if there's a claim, the warning will help."

Nathaniel nodded, then rescanned the systems as he waited for the sequence to run.

"Countdown to jump . . . four, three, two, one . . . jump!" Reentry was normal, and Nathaniel eased the drives to full, ensuring they were stabilized, before restoring ship grav.

"Smooth," observed Muerotte, "but were plus five on the ecliptic."

"Right. We'll angle down. The dust buildup will be greater at the end, but we'll get there faster, and not by the normal route." The Ecolitan pointed to a signal on the EDI screen. "I wonder who that might be. The drive tuning would say either Hegemony or Fuard-maybe Orknarlian-but it's not Imperial or Avalonian." Muerotte swallowed.

"Almost cruiser size, just outside the formal system bounds," continued Nathaniel. "I'd say just about where we would have been. Justifies my faith in human nature."

"As if you had any left," quipped Sylvia from the rear of the cockpit.

Nathaniel eased from the seat. "Your ship. Captain. We would like to remain here until you lock in-in case we can provide any additional assistance." The Ecolitan smiled as Bousie slipped past him and into her couch. "Although we all hope it's totally unnecessary."

"Shipping headquarters won't be happy."

"They'd have been a lot less happy with no ship at all," pointed out Sylvia.

"Remind them of that."

XXIX

The Legation of the Coordinate of Accord in Camelot was not on Embassy Boulevard, but a block south, across a narrow street from an unnamed grassy square. The building itself was of gray stone, three stories high, with a

green tile roof, and golden wood shutters that actually were hung on antique wrought-iron brackets and could be closed against the driving rains that still occasionally drenched the temperate capital city of New Avalon.

The parquet-floored foyer held only a single console centered on a green patterned carpet. At the console was a thin-faced young woman. Her eyes widened fractionally at the sight of the pair in Ecolitan greens, but she only asked, "May I help you, Ecolitans?"

"Yes. I'm Ecolitan Professor Whaler, and this is Professor Ferro-Maine. We've been conducting a study on Artos, and I'd like to set up some appointments with the commerce section chief and his staff. I'd also like to see Ecolitan Swersa as soon as possible."

"Let me contact Ecolitan Swersa, first." The receptionist/ screener touched the console, waiting momentarily. "Ecolitan Swersa, there's an Ecolitan Whaler. . . yes, sir, I'll send them right

up." The hint of a smile crossed Sylvia's face.

"You're expected, sirs. Take the stairs there"-she gestured over her left shoulder-"to the next level. Ecolitan Swersa's office is at the back. I'll check with the economic section while you're with the Ecolitan."

"Thank you."

The two Ecolitans lugged their field packs and the remaining datacase up the stairs.

A trim but muscular white-haired woman in greens met them in the second-floor corridor, "I'm LuAn Swersa. It's good to meet both of you." A broad smile creased her face. "I understand the Avalonian bureau-rats actually let bona fide economists onto Artos. I'll wager that Clerigg and his crew will want to spend hours grilling you. Come on in." She stepped inside the corner office, holding the antique wooden six-paneled door.

The office overlooked a small garden courtyard, but both large corner windows faced blank brick walls. "Its got light, but not much of a view. Typical of our operation here."

Swersa closed the door, then stepped toward the console, where her hand flicked three switches. "All right. We're blocked, but I won't guarantee that even with the random screens that it will hold for longer than a quarter stan. This place is almost as bad as I hear New Augusta is. So let me tell you what I know. Sit down." She gestured toward the armchairs opposite the console. "That bad?" Nathaniel set down his pack and sat. "I could be exaggerating. It seems that way." Swersa coughed once. "First, the Fuardas have begun to pour men and materials into their Three System Bulge bases and developing staging areas. The Hegemony and the Union are beefing up their adjoining systems. Second, the Imperial Senate is almost certain to require the Eleventh Fleet to move to Sector Five adjacent to the Rift, and there's talk of reassigning the Ninth and Third Fleets--"

"I thought the trade talks . . ." said Sylvia. "There have been massive algae and anchovy kills on five water planets, including on Anarra. Squamish and Kaneihe inside Imperial Sector Four. The synde bean plague has spread to another dozen Imperial planets. That makes twenty affected now, all of them planoformed."

"No natural hydrocarbons," ventured Nathaniel. "Exactly, and Heraculon has

already lost more than five million people to starvation. That's in the latest briefing files."

"Five million?" whispered Sylvia, paling. "There are resistant strains, aren't there?"

"Of course, but most produce less, and it will be two years before they're mature. The lag time, you know. And everyone believes it's our doing," Swersa said. "As if we were that stupid. Or cruel."

"We didn't. I talked to the Prime about it. He wished, and I do now, that I'd made that clear when I was on Old Earth." Nathaniel shrugged. "But I didn't know." His shoulders slumped slightly. "And I wanted to use every tool possible." Sylvia gave a low whistle.

"So the Empire is convinced that the trade talks were a cover while we undermined them ecologically?" asked Nathaniel.

"It's more political than that," suggested Sylvia. "D.I. and the I.I.S. have to know better, but the Senate reacts to public perception, and the eagles have always wanted an excuse to go after Accord."

"That's the way I'd read it," affirmed Swersa. "Is Artos as bad as I'd guess?"

"Worse," suggested Nathaniel. "It's fragile ecologically and worse economically . . ." He quickly sketched out their findings, the varied assassination attempts, and their trip to Camelot. Sylvia added what he forgot.

"Whew," murmured Swersa. "Worse than we'd guessed. Your thoughts about the politics here are pretty much right on. The sys

tern's teetering on bankruptcy or economic collapse, and they've got their heads tucked inside wormholes to avoid seeing that they're going to lose half the Commonwealth systems if they don't finish what they started-but they don't have the capital or the drive."

"Who's the Legate here?" His briefing documents had noted that the position was being filled. "Has one been appointed?"

"The honorable Morion Spangall. He was the temporary Legate, and the House of Delegates confirmed him about the time you went to Artos."
"That bad?"

"He's a political type. Brand-new and placed by Verlingetti, or so I've been led to believe. After we're done here, I'll take you up and introduce you."

"Who is Verlingetti?" asked Sylvia. "Remember . . ."

"Sorry," said Swersa. "He's the deputy minority leader in the House of Delegates-the one who handles all of Elder Quaestors' dirty work. And the Orthodoxists have been known for less than spotless political tactics and techniques."

"How does the minority get to place people?"

"It's a complex rotating system. Actually, all appointments are worked out by both parties on a consensus basis. New Avalons not considered important, compared to other places, so . . ."

"That's where the minority's choices go?" suggested Sylvia. "Here, Orknarli, maybe Olympia." A series of red lights played across the console. "Here they go. I'd guess another ten units," said Swersa. "What else?"

"We have another problem. We need to finish and release our report, and we'll need some quantitative backup, and lots of impressive-looking graphs and tables. I can set them up, but we've only got a few days. Do you think Clerigg and his team can handle it—both technically and from a security point of view?"

"Is this study that hot?"

"Not on the surface," said Nathaniel. "But its critical that it be finished before we leave Camelot, and we'll have to leave in the next week, maybe sooner." A faint frown crinkled Sylvia's forehead, but vanished. "If you're that pressed," added Swersa, "you probably ought to be staying here. We've got some guest suites on the fourth level... not huge, but more secure."

"More secure sounds wonderful." He frowned "How secure is the Legation?"

"Physical security—as good as anywhere in Camelot except a Defence installation. Snooping? I wouldn't yell, but the guest suites don't have any powered equipment, and they're centered. Stay away from the windows, and it's pretty good."

"Do you have two with adjoining bedrooms?" asked Sylvia. "The main suite is free. That's got a center sitting room with bedrooms on each side. Separate freshers." Swersa glanced from Nathaniel to Sylvia.

"That's fine," said Sylvia. "Especially the separate freshers." More red lights flicked across the console. Swersa rose and tapped a series of studs. "Let me call Farlen, and tell him to get the Legate ready for you." Nathaniel looked toward the two field packs by the door.

"You can leave your luggage here for the moment. Farlen. . . the Ecolitans are ready. We'll be right up." Swersa broke the screen link as fast as she had established it.

The Legate's office was on the top level, and looked out through wide sliding glass doorways on a roof garden. The entire decor was Ecolog Secession, proving a sense of sparseness that seemed to clash with the slightly pudgy man in a dark blue tunic and trousers who waddled forward to meet them.

"Welcome, Ecolitan Whaler, Ecolitan Ferro-Maine. You have no idea how marvelous it is to see faces from home. No idea how marvelous." Morton Spangall offered a broad and charming smile under short, wispy blond hair. His blue eyes remained distant. "It's a pleasure to be here," Sylvia offered. Nathaniel just bowed.

"It is too bad you could not have come earlier in the fall. Simply marvelous, and the Landing Fest is something you must experience to believe." Spangall extended his hand toward the roof garden, pointing toward the shimmering building on the hill. "If you have the chance, you should visit the Commons Hall. Such tradition there." He offered another smile. "Farlen tells me that you have come from Artos. You have been doing a study there. Economics of some soft?"

"Infrastructure economics. A contract from the Avalonian Ministry of Commerce."

"Good. It's about time they brought in some experts. Clerigg has been urging that for years, I understand. You haven't met Clerigg yet, have you?"

"No," offered Sylvia.

"Good man." Spangall gestured toward the table, set with two tea services.
"Some tea-or liftea?"
"That would be good," said Nathaniel. Swersa nodded, as did Sylvia.

"Oh, help yourself, and take a seat. Were not much on ceremony here. Certainly not the way the Avalonians are. I've never seen a people with so many ceremonies."

Nathaniel waited for Sylvia and Swersa to pour their tea, then offered to pour for the Legate.

"No. I'll get mine. I mix them, you know. The Avalonians think it's a terrible thing. It almost would make me want to do it, even if I didn't like it that way." Spangall laughed, a deep booming sound. "How did you find Artos?"

"It's a recently planofomed planet," Nathaniel said. "Backward in some ways, but you expect that."

"And you, charming professor, what did you think?" Sylvia finished a sip of her liftea before answering. "I enjoyed seeing the open land and meeting the people. Some of them were very nice."

"And the others?" asked the Legate with yet another laugh. "The others were like people everywhere."

"Like people everywhere . . . ha, ha, ha! You should be the diplomat. Yes, you should." Spangall lifted his cup. "To the successful conclusion of your study!"

"Thank you."

"You aren't the Whaler who worked out that trade agreement with the Empire, are you?" asked the Legate, as though the thought had belatedly crossed his mind.

"Yes. They needed an economist there. The issues were somewhat . . . intricate."

"You do get around. Then, I guess that's the business of Ecolitans . . . getting around, that is." By the time the tea was over, Nathaniel felt wrung out. "The Legate can be overpowering," said Swersa as they headed back down the stairs. "His personality is formidable."

Nathaniel suspected that Spangalls political cunning was also formidable, but that the intellect was somewhat less impressive, although assuming that might be decidedly dangerous.

"I take it he concentrates on impressions," said Sylvia, "so that others forget his intelligence."

"His personality obscures a keen mind," confirmed Swersa. Nathaniel decided to bury his observations, as well as to change the structure of the study somewhat.

"Here we are-third floor, possession of the substantive folk." The white-haired Ecolitan turned toward the front of the Legation, leading them into a long narrow room with high windows. A balding, stocky man with a brush mustache stood up. "Clerigg, Professors Whaler and Ferro-Maine."

"Delighted to meet you both." Clerigg smiled broadly as he stepped forward and

bowed, then inclined his head to Nathaniel. "It's not my area, but I did enjoy your piece on the external diseconomies of deep space mining, I'm not sure outsiders would have understood it all."

Nathaniel hoped not. "Thank you. Professor Ferro-Maine is a specialist in applied infrastructures and policies. She has special expertise in large bureaucracies."

"Its good to see you both." Johannes Clerigg motioned to the two most comfortable-looking armchairs. "I can't believe they actually let a trained economist onto Artos, let alone two. I mean ones who aren't owned by the Commonwealth."

Nathaniel refrained from noting that the two economists in question weren't ever supposed to leave Artos, merely saying, "We were fortunate."

"Very fortunate," added Sylvia with enough irony that Clerigg paused momentarily, before he slumped into a Straight-backed chair across from them. Swersa tucked herself into a corner chair, effectively guarding the door.

"Is there any possibility that you might be able to share your findings with us?" asked Clerigg.

"I'll make you an even better offer," said Nathaniel dryly. "You and your team help us write it, and you can be the ones to release it."

"You aren't . . . you mean that?"

"Absolutely. You get the best of both worlds. Our names are on it, with the Institute seal, and you get to tell the Galaxy about it."

"You sound as though this isn't the greatest offer," said Clerigg.

"It isn't," admitted Nathaniel. "I'll need almost every member of your staff full time for the next three to four days. In return, you can copy all the data and use the study-immediately."

Clerigg laughed once. "Since you could commandeer us all, or Swersa could on your behalf, you're being more than fair. When do we start?"

"Tomorrow," said Sylvia. "Today's been long enough, and we need to sort out some things."

Nathaniel turned cold inside. Had he been too domineering? Probably. Had it been necessary? Probably not. Was he going to stop digging holes for himself? He hoped so. He took a slow deep breath, then looked at Sylvia. She inclined her head. They both stood. So did Swersa.

"Thank you," offered Nathaniel. "Until comorrow," returned Clerigg.

Once outside the economic chiefs office, Swersa gestured toward the stairs. "We need to get your packs from my office, and then I'll get you settled in the suite, and you can do what you need to do."

The packs were where they had been left, behind the apparently sealed office doors, and looked and felt untouched to Nathaniel, not that there happened to be anything particularly unique in the packs, just the information in the

datacase. "Now, back up two levels," said the Legation Ecolitan. At the door to the main suite, Swersa extended two small datablocs. "These were just recorded. The Legation mess is on the lowest level. Its open until nineteen thirty, and opens in the morning at zero six forty-five. If you want to go out, there are a number of decent restaurants in the blocks behind the Legation. I'll have you coded into the entry system in the next few units." Swersa paused. "If there's anything else I can do, let me know."

"There will be, I'm certain," Nathaniel confirmed, trying his databloc. The door opened, and he stood aside. With a quick smile, Swersa was gone. Once the packs were inside, he closed the door and studied the sitting room—two desk consoles, two sofas with matching upholstered armchairs, all arranged around a low wooden table with a large spray of fresh flowers.

"Luxury accommodations." Sylvia looked at Nathaniel. "Status for a former envoy?"

"More like luck and a friendly Ecolitan," he answered. "I doubt my status entitles us to this." Nathaniel hugged Sylvia. "I'm not in the mood . . ."

"I know," he whispered. "Hug me back and listen. Your turn is coming. That's why we have to finish the study here and now. Can you get it through the Imperial embassy and to the I.I.S. and the Defense Miniscry?"

Sylvia relaxed slightly and bent toward his ear, nibbling it slightly, but scarcely sensually, before answering. "Until I try, I won't know, but I think so. Do you think the Legate will let the report go?"

"He can't overrule an Ecolitan, but he also has to know what's in it. If he's the typical political appointee, he'll only want to see the executive summary, and that's just about all he's going to get, certainly not any of the appendices, not until it's spread across the entire diplomatic community here, and to the New Avalonian Ministry of Commerce, which has to get the first copy. You and I are going to do one of the appendices. It will have a title something like, 'The External Diseconomies of Artosan SpacioGraphics.' "

"Meaning that it will spell out everything?" He nodded. "That wont stop this . . . war."

"No. But it will slow down the Empire, I hope, while we find a way to stop the war."

"Us? Just us?"

"Us."

"That scares me," she whispered.

"If its any consolation . . . it scares the frig out of me. And I do love you, you know." He gave her a last hug. "Now . . . let's get freshened up and then get something to eat. Is that all right?"

"I am hungry." She lifted her field pack. "Let me put this in the bedroom. Which one do you want?"

"Why?"

"I want the same one."

"But . . . ?"

"That was to keep you in line." She kept her face straight for a moment,

before smiling wickedly.

"I think you're doing just fine." He lifted his own pack. "You pick."

XXX

What about these tables?" asked the young man with the goatee, easing up beside Nathaniels console, where the Ecolitan continued to struggle with the wording of the executive summary. "Do you want frequency distribution or a geometric mean?"

"Both," decided Nathaniel. "Label them Thirty A' and Thirty B.' "
"Stet, sir."

No sooner had the goateed staffer departed than Clerigg reappeared.

"Fascinating figures here. Quite a story." The Ecolitan nodded, waiting.

"I don't quite understand what you meant in this direction," confessed the Legation economist, showing Whaler the table he held, and the note hastily scrawled earlier by the Ecolitan. "Wasn't as clear as I could have been, probably," said

Nathaniel. "Take the energy production figures, both liquid fuels and fusactor output, converted to quads, and show total production and per annum rate of growth. Then I'll need a separate chart that breaks out per capita liquid fuel production, with two subcharts, one showing per capita production, and one that takes per capita production of say, five years ago, and increases it by the percentage of economic growth for the whole Artosan economy. On the same chart, the second one, show the surplus. Now . . . these second charts go in a separate appendix we're working on. You put the gross power charts in the infrastructure appendix."

"You're saying that there's a considerable increase in liquid fuels sources, far more than accounted for by population demand?"

"Something like that, but we'll let the figures speak for themselves."

Clerigg nodded. "Fascinating." Nathaniel hoped so.

"You're generating some strange-looking figures, Ecolitan Whaler," offered the third staffer, easing three hard-copy color graphs onto the flat area beside the console. "Are these what you wanted?"

"Leave them. I'll let you know in a moment." He looked over at the second console, where Sylvia was inputting text for the appendix. "Hows it going?"
"Slow."

"Me, too. The summary's got to have just the right flavor." She shook her head.

They both looked up as the door to the long office opened. "This just arrived," announced the fresh-faced receptionist, "by courier from the Frankan Legation."

"Frankan?" Nathaniel pondered.

The parchment envelope with the Frankan Union seal in the upper left corner

THE MOST HONORABLE NATHANIEL F. WHALER THE HONORABLE SYLVIA V. FERRO-MAINE

The sandy-haired Ecolitan walked over to where Sylvia struggled, watched as she pushed a strand of dark hair behind her ear. "Here. You open it." He watched as she studied the names. "What does the V stand for?"

"Vittoria."

"You never cold me."

"I don't recall that you asked." Then she smiled, reached out, and squeezed his fingers before she opened the envelope, only to find a second inside. Within the second envelope was a card, also neatly scripted.

THE HONOR OF YOUR PRESENCE IS REQUESTED AT THE SALISBURY CLUB, THE EIGHTH OF NOVEMBER, AT 12:30 P.M., FOR A LUNCHEON.

The signature beneath was that of Gerard De Vyierion. "Who's De Vyierion?"

"He was the Frankan Legate to New Augusta."

"Then we should go." Sylvia looked at the screen and the lines

of text. "That's tomorrow, and I'll need a break from this."

