

OUTMATCHED

With shocking suddenness, a bizarre creature dropped upon them from the ceiling. It was dark gray with pink streaks, and a beard of green polyps matted its chest region. It had two humanlike legs and a number of long, narrow tentacles.

The thing struck with the hardened tips of tentacles that stabbed flesh as effectively as spears. Men were eviscerated, beheaded, amputated of one or more limbs in a frenzied but brief struggle.

Then Janodo of the Gate hit it with a shotgun blast, in the chest, where green polyps were thick. Blood and fragments spattered the floor.

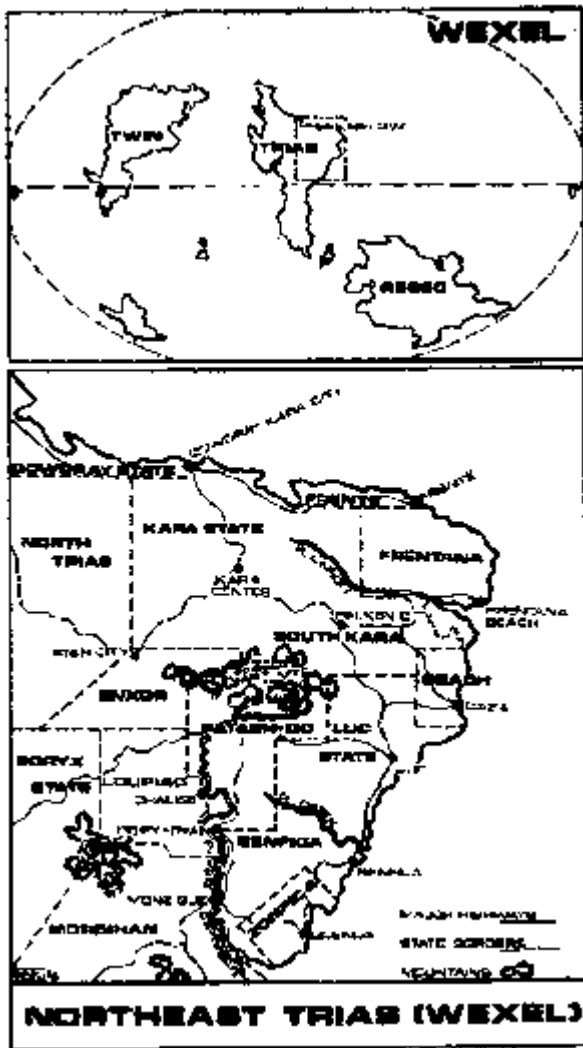
The men stepped back, expecting the thing to fall dead. With another loud hiss, it seized Janodo and bounded out of the cowshed.

THE
VANG:
THE
BATTLEMASTER

CHRISTOPHER ROWLEY



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CHAPTER ONE

THE UNIVERSE IS A THING OF LACY TEXTURES, SUDDEN EXPLOSIONS, cold vastness, frozen foams. On these insubstantial threads and tatters lost in the boundless void, primitive life survives by accident, a thing of the merest margins.

Through the slow tick of time, species have come and gone, their viability tested by climatic change, by asteroid impact, by evolutionary wedging.

The merest handful of species has ever risen beyond their evolutionary envelopes, the limited horizons of their home-worlds.

Of these, a tiny fraction have reached the stars.

In the midst of the fifty-fifth century of spaceflight, the third millennium of the ITAA Era, the human species, originating in the Sol system, was the dominant intelligence within the local galactic arm.

This position had been achieved, however, only through the lucky discovery of the Starhammer weapon. Without this technology bequeathed from an ancient war, the human species would never have broken free from the domination of the laowon, the other Orion-arm bipedal spacegoing species of this era.

However, the discovery of the Starhammer had brought humanity face-to-face with the terrible reason for the great machine's existence, the ancient enemy to all other life, the self-termed Gods of Axone-Neurone.

This complex and largely parasitic lifeform, which had been destroyed by the Starhammer builders in self-defense, was not yet entirely extinct.

A few fragments persisted. Fortunately interstellar space is so vast and empty that most derelicts from the ancient space-reefs of war were lost forever in the dark.

And yet, here, there, they offered a terrible threat, like mines waiting to explode upon the unwary.

In this, of course, we see no more than another roll of the cosmic dice. A form of evolutionary wedging on a galaxy-wide scale. This kind of life, or that; either was possible.

Two thousand years terrestrial standard had passed since the events on Planet Saskatch. Again the dice tumbled from the cup.

The door to doomsday opened a crack once more and went unnoticed. A bleak unsympathetic light flashed out to illuminate the worlds of humanity.

It began with a trifling incident, in the barren hills of the Ruinaris, on Planet Wexel in the Scopus cluster.

Here, on the exposed face of some ancient sandstones, an autopick was drilling in search of gypsum deposits. The bore holes were spaced a couple of meters apart, probing downward toward what on the satellite mineral maps appeared to be a cave system.

Suddenly there came a harsh screech as the autopick's drill hit something harder than mere rock.

This autopick was a Daiko 400, very durable and somewhat stubborn. It pulled out the drill and inserted its hammerpick and hammered at the unbreakable thing for a full minute while rock powdered and blew away in the wind.

Finally it gave up and carefully checked its files. The rock face was a resistant sandstone from the Upper Karavian, some eighty million years old. The geo-survey showed no evidence of volcanics or harder rocks. And even the hardest rock would have given way under the hammerpick.

Baffled, the Daiko called for help.

The message was downloaded at Castle Karvur, fifty kilometers to the south. It was studied by the Karvur Autome, and then left for Count Geezl Karvur's personal attention. The Autome, a programming masterpiece from the Ienjii Software Period, knew that Count Karvur would be interested.

Eventually the count, a tall, gaunt-faced man in extended mid-life, returned from a rampage on his estates.

The twin daughters of a tenant in the West Ward had reached sixteen years. They were betrothed, and the count had made sure to exercise his patronal rights immediately upon their birthday chime. The weeping parents had been bound and gagged by his guards while Lord Geezl, the patron of the district, took the young maidens by force in their own bedchamber.

The Karvur Autome, a rather stuffy software, would not assist the count in such matters. The count cared not, and employed a cameraman instead to film the proceedings for his later amusement.

All in all it had been an excellent break in the dreary life on the Karvur estates.

Now returned to the grim stone pile of Karvur Farm, the count examined his messages.

There were many, and they were all from creditors and lawyers and more creditors and collection agencies, and he blipped them to oblivion with scowls and groans all except the one from the autopick, tagged by the Autome.

The autopick indicated that something large and non-natural underlay the Karavian sandstones. In addition this thing was built of extremely resistant material.

Intrigued, the count flew out to check for himself in his luxurious Baschlit VTOL jet.

Dressed in black rainslick and boots of human hide, Karvur stalked about the site.

He summoned a power shovel, at work a few miles away, and when it had chugged its way over the hill, he put it to removing the sandstone cover over the hidden object. Then he flew away once more, intrigued by this discovery, but not yet obsessed.

A few days later he returned to the site and found a flat surface, a floor, made of a smooth indestructible material with the color of old bone.

Karvur's heart filled with a wild excitement.

It was also apparent that whatever this thing was, it was very large. There seemed no end to the ramifications of it.

The excitement mounted.

For nigh on thirty years now he had been exiled to this drab life on the ancient family estate in the Ruinart Mountains, doomed by a stupid mistake made in the rashness of youth.

He had spent those years searching Karvur Estate for something of value. Something that could bring him enough credit to allow him to return to the old life-style, when he'd had money.

Once, the very name Geezl Karvur had glittered in the celebrity columns of Wexel's greatest cities. He had owned three homes and a yacht with berths for two dozen guests. "Emperor" Geezl, his friends had called him with affectionate mockery, on account of the lavishness of his hospitality.

Alas, poor Geezl had become the victim of a skilled trickster by the name of Lari Afriq. An incredible twenty million in ITAA credits had been borrowed for a giant stock-market maneuver. The maneuver failed; huge amounts of credit disappeared. Finally the collateral for the loan turned out to be entirely Geezl's responsibility as Lari Afriq disappeared from the ruinous scene.

All Geezl had been able to retrieve from the wreck was the ancient Karvur farm in the rainshadow of the Ruinarts.

His lavish homes in Cowdray-Kara City and Frentana Beach were lost, along with the family's ancient mansion in Doisy-Dyan. His yacht was auctioned, his paintings and sculptures, his collection of rare books and historical objects; even the Karvur wine cellar, which had held some magnificent treasures from the Crook Islands, was sold.

The ancient stone farmhouse survived because it was held in trust by the family and never belonged to Geezl personally.

With the farm came the income from the estate, which covered some five thousand square kilometers of oak-infested uplands, and which provided a rather pinched sustenance for less than a hundred peasant families. Anyone with any gumption had long ago fled these parts, and the Karvur peasants were much beaten down.

When all traditional claims on this income were met there was scarcely enough to keep Geezl in fuel for the purple skin-flake Baschlit VTOL jet that was his sole remaining treasure.

He'd sneaked it out of CK City Air&Space under the noses of the creditors, and thus it was the one beautiful thing from the old life he had managed to hang on to.

And thus the count was left with nothing but the homely peasant girls to pursue for his pleasure and the seedy bars in Yellowfork town for solace and wild cronies. These at least were some kind of company. He had little else. His old friends were in the glitter spots of the Twin Continent, thousands of kilometers away.

Furthermore, his own family was an unwelcoming lot. Little better than peasants themselves, they regarded the city-bred lord of the family manor with suspicious eyes from the first.

The titled branch of the family had left the farm centuries ago and had rarely been seen there since. There was little love between the branches of the family, and Geezl was now the last of the wealthy Karvurs and was no longer rich. He had returned, impoverished, to live upon them on account of his birth and title.

Soon there came the tales of woe from the family servants, who were used to living there alone, dining off the Karvur accounts as they had for generations. The city-bred lord was a monster, with perverse ways with women. He drank too much and broke things and wept incoherently at times and was ill on the rugs at others.

The family protested. There were endless wrangles and domestic tempests. The count was unable to wrest complete control of his own income from the grip of the ancient accords. The lawyers in distant courts devoured the rest.

He grew embittered and desperate. He flung himself into one get-rich-quick scheme after another.

He'd tried to raise chickens, but they died of the putrid-rot disease peculiar to Wexel. He sank more money into a woodpulp-farming scheme. Only then did he discover that he was too far from any viable market for the stands of Kenaf he had planted. Worse, the quick-growing Kenaf had become a weed, spreading wildly through the Karvur lands and earning Geezl the hatred of the peasants.

He had searched for oil, for gas, for minerals, for anything of value, in fact. Apart from some gypsum deposits worth a pittance, he had found nothing.

Except for this odd thing, this sheet of unbreakable material that had been found by the autopick.

Geezl was galvanized into frenzied activity. All night he supervised the two machines as they dug around the thing. By daylight the awesome dimensions of what he had found had become clearer.

He had exposed the corner of an irregularly shaped object, something like a fluted spearhead, perhaps; it was as yet difficult to say since so much remained buried.

Even more exciting was the discovery of a rupture in the smooth, unbreakable surface. It was a sharp break, right through the entire thing. This crack was filled with the sandstone again, but it was quickly attacked by the autopick and eventually a cavity was exposed.

Count Karvur experienced an explosion of hopes. This was an archaeological event on the geologic time scale. It would be worth a fortune.

Soon it became apparent that there were dozens of such room-sized chambers, some hexagonal and others that were round.

Spheres, tubes, coils, and loops of the hard white material occupied some rooms, some passages, and some shafts, but not others. It was like some giant three-dimensional puzzle.

The count explored furiously. There had to be something more! Something he could exploit!

So numerous were the cavities and the tubes and passages that interconnected them that the whole vast thing began to resemble a cross between an engine and a sponge to Geezl after a while.

Complexity was piled upon complexity, to a point beyond understanding. What could it all mean?

And then an opening was found to a passage that went down, deep into the heart of the complex workings of the ancient thing.

Geezl lowered a lamp into the depths. It dropped down a smooth tube for three meters or more and came up against a "floor." A number of other passages radiated away from this spot.

Geezl lowered himself into the interior of the maze. Within a few minutes he made the greatest discovery of all.

Trembling with excitement, he hurtled back over the moors to the farm with the purple Baschlit cracking sonic booms over the hamlets and villages.

There he drank wine and cavorted, shouting in a hoarse voice through the front rooms of the ancient house while the servants peered at him from around the doors. Occasionally he hurled a glass into the fireplace, or even out the window.

Later, he calmed and took his supper, then sat brooding into the night, communing with the planning software in his personal computer rather than discussing the matter with the Autome. The Autome's request for time was brusquely rejected. The Autome withdrew to the fastness of its antique computer chest.

Karvur returned to his study of the situation at hand.

A number of obstacles lay in his path, the first being his need for some scientific and technical assistance. He required sophisticated bioanalysis. But it would have to be from a secure source. He could not afford to lose control of this.

Fortunately, Geezl Karvur still had a few old friends that he spoke to occasionally over the net. Although it had been years since he'd last seen any of them, Geezl kept in touch, while keeping his hopes alive of returning to the glittering cities someday.

Now he made inquiries about the life science departments in the various major universities on Planet Wexel.

When his Mends at Cowdray University asked what it was all about, he laughed evasively and claimed to have found a way to produce oil from the excrement of peasants. They chuckled indulgently. Geezl had been living out in the boondocks too long, it was plain; his mind was going.

Eventually, after some careful sifting of information and a number of phone calls, he was ready. He flew north across the east limb of Trias continent to the greatest metropolis on Wexel, Cowdray-Kara City.

From CK Air&Space, he took a taxi out to the campus of Cowdray University, arriving about seven o'clock in the evening.

There he met with one Caroline Reese, an up-and-coming junior professor. They rode up the College Spire to the revolving bar at its top and took seats in a window booth.

"CK City," Karvur murmured with a gesture to the window, where the towers glittered in the distance. He sighed. "I used to love this city. But I see there have been many changes since I was here last."

Indeed there were many unfamiliar towers among the throng around Kara Park. CKC was a restless city, awash with the energies of humanity.

However, while most things changed, some things would always remain the same. Geezl knew that the white yachts would be moored in neat rows at the marina as they had always been.

Couples would be strolling in the Jardin de France. Diners would be taking their places in the hottest restaurants, overlooking the sea.

"You know the city?" said Ms. Reese, a woman in her middle years with tinted blond hair and firm features that showed a slight tendency to fleshiness.

"I used to live here once. I had an apartment in the Prevkyat, do you know it?"

"The Prevkyat! Who does not know the magnificence of all those lovely buildings on the harbor? Who doesn't dream of living there someday?" In fact, Caroline was surprised. The man dressed like a farmer in his best suit, black and plain. He hardly had the look of a magnate from Tidal Row.

"Yes, well." Karvur looked down at the glass of chardonnay in front of him for a moment. "It is about wealth, enormous wealth, that I have come to see you. When we spoke on the phone before you said you were interested in such a proposition."

"Yes, well, of course. Who isn't interested in such possibilities?"

Karvur nodded. "You also said that if such an opportunity were presented to you, you would be prepared to ignore the rules. You would seize the chance with both hands, giving it complete commitment."

There was a sudden glitter of fanaticism about the gaunt man with his overlarge nose. Caroline wondered what the hell she'd gotten herself into this time. She should have known this caller would turn out to be crazy, but she'd given in to her wilder side once again. There'd been something quite persuasive about him. And besides, Caroline was looking for a way out of her present predicament at the department.

His next words stunned her, however.

"I also know that you are unhappy with your present situation here in the life science department," the incredible man said.

"I have done some research on your background, you see."

"What?" She felt a rush of sudden alarm. "What do you mean? Who are you?"

"Please." He held up a hand to calm her. "Please bear with me. I told you I would be investigating you during our previous conversation. You said it would not be a problem."

There was a long, tense moment. Come to think of it, Caroline did recall saying something to that extent. She got her breath back. She hadn't done anything wrong, even if someone was investigating her.

But of course she remembered the horror stories. What if this hatchet-faced man was some kind of ITAA agent provocateur?

"All right, go on then."

"You will not be disappointed, I assure you." Karvur pressed his thin black hair back over his scalp.

"As I was saying, I know that you feel blocked from promotion here at the university. Professor Gottschalk stands squarely in your path. I'd go elsewhere, however, will be difficult. Across the Gran Mer lie the Crook States with their universities, but they have a surplus of professors right now. If you go to North Trios or Dao you'll have to deal with hostile bureaucracies. The Blue Cities of Panshang are equally alien to you, since you speak little Pang or even Chinese."

Caroline's brow furrowed again. He seemed to know an awful lot. He went on relentlessly. "Essentially Cowdray is the best place for you to be, but Gottschalk is in your way. And he always will be. We both know that he is less worthy than yourself, far less intelligent to say the least, but that he has tenure and primacy. To get around him you need a coup, something completely out of the ordinary. I believe I can provide you with that something."

Caroline was staring at the man. He had laid out her career situation with a painful accuracy.

"You know me very well, rather too well, Mr. Karvur."

"Please call me Count. It's the family title, we've held it for centuries now. Anyway, yes, I have been thorough, I won't deny it. But then with something this important I have to be. Still, I think it will make you very rich, if you are interested and if you satisfy me that you will be cooperative."

Count Karvur? An aristocrat from one of the old families, then? Now Caroline was really intrigued. She'd always had a thing about the aristos and their ancient titles.

"And what of yourself? Am I to know nothing more than your name?" she murmured. "I mean, before I commit myself to something I want to know what I'm getting myself into."

"Of course, I will provide all the details necessary, once I have your commitment to complete secrecy concerning this project, even if you decide to decline my offer."

Caroline sipped her wine. It was a lovely sunny evening. A sudden breeze shook the campus elms. A student in a pink jogging suit was running on the grass of the long lawn. Caroline felt infected with the excitement emanating from the rather odd Count Karvur. Was this the opportunity she had been waiting for all these years? She began to feel her hopes rising.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FOLLOWING DAY Count KARVUR CAME TO SEE CAROLINE at the laboratory. He showed her the video of the objects he had found on the Upper Yellowfork. Her interest quickened considerably. She asked to see a sample, and he pulled out what looked like a rather undersized hen's egg.

She handled it gingerly; it felt smooth and hard and light.

"Nothing cuts it, not even diamond," Karvur said. "It must be a ceramic with a diamond-like surface or something similar."

"Quasi-crystalline perhaps," she murmured.

Under his watchful eyes she subjected the egg to various tests. It weighed little more than twelve grams, but a scan showed that it was not hollow. The internal structure appeared to be that of a sponge, filled with small cavities. The surface was indeed uncuttable. She tried a number of chemicals of increasing aggressivity to no effect. Finally she tried subjecting the thing to stresses of various kinds, including the hammer press. It resisted two tons' pressure.

Caroline grew irritable. "Is this thing that valuable?" she asked.

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that I would like to subject it to considerably higher pressures. To find its breaking point."

Having obtained Karvur's permission, she slowly turned up the massing on the hammer press. At forty-seven tons' impact pressure the egg cracked and broke into fragments.

"It has the strength of some structural polycerams, titanosilicates, hi-steel. Very interesting, Count Karvur."

Strangely, Caroline felt better just for having broken the damned thing. The fragments proved more amenable to analysis. A ceramic was definitely indicated.

Caroline pondered the thing through the rest of that day, finally calling Karvur at his hotel that evening. She accepted his offer and the terms of the agreement.

Four days later she flew south, across the upper limb of the continent to the state of Patash-Do. From the capital, the blowsy little city of Doisy-Dyan, she flew to the Upper Yellowfork via Loupiac and Songerfald. They landed within sight of the mighty Ruinarats.

Karvur was there to meet her in a battered, mud-colored ATV, which he drove like a demon over ancient rutted roads to a grim stone house overlooking the moor. The next day they flew up to the excavation site in Karvur's extravagant old Baschlit VTOL.

Once there, Caroline literally felt her eyes bulge in her head as she stared at the things he had uncovered: rooms, tubes, holes; an enormous complex of shapes within some kind of arrowhead-shaped mega-artifact.

"This was all buried under the sandstone. It's at least eighty million years old," he said matter-of-factly.

"Impossible," she said, instinctively.

He spread his hands. "It's here, that's all I know,"

"Wexel had no lifeforms more evolved than fish or insects when humans arrived."

"Your guess is as good as mind, Professor."

She ducked her head inside the excavated cavity.

"And it was empty?"

"Once we cleared out some sandstone we found a lot of it completely empty. There are lots of objects, however; you will see."

Caroline could feel the man's inner excitement as she followed him through the opened crack.

"Come on, you have to look inside," he exulted with the passion of a small boy.

He climbed down a rope ladder glued to the wall. She followed, and at the bottom they moved through a narrow passage. Construction lights activated at his approach, and the passage opened out into a series of chambers, some spherical, some rectangular, all with other passages leading off to other unseen chambers. Within these passages there were shapes like shells that jutted from walls, floor, and ceiling. Tubes crisscrossed some of the rectangular "rooms"; in others they were coiled or arranged like radiators, humping out of the "floor."

"Was this a lifeform of some kind?" she wondered aloud. "A very, very large lifeform?"

"No, I don't think so," Karvur said.

"I thought perhaps it might be the skeleton of some huge creature."

"You will see, believe me."

On they went into the bowels of the monstrous place until they penetrated a heart-shaped room in which a large sphere, two meters across, sat like the lost knucklebone of some prehistoric behemoth. The walls of the room were "scarred" with rough areas that looked to Caroline like adhesion points for muscles six feet wide.

Her eyes bulged once more. A section of the upper surface of the six-foot sphere was translucent: a viewport! The lower surface was ridged and patterned just below this port. Tiny lights were winking in the patterning!

"It's a machine," she gurgled. "An alien machine. By all the gods and goddesses, what have you found?"

"Come, look, see what is inside."

Something that looked like a large jellyfish, pale and pink, floated on a layer of clear gel in which was suspended a network of crimson wires. Stimulated by the light, these wires stirred vaguely in the gel.

Caroline gaped.

"It's alive?" she gasped.

"I don't know. It always does that when you first shine the light on it; those tentacles move."

"I see. At least I think I see. This is what you want me for."

Karvur wasn't listening to her.

"We want to take this thing and find out what it is and how it ticks. Who knows what were dealing with here."

"We would need facilities."

"I will provide a laboratory. I have already set the work in motion. We have an unused cow shed that is being converted.

We cannot afford the most expensive equipment, however, which is why I came to you. You have access to the equipment at the university. Perhaps you will be able to analyze this thing there."

"A cow shed . . ." Caroline almost exploded, and then thought better of it.

"Yes, it is possible." She would do the molecular work at the university, in secret. "Can you move this thing that it's inside of?"

"It rocks when you push it. But it's too large to be removed from here. I have a theory that this entire spherical room was filled with fluid. Indeed, I think this whole structure was filled with fluid. A hydraulic system, although the fluid may not have been water. .

Caroline nodded. "Perhaps this was all at the bottom of an ocean, under great pressure."

"Anything is possible." That streak of anger surfaced in the man's face again. He was rather frightening when that happened. Now he made a curt dismissive gesture. "All that concerns me is this, that I realize the great value of this discovery myself. And that means we must proceed with care. This creature, or

whatever it is, is valuable, but infinitely more so if we keep it alive than if it dies."

"Of course." Caroline Reese suddenly had a vision of herself as the president of the university. Or at the helm of her own research institute. Perhaps a later career in politics; who could say to what heights she could rise on the strength of this incredible discovery!

CHAPTER THREE

THE DESCENT FROM ORBIT HAD BEEN RELATIVELY SMOOTH Luisa Chang had suffered plenty worse. Still, there was a long wait while the shuttle settled into its cradle at the spaceport and locked home. Colonel Chang spent the time gazing out the window.

Planetside at last. Her first ground posting as full colonel, and a real hornets' nest to boot, or so she'd been informed at Scopus Cluster Central Command.

At last the shuffle's doors opened and the passengers began to disembark. "Welcome to Doisy-Dyan Space Center," a disembodied voice murmured from the speakers.

"Welcome to Doisy-Dyan, armpit of the system," said a sarcastic somebody in the crowd in the exit tube.

"Why did they send me back here?" someone else wailed.

"Because you deserved it, of course," the first voice said.

"Yeah, thanks, why didn't I think of that."

The elevators whined, the doors crashed open, and a gust of hot, humid air blew in.

Outside, the glare was tropical, the heat ferocious. Colonel Luisa Chang cut in the attenuators in her bodysuit and felt shafts of coolness spread across her chest, back, belly and crotch. Her screens had already shifted to mirrorshade against the glare.

This was Wexel, a tropical world, a troubled world. An exciting challenge. This was where her career was going to take off.

But the air was pretty damn stifling, and there were certainly no comforts, no extra burdens on the ITAA taxpayers in view.

No air-conditioned arrivals lounge, that was certain. Instead there was a barnlike room that was hotter than hell and virtually empty while a crowd waited outside in their air-conditioned vehicles.

Even with the attenuators she was starting to feel icky and sticky in that room. Everything was just gross; there was dirt everywhere. Her skin was beginning to crawl. She realized she'd been in space too long again. Planets were organic, inherently dirty. She knew she'd get used to it.

A few straggly trees, some squat gray buildings, and some kind of gantry were all visible at one end of the vast expanse of hot tarmac. In front, the shuttle cooled in its enormous cradle, a bulky thing like a cross between a catcher's mitt and a radio telescope. Around the base of the cradle crouched a group of trucks and tankers.

"Colonel Chang." A young man in white shorts and a gray T-shirt was saluting in front of her. Behind him was a dusty white ATV. He had sandals on his feet. He, too, had mirror-shades but no hat.

Not much of a welcoming committee, she thought, as she slung her personal bag into the back of the ATV. The driver was scarcely wearing clothes, let alone a uniform.

His salute had been sloppy, too.

Chang chewed her lip. They'd told her this was going to be tough. This was Planet Wexel, an infamous eco-disaster world of slash-and-bum agriculture and blatant industrial pollution.

In the aftermath of the Laowon Era, Wexel had succumbed to a pathological politics dominated by a tiny aristocratic elite.

Immense regions were ruled by the gun rather than the ballot.

Intense poverty had become the lot of millions in the repressive tropical states. The ITAA was increasingly concerned.

Her bags arrived at last, shoved in place by a couple of perspiring porters wearing locators clipped to their heads. The locators marked them out as property of the Patash-Do State Prison System.

The ATV moved out. Chang stared out at the terminal buildings as they went past. The paint was dull; there was a broken window on the ground floor.

A rusting truck was set up on blocks in a cargo bay. They passed through an unmanned gatepost and turned onto a four-lane approach highway. Various ramps joined the road as it curved down to meet a six-lane highway.

The roads were in terrible shape, truly terrible, with potholes like craters, and broken railings, rusted and torn, projecting up like daggers in places.

The highway was flanked by endless billboards, which jammed the view in an unbroken line leading into the distance. They were a peculiar *mélange* of images. Among the commercial ones advertising beer and household products there were many that amounted to enormous written demands for the execution of this or that specific person. These demands were written in stark headline black, charging so-and-so with subversion of the State of Patash-Do and demanding the death penalty on behalf of the Committee for the Preservation of Society.

Some of the other billboards featured enormous skulls, with a conspicuous bullet hole through the forehead. Beneath this was a slogan: "Get them first and they can't get you!"

Soap, video, beer, and skulls with bullet holes. Chang winced.

The ATV bounced through a section of raggedy concrete and rusted-out steel dividers.

The city of Doisy-Dyan lay dead ahead, a small tower park of black buildings. Black glass and steeltone filments were clearly popular with local architects.

The billboards petered out as they drew through residential areas. Small suburban towns of stone and

brick were followed by buildings set behind high redbrick walls. Data-beam reflectors, made from warped squares of glass, sat atop fifty-foot-high poles at every corner.

Ground cars with a military rake and conspicuous armor plate dominated the traffic. Donkey carts and rickshaws filled up the slow lanes.

Farther in, the buildings became more general, with taller structures, gaunt tenements, glass blocks. Bars, restaurants, and shops lined the streets.

In a public plaza there loomed a sculpture with a remarkable resemblance to a giant guillotine. Chang stared at it with startled eyes. Then they were past it and the view ahead broadened as they approached a wide, mud-colored river.

A bridge loomed, a rusting green colossus. Then the view vanished. The bridge was walled in with more billboards, mostly of the commercial variety.

"Chugga-Chugga-Chug-Chug-Chug" one shrieked in yellow letters. "Chug beer, the best!" another howled.

Chang murmured to herself in quiet disgust.

The ATV plunged forward. There was a brief continuation of the urban scene. Ancient buildings of considerable size, their stone walls a murky black from soot, lined the roads. Tenement alleys, teeming with people, led away from the road. And then the city was behind them and the walls of an ITAA barracks rose up ahead.

The MPs on duty at the gate were at least in uniform, although they said nothing to the driver about his clear violations of dress regs.

The barracks consisted of a two-story administrative block in red brick and a group of green armortac buildings that huddled and clumped behind the admin block.

At the main entrance to the admin building a laconic pair of lieutenants was waiting for her. Neither was in proper uniform either, but from overdressing rather than under.

After introductions Chang was escorted to her new office through a building that was clean but scruffy. Again there was a crying need for a new coat of paint.

She was left alone with the man she was replacing, one Colonel Avatar Huron.

Chang left the shades on. She'd been given a thorough briefing on this command. Colonel Huron had not come out of the briefing very well. Then, it had to be noted, no one had done well in command at this post in centuries. One reason they'd selected Luisa Chang for the position.

"Welcome to Wexel, Colonel Chang." Huron was a beefy, red-faced type-seriously overweight, too.

"Thank you, Colonel Huron." At his invitation Chang went around the desk and sat in Huron's chair.

Huron smiled, enigmatically. He had heard they'd brought in a hotshot, a scorcher from Cluster Command. A female colonel in the Orbital Marine Corps, one who'd passed out first in her class at Academy. She was just the type to get chewed up bad in this hellhole.

"Perhaps I should bring you up to the moment in affairs around here," he said. "Some of the characters you'll be dealing with." He began pacing up and down.

"Yes, please do."

"First of all, Blake wants watching, he's devious and sly and prone to ignoring orders of all types."

"Captain Blake, 624 OSF?"

"That's the one, a difficult man if ever I met one."

"Mmm, I see," she said, wondering really. Blake had a near incredible combat record.

"Captain Cachester, of course, is out to destroy you. You need to be aware that the Fleet officers here are crazier than any you've ever met before. Guaranteed!" Hrudna rubbed his hands together as if anticipating Luisa's troubles ahead with considerable pleasure.

"I see," she said. Cachester had virtually no combat record whatsoever. Instead he'd spent most of his career on Wexel, two consecutive five-year stretches. He was known to be a favorite of Admiral Heidheim, however.

"What else do I have to look forward to?" she said.

"Commodore Benx!" Hrudna beamed.

"He's said to be difficult."

"Hah! Difficult, eh? He's as prickly as a spine toad and almost as venomous. Completely in cahoots with the Cowdrays who control the smuggling through Cowdray-Kara Air&Space. I advise you to have as little to do with him as possible."

"They told me I would have my bands full here."

"No doubt at all," said Hrudna, who proceeded to work his way through the other staffing problems she faced before launching into a general lecture on the intractable nature of evil old Wexel.

Finally Hrudna finished and, after mercifully brief farewells to the office staff, headed for the spaceport. Luisa was left to stow her gear in her quarters and look around the barracks.

In the evening there was supposed to be a reception for a new CO in the officers' mess, a narrow room on the top floor of the admin block. Portraits of previous commanders of the 624 Orbital Strike Force were grouped on the walls by era. Battle flags with famous names, from Hector to Idanthus and Melgijion, hung from the ceiling.

Chang found the place almost empty. A couple of staff sergeants were drinking beer in a corner, and there were a few staff orderlies on hand to fetch drinks and snacks, but there were no officers.

She hesitated for a moment and then went over and got a beer herself and joined the staff sergeants, Ronx and Lagedeen.

"We haven't met but I feel I know you, you were in so much of the briefing material."

Ronx was a big cheerful man with a face composed of brown slabs. "That's because we pretty much run this place."

"Without me and Ronko this place would grind to a halt," Lagedeen said, raising his beer can to her and then taking a hit. Lagedeen was a big-bellied man with a round, red face and twinkling eyes.

"And don't forget Povet, she's one of us, too."

"Yeah, you'll meet her later, I'm sure, Colonel." She sipped the beer; it wasn't great but it was cold.

"Where's everybody else, do you think?" she ventured.

"There's gladiators on TV," Ronx said.

"Yeah, the Fleet boys here are heavy gamblers. All the sports they bet on."

"They'll be here right after the nine-hour bell. You'll see."

"Except Blake, of course."

"Oh, why is that, he's fighting on TV himself?"

Lagedeen chuckled. "He'd have to be in your briefing, eh? The way he goes on."

These two were a regular old pair of charmers, she decided.

The briefs on them said they were bought, but cheap. But then they did not control the areas where money could be really made, the spaceports on Wexel. It was the Fleet Officers Corps here that was the problem.

"So where might the heroic Captain Blake be?" she said quietly.

"Ah, well," Lagedeen said.

Ronx waved a hand. "He's upcountry. Somewhere in the Skullas, chasing Liberators again."

"Won't see him till tomorrow," said Lagedeen.

"The captain takes field duty often?"

"All the time, hardly ever stays here. Of course, it ain't safe for him here, you know. The CPS is trying to kill him again."

"The Committee for the Preservation of Society," said Lagedeen helpfully.

"Yes, of course."

"Very important down here in Doisy-Dyan."

"They've tried before?"

Ronx and Lagedeen chuckled together. "Oh, you bet they have. But that Blake, he's a wild one."

"Best security man I've ever seen. You want to know something?" Lagedeen became conspiratorial and dropped his voice to a whisper. "I think he's Military Intelligence. Not just that he's crazy, with that combat record of his that's what you'd expect, but there's something else. He's just too damn good for it to be anything else."

Ronx chuckled. "Charlie, you got a helluva imagination."

Luisa sipped beer. It was possible. Blake could well be from the Third Directorate, the Military Intelligence service that stiffened the spine of ITAA structure. The situation here was mucky enough; there was no reason not to expect MI intrusion.

The nine-hour bell went. Within seconds the officers-a-half-dozen fleet ensigns, two lieutenants, and Captain Cachester---- were in the mess.

Captain Cachester introduced himself with a firm handshake and then a salute. The salute was exaggerated; some of the other men laughed.

He was a tall, good-looking fellow with hair allowed to gray atop a craggy profile. Physically he was in his mid-forties, with a paunch and other signs of a lack of exercise. His manner was affable and outgoing.

"Welcome to Doisy-Dyan, Colonel. I hope you have a good stay."

"So do I, Captain, so do I."

There was an opacity about Cachester that was vaguely alarming. Here was a man out to be mysterious.

"Of course, we've all been briefed, Colonel. We all know that you've been decorated for field service, for instance. We know you've served two five-year terms, too. So we're aware of what a distinguished field officer we have joining us. I'm sure once you've shaken down you'll find your role to play."

Role to play? she wondered to herself, and was too stunned for a moment to reply.

Cachester moved close and tried to put a hand on her shoulder, preparatory to slipping his arm over her shoulder and taking social possession of her and the situation.

Luisa sidestepped the hand and moved to keep her personal space inviolate. This was basic primate behavior, she thought, and Cachester was attempting to assert a crude kind of physical dominance.

She knew he knew perfectly well what he was doing.

She thought briefly of kicking him in the right kidney preparatory to rendering him unconscious, but got a grip on herself and favored him with an opaque smile.

Cachester let her know that he knew that she knew that the battle was on.