"We'll be mostly done by then."

"You will. I won't."

"We will."

"Promise?" she asked. "I promise."

"Good. How anyone . . . could like being an economist." Nathaniel chose not to point out that his being an economist

had brought them together. Instead, he murmured, "It's a living."

"So long as it keeps being alive," she answered dryly. They both laughed, ignoring the puzzled looks around them.

XXXI

Ecolitans?" ventured the thin-faced woman at the Legations

front console. "Yes?" Nathaniel and Sylvia paused.

"Legate Spangall suggests that if you are going out, today would be a good day to see Gerry Adams Park. It's quite a spectacle, you know, with all the speakers and posters. "Thank you," said Sylvia.

The two hurried down the steps of the Legation toward the waiting groundcar and driver.

"It'll have to be after lunch," Nathaniel said. "We're cutting it close. I know. It was my fault, but I wanted to get those last graphs right. As if anyone will read them." He snorted. "The economics make it obvious, but if you say it in plain language, it's suspect because it's too simple, and if you use the proper terminology everyone's eyes glaze over."

"There's another problem," ventured Sylvia. "More wars have been caused by economics than by any other factor, and almost no one recognizes that even

after five millennia of constant proof." She opened the-groundcar door and slid across the seat. "The Salisbury Club," Nathaniel added as he closed the door. "Yes, sir."

"While were being philosophical," Nathaniel continued, "I'll add another thought. Everyone thinks that conflicts are caused by politics or personalities, but they're not. They're caused by massive forces. That's why personal diplomacy is generally only good for buying time while the forces are rearranged."

"As you did in New Augusta?"

"I'm getting this feeling that the forces weren't rearranged . . . the big problem is that individual diplomacy and economic Studies usually aren't sufficient to offset public opinion and basic economic forces." He laughed harshly. "Dramas and trideos and books and their sappy happy messages to the contrary."

Sylvia smiled wryly. "Whereas economic disruptions and war are sufficient?"

"Or their equivalent. And then everyone protests, saying, 'You didn't have to do chat.' "

"You've been writing too many economic studies."

"Absolutely."

They reached the Salisbury Club at twenty-five minutes past noon.

"Might I be of service, sir and madarne?" asked the figure in the antique black formal jacket and black bow tie, looking coolly at the green uniforms.

"Sylvia Ferro-Maine and Nathaniel Whaler. We were to meet Gerard De Vyierion . . ." said Nathaniel.

"He has arrived. If you would follow me." The maitre d'hotel bowed and turned, leading them through the half-open dark oak doors and past a false leaded glass window showing the first landing at Camelot, framed by deep maroon velvet hangings.

"He knows where to dine," murmured Sylvia. "He knows a great deal more than that." A tall, almost ascetic, figure rose from the table in the paneled, velvet-framed corner of the room. "Gerard de Vyierion, Lady Ferro-Maine . . . a pleasure to see you again. Lord Whaler."

At the terms "lady" and "lord," Nathaniel caught the faintest stiffening in the posture of the black-coated maitre d'hotel, and the Ecolitan held in a smile, even while returning Gerard's bow. "You're very kind," answered Sylvia. "I'm an economist, not an envoy," protested Nathaniel. "A most distinguished one. Did not the Emperor himself provide that collar pin?" An amused smile played across Gerard's face momentarily. "Ah... well... yes."

Sylvia turned to Nathaniel. "I don't believe you mentioned that."

He flushed. "I had more important matters on my mind at the time. I was trying to get clearances . . . for a colleague." She flushed.

De Vyierion nodded past the Ecolitans, and the maitre d'hotel slipped away quietly.

"Please . . . please . . . be seated." De Vyierion eased out the chair to his right for Sylvia.

As the two sat, a server in white carrying a silver pitcher filled their crystal water goblets, then retreated.

De Vyierion reseated himself. "I have been enjoying a glass of Lexin-very similar to Imperial Sperlin-but slightly drier. Would you like some? Or could I order something else?"

"The Lexin is fine." Sylvia smiled. Nathaniel nodded.

"And you will pardon my emphasis on titles, but it is so amusing to see the Avalonian reaction. Accomplishments, and you both boast considerable accomplishments, mean little in Camelot. Only the titles matter, and that, my friends, is why New Avalons days are numbered. I should not be so philosophical, but I am so glad you two could spare a moment for a luncheon with a brokendown old diplomat."

"I would have to dispute that description," said Nathaniel with a smile. "Please . . . I know what I am."

Another server arrived with a pair of wineglasses, and De Vyierion leaned forward and filled both. "To your continued health," offered the diplomat. Both Ecolitans raised their glasses. "And to yours."

Continued health was definitely a good toast, reflected Nathaniel, as he glanced around the half-filled dining area.

The leather-bound menus arrived, silently, and the blackcoated waiter vanished momentarily. "What might be good?" asked Sylvia. "It is all good." De Vyierion smiled. "Perhaps not so good as I could offer you in Wryere, and I hope that in the future you will be able to visit me there. Caroline would enjoy meeting you both. This was to be a short trip; so she was unable to accompany me." After a sip of the Lexin, the diplomat added, looking at Sylvia, "You might have been her sister, years ago."

"She must be beautiful," offered Nathaniel. Sylvia flushed again.

"He does you and her justice," suggested the diplomat with a gentle smile. "I do admit I am prejudiced after all these years." He looked at the menu as the waiter bowed. "Have you decided?"

"I think I'll try the scampig," said Nathaniel. "How are the spicetails?" Sylvia glanced at the waiter, offering a dazzling smile.

"They are good, madame. So is the deep crab."

"I'll cry the deep crab."

"Just the Shienmez salad for me," added De Vyierion. The waiter nodded and collected the menus.

"Once I had heard you were in fact in Camelot, I hastened to send an invitation, although one must not appear too hasty, especially in these times. That is why it was so formal."

"Formal or not," answered Sylvia, lifting the crystal glass, "it was appreciated."

"You were most helpful on New Augusta." Nathaniel smiled and turned to Sylvia.

"Gerard is the one who told me that hard proof arrives only just before the warheads, or words to that effect."

"You have a good memory, an outstanding memory. I only quoted an ancient writer. Very cynical, but accurate. How do you find the Lexin?"

"This is excellent, if not quite in the class of Remoc." Sylvia inclined her head as the silent waiter set a green salad before her, then before Nathaniel, and finally De Vyierion. "It is not, but it is close," affirmed De Vyierion. Nathaniel knew that was something he didn't know. He could taste bad wine, but the subtleties between very good and great wines were far beyond him. "I wish I had your taste, both of you."

"You have other expertise." Sylvia's eyes were warm as she glanced at him. "Indeed he does, as do you, lady."

"So do you," suggested Nathaniel. "Such as being in the right place at the right time. I somehow doubt that your presence here is a happy coincidence. You were headed back to Wryere, as I recall?"

"I was." De Vyierion set his fork on the side of the pale green porcelain plate. "So why are you in Camelot?"

"There was a temporary vacancy here for a Legate, and I was asked to fill the position for a few months. I had thought to retire . . . -and that made me above politics, as if anyone ever is." The Frankan laughed self-deprecatingly. "For reasons of my own, I accepted."
"Reasons of your own?" pressed Sylvia.

"I could say that I have taken an interest in your careers, and that would certainly be accurate. Accurate, but not wholly truthfill."

"My career? An infrastructure economist?"

"A low-level Imperial political staffer?"

"An infrastructure economist with a tendency toward, shall we say, accomplishment? Accompanied by a lovely and talented lady whose looks belie considerable experience in understanding convoluted machinations and who possibly retains contacts with the only organization within the Empire capable of understanding the situation in which she and her companion find themselves?" De Vyierion smiled. "Surely, you are aware that practically the entire Galaxy knows about your study."

"We had that feeling." The Ecolitan took a last bite of the salad, then sipped the Lexin.

"A pity that the New Avalonian ArchTory government fell. You know, I assume, that the commission of your study was about its last official act?"

"No, I didn't know that." Nathaniel could sense Sylvia stiffen and swallow hard.

"The ArchTories succeeded in being voted out because they suggested, and attempted to carry out, a program which reduced social benefits in order to fund greater infrastructure development on the outplanets. They argued that greater development would eventually reduce the drain on New Avalon. " De Vyierion paused and sipped his Lexin. "Any economist or even broken-down functionary could understand that. The voters did not."

The salad plates vanished into the hands of the silent server, and were replaced with the entrees. The aroma of apple-roasted scampig drifted up to Nathaniel's nostrils, and he could feel his mouth water—a definite improvement over ship fare and the mess at the Legation. "And?" prompted Nathaniel.

"Your study was commissioned, and funded, as a means to embarrass the new government."

"Will the people care?" asked Sylvia,

"No," said Nathaniel, "not until the next elections. Then someone will drag out the study to show the new government's failings."

"If there remains a government," added De Vyierion, "or a problem with Artos."

Still listening to De Vyierion, Sylvia took a small bite of the crab. "This is very good."

"I am glad." De Vy-lerion glanced at his salad "I doubt that Minister Smeaton-Adams will be quite so enthused about your findings, although Harding-Eames will be. He's the shadow minister, now."

"How did this change of government affect overall New Avalonian policies?" asked Nathaniel.

"Let us offer an analogy. New Avalon resembles a stately spaceliner whose drives have failed and which circles a black hole in a decaying orbit. I have some doubts that changing the captain alone will effect any significant difference in the eventual outcome."

Sylvia took the smallest of sips of Lexin, then reached for the pepper.

"You have doubtless observed the decline of New Avalon." De Vyierion gestured around the oak-paneled and velvet-hung room. "Although that decline is far from obvious in present surroundings. Camelot has much to offer, even in its present slow decline. Some might suggest you wander through the Gerry Adams Park today. That offers a view of Camelot unlike any other. Myself, I would think you would find the park inhospitable today. It might be chilly . . . unwelcoming. Perhaps on a warmer day," De Vyierion suggested.

"Aaachew. " While Sylvia's sneeze was muted, both men paused for an instant.

"Sorry." Sylvia rubbed her nose. "I overdid it on the pepper."

"That is easy to do. I have done so often." De Vyierion nodded politely. "As for the park, no one quite knows where the name came from, but I would surmise that she was an early politician, somewhere. Its quite amusing really, and sometimes informative. Perhaps the only place on New Avalon where one can speak in public and be totally ignored."

"Or in New Augusta," suggested Nathaniel. De Vyierion laughed politely. "Only visibly ignored," added Sylvia.

"True," admitted Nathaniel. He set down his fork, not believing how quickly he'd demolished the scampig. "How do you see the situation on Artos?"

De Vyierion lifted his wineglass, sipped, then offered an almost imperceptible shrug. "There will be a struggle for control of Artos. That has been obvious

to those near the Three System Bulge for some time. Yet, except for the Empire, and for New Avalon itself, those likely to be affected are locked in a delicate balance of force. We of the Union have an alliance of mutual survival with the Hegemony against the larger forces of the Conglomerate and the Empire . . . although we share little else." He raised his eyebrows. "Very little else."

"You think that New Avalon has any awareness of the situation?"

"Awareness . . . most certainly. The will and ability to commit resources? Most certainly not. So we shall see." De Vyierion paused. "Oh, by the way, I understand that you prevented some considerable unpleasantness on the Omnia Gallia." De Vyierion laughed gently. "Captain Muerorce did not see it that way initially. But he does now."

"Thank you."

"No, most honored Ecolitan envoy, the Frankan Union owes you. At this time, to have a ship disappear on jumps through Hegemony territory . . ." He shrugged. "That would be destabilizing, to say the least."

"It would seem that everything points toward destabilization," began Sylvia, lowering her wineglass. "Yes, Lady Ferro-Maine, and the name suits you, much points toward such destabilization. Much indeed." Sylvia waited expectantly.

"And of that, there is the Empire. Alas, I fear that the Imperial eagles would employ any excuse to begin a conflict on the Rift. That could, unhappily, divert Imperial forces from our sector here." De Vyierion shrugged. "I mentioned that to my Imperial counterpart. Legate Wu-Reginald, but he was less concerned than I. Could you speak to the feelings of the Accord Legate?"

Sylvia nodded at Nathaniel, who stalled by sipping the wine. Good . . . but was it excellent? How would he know? Or ever know?

"Legate Spamgall has expressed some concerns about the economics of the situation." That much was true, and it was about all Spamgall had said in three days. "He has avoided commenting beyond that."

"That would seem politically wise . . . for anyone but a representative of Accord."

"Legate Spamgall is a politician appointed by politicians," Nathaniel pointed out.

"As are all too many Legates." De Vyierion laughed ironically. "Would you care for dessert?"

Nathaniel considered the tightness of his trousers. "Ah, I'd care, but I would regret it long after the pleasure passed."

"That could be said of many pleasures. Lord Whaler."

"He takes his duties very seriously." Sylvia's somber words were lightened by the twinkle in her eyes.

"In that. Accord is fortunate, as are we all." De Vyierion eased back his chair ever so slightly. "I do regret that Caroline was not here to meet you both, but I would hope that, once you have completed your study and the associated duties, you would be able to visit us."

"That would be a pleasure," said Sylvia. "Thank you, for everything," added Whaler. The Frankan Legate rose. "It has indeed been a pleasure in seeing you, and I wish you every success in your study, and in con

veying the results to all interested parties. I would hope to see a copy, as we might be able to aid in its distribution."

"Thank you. You're most thoughtful," said Sylvia. Nathaniel inclined his head as he stood. "You've always been helpful, and you have been again."

"We do live in the same Galaxy, Lord Whaler, and it grows smaller with each year. Some fail to recognize that, or that the laws of economics are not to be mocked . . . but we must try. My best to you both." De Vyierion inclined his head again as the Ecolitans left.

XXXII

The Fuardian colonel saluted, crisply, before the wide gray antique desk that held no obvious data console. "Your summary here was incomplete, colonel." The submarshal lifted a gray-covered folder. "The first report."

"Sir?"

"You failed to mention that the Accord agents escaped from Artos, despite your group's efforts. You knew this when you filed the report. You also failed to mention that they apparently contacted the Frankan agent on Artos." The submarshal's smile was cold.

The colonel stood stolidly, ignoring the sweat heading on his forehead.

"What have you done to remedy this, colonel? Anything?" The sub-marshals tone was indolent, relaxed. "A second team has already landed in Camelot."

"Did you know that the Hegemony's Blues failed?" The sub

marshal's square fingers tapped the hard gray surface of the desk. "And that the large growers of Artos are mobilizing against them?"

"I have just received that confirmation."

"Just?"

"Yes, sir. Team Twos deep agent was neutralized as well. The Frankan ship deviated significantly from its normal jump and entry patterns. I believe I mentioned that in the second report, sir."

"So you did. And why did the Frankan ship deviate?"

"We have not received the reports. I would assume that the Accord agents took control of the craft."

"Assume? Then why did they go to New Avalon? If they knew enough to understand the need to seize the ship, why would they go to New Avalon? Perhaps you can answer that question?"

"That is the closest Accord Legation."

"But no military support. For that you should be grateful. Perhaps you will do better on the next effort. There will be no third effort. Not for you, colonel. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good."

XXXIII

Light rain, more like mist, drifted around the two Ecolitans as they walked back through the gray, chill afternoon toward the Accord Legation.

"If you believe De Vyierion, it's even worse than we thought," ventured Sylvia. "I believe him."

"So do I."

"Is that Gerry Adams Park? The one the Legate mentioned?" Nathaniel gestured toward the walls ahead, intermittently fringed with brown bark mulched flower beds, evergreens, and barelimbed deciduous trees that had shed leaves perhaps half a season earlier.

"De Vyierion also said something about it, but I was arguing with the pepper."

"I wish . . . oh, well . . . he did say that it was the only place where we'd hear even partway free speech."

"We can walk through it, and then turn right at the next corner. That would get us back," pointed out Sylvia. "Without taking any more time. Or much more."

Gerry Adams Park was odd, to say the least, with stone walls two meters tall on all sides, except for the wide arches at each end.

"It's hard when you change systems. It was midsummer on Artos and now its almost winter here." Whaler eased to one side as two youths in short-sleeved shirts ran pell-mell past them. "You wouldn't know it from them."

A handful of people were gathered around a woman standing on a black box that raised her several heads above her audience.

"Do you think they care? Women, for all those rights in the Charter, are nothing more than baby factories to the Archlories. Factories to produce laser fodder on worthless colony planets. . ." The Ecolitans exchanged glances.

"I think I've heard this one before," said Sylvia. "Lets try the next one."

"What did you really think of De Vyierion?" he asked as they drifted toward a second speaker, a white-bearded barrel of a man.

"De Vyierion is supporrive, and thankful, and it seems real." Sylvia glanced at the speaker standing on a red box framed by dark green conifer needles that were turning yellow at the tips.

". . . if you eat, you are their puppets. If you watch trideo, you are their puppets. You have always been their puppets. They doctor your food with chemicals. They pour what they want you to think into your brains through the trideo, and you think what they want. And you think your thoughts are yours . . . do you know how many images you cannot see? The commands that are implanted in your trideo through their schemes . . ."

"I've heard this one," Nathaniel said.

"There's a group like this in every society, pointing out how people are led to think." Sylvia shook her head. "The truths closer to the opposite. The media and the politicians pander to the prejudices of the people, but the

people, of course, always protest the opposite is true."

The two in greens walked slowly along the stone walkways flanked by turned dirt that probably held flowers in the summer.

The third speaker's box was empty, but a young man in brilliant purple stood beside it, handing out leaflets.

"Join the Purple Peace Party! The Purple Peace Party for eternal love and peace."

Both Ecolitans smiled sadly and shook their heads. "Well . . . back to finish our masterpiece."

"Will it do any good?" Sylvia gestured back toward the barrelshaped speaker. "When I hear trash like that, I wonder."

"De Vyierion seemed to think it would. From what he said, I get the feeling that the Arch Tories want the study to embarrass the Conservatives, maybe even as something to topple another government."

"He made that pretty clear."

"Would that be enough to have someone in the New Avalon structure go after us?"

Sylvia shrugged as they turned and moved toward the middle of the park.

"Another thing," said Nathaniel in a lower voice. "Have you noticed that the modus operandi is either an accident or Imperial military needles-no matter where we are?"

"That means it's not the Empire, but it could be almost anyone else."

"Or several anyone elses," pointed out the sandy-haired Ecolitan.

"That could be . . . everyone copying the first incident on Accord." .

"They're all copying the first player, which effectively conceals exactly who's involved?"

"You've got it." Sylvia glanced across the park, then slammed into Nathaniel, dropping them both to the ground. ScrittiScritt!

Needles splintered on the stones behind them. From the damp grass beside the stone walkway. Whaler turned his head to catch sight of one thin figure in a baggy gray coat dashing toward the end of the park, while a chunkier man struggled in the other direction. Scritt!

He ducked again, even as Sylvia rolled off his legs and into a crouch.

"Someone's shooting!"

"Maude! Get down . . ." Nathaniel took three fast steps to join Sylvia. Whheeeeeee!Whhee!

"Over the wall," Sylvia snapped. "You go that way . . . over the wall." Then she was gone, headed toward the far wall.

"Right." Nathaniel half-vaulted, half-scrambled up the rough stones and dropped down into the dried bark covering the flower bed on the outside of the

park wall. An older couple stared, wide-eyed.

"Training," he said, wondering why he'd bothered. Then he sprinted eastward along the edge of the park, trying to breathe deeply as he ran.

The thin man walked out of the east gates of Gerry Adams Park and across the empty crosswalk, as if he had not even been hurrying. Then he turned at the other side of the street, glanced at the oncoming Ecolitan and reached inside the coat again. The handful of pedestrians scattered.

Squeeeekkkk. . . eetch. . . Two groundcars tapped into each other.

The Ecolitan slammed into the gray-coated figure, staggered, then managed to lever a side-footed kick into the others knee. The man in the gray coat crumpled, his knee shattered, but his hands still groped under the jacket. Nathaniel slammed the man's wrist, snapping away the minineedier, and probably the would-be assassin's wrist. Even as he reached for the weapon, the figure slumped, and the eyes glazed.

Without hesitating, Nathaniel searched the prone body, getting only a thin wallet folder, nothing else from otherwise empty

pockets, and leaving the needier untouched. Then he sprinted back toward the park, dodging groundcars. Once past the gates, he slowed to a quick walk, eyes darting from side to side. "Here!"

Following Sylvia's yell, he dodged more groundcars making his way across the second avenue to join her. They loped down the street.

"You didn't . . . get him?" asked Sylvia. "Got him. Suicide bloc."
"You, too?"

"You . . . left the body?" asked the taller Ecolitan. "Why not? All he had . . . was . . . thin wallet. Probably minimal identification . . . wad of credit . . . notes . . ."

Once around another corner, they slowed into a groundcovering walk.

"That. . . was. . . all mine had," said Nathaniel between deep breaths, wondering if he'd ever be in the shape he once had been.

"Good thing you left him. Great minds think alike. We'd better hurry back to the Legation. Who was behind this?"

"Has to be a cold outsystem. They weren't warmly dressed."

"Or paid locals," she suggested. "But why were we there? De Vyierion told us to go."

"No, the Legate told us," corrected Sylvia. Nathaniel swallowed. "De Vyierion said any day but today, in effect. He warned us, and I didn't catch it."

"Neither did I."

"Our own Legate . . ." Nathaniel shook his head. "Is it safe to go back.""
asked Sylvia.

"I'd bet on Swersa and the permanent staff. No one else. And we don't say a word."

They both moved more quickly, scanning the avenue, ignoring the sounds of

sirens and whistles blocks behind them.

XXXIV

Nothing." Nathaniel thumbed off the trideo news. "Not a thing. Two dead bodies and toxic military needles all over the park. And not a thing on the news-except a reference to two homeless men who had heart attacks."

"You don't know about toxic needles . . . not for sure. And sympathetic blocs do cause heart attacks." Sylvia looked up from the bound copy of the report, then handed it across the sofa to him. "I'm glad we've got this suite, particularly now." She stretched. "I can't find any more typos or dumb sentences."

"Time to go with it." He glanced at the cover, scanning the title. The Economic Infrastructure of Artos, Analysis and Recommendations, then set it on the low table, "I'm hungry."

He stretched, then touched his cheek. It still hurt, and his legs and feet ached slightly as well. No matter what anyone said, sprinting in boots on hard pavement did nasty things to human tissue.

"You're going to have quite a bruise there. I'm sorry."

"I'm quite happy to be alive, thank you." And angry, angry at his own stupidity, angry that she could have been killed because he hadn't paid enough attention to De Vyierion. Had he missed anything else? He hoped not. He sincerely hoped not.

He glanced at the two folder wallets on the table. "False Coordinate passports. I still can't believe it." Sylvia stifled a yawn. "I can."

"So can I. They cant lose. If the assassins get us, then Accord gets in the trideo or print news. If we get them, then two dead bodies with Coordinate identification are discovered. I just wish I knew who."

"It probably isn't the Union."

"It could be almost anyone else."

"Or everyone," she suggested.

"That possibility had crossed my mind. I almost feel like the rest of the Galaxy,' including some of our own people, is running after us to pin our dead bodies on someone else's door step." He shook his head. "We've speculated and speculated, and we still don't know. All we can do is play the game." He lifted the draft report. "Lets go downstairs and finish this off. Then, all we have to do, once we get the corrections made, is worry about how we get this out of here and to your friends over at the Imperial legation."

"We don't, because that's one giveaway. They're looking for two of us."

"Oh?"

"I'll do it, and I know how."

"How, my more effective operative?"

"Status. I'll leave with the cleaning crew in a dingy singlesuit in the morning. Ecolitan professors don't look like maintenance types."

"I could . . ."

"No," said Sylvia. "You're too big. You cant disguise all that muscle. You're almost ahead taller than most men here. That's one reason why they could follow us so easily."

"We could also post a meeting on the Legation schedule for both of us with Clerigg for tomorrow morning," he suggested.

"That wouldn't hurt, especially since there's clearly a leak somewhere here."

"A leak? I doubt there's just one." He shook his head. "Let's get this fixed. We'll need to hurry if we want to eat before the mess closes. And I'm hungry." He almost touched the bruised cheek again, but dropped his hand. "You have the keyblobs Clerigg left?" He nodded. "I'll be glad to get this done."

So would Nathaniel, except he had the feeling that completing the study was only the beginning of the end, if that.

He also didn't like the fact that the Legate had sent them into ambush. Either someone had set up Spangall or the receptionist, and that meant infiltration of the Legation, or Spangall himself was involved in the mess. Right now, there was no way to tell which, but they'd have to assume both alternatives were possible.

XXXV

Nathaniel paced to the front of the economic section office, then back to the console. He glanced up at the high windows and the gray clouds of winter chat oozed across the permaglass.

She'd been gone four hours. Surely it didn't take that long, did it? But the Legations didn't open that early, did they? Probably not on New Avalon. Even the Accord Legation wasn't open to the public until zero eight thirty. Clerigg glanced at Whaler. "I thought Ecolitan Ferro-Maine

was supposed to be here."

"So did I." Clerigg went back to his console, then looked up. "When can we send--"

"As soon as she shows up." He swallowed, "I'm sorry, Clerigg. It's been a strain. I know it's been a strain on you, too." The Ecolitan's eyes went to the door, but it was only the mes-

senger, who delivered several envelopes to the economic section chief.

Sylvia . . . how long could they keep it up? Sooner or later. . . He shook his head, his hand going to the bruise on his shoulder where she'd slammed him into the permacrete to save his life. He hadn't even felt that one until later. Twice so far, she'd saved his neck, and that probably didn't count the times her knowledge had averted danger. She hadn't trusted the second pilot on the Frankan ship—not at all. Nor Kennis.

But who was following them closely enough to strike in New Avalon? Was it the Imperial military? Despite Sylvia's statements, Nathaniel had no doubts that the eagles were cold enough to use sympathetic death blocs. But so were the Fuards and the Hegemony. And, where men were concerned, so was the Matriarchy.

And who had infiltrated the Legation? And, if it weren't infiltration, why was the Legate working with an outside power? Spangall was a political creature, and that type, contrary to popular opinion, wasn't usually open to venality or

bribery. Their vices were linked to power, not credits.

Nathaniel paced back to the front of the office. Clerigg glanced up, then looked away.

He kept pacing, and Clerigg kept looking at the time readout on his console. Click. He turned.

"It's done." A damp-haired Sylvia stood in the door in a maroon singlesuit.

For a long moment, he just looked, and his knees felt rubbery. Then he stepped forward and hugged her . . . hard.

For a moment, she hugged him back, then eased away. "It's no great accomplishment." She shook her head. "Not at all."
"It's a fine study," protested Clerigg.

"The study is good," Sylvia admitted, offering the staff economist a brief smile. "And you made it possible."

Nathaniel nodded to Clerigg. "Send them all out, regular courier, as if it were totally routine distribution."
"Just routine?"

"The fireworks come later, Clerigg. We discussed this. If we call attention to it, then we'll be accused of sensationalism."
"Yes, sir."

"I need to change," said Sylvia, "and we have something to discuss."

"I thought-" began the economist.

"We'll get to it," temporized Nathaniel. "Thank you for everything." He followed Sylvia outside into the corridor.

"Up to our room," suggested Sylvia. "There's a trideo set there."
"A trideo set?"
"Yes, a frigging trideo set." He winced and followed her,

Even before heading to the fresher or the closet, she went to the set and slipped in a cube she extracted from a pocket. "This and a few other items were waiting for me. They knew! Frig it! They knew, and they were waiting. That report is probably headed for orbit already. Not that it'll do much good."

Nathaniel watched the holo images that rose in the center of the room, a series of people in uniforms and formal dress around a raised throne, the scene showing a vague resemblance to that of the Imperial receiving hall where he had presented his credentials as an envoy.

"That's him-the evil envoy," said the trim and handsome woman in an Imperial uniform, pointing to another figure at the far side of a huge reception hall. Then the images shifted to reveal a blocky, hard-faced figure in a caricature of Ecolitan greens, with a smooth smile and cold eyes.

"He can make the smartest people think black is white . . . or that green is beautiful . . ."

Nathaniel wanted to retch, but he kept watching. After several units, Sylvia cut off the images. "There's three hours of cuts like this. That's what Berea said. There's even one that shows the evil envoys traitor aide-she's a former exotic dancer who seduced her way into an Imperial bureaucracy to get the information to sell out to the evil envoy. Slander is the sincerest form of flattery, I suppose." Sylvia's voice was bitter. "I'm sorry. It wasn't . . . I didn't."

"Don't apologize. I know all that, but it still hurts. It shouldn't, but it does."

"But why would the Empire--"

"It's not the Empire. These are all commercial productions, sponsored by TTG. That's Tech-Transfer Galactic, and one of TTG's subsidiaries is an outfit called AgriTech. It operates in the Empire, the Frankan Union, the Hegemony, and the Conglomerate. Supposedly, it's headquartered on Tinhorn."

"So Accord is getting an incredibly bad image through all these trideo dramas?" Nathaniel still wondered who would watch the dramas . . . and accept them as real . . . except he was afraid he knew.

"You've got it. And what will one economic study do to combat all the biases being raised and fanned by the entertainment industry? One excellent, factual, and dry economic study? And that's not all."

"Oh?"

"The synde bean thing. You were right. Something very funny happened here in Camelot. An Avalonian trade factor was almost killed--a hit--with Imperial style needles. It's coincidental, of course, but he had some dealings with the Conglomerate and the Federated Hegemony--and with R-K Enterprises. Several months ago, some new strains of beans went to Artos, and to George Reeves-Kenn. Berea flagged it because it made no sense. The value was minimal, but you have to log those to a planofomed system--ecological imbalance."

"The plague . . . the different beans . . ." mused Nathaniel. "There's no way to prove that, but . . ."

"It looks that way. George found out about the plague and

wanted to protect himself, but that left a trail. Smack--no trade factor, and no George. Someone wanted to cover their tracks."

"And make sure the laser stayed focused on Accord."

"That's how I see it." Sylvia's voice turned edged as she added, "And there's nothing we can really prove. Berea suspects, and she's reported those suspicions, but how can the I.I.S. tell the Imperial Senate that they suspect this without proof--especially when the entire Empire knows Accord is out to poison it. How many millions have already died from starvation or power losses? Five, ten million so far?"

"I guess we'll have to do more to put a stop to it."

"What? Destroy half the Galaxy? That's what it would take. And we'd have to do it before the Empire destroys the other half."

"With my luck. I'd choose the wrong half," mused Nathaniel. "I don't know. I'm soaked. I'm cold, and I need to change." Sylvia stripped off the singlesuit.

"Then we'll get something to eat, and talk. Although what we can come up with, I don't know." She draped the damp suit over her arm and walked to the fresher, seemingly unaware, or uncaring, that Nathaniel watched. "A frigging

exotic dancer! That crap . . . how can people . . . ?"

XXXVI

Do you think you can go back to the Imperial Legation?" Nathaniel asked as he closed the door to the suite, wishing he'd eaten less of the heavy crepe. He burped quietly, he hoped, still wondering how a crepe could have been so heavy. "I worry that going back again . . . they might . . . not be so helpful."

"Berea was encouraging. . . and told me that they'd take anything else I could bring . . . but I don't think it's going to help enough. This whole thing has gotten beyond reason. Then, I suppose it always was." Sylvia stood and looked at the silent trideo projector. "An exotic dancer . . . that's hard to believe. A frigging exotic dancer . . ."

"I find you very exotic."

"You won't find me doing that kind of dance." She smiled briefly. "Not in public."

"Does that mean I have something to look forward to?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"A very permanent arrangement," he blurted, not believing that he'd said what he had. "If we get through all this . . ."

"Promise?" She kissed his cheek. "First things first . . . like survival."

"Survival isn't enough."

Sylvia looked at him directly, her gray eyes deep, for a long time before she answered. "No, it isn't, and that's the problem. We both want more than mere existence." She sighed. "We all do. But most peoples desires are modest on an individual basis--and totally unreasonable for an entire society. Maybe that's why reason doesn't work in government."

"Reason can work on those in power . . . if you use it to appeal to greed, fear, and prejudice," suggested Nathaniel. "I don't like that."

"Neither do I."

"That's what you did in New Augusta, wasn't it? And that's why you didn't tell me, either?"

"I wasn't that noble." He snorted. "I wish I had been, but I didn't want you hurt if things went wrong."

"Please don't protect me that way anymore." Nathaniel looked at the numbers on the borrowed hand calculator, wishing he'd understood them before, but the trideo shows and the little information about the beans had been the key . . . those and the Artos study, once he'd really had a chance to investigate the data. "I won't, but it's hard."

"Go ahead." She reached out and squeezed his hand. He took a deep breath.

"All right. Who's behind all of this? Let's take it step by step. Forget about hard proof for the moment."

"Do we really want to know?" Sylvia took a long swallow from the glass of water she held. "It's dry in here."

"I know. Can I have a sip?" She extended the glass, and he drank before

answering.

"Probably not, but it wont go away, and things will just get worse." He cleared his throat, glancing at the figures and phrases he'd scrawled out. "From what we do know, the overall effort to put the Empire and Accord at each others throats isn't being caused by either the Coordinate or the Empire." Sylvia nodded. "Nor New Avalon or the Frankan Union."

"Now, the attempts on Artos and here probably weren't managed by Halstan or by Orknarli or Olympia-they're too distant. Effectively, that leaves the Hegemony and the Conglomerate."

"It has to be the Conglomerate," said Sylvia. "Why?" asked Nathaniel idly.

"Take those trideo clips. They're airing all over the Empire. Who else could afford them?" Nathaniel laughed. "Don't make fun of me."

"I'm not."

"You are."

He swallowed. "Let me point out something. Probably the shows paid for themselves. People like that sort of thing. But even if they didn't, what was the total cost-production, sponsors, airtime, everything?"

"I wouldn't know, but a commercial slot on New Augusta might cost a quarter million a minute. It'd be less elsewhere."

"And the show is aired twice a week . . . three times a week? Eight minutes of dedicated commercial sponsor time." She nodded.

"All right, let's assume that they sell the commercial spots for next to nothing, but the structure works. That means that, on Old Earth, each show costs four million, or twelve million a week. That's six hundred million a year for intensive coverage. How many systems are there in the Empire?"

"One hundred sixty seven, but only ninety-some with significant populations. Voting populations."

"There's no other market that expensive. Lets assume the average cost is twenty percent of that on Old Earth. A little over a

hundred million a year a system. That works out to nine billion credits. Do you know what the cost of the HMS Black Prince was?"

"No." Sylvia frowned even as her mouth opened. "Eleven billion credits."

"But people don't look at it that way." She fingered the nearempy water glass.

"They don't. That's the beauty of it. People don't think in those terms, but whoever is behind this is brilliant. This is a fullscale, low-budget war. The Empire is practically ready to launch an all-out assault on the Coordinate, and it's cost the Fuards less than two capital ships, and probably less than a hundred million in bioresearch and bean plague dissemination efforts."

"You said it--"

"You were right, but not because of the money, not exactly. Its the commercial ties that counted, and the Hegemony doesn't have enough. But my guess is that the two are working together, despite the Hegemony's official alliance with Wryere."

"Sonderssen and his friend Fridrik?"

"And Kennis was trying to get his section of the pie. He'd be able to keep it under either Fuard or Hegemony rule. So he wanted us out of the way as well." Nathaniel nodded. "Another is Gerard De Vyierion. And there's a feel to all of this."

Sylvia looked at him. "Fine. We know who, but what can we do? Our study will convince the U.S., but they're already convinced. Oh, I had Berea make sure your friend the special assistant got a copy. She might be able to persuade her mother. Probably not, but it couldn't hurt."

"She's not exactly my friend."

"She tried hard."

"You are much superior."

"I'm glad you recognize that." She offered a brief smile. "So? What do we do?"

Nathaniel swallowed-twice. Was there any choice? Realistically, he couldn't see any. Not with the little time they had left.

"It's the whole business of being an Ecolitan-the Prime calls it the Ecolitan Enigma. I told you that before, the interaction of power and ethics." Sylvia waited.

"It's like a puzzle. If we wait until what we do is obvious and justified, then far more people are hurt, but we can claim justification. Or we can do what needs to be done as soon as possible." He pursed his lips. "And then we're arbitrary and enigmatic . . . puzzling . . . and always called overbearing and high-handed. I suppose it really ought to be called the Ecolitan Dilemma, but the Ecolitan Enigma sounds better. And isn't that the way people do it anyway, picking whatever sounds better?"

"You're avoiding getting to the point."

"It's hard." He edged closer to her on the sofa, and lowered his voice.

"Ecolitans always have contingency plans. The Prime insisted I develop some. You won't like them. They're far worse than what I did in New Augusta, far worse--"

"What we did."

"What we did," he agreed. "Here's what I have in mind. You and Swersa and I are going to raise the military and governmental stakes. . . very high. . . and very directly. . . for Tinhorn. One thing that the Institute has understood from the beginning is that you strike for the heart and at those responsible."

"That's why you hit the Defense Tower on Old Earth." He nodded. "This is worse. I think we can take out the Conglomerates entire command structure."

"You . . . us? No one's ever done that."

"It's been done before. It's just that most leaders avoid operations that would make them targets in retaliation. . . and there's going to be some collateral damage. Maybe a lot of collateral damage."

Sylvia swallowed as he continued to lay out the contingency plan. Finally, she held up her hand. "Do we really need to do something this drastic?"