"This way, Colonel Chang."

In short order Luisa met the other officers and NCOs and tried to place them in the briefing structures. Captain Basonth and Lieutenant Crook, sergeants Molder and Drambeek, ensigns Younts, Kishuki, and Bladeev, all the young men and women who represented the ITAA Fleet Officers Corps on Wexel.

Finally, there was Major Yang, who had just flown in from Cowdray-Kara. As chief The Air officer, Yang was another new element in the picture. Tac Air Command had shifted his predecessor without warning Scopus Central. That had Chang's superiors wondering if Tac Air was siding with Fleet Command in the coming struggle for Wexel's military.

The only important absentees, in fact, were Commodore Benx, who did not even send a welcoming message, and OSF Captain Blake, who was rarely to be found in Doisy-Dyan by all accounts.

After a while she found herself out on a veranda, alone at the far end of the mess.

She had her work cut out for her.

The tropical night had fallen across the landscape, veiling everything in a dusky velvet. She could see the scattered lights of Doisy-Dyan and the cars on the highway in the mid-distance. Tumbled slum tenements poked through the tree cover.

A cool breeze was blowing in off the river, taking off some of the steaming heat of the day.

Suddenly there was the unmistakable sound of an automatic weapon. There was a long burst, then a short one, and then silence.

Ronx stuck his head out the door. "That was in Chaleban, probably Plum Street again," he said with an air of certainty.

Cachester was there. She gave him a questioning look.

"Local death squad again, I'm afraid," he murmured.

"Death squad?" she said.

"Sorry, our slang for the local police," Cachester said.

"What is going on out there?"

Cachester compressed his lips and studied the drink in his hand. "Well, probably some slum dwellers have just been put against a wall and shot. After being accused of liberating."

"By the local police?"

"Off-duty, of course. It's evening work, but they're well paid. It's all taken care of."

Chang bristled at the implications. "Who pays for this off-duty slaughter?"

Cachester looked very uncomfortable. "Well, the CPS, of course."

"The Committee for the Preservation of Society?"

"Of course, very active here in Doisy-Dyan, all of Patash-Do in fact."

"A legal body, accredited to the ITAA."

"Of course." Cachester frowned. "Look, Colonel, I feel there are some things we should talk about, but privately. It would be best that way. Perhaps tomorrow morning at my office."

Chang noticed a pair of orderlies staring at her with luminous eyes, absolutely attuned to her very next words.

"You have to understand how it is here." Cachester was practically whispering. "There's virtually no middle class, just the top and the bottom. The Liberators are considered nothing but thieves and terrorists."

She looked away, out across the highway to the tumbledown tenements, floating there in the velvet night.

Somewhere an ambulance was wailing.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NEXT MORNING CHANG ARRIVED IN HER OFFICE EARLY, equipped with a debugging device. When switched on it blew a dozen small listening thingies hidden in the room and announced the presence of a very skillfully designed passive device that was built into the lamp on the desk.

Luisa removed the lamp along with what remained of Hrudna's papers and dumped it in the outer office. She also tossed out all the computing equipment; it, too, was hopelessly compromised. She substituted her own briefcase computer, a lovely old Strand that had been in her family for generations. It had a very pleasing male voice, and for some reason Luisa always preferred male computer voices.

Then she worked through the mound of reports on the desk. Conflicts abounded, outrages were commonplace. Lebanonization was widespread, economic terrorism virtually the norm in some places. Here, "Liberators" broke into warehouses, slaughtered merchants, and made off with the trade goods. There, "Regulators" swept through peasant villages hauling out young men and executing them at the roadside.

In Luc Province, Liberators had stormed the town of Jajuste and carried out a frightful massacre of the inhabitants, who were accused of profiteering on the backs of the peasants.

In Fourcas Province, a mercenary band known as the Greedy Dogs had been squeezing the people and towns for months, killing wantonly whenever their demands were not met.

In Fourcas's neighbor Shamsoon Province, there was virtually civil war raging between the Dengs and the Catroon clan.

Artillery barrages had taken a hundred lives in the past two weeks.

In Azoma on the Twin Continent, Male Cultists continued to practice infanticide on female children despite repeated interventions by the ITAA forces. In Chungyan Province, a local ruler had slain more

than a hundred villagers after they banded together to oppose his theft of their irrigation water.

It went on and on, a litany of crimes and horrors, to make one wonder at the collective sanity of the population of Wexel. After half an hour Chang finished skimming the pile and pushed it aside.

She took a breath and switched to another set of reports, which she brought out of her own briefcase and scanned on the Strand's screen. These reports concerned the officers and troops of the ITAA Wexel Command.

She was still at work on these when her secretary Forsht checked in, twelve minutes late. Forsht was a plump, overly well-fed youth, a sub-corporal from the 624 transport section. His salute was sloppy; his uniform was a mess of garish nonregulation items.

Chang dismissed Forsht on the spot and sent him back to the transport section as a private. She used the Strand to track down a female sergeant, named Povet, who worked in the central administration section.

Jean Povet arrived within a minute. Her uniform was simple and correct. She knew how to salute. She gave off an impression of solid efficiency. Chang knew she'd been bought but that she wasn't a greedy sort. Lagedeen and Ronx had a high opinion of her. She needed friends here; to do what she was going to do later she first had to build bridges.

"I need a new secretary, Sergeant," Chang said.

"Excuse me, sir, but what happened to Corporal Forsht? He was Colonel Hrudna's secretary."

"Private Forsht has returned to his posting in the transport section. You will be the new secretary here."

"Yes, sir." Povet exhibited a wary degree of enthusiasm.

"I have examined your record very closely, Sergeant Povet. I think we will get along. I like things done by the regulation, by the code, and by the book. That means I want ITAA uniform to be worn correctly at all times by those on duty. I want regulations concerning punctuality and duty time to be rigorously enforced. This unit will pull itself together and demonstrate the proper ITAA spirit or I will have everyone's hide. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir!" Povet continued her cautious approval.

Luisa thought she and Povet might get along well.

"Right, then get on with moving yourself up here and then book me a meeting with Sergeant Ronx. The MP section on this post needs a few lessons on the dress regs, I believe."

Povet vanished, still smiling.

Chang turned her attention to the oddly evasive Captain Nathaniel Blake.

His file indicated a record of battle honors like none she'd ever seen before. A veteran of the fighting on Planet Kursk as well as the Malan cluster, he had numerous decorations, including the ITAA Silver Star, the highest award available for conspicuous courage in the face of enemy fire.

The recent comments in the file, however, placed there by previous commanders on Wexel, gave a more negative picture.

"Headstrong," "oblivious to orders," "insubordinate and wild"; they formed an unbroken litany of condemnation. At the same time the captain was mentioned for his involvement in dozens, hundreds of policing incidents. A sample showed most to have been successful.

Chang was left to wonder. She had already sent out an order for Blake to present himself in her office as soon as he reappeared on base. As yet this order had produced not a trace of the man.

Chang had a working lunch with Sergeant Povet, some yogurt and fruit with a cup of instacaf to follow. They discussed the base and its situation. Chang found that as Povet saw it, the base was more decoration than anything else. The ITAA presence on Wexel had been neutralized, at the local level, through generations of accommodation and bribery.

Finally, at 1400 hours there was a knock at the door and a somewhat dusty Captain Blake appeared. Chang felt a degree of disappointment at the sheer ordinariness of the man. She'd expected a real tiger, but this fellow was rather nondescript in appearance. One-point-nine meters tall, about two hundred pounds, with short graying hair and a slightly pudgy look to his face, he was hardly of the heroic mold.

It was the eyes, however, that belied the rest. They were cold and hard, like gimlets of blue fire.

He was wearing well-worn combat fatigues with sweat stains, and dusty boots. The holster for his side arm seemed as worn as the rest of him. He saluted with minimal style.

"Captain Blake, we meet at last," she said. "Please take a seat"

She kept him waiting a few moments while she finished a memo and sent it off via the Strand.

"Now, Captain. We can talk."

"I'm the new commanding officer here; Hrudna has gone."

"Yes, sir, I know that."

"Good, you know that."

Blake leaned forward with an earnest expression.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be at the welcoming party last night, Colonel, but I had something I had to check into."

"I've been told that you're not much of a man for parties anyway, Captain Blake."

"Well, they may be right. I'm generally too busy."

"And what were you doing last night, then?"

"You heard me."

"Well, sir, we had a report that indicated that we might be able to intercept a particular group of

Regulators in the act of committing an atrocity."

"Where, who, and what?"

"In the Skullas Hills, sir. The Regulators are in the employ of Lord Schreck of Ganover. We thought they would be sweeping the villages."

"And were they?"

"No. They were busy elsewhere. In Cusifat, where they hanged five youths accused of liberating."

"And were they Liberators?"

"No, sir, just petty thieves. Most of the people executed for liberating are either thieves or unlucky."

"Unlucky?"

"Unlucky enough to fall afoul of some lord or lady connected to the Ownership."

"Ah, the Ownership, a mysterious entity that is much discussed in the learned articles. You affirm that it exists."

"Certainly, sir. It has different names in different provinces but essentially it is the same thing. An oligarchy that was produced in the violent overthrow of the laowon and which has endured ever since."

"A selfish oligarchy?"

"A good description, Colonel. Ah, Colonel, sir, may I ask a question?"

"Certainly, go ahead, Captain."

"I'm sorry to ask this, sir, but! want to know if you had a security sweep in here for listening devices."

Chang nodded, "I found a few things; one was very subtle, built into the light fixture."

Blake hunched forward. "They'll be replaced tonight, you can be sure of that. And if you do continue to sweep, they'll simply read your window."

"Laser reflection, eh?"

"Of course, sir."

"Well, I'll put a vibrator on the window, then."

"Sir? You might want to consider a Taldish system; it's cumbersome, but I know it's effective."

Taldish devices everywhere, roaming the walls like big metal cockroaches, vibrators on every corner, every aperture. Chang sighed.

"I will have to take steps, I can see."

"Sir, may I speak freely?"

"You may, Captain."

"This is Wexel, sir; there are spies everywhere. Security cannot be trusted."

"ITAA Security?"

"Yes, sir. Who told Lord Schreck's Regulators to work in Cusifat last night? Our security leaks like a sieve, sir. It's getting out of hand lately."

"Tell me, Captain Blake, how have you survived here? You've served five years now."

"I try and stay unpredictable. It comes and goes."

"They've tried?"

"About twelve times now."

"I see." Chang felt a sudden gust of apprehension. How was she going to overturn all this?

"Sir, I must emphasize the security problem. Because if they think you're going to go against them they'll kill you. Or just see that you're injured so badly you're transferred elsewhere. They have a total disregard for any consequences."

She hesitated for a moment. This was an extremely frank conversation; she was a little surprised. If Blake was MI, wouldn't he be more reticent?

"Who are 'they'?"

"The Committee for the Preservation of Society would do the job. They regulate Doisy-Dyan."

"And who do they report to?"

"You want particulars right now, Colonel?"

"No, just generalities."

"The Committee is dominated here by the Plantain family, but names like Bourcey and Shogt should be noted. Police Chief Hafka is one of them, of course."

"And they represent the tiny oligarchy that murders anyone who stands against them?"

"You know, sir, I've heard that murder rate described as 'nature's way of keeping things stable.' A fourteen-year-old girl, daughter of a very wealthy family, told me that as matter of fact, as if she was talking about putting down rabid dogs."

Chang sighed. "Why do you think the ITAA force has been so ineffective?" she said.

"Fear and greed, sir. They usually grease the commanding officers real good and then terrorize the rest."

"So what you're saying is that I'm up against a planetwide conspiracy by the landowning elite."

"It's as natural to them as breathing, I'm afraid."

"Mmm, well, if I'm to believe that then I have to rate my own chances of changing things as poor."

"Not if you can stay alive, sir."

"Yes, and how would you suggest I do that, Captain?"

"Put yourself in my hands, Colonel. Don't let Cachester have anything to do with your personal security. Don't ever sleep in the same place twice in a row, make all your movements unpredictable. Never ride in the same ATV, never depend on anyone else to do your security sweep."

Luisa Chang felt a mounting sense of panic. These were ideas that'd already occurred to her and been dismissed as paranoid.

"Well, thank you for your kind offer, Captain. Your advice is sound and I will certainly take precautions. However, I will take care of my own security needs. I hope we can work together to make some changes here."

"I have ten months left to serve here, sir, and then I'm afraid you'll be on your own. Don't take too much time, sir; act quickly or you will never get the chance."

"Yes, Captain, well, I'll see. I like to set my own timetable."

Blake looked down. "Whatever you say, Colonel, sir." He sounded as if he had already consigned her to the ash heap of history.

Chang composed herself. "In the meantime, Captain, I want to get a feel for the ground situation. I would like to accompany you on a patrol. When are you going out next?"

Blake was not surprised by her request; he'd read her file. "Oh-eight-hundred hours tomorrow morning, sir. We're going back to the Skullas."

"Really, you think the Regulators will be out once more?"

"We do, sir. The harvest has been dismal in the region and the tax collectors have been squeezing harder and harder on the poor. There's nothing left, so the people have taken up liberating once more."

"Stealing back their own produce, I take it."

"That's about the size of it, sir."

"You'll be patrolling through the villages there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well in that case, Captain, you can expect me."

"Look forward to it, sir." He hesitated a moment, then nodded to the small scarlet combat strip she wore on her tunic. "You were at Kursk, I believe, Colonel."

"That's right, Captain, and you were there, too."

"I saw Strantung, after it was captured."

"Not a pretty sight, Captain. That was fierce fighting that day."

"I was there with the 24th Orbital Division, General Licino's division."

"I remember the 24th well. We were relieved by units from the 24th. I was with the Advanced CF, nominally the 42nd Orbital, but we hadn't seen anybody from Division in months by that point."

Blake hid a small smile—a carefully hoarded thing, she imagined.

"So our paths cross once more, Captain. See you tomorrow morning."

Blake left.

Chang spun her chair and put her hands to her temples.

No wonder Sector General Nomura had warned her against taking this job.

He'd sent her a character poem just before she left.

The rock waits,

The waves are not gentle

The ship comes

Who will watch the sky?

Captain Cachester called. "Colonel, Is waiting for you in my office. We must talk."

Chang smiled. Cachester was so relentless. "Captain, I'm afraid I've been rather busy this morning, why don't we schedule this meeting for later today, in my office."

"Colonel." Cachester became very serious. "It is very important that we meet. You have to know how it is around here."

"Well, Captain Cachester, I believe I'm getting an idea or two about how it is around here."

"The situation is complex, Colonel. As you know, there are extremes of social disparity, a great deal of poverty."

"And a tech level in places akin to the Stone Age, too."

"I'm afraid it's been this way for centuries, sir."

"Indeed, and it is up to the ITAA to try and do something about it in this century."

"Why not pop over right now?" Cachester said.

"I'm afraid that would be impossible. Why don't we meet, here, at five this afternoon?"

Cachester displayed his level teeth in a wintry little grin. "A better idea, since you're so busy getting settled today, Colonel. Why not meet here for breakfast tomorrow morning. I can have Chakes fetch up whatever you like from the canteen."

Chang shrugged. "I'm afraid I'm on the move tomorrow, all day, starting very early, so I can't make any appointments at all.

I won't be back here till very late."

Cachester put a hand to his forehead as if he were suddenly in great pain. "Blake," he groaned aloud in a theatrical tone.

"I should have known it. He's got at you and got you running off on one of his wild-goose chases."

Luisa kept smiling. Cachester grew impatient with her.

"Colonel, I have to speak frankly, to protect you. You don't know Blake, I'm afraid. He's been here too long and he fights all our attempts to have him reassigned. He's become infected with Liberator attitudes, I'm afraid. Personally I think he's overdue for a psych assessment."

"Liberator attitudes?"

"Well, sir, he just automatically takes a position against the leading elements of society here. Every time, sir; it's so predictable it's pathetic. I mean, we're dealing with an ancient civilization here, sir; Wexel has just basically gone its own way. It's no good condemning everyone here because they don't live up to ITAA technocrat standards. Everyone who serves here comes to realize that after a while, but Blake, well, he's become an extremist."

"You have some kind of evidence to back up these charges against Captain Blake?"

"Evidence?"

"Yes, Captain, proof that what you say is true."

"Well, I guess so, sir."

"Then bring it to me, I want to study it at once."

"It may take time to assemble, sir, I mean."

"I don't want excuses, Captain, I want evidence, understood?"

Cachester bristled. "Colonel, mine is a Fleet command, I don't think your authority runs that far."

Chang was no longer smiling. "Read your orders, Captain."

Scopus Central has posted me here on full Planetary Command, Directive Nine. If you disagree with the orders I suggest you take it up with Admiral Heldheim at Sector Fleet."

Cachester glowered at her.

"But until that order is rescinded I am planetary commander and that means everyone here, including all Fleet officers, is under my authority."

"Does Commodore Benx know about this, sir?"

"He should, if he's looked at his orders."

"I had better call him and make sure that he has, Colonel.

The commodore is a very busy man."

"That sounds like a good idea to me, Captain. Tell Benx to call me."

"I will, Colonel, count on it."

CHAPTER FIVE

IT WAS NIGHTFALL BEFORE THE VTOL FINALLY SET DOWN AT Karvur Farm. The weather was atrocious, with rain driving in horizontal sheets while the winds moaned down from the moor.

Caroline awoke from a doze in which she'd dreamed of water weeds, alive and writhing like worms, reaching up to the dim brown light of a dying sun. It was an unsettling dream.

The engines cut off, leaving nothing but the wind. Some small lights ahead showed that Karvur's servants were coming. A door opened in the dark mass of the house, and yellow light spilled out for a moment.

"We're here," said Karvur. Caroline nodded, still not completely awake.

"We should unload right away; I'm still worried about the battery power. I want to get it hooked up to the farm grid as quickly as possible."

Caroline observed further signs of strain in Karvur's gaunt, harried face. He popped open the door on his side of the compartment and a blast of wind and rain came in that sent her scurrying for her parka.

She pushed open the hatch and slid out into a world of wind and water.

Karvur was at the rear, the ramp was down, and he had activated the robot loader, which was inching down the ramp with the calving machine gripped tight on its lower platform. The calving machine, an artificial womb, was a cubical tank slightly less than a meter in width, with supporting machinery clustered around the base.

The servants bustled around Karvur, irritating him with their desire to help until he drove them away

with orders to run hot baths and put out hot food.

Then, walking beside the loader, he headed for the cow shed.

Caroline stumbled along behind, although in reality she was so exhausted she would much rather have headed for the warm kitchen inside the rambling farmhouse.

The cow shed was cold and empty. Harsh light from a set of fluoros in the ceiling revealed damp rime crusts on the ancient flagstones. The separate pens were made of steel, worn from centuries, even millennia, of use.

Set up at one end, with a protective screen, was a large wooden table. Power leads had been laid out across the table. A portable computer and other devices were set up nearby.

Now the loader set the calving machine on the table and backed away. Karvur dragged the leads across and began connecting them.

Caroline checked the machine; its screen image was still tight and sharp. Inside the artificial womb, the alien thing continued to float, little more than a blob of jelly the size of a big yam.

Occasionally its tentacles stirred in the gel.

Caroline recalled the gurgling sound and the odd stink when they'd broken into the alien machine and then poured the contents into this calving device. They'd had to do it to remove the alien from the interior of the ship or whatever it was that Karvur had exposed beneath the rocks. Even the calving machine had been a tight fit in some of the tunnels near the surface.

"Everything's working properly," she said.

Karvur attached the power cable and opened the connection. Then he disconnected the battery.

The machine checked itself and reported no faults.

"The batteries worked, then," Karvur muttered. "Thank the ancestors for that, eh?"

"They were that old?"

He laughed. "Everything I own is old. This farm has stood here since before the days of the laowon."

"So you have said."

"What does the device say?" Karvur said.

"Temperature is the same; the creature continues to breathe, albeit very slowly."

"Good, then tomorrow we shall start our attempts to revive it!"

"Mr. Karvur, I would prefer to run some tests on this thing before we do that. As I told you, I think we should conduct a microbiological assay before we attempt anything as violent as a resurrection of this thing."

"Bah, you were against trying to move it in the first place."

"Indeed I was, and we still don't know what effect that might have."

"Look at it! It still lives, it twitches in the jelly and it breathes. When we awaken it we will learn much and we will profit!"

Once again Caroline heard that crazed tinge to the man's voice. It made her wish she was far away, back in her apartment at the university in CKC. There was no getting away from it, she just didn't feel safe out here beyond the boundaries of civilization.

"Come." Karvur was motioning to her. "There will be hot soup and bread waiting for us, and then we can bathe. I'm sure you're ready for a hot bath."

He was right on that point.

They ducked out into the rain and strode across the yard to a heavy wooden door. It opened at Karvur's touch and let them into a narrow, brick-floored hallway redolent of kitchen odors and the warmth of a mighty stove.

CHAPTER SIX

At FIVE MINUTES PAST EIGHT THE PATROL LIFTED AWAY FROM the ITAA base at Doisy-Dyan. Less than an hour later they slipped in at treetop height to the fringes of the Skullas Hills. Captain Blake ordered the VTOLs down in a grove of panumpey trees that bulked, black and swollen, on the slopes of a ridge of pale stone that was effectively the last outcrop of the hills.

Luisa Chang climbed out to join the six-man patrol. She wore a bush suit with attenuators and a wide-brimmed hat. She was carrying a Lessingham 9mm side arm, a gun she'd favored for many years.

The VTOLs took off on low thrust to minimize the noise and pulled out of the area, fast.

The patrol formed up in two lines twenty meters apart. Chang was the back door on the right-hand line, directly behind Blake.

A squat, heavily built man named Jun was the point. The other line was led by Corporal Cormondwyke, a slim fellow with very pale skin.

The little panumpey trees clutched the bare rock with roots like the fingers of ogres. Further up the ridge the soil grew even less fertile and just the occasional clump of dry grass broke the rocky surface.

As they advanced they passed the remains of some ancient, long-abandoned farm machine, a rusting monster of ribs and dead wheels.

"This land up here was ruined fifty years ago," Blake commented. "They stripped the soil by overfarming."

"What happened after that?" Chang said.

"A ten-year-long civil war that took thirty thousand lives."

The hatreds it left behind keep a lot of feuds going in the hills."

Eventually the bare rock grew hot from the sun. The attenuators helped some but Luisa was soon sweating. Get used to it, she told herself grimly, and kept her place, head up, ears cocked for anything behind them. Besides, it was a beautiful day, with a clear sky and wide views all around them. This was it, back on field duty, at last!

They halted at the highest point. Chang flipped up the map screen on her wrist unit. The ridge showed as a red snake, pink downslopes on either side, a green line for the River Shabbulus beyond those and further pink upslopes after that.

From the ridgeline they could see far and wide across the valley of the Shabbulus. They stayed low, to give no profile to distant observers, while they examined the terrain.

Chang noted the river's sweep and the maze of small fields that turned the bottomlands into a patchwork of greens and browns. Smoke from distant villages hung in columns in the still air. Farther away the Skullas bulked up in gray masses streaked with green.

"What's the plan, Captain?" Chang said.

Blake pointed to a notch in the side of the ridge a short distance to the north of their position. "We'll take the grotto trail down to the valley floor. We suspect the Regulators will be in Hubu village this morning. Hubu has been blamed for a number of recent liberations. If we can catch them in the act we can impose ITAA emergency rules of justice."

"You'll arrest them?"

"We'll arrest the survivors."

Chang's eyebrows rose. "We will avoid the unnecessary taking of life. I won't stand for anything else, you understand that, Captain?"

Blake spat before growling, "None of these men deserve to live, all are murderers many times over."

"That may be, but we are not judge and jury."

"Yeah, I know. You want us to arrest them, well, we'll try."

"You have enough troops for this?" she said.

Blake nodded imperturbably. "We have good intelligence this time and we made sure that no Fleet officer knew where we were going."

Chang nodded, unsurprised. If Blake was MI, he would know the background on her mission. He would know that the Fleet command under Admiral Heidheim was under investigation for corruption and that literally hundreds of officers were involved.

"So, for instance, Captain Cachester has no idea about this patrol?"

Blake grunted as if amused. "I have found that it is unwise to share intelligence with Captain Cachester."

Shortly after any such sharing the source of the intelligence is detected and disappeared."

"That's a powerful accusation, Captain."

Blake shrugged, turned his binoculars down on the woods.

Chang looked across to the hills; hawks were flying in the clear air above the slopes. Peasants were at work in the distant fields, tilling the landlord's ground for their tithes.

Blake ordered Cormondwyke to take his line forward, and the whole patrol moved off to the north, behind the ridgeline, through more groves of panumpey trees.

In time they reached the grotto, a steep-walled canyon cut by a spring-fed stream.

Blake released a small floater from his pack. To the untrained eye the little robot was a sparrow, *Passer terrestris*, an ITAA created breed that was successful on many worlds.

Upon release it flew off down the narrow canyon. Soon it was sending back video data from the cameras imbedded in its head.

"Let's go," said Blake.

The grotto was a steep-walled gorge, where the stream had cut down through blue limestone to form pots and caves and cubbies.

Soon after they began the descent through this gorge, Chang began to notice the bones. First a scattering of skulls, placed in niches. Then femurs and ulnas, ribs and pelvises, both whole and in fragments.

Farther down they formed piles, five feet deep, like scree along the walls of the grotto. Some were scattered loose, in fragments, eye sockets, hips, like autumn leaves over the rocks.

"What the hell is this?" she said to Blake.

"The grotto of skulls. You didn't know?"

"Laowon skulls?"

"Correct. This was a place of slaughter during the Days of Rage."

"So.. ." she mused. "At the end of the Starhammer War, I remember now, in one of the briefings."

"There were four million laowon here then; by the time the laowon fleet could lift them off there were only a hundred thousand left." Wexel, a planet infamous for slaughter.

On they went, stepping quickly down the natural ramps of rock, surrounded by the pitiful remains of slaughtered laowon from long ago.

"Why haven't these bones been buried? And why haven't they turned to dust?" Chang wondered aloud.

"The local people took pains to preserve the bones. It was a tourist attraction for centuries afterwards."

Blake paused to scan the video from the floater. "Lately, though, it's been forgotten. So much liberating going on in the Skullas the tourists would be fools to come."

A tourist attraction?

To Luisa's ears the stream's cheerful babbling seemed madly out of place. This canyon should be haunted by screams.

On they went for two miles, and the rifts of bones and skull fragments grew deeper if anything.

Then at the bottom there was a change. Among the laowon bones were fresher skeletons, human ones this time. Finally, there were bodies, sometimes headless. In various states of decomposition.

Chang looked to Blake.

"The Grotto of Skulls is still in use." He gestured to the bodies. "These were all killed by Regulators, working for the local landowners."

"They were suspected of liberating?"

"Some were probably Liberators, but mostly these were just the unlucky who fell foul of somebody powerful."

Chang gestured to the bodies. "Why do so many risk liberating?"

"It is hard to feed families on the produce from a one-acre potato patch. Taxes are so high now that peasants lose almost all their income. Ninety percent in this region recently. So Liberators steal whatever they can. Often it makes the difference between survival and death by starvation."

"And the owners, do they live in fear?"

Blake had that bitter smile again. "Not on your life. Few of them ever visit the Shabbulus valley as long as they get their monthly checks. The Regulators run things for them."

"No legal protections, then."

"None whatsoever."

At length they left the ghastly grotto behind and entered the Malaki woods, which were made up of groves of scrubby oak and white ash growing on fairly level ground that tilted downward slightly toward the Shabbulus.

"This is the property of the Marquma family. They used to keep a palace here, but it fell into ruins long ago."

A few minutes later they passed the ruins. A pocket-sized faux Versailles moldered beneath vines and overgrowth. Graceful balconies, fallen-in roofs, tree limbs thrust through empty windows.

"The Marqumas were decimated in the civil war. They got out after that. But they have refused to sell their land, or to allow these woods to be cleared."

"What protects these trees from the local people, then?"

"Same thing that protects them from thieves. The Regulators pay rewards for information."

"And then more bodies are found in the grotto."

"Of course."

After another couple of kilometers walking through these woods, with nothing but insects for company, they came to the Shabbulus River.

"The ford is a little to our right," murmured Blake. "Our contact will be waiting in the woods beyond."

The river was wide but shallow at this point, and where they crossed it barely came to waist height.

On the other side the woods thinned out shortly, and they came upon a road, with stone walls on either side. Small fields bounded by more stone walls stretched before them.

They moved along, parallel to the road, bidden in the woods.

Suddenly a peasant dressed in the customary ragged homespun stepped out from cover and signaled to them to follow him across the road.

"That way," said Blake, and they went on through groves of cedar and Thor pine.

"What's going on?" whispered Chang as they tiptoed along a leafy lane.

"Regulators are in the village."

Soon they were in a vegetable garden behind a rather dilapidated peasant's cottage.

From beyond the house there came the sound of blows and cries of pain.

They stepped forward, filtering into the dark, squalid interior of the cottage. From a dark corner a peasant girl stared at them with blank, hopeless eyes.

Blake shoved the girl roughly to the back door and told her to run to the safety of the trees.

Chang peered out through a crack in the wooden shutter that covered the window.

In the village square stood a group of men in shiny black uniforms with steel helmets. A number of green-and-black ATVs were parked nearby.

Chang saw what these men were doing and felt her gorge rise in horror.

A number of metal T-frames seven feet tall had been set up. Hanging on each of these frames was a man, crucified.

A knot of the men in black was gathered around one of the crucified. As she watched, they asked questions and he answered them with curses. One of the men in black, a huge brute, took up a knife and cut open the belly of the man hanging on the T-frame. With both hands he reached in and hauled out the

victim's intestines and let them dangle down into the dust of the square.

Another black-clad thug lit a propane torch and began playing it back and forth inside the body cavity of the dying man on the frame.

The other men in black guffawed at the weak cries of horror that emerged from the dying man's throat.

Chang shivered, then found she had been joined at the peephole by Blake.

"Regulators at work, Colonel. Not a pretty sight."

Chang felt a fury rising inside her.

"What's next, Captain?" she snapped.

"Difficult bit, we can't very well start shooting. Too many innocent people will get killed. Have to record the atrocity and hit the Regulators as they leave."

"You mean we will allow them to carry on with this?"

"Not much else we can do, unless we want to risk shooting any number of civilians."

Chang looked back into the square. The Regulators were at work on another victim, a boy of no more than twelve, strung up on one of the frames. They were slicing off his genitals, and then, to a roar of laughter, they shoved them into the boy's mouth, choking him.

A man on the ground, with his wrists bound behind his back, somehow got to his feet and charged the Regulators.

He was knocked down and then hoisted up and placed on a frame next to his dying son.

Now the Regulators went to work on him, with knives and propane torch, roasting his liver inside his body.

Chang ground her teeth.

"I count fewer than twenty Regulators. Take them down." She turned on Blake.

He gave her a cold stare.

"Do it!" she snapped.

Blake give the order via his communicator.

On the count of four the ITAA squad opened fire, taking the black-clad thugs completely by surprise. In a matter of seconds most were down.

A handful of survivors were left, however. They returned fire. One of them reached an armored ATV and opened up with the ATV's twin twenty millimeters.

The people in the square screamed and groveled, trying to dig themselves into the ground.

Chang herself crouched in the muck on the floor of the cottage as the wall above disintegrated under a hail of twenty-millimeter cannon shell.

Blake was moving; Chang noticed him zip through a hole in the side of the cottage from the corner of her eye. Then she was forced to duck once more as the twenty-millimeters came sweeping back. The ceiling fell in and parts of the rear wall collapsed.

It looked as if Blake had been right and she'd done the absolutely worst thing.

Fresh screaming broke out, signifying casualties among the people trapped in the square.

Luisa cursed herself, slipping into her mother's Chinese to do so.

There came a heavy thud, and another, and the twenty-millimeter guns were silenced.

Still, other weapons were in play. There were more detonations, more screaming; the sound of automatics and assault rifles cracked the air.

Chang remembered her own Lessingham and wriggled around until she could draw it from her holster.

Just above her head there were six-inch holes blasted through the mud-brick wall. She risked a peek through one of these.

The last Regulator, clutching his rifle, was running for the ATVs. He was hit the next moment and went tumbling.

Blake was in the square, along with Cormondwyke and Sergeant Jun.

Chang got to her feet and staggered to the side door and stumbled out into an alley. In her right hand she was still clutching the Lessingham machine pistol.

A sound behind her gave her warning. She ducked, just as a gun went off behind her ear.

The bullet rang off her helmet but it was only a glancing blow, and though she fell she was unhurt. From the ground she found herself firing the Lessingham exactly as trained, without even consciously thinking of it.

The Regulator's body bounced backward into the alley gate and hung there jerking under the fire. She emptied the clip into him.

The body slid off the gate.

Chang's mouth was dry and hard with fright. Her stomach twisted suddenly at the smell of the man's blood and the terrible reality of his death.

When Blake arrived on the scene, she was still there, fighting down the nausea, still holding the warm gun in both hands.

THE FOLLOWING DAY CAROLINE REESE FLEW DOWN TO DOISY-Dyan and then took the next flight on Transcon Air back to CK City. With her she took a small refrigerated case containing six tissue samples taken from the small, repulsive creature in the tank.

Caroline was operating on a high level of excitement. She felt that she had been caught up in great events, for the first time in her life. There was a thrill in the knowledge that she had discovered a hitherto unknown alien form of life. And there were all the exciting possibilities. The thing did appear to be alive. It was all so sudden and so wonderful.

The opportunity of a lifetime, and one that had so suddenly dropped into her lap.

This thought started others, and she chewed her lip and stared out the window at the clouds as she wondered what she should do next.

First she had to get a bioanalysis program and an analyzer unit. She couldn't just give this to someone in the biology building, ask for an analysis of an alien lifeform, and not expect some tough questions.

She would call her friend Soille Benuki, who was an assistant professor of med science. Soille had access to the biology building. She could sign out the necessary equipment and software.

Then, once she had the samples in analysis, she would turn to the other aspect of the situation.

Karvur. The name brought up an involuntary feeling of fear. There was something about him that was chilling.

She had to find out who on the faculty had given Karvur his information about her. It had to be someone who knew her well, someone who knew Gottschalk, someone familiar with the workings of the university.

Karvur had Mends and she needed to know who they were. Because she had already decided she would not return to Karvur's farm.

She had been quite genuinely terrified by Karvur for a week, all alone with him out on the excavation and then surrounded by his grim-faced servants on the farm. He was unstable, liable to do anything. And she would always be alone up there, an outsider among Karvurs and their underfamilies. She would not risk that again.

But she had the samples, and she knew the fast track to getting published and announcing the discovery. That would be enough if she moved quickly.

The flight finally descended to the guide path to CKC airport.

After landing she transferred to the commuter chopper, and twenty-five minutes later she was in her office.

It was enormously reassuring to be back in her own empire, surrounded by her own possessions. She made phone calls, touching base with assistants and colleagues.

She went through the stuff on her desk. Department administrative matters for the most part. There was a message from Gottschalk, chastising her bluntly for running off suddenly for a week. They would have

to 'discuss this matter' on her return.

Then she called Soille and told her she needed a big favor. Soille was excited to hear from Caroline and they agreed to meet for dinner that same evening.

Caroline went home, showered, took a nap and then made more phone calls to Mends. She explained her week's absence as a mission of mercy to her hometown, where an aged aunt was very ill. Since her hometown was a remote spot in the state of North Trias this brought out a certain sympathy and interest in friends.

Later she met Soille at the Brown Cow restaurant on Pure Street, which featured revivals of ancient terrestrial cuisines.