"Let's see. We've killed two Fuardian agents; highjacked a Frankan ship; sent information and messages to most of the intelligence agencies in the Galaxy. The I.I.S. has beaten on D.I. and the eagles. In response, the Empire continues to prepare to attack Accord. The Conglomerate continues to spread bean plague and increase its military arsenal while preparing to invade Artos.

All the factions on Artos are ready to explode into a civil war which none of them can win."

"That's all true," Sylvia said. "But do we need such a drastic response?"

"There theoretically might be something less . . . catastrophic. There's only one problem. We don't have those kinds of resources. We don't have a fleet at hand. Or landing battalions, or whatever." He paused and took a deep breath. "Besides, I have a moral problem with that. Our hypothetical fleet-and the people in it-is innocent. We're supposed to get lots of our people killed after the Fuarda have already killed millions? As I see it, I have a choice. I can wait until Artos is in Fuarda hands, and until the Empire and Accord are at full war, and until millions more die on planofomed worlds. Then, any action I take will be justified. Or, I can take immediate action to prevent a war and be condemned for being immoral and precipitous because any action I take has to be targeted and catastrophic."

He looked at Sylvia. "Now . . . I've been raised in a system that believes that early action that saves the innocent is more moral than later, more justified action that results in more deaths. And sometimes, we're wrong. And if I'm wrong now, a lot of people will die. So, first, do you think I'm wrong about the cause of the problem?"

Sylvia moistened her lips, then looked at the floor, then at the window. Nathaniel waited. "No," she finally said.

"All right. Can you think of any other way to stop this mess before millions or hundreds of millions die?"

"No. But that doesn't mean there isn't one."

"You're right about that, too," he admitted. "How much time do we have to come up with another solution?"

"Not much."

"How about a compromise of sorts? We work on this. If you can think of anything that we can actually implement that's less deadly . . . we'll look at it." Sylvia took a deep breath. "I don't like it."

"Sylvia, do you think I do? Do you think I like being the point man in a universe where every time I have to act I discover that people respect only force in large quantities? Where people are more interested in self-justification than in preventing unnecessary deaths? Where I'm being betrayed or undercut by my own people? Where the same thing is happening to you?"

"You might as well get on with your plan." Her voice was hoarse.

So he did, stopping for water all too often to moisten a throat that got drier with each deadly word.

XXXVII

We have a problem," said Nathaniel as the two stepped into Swersas office. Sylvia closed the door. "I thought your study was complete." The white-haired Ecolitan fingered her chin and frowned.

"The study was only the first part. It was also a cover. " Whaler laughed. "It's a good study, but it wasn't enough."

"Reason and rationality usually aren't," Sylvia added with a hard and bright smile.

"Might I use your console for a moment?" Nathaniel smiled politely.

Swersa swallowed, then stepped toward the equipment, and flicked the privacy screens on. "You're not just an economist."

"I'm an economist who's been continually drafted into trying to solve problems bigger than I am."

"You're going to invoke the delegation clause, I suppose?" Nathaniel shook his head, almost sadly, as he slipped behind

the console. "No. I'm invoking the Prime clause."

As the lights flickered across the console before settling into the green, the older Ecolitan looked from one green uniform to the other, then to the grayness of brick and clouds beyond the windows. "I got the message, but . . . I hoped it wouldn't come to this."

"It has. Perhaps worse than the Prime anticipated." In the silence that followed, Nathaniel sat behind the console and began to enter the necessary codes.

Over his shoulder, Swersa watched as the lines unfolded on the screen, and her eyes widened. Her swallow was more like a gulp.

"You want to purchase the largest interstellar cargo carrier available in the New Avalon system and want it delivered now? How can you afford--"

"The credit line is twenty billion. You should be able to get what we need for three."

Even Sylvia swallowed as Nathaniel offered the numbers. Swersa continued to stare over the sandy-haired Ecolitan's shoulder at the screen.

"Now," emphasized Nathaniel. "The largest carrier available by tomorrow, the day after by the latest. With support boats. If not support boats, then yachts that will fit inside a cargo lock. No publicity, no notice." He began to type in the remainder of the specifications he had developed at a time that seemed all too long ago, even though it had been less than two months earlier. "Isn't this premature? I mean, nothing's happened." Sylvia shook her head. "By the time anything happens, it will be too late."

"This would happen to me." Swersa paused. "What about a crew?"

"Me . . . you . . . Sylvia." He paused. "You are current, aren't you, at least to be a second pilot?"

"I've got a command cert, sir."

"Good."

"But. . ."

"What is the oath?" Swersa paled. "You can't be serious."

"Don't you think averting a Galactic war is enough justification?"

"I can't believe you-or the Prime--" Sylvia's eyes flicked from one Ecolitan to

the other. Nathaniel shook his head and said slowly, " 'All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.' Veryancient quote. What does the oath say?"

"To do what is necessary . . . to act for the greater good . . . to put principle above politics."

"That's what we're doing." He pushed himself away from the console and gestured to the screen. "That's your charge."

"But a cargo carrier . . . how will that . . . the Conglomerate has hundreds of warships. Or will you pull out some economic miracle?"

"As all of the great villains in history have said, 'Trust me.' " Nathaniel laughed harshly. "If I'm successful, I'll doubtless join

them. If not, then several hundred million more innocents will

XXXVIII

PRIORITY FLAME ONE DENEAL F. KRUPKLAATU MARSHAL OF THE FLEETS DEPARTMENT OF WAR FUARDIAN CONGLOMERATE TEMPTTE, TINHORN PRIORITY FLAME ONE

TINHORN'S INTEREST IN ARTOS, AND THE SPACIAL CONCERNS SURROUNDING THE THREE SYSTEM BULGE, HAVE COME TO THE ATTENTION OF THE ECONOMIC SURVEY SERVICE OF THE ECOLITAN INSTITUTE. WE ARE DEEPLY CONCERNED AS WELL ABOUT THE MISUSE OF CERTAIN ECOLOGICAL STUDIES INVOLVING HYDROCARBON FIXING AND SYNDE BEAN OPTIMIZATION. WE HAVE CONVEYED OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THESE CONCERNS TO OTHERS WHO SHARE SIMILAR INTERESTS.

IN VIEW OF YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES AS THE TITULAR HEAD OF THE DEPARTMENT OF WAR, THE INSTITUTE REGARDS ANY ATTEMPTS TO (1) DESTABILIZE THE DOMESTIC STRUCTURE OF ARTOS, (2) IMPOSE A MORE STABLE STRUCTURE THROUGH EXTERIOR EFFORTS, (3) REDUCE HYDROCARBON FIXING ON IMPERIAL AND OTHER SYSTEMS THROUGH THE PERVERSION OF ECOLOGICAL STUDIES, AND (4) THE USE OF COMMERCIAL ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA AS A VEHICLE FOR TARGETED ADVERSE PROPAGANDA AS CONTRIBUTING TO GALACTIC DESTABILIZATION.

BECAUSE THE INSTITUTE HAS LONG VIEWED ECOLOGICAL, SOCIOLOGICAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STABILITY AS INTERTWINED, THE INSTITUTE REGARDS ANY SUCH ATTEMPTS AT DESTABILIZATION AS ECOLOGICALLY UNWARRANTED. THAT DESTABILIZATION WILL BE RIGHTED SHORTLY. WE STRONGLY SUGGEST THAT YOU NOTE THE MINIMAL USE OF RESOURCES REQUIRED TO ACHIEVE THIS RESTABILIZATION.

YOU WILL ALSO NOTE THAT ALL OTHERS WITH AN INTEREST IN SUCH RESTABILIZATION HAVE BEEN COPIED. THEY HAVE ALSO RECEIVED SUPPORTING INFORMATION THAT IS UNNECESSARY FOR THE CONGLOMERATE.

The Fuardian marshal looked at the flimsy. "They're bluffing. They have to be bluffing." The sub-marshal waited. "What do you say. Sub-marshal Hommel?"

"I do not have the information you have, ser."

"But?"

"Accord-the Institute-has never bluffed."

"They cannot stop us. Not even they can stop us. Not now. Continue the plan."

The four stood behind the lock hatch of the shuttle as it crept up to the

wall-like hull of the former J.M. Turner. "She's all yours, Ecolitan. Fully energized, with all the boats except number five." The small man wiped his forehead. "All the magtites operational except number three—you knew about that. And two weeks of standard crew fare." He raised both eyebrows. Nathaniel nodded. "We'll take a look, of course."

"Yes, sir." Magnuson, the ship factor representing the Bank of Camelot, wiped his forehead again. "The crew fare is class one, I might add." . "Thank you."

Clunk. The shuttle shivered as the small craft linked to the cargo carrier.

"Magnuson, you're clear to take the purchasers aboard." The words reverberated from the speaker above the lock. Nathaniel closed his helmet, as did the others, before enter

ing the lock. The faint hissing as the pressure between the cargo carrier and the shuttle equalized was inaudible, and Nathaniel automatically checked the outside pressure gauge—a little over thirty, or about eighty percent of T-Norm. The pressure stayed there as the four entered the Turner's lock. Even the passenger lock was oversized, with a three meter square hatch, probably for large and delicate cargo of some sort.

Once the inner lock hatch closed behind the four and they stood-or floated-in the red maintenance lights of the passageway, Nathaniel cracked his helmet. The air was chill, both sterile and musty, although the Turner had only been laid into storage a month before, with the bankruptcy and collapse of Hanoverian Shipping, Three other cargo ships had also been available, but the Turner had the largest drives and the greatest tonnage.

"Forward." Nathaniel turned and let the others follow as he pulled himself forward.

The cockpit—except it was the bridge on commercial ships, Nathaniel recalled—was only slightly larger than on an Institute cruiser, with four couch positions, rather than five. The board before the pilots' couches was simpler, the engineering board close to identical, but a military ship had nothing to compare to the fourth board, for cargo handling and loading. Then . . . there were no weapons board, and no separate comm board.

He pulled himself down into the captains couch, belted himself in, and lifted the input set, adjusting the clamps before easing it into place and toggling the system standbys. He could feel Magnuson wince at the power drains. Anything drained power on a ship so large.

"Cells , . . normal . . . converters . . . accumulators . . . shield lines . . ." he murmured as he checked the circuits to each and the readouts.

From what he could tell through the shipnets, the Turner was as represented, not that he could afford to reject the ship if she were basically capable of what he needed. But there was no point in letting the bank's tame factor know that. He paused, then set the gee field to minimum.

He set aside the input headset and stood. "Now. . . the drive spaces."

Magnuson nodded, and the three followed him aft, halfbouncing, half-drifting in the min-gee he'd toggled into place.

The door to the drive spaces creaked as it irised open, but moved smoothly.

Each jump-generator was the size of the entire drive space in a military corvette, and there were five. In spite of himself, Nathaniel was impressed. The Turner might actually have the power to do what he'd planned. He pushed aside those thoughts. First things first, or he'd never get to the end.

The drives and supercon lines looked operational, as did the rest of the arrayed equipment.

Nathaniel plugged into the lower boards, running through the circuits, starting with the drives, then going to the jumpgenerators, and finally ending with the power leads to the magtites. He shook his head.

"What's the matter, sir? It's just as the specs said . . ."

"The power draws for the magtites are thirty percent above specs. That wasn't specified."

"We'll rebate a hundred million."

"Make it two." Nathaniel wouldn't need to use the magtites anywhere close to capacity, perhaps not at all, but there was no sense in the Institute paying more than necessary. "With four of these beasts to sell . . ."

"All right." Magnuson swallowed. "All right. Two hundred million."

"If you would, just send it to the Legation. They can handle it. And make sure title is held by the Institute," he emphasized again. "As you wish, Ecolitan Whaler."

He closed down the boards, shifting the controls back forward, and sealed them. Then he checked the supercon lines again, and the actual power flows. Supposedly, cross-connections were standard on every cargo carrier, but he needed to ensure that.

He finally nodded. He could shift everything into the insystem drives, every last erg of power. "Is that all?"

"Almost, Magnuson. The boats, and then we'll be through." There were supposed to be two boats for each hatch, ten in all, and a lifeboat, which was more like a courier. In fact, the specs were similar. One boat-five was missing, as the factor had pointed out from the beginning.

From what Nathaniel could tell, the ship held atmosphere; the boats were operational; the systems worked; and the entire carrier was economically unfeasible under current economic conditions.

After checking the courier, the Ecolitan straightened. "Everything seems to be as specified . . . except for the magtites. Let's go back forward."

As the four reached the passageway opposite the forward crew/passenger lock, Magnuson fumbled out the oblong that was half clipboard, half datacase. "If you would authenticate this, and make the changes. The rebate section is at the end . . ."

Nathaniel forced himself to read through all the clauses, just to make sure of things like liabilities and contingencies, to ensure they didn't outlive the lifetime of the ship. From what he could tell, they didn't, and he finally authenticated everything, after he'd added the provisions for the two hundred

million credit rebate, and ensuring that the Institute held title.

He wanted to smile. For a man who'd never made fifty thousand, spending slightly over three billion credits in a day seemed insane-but what he was planning was equally so.

"What are you going to do with her, sir, if I might ask?" Magnuson stowed the datacase, then paused by the passenger lock.

"Reinforce some of the forgotten laws of economics, Magnuson." Nathaniel smiled coolly. "I... we... wish you well."

"Thank you."

After the ship factor's boat vanished into the darkness beyond the hull, Nathaniel took a deep breath. They had much to do, too much.

Sylvia and LuAn looked to him.

"First, we get ready to break orbit and get out of here, before anyone understands what we've got."

"What do we have?"

"A ship almost as big as the largest Imperial battlecruiser." And about a dozen times as deadly ...if... if... his contingency plans worked. He turned back toward the bridge-cockpit. "Let's go."

Nathaniel eased the drives on line, then completed the checklist before squaring himself in the pilot's couch and triggering the comm. "New Avalon orbit control, this is Coordinate ship Adam Smith, breaking orbit this time. Breaking orbit this time."

"Coordinate vessel Smith, cleared outbound, radial zero nine five, remain within the orange until past beacon three. Request you remain at point one zero delta vee until clear of the home zone."

"Stet, control, holding point one zero on zero nine five this time. Point one zero on zero nine five this time." Nathaniel glanced toward the second seat where Sylvia sat monitoring his actions, trying to get some basic understanding of the board. He turned his head toward the engineering board. LuAn nodded. "Everything's in the green."

Nathaniel stretched, but continued to scan the boards and the shipnets. While the basic layout was familiar, neither the scope and size of the ship were, and he would need a better feel before he had to implement his contingency plan. "Feels like . . . it's big," added Swersa. "That's the point. We need a big ship," Nathaniel said. The newly named Smith was big enough that there were different grav-field generators for the bridge-cockpit, and for the rest of the ship-a definite energy-saving measure for the big cargo-carrier. Sylvia frowned.

"Coordinate ship Smith, this is orbit control. Interrogative destination. Interrogative destination."

It was Nathaniel's turn to frown. He wasn't about to reveal their interim or ultimate destination, but what plausible destination could he provide? Then he grinned. "Herzogov three. Herzogov three is immediate destination." A destination of the military core of the Federated Hegemony should create a

little stir. "Understand Herzogov three. Smith. "
"That is affirmative. Herzogov three."
"Thank you. Smith. Pleasant jumps."

The Ecolitan pilot went back to the boards and began a thorough scan of the systems, taking his time as he did, and interspersing his check-out with continued scans of the comm bands and the EDI. He didn't want any more deep space surprises, not after their experiences with the Gallia.

Nearly a stan later, he leaned back in the couch and wiped his forehead.

"All right, I've waited. Can you two let me in on the big secret?" asked Swersa.

"Yes. Sorry I haven't been too communicative, but I figured there'd be time to explain along the way." Nathaniel checked the EDIs—nothing headed their way, and a clear corridor to an outsystem jump. "And there will be. We've got another three until jump point."

Swersa turned to face Nathaniel directly. "In simple terms, we're going to destroy the Fuard High Command."

Swersa's jaw dropped. "With what? This is a cargo ship."
"Exactly. And we're going to visit a graveyard."
"A graveyard?"

"A place called Sligo. The Empire fragmented it four hundred years ago. You may recall . . ."

Swersa nodded. "I trained there, but that was years ago, and even then . . ."

"There's a lot of free metal hanging around."
"I don't think I'm going to like this." Swersa paused. "And just how are you going to turn this cargo hulk into a warship?"

"I'm not. I'm going to turn it into the biggest high-speed torp ever launched." The older Ecolitan paled. "I don't like it, either," Nathaniel admitted. "But the Fuards are on the fringe of starting a war between Accord and the Empire, plus a civil war on Artos. The civil war will allow them to take Artos, and begin to turn New Avalon into a protectorate. The Empire can't respond, not with the animosity created toward Accord, and not with three major fleets being shifted away from the Three System Bulge toward Sector Five."

"Just how will devastating the Conglomerate High Command stop this war? That's assuming you can even pull off this miracle."

"It will be a disaster, not a miracle," confessed Whaler. "I calculate that it will bring home three points. First, that Accord can create vast destruction without use of a single known armed vessel. Second, that governments should not be allowed to manipulate others into fighting their wars, not and get away with it. And third, that Accord is impartial enough to rescue the Empire, since the Coordinate can obtain absolutely no advantage from this, economic or military." The pilot smiled. "Except to prevent an unnecessary war."

"Won't the Conglomerate . . ."

"They can't really get to Accord, except through the Empire, or the other major outsystems, or by taking incredibly out-of-the-way jumps, which won't leave them with much energy to spare," pointed out Sylvia.

"Plus, it's very hard to carry out a war when you have no coordination and command structure left." Not to mention high collateral damage, he added to himself. Would he be part of the collateral damage? There was an awfully high risk of that. "I don't know." LuAn touched her chin. "I don't know."

"Would you let a Fuardian fleet jump through your space? That's also assuming that they're going to want to after all the information about their little covert war is spread to every intelligence service in the human Galaxy," added Sylvia. "Will the Empire believe this?" asked Swersa. "The I.I.S. already does, but it can't change things under the current political climate," answered Sylvia.

"In short, the mob still wants to whack the Coordinate, and the Fuards are somehow encouraging them."

"I think that sums it up," acknowledged Nathaniel. Swersa turned to Sylvia. "How many links to what you two do have?"

"Enough," answered Sylvia. "Enough."

"When I got that message from the Prime, I was worried." LuAn grimaced. "I don't think I understood how much I should have worried."

There wasn't much either of the other Ecolitans could have said, and they didn't.

Nathaniel dropped back into the shipnets, trying to improve his feel for the huge cargo boat.

XLI

Stand by for jump. Mark . . . four, three, two, one . . . jump."

As Nathaniel touched the jump stud, the big ship turned inside out, black becoming white, then, after that timeless and endless moment of jump, reverting to black.

Thirty percent of the power-gone from one jump, and not that long a jump. No wonder Hanoverian had gone bankrupt.

He scanned the screens. No EDI tracks, just the selectively compressed image of the representational screen showing the Sligo system-out of scale. With a slow release of his breath, he eased the Smith on course toward the long-abandoned asteroid metal processing facility in the Sligan belt. "What are we doing?" asked Swersa. "Heading in-system to the processing center."

"They just left it? Half a system away from where it was used?" asked Sylvia. "I know you said they had, but . . . that's a

lot of equipment, and you look at a place like Artos, starving for fabricated metals and technology . . ."

Nathaniel went through the shipnets again, then rechecked the drives and board readouts. Except for a slow pressure loss in the aft cargo section and the exorbitant use of power, the ship seemed fine. The EDI screen was clear, and he hoped it remained that way.

"Economics again. You saw what we paid for this, and we probably got it for a third or less of what it cost to build. Relative energy costs always climb in a developed system, even if absolute costs drop. That increases the comparative disadvantage of highcost, high-bulk transport, and transporting anything across stellar distances is costly. Smaller ships can do it cost-effectively if they carry extremely high-value cargoes. Iron or even carbon steel or specialty alloys are not that high value. Plus, carrying all that potentially magnetic material plays hell with jumpshift generators after just a few shifts, and that increases the maintenance costs. The Smith probably has the capacity to supply all Artos can afford for a year-six months anyway-in one trip. All of that factors into a cost spiral . . . multiple cost spirals really . . . the bottom line is that big ships don't work, except when you're planforming and need everything-and some government foots the bill. Its still not strictly economic, but provides the illusion that it is. Add to that the fact that there's always someone out there who thinks big is better, generally who's new to the industry. . ." Nathaniel broke off as he saw the glazed look begin to appear in the eyes of both the other Ecolitans. "Sorry. I didn't mean to go on and on."

"Just about the time I forget that you're an economist," said Sylvia with a small laugh, "you remind me."

"For an economist. . . you are. . ." Swersa groped for a word or phrase.

"Terribly bloody-minded," Nathaniel suggested as he rechecked the EDIs, which were still clear, thankfully.

". . . you're suggesting a pretty costly solution," LuAn concluded.

"In war, all solutions are costly," pointed out Nathaniel. "Especially losing. The real winner is the one who can get everyone else to pay. That's what the Fuards have been trying, and we're going to present the bill for collection."

After a glance at the two, Whaler tried again. "Look. War is economic . . . whoever spends more generally wins, except our friends who're going to receive their just desserts thought they had found a way around that law. And they probably have, and the Galaxy won't be a better place for it if anyone thinks it will work again. We're going to make sure that message is delivered." Another silence filled the bridge-cockpit. "We've got time," suggested Sylvia. "You never finished why the Sligans had a mining station so far from the planet."

"I'll try not to ramble on," said Nathaniel. "There are effectively two ways to mine iron-you take it to where there's power and smelt it or you take power-to the iron. By using small miners-exploitation, if you will-most systems with metallic asteroids can keep costs the lowest by building a fusactor-based processing facility somewhere near the belt. It's outside any major gravity well, and you can use low-acceleration barges on long declining orbits. One load of steel or iron is the same as any other. You just keep the pipeline full. And you keep a bunch handy in case the natives, the exploited miners, threaten to hold back." He shrugged. "That's what we're after. The reserve inventory. No ones touched it. There wasn't any reason to . . . not until now."

"Just a lot of iron? That's going to make the difference? No weapons, no . . . planet-busters . . ." LuAn frowned slightly.

"Several years ago, you might recall that comet that hit Raisa, an ice and rock comet massing only a few hundred tonnes. The terminal velocity was somewhere around fifty klicks a second."

"Fairly big mess, as I recall. It wiped out a few towns, created a killer storm, and sterilized part of one continent."

"The mass of the Smith-empty-is well over one hundred times that. Do you have any idea what terminal velocity on drives is?"

"The atmosphere . . . it would be like hitting a barrier."

"The Fuard Command is on Tempte. It's a nickel-iron asteroid put in orbit around Tinhorn. It doesn't have much atmosphere to speak of. The shields will last a while . . . until the ship gets lower . . . low enough, anyway."

Swersa paled. "You wouldn't . . . the collateral damage from that sort of orbital fragmentation . . ."

"The last war the Empire started left this . . ." Nathaniel gestured to the screens that showed the lifeless system and the slagged fragments that had been Sligo. "There are five fleets mustering to take on the Coordinate, because of what the Conglomerate has set up. Do you have any better suggestions?"

"But, no one's declared war, nothings happened yet." Nathaniel took a deep breath. "Let me get this straight. If I wait until millions die, then it will be all right to unleash a terrible weapon. If I bring devastation on those who would create it, and who have already started a civil war on one planet and starved millions on others, then I'm history's greatest villain."

"Starvation?" asked LuAn.

"Oh, the synde bean plague," answered Sylvia, her voice hard and falsely bright. "That was unleashed by the Fuardas or the Fuardas and the Federated Hegemony together. The last hard figures we had were over fifteen million dead."

"But an entire planet?"

"The collateral damage wont impact the entire planet, but the point still holds-if I don't do something, millions more will die." Whaler's eyes flicked across the EDI screens.

"You're holding a people responsible for the actions of a few leaders."

"Exactly. Who else should be held responsible?" asked Nathaniel. "They allow the system to continue. No government can stand against its people, not if they really want to change it. So . . . any protests that they can't do anything about it are really

a statement that they don't want to pay the price for changing it. Why should the rest of the Galaxy pay? Or have you forgotten our oath?"

"I haven't faced a case where the price was this high," Swersa said tiredly.

"Neither have I." Nathaniel took a long, slow breath, and went back to the pilots board, hoping it wouldn't be that long before they reached the Sligan belt and the long-abandoned processing center.

After a few units, he turned back to Swersa. "If you wouldn't mind studying that cargo board. .. were going to need to do some loading once we reach the

processing center. It would help if someone were familiar with the equipment." Swersa nodded. "I can do that."

Nathaniel went back to the board, then, in between scans, began to call up the specs for the ships cargo boats.

Sylvia, with occasional glances toward Nathaniel, studied the procedures manual, while Swersa shifted to the cargo board.

Although time did not fly by, Nathaniel felt he still hadn't worked out all he needed to do by the time the Smith neared the shielded Institute beacon that marked the abandoned processing facility. "Were about there."

"Wherever there is," murmured Swersa. He ignored the comment and eased more power on the forward thrusters, watching the closure rates ever so carefully until the big cargo carrier floated opposite a flattened bricklike asteroid. "That should do it."

"There's stuff piled all over that," observed Sylvia. "They just used a big laser to slice and flatten it," he noted, "and then they stacked different products in different sections. Out there are tonnes of steel-or iron as the case may be-and we need to take a quick inventory and determine exactly what will

it where. In essence, were going to transfer all those lumps of metal onto the Smith, or into the boats, or both."

"That's all?" asked Swersa.

"Even with the heavy magtites and loading scooters, it's likely to take a long time-several days, perhaps-for three of us to load all of it correctly. And we'll have to be very careful, because, unlike most cargo vessels, we don't have any backups." He didn't feel the smile he offered.

Nathaniel slumped onto the couch. The rough blocks of iron and the shorter girders might have been weightless, but inertia and mass they had, and attempting to move them, even with magtites and the loading scooter, had used muscles he hadn't exercised in a while-a long while.

After two days, everything ached, and while the Smith carried as much as Nathaniel dared pack into her, he still had more work to do before they could break orbit. "You need to eat," said Sylvia. "We all do."

"Eat . . . I suppose so." He dragged himself erect in the minge and bounce-floated aft toward the crew room that doubled as mess and lounge.

Swersa had two mealpaks on the table stick-tights and was taking a third out of the heater. "If this is class one, I don't ever want to see class two." "He didn't say whose class one-probably. . . I don't know..."

Whaler eased himself onto the plastic chair that was locked into place, and sipped from the bulb-some lime-flavored concentrate drink with a vaguely metallic aftertaste. The stew goulash was better, but with too much pepper and a bitter edge. The biscuits were bland and totally tasteless, a definite improvement. "What does economics say about food?" asked Sylvia. "You don't make stored food taste very good, because if it is, it gets pilfered."

"YOU economists are such cynics," said Swersa after finishing a mouthful of something.

"That's because we quantify human behavior, and most of it's not very uplifting."

"I don't get it . . . or maybe I do, and don't want to face it," said LuAn. "We've filled the ship to the edge of its tonnage."

"Actually, somewhat over that . . . just short of its jump capacity."

"That will drain the power," pointed out the white-haired Ecolitan.

"That's right. We'll have to repower, but I've got that. figured out."
"Oh?"

"Basic economics again. We're talking ten million credits or more of power. Most systems are perfectly willing to do that for an unarmed cargo boat, few or no questions asked."

"You are pretty cynical about human nature," said Sylvia quietly, lifting her drink bulb.

"I prefer the term realistic." He laughed harshly. "That way I won't be too disappointed."

Sylvia reached out and squeezed his knee. "There are good people out there."

"I know. That's who we're doing this for." He looked down at the empty mealpak. "I guess I was hungry." He eased out from the fixed chair and eased the mealpak off the stick-tight. "Were loaded," said Swersa. "Now what?"
"If you wouldn't mind, we need to make some alterations to the boats. You could help me a lot." The pak went into the disposer. "Fine"

"What do you need from me?" asked Sylvia. "You need to get those packages ready for the message torps. We need the word spread everywhere we can. Not that I expect many people to understand. Most people only understand what they want to, or what they're forced to." She nodded. "And after that . . . we'll see."

Nathaniel and LuAn made their way aft almost silently, all the way to boat bay ten. He had decided to start aft and work forward. "What are we doing?"

"Reconfiguring the drives and shields." He stepped into the bay and walked up to the boat, only twice his height, where he triggered the hatch. Once it opened, he reached inside and released the access cover over the drive section, then walked back to the drive thrusters. Swersa followed. "That's what we need to change."

Just forward of the paired thrusters was what he needed—the control module. He glanced at the boat drive controls, calling up the images he had memorized so many weeks—had it only been weeks—before and comparing them to the controls.

Why had he ever thought he could convert a drive into what amounted to a large-scale message-torp drive?

Because you have the Ecolitan complex—we can do anything, convert any machinery at hand to the dirty job necessary. The unspoken words sounded bitter, and they were. Who was he to determine which planets and people lived? Except . . . if he didn't, then millions of others would continue to die as

the Fuards set the Galaxy aflame. But why were politicians so stupid?

"They aren't. They want to stay in power, and that means catering to popular prejudices, and popular prejudices will mean war between the Empire and Accord."

"What?" asked Swersa.

"Sorry. I was muttering about politicians instead of getting to work."

With a sigh, he picked up the long-handled miniature hex wrench and began to remove the cover to the drive controls. "Can you loosen the other side?"
"That I can do."

Removing the override governors was simple enough—at least in theory and comparatively, since the boats were meant to be foolproof, and the governors were hardware with circuit blocs. He had to lay and bond a strip of silver between the contacts, probably overly wide, but it didn't matter that much, not for the remaining single flight of the boat.

Still, his hands were trembling after that effort, even with Swersa's help, and they had to sit on the boat hatch ramp in the clammy boat bay and rest for a moment before they went back and replaced the drive control cover. Next came disabling the power lines to the grav-field generators and the habitability module. That would allow the firin cells' power to be concentrated where it counted—drives and shields, mostly shields. "Four adjustments . . . nearly a standard hour."

"That doesn't seem bad."

"With eight more to go?" he asked. "Hope we can do better." They did do better. It only took half that for the next boat. He tried not to think about the program changes to the guidance systems, so that the boats would home on a signal besides that of the Smith and hold course, even if the signal were eliminated.

Between drive and power reconfigurations, and the slight modifications to the homers, it was nearly a full day later, including much needed sleep, before the three settled themselves back in the bridge-cockpit. "Everyone ready?" asked Nathaniel. "Stet," offered Sylvia. "Stet."

Nathaniel began to ease power to the thrusters, very, very gently. Even so, the big ship shivered, and he kept scanning the boards and the systems until he had the Smith on a clear outbound corridor.

Then he took a deep breath.

"I still wonder. This is insane." Swersa shook her head. "Attacking the center of the Conglomerate."

"No. That's what everyone says when you break the rules. But there's never been a good defense against attack from space—except lots of ships—and that's expensive. And if you put all your ships around your home system, then that leaves others unprotected, and you can't maintain a large multi-system government without projecting force."

"But, why hasn't this come up before?" asked Sylvia. Swersa just winced.

"Who said it hasn't?" Nathaniel shook his head. "Both sides tried it in the Secession, except the Coordinate was more successful. It's been four centuries, and people forget because they'd rather not understand how high the stakes are and how vulnerable populations are. And no military figure or politician is about to remind them."

With that, he went back to checking the Smith and all the systems, conscious of just how close he'd loaded the ship to its margins. While he trusted everything was braced and solid, or more than that, there wasn't any point in not being cautious.

They reached the Sligo outsystem jump point without incident—and without any stray EDI traces. "Ready for jump . . . mark, four, three, two, one . . . jump." The universe turned inside out once more, black to white, and back again, for the endless and instantaneous transition between congruency points.

"Were at less than thirty percent, thanks to all that mass," pointed out LuAn.

"That's why we're headed in system here. It's as short a jump as possible from a non-Conglomerate system. We might have seventy percent when we emerge beyond Tinhorn." Nathaniel frowned, then added, "LuAn, Sylvia . . . can you two get out the power cables and make sure every one of the boats is fully charged? And the courier."

"You want that done before we repower."

"Every margin possible," he admitted. The two dragged themselves aft, not to return until they were approaching their interim destination.

"A couple—three and seven—are bleeding power," announced Swersa. "How much?"

"Two, three percent. That's in just three days."

"We can handle that. Thank you both." He waited until they were back in position, not that it mattered, before transmitting.

"Galatea one, this is Coordinate ship Adam Smith, inbound station this time."

"Where did you come up with that name?" asked Sylvia as they waited for the Frankan outpost's response.

"He was an ancient economist who believed in the invisible hand of economics, or something like that. It's better than calling us The Invisible Hand, I thought."

"Coordinate vessel Smith, interrogative intentions. Interrogative intentions."

"Intentions are repowering and transit. I say again, repowering and transit."

"Thank you, Smith. Cleared to beacon one three. One three."

"Were reaching the end of the easy part," he announced. "If this has been the easy part, can I get off?" asked Sylvia, straightfaced.

"Of course. As soon as we finish the hard part."

"Somehow, I was afraid you'd say that."

The special assistant waited for the secure link to unscramble and the image of the Grand Admiral to slip into place before she spoke. "Did you get my latest?"

"Yes. I got the report from your tame Ecolitan-and the former I.I.S. agent. My analysts and D.I. both agree that its first rate, and probably on target, especially the apprentices. I took the liberty of sending a copy to the External Affairs Committee. Theyll have trouble with that message to Tinhorn, though. They won't believe that it's anything but rhetoric."

"Even now?" asked Marcella.

"It's been too long since the Secession, and they don't want to remember. In time, it will make your life easier." The Admiral shrugged. Marcella paused, then asked, "I assume that means there is

no change in the plan to send the Eleventh Fleet along the Rift? Or to move the Third and Ninth Fleets?"

"As I told you earlier, Marcella, I cannot comment on rumors, not even on a secure link. As you know, I must follow the directives of the Imperial Senate." A faint smile crossed the Admirals lips. "And, as I indicated earlier, such repositionings do take time, and we have uncovered several logistical problems that may add to that." A nod followed. "But, after a meeting called by the Senate Pro-Consul, I was able to assure them that the Ministry of Defense will indeed be able to carry out their directives, and stands ready to implement the wishes of the Senate. . . whatever they may be."

"Translated loosely, the idiots are convinced, despite all factual evidence to the contrary, that Accord is engaging ecological warfare on the Empire. That's even after a clear statement with evidence from the Ecolitans that the Fuard's are behind this?"

"There isn't enough evidence, Marcella, not the kind that they can parade before their constituencies. Nothing that will satisfy the Senator from Heraculon, who reports more than five million deaths from energy shortage-related starvation. Of course, he also wont admit that he supported energy monoculture because of the contributions from the Agricultural Technology Alliance. Nothing will satisfy the Senator from Squamish, where deaths are nearing two million with the failure of the fisheries. Tell me. Can you transport that much food?"

"You know we couldn't, not even across a system, let alone transstellar distances. We've diverted everything we can, and it's changed almost nothing."

"Then how can I brook the will of the Senate?" The Admiral shrugged a last time. "Unless something changes the political dynamic. Right now, its still easier to oppose Accord than the Conglomerate."

"They really would rather be reelected and see the Galaxy in flames."

"Hasn't it always been that way? Do you really expect them to behave any other way?"

"I could hope."

"Hope does not vote, Marcella. Remember that." With a swirl of colors, the Admirals image disappeared, leaving a dark screen.

The Smith dropped out of its jumpshift into normspace, and Swersa looked up from the screens before her to Nathaniel. "The screens are skewed. Where are we?"

"Were actually below Tinhorns ecliptic. No one looks out here. Or down here."

"Can you explain this in simple terms?" Sylvia twisted in the second pilots seat, but she kept her hands clear of the manual controls.

"Application of the anthropomorphic principle number three." Both looked at him blankly.

"Nathaniel," began Sylvia. "I know what you're trying to do. That's clear. And its clear that you're worried. But there's no one close to us-even I can see that on the screens. So, could you explain? Why are we trying to attack from here, when the system is up there-if up is the right word?"

The pilot forced himself to take a deep breath, leaving his eyes and senses on screens and shipnets. "Everyone looks up, scans up . . . or out. But we're coming in perpendicular to the ecliptic from below. By the time we register on the EDI screens, our TIV will be too high for them to have much time to react." Nathaniel smiled grimly. "And even if they do, they won't have more than a few ships with which to do it. No one puts big lasers in orbit around inhabited planets. Or large fleets. They cant intimidate other systems there. Also, people are afraid of that much power too close to home." He coughed, hoping he wasn't getting something, or that there wasn't some allergen in the ventilating system.

"In theory, anyway, its very simple. Large and small objects at excessive rates of speed have a tendency to create large craters when they impact immovable objects. They also create great heat and climatic violence when they impact comparatively shallow bodies of water. The Fuard military command is on a planetoid which was laboriously dragged into orbit around Tinhorn. I have made some major modifications to the drives on the mining boats, and to the directionality of the shields. There are similar modifications to the drives on the Smith. The courier is for our departure."

"They won't let you get that close," pointed out Swersa. "That's why we're here. Down here-anthropomorphic principle number three. Nobody looks underfoot."

"Which you just made up," quipped Sylvia. "Right. But I'll stand by it."
"Economist and now anthropologist."

"No. Anthropomorphic principles were developed by cosmologists and physicists to explain what cold, hard science couldn't. Something like that, anyway." His eyes went to the EDI screens and the glitter of energy points surrounding Tinhorn . . . so many that, at the scale showing, the area around the planet was more of a glow than a sharp image.