A bottle of North Coast Chardonnay arrived with the pseudoshrimp cocktails, and Caroline sipped the wine and felt herself relax with a nearly audible groan of pleasure.

Soille was watching her with bright, inquisitive eyes. "It's good to be back, I take it," she mused.

"Damn right."

"Where are you from again? Enxor?"

"No, North Trias."

"Oh, that's incredible. North Trias, isn't that a huge dustbowl or something?"

"No, not really, anyway."

"And your aunt was sick or something?"

"Yes, but that's not what I want to talk to you about. Soille,

I'm onto something very exciting; it's in my field but it requires a biological analysis. However, for reasons I can't go into yet, I have to keep it a secret."

Soille's antennae twitched. So this is what Reese wanted. "So you can't just take it over to the bio department."

"Exactly. I have to analyze this myself I need hardware and software."

"For how long, I mean how much analysis are we talking about?"

"Not long, a day or two at most. I just need an analyzer and the library software."

"And then what?"

"Then I need to talk to Jo Rugan about publishing a paper, real fast."

"What have you found, Caroline? What is all this?"

Soille was interested, picking up on the excitement she could feel reverberating in her friend.

"Let's just say that it might be one of the most important finds ever made in the Scopus cluster."

Soille's eyebrows rose. "In the whole cluster?"

Caroline had some wine. "Exactly."

"But it's not strictly old rocks and bones, then, not if you want a bioanalyzer?"

Caroline stiffened. "I can't tell you any more than I have. Now, be a good friend and stop asking questions and just tell me if you can sign a machine out and lend it to me."

Soille grinned. "Of course I can, darling."

"Good. Now tell me, what's been happening between you and Eric? How many times did you see him this week?"

Soille laughed. So Caroline was determined to be mysterious.

Soille knew there would come some other opportunity to find out what this exciting mystery was all about. She would keep her questions until then.

Their entrees arrived, and they chattered happily about men and their Mends and the latest political maneuvers in the life sciences department.

By the time they were done it was late; Caroline felt a sudden heavy fatigue. She'd had a long day, though she felt quietly elated and full and warm and sleepy.

She did not notice the hot-eyed, gaunt man in a dark raincoat who watched the two leave the restaurant and then followed them out. He observed Caroline tumble into a cab and head for her building, and then he followed Soille to her building, on the far side of the campus.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ONCE THEY HAD BEEN THE SOUTH WEST ARENTE LIBERATION Army, or SWALA. They had been a jaunty force, driving their customized ATVs down the back roads beneath blue-and-gold pennons. They were even headquartered for a while in an old mansion by the banks of the Arena, where they held the owner hostage along with his family.

But things had gone badly for them after a while, and a vigorous local landlord named Kaput had succeeded in rousing the rest of his class into settling their differences and hiring a strong force of Regulators to deal with such groups as the SWALA.

Soon they were driven out of the farm belt. They were no longer able to coerce support from the villages. They were reduced to preying on outlying farms and hijackings on the Kara State highway system. They became mere bandits, known as "doubters" in the Ruinart States, and existence became more precarious.

Hijacking on the highways was dangerous. The Kara State Highway Police had a reputation for being very tough. They ran dummy trucks all the time and used heavy surveillance. They also tended to kill

hijackers the moment they had them in their sights. They tended to ignore hostages, killing them, too, quite often.

This possibility only drove the potential hostages who rode the big trucks into arming themselves to the teeth. It was easy to take casualties when trying to lift a truck on the Kara highways.

Their string ran out at last when they tried to lift a Jackson Me tractor trailer they thought was loaded with expensive carpets but turned out to be full of Regulators.

What was left of them-eight men, eleven women, and nine children-was holed up in a box canyon off the Climate River, on the fringe of the Ruinaris.

They were low on ammunition and virtually out of money. They had three vehicles left, two four-wheel Mogen ATVs and a big six-wheel Jahmsbok that needed a new clutch.

Regulators hired by Jackson Eme were still combing the hills for them, and occasionally a chopper flew along Peekaw Ridge, just fifteen kilometers north.

They were safe there, but they were reverting to savagery as their stuff broke down, fuel cells gave out, and ammo ran too low to hunt with.

Rhem Kerwillig was now corporal of A Squad. But since A Squad now consisted of just Rhem and Gugen Schuppet, he was really more the second-in-line corporal of A-and-B Squad, which had six men and four women survivors. The other women were not fighters. First corporal was Larshel Deveaux, a onetime radical firebrand at Cowdray University, who had drifted for years in the Frente States before joining SWALA. Since the loss of Manzaut and Commander Kafka, Larshel Deveaux was nominal chief of military operations.

On the political side Dendra Witte was now first leader, with Lambda Bo as assistant. Political enthusiasm was now as low as it could go. No one even bothered to call for meetings. They met anyway, every night around the fire in the main cave. There wasn't much else to do but sit there and drink homebrew and watch TV.

Rhem had lost his idealism a long time ago. For a while past that stage he had fooled himself into believing that his time in the dubtigers would pay off somehow. There was always the possibility of a big score and enough money to leave the hills and start a business in Frentana Beach.

Gradually that dream faded as it became apparent that it was getting too tough on the highways. A sour despair welled up in its place: he'd missed his chance for the good life.

Until Reena came. That had changed things drastically, and not entirely for the better. In fact, right now they were at their worst.

Reena was a dark-haired beauty, a self-admitted perpetual adolescent at twenty-eight who joined the SWALA with a burning desire to avenge the deaths of her parents at the hands of Regulators. Her lithe, slender body had since caused a lot of fights among both the male and female SWALA dubtigers.

Rhem had started out as the son of a well-off grocery-chain owner in Palken City in the Peach Bowl, the heart of Arente Province. Rhem had disagreed with his father about almost everything, from an early age. At eighteen he was so caught up in displays of rebellion that he began to run with the Bindini brothers, who were more or less criminals and who had connections to the SWALA, much in the media

at the time following some dramatic raids on wealthy houses in the Peach Bowl.

Rhem discovered how really exciting life could be when he drove out with the SWALA for the first time. A night with both moons showing and the back roads were like dark corridors under the trees. Their guns were loaded and ready, cool and heavy in their hands.

They hit a small factory on the edge of a sugar plantation. The place made custom phototronics and sold them through mail order all across North Trios.

They got the manager down on the floor with a shotgun pushed up against his testicles. He gave up the keycodes for the vault and they made off with two hundred thousand in ITAA cargo promissory notes.

All at once the SWALA had been flush with money. Life out by the Arennee became a round of parties, orgies, and savage amusements. When they went to the villages they went armed, and they took anonymous petitions from peasants who paid well, and they dispensed the so-called justice of the SWALA. Other peasants paid well to overturn such justice and thus there was competition to buy off the SWALA and things were pretty wonderful.

Rhem Kerwillig abandoned school for the SWALA and never returned to his parents' home in Palken City.

And now?

Now he was reduced to a dirty cave and ragged clothing. For pleasure there was nothing but homebrew and panting after the sexy Reena, who was driving him crazy. Worst of all, he could foresee no way of getting out of there. He didn't have enough money to get a fuel cell, and all the cells in their ATVs were down to the nubbins.

Meanwhile he sat there staring hungrily at Reena whenever she was around and trying not to think about her the rest of the time.

At least Rosa Limcheg was still willing to share her bag with him nights. Rosa was in late extended middle age. She had been the girlfriend of one of the founders of the SWALA, a professor from Arente University by name of Drola. Drola had died long ago, ambushed by Regulators in a dusty Peach Bowl village. Since then Rosa had been the mother hen of the SWALA. She had borne three children and seen them grow and then die, lynched for thieving in Dowensville market. Her body was worn, her hair had grayed, and her beauty, such as it had been, had faded. Still, she was a woman and knew how to arouse a man.

But while Rosa was there for him at night, Rosa was not the woman uppermost in his thoughts. Instead he visualized the voluptuous charms of Reena Kirshtin and imagined her sharing them with Griff, and it drove him crazy.

All the women hated Reena, even the other fighters, who weren't normally interested in the men anyway.

Things weren't great between the men, either. Rhem wasn't the only one who wished he'd left for Frentana Beach a long time ago.

Reena's games were a real irritant. Griff and Larshel had just about come to blows again this morning. Griff was still sporting bruises from the last one.

And Reena was out there now, with Griff, and Rhem knew all too well just what she would be up to.

There had been a time when she'd gone out there with Rhem, with just a single sleeping bag, to make love under the stars, all night long.

Reena was young and in love with herself and her magnificent body and the orgasms it could have. These were nights to remember.

Rhem could recall the shape and feel of her breasts, her ass, he could virtually taste the damn woman, and she wouldn't even talk to him now.

Since the disaster on the highway she had turned away from him completely. For a while it had been all Larshel Deveaux, which Rhem thought had to be just for spite. Larshel was as ugly as sin, with his prematurely bald pate and his pop eyes and blubbery lips. She was doing it just to bust Rhem's balls.

Now she was out there, with Griff!

Griff was the latest. Griff was young enough to have fallen in love with Reena. In fact, Griff was just about insane over her.

The problem was that Larshel had blubbery lips and hands of stone. He had once boxed in the Frente Leagues, hands and feet, in the ancient kung fu forms.

Fighting him was something most men only ever wanted to do once. Griff, however, could not stay away from Reena, no matter what Larshel said.

Rhem had a sickening feeling that it was going to get down to gunplay soon, and then there would be a complex ripping up of the social fabric among the survivors.

Whose side was Rhem on? He had to decide and soon. Griff would either have to leave and take Reena with him or kill Larshel. And everyone would have to choose sides.

Larshel had seniority, by along shot, but he was not a popular choice. None of the other women wanted him as commander.

Neither Rhem nor Gugen cared for him, either. But they would come under pressure from a few of the older men.

It was going to be rough.

Someone was coming in; it was Reena. She strutted into the cave. She was wearing Griff's flage shirt. It was a good shirt, only good one Griff still had. Rhem wondered what she'd done for Griff to get him to give it up and then felt angry because he didn't want to imagine it between her and Griff, it still tore at his guts.

She circled beyond the fire and stopped by the keg and drew a jug of homebrew.

Larshel Deveaux was staring at her with pleading eyes.

She ignored Larshel, filled the jug, and turned on her heel and headed back out.

On her way she passed right by Rhem. She smiled at him, the first time in weeks. To his dismay his heart skipped a beat.

"Hi, Rhem," she said in that breathy way that turned men to jelly.

"Reena," he said. Their eyes met. He could scarcely believe it, she was being friendly.

"It's been a long time," he blurted, not meaning to.

Her eyebrows drew together. "Yes, Rhem, it has been," she purred. "I'm sorry about that, are you?"

"Yes, of course I am." She giggled. "Good."

Hopelessly he watched her leave the cave with the jug of beer.

He took another mug for himself and tried to dull the feelings enough to sit still and watch some TV.

It couldn't get much worse than this, could it?

The sleep of aeons was interrupted. Vaguely surprised to be called back to life, the Battlemaster awoke.

It had not expected to do so, ever again.

Slowly, painfully slowly, the oceans of dark oblivion parted and consciousness emerged. Sensory inputs were terribly dim on visual and audio wavelengths.

The olfactory sensorium was stimulated, however. Chemical receptors detected the presence of living animals.

Host!

Warm-blooded animals with oxygen-driven metabolic processes were close by. The sweet-salty exudates of the creatures hung in the air.

The Battlemaster struggled to awaken more completely, crawling up out of the well of nothingness as the tiny remnants of its nutrient base were converted to build sensory cells and pump the last reserves of blood into the brain. As the Battlemaster crawled out of that hole in the universe, that darkness of near-death, the lust for host grew to a wild, terrible passion.

Host! screamed every cell in its being.

As the brain came to life it began to equate the few facts that were known.

There was heat; ambient temperatures were relatively comfortable.

There was light, although the optical surfaces were seriously degraded and it was impossible to know even how intense the nearby light sources were.

But above all, there was host!

Many questions bubbled to the surface of thought.

How long had it been since the darkness had swallowed up the Battlemaster in the aftermath of the disaster?

And where was this, with this damp air so tantalizingly loaded with the odor of living host animals?

Then a second tremendous discovery was made. Nutrients were available. Indeed, the Battlemaster lay in a tank of them.

Water with easily metabolized sugars surrounded the Battlemaster on all sides.

Without a wasted moment the Battlemaster began to absorb nutrients. Dead tissues were sloughed away, fresh cells grew as quickly as they could be made.

In less than fifty minutes a new optical organ slipped from the purple sheath and wobbled into the air above the nutrient gel like an orange carnation on a stalk of shocking pink.

And now the Battlemaster gazed upon the new world into which it had been reborn.

CHAPTER NINE

COWDRAY-KARA CITY WAS THE WORLD CAPITAL OF WEXEL AND knew it. The teeming tower park of the downtown section was laced with elevated highways and personnel tubes. The streets were crowded with confident folk, sure of their place in the world. Media centers, theaters, a multitude of restaurants, all competed for the roving human eye.

Luisa Chang had seen it all before, of course, on several different worlds. On Bracken it was the city of Gismar with its spectacular glass towers. On Heimworld it was Krettchen, the city of a thousand bridges. On Wu it was Changzou and the pagoda of Kusu.

In every case the settlement pattern for these metropolises was broadly similar: layers of suburb in varying density and price bracket, surrounding the dense hub zone with its towers and highways.

On this evening, the rays of the setting sun were striking the rooftops of the towers, producing rainbows and golden reflections that flashed across the city.

From her hotel room on the thirtieth floor of her hotel's slim tower, Luisa enjoyed the view for a few minutes before checking herself in the mirror one last time. Her evening dress uniform was simple but elegant. White shirt, black trousers, and gray jacket with black trim, the ensemble broken solely by the green and red of the small service strip she wore on her left lapel.

Luisa was proud of those colors. She'd fought throughout her career to avoid PDJ (permanent desk job). As a result of her efforts she'd seen action on four separate occasions, if she wanted to include the horror of yesterday morning's shambles in the Skullas Hills.

On that score, however, she was not proud, not at all.

She had already decided not to put in for her fourth red strip, so disgusted was she with her own

performance.

The thing had exploded into a catastrophe. Four dead civilians, sixteen dead Regulators, all on top of the eight dead men the Regulators had crucified. The damn thing had been a slaughter. Plus there were a dozen villagers in the hospital with wounds from the firefight.

But she had put Cormondwyke in for a second pip on his combat shield for his action in snuffing out the armored ATV with its twenty-millimeter cannons.

Blake had snorted derisively at that; she still didn't know why.

Cormondwyke certainly deserved the honor. But all the way back to base at Doisy-Dyan Blake had been cold and silent. She had barely spoken to him since.

She shook her head angrily. There was no point in second-guessing it. The Regulators might have killed that many more men themselves. It had to be done. That was the way irregular war always was. A mess, with no clear black and white, no obvious line between what was right and what was disastrous.

Luisa caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. How pale and distracted she appeared. She could hardly imagine herself in less of a mood for the upcoming festivities that she was to be the centerpiece of.

Angrily she shook her head; it was time to snap out of this! She had a job to do. She straightened up, tightened her lips, and did her best to shove it all out of her mind.

Right now she had to concentrate on other matters. She was about to meet the planetary elite. A banquet party on the top floor of the Hotel Zorel, with two hundred selected guests. Satisfied with her appearance, if little else, she left her room and made her way to the elevator banks.

In the elevator there were two couples, also en route to the top floor. Bankers, she guessed, as she exchanged a small tight-lipped smile with them. They wore vibrahide suits in subtle hues of taupe and mauve with full luxurons and genuine leather shoes.

The men were red-faced, bluff types with the look of Extended Life. The women were younger, beautiful leisure girls got up in haute couture for these men.

The rooftop restaurant was large and artificially darkened when she arrived. The reception was already in full swing. People milled about the entrance. Chang wove her way through them.

Inside there was a swarm of introductions to be endured. Luisa found this kind of thing rather intimidating. Worse, on this occasion she was the new CO for ITAA forces on Wexel. The entire focus of the thing would be on her.

She noticed Captain Cachester standing with a group of civilians to one side of the entrance. Beyond this group were tables with pink tablecloths and blue lights. Cachester glanced toward her with cold eyes, then looked away without making eye contact. Of course she knew that Cachester had put in for another extension. He wanted another five years on Wexel. Luisa wondered idly how much he was racking up for his position. How many of the people in this room had deals going with the handsome Captain Cachester?

Suddenly a portly gentleman in a gleaming blue tuxedo appeared in front of her. His head was crowned with thick, wavy white hair. He performed a stately bow.

"Colonel Chang, welcome."

This was the Baron Vogn-Duvo, the "host" for the evening.

"Colonel Chang, "he said, baring lots of white teeth. "May I welcome you to the city of Cowdray-Kara. I do hope you will enjoy your first visit here."

"I'm sure I will, Baron, my room has the most wonderful view of the tower park."

"Ah, excellent, excellent. This hotel is one of the best we have, and certainly the tallest."

The baron led her on into the room. She took a glass of seltzer-it was too soon for wine-and began the whirl of introductions. Fortunately she had learned the habit of working hard on the briefing material before each new posting. Her work on this occasion paid off almost immediately, for she recognized old Stramber Bascoyne and Dame Urda of Luc right away. They were so stunned to be recognized they forgot all the penetrating, hard little questions they'd wanted to ask.

The baron was good at this sort of thing; he detected the right moment to break away and move onto the next with a fastidious sense of precision. Now he helped her on before Bascoyne could recover his wits.

In succession she met such notables as Muscat of Cablara, Lord Shackdent, and Lady Mong. Several members of the incredibly wealthy Kuang family were there. The Kuangs owned areas the size of countries in the south of Trios continent.

"You were at Kursk, Colonel," the elderly Shackdent said.

"A terrible fight that was."

"It was."

"Did you see combat there, Colonel?"

"On the north continent. I was at the battle of Strantung."

"Ahah, Strantung, eh? Terrible things happened. Terrible events. But it is always so; humanity seethes with rebellious, dangerous urges. The maintenance of control, with law and order, is a task best not even left to human beings. Their hearts are too soft, their pockets too empty."

"There will never be another Kursk, Lord Shackdent. The ITAA has learned that policy must be pressed in such cases and conditions, before the stage of mass war develops."

"But the ITAA is so feeble about crime and liberating! If left to the ITAA there's not one of us that would have two coins to rub together! We get too much interference from the damn ITAA as it is, if you ask me."

Shackdent clearly was most exercised on this issue.

"So you would have left Kursk to destroy itself in endless warfare with modern weapons?" she said coolly.

"Ah, well, no, that would not do," he admitted. "Nobody emerged from Kursk with anything worth having."

"Perhaps you should read the recent reports on Planetary Interventionism. The ITAA doesn't want to be pulled into local conflicts everywhere, but there can't be another Kursk."

"Now, Shackdent, leave her alone," a weird voice said on her left. "We want to meet the new colonel, too."

Chang found a pair of women, in advanced extended age, standing at her elbow. They wore extended luxurons and thus resembled pillars of shimmer, the one gold and the other purple.

Their faces emerged from the shimmer beneath fantastic hairstyles, with elaborate waves and curls. No matter how you looked at them they were very old.

The baron was there at once. "Colonel, may I introduce the Cowdray sisters, Menereth and Gwynalda."

Menereth was slightly the older, by about fifty years, Chang decided, but both were in their third centuries at least.

"Welcome to Cowdray, Colonel. I'm sure you're finding it quite a wonder, are you not?"

That weird voice, like a velvet echo from an unknown past. She smiled back nervously. These women owned the state of Cowdray, or most of it. In the planetary power equation they were the single most powerful variable.

"The city is charming; my room here in the hotel has an excellent view."

"Good. The view is to the north, of course, and that is as it should be."

"Yes, you best remember to keep your eyes north while you're here on Wexel, Colonel Chang," Gwynalda said as if she were reproofing a child.

"Way down there in that hellhole in Patash-Do, you can pick up unfortunate attitudes. You know it's not our fault the ITAA puts its planetary base in Doisy-Dyan."

"We offered them land in Cowdray, didn't we, Menereth?"

"We certainly did, but they wouldn't take it, oh no. So the poor fools are stuck down there in that backwater."

"I was there once, to see Lucy Wendt before she died. The place was a pit, absolutely revolting."

Chang nodded politely. Doisy-Dyan certainly could use improvements, and eccentricity was to be expected from ancient power brokers like these.

Eventually the sisters moved on and Luisa was confronted with new faces. Still, the phrase "unfortunate attitudes" lingered in her memory. What could it mean? She resolved to investigate the complete history of the base here, as soon as she was back in Doisy-Dyan. There was too much she didn't know yet.

At dinner Luisa received a little relief, since the ITAA diplomatic staff was seated around her in a defensive huddle.

"We made them do it; only way we'd ever get to meet you, I think," said their leader, the consul, a bluff gray-haired man in his fifties named Hauger. He introduced the others: Technical Officer Paltz, Communications Liaison Alisan Bunayel, Audit Controller Feng.

The conversation was light, concerned with shopping in CK City and the difficulties of finding a taxi in some sections of downtown. There were commiserations from everyone on the misfortune of her being based in Doisy-Dyan. It was generally agreed that there wasn't any shopping worth doing in Doisy-Dyan.

"Hellhole!" Changsha Feng said.

"Patash-Do is really about the worst spot on Wexel," Alisan Bunayel said.

"It's the pits," Paltz and Feng murmured together.

"Well," Luisa remarked "it's certainly not like this city."

"On Wexel, there aren't many really large cities, just CKC, Frentana Beach, Dao, a handful of others," Alisan said.

"Wexel is a brilliant example of maldevelopment," Audit Controller Feng explained.

"This planet is completely aberrant. Political evolution has been stuck fast for centuries." Helmudt Paltz added.

"Not too loud with that sort of talk, please, Helmudt," Consul Hauger said.

"Always the listeners are working, eh, Consul?" Paltz said in a tone of slight disrespect.

Hauger, however, did not take offense. Chang's eyebrows rose.

"Of course, so you will please remember that fact."

Chang exchanged a look with the consul. Was he another Cachester? It seemed all too likely. Another important thing to add to the list of very important things that had to be done, real soon now, was to investigate the ITAA staffs around Wexel, to sort out all the likely Cachester-like opponents.

For the rest of dinner the conversation remained light discussing the upcoming Cowdray Derby-the most important horse race on Wexel-and the ensuing season of parties and weddings that would follow this inaugural rite of spring.

Later there was music and dancing and more circulating and introductions. Luisa sipped her wine and kept up her official smile and a cool, affable front while she waited for the moment when she could finally escape and go back to her room.

Finally her time was up, and she took a last round of the tables with the baron to make farewells before riding the elevator down to her floor.

She took off the little shoes and padded along the carpeted corridors to her own room.

Inside she switched on the light and leaned back against the wall.

And froze, stunned with surprise.

A man wearing a black cloak and hat, with a white mask on the upper half of his face, was standing there. He had a gun in his hand which he now extended and aimed directly between her eyes. The gun had a bulky silencer attached. It would be virtually soundless.

"Colonel Chang," the man said in a tight voice.

"What do you want?" she said, although her mouth had gone dry and she felt her knees growing a little weak.

"My family has a message for you."

"Your family?"

The black eyes blazed at her. He stepped forward and pressed the barrel against her forehead.

"Don't move or I might have to kill you," he whispered.

"What the hell do you want?" she repeated.

"Stay out of the Skullas Hills, Colonel. We settle our own accounts in Macumbri land. You don't belong in the Skullas.

You come there again and we kill you. Understand?"

She nodded. "I get the message, loud and clear."

"Good, let us hope you learn from it." He produced a small gas bulb in his other hand and squirted it into her face. She lost consciousness in a matter of seconds.

When she awoke it was three hours later and, she had a disgusting headache. She was still lying on the floor of her room, where she'd fallen. The man in the black cloak was gone. Useless to call security on this now; the man was long gone. With a groan she pulled herself onto the bed, tore off her clothes, and staggered into the bathroom for aspirin and water.

Later she went to bed, but not before checking the door and sliding the deadbolt across at the top. The lock was plainly not to be trusted.

Finally she removed a small traveling handgun, a chopped-down Faud .32-caliber quikpump automatic. It was small and light and reassuring when she placed it under her pillow.

This was Wexel, she reflected. This was going to be the toughest job she had ever had.

CAROLINE REESE HAD AN ASTONISHING DAY. The analyzer had timed up at her office at ten. She'd had it running by eleven and was getting gas-chromatography data by lunch. All afternoon she worked at matchups while looking through the mineral balances and amino-acid counts.

It was bizarre stuff. The DNA was so short as to make her think it was artificial, the product of a gene lab. There was ubiquitin, thus continuing the universality of that useful little protein. Ubiquitin played many roles in nucleated cells, and its basic structure had remained the same to an extraordinary degree. For example, between human and yeast ubiquitin there were only three different amino acids. Between human ubiquitin and the ubiquitin of the alien creature there were also three different amino acids.

Ubiquitin continued to live up to its name.

Some of the other proteins were very unusual, however, with no match in the terrestrial biologists or the lowon biologist. A further check showed no match within the more limited ancient Wexel biologist, either.

A further check of corporate biologists registered with the ITAA showed no matchups with known artificial lifeforms, either.

Dead ends everywhere, and that left her wondering.

On the cellular level there were hundreds of peculiarities, and she sensed that the analysis there would take a considerable length of time.

There were many different types of cell; the creature was profoundly complex despite its straight little strip of DNA. But all the cells, nucleated or not, were equipped with a protein in their outer layer that could expand to close all cellular pores watertight. With a single protein shift the cell became a kind of spore, able to survive extreme conditions.

At the back of Caroline's mind something twitched reflexively. She felt an odd premonition, and she tried to track it down in her mind, but it led to nothing and after a while she pushed it out of her thoughts.

It was alien life, no doubt about that, but beyond that it was hard to say what it was. Sparse was intelligent life, space-traveling intelligent life, then it represented a colossal find. For apart from the lowon, no such lifeforms had been discovered yet in the galactic search. All other evolved life was restricted to the planet of its birth.

Of course, there was the Starhammer, and the evidence of the ancient war a billion years ago. But those lifeforms were long since extinct, no more than an exotic quirk of history.

She began a series of molecular imagings, looking for connective proteins. She was sitting in her chair, twiddling a pencil and looking out the window and across the quadrangle to the University Tower. The carnelian creeper that grew up the gray stone was catching the long flat evening rays like an array of small bronze mirrors.

The clock struck the quarter hour.

There was something at the back of her mind, something that she was trying to recall.

And then she had it and breathed an ancient name: "Saskatch, Planet Saskatch."

The planet destroyed two thousand years before in the No canicus sector. A human world devoured

entirely by a deadly alien lifeform.

Caroline stared at the screen.

Could this find be related to that?

She summoned up an ITAA biolog listing from the central data bank. After the ID check she fed in her protein analyses and asked for match ups from the biolog of known alien life.

The ubiquitin match should come soon, so she waited for a reply and spun her chair back to the max-screen and went on with microscopic molecule imaging.

The ITAA check seemed to be taking longer than she thought normal, and she looked up at the clock impatiently and noticed two things.

It was already five o'clock in the afternoon, and Count Geezl Karvur was standing by the door to her office.

She started up with the shock and knocked over a pile of modules on her side desk.

"What are you doing here?"

With his usual arrogance the man swept in and seated himself in her office. He was wearing full evening wear, black silk tuxedo, purple bow tie. His features were contorted into a weird smile.

"I'm afraid I just couldn't stand the wait any longer. So I thought it through and I decided it would be a great time to go to Cowdray-Kara and see about some business affairs. While I was here I could visit you and find out what you've discovered."

For some reason her heart was pounding. She didn't want Count Karvur in her office. She didn't want him anywhere near her life at all.

How had he got past Security? Her breath was only slowly coming back.

"Well, you're too early to find out much," she croaked.

"We've got about two hundred proteins mapped and lots more to do. But I still don't understand why you're here. Why aren't you at the dig as you said you'd be?"

He chuckled without amusement. "The diggings will keep, and I would not trust the phone lines. It will be better this way."

"Better?" she groped.

"Yes, much better. Now what have you found out?" He was leaning forward, with his hands on her desk. The debonair patina was gone; his eyes were hard.

She swallowed. What if the ITAA biolog analysis came in at this point?

"About all I can say we've found out for sure is that this definitely did not originate on Wexel. With the one proviso that it might have done, if it represents an earlier, extinct evolution path. Perhaps something

obliterated by comet strike in the distant past"

"Those are Karavian sandstones, a mere eighty million years old. Wexel lifeforms were already evolved; I know because I investigated all these things. I wanted to know how this could be."

"Then we can rule out completely any idea that it is from Wexel."

"As I suspected all along," mummured Karvur. "It's too old and complex for Wexel."

"Certainly it's complex. The cells were designed like safes, or puzzles, or a mixture of both." She shrugged. "I'm going to check the ITAA biolog of known alien life. If it isn't in that, then we've really got ourselves something."

Karvur's eyes glittered. That feral glitter disturbed Caroline; she was beginning to be seriously frightened. The count seemed capable of anything, even irrational violence. And what protection did she have? There was nothing in the office, and Security seemed to have let the count through without a murmur.

How the hell had he got in here?

And then the door opened a second time and Soille Benuki walked in, and Caroline was never more glad to see her.

"Soille!" she exclaimed, jumping to her feet. "I'll be ready in just a minute."

Karvur glared at her.

Caroline switched down her computer screen and left the machine to complete the ITAA biolog interface on its own without screen display. As the screen dimmed she moved quickly, gathering up a bag and a set of printouts.

Karvur was on the point of saying something, but she stopped him with a cool smile.

"I'm sorry, Count, but I have an appointment, and we'll be late if I don't leave right away."

Caroline gave thanks for the fact that Soille was very quick on the uptake. Soille sensed a wrongness in the room. She kept her mouth shut.

"Reese, I don't know what you're playing at," Karvur muttered.

"Count, you must leave now. I've got to go. Look, the next time you drop in give me a call, give me time to make arrangements."

Karvur rose to his feet, growled "Enough of this!" and stalked from the room.

Soille's eyes followed him and then snapped back to Caroline. "What was all that about?" she asked.

"We've got to get out of here," Caroline muttered, "I need a drink. Come on."

Outside she went down the back way, through the chemistry department. She suddenly felt sure that Karvur would be outside the main entrance waiting to follow her. She could imagine the man stalking her

through the city. He was probably armed- some virtually silent handgun, or perhaps a knife.

She very definitely did not want to see Count Karvur ever again in person.

They ducked into the Woodbeam, an ancient student pub, and took a dark booth in a far corner. They ordered coffee from the single, bored waiter.

Young men with long hair and skintight costumes were playing the ancient game of darts while drinking weak beer. Their shouts and chatter dominated the room.

"All right, Caroline, now you have to come clean. Tell me what the hell is going on."

Soille would not take a brush-off this time. Caroline knew she had to concoct some kind of story.

What she was doing was unethical. She should have reported the find to the geology section. She should have prevented Karvur's rough and ready excavation of the site. The list of things she should have done but hadn't was too long to even contemplate. If Gottschalk ever got hold of this, he would destroy her career on the spot.

And Soille was not the best keeper of secrets in the Department of Life Sciences, either. This would be difficult.

"Look, Soille, I've got myself into a rather tight spot. You're going to have to keep a secret, or else you'll probably get me arrested."

Soille's eyes bulged. "I knew I lived in interesting times," she murmured. "What is it, Caroline?"

"I think I may have found an alien form of life, completely unknown. That's what I'm analyzing for right now."

"ITAA biolog check?"

Oh, Soille, always so quick on the uptake. "Yes, of course."

"Well, if they don't have it, nobody does. Although you could contact the laowon."

"Expensive call, and I already checked the published laowon biolog, that covers both Laogolden and Ratan. I'd have to get clearance from the university. They'd want to know why."

"And you want to keep it secret."

"I have to, Soille, I have to until I know. It's the only way to keep control of it. And besides, it's not just me."

"Ah, that explains the ugly man in your office. Who is he, and what does he have to do with this?"

"Well, I can't go into that. But he's an aristo from the south."

"Oh, where? Someplace awful I'll bet. Luc, or-yeah, I bet he's from Patash-Do."

Caroline was unsettled by Soille's deadly accuracy. "It doesn't matter where he's from," she blustered.

"He is involved in this and I think he's somewhat unstable."

"Somewhat unstable? What does that mean?"

"I don't know, Soille, I just have to be careful. That man worries me."

"If he's an aristo from Pat-Do then you might have reason to be careful. They're a violent breed, everyone knows that."

"So, tell me more about this form of life. What is it? Animal, vegetable? Old Wexel? Don't tell me you've found something that evolved in the reducing atmosphere?"

"Look, Soille, you cannot tell anyone about this. Not until I'm ready, you understand?"

"When's 'ready' going to be?"

"I don't know yet, a few weeks maybe. I have to get a lot of paperwork set up."

"What? You're gonna write the book first?"

Soille was so deadly quick. "I've got to save my ass, Soille."

Gottschalk will want to fry me alive when I release this. I need to be sure I can survive his attack."

"So you come out with the book, get the media attention here, and look strong for the university regents. Why fire a new red-hot? So they'll tell Gottschalk to calm down and give you whatever you want."

Caroline nodded. "Well, something like that. I hope."

Soille was smiling. "Well, it sounds great, Caroline, except for one thing."

"What's in it for Soille?" said Caroline.

She laughed. "Why not? Don't I deserve a little something after I got you your analyzer and saved you from that awful man?"

"Yes, Soille," said Caroline, "of course. I'll give you a coauthor credit if you like, anything that'll keep your mouth shut about this until it's published."

Soille was impressed. "That sounds like rather a good deal, Caroline, I think I'll take you upon that."

They sipped the coffee and then went their separate ways.

Soille was going to think it all over and get back to her with details of what sort of credit Soille would want.

Caroline went home, keeping to different paths than usual, afraid that the count was waiting for her.

She had to admit she was nervous. He was an aristo from Pat-Do. His world was one of a near-savage feudalism where he was an absolute monarch. The way he treated his people! She'd seen

the rack and whipping posts in the backyard of the farm. She knew the way things were.

Complicating matters horribly was that he obviously had good connections of his own right here at the university. For all she knew he was an alumnus, an important contributor to the sports program.

Could he possibly just force her to obey him, and go back to Pat-Do with him?

She had already decided that she would not let that happen.

She would take the discovery and she would make them both rich and famous. All he had to do was to keep out of her way while she was doing it. She had no intention of trying to cheat him of his money.

But she was never going back to that awful place without her own expedition.

At Shingle Street she walked down the right hand side past the shops and then cut through to the rear passage to her building. Once she was securely in her apartment with the door locked and the security link on she felt much, much better. She made herself a drink, popped a meal into the microwave, and watched news TV for a while.

There were amazing scenes from the Festival at Frentana Beach this year. Astonishing costumes from the Frentas and the Costas. The Blue Queen was forty feet high.

Meanwhile, the Sisters Cowdray had been elected to the chief office of Cowdray County for the fortieth time. Their rule thus rolled on unbroken over a territory of five hundred thousand square kilometers.

Commercials came; she grabbed the food from the microwave and tucked into lasagna and broccoli while the news shifted to the nightly rundown of Wexel's current wars. DeJon, Luc, Nairac, Benfica-these were the names of regions and cities racked by the sputter of rebellions, repression's, and the astonishing violent crimes of both Liberators and Regulators.

Eventually, however, the news TV generated a pleasant feeling of numbness. All these terrible things were happening, but they were happening to someone else. Things in the immediate vicinity remained safe and comfortable.

She finished her snack, recycled the packaging, and went to bed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE NEXT MORNING CAROLINE WOKE WITH THE SUN. She breakfasted early, showered, and headed for her office.