They still had a long way to go, and they needed more velocity. He checked the power situation. Fifty-eight percent. Forest lord! The cargo carrier was definitely an energy guzzler, not that he'd expected anything much different, and close to sixty percent would be more than enough. More than enough, indeed.

He eased more power into the thrusters, setting the acceleration on the high end of the expected commercial range, just slightly high. Then his senses dropped back to the shipnets to monitor the stresses on the Smith. Outside of a faint creaking, and increased pressure on aft retaining bulkheads-

compensated for, he hoped, by the internal grav-fields—nothing seemed to have changed.

Tinhorn remained a point of light, not measurably closer, nor did the EDI patterns around the Conglomerate Centre planet change as the Smith—the erstwhile Turner—lumbered 'upwards' through the darkness toward the plane of the Tinhorn system. The three Ecolitans sat and watched, sat and watched.

One Ecolitan occasionally made minor power and course adjustments as slowly, ever so slowly, the blue dot that was the Smith on the representational screen crept closer to the red dot that Nathaniel had placed over the planet.

The nearer the Smith came, the more often he scanned through the frequencies, mentally regearing his mind to think in Fuardian, trying to match those on standing wave and those with direct radiation.

After a time, the signals seemed to bounce through his thoughts, as well as through the net, none quite steady enough . . . yet. The Smith only seemed to creep toward Tinhorn and the metallic asteroid that was Tempte, and their target, but Nathaniel had no intention of boosting acceleration since that much of a power increase could trigger increased attention. He merely wanted to create the impression, were anyone even looking, that the cargo carrier was the victim of poor piloting or jump error, and struggling back toward the ecliptic on a standard power curve. Finally, he verified the signals he wanted, and locked them into the net. Then he turned in the pilots couch. "Swersa?"

"Sir?"

"I want you to maintain this heading. I'll be aft. Let me know if anything strange occurs. Anything." He slipped out of the couch, and started aft.

"Are you hungry?" asked Sylvia before he reached the hatch. "Ah . . . actually, yes."

"How long will what you're doing take?"

"Haifa stan, could be a little longer."

"I'll have some of our class-one fare waiting. It's one of the things I can do for you ship jockeys." She smiled. "Thank you." He smiled back. "I'm sorry." "That's all right, but I want to learn how to pilot one of these. You aren't doing this again."

"You will."

"Promise?" she asked. "Promise."

"Good."

Nathaniel paused, then turned to Swersa. "Oh, I forgot to tell you. I'll be opening the boat ports. Leave them open."

"Yes, sir."

He climbed back into his space armor and checked the tool set but left the face plate open. Again, he started with boat ten, the farthest aft.

The drill was simple enough. Enter the boat, open the port, tune the homer, set the makeshift cutout to leave the autopilot on the last homer course, leave the boat.

Nine boats and nearly a standard hour later he slumped onto the plastic chair

in the crew lounge. His class-one fare-and Sylvia-were waiting. "Just eat. You're turning white."

"Swersa all right?" He took a bite of yet another mystery protein swathed in a cheese sauce. "She's worried. I can tell that."

"So am I." Two more bites of mystery protein vanished. "Do we have any chance to get out of this?" Her gray eyes met his. "Straight talk."

"If things go as planned."

"If? How likely is that?"

He swallowed some of the metallic lime drink. "You need to eat, too."

"I did already, while you were working. I took some to Swersa, also. How likely?" she asked again.

"I don't know. What I've rigged up ought to work. But like a lot of things we do, you can't test them in advance. And I don't have the experience for this sort of thing. No one does, these days." He lifted his shoulders, then dropped them. "I'm hoping."

She reached out and squeezed his shoulder. "We don't have any choice, and I think you're doing the only thing we can."

"It's not the right thing," he said slowly. "We did all the right things, and no one listened. So we have to do this. But it still bothers me. It bothers me that numbers don't matter, that reason doesn't matter, that only force matters. And I can't tell Swersa that. I've pushed her too hard anyway."

"Greed and force-that's all most people listen to," Sylvia said.

"This is definitely force." He took the last bites of his class-one ship's fare. "I have to keep telling myself that five million innocents have already died, and several million more will die, even if we succeed. If we don't, the number goes to hundreds of millions."

"I know. Do you feel better?"

"Close to human . . . for now. I guess we'd better get back up front. Before long, things are going to get messy."

"They've been that way all along." She bent closer and kissed his cheek.

He turned and held her, more tightly than he'd intended, despite the armor he wore. He just held on as if the moment would never end-as did Sylvia.

Finally, he let go, reluctantly, and so did the gray-eyed woman. After a last kiss, they headed forward. He dropped into the first's seat and donned the input set, set

ting the helmet in the holder to his left. All the boat doors remained open. Pressure leakage from the aft section had increased slightly, which probably meant the leak was in one of the boat ports, not that it would matter, not much longer.

"Nothing new, sir," reported Swersa. "Chatter, but that's been it. Seems like

a lot of in-system traffic."

"It is a military base, even if most of the ships are elsewhere." He studied the screens . . . less than an hour at current acceleration. He shook his head. They still hadn't been spotted, not yet.

Pursing his lips, he ran through what seemed to be the Conglomerate tactical bands, finding nothing of interest, not for another quarter stan when a higher-powered standing wave transmission caught him.

"CommCon . . . energy source plus ten . . . apparent heading into the red zone . . . below the ecliptic."

Nathaniel nodded and eased a trace more power to the thrusters. Total power load was down to thirty-eight percent.

". . . interrogative any delta vee. . . delta vee. . . on low ecliptic ..."

". . . unknown vessel . . . matches cargo-carrier, class super one . . . drives tuned to Alpha scale . . ."

"That's GraeAngIo comm scale."

". . . delta vee is three plus gees . . ."

Nathaniel checked his own figures. The Smith's actual acceleration had crept up to nearly four plus gees. He shuddered to think of the catastrophe that would occur should the grav-fields fail. Then don't think about it, he reminded himself.

Two points of light on the rep screen veered slowly on an intercept course, almost casual in their convergence. "Interrogative your last . . ."

"This is Nordel one, correction to my last, CommCon, target at four plus gees."

Nathaniel eased more power into the thrusters, balancing the acceleration against the stress on the grav-field generators and the Smith itself. A momentary heaviness pressed him into the couch as the grav-fields readjusted.

"CommCon, one, target continues to accelerate."

"Unknown ship entering Tinhorn control. Request you decel immediately. Request you decel immediately. " The signal smashed across all the normal traffic frequencies, as well as the emergency band.

Nathaniel winced. The same message appeared in the comm window of the EDI screen. "They seem upset, sir," observed Swersa hoarsely. Nathaniel swallowed, realizing he wore armor and they didn't. "LuAn, Sylvia . . . you should . . . suit up. Right now. You can leave your helmets cracked, but suit up. We'll probably lose our atmosphere sooner or later, and it could be before too long."

"Yes, sir."

Sylvia eased herself out of the second pilots couch, her hand squeezing his shoulder as she passed.

"CommCon, two here. Intruder remains on constant bearing, decreasing range. Prime one, zone one."

"This is CommCon. Scramble all hornets this time. Scramble all hornets."

"CommCon, Hornet leader. Scrambling this time." Nathaniel glanced back to the boards, watching as the EDI tracks of the additional interceptors began to separate from the small circle on the rep screen that represented Tempte-the asteroid base housing Conglomerate military headquarters.

"CommCon, we have intruder. Course unchanged, velocity increasing . . . mass indications off the scale . . ."

Nathaniel continued to ease power up on the thrusters, although he couldn't go much farther, because each increment also increased the grav-field drain even more proportionately, and the Smith was down to just above twenty percent and burning more power than a battlecruiser pushed to max gee. Then, the Smith massed more than any mere battlecruiser, considerably more. Sylvia, in full suit, slipped into the couch paralleling his.

"Unidentified ship, halt and identify. Halt and identify." Ignoring the request, the Ecolitan dropped into the datanet, running his own computations. Already, they were heading into the dilation zone, and that meant he had to think faster than the Fuard's.

Before the ship came anywhere close to Tinhorn he was going to have to reduce the thrust, because the grav-fields would have to go to the shields for the Smith to get past the torps of the Fuard corvettes and close enough to Tempte. There was little point in getting squashed-or releasing multiple thousands of tons of steel and iron from grav-field restraint.

"Hornet leader, this is CommCon. Authentication follows. Attack at will. Attack at will."

Nathaniel snorted to himself and began to ease back on the thrusters. The Fuard's were rattled-as if he could have halted. The old cargo boat didn't have enough power left to reverse the velocity she'd built, and she was centered on Tempte's underside.

The shields flared into the amber, then eased back into the green. Nathaniel frowned. The hornets, corvettes from the EDI indicators, weren't close enough for torps, even boosted torps. The shield flare had to have been space debris-a big chunk to create that much strain on the shields. "Suited, sir," reported Swersa.

"Stand by, no. Swersa, would you go back to the lifeboat bay and power up the courier? Get it ready for launch?"

He eased the ship's shield into more of a point, focusing the energy diverted from the thrusters into the forward shield. "Yes, sir."

He could detect a shade of relief in the white-haired Ecolitan's voice, he thought.

Two sets of dashed lines flickered from the lead interceptors, already almost flanking the Smith. The torps arrowed straight toward the cargo-carrier. Because of the relative velocities, Nathaniel could see that the Smith would probably clear the fire zone of the first two Fuardian ships without affording another shot.

. . . eeeee . . . eeee . . . The shields barely flickered.

"Hornet lead, target exceeding range. TIV estimated as nearing half-ell."

"Interrogative half-ell in system."

"Affirmative, Hornet lead. Affirmative." Nathaniel half-nodded. The only thing that would stop the Smith now was a large chunk of real estate, and there weren't any chunks between the ship and Tempte and CommCon. The laws of inertia being what they were, the Fuards had no time to put any there, and with the speed, the shields, and the inertia of the huge cargo-carrier, nothing beside several battlecruisers would be enough to stop it. And the nearest battlecruiser was somewhere beyond the orbit of the fifth planet.

After all, only idiots drove iron-filled cargo-carriers directly at asteroids around planets at high sub-light speeds.

"Sorry about that," he murmured. "Sometimes natural laws work for you, and sometimes, they don't." Just because nothing could stop a large mass, however, didn't mean that the small entities within it couldn't be stopped.

He triggered the intercom and local comm. "Strap in, Swersa. We're under attack and the gee fields are going to oscillate." He turned his head as he checked his own harness. "You, too." Sylvia nodded and followed his example. "CommCon, Hornet squad commencing attack. Commencing attack."

The six corvettes appeared ever nearer on the screens, the distance shrinking moment by moment. A dashed line streaked from one corvette, then another, and then a third.

Nathaniel tightened his lips, then dropped most of the gee field power into the shields, pulsed them . . . once, twice . . . Eeeee . . . eeee . . . eeee . . .

The forward screens blanked with the impacts and amber lights cascaded across the board, then settled . . . slowly . . . into the green.

The Ecolitan wanted to shake his head . . . and wipe his sweating forehead. He didn't think anything could stop the Smith, but . . . he'd never tried anything remotely approaching what he was doing. And unlike his distant forbear, he had only limited training and was gambling on mass and velocity being enough and that they would survive the pounding the cargo-carrier was about to take.

Three more dashed lines flared from the corvettes that the Smith rumbled toward. Nathaniel could almost imagine the fabric of space vibrating with the mass and speed of the cargo-carrier, except space didn't have that much fabric to vibrate. Eeeee . . . eeee . . . eeee . . .

The screens flared again, three times in sequence, and only one shield even registered amber, but momentarily.

Then, almost impossibly, the Smith was past the second line of corvettes, and the space between the Fuard craft and the cargocarrier seemed to widen even faster than it had closed, and Tinhorn had changed from a point of light on the screens to a disc. Tempte was finally visible as a point almost merged with Tinhorn.

Nathaniel swallowed, then noted the third line of corvettes, nearly a dozen in all.

"CommCon, Stinger squads commencing attack." A dozen? He turned to Sylvia.
"All right. Into the courier. Quickly."
"No."

He turned in the couch and looked at the gray-eyed former dancer. "Look. Fair is fair. You cant help me from here on into Tinhorn. Someone has to finish this. Once we're locked on final course, I'll get back there. Leave the lock open." He activated the comm to Swersa. "Swersa, listen."
"Yes, sir?"

"Just in case. . . if I'm not in good shape. . . or. . . anyway. . . use a little power, as little as possible, to get the courier clear of the Smith. Then use a single large burst . . . and nothing for a good half stan after at least. The accumulated velocity will bat-ass you straight up at right angles to the ecliptic until you're dust-free. Save your juice for decel. You'll need it. Once you clear the dust, jump straight for the Rift. There's enough power to get us to the Coordinate."

Maybe not a lot more, he thought, but they certainly didn't want to be caught anywhere else, not if what he had begun worked. "Understand?"
"Yes, sir."

"Yes." Sylvia's voice was calm. She rose, then bent and kissed him. "If you don't come. I'm coming back for you."
"I'll come." If there's any way at all.

His senses went back to the screens and nets even before Sylvia cleared the bridge-cockpit. Pressure leaks were building, especially aft, and the stress meters were registering strains that the cargo boat probably hadn't been designed for.

A series of dashed torp lines flickered from the corvettes ahead, corvettes that seemed to close impossibly quickly, except that he knew that the Smith's built-up velocity was the major reason for the closure rate.

"CommCon, Stinger lead. Torps away and on target." On target, all right. That Nathaniel could see, but he didn't have the skill to move the Smith, not without tearing the ship to shreds. He kept hoping that velocity, beefed-up shields, and speedinduced grav-distortion would prove enough. Eeeee . . . eeee . . . eeee . . .

With the flaring of shields and screens, the Smith shivered ever so slightly, and Nathaniel checked the course line and heading. The ship remained centered on Tempte, now a small disc in its own right. Eeeeeee...

One of the screens remained in the amber. Nathaniel watched, even as he triggered the comm link. "Courier, this is cockpit. Comm check."
"You're clear, sir," answered Swersa. "Good. Stand by. I'll let you know."

"Standing by."

Another torp flared past, not close enough to place any more of a load on the shields, probably a good dozen kilos wide.

"Stinger lead, this is CommCon. Intruder remains on course for Tinhorn. I say again. Intruder remains on course for Tinhorn."

Thanks for the confirmation, thought Nathaniel. Eeeeeee...

With yet another torp, the shields and screens flickered. Suddenly, Tinhorn swelled, appearing seemingly below the

Smith.

The Ecolitan swallowed. Was he too late? His finger flashed across the boards. "Launching boats. One . . . away. Two . . . three..."

The miniature points of light flared into being on the EDI screen, accelerating slowly away from and ahead of the lumbering cargo-carrier toward the asteroid that held Conglomerate military headquarters and more than a few research and repair facilities, he suspected. The boats could not have attained their speed except from the platform provided by the Smith, but in space, their drives were more than enough to compensate for dust density, even in system.

"CommCon, Stinger lead, intruder has released large missiles. Large missiles. Course line unknown. Course line unknown."

With a grim smile, the Ecolitans concentration went back to the three remaining Fuard corvettes ahead, and the dashed torp lines shown on the rep screen, dashed lines that leapt toward the Smith.

A second series of torps followed the first, and then a third. Amber lights flickered, only flickered, across the cockpit boards. So far, shields and mass and speed had sufficed. Would they continue to hold against the smaller attackers? Nathaniel tried to swallow, but his mouth was too dry. The corvette on the right flank changed course, flickered somehow. Nathaniel gulped, knowing what was coming, even before his mouth opened on the comm link. "Strap in. Impact. Strap in."

The words weren't right, but he didn't know the correct warning. There was so much he didn't know about space combat. Too frigging much. Eeeeeee . . . eeee . . .

Surprisingly, the shudder was only slightly more noticeable than a torp impact on shields, but amber lights flashed across the entire board in a series of patterns that made no sense to Nathaniel. His forehead seemed to burst into sweat in the heat that filled the bridge-cockpit.

Another series of lights flared beyond the screens, and the outside screen panels flickered, then blackened under the energy overload. Only the center screen remained functional, and the images there wavered, distorted. Distorted by the furnacelike heat, or damage to the equipment. He struggled to check the shipnets, but the links were dead.

"Intruder is holed, leaking atmosphere. Course unchanged." A chill wind tugged at Nathaniel's face, its cold almost comforting, and he forced himself to reach for the helmet deliberately. But his fingers still fumbled when he sealed the helmet, and then sealed his gauntlets on, his fingers already chill as the atmosphere began to shrill out of the cargo-carrier.

He checked the course line. On target, and the remaining shields still held. He hoped they would as he locked the board, then clumsily unscrambled the couch harness and struggled aft toward the lifeboat/courier bay in the dim red

emergency lighting.

The deck trembled under his boots, and the atmosphere tore at him. His head ached. Partial decompression? He blinked.

Another heave underfoot-or had he tripped? Why was he so frigging clumsy? He took another step, and another. Light flared around him. More torp bursts? He forced another step, before the darkness rose around him, deeper than the void between systems.

XLV

Vague images blurred across his eyes, and sounds rumbled in his ears, and the sounds were like knives in his skull, the images searing as though they had been drawn with lasers.

". . . some decompression . . . burns . . . radiation . . . who knows..."

". . . can't hurt to keep them cool . . ." Burns . . . burns . . . how could there have been burns? He hadn't been on Tempte . . . where thousands had to have been burned or boiled alive . . . or Tinhorn . . . with millions of casualties . . . millions . . . millions. He struggled to speak, then dropped back into darkness.

The second awakening was worse. He was bathed in heat, heat welling up from deep within, and yet his entire body shivered simultaneously, as if dipped in the space between stars. Someone kept putting damp cloths on his forehead, cloths

simultaneously too cool and too hot. And the blackness he fell back into was the steaming heat of a sealed industrial furnace, a furnace where every sinew, every bone, was seared, slowly seared, then ripped apart.

The third time, the overhead was wavering gray, with a face in it, a familiar face, except he could not make out the details. "Tried . . . didn't . . . make . . ."

"I came and got you." The words were soft, and another cool cloth went across his forehead and his cheeks. "You didn't think I'd leave you . . . I'd never leave you. Just hang on . . . were almost home."

Almost home? Home . . . did he have one . . . anymore? How could a mass destroyer have a home?

Her long fingers were cool on his forehead . . . cool and welcome, and he tried to hold on to her image-and failed as the heat and darkness covered him again.

XLVI

The Grand Admirals shoulders squared as the image of the sandy-haired woman appeared in the screen. "I thought you'd like to know that you were right, Marcella. The Senate Pro-Consul departed a short time ago. We have been requested to pull back the fleets."

"Fact . . . mere fact, that wasn't sufficient, was it? Pages and pages of documentation, they weren't adequate, either. It only took the total

conversion of the single largest military installation in the Galaxy to total energy and ten million deaths on Tinhorn." Marcella's voice was cold.