No one appeared to be following her, she breathed a sigh of relief.

She passed the Security at the front entrance of the Life Science Building. There had been no sign of the count there that morning. However, when she opened the door to her office she found that the space had been ransacked during the night. The analyzer was gone. Her computer had been raped and the main drive erased.

The data modules with copies of the work on the alien find were also gone.

Dumbfounded, she stared at the wreck and then sat down heavily. An appalling despair settled over her. The count had destroyed her work, just like that. A sudden shiver of fear ran up her spine. The man was dangerous, no doubt about it.

She called Soille. There was no answer from her home phone, so Caroline left a message on her work phone.

She wondered whether she dared call the police. How might she maneuver it so that Karvur be arrested without triggering an investigation into the material he had stolen?

It seemed it would be a difficult feat.

Then she realized that Karvur was probably already back in Patash-Do, and that once there he was virtually immune to criminal justice in CK City.

There was virtually nothing she could do. Her rage drove her to the edge of tears. Everything was gone, there was nothing here to substantiate her paper, she had nothing to present, and thus she had nothing at all.

In fact she was back to where she'd been before all this started, except she'd lost a week's work and Gottschallc was furious with her. And there was the matter of the stolen analyzer. That was going to be an expensive item to replace.

Then the phone clicked. On her screen was an unfamiliar man saying unfamiliar things, words like "Police" and "Did you speak to Soille Benuki yesterday evening?"

The gyre deepened, the tornado swept her up in its embrace. She, it appeared, was the last person to have seen Soille Benuki alive. Soille had been found, beaten to death with a metal pipe, in the shrubbery of the little park near where she lived.

Stunned, Caroline stared at the man on the screen.

Now the nightmarish details tumbled in upon her. When asked questions she responded as vaguely as possible. She told them that she and Soille had gone out for a drink and that Soille was going out with a man named Eric Karioka. He was a research chemist, a Crooker from the Isles. No, she did not know of anything between them that would have provoked this kind of an attack. No, she could not think of a single person who even disliked Soille Benuki. Not enough to kill her, that was for sure.

Eric and Soille had been seeing a lot of each other. They had been thinking of moving in together. Soille had mentioned children more than once. Eric was a pleasant type; Caroline had met him only once or twice. She recalled a tall, fair-haired Crooker, with a pronounced Island accent and an easygoing manner.

Now the police were searching for him; it seems he was not at his office this morning.

She gave the police what details she could. She promised to stay in touch.

When it was over she fell on her couch and wept bitter tears of sorrow for her friend. Poor Soille, doomed to a horrible death because of Caroline's greed. For the moment she thoroughly hated herself

Eventually, however, she stopped crying and woke up with a burning anger in her heart toward Count Karvur. She knew it had to be his work, just as he had burgled her office. It seemed he was prepared to kill people to keep his secret safe.

She vowed to seek revenge for Soille.

Her problem was that she had no weapon handy. Abruptly she realized her own vulnerability.

Caroline had never carried a weapon in CK City before. In fact, she'd gotten completely out of the habit since she'd left North Trios way back when. She was used to civilization. Now she needed a gun because she realized how fragile was the shield that civilization had to protect her with.

Fortunately she knew where to go.

She quickly cleared her schedule for the day-something she knew Gottschalk would give her hell for-and checked out a town car from the university car park, and drove into the city.

At Schneider's Guns on Melborne Avenue she parked and shopped. Eventually she bought a "ladies" Faud .38 and sixty rounds of man stoppers, plus a pair of grade-three AP gas grenades that came on an aluminum clip.

In the car she loaded the handgun-an illegal act, as she was well aware-and drove back to the campus slowly.

It was past noon now, and she checked the car back in and headed for her apartment.

The building security system reported no intruders, but she kept her hand on the little Faud .38 in her bag as she went through her front door. Karvur had had no problem with the university security system; perhaps he had access to secret codes.

Nothing had been disturbed; everything was as it should have been. Carefully she locked the door behind her and scanned the windows. Their seals were untouched. The kitchen-and-dining nook was empty. There was no one in the bedroom, or the closet. At last she relaxed and let the gun drop. She went back to her living room and set the gun on the coffee table and then dumped out the white ammo boxes from her bag.

She kicked off her shoes and removed her jacket.

She was going to fight back. Soille would be avenged, she was going to make sure of that.

For a few moments she rested there, hardening her resolve to take some action, although as yet she was unsure as to what it might be.

Perhaps she might publicize the find, go to the media. She knew someone who knew Darel Hopester of WEXnet 7; she'd go to him. Get this story out and get the ITAA involved. Karvur would end up in an ITAA prison in the end.

She'd make some phone calls, she decided. But first she needed to go to the bathroom.

She wandered in and was surprised by Count Karvur, who emerged from the shower stall with a handgun, which he pressed against her head.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE DESERT AIR WAS DRY AND WARM, AND FLYING OVER THE empty vastness in the Skua turboprop was actually a pleasure. Chang realized she was enjoying herself for the first time in days and tried not to think of anything else.

She wasn't entirely successful, but it was still a relief after the last few days' tension.

The Skua was a turbo subsonic fixed-wing that she had sequestered for her personal use. She had also given it an exhaustive overhaul to be sure it was clean of bugs as much as anything.

Chang had flown Skuas before; she was familiar with their steadfast sturdiness. She also liked the fact that they were capable of such long-range journeys on a single fueling. This one was an ancient 800 series, which could only reach 600 mph but could cover eighteen thousand kloms at a jump.

As passengers she had an interview team from WEXnet 7 in CK City: a camerawomen named Lei, a glamor talk-head named Darel Hopenster, and a minder named Urami, who sounded to Chang as if he came from Dao. Already she was becoming sensitive to Wexel accents, which were often peculiarly strong.

They were headed into the Suukup desert to visit an ITAA unit that was putting in a deep well for the Skuzoi nomads and their flocks. The visit would give them an active background for the interview, and the interview would give Chang a chance to speak to the elite audience of WEXnet 7. Maybe she could dispel the "image problem" that her day out with Blake in the Skullas Hills had created. That there was an "image problem" she had no doubt. Since her return to Doisy-Dyan she'd had three threatening phone calls, from different people if the Strand's analysis could be believed. That there were that many potential assassins already was somewhat ominous, she had to admit.

Darel Hopenster was WEXnet 7's star. He had the stereotypical talk-head look with clean-cut features, brown blow-dry, and an ability to be various shades of "concerned" in front of a camera.

Most of the way down they chatted about the various great cities of Wexel and how they compared. Chang discovered that Hopenster had visited several of the nearby worlds in the Scopus cluster; he had even spent some time at Cluster Central, the habitat world in Scopta system where she herself was based.

They both shared fond memones of the city of Krettchen on Heimworld. Its graceful bridges and the spires of thousands of philosophers' temples were an unforgettable experience.

Luisa decided that she actually quite liked Hopenster; he was more than just the surface flash of his video personality.

They were deep in the heart of the desert when the approach beacon finally lit up to announce their arrival at the well site.

The Skua descended to five hundred feet and circled the site, a drill rig and three tents, then came in for a short-stop landing nearby. Chang was met by the drill team, Lieutenant Yasoda and officers Sakomi and Hikado, all of the 624 OSF, tech-brigade.

She inspected the site. They had gone down two hundred meters so far, through very hard rock, to reach an aquifer. The word would go out soon to the thirsty nomads. The ITAA was at work here, providing assistance where it was needed.

While she examined the work, the camerawoman, Lei, kept her cameras in motion around Chang.

Then Hopester began the interview itself. Chang deliberately spoke in a quiet, no-nonsense voice. She tried to be as bland as possible.

Wexel had problems, she agreed; they were old problems, they were hard-to-solve problems. The ITAA could only do so much, she told Hopester. Furthermore, she didn't see her role as that of some "appointed savior," as some right-wing medianauts in Frentana Beach were saying.

One person just couldn't achieve that much, she maintained throughout.

Which, she already knew, was absolutely true. Every day brought her closer to despair.

Captain Cachester stood squarely across her path. The Fleet Command here had been on top for a long time, and everything had developed under its control. Prying the levers out of Cachester's hands was proving difficult.

Beyond that there was this crazy planet. The State of Patash-Do had hardly any prisons. Death squads were the preferred alternative. Doisy-Dyan was racked by bombs on a weekly basis, with shootings and murders in the slums most nights.

Turning this situation around was going to take an awful lot of work. That's what they'd meant back at Sector Command when they'd told her that she only had to be "the first stone in the avalanche."

When she thought of the maddening obstructionism of Cachester, the whole thing seemed almost overwhelming.

Fortunately the interview was soon over. The drill team had made a special lunch and afterward they posed for pictures with a small group of nomads who had wandered up out of the wastes.

Luisa felt the interview had gone about as well as one could hope for. She thought she looked proficient and pretty damn calm when she looked over some of it with the vid team.

On the way back to Doisy-Dyan in the Skua 800 she and Hopester found themselves enjoying one another's company.

Their conversation roamed willfully around. Hopester's video makeup was gone; he seemed smaller, older, rumped, even nice.

He was also surprisingly bright and candid. Almost the first thing he wanted to know was whether she'd checked the plane for surveillance bugs.

"It's clean," she said. "I keep this Skua in its own locked hangar. I do all the maintenance on it myself, and I screen the machine very carefully before I take it up."

"You must have had an, uh, experience, already then."

"You could say something like that."

"If you anger them too much they'll get you. They'll find a way."

"I was told they rarely kill ITAA officers."

"Oh, they don't just kill them, they turn them into broken animals here. There was one famous one about forty years ago. A Colonel Baptiste, who succumbed to a bioweapon passed him by a prostitute in Doisy-Dyan. He didn't die, he became a thrashing shambles, no muscular control, a great spasming idiot. He was still able to think, but not talk, or control his bowels, poor bastard. And then there was one they infected with a fungus; he died, eventually. No, they've had their way with ITAA officers pretty much the same way they've had it everywhere here."

"Baptiste's crime was?"

"He wouldn't bend over and accept the check, I think. He was part of some reform effort. I think it originated in Scopus Central."

Chang felt a slight chill. They'd tried this before and failed?

She hadn't known that. Why hadn't they told her that? Did they think she would've backed out?

"I don't intend to accept the check, as you put it, either," she said with a sudden intensity.

"You trust me enough to say that? Hey, we've only known each other for a few hours, Colonel. Don't you think this is a little abrupt?"

"Well, I feel that I know you pretty well, Mr. Hopester. Access to ITAA data is worth something at least. You're on the outs with your wife and she's the one with the family ties, not you. You're just jumped-up trash from some hellhole in South Trias. You're a hustler, Hopester; in fact, your real name is Gelim Makoob. I even have a file on your mother, Jillian Makoob. She was an interesting woman, highly creative."

Hopester bridled.

"You'd better be right about this plane being clean or you may have signed my death warrant by saying that."

"It's clean," she smiled. "Come on, man, that's my profession, you can trust me on surveillance. And the Skua's engine noise is enough to make long-range surveillance by satellite imager very difficult; everything on these planes vibrates."

Hopester stared out the window. Chang was sure she'd nettled him with that "jumped-up trash" remark.

"I'm sorry if I'm too candid for you, Mr. Hopester."

"Call me Darel, and I'm sorry for being prickly, but you have to remember where you are, Colonel. This is Wexel."

"So everyone keeps telling me."

"We're used to an ITAA that just puts in its wells and keeps its nose clean, you know what I mean?"

"I know there have been a series of complaisant ITAA commanders here. However, there have been changes within Cluster Command. A certain executive commander has been retired from the force and will face charges."

Hopester's eyes widened. "Well, at last." Then he chuckled mirthlessly. "And so they send you?"

She had to smile. "Well, thanks very much, Mr. Hopester, for your expression of confidence in me."

He rolled his eyes. "Hey, you could be Attila the Hungry, the big blue man-eater, and you would still be all alone in this thing. If the ITAA is going to change things here, they have to send in more than one new person."

"A lot of people are going to be replaced. Eventually the entire ITAA operation here."

Hopester whistled. "Well, who knows, maybe this is the story of the century. I should get onto the net at once."

"You do that and I will kill you, Mr. Hopester, no joking."

Hopester chuckled. "I've got it then, you're a spy. They sent you in to rouse up the waters and see who needs to be taken out first. Then they gradually bring in an entirely new unit to take over."

Hopester was smart, no doubt of that. "They're retraining people for the operation right now."

"Only question is can you trust the new people. Are there that many honest people in the ITAA?"

A good question, a terribly good question, she thought.

"I don't know, Mr. Hopester, I hope so," she said in a toneless voice.

"So it still all rests on a political faction. It's still a risk. You could find yourself out on a limb in this thing, and anyone who helped you would be out there with you. Guilt by association is very popular here."

She shrugged. She was a career officer in the ITAA military, what did he expect of her?

"I don't have any easy answers for you, Mr. Hopester. If my operation works as planned, most of the people currently on duty here will be replaced within a year. During that time we will take a more vigorous approach to the war fronts and the killer groups."

"But they own the goddamn planet. I mean the Regulators are controlled by the rulers here."

"The ITAA legal division is big enough to take them on. Don't forget, for the ITAA, time in an ITAA court is free."

And that was an ultimate truth. Hopester knew it.

No human world could leave the ITAA; that was central to the agreement itself. And thus anyone was liable to appear in an ITAA court if summoned, and no amount of money and influence could prevent

being selected for trial. And once in the toils of an ITAA court a person faced years of legal pressure and eventual prison sentences. The ITAA had been built on the absolute need in the worlds of man for a form of justice that ruled from beyond the planetary envelope. Something to pluck down dictators who went too far or powerful crime lords, or cultist archbishops. By and large it had worked well since it had been established.

Outside, below them, the desert was beginning to give way to grasslands, with occasional stands of trees.

Hopester pointed, seeking the right analogy for Wexel.

"Did you know that the Suukup is a man-made desert?"

"Mmm, I may have read something about that. There's been a lot to read."

"Used to be a forest, when people first settled Trios. That didn't last long. The native trees were primitive, the wood wasn't much good. Most of those species are extinct now. In fact, they built the original cities with the trees. Mostly as plywoods, mostly for concrete molding. Then for a long while it was farmed, but the soil was weak and soon gave out. It's bare rock for hundreds of square miles in the center."

"Not the only burned-out region of Wexel, is it?"

"There are thousands. Look, I'll admit up front that I'm an ecovist, but I don't think it's biased to say that Wexel has been abused continuously since the beginning of the colony."

"But there was nothing inherently different here than on a thousand colony worlds."

Hopester grew somber. "It was the lost century that did it. Wexel was out of touch for more than a hundred years, after the Starhammer War."

"Sheer bloody anarchy, then?"

He nodded. "The rule of the strong, the small armies, genocide everywhere."

"Genocide, yes, I noticed."

"That started with the laowon. On Wexel the resistance was very intense in the early days. The laowon responded with terrible cruelty."

"Of course, all the Wexel children's tales are still concerned with Der Thchumpser, 'He Who Ate Children.'"

"Which he did, by the way, on television, widely broadcast.

They were roasted alive and then carved and eaten by the Thchumpser's court."

"Der Thchumpser was a real person?" she said in disbelief. "Not even the laowon were that weird."

"Der Thchumpser was born and bred on Wexel. A laowon noble of the Blue Seygfán. He was regarded as an extremist, no more. On Wexel the laowon had always taken a stern line in their dealings

with the human population.'

"And then?"

"After Laogolden and the great fleet were destroyed the laowon here died, most of them. A couple of hundred thousand at the most ever got out. The rest were slaughtered. There is a grotto in the Skullas Hills."

"Yes, I know, I've seen it."

"Ah." He was surprised. "Well, in that case you can understand. But the real tragedy, in a sense, came after that."

"So they were out of touch? Most of the human race was out of touch. The ITAA started small, it took time."

He was angry all of a sudden. "You refer to the heroic period of our ITAA civilization," he sneered. "Yeah, sure, great events in a very brief span of time, I know. That was on my education tapes like everyone else. What happened on Wexel was that things broke down totally. There was savagery here. It's all been over for two thousand years, but the planetary economy is less advanced than it was before the laowon came. I don't think it can ever come back."

"Social lebanonization; there are soft-generated social crisis predictions about that."

"The Ownership prefers it that way. Any other way and they'd lose. It's a very successful oligarchy."

"Well, things have to change; Scopus Central is determined about that."

"I hope so; for all our sakes I really do."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IT WAS COLD AND UNNATURALLY BRIGHT IN THE COW SHED. IN one corner stood a low cage, designed to pen up veal calves long ago.

In this cage crouched an exhausted Caroline Reese, in terror for her life.

The cage was a horror of cold, tubular bars and a rough concrete floor. There was no room to move, not even to turn around. It brought on a dreadful claustrophobia that threatened to send her into a fit of manic screaming.

From the front of the cage, which was but a meter wide, a meter high, and two meters long, Reese could see the boxy calving machine. Its white surface gleamed unpleasantly under the overhead lights.

A bench with lab decks and monitors had been set up opposite the table with the calving machine. A video camera on a tripod was positioned at the calving machine's dorsal observation window.

To the decks came Count Karvur from time to time, to make a cursory inspection of the screens and the data outputs, and then with a melodramatic sniff to march away, his heavy coat flapping around him. He always ignored Caroline.

The rest of the time the place was empty except for her and the thing in the machine.

Except that now and then a beetle scuttled along the floor, checking the gutters of the old cow shed for edibles. Caroline shuddered at the sight of them. Little Wexel kachi, a ubiquitously successful native insect.

From the fact that she was still alive she knew Karvur needed her for some purpose. She had one hope, that she might play on that need to survive until she could escape. How she was going to do that she had no idea. Her options seemed painfully restricted.

She had been there for at least a full day and a half when she noticed the first odd sounds.

There was a high squeaking in the air, with a harsh metallic tone to it as if it came from tiny drills working on metal.

It lasted a minute and was followed by a scraping sound. She stared across at the calving machine. Was it breaking down?

The noise intensified.

A small power port on the lower right side of the machine suddenly snapped out of its socket and hung loose.

Something scuttled out and dropped to the tabletop. For a moment, no more, it stood there surveying the place. Details were hard to discern from fifteen feet away, but to Caroline the thing bore the definite appearance of a tiny man, a scarlet biped six inches high with earthworm skin and an undersized head.

Then it disappeared over the side of the table. A few seconds later it reappeared, running across the floor to the foot of the high bench on which were set the science decks and monitors. It climbed a table leg with a swift motion reminiscent of a man climbing a tree and then moved briskly around the equipment for a few minutes.

Caroline crouched back in the cage, with both hands stuffed in her mouth. There was a weird purposefulness about the thing that made her skin crawl.

After about five minutes there was a click and the video camera moved while lenses turned in the turret; then it swung back to covering the viewport in the calving machine.

The small biped had discovered the camera controls.

There were other clicks and switch noises. Other aspects of the equipment responded. Then the biped appeared once more at the top of the table. For a moment it stood there like a man atop a cliff, and then it jumped, landing out of her sight beyond the bench.

A few moments later it reappeared, on the far side of the calving machine, speeding across the concrete floor of the cow shed like a miniature human sprinter.

It moved with an insectile rapidity, going from the windows to the door, to a set of lockers by the door. Eventually it began to move toward the corner where Caroline was caged.

She was about to scream her guts out when it stopped in midstride. A large kachi was ambling along nearby. The scarlet biped ran down the bug after a brief chase and hoisted it, alive and kicking, over its head and ran back with it to the calving machine.

There it scrambled up the side of the machine and back into the outlet port once more, dragging the kachi behind it. The cover snapped shut a second or so later.

Caroline shuddered in a new, terrible way.

That was no hallucination.

The thing in the machine was alive all right, and it was breeding, or budding, or something along those lines. Not only that but it had worked out how to get out of the calving machine. All this in just a couple of days since she'd seen it in a condition much more dead than alive.

Questions rang in her thoughts.

What the hell did it want kachi for? What the hell was it that it could reproduce so rapidly? The thing she had left two days ago had been inert, barely capable of twitching in the nutrient gel.

Had this new form been in gestation at the time? It seemed impossible; the scans would have picked it up.

All of a sudden she had an enormous desire to see that ITAA biolog download that she knew had been sitting in her office computer when Karvur broke in.

Had Karvur taken the trouble to record all the stuff on her chives before he erased them? Had he already reviewed the ITAA biolog match data?

She had to get out of this place.

Karvur came back for another inspection of the equipment. It was storming outside, something that occurred frequently on the high moors of Patash-Do. He was wearing a huge rainslick and a wide brimmed hat that dripped water on the cold stone floor.

She called his name. It was the first word she had uttered since he'd shoved her in this hellhole. He ignored her pointedly.

She begged him then, without shame.

Something about the urgency in her voice amused his interest. After a few moments more spent toying with the controls, he strolled over and squatted down on his haunches by the veal pen. Water continued to drip from his slicker. He wore enormous Wellington boots.

"You've come to your senses, then?" he said in a soft, deadly voice.

"Yes, Count. I-"

He clucked and raised a hand slightly as if to ward off praise.

"You're a bright young woman, I knew you'd come to see things as they are. Especially now that you're

out of that awful, glittering city with all its false values, all its soft seductive ways. Things are different here, aren't they?"

"Yes, Count."

"I expect you'd like to take a bath and have a nice hot dinner.

It's a bit cold out here in the lab, isn't it?" He put a strange emphasis on the words "in the lab."

"Yes, please, Count."

"And after that good hot dinner, you'll want to reward the count, the kind count, who has given you such viands, so you'll come willingly to his bed."

A hard lump rose in her throat. "Yes, Count," she managed to say.

Anything would suffice if it just got her out of this cage.

"And in that bed you will gladly give that kind count everything you've got to give."

"Yes, Count," she whispered. What the hell did he want from her?

His eyes flashed. "Excellent, I knew you were an intelligent young woman. Got to live and learn, don't you know?"

He unlocked the cage and helped her out, holding her close with a familiarity she found quite disgusting.

This was going to be very hard. Caroline was not a sensualist; in fact, her love life had been relatively quiet for years. Pretending to want to make love to this horrible man was the last thing she could imagine doing. She just hoped she could submit without being sick all over him.

Karvur kept his arm around her waist as he walked her to the calving machine. His thigh pressed intrusively against her own.

"Would you like to see how our find is coming along?" he purred.

"Yes, Count," she muttered submissively. "Of course I would."

On the vidscreen floated a full view of the thing. She gasped.

"It's grown!"

It was twice the size it had been. And it was active. The tentacles were in constant motion, brushing the walls, stirring the nutrient gel.

Floating out of the slug-white, central mass was a thing that looked like a great orange chrysanthemum. It wobbled, alive with a weird, fervid motion.

There was something utterly repulsive about it; she shrank back, appalled by the vigor of the thing.

"Our visitor is not exactly beautiful to the eye, is it?" The count mocked her. "But it will still make us

rich, eh? That's what counts, eh?"

His hand continued to roam around her body with a horrible familiarity.

Caroline prayed she'd be able to handle this and not break down and try to kill him.

She had to survive, and she had to find that ITAA biolog check.

"Come along, Caroline, I want to watch you shower," murmured the count, tugging her toward the door.

Outside the rain was lashing down. The count gallantly opened his raincoat and shared it with her, holding her close to him as they crossed the yard.

"Women like yourself," he said in a hoarse whisper, "women in the fullness of middle life, these are my favorite women sometimes." He gave her behind a heavy squeeze. She quickened her step reflexively.

"Women like yourself, zaftig, generous, full of love."

"Count, please, I protest," she squeaked.

He goosed her, and she broke and ran for the back door to the house, getting drenched in the process, with his laughter pursuing her through the door and into the scullery.

The evening progressed to a night of enforced carnal submission of a sort that Caroline Reese had never dreamed existed, let alone imagined happening to her.

But of course she knew that it was a matter of submitting or being killed. No one on Karvur Farm would question the count.

He was merely exercising an age-old tradition. Any woman, indeed any man, could be taken by the count for sexual use. Thus it had been since the days of the laowon.

Professor Reese thus suffered the most bitter degradation, but she survived.

And yet, she was fortunate in a way. Because the next time the small, red bipedal thing emerged from the calving machine it immediately searched the veal-calf enclosure and collected traces of her occupancy of the space, which it took back to the calving machine along with another Wexel kachi.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THEY WERE STILL TALKING WHEN THEY LANDED AT DOISY-DYAN, and for some reason it seemed the most natural thing in the world to simply carry on talking by going out for dinner together.

The camerawoman and the minder peeled out, to swim and exercise and get some sleep.

Hovester knew an ancient paisano restaurant, where they feasted on crawfish and drank chilled Doisy beer. Luisa wore a plain raincoat over her uniform and put on a little makeup. After a while she found she was truly enjoying herself for the first time in weeks, or so it seemed. At least since the beginning of the

mission in the Skullas Hills.

Afterward they walked together on the river promenade, past the huge billboards of skulls and guns, and they were oblivious of both skulls and river view.

They checked into a hotel room under Hopenster's ID, and made love with a delicious intensity that matched the rest of the evening.

It was exactly what Luisa had needed. It had been too long, far too long since she'd last had sex. It was one of the real problems in the active service officer's life; you couldn't be married and have the career, ITAA forbade that. You moved a lot, you covered light-years at a time, your friends back home were long since into their second century of life, and there was no "home" to go home to, ever.

Of course she knew that Hopenster had a wife and three kids; in fact, he had the whole suburban life going up in CK City.

But in a way that was the best thing of all. She could not possibly enter any relationships right now. Someone she might see occasionally, even less than once a month, might be just perfect.

And Hopenster, well, she knew he had a woman in every port. His wife probably had her lovers, too, and they let life roll on, managing like most people did, everywhere.

Afterward she lay on the bed and stared out the windows at the dumpy skyline of Doisy-Dyan.

"You'll be heading back to Cowdray-Kara tomorrow morning, I take it," she said eventually.

He headed for the shower. "Actually no, tonight; the show must go on. I have an interview with Palatina Cowdray."

"The reigning debutante?"

"I have to be there by nine tomorrow morning, so I'll have to fly on up there tonight."

Checking back in with wife and family no doubt. She imagined the scene. She'd never wanted that for herself.

"It's too late. There aren't any more flights to the North Coast."

"There's a late-night flight out to Luc. I can haul down a carrier on the strat route there and get up to Frentana Beach.

From the Beach I can get over to Air&Space in time to just make the shuttle bus and hop over to Cowdray Towers by nine tomorrow morning."

"Take three stress tabs and sleep on the plane then?"

"From Luc to Frentana I should get a little sleep."

"So much for wife and kids, then?"

"Yeah." He nodded, and she sensed a true disappointment in him. "But I'll be with them tomorrow. We

have three whole days coming up. It'll be good."

Suddenly she felt the warm fire of the nuclear family, the human way of life that she had forsaken for her career. A strange little pang of longing and guilt passed through her. How good it must be to go home to one's family like that. To a place of warmth and security, webbed in with love and respect. How different from the lonely camp bed of the CO for ITAA forces on planet Wexel! In a room that had to be sec-searched every day.

She waited until he emerged from the shower to ask the other question.

"Will I see you again?"

He smiled and kissed her gently on the lips. "It was good wasn't it? And really I'd love to stay, but as I explained, I'm a family man. And if you want to see me again then the answer is yes, but here in Doisy-Dyan. My wife and I, we have an agreement about that."

"No lechery inside the city limits, eh?" "We keep everything out of CK City." Her turn to smile and be indulgent.

"I understand. I'm not exactly in a position to have a family, or very many men friends."

"Yeah, I can understand. You're new here."

"And it could be dangerous. There's too much riding on what I do in the next few months."

"They've dealt you a pretty big hand."

"I just deal the first card. And I know how to handle myself.

See these red bars? Combat missions, every one."

He wasn't as impressed as he should have been.

"Yeah, I know, Colonel. You've seen combat. But this is different, these people are murderers. Remember Huberte Baptiste. They play dirty."

She gave him a cool look. "Are you saying you're a spy for the Cowdray sisters?"

"No, but what if I were?"

"Then I'd be compromised. Time to get pulled out, go back to Scopus Central with my tail between my legs."

"I'd probably be doing you a favor."

She felt a gush of irritation. "I know you're all right to talk to because I did my research on you pretty damn thoroughly. It was no mistake that I chose you to do the interview."

"Hey, WEXnet chose me, you don't give WEXnet orders."

"Of course not, I just made it a request."

He shrugged. "Well, it was a good interview; it'll go out tonight, I think, they'll highlight it on the evening news."

The irritation had passed as suddenly as it had come. She gazed out the window once more, and Hopester dressed.

Soon after that he was gone. Luisa missed him. But she made an effort to get over the sudden loneliness with a belt of Scotch and the TV news until she fell asleep.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IT WAS AN IMPOSSIBILITY, BEYOND ALL CALCULABLE PROBABILITY. But astonishing or not it was indubitably true.

The Battlemaster had been resuscitated into a new universal era.

That it was a new era was already certain. An enormous span of time had passed since the catastrophe. Even by the time it had lost consciousness, the space reef had drifted, smashed, slowly cooling, for a million cycles.

Somehow the Battlemaster's magnificently well-designed body had survived in a dormant state for much, much longer than that.

Survival was astonishingly sweet for some reason. The Battlemaster relished the return to consciousness and decision making.

First there had to be regeneration. The braimass had fallen into decrepitude. The organ inventory was utterly basic. As fresh organs were created the bodymass swelled subtly. The tentacular nerve arms sloughed off and were replaced.

The refreshed optic systems examined the surrounding tank with exacting precision. It was made of a hardened ceramic, with some steel parts and a clear glass inset that had to be a viewport in the upper surface. Whatever had made it depended on vision as a dominant sense.

To the Battlemaster the tank smacked of a piece of lab apparatus. The nutrient gel was replenished from a tank in the base of the machine. Here also were mechanisms for maintaining constant temperatures and pressures within the gel chamber.

It all had the feel of a scientific approach. Undoubtedly the work of a technically advanced civilization. For a moment the Battlemaster wondered if the Batrachian enemy had survived into this era. Was this some strange Batrachian experiment? Was it a prisoner of the great enemy?

Inspection of the viewport was rewarded, however, with sightings of a bipedal creature, with a relatively large head-to-body ratio, that peered in through the glass with a pair of rather strange recessed optical sensors.

The impression that the creature's sensory apparatus was weak was confirmed when a mechanical imaging system was clamped in place outside the window. Everything that went on inside the chamber was thereafter recorded.

This confirmed the lab apparatus theory.

There was no sign of the presence of the Batrachian enemy. For this there was cause for rejoicing.

But the question remained: Just how long had it been?

The Battlemaster was consumed with an odd fear. What if it had survived alone from the Empire of Axone-Neurone? What if it was the last representative of the great race of the higher nervous system?

What should it do?

Unfortunately, no obvious mission presented itself, other than to escape from the confines of the machine and seize some kind of usable host animal.

The peering creature would serve adequately as host; it appeared to be graceful and fairly flexible. That it was intelligent was of no importance. It was a primitive lifeform, trapped inside a wild genetic code that equipped it with anachronistic physical equipment.

But that equipment, surplus as it undoubtedly was for technical civilization, would be good raw material for conversion to hostform.

And thus, as regeneration of the organ inventory proceeded, the Battlemaster moved to obtain more information about the world outside the gel chamber. Accordingly it fashioned the rover, growing it from a regenerative bud within the digestive complex. A damped down gene-mix from full pup was used to keep the thing very small. Then it was released into the gel beneath the main body and sent down the waste pipe at the base of the tank.

Inside the waste system the rover avoided destruction by breaking through a filter pad and then cutting a way through a pipe. Eventually it found its way to an exit from the machine and explored the surroundings. It returned with a pair of small alien lifeforms. These were investigated carefully in a receptor pouch that was grown at the base of the bodymass. Then they were dissolved and ingested.

The Battlemaster was aware that it was under scientific surveillance; it took extreme pains to conceal its reconnaissance activities. There was a dreadful weight of responsibility upon its actions. It was quite possible that it was alone in the universe. That on its own it would have to re-create the race of the higher nervous system.

An immense task.

But the Battlemaster was not simple Military Form. It carried no Higher Form and was subject to no compulsions in that direction, other than a general desire to see the Empire of the Gods of Axone-Neurone restored to glory.

In another step the Battlemaster had hardened some tentacle tips until they were able to remove screws and break through plastic walls. It grew a small, tough sac in which it brewed powerful organic acid that could be used to cut through metal and might also be useful as an offensive weapon.

The Battlemaster soon found ways to penetrate the interior of the calving machine. Tentacles and independent "runners" were thrust into every recess. Eventually it investigated the entire machine, every cranny, every component.

As information flowed in, certain parameters became apparent in the situation.

It was alone in a medium-size structure that appeared to have been designed to contain a number of large animals. Beyond the structure lay a planetary, exterior winds, rain, and other signs made this clear.

The bipedal creature was the only visitor to the structure interior. It appeared only rarely and never lingered more than a short while. When it came it gave the instruments a cursory inspection and that was all.

That the bipedal creature was not alone in the world was determined when the Rover brought samples of recent animal exudates from one corner of the structure interior.

Quite recently a second creature had lain there.

The Battlemaster felt a pang of regret. Suitable host might have been had quite easily had it but known!

The Battlemaster was in close to prime condition.. . all but for the single, yawning chasm: the lack of host.

This was an itch that could not be met for the lack of a host creature, modified to ride beneath the superior nervous system.

It returned its attention to the biped that visited. There would come an opportunity soon.

In the box canyon near the Klimatee River, Rhem Kerwillig didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Life was becoming an absurd switchback of euphoria and terror.

Reena had taken him back and banished Griff as well as Larshel from her presence. So there was reason to laugh. The men were planning on killing him, so there was plenty of reason to cry.

Every evening now she went out with Rhem into the scrub and gave prodigiously of herself. She was sexually inexhaustible, and Rhem was on fire for the woman. He could scarcely think about anything else.

The rest of the men, on the other band, were not so overjoyed. Larshel and Griff were now the best of friends, and one night they kept braiding rope and tying nooses in it while giving Rhem venomous looks from the other side of the fire.

The next night Griff knocked his beer mug over with a deliberate sweep of his foot as he passed by. Rhem bristled and saw Larshel watching him with cold eyes from the back of the cave.

He knew he could get killed here very easily. And maybe that was what Reena wanted. She seemed to get her kicks from having men fight over her; maybe she wanted them to die over her, too.

The only choices were to stay and get stabbed one night while asleep or to leave the SWALA and head north and take his chances with the Regulators and try to start a new life.

That wouldn't be easy. His ID had been nailed a long time ago, and he was on the informal computer-network lists. Any local CPS group would gladly execute him if they noticed him.

Any job would have to be found with new ID, and new ID would cost money if it was to be any good.

And, of course, Rhem Kerwillig was penniless.

But staying in the box canyon was likely to be the death of him.

Dusk was settling over the hills by then, and Reena came past. She had a certain look on her face, with a suppressed smile, that told him she wanted him to follow her out into the woods.

She went up the steep back path. Rhem looked around, got up, stretched, and followed her, as casually as possible.

He heard someone spit loudly behind him.

At the top of the trail she was waiting for him and the touch of her body, her lips, her breasts, seemed to ignite a flame in his loins once more.

On they went, into a scrub forest with a hundred small trails and clearings. Rhem looked behind them to see if they were followed, but he saw no one.

In a clearing she drew a sleeping bag out from a hollow tree and pressed its unroll tab. It inflated quickly, even as her hands moved over his body and his lips pressed hard against hers.

Naked, they lay together on the bag and Reena moved to ride astride him. This was her preferred position, where she could control things.

Usually time ceased to have much meaning for Rhem during these sessions with Reena, and he had lost all track of it once more when there was a shocking interruption.

A hand grabbed Reena's magnificent ponytail from behind and yanked hard, dragging her back and away from Rhem.

She gave a shriek, which cut off with a heavy slap. A boot slammed into Rhem's side, but he was already rolling away from it and only took part of the blow.

The boot was coming again. He caught the leg and spun, twisting his attacker off his feet.

Rhem was up in the next moment and looking for a weapon.

It was Griff, and he was alone.

Rhem wasn't afraid of Griff, only Larshel. Griff had forgotten himself; Rhem was the better fighter.

Griff did have a knife out, though, glittering in front of him.

Where was Reena?

Rhem cast a quick look down at her. There was blood on her face, but not enough for a stabbing.

Then Griff attacked. Rhem pivoted away from the knife and tried to kick Griff in the knee. He came close. Griff was so worked up he was careless.

Rhem felt more confidence return. He maneuvered to one side and tempted Griff to strike with the

knife.

Again he ducked away from the blow, but without any kick.

Once more they paced around each other; Griff lunged, Rhem moved, but into Griff, pushing the knife hand away and landing a solid right hand in Griff's midsection.

Griff gave out a gasp and staggered backward. Rhem came after him. He noticed that Reena was on her feet and moving, too.

Griff slashed with the knife to keep him back, but Rhem moved in, parrying the knifehand. Griff tried to kick but Rhem kicked first and Griff went down on one knee.

Rhem saw something flash in the corner of his eye, and he ducked and heard a thud.

Griff fell facedown without a sound. Reena stood over him with a heavy stick in her hand. Rhem's eyes widened. It was a club, one of the ones they'd made to kill animals they caught in their traps. She'd hidden it here.

She raised it again and gave him a contemptuous glance as she brought it down hard to smash the back of Griff's head in and spray his brains around the clearing.

"Shit, Reena," he grumbled, "you killed him."

"The asshole deserved it," she said matter-of-factly.

Rhem found himself in agreement with her on the point. Still, there were other concerns.

"We got to hide the body. Larshel will want us dead otherwise."

Reena laughed and put a hand on her hip.

"Don't worry about Larshel, honey, I can make Larshel Deveaux do anything I want. I made him bark like a dog for me once."

Staring at her magnificent body, Rhem could imagine the foolish scene all too well.

"Yeah, but this is different, this is killing. I don't know what Larshel will be like when he finds out."

Reena shrugged and deflated the sleeping bag before putting her clothes back on. The bag hissed to itself as it emptied, roiled itself up, and fastened its clips.

Rhem dressed hurriedly, trying not to look over at Griff's smashed-in head. He was just thankful that none of Griff's brains had spattered onto his own clothing.

"Where you going, Reen?" he said.

"Down to the pool, where do you think? I want to bathe and then have some food back at the cave. I'm thinking of maybe sleeping out in the woods tonight. How about you, Rhem?"

Rhem thought it was a great idea.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Count KARVUR WAS SO CONSUMED BY HIS PASSION FOR THE pale, zaftig Caroline Reese that he entirely forgot to visit the cow shed during the night. Indeed, he awoke at dawn still aroused and immediately took the woman once more, before she was even fully awake. There was something about the softness of her, the womanliness, that was intensely arousing to him after the hard-bodied peasant women he'd grown used to.

The sexual act amused him and when he was done he bathed briefly, a dip in the cold-water stall, and breakfasted on porridge and milk.

Then he went out to check the cow shed and its contents.

The rain had stopped; a morning mist cloaked the farm. Oxen moaned in the fields. The peasants were hard at work. The rains had come early and the peasants were planting wheat, soybeans, and potatoes.

The count took a few deep drafts of the morning air, fresh and alive with the scents of the country. Soon, he told himself, all this bucolic tedium would be behind him. He'd be back to the Geezl Karvur of old, living in Frentana Beach all winter and CK City in the summer.

He adjusted his shirt, tucking it in more firmly at the back, and keyed in the combination to the cow shed door lock. It opened with the usual faint beep.

Inside the cow shed the count couldn't resist peering in through the observation port. He looked and felt his heart pound in his chest.

The womb-tank was empty!

Stunned, he whirled round to the computer screen on the table. The screen still held an image of the alien creature, a still frame frozen on screen for who knew how long.

Karvur checked the microcomputer; no alarm had been raised on its auxiliary screen. Nothing bad been detected that was out of the ordinary.

Yet the thing was gone.

What the hell had happened?

Had it died and evaporated overnight?

Karvur clutched at his head and screamed with rage.

His precious opportunity was being snatched from his hands! His dream of regaining his former position in society was toppling like a falling tree.

And then a shudder ran down his back. He realized what bad to have happened.

Someone had broken in and stolen the thing. They'd neutralized the computer by some means and made off with the thing while he'd been disporting himself with the luscious professor.

He swore to be avenged.

This was treachery from the inside. Someone from the farm. By the blood of his ancestors he swore he would have them swinging from the gibbet before he was done. It was the peasants, the damnable, lazy peasants with their bedrock superstition and religiosity. They had always tried to prevent him from securing his rights. Now they had stolen away his last great chance.

He whirled about, and froze. He was not alone in the cow shed. Something utterly beyond his experience fluttered toward him with the haste of ancient hunger. He glimpsed a whitish, bean-shaped body about three feet long and six inches thick. It ran on many long, spindly limbs.

Then it was on him.

He attempted to defend himself against this small but agile assailant. He tried kicking it.

His ankle was lassoed by a red tentacle and he was jerked off his feet.

His shoulders hit the ground before he could react, and the bean-shaped thing landed on him. More arms or tentacles were wrapping themselves around him. They were as strong as wires; their grip was terribly tight.

One hand came free. He grabbed at the whitish beanbag and pushed it away from his body for a moment. It was covered in a thick warm slime. His hand slipped on the slime, and a tentacle seized his wrist and started to drag it down to his side.

His other arm was immobilized completely, held at wrist, elbow, and upper arm. Try as he might he could not move it.

The beanbag body was pressed tightly against him now, and more tentacles were wrapping around his neck.

He writhed and twisted with the maniacal strength of the damned, but it was to little avail. Here and there he thrashed upon the floor, knocking over the camera stand, slamming into the base of the calving machine, but the thing clung ever more tightly and strengthened its grip.

Just once, he got to his knees, but then he was tugged over and held down on the floor. A thickening web of tentacles spread over his face and neck, choking the breath out of him.

Other tentacles were tearing open his shirt. He felt the slimy, bean-shaped body lying on his belly. It seemed to tremble with desire.

Screaming in horror, he kicked and flailed, but he could not dislodge it. Tentacles invaded his ears, then his mouth and nose, then his anus and navel, and finally the tip of his penis. His screams rose to a most passionate climax but then died away to gurgles as these tentacles forced their way into his body cavities.

Other tentacles, with black tips, now dug into his belly and chest like claws. Needlelike extensions lanced into his flesh. Quickly they identified the nervous structures. Finer and finer tendrils sprouted from the black tips and began to tunnel into the major nerves, destroying and replacing them simultaneously.

Pain beyond Karvur's imagination of what pain might be sang through his body.

From other places the pain was joined by new crescendoes as similar nerve invasions were begun in his throat and chest, his abdomen, and finally his spine.

His body leaped and thrashed like a horse being spurred to madness. At times it came right off the floor like a fish leaping in the bottom of a boat.

The brain-boring was the last and worst, and during it he blacked out more and more and finally faded into a merciful oblivion as the higher parts of the brain were cut off from the rest of the system.

Quickly the soft oblivion strengthened into the murk of eternity, and Count Geezl Karvur was no more. But although the count was dead, his body lived on, and was rapidly being changed to reflect its new status as hostform for the Battlemaster.

In the upstairs bedroom where he'd left her, Caroline Reese grew uneasy. The count had been gone for nearly an hour, an unheard-of length of time for him to remain in the cow shed.

She showered, put on her cleanest clothes. She looked out the window. Off to one side hulked the barn with the cow shed alongside it.

Where was the count? He had said he would return shortly and she had dreaded that, because he was on fire with such a peculiar lust for sex. She felt almost that she would prefer death to any further sexual assaults by Karvur.

Escape returned to the surface of her thinking. She had submerged the thought of it through the long, terrible night. But now it was all she could think of. She had to get downstairs and outside without being detected. Then she had to reach the Baschlit VTOL that was parked out on the landing field.

The door was locked. She strained at it but could not budge it a micron.

She examined the window. The room was on the third floor of the rambling farm building. Outside, below the window, was a narrow ledge that connected to the gutter from the roof of slate slabs. If she didn't lose her balance and go crashing down to the stone terrace below she could reach that gutter and climb down to a stair window that was half-open.

The sun was up, the sky was clear, and the fields in the mid distance were filled with peasants at work. No one was visible in the immediate vicinity, however.

Caroline pulled the window as far up as it would go and clambered out and rested her weight on the narrow ledge of weatherworn brick. It was smooth, about eight centimeters wide. From this window it was about four meters to the gutter. There were no more handholds so she would have to inch her way along and pray she didn't fall.

Below was a thirty-foot drop.

She looked over to the cow shed in the other direction. There was no sound, no sign of the count.

There was nothing to it. She set off along the narrow ledge toward the gutter. It was hard work to keep herself pressed against the ancient stones of the wall. Fortunately there were a few handholds, cracks in the stone on one occasion, gaps in the mortar on others.

Eventually, however, she reached the gutter and stretched out to it, and almost fell as she lost part of her footing and teetered on the brink for a moment. Then she had a hand on the gutter and pulled herself back.

After getting her breath back she slid around the gutter and lifted the window and climbed inside. She dropped down onto the stairs leading to the second floor. She was sweating profusely.

There was no sound indicating anyone was approaching, although she could hear the sounds of some human activities lower down. Several voices were conversing loudly somewhere behind a closed door. Muffled exclamations came to her.

Quickly she slipped down the stairs. The second floor was carpeted with red patterned rugs, the walls needed whitening, and there were ancient portraits in dark oils mounted everywhere.

The doors of black oak remained closed. She went on, down to the first landing and then to the ground floor, near the great doubled front door. Just the entry hall to go, with its red brick tiles and white tiled columns.

She paused there for a moment.

A door opened and two women came into view. They saw her at the same time.

"It's her!" one said in a sharp voice with the pungent accent of the Ruinart region.

"What are you doing out, mizzi?" the other said.

They approached her warily, arms spread. They wore the simple brown-and-white garb of the housekeeper staff; Reese recognized it at once.

"I'm just on my way to see the count," she said.

"Ohhh is that you be wanting, eh?" cackled one of the housekeepers.

"Count wants some more of you then, eh?" said the other with a knowing smirk.

There was a malice about these woman that chilled her. "This is important," she faltered. "we have to find the count. Now."

The women were closer. "The count's in cow shed. He's not to be disturb."

"We better be taking you back to your room. The count he be very unhappy if he find out your not in your room."

They rushed her. She tried to push one of them out of her way, but the woman grasped her wrists with strong brown hands and would not let go.

The other woman seized her from behind and got her in a head lock. Then they marched her into the kitchen and tied her wrists together, locking her arms around the pole normally used when a pig was slaughtered.

"Look," she gasped, "it's vitally important that you believe me. We have to check on the count. He's

been in the cow shed for too long. Someone must go and see that he is all right."

The housekeepers gave her no response. There was no comprehension in their black, suspicious eyes. They snorted in contempt and turned their backs and left her alone in the kitchen.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE COW SHED ON KARVUR FARM WAS STOUTLY BUILT OF Ceranicized airblock. Very little sound carried from its interior. As a consequence, the frenzied screams of the count in his last moments were barely heard in the farmhouse or the fields.

The servants of Karvur farm were loath to involve themselves in the count's private business. Doing so was a likely way to get a whipping. Thus no one dared to actually investigate the place for a good two hours after the count's last shrieks had faded away.

Finally the groundkeeper, Ewane, was convinced by the housekeepers to knock on the door with his heavy fist.

There was no response. Ewane turned to the watching housekeepers by the scullery door and shrugged. He would as soon have left things as they were. Whatever it was that the count was doing in the cow shed, it was likely to be unpleasant and painful to others. Between Ewane and the count existed naught but a mutual dislike. The count would have dismissed him long ago, but Ewane was of a Karvur distaff line and his position was hereditary and tenured.

Ewane began to move away from the door. The housekeepers waved to him to go back.

"Try again. The count is in there and he may need assistance."

With a surly oath, Ewane complied. Still there was no response. Finally he nerved himself and pushed open the door. The first glance told him something was seriously amiss. Machinery lay disemboweled over the table.

He opened his mouth to shout and then lost his breath as something drove like a meat hook into his solar plexus. A hand caught him about the back of the head and pulled him inside with a lurch, and the doors slammed behind him.

Alarmed, the housekeepers retreated inside the scullery and peered out through the window. Whatever had happened to Ewane? Where was the count?

Screams were coming from inside once more. The housekeepers screwed up their courage and tiptoed across to the cow shed and listened at the door. A terrible howling echoed from within.

The housekeepers jerked open the doors. They barely comprehended what they saw before them. Ewane's body twitched and struggled in the grip of something that resembled a giant gray grasshopper or an octopus with metallic tentacles. Things that resembled bright orange flowers grew from its head, and these swiveled to regard the housekeepers. Tentacles fucked toward them like whips. They shrieked and slammed the doors on the tentacles, then ran headlong back across the courtyard and into the house. There they barely paused to shout alarms into the upper floors before they ran out the front door and down the path to the village.

Caroline Reese heard their screams and felt a chill run down her spine.

Something terrible had happened in the cow shed.

Caroline had seen that tiny red man running across the floor. Her urge to get away became stronger with each passing moment.

She had to get away, except that she was tied to the damnable pole.

Desperately she glared around the kitchen, seeking some route to escape. And then her eyes lit on a knife block on a table beside the far wall. Alas, it seemed out of reach.

She pulled her hands down the pole and extended a foot toward the nearest leg of that table.

It wasn't so far after all! Maybe she could tilt that table and make the knife block fall.

She strained and struggled but her outstretched toes could not do more than brush lightly against the leg of the table. It was tantalizingly close, but still too far.

She abandoned the effort and looked around once more.

There-another knife, hung from a rack of spatulas and wire whisks. But it was at shoulder height, hanging from the ceiling between worktables.

How was she ever to reach it?

A kick?

Caroline had never been a dancer or a kung-fu student. She had no idea if she could get a leg up that high.

She raised her hands up the pole and used the rope binding them together to get some leverage, and then launched herself in a wild kick.

Her first effort merely got her leg to waist height and cost her, her balance, and she fell spiraling around the pole and hit her head, leaving her sick and dizzy. She regained her feet and screwed up her determination. Her second effort was much better, executing a clumsy high kick and jostling the utensil rack.

The utensils clattered together but the knife did not fall. However, she was left with a glimmer of hope.

Her third and fourth efforts were little better than the first except that she kept her balance.

She was perspiring and breathing hard when she launched into the fifth attempt with everything she had left.

She felt a muscle in her side pull sharply, and then her foot encountered the rack and sent it spinning around while wire whisks fell off to one side and the small knife flew off in the other.

Despairing, she watched the knife hit a wall, drop to the floor, and then, miracle of miracles, come spinning across the floor to a point not too far from the pole.

With a gasp she pulled her hands down the pole once more and stretched out a foot to the knife.

With some effort she managed to draw the knife closer. Then she bent her head down to the floor and seized the knife's wooden handle in her teeth. Holding it clamped between her jaws she sawed back and forth on the string binding her wrists. It was rough, imprecise work, and she cut herself twice before the first string finally parted.

A minute later they were all gone and she was free.

Clutching the knife, determined not to be taken prisoner again, she stalked to the scullery door.

Across the yard was the cow shed. All was silent there. To the left was the barn and beyond it the stables. To the right was a brick wall with an empty gate.

Without more ado she slipped out the door and ran to the gate. Ahead was the rough road that ran down to the village.

From that direction she heard shouts, and in a moment she glimpsed a group of figures approaching.

To the right was the front garden of the farmhouse, with a long lawn and a line of stately old elms.

To the left was the vegetable garden, also exposed to the view of the men running up the lane.

She turned back and ran into the courtyard once again. Where to hide? The cow shed was out of the question, as was the house.

A small door was open, leading into a coal hole. Here she crouched, peering through a crack in the door as a mob of villagers, armed with pitchforks, machetes, and the odd gun, entered the yard.

Seeing no "demons" in plain sight, these men were immediately emboldened to open the door to the cow shed.

The doors slid back on their rollers.

The men surged in with their weapons brandished and found the place empty, or almost. The calving machine still hulked in the center, surrounded by benches and equipment. The machine's innards, however, had been removed and lay over the bench.

Beside the calving machine's hulk they found poor Ewane, or what Ewane had become. The man was crouched over in a fetal position, while a layer of pink slime was hardening around him like the outer layer of a cocoon.

Some of the men tried to shake Ewane awake, but to no avail.

He was either dead or in a trance.

And then with shocking suddenness a bizarre creature dropped upon them from the ceiling. Dark gray in color with pink streaks and a beard of green polyps that matted its chest region and hung beneath the jaw, it had two humanlike legs and a number of long narrow tentacles that were white with brown tips.

But it was the face that most appalled the men, for it was that of Count Geezl Karvur, distorted, transformed, but still recognizable.

This was the one fact that the survivors were all able to agree upon.

Events moved swiftly. The thing struck at the men with the hardened tips of tentacles that stabbed flesh as effectively as spears. Its movements were as quick as those of machines.

In horrified fury men struck back with everything they had. They died in the effort. Blood spattered the walls and drenched the floor. Screams and shots echoed maddeningly. The thing was hard to hit; it moved too fast.

Men were eviscerated, beheaded, amputated of one or more limbs in a frenzied struggle that lasted less than half a minute.

Then Grike the Strong, a burly peasant, got his pitchfork well into the shining gray side of the thing.

It gave a peculiar hiss and knocked him headlong with a convulsive lash from one of its lower limbs.

But now Janodo of the Gate hit it with a shotgun blast at close range, right in the center of the chest where the green polyps were thick; blood and fragments spattered the floor.

The men stepped back, expecting the thing to fall dead on the spot.

Instead it seized Janodo with another loud hiss and bounded out of the cow shed doors.

Once free of the shed it hurled Janodo away while taking possession of his gun, which it cranked into use and began discharging into the crowd of peasants thronging the gate.

They scattered with shouts and screams.

Then, with a curious skittering stride, the thing ran across the courtyard and crashed through a window into the main house. Screams came from within.

Meanwhile the surviving men from the cow shed had reappeared, howling with rage and fear.

There were bodies everywhere; the creature had taken a terrible toll.

By a miracle, Janodo himself had survived being thrown against the wail of the cow shed. He staggered onto his feet, white-faced.

The men were in a wild state. None who had seen the thing in action would ever forget it. It moved too fast for human beings.

They blamed the count, of course, in loud and terrible voices, and they trembled, for they did not want to die.

But their fear was balanced for the moment by a fierce rage on behalf of their fallen comrades.

"It's in the house!" someone yelled, and they ran across the yard in pursuit. Janodo was left, still staggering.

Inside the house they found a trail of devastation, and a dead housemaid who had foolishly barred the creature's passage into the parlor and been gunned down.

It had exited through the window of the parlor. From there it had run across the lawn, staggering a little now from its wounds, and disappeared in the shrubbery on the far side.

Caroline Reese had seen the thing emerge from the cow shed carrying poor Janodo. She had seen it toss him aside and concentrate on the shotgun. Sensors like flowers pointed in many directions from the "head" region. It worked the gun mechanism just once before it began shooting into the crowd.

With horrified eyes she'd then watched it spring across the yard and into the scullery door. She'd heard its progress through the house, the shot that killed the housemaid, and a distant crash as it burst through a window and made its escape.

Now the peasants stormed around the house in a rage; one man kept firing his hunting rifle into the air and cursing in the Patash-Do vernacular called Quoink.

Caroline shrank back into the coal hole and nestled down among some large logs that were seasoning there. In their excited state the peasants were dangerous to any strange face. Caroline had no desire to be seen.

Eventually the sound of the peasants died away as they returned to the village carrying the bodies of the fallen. The farmhouse and the yard were quiet.

The village chapel began tolling its bell.

When Caroline peeked out once more it was dusk; there were few sounds other than the sighing of the wind through the trees and the bell in the near distance. She ran to the gate and then went quickly down the lane past the vegetable garden and emerged behind the landing pad for Karvur's lovely old Baschlit VTOL.

Unfortunately the Baschlit was locked and wouldn't open itself for anyone but the count.

Undaunted, she turned and ran on down the lane to the work shed. There were several vehicles parked there. She found a four-seat, bigwheel ATV, a Loughlin with a 500cc hydro burner and eleven hundred kilometers in the fuel tank. It seemed the best choice available. To get it started she resorted to the manual start button, and it responded at once. From the speedometer scale the machine was clearly designed for highway driving as well as rough terrain.

Once she had it going, she drove it out of the work-shed yard and into a lane that fed into the main road connecting Karvur Farm and village to the highway down below the Yellowfork.

The road was in bad condition, and even with the ATVS jumbo tires she was slowed, working her way through a series of wallows where everything degenerated into mud two or three feet deep.

By then she was well beyond Karvur Farm and passing through the extensive scrub of panuki and hackbush that was about all that could prosper on these tropical moorlands.

She stopped for a moment and rolled down the window to listen for the sound of pursuit.

There was nothing to hear but the hot breeze playing through the small patches of terrestrial acacia trees that dotted the landscape.

She shuddered.

What the hell had she seen back there?

What could it have been?

And pounding in her thoughts was the name "Saskatch" and a world destroyed.

What was she going to do?

She clenched her fists in her anguish. There was no way she could hope to emerge from this unscathed. ITAA prison loomed ahead.

But she knew she had to tell someone. The question was who? The ITAA Military, of course. They were based in the capital city of Patash-Do, to the south.

A quick check of the ATV'S computer showed that the northsouth highway that lay beyond the Yellowfork River would take her to a junction with the Nacional Highway, which went all the way to the capital, a distance of about 800 kilometers.

She got the ATV back into motion and rolled south to the river.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

COLONEL CHANG GLANCED AT THE LATEST LEAFLET FROM THE Committee for the Preservation of Society. There was a picture of her, taken at a recent official ceremony with the mayor of Doisy-Dyan.

The caption was hard to swallow.

"Does the Mayor know that Chang is a slimy lib-symp?" it said in big letters, and went on into a reprint of a short article that condemned her violently for her attack on Regulators in the Skullas Hills. She was credited with personally shooting five men, execution-style, with their hands tied behind their backs. The writer, the pseudonymous Pere Noir, went on to call for her assassination by any willing patriot of the great state of Patash-Do.

"Very helpful," she groaned. "I mean, really." She tossed it aside.

Troubles were thick enough on the ground without the intrusion of these crazies. It was bad enough working under a constant Taklish Security screen, but now she had to sleep someplace different every night and she was worried about her office security. She moved it twice in one day.

Meanwhile, Captain Blake had disappeared into the bush in Luc Province, in pursuit of some slavers who'd been raiding villages for children. He was keeping radio silence to mask his approach on the slavers' headquarters at a fork in the Kaster River.

How long he planned to stay out of touch was unknown. Since the disaster in the Skullas Blake had

barely spoken to her.

Luisa felt a gush of appalling hopelessness. A self-punitive voice rang in her head. She should never have gone on that mission into the Skullas. But five years behind a desk had made her so damned eager to get out in the field again she'd indulged herself.

It was the damned memories, that was all. They'd set the trap for her. Those brilliant, terrifying weeks on Kursk, they had been the most intoxicating days of her life. She wanted that thrill again, the upside of war.

And the biological clock was running against her; she'd lost five years at Cluster Command; it was now or never, she knew.

Damned fools are usually dead fools soon enough, she remembered the voice of an instructor somewhere, probably ITAA Star Academy at Scopus Minor. Luisa shrugged; she just had to go on, despite all this.

There was a knock at the door. Jean Povet was there with more bad news; Luisa could see it at once in her face.

"I thought you'd want to see this immediately," Povet said, putting a note on her desk.

Luisa read the first paragraph and felt her blood run cold. "The auditing software is shot, then?"

"Completely corrupted, it would seem."

"And the resident AI here at the base has no idea what's going on?"

"That too seems pretty likely."

"Incredible, in-fucking-credible!" Luisa banged on her desktop.

"The audits for the last six years are suspect, at least. It may be more than six years, we obviously can't tell yet."

"Who controls the keyware to this software sector?"

"As far as I can tell that's been in the hands of Captain Cachester for the last few years."

Cachester himself! "Of course," she murmured, "who else."

Luisa told the Strand to get Captain Cachester on line. As usual he resisted picking up her call. She felt her pulse pound in her temples as her anger rose. She stabbed the priority override code in and broke into his current call.

He was startled. He had been talking to Pilar, the new bargirl at Domini's, and suddenly Pilar was gone and in her place was the harsh, flat face of Colonel Chang.

"What's the meaning of this?" he began, but she interrupted.

"Captain Cachester, I understand that you have the keycodes used with the base auditing software, is

that correct."

His face hardened.

"Is that correct, Captain?" she snapped.

"In a manner of speaking, uh, yes."

"What are you talking about, Captain Cachester?"

"I have possession of the box they come in, but the codes themselves may only be used in the presence of a full Auditing Team from Cluster Command."

"Oh, really. Where is that listed?"

"Regulation 119 B, Auditing Codes Control, paragraph twelve, line six, sir."

Luisa put a query search into her Strand. In a few seconds she had a screen display on the Auditing Codes Control regulations.

"Ah, I see it. All this section, this 119 B, was written and added by Colonel Adrienne Barsch. When was this?"

"Several years ago."

"And since then has the auditing software ever been inspected?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"And how long have you kept the keycodes, Captain?"

"Well, I don't know if I should tell you this."

"You should, I demand it."

He was obviously flustered. "Well, I think it's been about five years now."

"I see. Thank you, Captain. I want you to bring the box with the keyware in it to this office."

"Well, I don't know, Colonel. Isn't this a little irregular?"

That box is in Fleet Command as of this moment. I don't know whether I shouldn't refer this to Admiral Heidheim."

"Shut up, Captain! Shut the fuck up and listen to me! I am planetary commander, the Fleet Command here answers to me. Do you understand this basic fact?"

"Well, I-"

"Do you? Because I will call Scopus Central right now and ask for your arrest and court-martial if you don't."

That shook him. He knew she had the authority. Heldheim could not be relied on to save his ass in this instance.

"Well, uh, Colonel, I can get it for you but it will take a little while. The box is in the timed vault. I can get it out in two hours' time."

"Good, then I shall expect it on my desk within two hours and twenty minutes. Understood?"

"Yes, uh, Colonel Chang." Cachester was licking his lips nervously.

Two hours and twenty minutes later, Chang received a call in her office. Cachester reported that the box containing the keywares was missing from the time vault. No one had signed for it nor was there any evidence pointing to when it had been taken.

Luisa thought a moment and then called Scopus Central. She hadn't yet called for help. It was time.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

AFTER ESCAPING FROM THE FARMYARD THE BATTLEMASTER HAD proceeded for a short distance into the forest before allowing the hostform to collapse.

It was badly wounded; essential fluids were leaking from the chest cavity. It was unfortunate but a period of rest and recuperation was going to be necessary. Feeding and physical repair were required before any further exertion could be demanded from the host.

And while the body of the hostform was being taken care of, the Battlemaster needed to explore the technical culture of the hostform creatures.

From the effort of taking the initial host, and then the creation of a secondary form in the second host taken, the Battlemaster had learned much about the nature of the creatures.

They were of an unusually high order of intelligence. Their tech-culture exhibited signs of mass manufacture. They understood the energies of the universe and were able to manipulate the electromagnetic force. They also possessed a primitive sense of ballistic-weapon science. The gun that it had been shot with was little more than a simple firing tube, equipped with a ten shot magazine that was empty now. The cartridges were scattershots, with small steel balls within.

This much was known. The Battlemaster knew that it was essential to learn much, much more, and soon. Crucial decisions had to be made and there was simply insufficient information available to make them on a rational basis.

One set of questions in particular burned at the forefront of the Battlemaster's thinking: Was this the homeworld of these creatures, and how had they come upon the Battlemaster's moribund remains?

From human DNA and cell structures the Battlemaster had already surmised a long evolutionary path for the creatures. The metabolisms were complex, but of a low order of intensity.

Longevity was clearly more important than immediate utility.

This was to be expected in wild hostform. And yet in the first hostform there had been something perhaps artificial in the matter of longevity. This posed another intriguing question mark concerning these creatures and their world.

After a period of immediate rest during which the Battlemaster worked feverishly to grow fresh tissue to seal the wounds, it mused the host back to its feet once more. There was little strength left in the creature, which had barely recovered from the taxing demands of the initial conversion to host when the hostiles broke in and precipitated the violence.

Slowly it shambled back through the woods toward the farm.

From the edge of the trees it surveyed the scene. Around the farm there was little sign of activity. In the mid-distance there was a repeated sonorous sound, as of metal being struck.

Suddenly there came a machine sound and from a group of sheds at one side of the farm emerged a vehicle. It had four oversized wheels and rolled swiftly past the other buildings, then turned and passed close to the spot where the Battlemaster crouched.

The Battlemaster observed one of the hostform creatures within the vehicle, directing it through a manual system.

It passed and went on down the straight passage cut through the vegetation expressly for this purpose.

The Battlemaster watched it go, then crept toward the farm buildings through the gathering dusk.

First, it looked into the cow shed, and experienced a pang of disappointment.

The young Secondary Form had been helpless, still locked in cyst when the fighting erupted. The hostile bipeds had taken it away, probably to destroy it.

The equipment in the place had been smashed to tinders, too; there was nothing here for the Battlemaster.

It moved on, noting the mix of primitive technologies with items of higher caliber that were interspersed among the rest.

There was little, however, that would be of use. In particular there was no sign of ammunition supplies for the gun.

Then in a long, narrow shed the Battlemaster found an answer to one pressing problem. Along the walls were a number of square pens, each containing a single, white, feathered animal.

Concluding that these creatures were food forms, the Battlemaster pushed forward. A food form was removed and killed while its wings flapped and it emitted squawks of desperation.

The Battlemaster withdrew with the white, feathered carcass into the trees. There it ate the thing with large, powerful bites, discarding feathers and bones where necessary.

The accelerated metabolism of the hostform digested the raw flesh very swiftly.

Feeling physical strength return to something above minimum, the Battlemaster moved on, heading

away from the farm.

Night had fallen. Wind sighed in the trees. A bright crescent moon had risen. Stars winked bright and merciless.

A vast unsympathetic universe looked down upon the scene.

The Battlemaster felt very small and very alone. Eternity had passed since the day of the Empire, of that it was sure. But did the homeworld still live? Could it even find the home system after this enormous span of time? Questions pounded in its brain. The Secondary Form was undoubtedly lost. Time was a precious factor now, and further information about the situation was most important.

The Battlemaster found the cleared passage cut through the vegetation. Ruts and potholes convinced it that this was a route for transports, like the one it had seen in use earlier.

After a few miles the Battlemaster found another smaller passage that went off to the left side of the road.

If the four-wheel transports were popular, then there could be many paths like this, and the host creatures might have habitations scattered along them.

It seemed an odd, low-density way of life to the Battlemaster, but aliens were capable of anything.

The hopes of the Battlemaster were suddenly rewarded when it rounded a bend and came in sight of a lone building.

It was smaller than the other farm, but built of similar materials, with slab stone walls and slate roof. It had shuttered windows from which spilled a soft yellow light.

The Battlemaster crept closer. An optical organ was inserted through the shutter to peer inside.

Two bipeds, a male and a female, sat at a table consuming food from a number of receptacles set between them.

Also visible in the room was a data-output screen. Currently it showed a set of changing symbols in one corner while the rest of the screen was occupied with full-color video signal. The thing was instantly recognizable to the Battlemaster.

The Battlemaster withdrew the optical organ. There was a dish structure on the roof that had to be for reception of signals in the UHF waveband range. This indicated a broadcast system for information of some complexity. Perhaps this was how the human centers of authority broadcast orders to guide the agricultural work force.

Whatever its purpose, it might prove to be perfect for the next step. What was needed was a few hours to rest the hostform and explore the tech-culture revealed here.

And at the same time these two host creatures could be taken for Secondary Forms.

There was a noise from the door; an animal was whining and scratching. It erupted into louder noises as the smell of the Battlemaster reached it more strongly.

The Battlemaster was familiar with the principle. Some lower lifeform that was kept to keep watch and drive off animal intruders.

The Battlemaster retired to the other side of the hedge and watched.

The animal uttered further sharp cries. One of the bipeds emitted another cry, almost as loud, with an unmistakable tone of irritation to it.

The unseen animal quietened.

The host bipeds had finished their meal. Slowly they packed away the food receptacles and doused others in a tub of water.

Then the door was opened and the guard animal released. It immediately scouted the area where the Battlemaster had stood and repeated its loud warning sound while searching for more scent.

Meanwhile the bipeds extinguished the lights and went up the stairs to an upper chamber.

The Battlemaster withdrew further into the trees.

The animal approached, sniffing its way toward the hidden Battlemaster.

What effect would the disappearance of the guard animal have on the human bipeds? Would they lock their door and take down weapons? Or might they come in search of the four-legged animal? Might they even come one at a time?

How quickly would news of the struggle at the farm have spread? Would these hostforms be aware of the danger?

It was hard to judge, and thus the Battlemaster withdrew further, accelerating its progress to take it away from the questing nose of the Doberman.

"Lucky," however, was the kind of dog that would never give up when something as stimulating as this took place. There was an alien animal smell, and it retreated before him. Lucky pressed on, determined to tree the thing and to bark and bark until the master came and shot it and left it to Lucky to rend and chew.

Two hundred meters from the house the Battlemaster decided to act. It was far enough to prevent sound from carrying. It understood well the sensitivity of human hearing.

It waited behind a tree as the quadruped animal caught up.

The animal sensed that the prey had stopped retreating, but this did not inspire caution in the small brain. It came on with a rush, growling as it accelerated through the undergrowth.

Alas for Lucky, this was not his day. A life in which he had rushed growling on many terrified animals now approached a terrifying terminus.

The Doberman rounded the tree and found the alien creature waiting.

It was a man that was not a man. A thing like nothing Lucky had ever smelled or seen or tasted before.

And then the Doberman was struck by tentacles that flashed like spears through its chest and belly. Lucky died with his last bark choking off in his throat.

The hostform tore the limbs off the Doberman and chewed on one as the Battlemaster drove it back to the isolated farm of Jaad and Beetris Benuil. Soon it stood by the hedge once more, gazing in at the light. Time passed, the small moon moved in the sky.

The door opened and one of the bipeds emerged, holding a light and emitting a loud single call.

The call was repeated and the Battlemaster understood that this call was to the dead guard animal whose flesh it chewed.

The Battlemaster noted that the hostform held no weapon. Carefully it calculated the distances.

Jaad Benuil advanced a few steps further from the door.

Now!

The Battlemaster surged over the hedge and onto the startled man.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ALL NIGHT Caroline REESE KEPT THE ATV ROLLING SOUTHWARD, listening to various radio stations along the way. She chose stations playing fast-paced Pat-Do country music. The words were unintelligible due to the heavy accent, but the strong beat and the wailing guitars helped to obliterate the other thoughts, the things she didn't want to think about.

However, the realization, made at the crossing of the Yellow-fork, that she'd left her ID tag behind with her other clothes at the fann left her coldly aware of the many difficulties that lay ahead.

The first thing she had to do was reestablish ID and credit codes, and in Patash-Do that could be difficult. Patash-Do was about as backward and out of touch as things got on Wexel.