"They weren't Imperial citizens, and we didn't do it." A chilly smile crossed the Admiral's lips, one that did not extend to her eyes. "For that, the Pro-Consul was grateful, somewhat belatedly."

"And Accord?"

"The Imperial Senate has welcomed, if not with entirely open arms. Accords offer to send scientific teams to Heraculon and the other affected planets, along with ships full of resistant bean plants and seeds. They made that offer along with their declaration against the Conglomerate. They also said they wouldn't hesitate to repeat the act against the next most-inhabited system in the Conglomerate . . . or any system contemplating commencing hostilities at this time. The message from their Prime was about as direct as I have ever had the pleasure of seeing."

Marcella shook her head. "I learned that Accord doesn't bluff from one envoy."

"Marcella, recall the jest about senators . . . five are always denser than one. There are three hundred of them."

"There isn't anything left of Tempte, and a lot of molten rock seared Tinhorn. How did they do it?"

"How? Our analysts estimate that someone drove a shielded battlecruiser, armored to the teeth, straight into Tempte at about a half-light velocity. Do you have any idea what kind of energy that represents? They did something similar with a needleboat several of them—except they went first and took down all the lasers and defense systems. The Conglomerate thought Tempte was impregnable. We thought so, too."

"Nothings safe from them."

"Right now, most of the Galaxy's in shock. If it had been any other system besides Tinhorn, or any other attacker beside the Coordinate, we'd all be arming against Accord. Nowhere is safe against them. They've made their point, something like: By the way, would you please respect us and leave us alone?" A faint chime sounded, and the Admiral glanced to the side. "I'll have to leave in a moment for my briefing of the Emperor."

"That really isn't the point," the special assistant replied. The Admiral waited.

"The point is that there is nothing so dangerous as directed and unrestrained action in service of principle. The Institute serves principle."

"You think we should eliminate the Institute?"

"How?"

"Your point, Marcella. Besides, we might need them again. Unfortunately."

"Why did it take so much to convince you?" asked the special assistant.

"I was convinced a long time ago. I never doubted you." The Grand Admiral shrugged. "But . . . I doubt if anyone else could have restrained the war dogs as long as they were." Marcella nodded. "And you hoped . . ."

"Even I hoped, daughter, even I."

Storms of boiling water, rains of iron droplets swirled around him, tearing

through his thoughts, and there was heat and more heat . . . and dark-haired women running through scalding showers screaming, a blond boy looking up as he shivered into ashes . . .

Sweat poured off his forehead, searing his skin, and Nathaniel tried to open his eyes, but they failed to respond.

"Easy. Your eyes are pressure-banded in place." Sylvia's words echoed in his ears. "Don't talk. You've been through a lot."

Me? he wanted to ask. What about all those innocents on Tinhorn? Or the junior officers and men? Or the corvette pilots? How many died . . . how many . . . ? Finally, he lifted a heavy hand, then shrugged. "What have you been through? How about partial decompression, or metallic mist in your upper lungs, incidental radiation poisoning, burns across your eyes and face requiring a total

regrowth of skin and eyes-that's why the pressure bands. Toxic systemic poisoning. You almost didn't make it. Swersa is a very good courier pilot, and the Institute had everything ready. You've been under sedation for nearly two standard weeks." Nathaniel wanted to shake his head, but feared any motion might jar something loose. His face itched, and so did the top of his shoulders, and his head. Every muscle was stiff-if not totally pummeled out of shape. "She's in better shape, but not wonderful, either," added a second voice, Swersa's. "She took a heavy dose of radiation dragging you through the passage and lock to the courier."

"What..." "Please don't talk." A hand-Gently?-gently covered his mouth. But what about all the people? What had he done? "You need to rest," added Sylvia. "They're going to put you back under for a while, but you needed to know we made it. Your subconscious won't struggle so much." A cool tingling massaged his arm, and he could feel the relaxation spreading. But there was so much she hadn't said . . . so much... "Oh. . . and it all worked. The Empire backed away from the war, and we're helping repair the ecologic damage there. You're going to look a little different, I'm told, more like one of your ancestors. So don't be surprised. The screen images show you'll be just as handsome . . . in a more exotic way." Her fingers were cool on his forehead . . . cool, even as the images of a boiling planet surged through his thoughts. What had he done?

XLVIII

The Director looked down the long and formal conference table. "Perhaps. . . perhaps. . . some of you will understand why the I.I.S. has always opposed any conflict with Accord, and particularly with the Ecolitan Institute." "They have little regard for human life, that is certain," murmured the blond on the right at the far end. "They ought to be tried for war crimes!" The Director turned to the redhead. "Who do you propose would try them? War crime tribunals are usually something foisted on the loser by the winner."

"But to let them get away. . ." "We've already lost ten million, or more. They stopped the Conglomerate and punished them. Do you suggest we take up a war against Accord when we have more than fifty planets that individually contain in excess of four hundred million people? Just how would we protect them? Or do you propose that we attempt to do them one greater and attempt to wipe out all their planets? And what would protect our people in the meantime?"

"They'll get away with it?" "Probably," admitted the Director. "Just like the first users of nuclear weapons in ancient history did. Any other system that

has the resources to retaliate-including the remainder of the Conglomerate-still has far more to lose than does Accord." After a long silence, a hand lifted at the end of the table. "Can you tell us how they translated a battlecruiser that close to Tinhorn?" "They didn't. From what we can determine, they purchased an obsolete cargo-carrier, loaded it with something of high density, and then accelerated it into Tempte at high sub-light speeds." The Director paused. "Any other questions?" "Ten million people. . . the debris and residue killed ten million people..." "Correct," affirmed the Director. "That's not even a new record. The Empire murdered a mere fifteen million when it destroyed Sligo four hundred years ago. Those who are counting can take consolation in the fact that Accord concluded one of the relatively less-costly interstellar conflicts-and we lost nothing. The Emperor and the Senate should be mightily pleased." "How . . . could anyone do that?" asked the dark-haired assistant director. "How could anyone knowingly murder that many people?" "I doubt the Institute set out to murder any civilians. They set out to destroy totally an insane military regime. They succeeded. The collateral damage was some of the population on the planet beneath. There is a difference between debris-even large chunks of debris-killing bystanders as a result of a justified military action and targeting civilians directly." "I didn't realize they were that bloody-minded."

"I don't think you understand. The Institute, for better or worse, operates on principle. They try to avoid small wars because the costs are disproportionate with no benefits . . . and they'll do that by deceit, assassination, or economic warfare. They will try any type of small-scale tactic to avoid war. They always back the right of an indigenous people to their own government, and the right of people to leave. That's the good side." The Director paused again. "The other side is that when they do fight, they ensure they don't have to fight that enemy again. I ask you all. Is it clear, finally, why we have opposed war with Accord?"

"But ten million innocents . . . ?"

"Those ten million were among the hundreds of millions who allowed their government to kill, through indirect biological warfare, more than fifteen million of our people in twenty systems, and another five million in the outsystems. They almost precipitated a war between the Empire and Accord that would have killed who knows how many tens or hundreds of millions more." "But the people on Tinhorn didn't deserve that. They didn't start a war." "They didn't?" The Director's voice was cold. "If what the Conglomerate did isn't considered a war, would you want to be around when they got really serious and started what they would call a war?"

"But . . . ten million civilians?" "Do you want to tell the senator from Heraculon that it shouldn't have been done? The death toll there is nearing eight million. We're going to lose more than ten million ourselves, all told, the Halstanis several million, and associated outsystems another five to eight million from Fuardian ecological efforts. That's not a war?" The Director's eyes traversed the table. "That is all. . . for now." XLIX Werlin Restinal walked up the polished wooden stairs slowly, feeling like a man headed for an execution. "Do come in, Werlin." The Prime's voice was firm, but not exactly welcoming. The Delegate Minister of Interstellar Commerce and shadow minister for intelligence-since the Charter forbade an official intelligence ministry-stepped into the sparsely furnished office. With the Prime was a slender dark-haired woman, also in Ecolitan greens. "Werlin, this is Ecolitan Sylvia Ferro-Maine. She was the one teamed with Ecolitan Whaler on the Artos economic study." The Prime inclined his head to the chairs, and the woman sat immediately. Restinal sat more slowly, turning toward Ferro-Maine's thin face. Her cold gray eyes drove right through him. He'd dreaded seeing the Prime again, but Ferro-Maine was somehow worse, and he didn't know why. The Prime lifted a thin bound volume. "As Commerce Minister, and in your other

capacities, Werlin, you have certainly read this study." "Of course, Prime Pittsway." Restinal's lips felt dry. "Minister Restinal, you must have been aware that New Avalon was systematically cutting off capital and technology to Artos. That was obvious on the first day we were there. The Commons certainly needed no study to confirm that." Ferro-Maine's voice was cooler than her eyes. "No . . . until I read the study, I was not aware of that."
"Who actually requested the study?"
"I was told of the need for the study by Elder Torine."
"Who told him?" pursued Ferro-Maine. "Prime, I must protest . . . a minister being grilled. . . ." Restinal glanced at Pittsway.

"Werlin, well over twenty million people across the human Galaxy have died in this fiasco. Some of that occurred because you and Torine wanted to protect your precious and precarious government. You can stand a little grilling." For the first time, an edge appeared in the Prime's voice. "Do you wish me to announce to the entire Galaxy that your actions began this disaster?"

Restinal looked down momentarily. "I honestly do not know. . . or I didn't, for certain." He paused, more aware than ever that he sat like a rat between two cliff eagles with sharp beaks and even more powerful claws. "Subsequent events led me to believe that Delegate Verlingetti was the one who pushed for the study."

"Do you know why? Or suspect why?" Restinal shrugged.

"Werlin," began the Prime softly, "I am well aware of your other portfolio. Surely, you have employed some of its attributes subsequent to recent events."

"I'm not certain—"

"Werlin . . . why don't you just tell us what you know about Gaetano Verlingetti? Skip the age and marital status, office, and electoral district."

Restinal glanced from one Ecolitan to the other. Both still resembled hungry and impatient cliff eagles. "Ah . . . you know about his political career. His only hobbies we know of are boxball and birdwatching. He travels a great deal to note rare species. He's on the board of a number of foundations on Accord—mostly in the education and political awareness fields. Ah . . . the Good Government Coalition, FORT—that's the Foundation for Restoring Traditions—the Business Support Fund . . ."

"They all contain politically aware and active individuals, I assume?" asked Ferro-Maine. "Oh) very politically aware and active."
"And financially solvent, too," added the Prime. "Does Verlingetti solicit for them?"

Restinal wanted to wipe his forehead, but did not. "That is not certain."
"What is certain, Werlin?"

"Contributions to their efforts have increased since he joined their boards."

"Do you have any idea what kind of contributions?"
"All kinds. Businesses like Flinsew and AgriTech, wealthy individuals like Linsin and Bastien . . ."

"Why would Verlingetti be interested in an economic study on Artos? His interests are all linked to Accord and public policy and ecology matters here

in the Coordinate." Ferro-Maines eyes were hard as she watched Restinal.

"We . . . I don't know, Ecolitan. It might have been a political ploy. We were in a difficult position. Elder Quaestor suggested that with Ecolitan Whalers status, he might consider a study beneath him . . . after the trade agreement. The implication was that the government . . . thought helping a smaller outsystem was beneath us."

"And you swallowed that?"

Restinal shrugged. "What harm could an economic infrastructure study do? Who pays any attention to economics?"

"As opposed to a charge of running an arrogant and highhanded government that cuts deals with the Empire and ignores

small systems who have nothing to offer?" asked the Prime. Restinal nodded.

"Can you add anything else about the study?" asked FerroMaine. "Why did Elder Torine agree?"

"He said he couldn't see any harm in an economic study." Restinal did wipe his forehead, as the questions continued,

seemingly endlessly.

L

Nathaniel shifted his weight in the inclined hospital bed and adjusted the lightweight dark goggles that protected his eyes. Lightweight or not, they tended to dig into his nose and cheeks. Sylvia had said she would be back-but not when. Why had the Prime wanted her this time? Then, while he'd been recovering, Sylvia had been spending a lot of time with Pittsway.

"Jealous . . . ?" he murmured to himself. Why? It was clear she loved Nathaniel, both from actions and words. "Insecure?" Definitely. He wasn't the dashing effective Ecolitan, just an invalid, and he hated being an invalid. Especially one with too much time on his hands to brood.

The nightmares continued-boiling rain, screaming people, and various other imaginary, yet realistic scenarios-and he had few doubts that they would continue for a long time. Yet. . . given all the circumstances, what else could he have done to guarantee that the Conglomerates evils were stopped?

"Great-create an evil, larger evil . . ." His head turned at the faint click.

The door opened, and Sylvia-and the Prime-slipped inside, but not before Nathaniel saw the guards that had accompanied them. "Guards . . . oh, of course."

"I can no longer afford to travel unaccompanied," said the Prime in a humorously dry tone, "now that my anonymity has been destroyed." He gestured toward the inert trideo set in the corner. "They're just about everywhere, and I understand that some faxcasters are flocking in from across the entire Galaxy. To get a profile on the leader of the most villainous Institute in human history."

"I'm sorry . . . oh, sorry, is such . . . what does it mean? You didn't do it.

Prime. I did. I took the ship-

"Ecolitan," interrupted Pittsway, firmly, but not harshly, "I told you to make contingency plans. I ensured that the Secession plan for the Old Earth mission was in those briefing books. I ordered you to take whatever steps you thought necessary. And I told you not to take half-measures. Did I not?"

"Yes, sir. But I was the one-

"You were the one to follow orders. That's correct. And you will pay for that . . . in due time. You will always share in that responsibility, and I could not lift that from either of you. Nor would I, nor will I. At the moment, however, we have an even more immediate problem, and that is to determine who on Accord facilitated the Conglomerates efforts." He smiled sardonically. "We just finished an intriguing, but highly inconclusive interview with Werlin Restinal that sheds more light, but not more proof, on the situation."

"And our study," added Sylvia, "which was a setup, plain and simple. We suspected that, but Restinal confirmed as much."

"This just wasn't someone trying to uncover-" began Nathaniel. "No," said Sylvia. "The study was designed to cover up what

really happened by tying the Institute to the bean plague and the rebellion on Artos."

"Well . . . there was a rebellion," pointed out Nathaniel. "It didn't turn out quite the way most people planned, either," added Sylvia. "I can't imagine Camelot likes the idea of a Frankan system there."

The Prime looked toward the door and cleared his throat. "That can wait . . . for now." Sylvia nodded.

"Then where did the study fit? Why did it trigger everything?" asked Nathaniel. "Did you find out who wanted the study-for real?"

"Quaestors number two, one Delegate Verlingetti," answered Sylvia.

Nathaniel turned. "He's the one who placed Spangall."

"I told the Prime. We were supposed to get killed, and then the bean plague that had already started on Artos would be linked to us, and the Institute."

"And another seed would have been planted discrediting the Institute." Nathaniel wanted to shake his head at the inadvertent pun. "And strengthening the Empires resolve to take military action."

"That would have also discredited Elder Torine and the Normists," pointed out Pittsway. "Because they would have been tagged as the Institute's lackeys. That would have caused the government to fall, and Quaestor and Verlingetti and the Orthodoxists would have taken over."

"But why did Torine go with the suggestion? Or Restinal?"

"We don't know, but I can surmise," said the Prime. "Torine respects the Institute. His hold on the House is too fragile to survive the next election, but he knows that the Institute usually delivers. So he had nothing to lose. He gambled on agreeing to it."

"Verlingetti?" prompted Nathaniel.

"That is interesting. He and Quaestor had to know that they stood a good chance of winning the elections, but they worried that Torine might pull something out of a wormhole." The Prime frowned. "This is speculation now, but I surmise that was the way Verlingetti suggested the idea of the study to Quaestor."

"There's more." Sylvia turned to the Prime. "After you left, I put a team on the bean plague," added the Prime. "I've followed their progress, and we've got a couple of resistant strains. But it's a nasty bug, one that's there's no effective remedy for, once it hits an area. All you can do is replace the beans with the resistant strains. There's already a resistant strain out there, and we've tracked it back from Camelot . . ."

"Through an outfit called AgriTech." Sylvia's eyes were bright. "Which has a small office in Harmony."

"Who sold out?"

"We can't prove it yet, but it seems clear that Verlingetti somehow got access to someone who could develop the bean plague and later, maybe even access to plague-resistant synde beans. What about Dr. Hiense?" asked Sylvia.

The Prime nodded. "Once you mentioned the contact, I had it followed up. There's nothing there-not directly. Hans Hiense is a noted authority on post-planofarming adjustments, but not on plant genetics. He's considered one of the best anywhere. The same contract for fifty years. Three children-all with the Institute, all with outstanding records. Liu Hiense is a martial arts instructor-applied hand-to-hand." Pittsway smiled. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Hiense and Verlingetti play boxball twice a week-regularly. But that's all."

"That might be enough," mused Sylvia, "at least to give Verlingetti an idea of who else to subvert."

"I thought so, too. We're still checking. There are also some credit transfers from AgriTech to several foundations, and all of them have Verlingetti on the board."

"That sounds like an Imperial intrigue," Nathaniel protested. "Accord isn't like that."

"Accord isn't a come-lately society," pointed out Sylvia, "no

matter how much you claim that it is. It might have been when your ancestor took on the Empire, but that was four hundred years ago, and from what all cubes and tapes I've had to digest-

Sorry.

"-Its been even more stable than the Empire. Stability always leads to intrigue."

"So what are we going to do?" asked Nathaniel. "Take a trick out of your bag, dear." Sylvia smiled. "We're going to hold a conference for the media to lay all of this to rest. The Prime has persuaded the top four officers of the House of Delegates, on both sides of the aisle, plus Commerce Minister Restinal, to be on the panel with him to answer all the media questions."

"They agreed?"

"Not exactly willingly," admitted the Prime. "But I was able to persuade them that Accord could not afford internal dissention and squabbling at a time when much of the Galaxy would like an excuse to incinerate or otherwise remove us, and that we needed to get this behind us and provide a united front."

Nathaniel didn't even want to guess at the methods of persuasion.

"It really wasn't that difficult," said Pittsway softly, "since I could say to Elder Torine that it was clear he had personally done nothing wrong."

"Stupid, but not wrong," agreed Sylvia. "And how will a media conference resolve this mess? All we have is speculation and logic--no real proof at all," pointed out Nathaniel.

"If were correct," continued the Prime. "The media conference tomorrow will resolve everything."

"And if were not?"

"Then . . . things will get resolved in another way, one not necessarily in our best interests."

"We take the fall?"

"Ecolitan Whaler," said the Prime somberly, "the Institute will always take the responsibility. The only question is whether we are perceived as thoughtful and responsible killers or weapons addicted, unstable idiots. That is what tomorrow is all about. For the moment, for the next several days, I only ask that you remain silent about anything you may have done after you completed the economic study on Artos. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir . . . but . . ."