At the same time she felt a terrible sense of guilt. People were going to die, had already died, and it was because of her greed, her stupidity.

She'd known there was something not quite right about Count Karvur from almost the beginning. An elemental greed, a kind of savageness that marked him as one of Wexel's troublesome aristocrats. They were capable of the foulest crimes, as the media showed the world every day.

And when she'd realized what he was offering she should have left an automessage on her machine, something to warn the world if she herself couldn't.

There was no getting around it, she'd fucked up and badly.

She prayed that there was a branch of the Cowdray Bank in Doisy-Dyan. There had to be; the "Cow Bank" had branches everywhere on Wexel, or almost. Of course, Doisy-Dyan was a real tropic hellhole with a huge underclass, where constant killing by Liberators and Regulators kept a high level of tension in the hot, humid air.

Did Cow Bank bother with a place like that?

It had to-the ITAA was based there.

And she had to have new ID. Without ID they wouldn't even let her into the ITAA offices. She could imagine the kind of security they must run.

She remembered her one trip to these southern states. She'd taken a tour to historic South Luc. They were in the beautiful city of Rotens-La. The streets were patrolled by "sangrados." At certain intersections accused Liberators were being crucified. There were steel nails driven into their palms and ankles.

At nightfall they heard the crackle of small-arms fire. And on the third night the hotel was actually attacked.

She'd never forget that night. Waking up to a dynamite blast at the front entrance. Then the ripping of automatic weapons, more explosions; it went on for twenty minutes until the "Liberators" were driven off.

It turned out that the "Liberators" in this case were Regulators, in fact sangrados, moonlighting for the local bosses, who wanted the hotel to kick back more protection money.

Caroline Reese had resolved at that very moment never to return to the wilder parts of Wexel. Outside of CK and a few other cities, that meant most of the planet.

She had stuck to her rule until the mad count had appeared in her life just a few days before and tempted her. And like a fool she'd followed him, as helpless as a moth in front of a light.

And now she was in Patash-Do, and she had to get new ID material, and she knew it could really be a bitch. If there wasn't a Cow Bank she'd have to try and do it all through another bank, and she knew that would be slow and very difficult.

What if the only banks were local ones? Patash-Do banks with legendarily slow and mean-spirited employees?

She felt the paranoia rising.

And what about that thing that she had left behind at Karvur Farm? What was it doing now?

She did not want to think about that, so she concentrated on the more immediate problems. Getting ID, establishing credit codes, and then buying some clean clothes and getting a hotel room and taking a long, hot bath.

Maybe she might even go out for a nice meal. One last indulgence before she became a prisoner.

And then, when she looked and sounded fully human again, she would go over and see the ITAA. And give up her life, her career, everything.

Would they clap her in irons at once? Would that be it? Detention before trial, followed by one of those ringing ITAA sentences, "Forty-five years terrestrial standard, no possibility of parole until after thirty-three years."

She moaned softly to herself.

She didn't want to spend thirty-three years in an ITAA prison. Even if her health credit plan with the university held up and kept paying for her Extended Life treatment, she'd still lose much of her looks, and three whole decades of life.

But there was no alternative, was there?

And then she thought about flying to CK City and getting a ticket on the next shuttle to the orbiter. If she took everything she had that was liquid credit, she could afford a ticket outsystem, get to Lursiane or Diphon's World. She'd be able to start over there. She'd be safe. Although she'd have to change identities.

And Wexel?

With no warning, what would happen to this terrible old planet of Wexel?

It could be consumed, like ancient Saskatch. Devoured by the terrible lifeform from the Starhammer Era.

So what, if she was safe somewhere else?

No, she couldn't do that. She couldn't live with herself.

She imagined the things running amok through her hometown in North Trios. She saw her family and relatives being eviscerated by greedy alien horrors, things that tore at them with worm mouths that bristled with teeth.

NO! She would not let that happen, even if it meant the end of her own career, her own life. And it would, of that she was certain. Because she'd have to go in person and sell the idiots in charge on her story. She couldn't just leave a message for the ITAA commander and then disappear. Crackpots left messages for the ITAA all the time. Wexel had more than its fair share of crackpots, after all, and in a place like Doisy-Dyan there would be thousands.

She had to go in person. She would have to sacrifice herself.

She sucked in a big breath.

This was not going to be easy. She didn't feel like a heroine and she didn't want to be one, either.

But while these gloomy thoughts refused to go away, the roads below the Yellowfork were a dramatic improvement over those north of it.

Soon she reached the junction with the east-west interstate, Highway Eight. She headed west, toward Sigayre City, where Eight met up with the major Patash-Do highway, the Nacional, which would take her more or less directly south to Doisy-Dyan.

She made good time here and turned onto the Nacional well after midnight.

Towns and villages were becoming progressively more numerous. There were more lights along the

road.

Now she turned over the driving to the ATV's software and arranged her seat and tried to sleep, while the car hummed south on its big fat tires.

The ATV purred smoothly southward, heading for the coast and the velvet Patash-Do dawn, and after a while the tension broke and she sagged into a deep sleep.

At about the same time, several hundred kilometers ahead of her in Doisy-Dyan, Colonel Luisa Chang was logging the last enormous software package onto the base computer system.

In less than a day she had stripped down the ITAA base AI, "Sancor," and rebuilt it with fresh modules sent out directly from Scopus Central.

Then there'd been fresh auditing packages and keyware and language codes and a new security net, and it all had to be downloaded through the old Strand, which had a mere terabyte of RAM but could be absolutely trusted. Eventually the Strand copied it all and spat out loaded microdisks.

And then Luisa personally loaded the microdisks into the base computer hardware, an old Spika Inc. network system.

Chang had already run a search/destroy software check on the machine to hunt out security breaches or worm programs that might still be resident in the computer after the dismantling of Sancor.

Quite a few things had been found and erased. Chang was sure that Captain Cachester and his backers would be most unhappy when they discovered this.

A long night lay ahead of her. Luisa had decided not to wait another moment. With clean hardware and new auditing software, the reconstituted Sancor started to investigate the base accounts.

Chang left the high-security computer room and passed out through the guard.

Outside it was another warm and muggy Pat-Do night. Crickets chirped in the long grass beyond the fence. The lights of the base buildings were surrounded by faint nimbi of humidity.

Back in the office she found Povet still at work. Security was still good. None of the blastproof doors between her office and the building front door had been tampered with for days. The bulletproof shutters on the windows were locked down tight, and the vibrators and Taklish systems were on full.

She and Povet slapped palms together as the Strand interfaced with the Spika bigsystem.

Within minutes the auditing software had found a number of discrepancies in the base accounts system. Put together they constituted a major bleed-off of funding.

Chang smiled grimly to herself as she studied the screen windows.

Cachester was in for a shock.

And then the screens shuddered and the building shook.

A dull, heavy thud echoed through the dank night air.

When Colonel Chang cracked up one of the shutters and looked out, she saw smoke billowing up from the ground-floor computer lab.

When she looked back to her screen she found error messages. The accounts files were gone, along with most of the Spika hardware, which had been destroyed by a bomb.

Alarms were wailing. Men and women were running across the concrete to the computer lab.

Chang swallowed hard and clenched her fists together in fury.

Another round to Cachester.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WITHIN THE ISOLATED FARMHOUSE OF JAAD BENUIL A STRANGE horror continued deep into the night.

As far as Jaad Benuil was concerned, of course, the horror had ended with no more than a terrifying glimpse of a thing of tatters and tentacles and a human face. He gave a single shriek as the thing ripped his throat out on his doorstep.

For his wife, Beetris, however, things had not gone so well. She was taken as Secondary Form.

Indeed, while she was still conscious, still screaming, the thing held her down and grew assault nerves directly into her body from a structure like a black pipe, or hawser, that grew from its thoracic region directly into her belly. While it did this it continued to eat parts of her dead husband.

Fortunately the Battlemaster had learned much concerning the human nervous system, and the process was much accelerated compared to the initial mounting upon Count Karvur. Beetris's agonies cut off as her brain was bypassed and isolated within her skull. Later the brain tissues were inundated with enzymes to break them down and recycle the material. The Battlemaster had no use for human brain structures within a secondary form.

And so poor Beetris was dead, although her body was alive, now crouched in the fetal position, covered in a hardening pink layer of skin. Within this shell her body underwent enormous changes, with a terrifying rapidity that consumed seventy years of life in a matter of hours.

And while she changed, the Battlemaster finished devouring her husband's arms and studied the output of the biped. host creatures' planetary culture. For this purpose there were conveniently located spectrum-sampling devices, working in both visual and audio modes. After an hour's perusal of stations 2 to 27 on the Benuil's TV system, the Battlemaster decided that the host creatures used the visual mode as the primary source of information, and commented on the visual material through the audio.

The visual mode was conducted in a straightforward representational form, and the Battlemaster quickly concluded that this was some kind of entertainment format. There were similar systems built into all Imperial warships, but entertainment had not been their prime function.

It also realized that the system was most likely directed from satellites, and this set in train a whole series of speculations.

Soon it found a channel that appeared to use a visualization of a satellite in orbit as some kind of punctuation among a torrent of images of human females.

They had satellites. This implied space travel.

Further investigation of the channels revealed more and more disturbing information.

This was not the host creatures' homeworld.

They were spread across many worlds.

They were an enormous, amorphous entity, a colossus.

This era in the galactic future was effectively controlled by these sluggish bipedal creatures. Mighty spaceships employing a technology unknown to the Gods of Axone-Neurone wove a steady path between the far-flung worlds. Thus knit together in violation of the rules of physics, as understood by the Battlemaster, an enormous multiplanetary culture existed, with swarming hordes of these bipeds on world after world across an enormous reach of the galaxy.

Even worse, although anticipated, there was no reference whatsoever to the Empire of the Gods of Axone-Neurone.

That implied nonexistence of said Empire, indeed nonexistence over a large span of time.

The Empire could not have survived into this era. The Battlemaster, quite possibly, was absolutely alone.

The Battlemaster tried to confront this truth and then to formulate a plan. Battlemasters were endowed with an emotional structure of sorts; it had been found essential to the successful conduct of war. Now these emotions rose in a choking cloud that rendered the Battlemaster barely able to think.

Rhem Kerwillig lay with his arms around Reena, staring up at the skies.

Clouds were thickening down from the Ruinarths, but the stars still showed through in patches.

Rhem had never been able to read the skies. He cut the classes on astronomy along with all the others back when it might have mattered.

Reena pointed suddenly. "There, you see that string of bright stars? Looks like a snake?"

"Those are the Orion stars; my father told me that Earth lies somewhere far beyond those stars."

"Yeah? Earth? It really exists, then?"

"Of course it exists, silly. Honestly, Rhem Kerwillig, what did you learn in class?"

"Nothing too useful in my later life," he groused.

"Nothing at all I sometimes think." She sniffed. "My mother always told me to avoid men with empty heads."

"Hey, I'm no cretin, woman. You know that."

"Rhem, you have no idea, do you? Oh, well, don't worry about it, it's too late to do much about it now."

He subsided; there was no point in arguing with her.

"Anyway, I've always wanted to go there."

"To Earth?"

"Yes, Earth. And I don't know what there is to sneer about; Earth is the homeworld, it's where our ancestors came from."

"Anything that old is bound to be burnt out and used up. Hell, look at Wexel."

"Earth is different, I know, my father had huge files on Earth, it was his hobby. There aren't many people left there, and the climate has moderated and the ancient pollution is being cleaned up.

"How are you going to get to Earth, Reena? I mean, that's not just off planet, that's outside Scopus Cluster."

Reena stroked the underside of her chin. "I don't know yet, Rhem, but I do know that I'm not staying up here much longer. I'm giving up on the struggle. SWALA is over."

Rhem knew SWALA was dead, but he didn't want to admit it. It was all he had left.

"Come on, Rhem, don't try and kid me, I know the truth. You gave up a long time back, before I even joined. I never took you for one of the ideologues."

"Well, Larshel is political."

"Oh, yes, with about one tenth of his brain, which is already so small there's not much room for intelligent thought."

"Look, Larshel's military side, you want political you talk to Rosa."

"Rosa?" Reena fairly shrieked with mirth. "Rosa may have been political once but she stopped believing a long time ago.

Rosa's been going through the motions for years."

"Could've fooled me, all those meetings."

"You sleep in meetings, Rhem. Anyway, you wouldn't know or understand a dialectic if it came up and bit your dick. I don't think you really ever had a genuine wish for political change, you were always just a dubtiger."

Rhem felt a confusion of emotions. "Hey, I believe," he started to say.

"Crap. You believe in you, that's all. But that's not bad, don't you see."

Reena was sitting up facing him, her face alive. He tried to keep his eyes on her face and not on her magnificent breasts, which heaved heavily as she got worked up.

"Rhem, I don't care anymore, I'm finished with all this. I don't want someone who's still political. I want someone like you, someone completely amoral and vicious, but weak."

"Hey, who's weak here, woman?"

"Not physically, silly; you just don't have the willpower, Rhem, that's all. But you don't have to worry because I got enough for the both of us."

Rhem swallowed. She was right and he was too beat down to argue. "Yeah, it's over, there's nothing left for me in SWALA."

"So I'm going north real soon."

"How you going to get ID, Reena? You're wanted in three states and the Highway System."

"No, I'm not wanted by the highways. There's a Wanted poster out in Kavexu but I'm not on it."

"All right, you can ride the highways safely, but what about the CPS? What you gonna do when they kick in your front door a few years down the road? They never forget, you know."

"I'm not going to be here. I'm leaving Wexel."

"How? With what credit? That's expensive-I mean, you could buy a nice place for the same outlay as a ticket out of the cluster."

"It's not that much; expensive, yes, but you exaggerate. Anyway, my father has plenty of money, I just have to convince him to give some of it to me."

"But you told me your father hates you and is totally terrified of you."

"He won't give it to me willingly, you dolt! I'm going to take him where it really hurts, his bank accounts."

"You planning on kidnapping him for the ID?"

"Of course."

"And when you've got the credit and bought the tickets, then what?"

"Then I kill the swine."

"Shit, Reena, he's your own father."

"Yes, I know that."

Her tone convinced Rhem that it was better to subside into silence.

"Then what do you do?"

"I leave Wexel, fly outsystem, probably to Scopus. Then get the long-haul flight all the way to Earth. There's a route that goes there, you have to change ships a couple of times, and it is expensive, but at the other end there'll be Earth."

"It'll be a long time in the future when you get there, too." "That makes it better, don't you see? Anyway, what I wanted to say was that I'm going but I'm not going alone. I want to take a man along with me, a man I think I can trust." Rhem swallowed. He'd never liked thinking about the future, but now he really had to. Leave Wexel and go all the way to Earth?

"A whole new life," he breathed.

"That's right, Rhem, a whole new life"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

WHEN LUISA CHANG FINALLY FREED HERSELF FROM THE FIRE Department people and shut her bedroom door, she was exhausted but so wired that she found it next to impossible to sleep.

After a fruitless twenty minutes tossing around on her cot, she gave upon it and made calls. First to the detectives on the bomb squad, who were still investigating. They had no news.

Then she set up a call on Deep Link, and when it cleared she put a bleep through to Scopus Central and left a message for Sector General Becker.

Later, she watched TV news with semiglazed eyes.

Was it the fact that she was exhausted or was she already growing numb from the effect of Wexel news? There were so many warring cults, so many overweening tribes and gangs. It was hard not to feel the acronyms were blurring together in a hopeless mélange of letters, numbers, and liberation armies.

Where did the Liberation Army for South Trios blend into the Montoneros Libros? Both outfits had the same leaders, but radically different politics. Where did the STWARF and the STWARK split hairs in their murderous ideological struggle in Rafundi? In Frentana Beach there was a gang war between the old Frentana Liberation Army and the "New" FLA. Recently a dozen NFLA streetmen had been shot, with the old FLA blamed.

In fact, it was now learned that the old FLA was innocent and that another group, the Sandmen, were actually responsible. Between the old FLA and the Sandmen there had been war for decades. Apparently the Sandmen were ready to take any opportunity to reduce the numbers of the FLA, even to killing ex-members of the organization.

It sounded like a joke, until the announcer remarked that 414 people had been killed this year as a result of the various feuds between armed gangs in South Frentana.

For the umpteenth time Luisa Chang wondered if perhaps Wexel's troubles were beyond the powers of the ITAA to remedy. If people were just irretrievably violent and corrupt, what were you supposed to do about it?

Maybe she should just tell the sector general that she was throwing in the towel. They could always shift her out of here, send her somewhere that was sane.

Why did she deserve this?

The question was getting harder to answer.

It was damnably hard to sleep, but eventually, around dawn, she managed to doze off.

At about the same time, with the sun peeking up over the horizon, Caroline Reese stirred in the seat of her stolen ATV and opened her eyes to the wild tropic dawn of Patash-Do. The road was rushing by as the car drove itself south at a steady 150 kilometers an hour.

She was still on the Nacional Highway, somewhere in the bottomlands of the wide Siringar River.

She checked the map on the navscreen and found she was already past Durbach-Chalise. The next place of any consequence was Doisy-Dyan itself, situated in the bottom right corner of the country.

For a while she watched fields of hydro-cane and super sorghum go by, with citrus groves and palm trees farther away.

The county names here echoed the crests of ancient families, Durbach-Dadoux, Flonigan, Dadoux-Somontere. The occasional billboards were dominated by the skull-and-bullet message of the Committee for the Preservation of Society.

On dirt roads she spotted peasant domes and bubbles. Once in a while the turrets of an aristo castle would appear, sited amid groves of trees and ornamental ponds.

After a while she pulled in to breakfast on crab cakes and a ripe mango at a colorful roadside stand.

The proprietor, and the other customers, spoke in Quink, the vivid patois of the region. As a result their conversation was mostly unintelligible to an outsider.

The Quinks drank coffee and ate fried eggs and catfish sides.

They drove small trucks with oversized tires and wore colorful short-sleeve shirts over their brown, glossy skins.

Caroline enjoyed the early heat of the day while she breakfasted and watched these exuberant men, for they were nearly all men, as they ate and drank and chattered with one another. Then, breakfast over, she pulled the ATV back onto the road and set off for Doisy-Dyan.

The yellow-ocher buildings of the capital city began to appear over the farms and forests about two hours later, and by lunchtime she was exiting the Nacional and driving into the center of the city.

From the car she was able to hook into the Doisy-Dyan information bureau and learn that there was indeed a branch of the Cowdray Bank. It was situated on the Medina, the city's main commercial street in the center of town.

Lacking ID, credit, and money, she was forced to park the ATV on a street instead of a parking

garage. There were few open places on the main streets, and when she eventually found one it was set back from the commercial zone. Not that there was any parking at all on the commercial-zone streets; no matter how you screened them, cars were easy to make into bombs.

The street was not encouraging. Grubby tenements overlooked the potholed road and the cracked sidewalks. Young goons in ragged costume eyed her speculatively. Incomprehensible graffiti covered every blank wall.

She walked up the street as quickly as possible and left the ragged young men behind. In a few more strides she was on the corner of the Medina. Immediately the mood was transformed.

Solid, imposing facades lined the street. Glass bowed in and out in seductive shopping curves. Signs and emblems glittered.

Ahead was the Cow Bank, a small but imposing tower of black glass in which the Cowdray logo, a four-leaf clover, rotated slowly in the glass, eight stones high.

The lobby was a security zone, and before Caroline could get in she had to submit to a body scan and a pat-down search by armed guards. Without ID or money to bribe anyone she had to endure every officious indignity before finally being allowed into the sanctum of the offices.

A pleasant-mannered young woman listened to her story and then set about establishing her identity. Her prints were taken, along with a small blood sample.

The retina and fingerprints matched those on file in the bank at CK City, so temporary credit was reestablished at once. She was given a new Cow Bank card and told to return the next day for the results of DNA analysis. Then her identity and credit position would be fully secured.

Re-equipped with financial means, she left the bank and headed down the street for the first clothing store she could find.

Once she'd found a group of boutiques she shopped quickly for some straightforward, everyday clothing in tropical knits.

Then, clutching her bags, she headed for a hotel. The first really good-looking one was the Hotel Splendide, also on the Medina. It was a tall, faux-brick building in a rococo style.

She checked in, took a luxurious room on a tower floor, and spent an hour relaxing in a long, hot bath. The hotel was a marvellous re-creation of the bygone splendors of the pre-space era. Repro-antiques were everywhere. Her room was a fantasy in blue satin, with faux-walnut paneling and a magnificent four-poster bed with satin drape.

After her bath she ordered some lunch from room service, a sandwich and a salad plate, and then she slept, on clean sheets in an air-conditioned room, feeling very safe.

When she awoke again it was evening. She changed the polarization on the windows and found her room inundated with the golden light of the sunset. Before her was spread the downtown part of the city, a collection of small, uninspiring office structures. Farther away was the river and on the other side more buildings, mostly less than ten stories high.

She took a deep breath.

It was certainly an exotic setting for her. For her own personal drama to unfold. Or rather, to come to a close, she reminded herself.

How horrible it had become and how doomed she was. It was all so terribly premature.

Such a desperate ending for a life that had held great promise. She tried to avoid bitterness as her thoughts flew back through her life, but it was difficult.

From social high school in North Trios she'd gone on to university at Westholm in West Trios, and then to CKU two years later. That was where she'd met Brian Altrop, the man with whom she'd lived for four years.

They'd been good times; her career was progressing and the world had been a friendly, fun place. Or so it had seemed.

Then Brian broke up with her, to live with another woman, a younger, more vibrant woman.

Caroline's heart had been broken and she'd learned something hard about life at the same time. Life couldn't be trusted. Life outside the imagined safety of her hometown in North Trias, anyway. Life outside the circle of family and old friends.

And she had never trusted her heart to another man since, always keeping her occasional affairs to a light, uninvolved level that could cause no pain.

In the meantime her career had ground to a halt, blocked from above by Professor Gottschalk. For years she'd been pushing her head against a brick wall, with little result.

And still she'd been happy with this life. She relished the fact that she'd made it all the way to CK City, to the big time on planet Wexel. She loved the urban things, especially those of the university, the theaters, the shows, the art, and also the restaurants and the sophisticated pleasures of the downtown area.

And now, all that life was over.

Something very hard was breaking in her throat. She turned away from the window feeling mortally sorry for herself.

Without conscious thought she dressed and went down to the hotel restaurant and ordered an expensive dinner.

Hors d'oeuvres of flash-fried shrimp and crab were followed by the house "Mique," a butter-rich pancake, over which was served a truffle sauce with a wonderfully creamy consistency.

She drank cold white wines, an incredibly expensive Chardonnay from Cowdray Estates' famous "Baby Vineyard" with a picture of the Cowdray sisters as year-old babies on the label.

The picture made her think of the Cow Bank, with a branch in every city on the planet. And from Cow Bank she thought of Cowdray itself, a state of more than three hundred thousand square miles, all owned and operated by the Cowdray family.

What must it be like to wield such power, she wondered. To control enormous wealth and be free of all the usual constraints on life. Why, if you were one of the Cowdray family you could do anything, or almost. Certainly Professor Gottschalk wouldn't get in your way!

Caroline drank her wine like a condemned woman.

For dessert she pigged out on a raspberries-in-chocolate concoction that in normal times she would never have dreamed of eating, except secretly and with extreme guilt. With it she sipped an aged grappa from Old Luc. It was a wonderful combination.

She sighed. Life was capable of such exquisiteness sometimes. She wanted to cry like a baby, and yet at the same time she felt a blissful sense of calm.

She paid and on her way out of the restaurant stopped for another grappa at the bar. It had a wonderful aroma, it was sinfully easy to drink. While she sipped she didn't think about anything much, simply reacting to the atmosphere in the bar and the view out the window.

Somehow she found herself back in her hotel room, and wondered about ordering up some more drinks from room service. She stared out at the balcony. If she wanted to she could drink enough so that when she jumped off it she'd never even feel the impact.

She'd seen that somewhere, in some video or other.

And she shuddered, appalled at the thought of dying in this rathole of a city.

The antique clock in the room chimed ten o'clock. She found herself staring at it. It was dark outside. Time was wasting. And it... it lived!

And it was out there. She had to move, she had to do it now! She couldn't stay here! She had to get out!

A whole world lay in the balance if she was right.

She dragged herself down to the elevators and into the bar by the restaurant.

It was as if she were teetering on the edge of an unheated swimming pool. She had to get warm somehow. So she had another grappa.

Then at last she called her ATV and ordered it to drive over to the hotel and pick her up. It turned up largely unharmed from its sojourn in the streets, although the back panel now sported an odd graffito in purple metal flake.

Once she was back in the car she felt a hardening of her purpose. Of course one whiff of her breath and the machine locked itself off from her. It would not let her drive manually, but once she'd clamped the seatbelt it agreed to take her to a clearly enunciated destination as long as that destination was on the navguide's computer memory.

Then the ATV rolled smoothly down the Medina and turned onto the bridge road.

As she went Caroline stared out at the bizarre billboards that lined the way. They were backlit at night, given a weird coloration in surround-glo. Huge skulls with bullet holes frowned down. Hands gripped

guns. Baleful slogans and logos glowed.

Life in Doisy-Dyan was tinged in the colors of terror, like some bizarre, menacing dream.

The ATV rolled over the bridge and into the other side of the city. More buildings passed by, even less distinguished than those in the main city.

Now she passed down a long tree-lined avenue; ocher-tiled apartment buildings lined the way.

And then there were no buildings for a while, but many bright lights.

She glimpsed an aircraft passing low overhead. Big hangar-like structures loomed through the darkness, illuminated by their boundary lights.

A big sign with ITAA in large letters passed by.

Caroline felt poised to light or run, to scream or cry. The ATV rolled to a halt by the gate post.

She hesitated, shuddering, and then forced herself out of the car. She walked up to the only visible guard, a heavysset female corporal in a smartly creased tropics-wear uniform, and announced that she had some disturbing information that had to be passed on to someone in authority.

The female corporal looked tough. She sized Caroline up carefully.

"You're drunk, citizen. Your lights are out. You don't know what you're doing out here."

Caroline studied the woman vaguely.

"But this is vitally important news. Someone's got to act."

"Yeah, yeah, someone. But not us. Look, lady, if you're married go home and sleep it off. If you're not married, go home and sleep it off. You got that? Go home, get back in your car."

"No, I can't do that. You don't understand. I have to speak to someone in authority."

The tough corporal gave her a hard-eyed look. "If it's so damned important, you can tell me. Then we'll find someone for you to talk to. As it is I don't know whether we're dealing with a lost dog or a straying husband. I mean, are you sure this isn't a police matter?"

"S'not a police matter. It's about life and death, for everyone, for whole damned world."

The corporal's brow furrowed. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Caroline stared at the woman while a mounting desperation rose in her mind.

"You've got to listen to me. Listen carefully. There's a Saskatch monster on the loose."

The guard snorted, then looked carefully at the woman.

"Saskatch monster?"

"Really, I think so. Dangerous, very dangerous."

There was something weird here. The lady was drunk, but she had something in her voice that made Corporal Asario wonder. And it wasn't the usual kind of crank stuff, either.

What the hell was this woman talking about? Saskatch creature?

Was this Directive 115 stuff? Better kick it upstairs; they said better safe than sorry on Directive 115.

Asario pondered it for a few moments and then called up to the admin block. On night duty was Sergeant Voltsk, a stolid fellow in late middle age, along-term career NCO. Asario would let Voltsk bring his considerable experience to bear.

Besides, Asario owed the old bastard a few. Voltsk and she had never hit it off while working together. Let Voltsk make a decision about this lady and her Directive 115 problem.

Asario waved Caroline through and detached Private Forsht to accompany her over to the admin block, where Sergeant Voltsk would be waiting.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

JOHRS VOLTSK HAD QUITE A BEMUSING CONVERSATION WITH the intoxicated woman sent along from the front gate.

Voltsk was a career trooper coming close to his pension. He just wanted to make his days and get out of there in one piece.

The day before he'd been chewed out by Colonel Chang in person for filtering out too much stuff that was on its way to her desk.

The colonel didn't want to be cut off from the flow of events?

All right, this drunken lady with her monster story was all hers. Especially since it was late and the colonel would probably be trying to make up on the sleep she'd lost the previous night.

Colonel Chang was in her quarters when the call came through to her from Jean Povet. She was working with the Strand on paperwork when the Strand interrupted the flow of documents and displayed some video of a woman in a degree of disarray through intoxication. The woman was babbling something about alien lifeforms.

Luisa glanced at the video of the subject. The Strand's instant analysis showed a reasonable possibility that the woman was being truthful-that is, that she at least believed passionately in what she was saying. It was either that or a schizophrenic delirium.

"Saskatch alien?"

"Strand has the details on that if you want them."

"Thank you, Jean. I think you'd better send this Reese person down for a psych test. Then when she's sober we'll talk to her again, all right?"

"Yes, sir." Povet blipped out.

Chang was left with the words "Saskatch alien" on the screen.

"What do we have on that?" she murmured.

"Encyclopedia has several entries," the Strand said in its warm, masculine voice.

Compressing the tip of her tongue between her teeth, she ordered it to scroll them.

An image of an odd, lobsterlike creature appeared first. "SASKATCH BULMUNK," said the caption.

A brief description followed. Blankly she read the text. "Indigenous intelligent lifeform of planet Saskatch (4216A Duprove Catalog), Human Colony World in era following Starhammer War. Bulmunk are the rarest of the known intelligent lifeforms. The initial population was small, constricted by glacial conditions. The fact of their intelligence was a secret until the events that ended the human colony on Saskatch. Descended from the single survivor of the species, which was fertilized at the time of escape, a small population of bulmunk has established itself on planet Novosibirsk. The Novosibirsk Extrasensory Research Institute was set up to work with the bulmunk, which are the only known true telepathic intelligent lifeform in the galaxy."

More enormous lobsteroids were on screen.

Chang's brow furrowed.

"Wrong alien, I want the other one."

The screen changed at once. Images of the dead alien monstrosities that were taken from the Baada liner Gracelyn flashed up—things that looked like dirty gray snakes, or worms, except that each central tube was fringed with thin wiry tentacles.

"VANG OORMLIKOOWL (Omniparasitic Lifeform)," flashed the caption.

"Ancient lifeform specialized to parasitize other creatures.

Possesses hyperactive nervous system. Is able to reshape and re-form creatures that it parasitizes. Such creatures have proved to be highly effective in military combat."

There was more, under the headings "Starhammer," "Lashtri III," and "Saskatch."

Chang remembered some of this material. Like all ITAA career staff, she had taken the "Saskatch" course. This was Directive 115 stuff, and anything to do with Directive 115 was of primary importance. It overrode all other considerations.

This lifeform had destroyed whole worlds. There had been an ancient war with the Starhammer builders.

Luisa Chang felt a shiver run right through her body.

If this was really Directive 115, then she had to wonder about her luck. How could this be happening

to her!

She took out the bottle she kept in her bottom drawer. Loupiac Grappa, 90 proof, aged ten years in oak barrels. With a guilty glance toward the door she knocked back a mouthful straight from the bottle.

The Loupiac was smooth and it went down easily. In a moment, she felt better. Chang pushed the horrors of the Saskatch video away and tried to concentrate on the business at hand.

Cachester ought to be under arrest, along with two sergeants from the accounts division, but as yet Chang's Taklish Investigator had found no evidence to link them to the explosion that had killed the base computers the night before.

She had to have some evidence, and soon, or they would be able to force a premature hearing in an ITAA court. All hell would break loose then; her cover would be utterly blown.

Scopus Central was already monitoring the situation closely. Chang realized that her job hung by a thread. It would be a disaster for her career if she was removed at this point. Effectively unhorsed by a subordinate.

To lose to Cachester could not be borne!

Meanwhile Captain Blake had disappeared again, taking a full patrol with him on an orbital drop at 0900 hours that morning. No word in explanation, no request for permission. A full twelve-person drop from orbit, at a cost of at least a quarter of a million credit units!

Luisa sighed heavily.

And then Jean Povet came in with a peculiar expression on her face.

"She's gone. The woman with the wild story? She left."

"Left? What do you mean left? You mean they let her just walk out?"

Povet looked uncomfortable. "They didn't have any orders not to. Voltsk sent her up here but he didn't tell the guards to keep her from leaving."

"Oh, great, do we have anything more on analysis?" The Strand whirred and displayed some information. "Have computed probabilities in excess of eighty percent now indicating some degree of truthfulness," it whispered.

"Thanks, Sergeant Voltsk. I guess this is the payback for yesterday. Shows you that you can't afford to lose your temper in this job."

Povet smiled. "Thick and fast, Colonel, thick and fast."

"Well, we've got to get this woman back. This is Directive 115 stuff, it has override. And I've got to tell Scopus Central, too; this might have to go Over-Cluster."

Povet's eyebrows rose at that. "We'll put out an all-points on her."

"Get me Chief Hafka. I want a vigorous search; we've got to find her if we have to turn over every

hotel in Doisy-Dyan. Can she get out of the city tonight? Check the airports."

"There's a midnight flight to Luc."

"Of course." That was the flight that Hopester was always taking, out to Luc where you could link up with the continental shuttle and get up to Frentana and Cowdray-Kara.

"I want a squad at the airport to make sure she doesn't get out that way. We'll have to energize the local cops to blockade the roads."

"Chief Hafka is on line for you now." Povet switched him through from the office, and Luisa Chang found herself staring at the fleshy face and narrow little eyes of the head of the DDPD.

She hadn't had too much to do with Hafka so far. Relations with the local forces had been good for years. But she knew that he was a leader of the local Preservationists and that he personally had executed hundreds of people considered Liberators.

Chang took a deep breath and explained that she had a potential Directive 115 problem.

"Directive 115," Hafka yelped in a voice that was ludicrously high for one so bulky. "That's the ITAA superclause, what's it? The one with alien lifeforms?"

Chang put Caroline Reese's image on the screen; her hair was disheveled, her eyes were wild.

"Something like that, Chief. I'm sorry to be the one with bad news, but this came to us first. I don't know why. Anyway, we need to find this woman and check this story out. We also have to do it quickly. There's probably nothing to it, but if it's somehow true then we need to know about it very soon."

Hafka nodded, grumbling to himself. "So you wants an all-points and you want fifty police and what else do you want?"

"I want a lot more than fifty cops, Chief. I want a complete shutdown of all road mutes out of the city and I want it fast. This should be a priority, absolute priority."

"Ab-so-lute priority! Colonel, what d'ya want, ya want the whole Doisy-Dyan PD? For how long? And what shall I tell the people of the city to do about protecting themselves from thieves and Liberators while you're using it? Come on, give me a break, how can I do this?"

"Directive 115, Chief, look it up. It's in the Addendum to the ITAA Charter. Wexel signed up for ITAA regulation, you must give this priority."

"Must, schmust, will you stop issuing orders, Colonel? I'm not in your command. I don't have to listen to any more of this."

"Chief, let's make peace. Look, I have a simple problem. My hands are tied; Directive 115 is written the way it is because it's the only way things can work in a situation requiring it."

"Look, I don't care what your directive is, you don't take over the DDPD while I'm around."

"Will you just put out roadblocks on the roads? I have to get this woman, tonight if possible."

"And you intend to search in my city? With what, ITAA troopers in full combat gear? What are you, crazy? Every Liberator in the whole rotten pack will be out there trying to kill one of your men and get his equipment. I'll be forced to call out the militia to protect you."

Luisa massaged her temples. This had to be handled skillfully. If only she didn't feel so tired and so fed up with obstructive behavior!