"I promise you that I will explain, openly and publicly, and that there will be no evasions, no justifications. The Institute must face this with a responsible, united position. If, after I have acted, you feel that I have not acted ethically and responsibly in any fashion whatsoever, you will be in a position to take any actions your conscience dictates." The Prime rose and nodded toward Sylvia. "Time is short, and I have much to accomplish." Sylvia rose.

"No. You two spend some time together. Try to enjoy it. Such moments get fewer as life demands more of us." A smile creased his face, and his eyes carried the same warmth for a moment. Then he slipped out.

Sylvia sat on the edge of the bed, bent down, and kissed Nathaniels cheek.

"He's right."

"He's always right." The Ecolitan shook his head slowly. "Once . . . I thought I might like being Prime. Then you discover . . . I don't know. I just don't know . . ."

"We will have time to think about it."

"You think so?"

"Yes." Her voice was low. "A long time." He put his arms around her, and she leaned back, her cheek against his, in the dimness of the hospital room.

Nathaniel watched the holo images in the corner of the darkened hospital room. He'd always been a day person, but he wondered if that would last with the sensitivity of his eyes to intense light. He'd start to find out when he was released within the next few days, according to the doctors.

He'd also start to discover if he could sleep better, and with fewer nightmares. He shook his head.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself. . . you did it . . . no one else. . ." His eyes went back to the holo images.

The faxers centered on Gairloch Pittsway as he rose from where he sat behind the center of the table. The hologram image seemed to fill the corner of the hospital room.

"Before we open the conference to questions from the media, as Prime Ecolitan, I have a brief statement to make." The whitehaired Prime surveyed the unseen faxcasters and reporters and who

knew who else, then cleared his throat and spoke directly, without notes, without hesitation.

"This conference is not being held to allow those responsible to point fingers elsewhere. Nor is it held to allow a parade of excuses. Nor is it being held to justify actions. The plain fact is that as Prime Ecolitan of the Ecolitan Institute of Accord, I directed that certain actions be taken to forestall what I determined could lead to Galactiewide war. At the time I took those actions, tens of millions of individuals across the human Galaxy had died or were dying from what I determined was the onset of biological warfare undertaken by the Conglomerate. I did not delegate, nor did I debate. I acted to stop what I believed and still believe would have been an even greater human tragedy. And yes, I also acted to preserve the Coordinate.

"Whether the circumstances would have led to a larger war no one will ever know. Because those circumstances have been drastically changed, no one can know. I determined that actions were necessary, and I am responsible for those actions. Some Ecolitans have died, and others were critically injured. The entire command structure of the Fuardian military and roughly ten million individuals in the Conglomerate have perished as a result of my decisions and actions. It was my decision, and I stand on that decision."

The silence was absolute-but not for long. "Prime Ecolitan, how can you possibly justify any action that caused the death of ten million civilians, no matter what the provocation?"

Pittsways eyes went to the unseen questioner. "I am not trying to justify that action. I made the decision on the basis of the information I had. It is my responsibility. This is not the forum for debating justifications or morality. But in the interests of laying that issue to rest, I will answer the question- once. When people invoke morality in these issues, they haven't the faintest idea what they really mean. The most moral action would have been to take out the entire Fuardian High Command ten years ago, before twenty million people died across a hundred systems. Such an action would scarcely be considered moral. When people talk about morality in interstellar politics, what they really mean is justification. It may be justified that I ordered an action that killed ten million civilians because twenty million had already been killed. Justification is not morality. The only moral aspect is that the action I ordered prevented millions more deaths and a Galactic war." The Prime bowed slightly. "The remainder of the conference is devoted to factual questions. Next?" Nathaniel nodded.

"Are you saying you do not have to justify your high-handed actions?"

"No. I am saying that any action which creates deaths can be debated endlessly as to its justifications. Justification is always after the fact, and, in that sense, is largely irrelevant. I gave the orders. Some people lived who would not have, and others died. For both the living and the dead, I am responsible. Next?"

"You are going to stand here and refuse--"

"I'm not going to debate whys and wherefores today. I'm responsible. No one else is. I'd like the next factual question please."

The hospitalized Ecolitan smiled grimly. Pittsway was what a Prime should be.

"Some analysts have suggested that the attack on Tempte was designed to placate the Empire, rather than a response to a real threat. Would you comment on that?"

"Distribution of the synde bean plague has been traced to a Conglomerate-controlled outlet, as noted in the background materials distributed a short time ago. All Fuard planets began growing and harvesting plague-resistant beans more than a year ago. Deaths in the Empire and other outsystems are nearing twenty million people. Materials implicating the Conglomerate in this and other associated efforts have surfaced in at least three other independent systems. I seriously doubt that the Institute could persuade the Matriarch, for example, to reveal such information were it not so."

A faint laugh echoed through the hall. "Analyses also suggest that a battlecruiser was used. The Institute has claimed it has no battlecruisers. Could you clarify that?"

"A large cargo-carrier was employed, filled with high-mass cargo. The total mass was greater than that of a battlecruiser. The Institute does not have, nor has it ever had a battlecruiser. Next?"

"Who was the pilot?"

"Until the next of kin of all those involved have been notified, names will not be released. In any case, the names are irrelevant, since they carried out my direct orders. Next?"

The predictable questions continued as Nathaniel watched and listened. The Prime remained cool under the glare of what had to be hot lighting and pressure. "Are you claiming that a mere cargo ship . . . ?"

"Were the trade negotiations merely a pretext . . . ?"

"What effect will this have on our system relations . . . ?"

"How can other systems trust the Coordinate after this terrible disaster . . . ?"

Abruptly, the Prime held up his hand. "The questions for me are rehashing those already asked. I would suggest that you now ask any questions that you might have of the elected Delegates."

The images almost jerked to pan down the line of Delegates, showing the ascetic Quaestor, the hearty-looking Torino, a sadfaced Werlin Restinal, and a thin-faced-almost ferret-faced Delegate who sipped from a glass of water a slender Ecolitan Sylvia had placed at his right hand. The name plate before him read Delegate Gaetano Verlingetti.

Nathaniel peered forward before the images shifted back toward Torine. Sylvia? In plain greens, with the darker green stripe of a support staff? "Elder Torine, the briefing materials indicated that much of

the Conglomerate war plot was discovered through a study commissioned by the House of Delegates. Is this true?"

Torine cleared his throat. "So far as the House leadership can determine, that is correct."

"Who suggested this study, sir?"

Torine coughed, shifted his weight before answering. "Both Elder Quaestor and I had discussed this."

"Elder Quaestor, why did you think such a study might be necessary?"

Quaestor shifted his weight as well under the glare of the lights. "While I would like to claim forethought-all politicians would-I assure you, I cannot. The idea surfaced because . . . we were seeking an opening with the new government of New Avalon . . . possibly for agricultural and technological-transfer development trade on Artos. Such trade would not make sense if the need were not there, and a study-an impartial study-was necessary."

"It's been said that Delegate Verlingetti actually suggested the study?"

"He did bring it to my attention." The images shifted again, moving in on Verlingetti. "Delegate Verlingetti, could you explain why you approached Elder Quaestor and suggested that the Institute conduct the economic study that apparently led to the Tinhorn . . . disaster?"

Nathaniel swallowed as Verlingetti opened his mouth, then closed it. "Delegate Verlingetti?" A panicked look crossed the man's face. "Verificants . . ." murmured Nathaniel. Sylvia had dumped fidelitrol into Verlingetti's water, just as she once had to his drink-at a time that seemed so long ago.

"Was the Conglomerate involved with your suggesting the study?"

A slight flutter and sighing intruded over the unseen questioner's words before he finished.

"We . . . were approached by the Conglomerate. They had . . . an agreement with the ArchTories, but the ArchTory government . . . fell . . . before the agreement could be breached or implemented."

"Why would you consider an agreement with the Conglomerate? What would you gain personally . . ."

Verlingetti glanced helplessly into the lights, then stammered, "The leadership of the House of Delegates . . ."

"Would you explain that?"

Verlingetti bolted upright and started to move across the table behind the podium.

At the end of the table. Elder Quaestor buried his head in his hands.

The one set of images vanished, immediately replaced by the image of a young

man at a console, a smile plastered on his face.

"The remainder of the conference here in Harmony has been closed to the media and public. We return you to our normal programming."

The hospitalized Ecolitan shook his head slowly, hoping that Verlingettis inadvertent truth-telling would be enough to ensure the media followed the story to its true end.

After what he'd seen of human nature, he wasn't certain . . . but he could hope. That and wait for Sylvia to return.

In the meantime, the sooner the hospital doctors declared him well, the better . . . nightmares or not.

LII

The wooden door of the Institute hospital opened, and Sylvia

stepped inside, followed by the trim, silvered-haired Prime, who closed the heavy door behind him with a firm click.

"What happened after they closed the conference?" blurted Nathaniel.

"What would you expect?" Gairloch Pittsway smiled crookedly and stepped toward the window, looking out into the late afternoon for a moment before turning back to Nathaniel and Sylvia. "Verlingetti is claiming he was drugged, and the media wants to know why he's opposed to telling the truth. Quaestors insisting he didn't know, and Torines saying nothing. Neither is Restinal."

Nathaniel squinted slightly as he looked toward the Prime and the window. The doctors had told him he'd always be sensitive to bright lights, and that the sensitivity would probably increase

with age. He hoped the nightmares of boiling planets wouldn't. . . but he supposed he deserved those.

"The media has already figured out that Verlingetti was trying a literal coup and they're chasing him, and Quaestor for being his dupe," added Sylvia.

"Do you think Torine wanted the study done because he wanted us to discover the ties between Verlingetti and the Fuards?"

"We don't know that for certain," said the Prime. "But if he did know, Torine couldn't have revealed what he knew because, first, he got the information by less than ethical means, and second, because the Institute is regarded as impartial. If we revealed the connection, then the Normists could take advantage in the upcoming elections. If Torine had to suggest chat, then it would have been an unfounded political charge."

Nathaniel winced. "He was willing to start a war, rather than lose an election?"

"What else is new?" asked Sylvia. "That's been going on since humans were all clustered back on Old Earth, and before probably."

"I hate to mention this . . . but verificants aren't legally accepted ..."

"They don't have to be. With a statement appearing in everyone's house, the media will take it from here. Or Quaestor will, to save what's left of the Orthodoxists." The Prime smiled wryly at Nathaniel. "I'm not sure that any member of the Institute has created as much havoc as you two since your distant ancestor. Are you sure he was that distant?" Pittsway turned toward Sylvia. "Are you sure you want to be associated with such a Galactic menace?"

"Can you think of anyone else better suited?" Sylvia returned the smile.

"Oh . . . and do you still have a few copies of that economic report you completed-on the economic infrastructure of Artos?"

"Yes, sir." Nathaniel took a deep breath. "Good." The Prime paused. "The Matriarch of Halstan has

asked for a copy. So has the Imperial Ministry of Commerce. The Commons of New Avalon wants another two hundred . . . as part of the support documentation for chronicling the disaster."

"They were sent a dozen," said Sylvia. "Those were mislaid, and now they desperately need copies." Pittsway's voice was dry. "Oh, and the Frankan Union has requested a dozen as part of their economic redevelopment effort now that they have occupied Artos. They've appointed a locala Geoffrey Evanston-as their interim Gouverneur General. So I hope your report is. very detailed, detailed enough for all such uses." The Prime winked at Sylvia, then smiled again. Sylvia grinned.

The Ecolitan professor of infrastructure economics took a long and deep breath.

"Now . . . we get to the real business." The Prime walked toward the window and looked out at the mid-afternoon sun. "The real business?"

The two younger Ecolitans exchanged glances. "I have tendered my resignation as Prime. I am claiming responsibility for the destruction of Tempte and the associated damage on Tinhorn. There is a complete file in my office, and the contents will be released to the media with my resignation . . . shortly after my ship breaks orbit." Pittsway turned and held up his hand. "This is the real role of the Prime, and I was unfortunate enough to be here. Now, the documents in the file are correct . . . and false by omission. They contain my directive to destroy the Conglomerate High Command. The name of the pilot is blacked out, and there is an explanation that since the pilot did not survive the mission, his name will not be revealed for two reasons. First, that he was carrying out my orders, and second, that the responsibility was mine alone. His family should not suffer from his decision, and the blame should be mine alone.

"Any other explanation would seem as though the Institute were attempting to shift blame, and we can never allow that to occur. The responsibility is the Prime's and I knew that when you left for Artos." Pittsway smiled, openly and gently. "Your turn will doubtless come." Nathaniel waited, mute.

"Your nomination as Prime has been submitted to the Institute--"

"Mine? After all I've done?"

Pittsway shook his head gently. "No, because of what you've done, although I am the only one who knows all that. The head of the Institute is not a politician. He or she can never be such. The Institute would not survive with leaders who followed political dictates. What ensures the Institute's continuation is not only our skills and abilities, but the absolute knowledge by every human government that we do not bow to politics, that we will not be intimidated, and that we will act when we feel necessary, regardless of the cost. That will must be tempered by the understanding of the weight of such costs. What other Ecolitan is there today who understands better in heart and mind the costs of our actions?"

"I . . . don't know."

"Your nomination as Prime will be accepted, if it has not already been, by the senior Ecolitans. You are a hero of sorts. You slaved off war with the Empire twice, apparently without overt violence. You are respected as talented and diplomatic, if somewhat younger than ideal. Your economic report has already been cited as proof of why the Empire would never have really attacked the Coordinate." The Prime laughed, once. "We know that is a great exaggeration, but, after the fact, it covers everyone's reputation. So, we have already let it be known that you survived numerous attempts on both your lives in an effort to bring this Fuard conspiracy to light, although the last attempt hospitalized you both." Another dry smile crossed Gairloch Pittsways face. "Even that is true in a way. The Fuards did do their best to kill you. All through this trial, you two have been the voices of sweet reason. That is the official position, and you will both ensure it remains that way."

Pittsways eyes went to Sylvia. "You, Ecolitan Ferro-Maine, have been nominated as Director of Infrastructure Communications. That is the official title for what amounts to our intelligence training operations."

"But..."

"I know. You are going to make some ridiculous claim that you have limited experience. Everyone's experience is limited. The most important qualification .that you possess is that you understand the consequences of intelligence operations, their strengths, and their limitations, and that you have survived all three. You are also willing to get the job done without trying to grab all the credit and blame."

The piercing eyes flicked back to Nathaniel. "I've been careful to point out that you, Prime-nominee Whaler, have only flutter and needleboat certification, not large ship experience. I and the unnamed pilot are responsible for the atrocities committed upon the Conglomerate. I did not call them such, but the unfortunate necessities of our times. However, history will call them atrocities."

Pittsways eyes turned even harder as he looked first at Sylvia, then at Nathaniel. "Your somewhat altered appearance may give rise to suspicions that you were impersonated. You will not discuss the actual attack on Tempte, except in general terms, but you will state that you are responsible for all your actions on Artos and New Avalon. That is the way it was and the way it must always remain. No matter what happens, and how it happens, we are responsible for our actions, the Prime most of all."

"But my actions . . ." Nathaniel began. "You are responsible for your actions, all of them, and you will pay for them. Admitting them publicly would be easier, far easier. You would either be dead, or unable to offer any productive service to anyone. You have scarcely begun to pay, as you will

discover once you take on the duties of Prime. I am ensuring that you will pay for your actions . . . every day of the rest of your life." His eyes softened. "The hard part of ensuring responsibility is maintaining responsible initiative on the lower levels. Micromanaging doesn't work. Your fate is in the hands of those who serve you, as mine was in yours. Most of the time it works out well for everyone. Sometimes, it only works out well for humankind, and we pay the price." He paused. "Yes . . . we. I trust you don't think I'm being generous or kind. You, being who you both are, will pay for what has happened for the remainder of your lives, even if nothing else of this magnitude challenges the Institute." After another pause, he added, "And, unless I've misjudged greatly, you will be far more vigilant than any of your former peers could ever imagine.

"Ecolitan Swersa has asked to accompany me. and I have accepted her offer." Gairloch Pittsway shrugged. "One must know when to exit. Remember that when your time comes. But I don't need to tell you that. You both need some rest, because, after comorrow, you wont see any for a very long time." He offered a last, almost sad, smile, then bowed. "Good luck."

In the silence after his departure, the two looked at each other, blankly.

"He's setting himself up as a target," murmured Sylvia. "We're all targets from here on in."

"We always have been. Everyone is—they just don't know it." She sat down on the edge of the bed beside him. "How do you feel about all this? About Tinhorn, about being nominated as Prime?"

"Guilty. What else would you expect? I still don't see any other meaningful alternative that was open, but people died."
"You still think you acted morally?"

Nathaniel laughed, harshly. "That's not the question. Guilt isn't rational. I have to believe I took the only moral course open at the time, but I'll always feel guilty, probably always ask and search to figure out what else might have been possible. That's guilt. Morality. . . I still don't have a moral problem. Oh . . . there will be plenty of people who will claim that what the Institute did is immoral. After all, ten million innocents did die on Tinhorn,

and were all those thousands of soldiers and technicians on Tempte really responsible for the Conglomerates actions? Weren't they just doing their job?" His tone was sardonic. "You are bitter."

"When people scream morality, they don't understand morality. The Prime had it right—they're confusing it with justification, and they refuse to see that. If the Empire and the Federated Hegemony thought they could destroy the Coordinate without retaliation right now, they would, and they'd call it moral. That's not morality, it's fear. They're afraid that they'll be called on their actions before they complete whatever new genocide they might contemplate in the future."

"From what I've seen . . . you're probably right."

"Yet we've never acted first. We have acted before others would, but there have still been plenty of bodies." He swallowed, then continued. "When you talk about morality, and when justice is applied as retribution, what you really do is give people or governments a choice. They can choose to be moral, or they can choose not to be, and take the risk of retribution or possibly getting away with it. When someone or something, like the Institute, even

hints that it won't wait for the immoral action to be completed, everyone cries foul . . . unless the immoral actions are already on so vast a scale that they can't be ignored. In practice, everyone ignores the problem until they can't keep ignoring it. Then, and only then, do they invoke morality."

"Thinking like that, especially out loud, will make you a target as big as Prime Pittsway." Sylvia tried to force a smile. "If they don't find out what you really did first."

"Who will tell them? Only four people know for certain who crewed the ship. That's part of the burden the Prime mentioned."

She shook her head. "We need to get you out of here, to get some rest before you become the designated target as Prime."

The door opened, and a young doctor walked in. "Ah . . . you can go . . . any time. Any time . . ."

"Thank you." Nathaniel looked at Sylvia. "Are we ready for all this?"
"Just keep saying we.' "

"After all that's happened, what else could I say?" What else indeed?

Nathaniel eased his legs over the side of the bed. His greens were in the closet. Sylvia extended an arm, and he took it, gratefully.