"Chief, if you don't give me what I'm asking for, I'm going to have to call Cluster Command and set in motion a process that will put you in an ITAA court sometime in the next year or so. I don't want to do that, I just want to find this woman and I need your cooperation. If I have to, though, I will do it, and later, when you've been put under arrest, I will use the DDPD and we will search your city for this woman. Because we have to, or we, too, will wind up in an ITAA court sometime in the next year. And all of us will then do a lot of time in an ITAA prison somewhere. You understand me? You know you can't beat the ITAA. Why risk spending twenty years on an airless rock? Besides, if it turns out to be a false alarm then I'm the one who'll be here to take the heat."

Chief Hafka was looking very unhappy. He sighed mightily. "Look, I got to check this Directive, what you say?"

"One-fifteen, damn it."

"All right."

Povet had another call lined up. "Captain Blake for you, sir, long distance, it's through the comsat."

Exercising maximum self-control, she fought down the urge to scream into the commo.

"Where are you, Captain Blake?" she managed in a remarkably calm voice.

Blake was grim and gray-faced. He was standing in a ruined house. He held up a gnawed human ulna.

"I'm up in the Ruinart Mountains. We have a very weird atrocity story up here and some things about it are making me think we have a Directive 115 thing here."

Luisa felt her eyes bug out of her head. She sucked in a breath. "What happened?"

"Some kind of creature got loose up here. A local aristo named Karvur had it penned up in a dairy barn. It escaped and killed several people here two days ago. Then today a relative reported people missing up here at this farm."

"What kind of creature?" Chang was dry-mouthed.

"Bipedal, tentacled; things that look like flowers projecting from the head. It 'stabbed' people with the tips of the tentacles."

"Oh, wonderful, just what we need. Anything else?"

"Oh, yes, it picked up a shotgun and used it. This was after it had been shot with the same gun."

"No, no, this is . . ."

"And there was another victim, who was turned into some kind of insect or something. The peasants say he was inside an egg that they burned. His face, on the body of a huge insect. These are unsophisticated people, they believe it's voodoo and they're ready to start a blood feud with any or all of their neighbors over it any time soon."

"There's no doubt about it, then."

"Directive 115," Blake said.

"Not my lucky day, is it. Well, I've already set a 115 alarm going down here. We have a fugitive informant who was trying to tell us something about this very same event."

Blake was taken aback by this; he pursed his lips.

"What's next, then?" he grunted. "Something horrible definitely happened here. We've found the corpse of a man here without his arms or legs. There are chewed human bones and dog bones, too. There's a lot of bloodstain, too. Better get some forensics up here fast."

Chang was licking her lips, feeling a new, high anxiety all of a sudden. Directive 115 for real!

She'd always thirsted after action, but never this particular kind of thing. If this was truly Directive 115, then the whole fucking human universe was on the line right behind her. Everything depended on how well she did her job.

"Colonel? Eh, Colonel." It was Blake.

She shook herself into activity. "Yes, Captain, look, you continue your patrol, but be very careful. I don't want this thing set into motion accidentally, we need to find this thing and we need to surround it. I'll see to reinforcing you and getting some air support up there soonest, understood?"

"Yes, sir, Colonel Chang."

"You find anything you get it back to me, fast, in video if you possibly can."

Blake was gone. Chang breathed a deep sigh. Then she straightened up. No rest tonight, no rest for quite a while beyond tonight.

She called to Povet, "Where's that damn woman? I want her and I want her now!"

Chief Hafka was back; his face was thunderous.

"All right, this thing is like you say. if you wrong then you fuck up so bad you gone from here next week. If you right then we got to save whole planet's fucking ass, right?"

"Right."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

REENA'S PLAN WAS FOR THEM TO LEAVE THE NEXT DAY, IN THE evening. They'd walk out. That meant getting down rough trails and over the Peekaw Ridge, perhaps fifty kilometers before

they reached the first hamlet. But they knew the country well between the Klimatee and the Peekaw, and they'd be over the ridge by dawn and Larshel and the others would never dare follow them then.

They woke with the dawn and dressed and headed out of the woods toward the box canyon. Griff's body would soon attract scavengers, and the crows would lead Larshel to it.

What happened next depended on how well Reena handled Larshel in the next couple of hours.

And then came something that altered all their plans, turning them to dust within the greater dice play of the universe.

They were at the entrance to the canyon, they could smell oatcakes cooking on the grill, when they heard it.

A popping sound, then a sputter, quite distant, the unmistakable sound of an ATV engine in low gear.

Already the other men were coming out of the cave. Larshel held up his hand for silence.

There it was again, a sputtering, coming from the south.

"Someone's coming down from the mountains," Gugen exclaimed.

"Bullshit, no one lives up there."

"Well, listen to it, asshole, it's coming from the south."

"Who you calling an asshole?"

"You is who, shut up and listen."

"This is strange," grumbled Larshel, whose eyes rested briefly on Reena's body. "Get your weapons, we can ambush at the slanted rock."

Cautiously the dubtigers stirred themselves and ventured up to the slope above the box where a slanted slab of rock overhung a narrow way through the canyons.

A glance to the south confirmed what they'd been hearing: a single battered ATV was indeed approaching, negotiating a tortuous way down through the boulder field above the canyon.

It was apparent to all of them that this ATV had come a long way. Its engine had the whine that said the fuel cells were close to exhaustion.

They disposed themselves to ambush the approaching vehicle.

Even as they took cover, the Battlemaster, riding in the ATV beside the Secondary Form, observed that the nearest passage down to lower ground lay between bluffs that made a perfect ambush point.

Still there was no reason to expect attack. No sign of the host creatures had been seen for days, not since the Battlemaster had learned to operate the poor Benuils' Spad ATV.

The Battlemaster had driven the vehicle north, away from the roads and straight into a trackless

wilderness. Then had come mountains and remote valleys and boulder fields, and finally glaciers. All had been conquered and left behind.

Now the ATV rolled on toward lower ground.

And bullets shattered the windshield and ricocheted around the cab.

The Battlemaster swung The vehicle in a hard right turn and took it off the level into a deep thicket of dry vegetation. With a crash the ATV rolled over, brambles scraping against the skin.

Bullets continued to peck away through the brush. The Secondary Form had been hit; two wounds in its side were leaking internal fluids. The Battlemaster assisted the Secondary Form out of the vehicle, and then both of them beat a retreat, continueing to the right through the dried-up brambles until they broke out into a hanging canyon where the vegetation thinned among boulders and bare patches of limestone.

The Secondary Form's wounds prevented it from taking aggressive actions. The Battlemaster gave it the gun. It would provide covering fire if needed.

They went on, pushing through the thickets in search of a path or thinner vegetation.

A few minutes later they caught the first glimpse of their attackers. Men in ragged uniforms of green were approaching the thicket from the slope above. They carried weapons.

The Battlemaster moved sideways, up the slopes of the canyon through a series of gulleys in the gravel. Once above the approaching humans a vantage point was secured from which the humans could be watched as they investigated the ATV.

The humans looked up and around, guns ready, but they found no target. Through unaided eyes the Battlemaster was too far off to be seen.

On the other band, the Battlemaster could read the print on the ammunition packs on their belts. It could tell the color of their eyes at a thousand meters. It could determine that their weapons were rifled ballistic projectors. The Battlemaster was familiar with that class of device.

Now scouts went forward, tracking the passage of the Battlemaster and Secondary Form through the brambles to the point where they had turned aside and begun to climb.

The others had begun to reverse the ATV out of the thickets and back onto the level ground.

The Battlemaster moved again, circling back toward the higher ground of the plateau above the canyon, intending to get behind the humans busied about the vehicle.

Where had they come from? How many of them were there?

These were vital questions.

The Secondary Form was slowing down. Its wounds were serious; a period of rest and recuperation was required to heal the wounds and repair the damage to internal organs.

The Battlemaster cast about itself. Above their position gaped a cave; this was limestone country with typical erosion surfaces.

The Secondary Form was sent into the cave and left behind. The Battlemaster retraced its tracks, erasing most of the evidence of their passage. Then, hefting the gun, it went on, around behind the humans and through the ambush point and down a shallow valley.

To one side lay a boxed-in canyon, a pocket eroded from the limestone behind a barrier of some harder stuff.

The Battlemaster discerned movements within this canyon. It moved to gain a vantage point above the open space within.

Here extreme care had to be used to avoid detection by the humans. There were lookouts posted above on the tops of a rock spire at one side of the canyon entrance.

The Battlemaster reached a position within a cleft of rock. A nest of wild bees was nearby, and they reacted to the presence of the intruder with a few stings.

The intruder did not react to the stings and did not make any overtly hostile move toward the nest. The bees gave up after a while and went back to their daily round.

The Battlemaster ignored the stings, though the hostform jerked with each one. As the histamine reaction began the Battlemaster intervened to damp it down; the hostform could be required for peak activity at any moment.

After a while the other humans returned, mostly in a group accompanying the ATV that had been rescued from the brambles.

Others appeared from the caves and formed a group around the ATV. Some began to disassemble it. The fuel cells were removed and examined.

Exercising extreme care, the Battlemaster worked its way back up the slopes behind the box canyon and eventually returned to the narrow cave where the Secondary Form was hiding.

All was undisturbed. The Secondary Form had healed its wounds and begun the repair of the internal organs. However, both hostforms were hungry and food was required.

The Battlemaster hunted through the thickets and discovered a rabbit, which it ran down and killed. It gave the rabbit to the Secondary Form and went on until it had found a couple of sluggish lizards. These it ate quickly, stripping off the skins and jerking the flesh down the gullet.

To supplement this the Battlemaster tried various plants growing wild. Many had defensive alkaloids, but from sorrel and wild parsley it took several sprigs for their essential vitamins.

Quite rapidly the food replenished the Battlemaster's strength.

With the Secondary Form following close behind it began to move back toward the box canyon where the humans were encamped.

THEY FINALLY TRACKED HER DOWN TO A SMALL TOWN IN North Trios, in the Banbury Valley.

It was a plain little house, a white rancher on a two-acre plot. When she came to the door she seemed surprised by all the attention.

An ominous Shark gunship hovered overhead on thudding rotors. Police vehicles were stretched along the street.

She was wearing a simple blue dress and no shoes. There was an open bottle of wine on the table. She'd been writing something; a screen glittered with amber text.

Then, as Chang's men charged in, she looked Luisa in the eye and said, "I suppose it was inevitable that you'd find me."

"We've had a planetwide search for the past forty-eight hours, sister."

The silver star on Luisa Chang's lapel seemed to fascinate her. Luisa waited on the doorstep while the security team ran through the place.

"You'd better come in, I suppose," Caroline Reese said after a moment.

Chang followed her in. A minicam team was taping everything for Scopus Central; everything had to be by the book.

"I tried to tell someone, you must know that."

"Why did you run?" Chang said.

Caroline Reese shrugged. She was floating; it was almost as if what they were talking about involved someone else, faraway, like a distant relative.

Chang felt her irritation rising fast.

"Does it matter?" Reese said.

Chang slammed a fist on the table; the bottle jumped and fell over and rolled off but did not break.

"Yes, damn you!" she roared. "It matters a great deal. Millions of lives are at stake, maybe billions."

Stupid, sullen resentment flared in Caroline's eyes.

"Nothing at stake in my life, is there? I'm fucked any way you look at it, right?"

Chang compressed her lips to keep the anger bottled up. "Damn right. Your consideration for the rest of the human race will be taken into account at your trial." Her voice was cold.

Reese flushed, heaved her shoulders awkwardly.

"I tried, I really did. I'm not very brave, I'm just an ordinary person. I mean I just couldn't handle it. Anyway I warned you, I went there, but they didn't believe me. They thought I was crazy."

"And you ran away."

"I couldn't go back, I couldn't go back there and I knew you would want me to and I couldn't face it."

"You ran. . ."

"You knew enough, you knew. . ."

Chang stood up. The security team was expressionless, hands on weapons.

"We still haven't found the damn thing. It could be anywhere."

Caroline looked up with hope in her eyes.

"Then it wasn't so dangerous after all."

"It's dangerous all right, it's just bidding. We don't know why and we don't know where."

"You can't be very good at searching for it, then, can you?"

Chang's temper was close to breaking. They'd lost days searching for this damn woman.

"Arrest her," Chang snapped.

"To the base, Colonel?"

"No, to CKC, the consulate rooftop. She'll be going to Cluster Command after we get a mindprobe completed."

From Banbury Valley they flew north and east aboard the Shark, a thundering colossus of black armor-plated weaponry. Chang had given up the old Skua for the moment because of the need for speed and possible offensive capability. The Shark had plenty of both.

Before they got within sight of CK City, though, Chang had a call from Rugesh Pradesh, chief detective of the CKCPD.

Rudesh got off on the wrong foot with an alarming quickness.

"Colonel Chang, I believe you have a prisoner of ours," he began.

"Correction," snapped Luisa. "The prisoner is an ITAA prisoner on her way to ITAA interrogation."

"I'm sorry, Colonel, but you have possession of one Reese, Caroline Susan, biological age thirty-six, born in North Trias."

"I do."

"Then I have to tell you she's wanted here for questioning in connection with the murder of a professor at Cowdray University.,'

"I know about your investigation and I assure you that you'll get your crack at her, but not for a few months. She's on her way to Sector Fleet Command, as soon as we complete the psych test and clear her ID."

"You can't take her offplanet! What the hell you think you're doing, Colonel? She's wanted in a murder case."

"This is Directive 115, Mr. Pradesh. Local jurisdiction is superseded."

"Look, don't try and give me that cockamamie garbage. That may be good enough for the yokels down there in Doisy, but not in my city, you understand me, Colonel?"

Chang shook her head. "I don't know, Mr. Pradesh, I don't write the rules. Why don't you read the directive; I know you were sent a copy."

"All that stuff about alien lifeforms? You must be crazy. If you think we can stop a big city's legal business over some kind of lettuce from space, you have to be out of your mind."

"Lettuce! What is this lettuce?" Luisa shrieked.

"Well, whatever it is I don't care, you aren't removing any murder suspects from anywhere within my authority, you got that?"

"What are you telling me, Chief, you intend to fire on me when I land at the consulate?"

"We will have to keep all options open."

"Chief, I'm coming in aboard a Shark-class gunship. You got any, idea what a Shark can do if you get it mad?"

"We're not helpless, you know."

"Yeah, but you've got a big city to protect. You have a shoot-out with a Shark over your city and it'll be a lot smaller city afterward. When they've finished with you you'll be in an ITAA prison for two hundred years. This is Directive 115; I am ordered to send this woman to Admiral Heidheim aboard the Empress Wu immediately. Don't interfere, you'll get your chance to talk to her later."

"I can stop you on the ground," growled Pradesh.

"And I will drop the 624 OSF on the Air&Space complex forthwith and there will be a lot of casualties. You want that on your head then go ahead, do something stupid."

"Dammit, you don't have the authority to pull this shit and get away with it."

"Look, Pradesh, if you can't read the directive then you go ahead and try and stop me. If I'm wrong and you're right, you're still going to get lifted for the casualties. So either way you lose if you do that. You can't lose if you just stay out of it."

Chief Pradesh considered this with a grumpy face. Finally he heaved a sigh.

"So the goddamn ITAA is out to fuck us raw! Damn you, I protest, I protest vehemently."

"So you do," Chang murmured.

"The entire Police Department of this city protests. I will have to take it up with higher authorities."

"You do that, Chief, but in the meantime just leave my Shark alone, all right?"

Chang cut out. The Shark hammered on toward the northern coast.

The mass panic was evident as they approached the city. All the roads into the spaceport complex were choked with traffic. People on foot formed long lines in the spaceport itself.

They went on to the heart of the city and landed on the consulate's roofpad.

The Shark was not the usual thing to land there; next to the little civilian aircraft parked nearby it looked like a dragonfly at a butterfly convention.

The flap over the imposition of Directive 115 had made conditions especially dangerous for all ITAA personnel. The consulate was surrounded by security screens. There had been half a dozen outrages already, including a massive car bomb that had stripped the surrounding towers and apartment buildings of their glass. The ITAA building had all its windows in a bulletproof clear ceram, but the rest of the neighborhood looked as if it had been shelled.

Caroline was hurried downstairs for the psych interrogation and mindprobe.

Chang, meanwhile, went to a room converted into a search control center on the twelfth floor. Out the window loomed the pinnacles of the harbor district. Inside, at work, were Jean Povet, with Feng and Paltz of the consulate staff.

Cbangsha Feng was the first to open his mouth. "We have a problem. The CKPD wants Reese for questioning in a murder investigation."

"Thank you, Feng, but I spoke to Chief Pradesh already. He knows he can't have her."

Jean Povet handed her a memo. "Commodore Benx says he can't give you those shuttle slots."

"Oh, great, here we go with Benx again. Call Central right away, we don't have time to go through Heidheim again. We need Tohoto himself."

"Right away."

Helmudt Paltz, meanwhile, had a rundown on the current situation. Chang flipped through it quickly.

"Panic, basically," she said after a moment. "Sheer, raging panic."

"I'm afraid so, Colonel."

"And still no sight of the damn thing," she grumbled.

"Well, sir, there have been thousands of reported sightings, some of them multiple sightings," Changsha said.

"A man in Sud-Trias said he saw an entire alien fleet landing on the coast," Helmut Paltz added.

"And somebody in Luc blew up an apartment building because he was convinced he saw the alien living there. I think there have been more reports on this creature in the past twenty-four hours than there have been killings in the last year," Povet said.

"So we're swamped."

"The native psyche here runs close to rabid paranoia anyway. This thing has driven them into a mass madness. I shudder to think at the final casualty toll," Changsha said.

Chang shuddered, too. What if she'd been wrong? What if somehow they had all been wrong and this wasn't really a Directive 115 situation?

Unimaginable error. She would sink like a rock to the bottom of the ocean. They would send her to perpetual solitary confinement for the rest of her life.

It was better not to think about it, but it was getting harder not to with every hour that passed without some further sighting of the alien.

"I'll have Scopus Central for you on hold in about half a minute, Colonel," Povet said.

"All right, it's time to talk to Benx again."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BENX TOOK A LONG TIME TO PICK UP ON THE PRIORITY LINE. Panic had sent a tidal wave of people into the spaceport. His temper had long since disintegrated.

While she waited, Luisa downed another square of anciophen with a can of cherry soda. Ancilophen certainly helped take the edge off these situations. Without it Chang couldn't have stayed awake for the last forty-eight hours and she certainly couldn't have talked to Commodore Benx for more than a few minutes before killing him.

"Yes, Colonel?" Benx's eyes were wide with suppressed rage, dislike, even hatred for her.

"What is this I'm being told about my shuttle flights?" she said.

"What shuttle flights? I never agreed to give over any slots here to Ground Command."

"You were ordered to put aside those slots; the order came from Scopus Central. Now, please comply with your orders and let us get on with it."

Benx shook his head, then fixed her with an intense glare.

"Colonel, may I say something, may I say that I don't think you know what the hell you're doing."

"Commodore, why ask for permission if you then go right ahead and talk anyway?"

"Do you realize the number of casualties this nonsense has caused?" Benx was trembling.

"There have been a lot of casualties," she agreed. Anciophen was great, no doubt about it.

"And all caused by you, Colonel. You are responsible, you are solely to blame for hundreds of deaths and this raging, freaking panic that is making life impossible around here!"

"Commodore, this is all under Directive 115, you understand that, I don't have a choice. If I'm wrong, then yes, my ass is done for, I'll get life without parole. Does that help you? It will be all my fault."

"Bah, we'll all be dragged down. I have spoken several times to Admiral Heldheim and he is not entirely convinced that you haven't just dreamed this whole thing up as a ploy to get rapid advancement."

"What? You think I would do this to myself to earn a promotion? How crazy are you? This is going to end my career either way. You think I wanted this!"

Benx's jaw tightened, his posture stiffened. Chang could imagine him springing at the screen like an attack dog for a few moments; then he seemed to get a grip on himself.

"I don't know what your reasons are, Colonel, but I refuse to be associated with this. I will not accept orders from someone I deem to be insane."

Chang nodded to Jean Povet, who cut through to Sector General Tohoto.

"Commodore, I have Sector General Tohoto on line, Deep Link. Tell him why I can't have the shuttle flights."

Benx blanched visibly.

"Commodore Benx I believe it is," a new voice said. "This is Tohoto, what is the problem?"

"No problem," Benx said.

"Then why this call, you know how much it costs to use deep link like this?"

"I didn't place the call, uh, Sector General."

"I know that, Commodore, I know why Colonel Chang placed the call. You refused her request for shuttle slots. You forced her to call on higher authority again. You know this means great expense. Besides which I am very busy; this emergency is placing a huge strain on our resources."

Benx licked his lips nervously.

"Sir, Admiral Heidheim is, uh, concerned about the correctness of the colonel's, uh, reading of the situation."

"Thank you, Commodore, I will immediately take this up with the admiral. He must be made to understand that the Fleet Command has to be subordinate in this situation, and I am sure he will realize that all good officers know when to simply obey orders no matter what they think of them. This is a Directive 115 situation, and I am ordering you directly, from Cluster Command, to actively assist Colonel Chang. Is that understood?"

Benx looked sick.

"Yes, sir, Sector General Tohoto. But I request the privilege of being allowed to lodge a formal complaint. I think this thing was called too hastily and I wish to be absolved from any responsibility for the outcome."

There was an ominous silence; then Tohoto grunted. "Your complaint is noted and entered in Cluster Command log. Now get on with your job."

Tohoto was gone.

"Now, Commodore, I want those slots, please. I want to be lifting off within an hour."

Benx looked as if he were ready to kill.

"You're crazy," he muttered. "You're going to spend the rest of your life on some frozen rock."

"Please keep your opinions to yourself," she growled back, "until there's a court-martial."

"Oh, there will be, you better believe it."

"We'll see when the time comes."

"You'll better pray that that damned creature shows itself again."

She let Benx cut out. It was unfortunate but true: they had better find some further trace of the damn creature or she was really done for.

Something had gotten loose up on Karvur Farm, and Luisa had Reese and the results of her mindprobe to back up the directive.

There was also the physical evidence from the farm.

But the fact that no one had seen the thing in three days and nights did not jibe with the ground rules of Directive 115. The alien lifeform was known to be terrifyingly single-minded and swift to act. It would attack at once and keep attacking until it had rendered the human population helpless, at which point it would kill or transform all of it.

That had been the pattern on Saskatch, and also in the one known, previous event of this kind, the destruction of the laowon world Lashtri III, in an earlier era.

And now three days had gone by with no further trace of it. Might it be dead?

But ITAA warships were already in system, dropping down the gravity well to planetary-exercise orbits. Admiral Heidheim would be taking command in a matter of hours; it was almost out of Chang's hands for good. And if the damned creature had disappeared for good, too, then not only was her career over but it was possible she'd wind up doing time in prison alongside Caroline Reese.

Luisa shook these thoughts aside. She buzzed Povel in.

"What's next?" she said.

"You need to thumbprint the extradition order on Reese. It's on-screen whenever you want it."

"Fine, then let's get out of here and get back to Air&Space for that shuttle."

"The Shark is warming up."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

AS FAR AS RHEM KERWILLIG WAS CONCERNED THE GREAT PULSE of life had gone from newly hopeful to stark, satanically horrifying. No hell of the Elders' imagination could have matched this situation for horror.

The day before had begun with Reena's plan and a new future for him. At last he had a direction. And he was ready to shake the dust of Wexel and travel enormous distances.

Today he was a naked, bruised victim herded into a rough-hewn cage and guarded by the thing that held the shotgun.

The thing-he barely dared to look at it, it was so horrible.

Here was a human face, drawn tight over an inhuman skull and jaws. A beard of green, glistening polyps hung below the chin, and orange flowerlike things wobbled in front of its eye sockets. It was like a demon from some old-time Patash-Do voodoo cult brought to life.

There had only been two of the things at first, that much had been revealed later. But at the time when they first struck the caves there had seemed to be more, many more. It was just that they moved so damned fast!

What made it all worse was that they'd known there was someone out there. Someone who had escaped the ATV in the ambush. There'd been a trail of blood, a lot of blood, from the ATV through the scrub and up the hillside, but they had missed the fugitives somehow and been unable to locate them before dark.

They'd consoled themselves with the thought that the fugitives would not get far in the dark and that they'd find them the next day and kill them. How could anyone bleeding so badly travel more than a few miles at most?

Then at night, after they'd filled their bellies with plantain porridge and the meat of a wild donkey, the things had attacked.

There was no warning from either lookout. Either they hadn't seen anything or they'd been killed themselves.

The things had leaped into the circle around the fire like bolts of death; there was a shotgun roaring, taking down any man who got his hands on a weapon. The others were killed or disabled by the terrifying thing with its whip like tentacles that stabbed like spears.

They hadn't had a chance. The things were so fast it was hard to follow their movements. They were

also hideously strong.

Most of the men had been killed, except for Rhem, Larshel Deveaux, and Dugen Schuppet, who had survived because they were the most intoxicated and thus were slow in getting up.

Then they and the other survivors had been pushed into the goat pen. The goats were set free, and having had a good look at the alien creatures, they headed away from the canyon at top speed and were not seen again.

Reena was so frightened she couldn't think straight. There just didn't seem to be any way out of this. Reena felt she was way too young to die.

Rhem and Larshel were not sure that Gugen Schuppet was going to last much longer. He had a stab wound in his belly and some severe lacerations on both arms where he had tried to grapple with the thing when it burst into the cave. His body was caked in blood and filth. His breathing was labored and he hadn't spoken in hours. Rhem imagined severe peritonitis would soon carry him off.

Larshel leaned over to Rhem and murmured, for the umpteenth time. "Gugen's slipping, I don't think he's gonna make it."

Rhem did not reply.

Gugen's eyes were closed.

Larshel licked his lips and hugged himself with his thick arms. He kept glancing over to the thing that stood outside the pen and then looking away.

It would pick another of them soon, and they all knew that to be selected meant enduring an agonizing death. Each of the three women and four children already taken out had been taken into the other cave and induced to scream for a minute or more apiece. None had been seen since.

Rhem was praying very hard that it would not be him taken next. But there was only one child and two women left. One of the men was sure to be taken next.

He looked to Reena again, but she was still frozen. She didn't want to talk. So she was trying to think of a way out of this. Well, Rhem had news for her: there wasn't any way out. The creatures or demons or whatever they were, were in complete control.

Rhem turned away from Larshel and saw something that made him lurch involuntarily. The other one was coming; it was time to pick the next victim!

Everyone in the pen stood stock-still, watching it approach. The child, a little girl of no more than five, started to whimper and then cry. Rosa held her, smothering the sound against her ample belly.

Rhem stared at it helplessly. What were those flowerlike things that twitched and wobbled and turned this way and that? Were they eyes? And why was there a travesty of a human face worn like a mask by each of the things? And what were the green things like worms that popped and hissed beneath the lean, long chins?

The thing paused in front of the men. Briefly it seemed to consider Gugen Schuppet; then it turned on Rhem Kerwillig.

With an odd atonal noise the thing pointed to Rhem.

His heart hammered in his chest, his stomach constricted. It was hard to breathe.

The other thing was opening the gate to the goat pen.

It was like being selected from the chicken house, grabbed for the pot, with the neck to be wrung.

Rhem could not move. The thing with the shotgun strode up to him and threatened him with the shotgun butt. This close to its shining gray skin he could smell the faint fishy odor.

He moved on legs that felt like water. Reena was visibly relieved; she avoided his gaze.

The other creature waited for him; then, as he approached it, it turned on its heel and set off, confident that he would follow without resistance.

Rhem followed. At the mouth of the cave he tensed, ready to run for it although he knew he had no chance of escape. He'd seen how fast these things could run.

The creature was facing him again. It pointed to a careful pile that had been made of all the dubtigers' audio-video equipment.

Rhem goggled. What did it want?

It pointed to the equipment again and then pointed to Rhem.

Rhem felt a tiny fucker of hope. Maybe it didn't want to kill him.

Rhem came to life. He reached down and picked up the first thing to hand, a Dorgen TV/audio unit for high-quality video.

The creature seemed to study him intently.

The Dorgen's fuel cell was still going strong. The thing was bent close to him; the orange flowerlike organs were twitching and shifting between Rhem and the Dorgen set.

Rhem switched the set on by pressing the white spot on the top. The major screen flashed to life; it wore four windows, split on the center line. Rhem set it down on the ground.

The thing was immediately intent on the set. The flowerlike things twitched back and forth. Rhem felt a wave of bitterness.

"That's what you wanted, eh? You did all this killing to get us to switch on the TV for you, eh?" Rhem's voice was cracking with barely controllable hysteria. "You didn't know how to ask nicely, did you?"

The thing turned to him for a moment. The orange flower things wobbled. The dead face of Count Karvur stretched and contracted like so much chewing gum. Then it motioned back to the stack of equipment.

The intent was obvious.

It wanted to know what the various bits and pieces did. It seemed incomprehensible to Rhem. What in all the hells did a demon want with this stuff?

Rhem picked out the things that still worked. There was a shortwave radio, and several walkie-talkies that they'd obtained in ransom for a Regulator in a South Arente cattle district.

Then there was a senso set and a keyboard computer with a purple extension cord plugged into one of its ports. Oona Lacordi had bought that, on their last excursion into civilization, three years before, when Rhem and Oona had taken counterfeit ID and ridden the bus down to Frentana Beach. For Rhem it had become an increasingly bright memory over the subsequent years.

Rhem plugged it into the Dorgen video unit and pressed the tabspot on the right side.

"Hello," announced the machine's resident software in a soft, husky female voice.

Rhem hit the keys to open the software up to visual inspection.

"Press Release if you wish to operate in silent mode," the keyboard said.

Rhem did so and the software shut up.

The creature was especially interested in the keyboard. It reached over and took it away from Rhem. It held it with the bony hands of its humanlike arms. The tentacles, which grew straight out of the flesh of the upper arm and the underarm area, ticked and tapped across the keyboard. The screen responded, windows opening and closing on different data fields. Colorful graphics romped in some of the fields, text blocked out others.

The creature seemed positively excited by this discovery. Abruptly it held out the keyboard to Rhem. Tentacles tapped around the edges.

Rhem took the board and worked the keys further. Repeating

procedures, digging up the software encyclopedia and putting the interlingua alphabet onscreen.

Thus passed two hours or more, by which time the creature had mastered some of the elements of human language and computer language and was communicating directly with the software.

Soon afterward it set the board down and stood up and gestured for Rhem to return to the goat pen.

Longingly Rhem looked out across the floor of the canyon, past the corpses of the others where they were piled.

"Look," he said with an eloquent gesture to the dark. "How about letting me go? Didn't I do what you wanted? Why not let me go, eh? I won't do you any harm. Hell, I'll never even look back."

The thing moved closer. The tentacles were stiffening; their tips gleamed, hard as assegais.

It gestured with its arm to the goat pen.

The other thing had got to its feet and cranked the action on the shotgun.

There was no escape. Rhem did not want to die. He stumbled into the pen.

"You shoulda made them shoot you, Rhem," Larshel mumbled.

The thing holding the shotgun walked over to the pile of corpses and swung a machete and cut off an arm.

Taking big bites from the arm, it walked back to its position close to the pen.

Meanwhile the other monster was still absorbed in watching the Dorgen TV. It fucked channels. It downloaded snippets, running them over and over on an inset window.

Hours went by. The humans in the goat pen shivered as evening's chill descended.

As it got darker the men watched the distant TV screen, their eyes caught helplessly by the hypnotic, brilliant jewel. Screens within screens, a dozen images at a time, cascades of graphic breakouts in blue and yellow, schematics in red-the thing had it pulsing madly.

And then, at last, as they had known that it would, the dreadful creature stood up and turned away from the Dorgen screen. It approached the goat pen.

This time it singled out Larshel Deveaux.

Larshel did not want to go. He fought, briefly, with the thing. It came at him and he evaded the grasping hands and spun round and delivered a tremendous kick with his shinbone, right into the thing's side.

It staggered and fell back. The tentacles whipped the air;

Larshel moved smoothly backward out of range and ran into the edge of the goat pen. It moved in, and with a blur of motions the tentacles seized his wrists while it punched him in the solar plexus several times.

He dropped to the ground and was seized by the back of the neck and dragged out of the goat pen and into the cave.

Once it had him well inside the other cave it laid him on the floor beside a row of egg-shaped things the size of human bodies. They were dark, even black at top and bottom, and pink in the middle. They were ripening rapidly.

Soon it would be time for the offensive.

But first there would need to be the ceremony of ghosht. The host creature was exhausted, worn out on a cellular level. A fresh host was needed.

Larshel shivered on the ground. The thing stood over him in the darkness, illuminated solely by the fucking light of the TV screen outside the cave.

As he watched, it seemed to crumple, as if it were deflating like a flat tire.

Then something like a small conifer tree with white branches was standing there, while the rest of the creature collapsed in a tidy pile in front of it.

Like an overcoat removed and dropped to the floor. Then the tree was also collapsing, the branches slumping into the trunk until it resembled a gray-white pole. Then this, too, collapsed and became a slithering thing, somewhere between a snake and a gigantic slug, that crawled up and onto Larshel's body while he shrieked and twisted.

Razor-sharp spines grew out of the thing and gripped Larshel while tentacles roved over his body and forced their way into every cavity.

Then, with a last convulsive shriek and the compression of his throat muscles, Larshel's body was taken.

The Battlemaster's plan was in motion now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

HOURS LATER LARSHEL DEVEAUX RETURNED FROM THE OTHER cave. He was the first one to do that. The other surviving captives watched him come with wide eyes. What did this portend?

But something had happened to Larshel. He was clearly not himself. He walked a little unsteadily; his head was carried at a queer angle. Rhem Kerwillig knew at once that something was very wrong. Where was Larshel's familiar rolling gait? Nor did Larshel respond to greetings from the women in the cage. Rhem knew then that it was not Larshel, but some grim simulacrum of the man, made by the thing.

"That's not Larshel," he snarled. The women screamed and crouched back.

Larshel approached the goat pen and stopped to stare inside. The eyes fucked around; the face was expressionless. Rhem was utterly certain that it was not Larshel who controlled it.

The women quieted. Rhem stared, shivering slightly in the cool air of the early morning. There were several hours before dawn. The thing gestured, made a strange grating sound. The other creature tossed it the shotgun and then opened the pen and entered and examined Gugen Schuppet.

Gugen was dead. The creature rose and strode across to the women and seized Reena by the arm. She wailed and thrashed and begged Rhem to help her.

There was nothing he could do and he knew it. He averted his face as she was dragged away into the cave. The other women wailed and the child sobbed, and then Reena began to scream and her screams took on the maniacal strength that they had heard, time after time, whenever someone was taken away into the other cave.

Meanwhile the thing that looked like Larshel Deveaux stood there by the goat pen holding the shotgun at the ready.

Occasionally it emitted an eerie wheeze, the sound of gases escaping the creaking flesh. Once it gave an odd groan as if something hot was cooling slowly in its innards.

This appearance of outward stolidity was only the result of the Battlemaster's lack of experience in operating a deceptform, an unmodified hostform for infiltration purposes. In fact, the Battlemaster felt anything but calm.

It was alone in all probability. It had no orders. What was it to do? At all costs it must avoid destruction, that much it understood. But then what? Fresh orders were necessary to a proper decision. Thus it was essential to obtain access to certain computerized records; there were star charts of particular interest.

However, they could only be accessed in person, and thus the need for deceptforms. The human type was very alien to the Battlemaster's experience. To control the host in this mode was difficult. Nor could full sensors be extruded. Thus the Battlemaster was reduced to taking the sensory information from the hostform brain centers. The creatures were equipped with remarkably poor sensors except in the optical area.

Of course, the hostforms were feral, unmodified. Their social organization was some kind of loose alliance between hosts of individuals compressed into vast societies, mostly gathered in artificial land reefs. Thus their sensors were the product of evolution, not of the perfecting hand of science.

Through study of the human culture as broadcast for TV the Battlemaster had some understanding now of the human language systems. Still the Battlemaster did not feel confident enough of this skill to undertake the mission ahead without a human "guide." It was another risk to be taken but one that was unavoidable.

The hatching in the cave came on schedule, and the big cocoons broke open and the battleforms emerged. They were lean, gray-skinned things, clad in armor and conforming to the host-form ground plan for limbs while the metabolic processes were sped up enormously.

The things emerged with a prancing, tight-muscled gait. The Battlemaster called them to a halt.

Rhem was staring at what had once been Larshel. How did it make that sound? It was like pieces of metal rubbing together.

Larshel's head swiveled to gaze at Rhem Kerwillig, and the zombie mouth opened and the dead lips spoke.

"You help me," it said in a voice that purred like skin rubbing on wet concrete.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

RHEM SAT IN THE BACKSEAT NEXT TO THE THING THAT HAD once been the beautiful Reena Kirshtin. Like the one in the front seat that had been Larshel Deveaux, it looked like Reena but it lacked any humanness. There was no liveliness to it, almost as if it were a machine. When Reena spoke now she spoke without emotion, in an eerily monotonous voice.

The Larshel creature sat in the driver's seat. It drove the ATV manually, with the computer damped down to its map-display function and the navbeacon turned off.

This, of course, was an offense all over Wexel, but one that was committed by millions of normal citizens every day to allow speeding, or entry into wildlife zones, or just simple tax evasion.

The Battlemaster understood the principles of satellite surveillance and took routine precautions. It drove on the correct side of the road only, even on the empty stretches. It obeyed all known traffic

signals and controls. There was no point in attracting police attention.

The ATV rolled smoothly through the small towns of South Kara State. Rhem knew their names well-Dowensville, Sembrant, Tosca Rego; this was the old stamping ground of the SWALA. Just on the fringe of the Arente Peach Bowl, but beyond the reach of Arente police and Regulators.

The familiar roads sped past, and Rhem was torn by a weird mix of emotions.

He had asked them where they were going and the things had not replied.

Rhem had learned that whatever they were they weren't interested much in Rhem Kerwillig. They rarely answered his questions; they rarely even turned their heads.

Occasionally they spoke to Rhem, usually to ask about the areas just ahead. Always these were to the north.

More occasionally they spoke together, in sounds that Rhem had never imagined a human could make, a series of rasps and groans that might have been made by cicadas the size of cats.

The sound chilled him every time he heard it.

It recalled the other things, the creatures that looked like the offspring of men and greyhounds. They, too, had made these sounds, once or twice, in response to the Larshel Deveaux creature.

They had driven together at first, the Benuils' old Casala ATV and the two Mogen ATVs from the SWALA transportation section. A convoy out of hell, moving down from the box canyon and along the banks of the Klimatee river until they came upon an outlying farm, the Peskanva place. It was the Peskanvas' misfortune to possess a small airstrip and a couple of planes.

The ATVs had driven past the outskirts of the farm and then parked in a hollow just beyond. The greyhound-cum-gladiator things had dispersed into the brush, leaving Rhem with the Larshel- and Reena-lookalike things.

They had waited a few minutes.

There was a distant scream, followed by a shout and then a shot. Then silence fell.

A minute or so later there was another, more distant series of screams, about five seconds' worth.

The silence returned. A weird squeaking, scraping sound emerged from the ATV's CB radio. The Larshel thing gunned them forward.

At the farmhouse they found a scene of carnage. The things had slaughtered everyone and were standing there awaiting orders. They had found several weapons in the house, a pair of shotguns and a rifle, plus an antique handgun.

There was a woman, decapitated and tossed to the end of the porch. In the kitchen was a fat man, stabbed through the chest, lying in a widening pool of blood.

A little boy had been killed in the front yard; the small body seemed so pathetic, so still.

Rhem found tears in his eyes when he looked away. He was surprised by this; he hadn't felt like that about another human being in years.

Then they had taken Rhem to the farm airstrip, a short takeoff field. There were two planes-an old Gurben Gull and a Wocanic Airdevil, a two-seater VTOL turbo. The Gull was a solid, slow, long-range cargo plane that was popular in the outlying parts of Wexel.

Rhem had little flying experience-he wasn't much of a pilot-but, as he pointed out, the planes were computer-controlled anyway.

This apparently was not satisfactory. The Larshel thing immediately took the instrument panel on the Gull apart and disconnected the computer, and with it its beacon. It did the same thing with the Airdevil. The beacon function in the navware for each plane was also cut out, with a burst of programming put in through the little portable keyboard computer that Oona Lacordi had bought in Frentana Beach, years before.

Then slowly and methodically it investigated the manual controls, measured the flaps and rudder response, and, with Rhem to translate unfamiliar human devices, went over the rest of each plane's inventory of parts.

Eventually, satisfied that the planes were understood, the Larshel creature instructed the greyhound-gladiators in their use and control. They were similar to a certain class of Imperial air attack craft except that they were absurdly luxurious. Where a pair of humans could be accommodated in the Wocanic, at least four or five of the battleforms could be fitted in.

Rhem listened as the scraping, whining sounds went on until the Reena thing caught his arm in a viselike grip and propelled him back to the ATV. She was incredibly strong; Rhem could not shake free.

The Larshel thing took its seat again, and once more the Casala bad rumbled to life and rolled forward on its oversized tires.

Rhem listened for the sounds of the planes taking off but heard nothing.

A couple of hours later they reached Basking Springs, the biggest town in the region. Here they were to get fresh fuel cells for the Casala, which was running low on power.

But first they told Rhem to get them food. Rhem was vaguely shocked by this; somehow he hadn't imagined they would want food. They didn't seem human enough to need food.

When he'd recovered he told them to drive into a roadhouse restaurant lot called Aya's. They parked by the order-in phone, and Rhem ordered hot sandwiches and milk shakes and crisp fried potatoes.

Mobile robots shaped like hamburgers rolled up shortly and extended trays loaded with the food in colorful biowrap.

Rhem was starving, and he bit deeply into his sandwich and sat back and chewed. Then he noticed Reena putting the whole sandwich in her mouth and gulping it down like a python swallowing a rat.

They demanded more.

Rhem called for more, and more, and more. Larshel and Reena were putting away enough food for a

week, it seemed. They barely seemed to chew, either; they just shoved the hamburgers into their mouths and swallowed them.

At last, however, they were sated. Rhem had lost count at the seventh round of Aya's Bigburgers. They burped now, with an unusual intensity. Rhem's hair rose up on his neck; the things sounded like animals, tigers or lions, great carnivores of some kind.

Whatever they were they had hearty appetites.

The burping subsided and the Larshel thing started up the ATV again.

Rhem cleared his throat; they were forgetting something. The robot gate to the lot was already squealing shut. Cameras in protected turrets were swiveling to cover the car.

Both turned to Rhem. They seemed uneasy. Rhem was terrified. Anything could happen in this sort of situation, and the things were armed.

"What is wrong?" Larshel said.

"We didn't pay for our food."

"Pay?"

"Pay money, credit, for the food. It isn't free, you know."

The thing pondered this for a few long moments.

"Ah, value units must be exchanged for food. Host-creature work/value system extends to food supplies. What value units do we have?"

Host-creature value units? What were these fucking things?

"I dunno, I didn't get the opportunity to bring any with me. If you see what! mean."

"See what mean? What is this?" The Reena thing was nonplussed.

The Larshel creature returned to the problem. "What can we do?"

Rhem swallowed heavily. If violence broke out here, he could easily wind up dead.

"Check the glove compartment," he blurted. "Maybe there's a credit card in there."

He then explained as best he could the principle of the credit card.

"Value-unit storage system," the thing said.

To his relief the glove compartment produced a small silver card, an Epoxo Banco fuel card in the name of Jaad Benuil. There was an address but it was entirely unfamiliar to Rhem.

Rhem proffered it to the hamburger robot and got it back a moment later with a fancy printed credit slip.

The gate unlocked and the cameras turned themselves off. Rhem felt his pulse slow down after about thirty seconds or so.

Just how the hell was he going to stay alive in this situation? The slightest thing could set off a holocaust, and Rhem would be right in the middle of it. Escape-he had to get away from the things somehow.

Their next stop was a fuel station. There were half a dozen along Basking Springs's main drag. Once again the Epoxo Banco card of poor Jaad Benuil was used without a hitch. Throughout the transaction the things stayed in the ATV and kept Rhem in his seat.

Once more they were back on the road, heading northward and accelerating on the Central Kara Autoroute.

Pretty soon Rhem knew they were in North Kara and had left the southland behind. Ahead lay Central Kara City, and beyond that the autoroute went on straight and six lanes wide through the Felix Hills and into CK City itself

Was that their destination? CK City, the world capital. Rhem hoped it was. In that sort of city he might just possibly be able to escape. At least his chances of getting lost in the crowd would be better.

And, absurdly, he just wanted to see the big town; he'd always wanted to go there, since he was a kid. But Rhem Kerwillig had only got as far as Frentana Beach, and that just a couple of times.

Now they made swift progress passing the graceful city of Kara Center, the capital of the state, and then an hour later, murky Burcade City, which lay astride the planet's chief iron-ore resource.

Burcade was a serious polluter town, and farther on, the south slopes of the Felix Hills were barren, their forests long since dead and gone. The acidified landscape could scarcely support vegetation, and gaunt crags, bare and rocky, loomed above the road.

Once they were over the Felixes and were coming down toward the north coast, the vegetation returned, with small, pleasant towns succeeding each other by the side of the autoroute as the ATV rolled on. This was the weekend-land of the middle classes of CK City, and the towns were exquisitely kept up. Graceful villas could be glimpsed down avenues of trees.

By midnight they were on the outskirts of Cowdray-Kara itself. The highway lights wound into a maze of other highways, and ahead glittered the lights of the great towers.

The things communicated briefly. Rhem felt almost certain that this was to be their destination. The schematic of the city was on the control screen.

The Larshel thing tapped the controls lightly. It was already highly fluent in the use of human control systems. Being trapped within the limitations of the deceptform had given the Battlemaster much greater understanding of human ergonomics. The human-machine interface was a surprisingly complex place, the Battlemaster had long since decided. The human culture seemed vaster and more complicated with every discovery.

A route in blue indicator appeared on the city map. The route passed along the southern side of the city, following the Coastal Interstate. Then it broke away to the southwest.

Rhem was right: they were going somewhere in CK City's suburban ring. But why were these things so specific? What did they want here? Did they have friends or allies?

Whatever it was he would find out in good time, that much was certain he was grimly aware.

The ATV drove on, through the highway loop below downtown and back out through ring suburbs to a subcomplex of small towers and rather graceful buildings in white stone.

"Cowdray University," Rhem read on a giant sign over the highway by the off-ramp.

The creatures wanted to go to school! Of course, of course, they were planning to take Human Studies, Rhem cackled madly to himself.

He felt the Reena thing turn and look at him. No human emotions motivated that blank face; she said nothing.

The ATV pulled into the university parking lot and came to a halt.

The Larshel creature opened the car door.

"What are we doing here?" Rhem said.

"We need library, there are data bases to study."

"The library won't be open until morning, you know. People like to sleep at night. You know, sleep."

"No, don't know sleep."

"Ash, well, that must be difficult. Old Larshel, now he knew about sleep. Oh, yes."

"How long until library open?" the thing said.

"In morning, when light."

The creatures creaked and scraped together.

They waited.

The Reena thing went out on reconnaissance and returned to report very little activity in this section of the hostform reef concentration.

They continued to wait, sitting in the dark interior of the ATV.

Rhem dozed.

He shuddered back to wakefulness hours later. His neck and shoulder ached from sleeping in a cramped position.

The Larshel thing spoke.

"You will accompany us into the library. You will speak for us."

It fitted.

"Yeah, I figured that was what you would want."

"We are on research project. We need access to star catalogues."

"Star catalogues, we're going on a trip, are we?"

"Star catalogues. If you try and escape we will kill you at once. You understand?"

It was a surreal experience. The things did not walk like human beings, they were too stiff or too loose, nothing was quite tight.

But Rhem moved just ahead of them, into the library. He

established identities for them, explaining that they were members of a cult of Dervish, under a religious obligation not to speak for a year. He was their spokesperson. The librarian remarked that she thought she'd seen everything but this was new.

The Jaad Benuil fuel card served as credit card once more, and since there was no security clearance required for the star catalogues they were soon seated around a holo-vid table with a stellar projection passing through its inky simulation of space.

The Larshel creature had a specific set of catalogue entries that it wanted to view.

Rhem caught sight of the tagline, "Arntage Crystal Stellar-Regression Series."

These were a number of mobile star maps, showing a group of stars, mostly bright ones, in speeded-up motion. Most of them were heading in one direction-Rhem assumed that was the orbital drift around the galaxy-while a few contrary suns were moving in the other direction.

The stars moved in their enormous orbits. There were more than a hundred mobile maps in the Arntage Series. Rhem was soon bored to tears. The Larshel and Reena creatures, however, continued to study the moving microlights with total absorption.

Rhem dozed; the Arntage Series, painstakingly worked out two thousand years before, continued shuttling through the holo-vid projector.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE BATTLEMASTER HAD MADE CAREFUL PLANS. THE situation demanded nothing less than the utmost care. The Battlemaster's central nodes were an irreplaceable resource, at least in the short term. Given enough time the Secondary Form would grow replacements, but for the duration of the immediate operation the Battlemaster was alone.

Unfortunately the human central intelligence's were equipped with vast power. The humans were a constant puzzlement: they were grotesquely individual, but they were also capable of forming colony-organisms for decision making. What they were incapable of doing was obeying those decisions once made. There were no in built biochemical controls on human behavior. Their societies constantly

verged on chaos and collapse. But from this disorganization came a dynamic, explosive society.

It was all very puzzling, and it necessitated the use of infiltration techniques to penetrate the human space-travel network.

Of course, everything in the Battlemaster's plan had been predicated on the initial success of the star search, using the painstakingly detailed Arntage Series of stellar regressions.

This enormous work had been done two thousand years previously, following a crisis event on a frontier planet. The Arntage series was nothing less than an attempt to map the progress of the galaxy's complement of stars through a billion years of history.

The Battlemaster had studied the history of the "Saskatch horror," on the encyclopedia memory module that it found in the house of Jaad Benuil.

The frontier planet had been overwhelmed by a small force of Imperial Military Form. The Battlemaster had no doubts of this. However, this Military Form had gravely underestimated the humans. The frontier planet had been invested by an enormous fleet and reduced from orbit to end the threat.

From what was known of the method of attack the Battlemaster was able to hazard a guess that it originated with a single Military Form, and that it had mistaken the cultural level of the humans that discovered it and provided it with its first hostforms.

It had cost the humans a habitable world, a precious resource, but it had been utterly annihilated in the end.

An Imperial Navigation Crystal had been recovered and analyzed, however. From it had been derived the core of the Arntage Series of star charts.

The Battlemaster had been impressed with the depth of the effort involved in the compilation of these charts. The object of the humans had been to discover the homeworld of the Empire of the Gods of Axone-Neurone.

The humans had discovered the purpose of the crystal quite quickly. They had then attempted to define each star by its spectral class. This was a much more difficult task since the crystal did not project true colors.

Once they believed they had achieved this, they projected each star's likely future, through its evolution along the main sequence and then off into the giant and dwarf phases.

It was believed that the events of the Starhammer War had occurred approximately one billion years before. At a time when there was no life beyond the single-celled upon the Earth.

Most of the stars on the crystal star charts had long since raced through their lives and shifted to either dwarf or the grander exotica of the universe, neutron stars and black holes.

So they had searched for groups and patterns in the known black holes and neutron stars to find matchups with the ancient bright stars. Black holes, of course, were well known; as the essential loci of the original Deep Link system, all the holes in the ancient human region had been carefully observed and catalogued. This study had reached out to include a great many holes observed elsewhere in the galaxy, and thus there was a strong data base concerned with them.

When a hole was found to match closely with the predicted size and nature of one of the ancient stars in the Imperial Crystal chart, its motions around the galactic core were charted backward to see if it might fit into the projections from the crystal.

All this required enormous computational resources. The computations for tracking the vast multitude of dwarfs were even more onerous.

Worse, the location of many dwarfs was unknown; this catalogue was far from complete, even in the era of the ITAA star culture.

Disappointment ultimately overcame the project. A few matchups were established, but there was much that remained hazy, too fouled by unknowns to produce worthwhile data.

The searchers gave up at last, after the death of Rieben Arntage, the human that gave his name to the Series.

The Battlemaster wondered what had driven this particular human to make such a prodigious, long-term effort. It seemed unlike the general pattern of human behaviors.

In its own search through the Arntage Series the Battlemaster had a significant advantage: it knew the ancient location of the homestar on the imperial galactic grid.

After some work it had established a match between the Imperial grid and the human mapping system. The star it sought still burned, fainter now, but still recognizable. Through the Arntage series of drift evolutions this star could be charted. It was small, an orange star. Insignificant, and never identified with anything important, at least not within the Arntage Series material.

It had been the distant partner of an F-class star that had long since become a white dwarf. The K star was now the major partner, and its galactic orbit had changed slightly as a result.

The Arntage Series allowed the Battlemaster to find the homestar once again—a steady orange flame against the galactic dark.

That such information should be so freely available continued to astonish the Battlemaster. But it had been amazed from the beginning at the openness of the radio spectrum and the wealth of information webworks that laced the chaotic human culture.

The Battlemaster felt giddy whenever it contemplated this chaos. Billions of free-willed beings clashed along the planes of the matrix formed by their economic and social choices. Wild fractal patterns loomed out of this statistical mass.

Free choice of life habits, untrammelled freedom to reproduce, and freedom to travel, even between the stars, for those with sufficient value units.

It was as if the competitive struggle between the high forms should be spread to encompass all forms within the Empire of the Gods of Axone-Neurone. As if all levels were to be privy to First Level secrets and allowed to act upon them!

As if all forms should have reproductive rights!

The idea was bizarre, and actually frightening with its implication that such social chaos could even be culturally successful. These humans had spread across an enormous volume of the galaxy, a much greater volume than that attained by the Empire.

They must be doing something right.

The Battlemaster gave the equivalent of a mental shrug. These were gentler times, perhaps. They faced nothing equivalent to the great Batrachian enemy.

And so they were soft and the Empire might yet be reborn.

Their chaoticism would stand little chance against the blade of the Imperial will once it was reforged and armed with the new technologies of this incredible era.

And yet the humans were liable to surprise one.

Thus the Battlemaster faced an unexpected problem. Despite a constant drumroll of broadcast warnings to the population not to panic, they had panicked very thoroughly indeed. In exact opposition to their commands from above they had packed into their mobile vehicles and fled to the nearest spaceport at the news that an alien creature was running amok in the distant Ruinar Mountains and that Wexel was under the infamous Directive 115.

The nearest spaceport was entirely surrounded by stalled vehicles jammed solid on the access roads. It would be difficult to reach the base and it would be even more difficult to get off-planet.

The Battlemaster had considered lying low until the immediate panic died down. But eventually it returned to the original plan. It was vital to make the escape now. There was a trail of evidence behind it, from the farmhouses to the box canyon by the Klimatee.

Moreover, this panic showed that the humans were already widely aware of the threat posed to them by the existence of the Battlemaster on their planet. Their central organs would inevitably respond with all their terrific power. The chaotic frenzy would die down and the organs would move into the ascendancy and escape would be impossible.

To stay here, therefore, would invite eventual discovery and death, or worse, capture.

Once it was sure of the homestar's likely location, the Battlemaster moved on to the next phase of the plan, entering a spaceport and getting a shuttle offplanet.

But to get to the spaceport in this panic meant bypassing the surface.

The Battlemaster scanned the skies. Aircraft of many shapes and sizes were in motion.

Once more it was Rhem Kerwillig's turn to tremble as the Battlemaster turned its attention upon him.

"How can we obtain possession of an aircraft?"

Rhem gulped. "I dunno, I'll have to think about it."

They had left the library before noon and set out on the approach highway to CK Air&Space. They'd soon bogged down in terrible traffic. An hour or more had taken them barely five miles.

Rhem turned it over in his mind. How was he going to walk these two inhuman-behaving critters on board an aircraft that would get them to the spaceport?

"Downtown," he said after a while. "fly to get aboard a corporate chopper. Most of the big towers have chopper parks on top."

The Battlemaster nodded. Downtown was opposite to the panic flow of traffic.

The ATV wheeled about and crossed the meridian on its big wheels and headed north once more, back into the city center.

In less than an hour a suitable corporate building had been selected. Small helicopters were coming to and from the roof almost constantly. A crowd was gathered in the street outside the building; these were the employees of the corporation, for the most part.

"You will assist us in getting aboard aircraft," the Battlemaster informed Rhem. "If you try to escape you will be killed."

Rhem was then pressed to help them plan their way into the building. There were armed guards at every entrance. Rhem suggested they seek out an executive elevator bank. Perhaps one connected the roof and the underground car park beneath the building.

They drove through a barrier and down a ramp.

Astonished guards opened fire and set out in pursuit.

The ATV was swung around the ramps at top speed until it was three levels down. Then the Battlemaster abandoned it.

With Rhem Kerwillig in tow the Battlemaster ripped open a locked fire door, displaying an inhuman strength that made Rhem gasp, and then set off up the emergency stairs.

Rhem was also left gasping by the speed of their ascent on these stairs. When he started to fall behind the Reena thing seized him by the arm and dragged him up the stairs at her own swift pace.

From the emergency stairs they emerged into an exit corridor at ground level. Here they turned inward, into the building, breaking open a door at one point to gain access to an elevator lobby.

The lobby was occupied by a small group of people who stood there, horrified, when they broke the door in. They were frozen while these intruders waited with them for the elevator.

Everyone simply wanted to get to the roof and to the line for the choppers to the suburban car park. Everyone just wanted to get home safely to their families.

Rhem, on the other hand, just wanted to get his lungs filled with air. The sweat was pouring off his brow and puddling in his shoes. He thought his heart might burst.

They stood there, the three of them, sides heaving, breath sobbing into tortured lungs while the executives tried to ignore them and the elevator rose smoothly to the roof.

They exited to a wide vista of the city in late afternoon. The tower had few peers in the Cowdray-Kara tower park, and the views were spectacular.

The roof was a rectangle divided by a rooftop lounge. On one side was an executive lunch garden. On the other was the chopper park. The elevator banks opened in a separate structure adjacent to the lounge blister.

The garden was crowded with executives waiting for their chopper out to the suburbs. Everyone had found some excuse to leave early that day. The Battlemaster pushed forward, elbowing through the crowd. A line of humans was moving along from the glass-walled lounge to the entry gates to the chopper park.

Another helicopter took off with a whoosh and thrum and whirled away from the tower top.

The lounge interior was also jammed with humans. The Battlemaster grew concerned. How were they going to get to the choppers?

It studied the lounge structure, a blister with a green metallic roof that jutted up from the deck of the tower roof. On the far side of that blister were the aircraft. There were dorsally positioned skylights running the length of the blister. If one could break through one of those skylights one might climb down on the other side.

It seemed the only feasible solution, other than trying to infiltrate through the gates. Kerwillig cautioned against that; they lacked identification cards.

The Battlemaster briefly conversed with the Secondary Form and then told the human to follow and not to try anything if it wished to live.

They pushed through into the lounge and headed for the central region. There were kitchens and storage rooms there; the kitchens were deserted, most doors were locked. The Battlemaster pushed the hostform that had once been Larshel Deveaux into a superhuman effort once again and broke the lock on a door into an empty kitchen area behind the rooftop restaurant.

Behind this kitchen was a hallway with other rooms off it on either side. In the roof was a skylight.

A klaxon began wailing somewhere. A robot voice was proclaiming an intruder alert.

There was no time to waste.

The Secondary Form vaulted off the crossed hands of the Battlemaster's hostform and sprang high enough to catch hold of the ledge around the inside of the skylight.

Rhem watched in astonishment as Reena's body performed an Olympian feat and then hauled itself up by its fingertips and swung over the edge of the skylight.

The Battlemaster broke open a fire cabinet and unwound the hose that was kept there. It swung the hose around a few times and then launched the head up to the Secondary Form with perfect precision.

"Climb!" the Battlemaster said to Rhem Kerwillig.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

WHILE THE SHARK HOWLED OVER THE CITYSCAPE, COLONEL Chang looked down with unseeing eyes. The big question just wouldn't let go of her.

Where was the damned Directive 115 alien creature?

No one had reported hide nor hair of it in days. What the hell was it up to? Had the damned thing committed suicide? A sickening thought, especially if they never found the body. Was that to be her fate, to go down as the female planetary commander who set off a Directive 115 for an alien that they never found?

How obscure would be the next job they gave her? CO of an asteroid in a bad system way out on the high top of the galaxy? Or maybe running a tanker park orbiting some methane planet with nothing but robots for company. Once again she checked with Captain Cachester at the military spaceport.

Cachester wore a jaunty grin. He was clearly enjoying the situation. After the bombing of the computer room at the base, Chang had considered putting Cachester under arrest. Then had come the Directive 115 flap and her problems with Cachester were forgotten. Now Cachester was laughing himself silly with every passing hour. If the thing turned out to be just a chimera then Colonel Chang was done for and there would never be an effective investigation into the computer-room explosion, or into the base audits of the past few years.

"I must report a scene of complete and utter panic here, Colonel," Cachester said. "I don't know how many casualties we have out there but there's going to be hell to pay."

"Yes, Captain, thank you."

"Oh, and by the way, Colonel, we've had six death threats now from the CPS. There are a lot of angry super rads after you."

Chang cut out.

Perhaps the thing had been diseased. Or wounded so badly by the peasants that it expired.

The peasant ATV it had taken had not been recovered. The ID marker punched into the engine cover had been neutralized by either the peasant owner or by the thing.

Peasants moonlighting as Liberators usually did away with the ID tags on their machines, which didn't help in this situation.

To make matters worse, Chang was finding that local police forces were largely uncooperative and quite sluggish in responding to orders from the ITAA.

But without that ATV they didn't know what the thing might have been up to, or where it had been.

She threw up her hands.

There was a soft beep on the commo. "I have a Darel Hopester on the line," said Povet in her ear.

"Well, well, well; put him on," she said after a moment's reflection.

Hopester's glamorous mug popped up on a nearby screen. "Greetings, Colonel, glad we were able to get you."

"Hello, Darel, I take it this isn't a personal call."

"Not with a Directive 115 emergency it isn't; WEXnet is after you. Any chance?"

"Of an interview? Are you crazy? As you said there's an emergency situation."

"Come on, Luisa, give us a chance. It won't take more than a couple of minutes of your time. And we've got good cause, anything we can get out that covers the facts here will help calm the panic. People are dying from it."

"And now it's Luisa, is it? Suddenly this call feels more personal than it did when you started."

"Look, I'm sorry I didn't return your call yesterday, but I told you I don't do anything outside of my marriage while I'm in CKC."

"A low blow, Hopester," she snorted, half-enraged and half-amused. "You know all this is being taped for posterity."

"Luisa, I'll do anything for the interview."

"Now, that's an interesting concept, Darel, I'll think about it. But the point about trying to do something about the panic is valid. I'll do it, but the rules are simple. WEXnet has to distribute the piece to all the other nets."

"Hang on there a second, Colonel. This is media business.

I don't think the ITAA has the right to get into making deals like who gets what news."

"Spacewaste, Hopester, it goes to every channel. WEXnet 7 gets two minutes' advance, that's all."

Two minutes!"

"You heard, good. Let's go. First question."

Hopester was flustered. "Shit, Luisa, we thought we could do it in person."

"Where? I'm in a gunship on the way to Air&Space. I have a shuttle slot in forty minutes."

"I'm at Air&Space myself, you'll be here in ten minutes?"

"Five."

"I'll meet you at the shuttle departure lounge. They have these booths in the café that are really good for one-on-one interviews."

"Sounds all right to me."

"Uh, Colonel, can you switch off the recorders?"

"No, of course not. This is Directive 115."

"What's going to happen to the plan, then? That we talked about before."

"Let us just say that plans have been revised. I'm gone from here in less than forty minutes. There's a full-blown sector admiral on his way here right now to take charge. This will switch to a Fleet Command at that point. I'll just be the CO of one OSF in the Twelfth Division."

"A Fleet Command?" he faltered.

"Full martial law, everything. There'll be an entire OSF division in orbit in another day or so. Things aren't going to calm down for quite a while."

"Then you must have more information about this alien threat than has been released."

She sighed. If only there were more information.

"I'm sorry, it's the most damnable thing, but we don't know much. There is a creature of some kind, it did attack some peasants. We think it may have killed and eaten some of them.

It stole a vehicle and it hasn't been seen since."

"And it's loose out there?"

"Yes."

"And the ITAA can't find it?"

"Unfortunately correct."

"You don't know where it is?" Hopester was aghast.

"Not right now we don't."

"And you think this creature is a so-called Saskatch monster."

"The biochem people say it matches."

"Oh, shit, I don't think we're going to calm the panic down much with that news."

"Five minutes, Mr. Hopester, be ready."

Chang cut out. Povet was waiting for her with news.

"Colonel," she faltered.

"What is it?"

"They are attacking Doisy-Dyan. The ITAA base itself has been hit."

Luisa's blood ran cold. Povet sounded tremendously calm considering what she was saying.

"They?" she managed.

"Things, gray coloration, look like greyhounds or something. We had Captain Cachester on line very briefly a few moments ago, then we lost all contact with the base."

"Any more?"

"Numbers are small, but they've killed a lot of people. Cachester sounded pretty bad."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

IT WAS THE MOMENT SHE HAD TRAINED FOR ALL HER LIFE, AT least in theory. This was it, the crucial point.

"Okay, now we know that this is for real. Povet, keep trying Cachester and get me the moment you get him."

"Yes, sir." Povet cut out.

The Shark roared in on CK Air&Space.

Chang went to sit next to Caroline Reese, who looked utterly exhausted.

"The plan has just changed."

Reese said nothing, remote in sullen sorrow. "You're going topside on your own. You'll be picked up from the orbiter and taken directly to Admiral Heidheim."

"Where are you going?" she said at the sight of Chang.

"Doisy-Dyan."

"Why? I thought you were going topside."

"There's been an incident, we're still getting the details. I'm needed there at once, this is a combat mission."

Reese, already pale, seemed to go absolutely white at this.

"What happened?" she breathed.

"Some creatures have attacked the spaceport there. They were armed with shotguns and hunting rifles and they caused a large number of casualties."

"Creatures?" Reese said.

The haunting horror of the name Saskatch returned in full force to her thoughts. Death wailed in an old,

unkempt graveyard.

"It will be your death to go back there," she intoned. "You should go topside now, while you still can."

Chang recoiled from this pessimism.

"Hey, now, Professor, we can handle it. This thing isn't called a Shark for nothing. This is the ITAA's premier fighting vehicle, there's nothing it can't kill."

"There are other machines, are there not? What if they have the other machines?"

"Sharks only respond to ITAA command codes; it's actually built into the hardware control interface. If you take that out you have to fly the things manually, which is very tough to do since they're about as aerodynamically stable as a rock."

"It won't matter. This is what killed Saskatch."

"We know that, and we have been trained to handle this. I've got an entire orbital strike force on hand here."

"I don't think that'll be enough."

Chang was nettled more than she liked to admit by this lack of confidence.

"Well, then, think of this: Within a few hours there'll be a full division in orbit up there, not to mention a capital ship capable of destroying the entire continent, razing it down to the bedrock if need be."

"Death, I am sure of it." Reese turned away, her focus inward, her face slack.

"Great, a wonderful contribution to morale, Professor."

Her comms beeped. It was Povet.

"We have contact with Captain Cachester again."

"Good, put me through."

She dropped into her seat as Cachester came on line. In fact, she was surprised he was still on the ground; she'd heard that he'd applied for topside, to transfer to Empress Wu at the earliest opportunity. Heidheim collecting his own, she'd understood.

"Where are you, Captain?" she said.

Cachester's voice was faint and crackly; his image was jumpy. "Position is as described previously, about two hundred meters down the approach way from the spaceport."

"What're you talking on, signal is badly broken up."

"I'm patching this through the Wasp comms. The air-base comms room went down about five minutes ago."

"Wasp?"

"Ground-attack vehicle."

"Got it. So what's happening in the air-base?"

"Well, it's hard to know exactly. There's still some shooting going on. Basonth is dead; apparently he was killed early on."

Chang felt her jaw muscles tighten. Cachester always had this effect on her.

"I know about Basonth. What I want to know is what's going on now. So I'm going to suggest you take the Wasp ground-attack vehicle back into the spaceport and find out for me. You may also help the ones still fighting." She used a very patient voice.

"We were in retreat, you see, we didn't know what was happening in other parts of the base."

"How many effectives do you have, Captain?"

"Uh, not many."

"Give me a number, Captain."

"There's just two of us here."

"Where is everybody else?"

"I don't know, uh, Colonel, we've taken a lot of casualties.

This is pretty bad."

And so they bad. As the story was pieced together it sounded worse and worse.

The attack had come with a skillful one-two combination that Clang would eventually recognize as the style of her opponent.

A diversionary incident had erupted in broad daylight. Explosions shook down a section of the perimeter fence.

Something ran across the open field and attacked the nearest booster cradle. It was an unmanned station but its doors were blown open and odd-looking creatures ran through it, ransacking it, in fact, searching for weapons.

A reconnaissance force was dispatched to the BC by Captain Basonth, who then went out to lead it in person when some of the members started wavering.

This force ran into very accurate small-arms fire from hunting rifles. The group's progress was slowed. They retreated into the safety of the nearest booster cradle station.

At about the same time a second group of the creatures broke into the air-base main terminal. Nobody knew how they had gotten in, but they began killing everyone they ran into and they were able to seize a

number of weapons from ITAA military staff members they caught in the corridors. With these weapons they'd quickly cleared the terminal building, shooting upward of fifty people in the process.

The shooting and the panicked mobs that ran from the terminal sent the gridlocked traffic jams into a paroxysm. Thousands of people abandoned their cars and took to their heels in utter panic. ATVs started driving back, over the roofs of other cars. People started shooting at them to try and save their vehicles.

At some point in the confusion Captain Basonth attempted to retreat back to the terminal but was shot dead by the accurate sniper with the hunting rifle.

With the terminal cleared and the ITAA administration block emptied the only humans on the base complex were the handful of men holding out in the booster cradle.

Captain Cachester had been sitting in a car, sipping a cold beer, alone with his thoughts about Doisy-Dyan and nine good, profitable years. In a few more minutes he was going to ride out on a shuttle and leave it all behind, including the meddlesome Colonel Chang and her damned audit of the base accounts.

Then had come the sound of gunfire, a lot of it. Bullets smashed into the windows on the upper floors of the spaceport block. Screaming people ran hither and thither. Cachester got out of the car to see what was happening. But the windows on the ground floor of the terminal offered little view of the action. He tossed the beer at that point and headed for the command post, which was in the roof blister atop the terminal.

He passed a few officers on his way. No one knew anything, except that terrorists were attacking the spaceport for some unknown reason. Cachester had decided it was some Liberators playing a prank, or even the CPS doing it to get Liberators of some sort blamed. He would have been amused, except that it promised to delay his own flight and that could create a ticklish situation. He had been counting on having a nice long interview with Heidheim personally before Heidheim confronted Chang.

Things would be much more difficult if he had to do his talking with Chang present, which was possible if Empress Wu got into low orbit before he did. Heidheim might even drop to dirtside to see things for himself.

Then Captain Basonth had led out a squad from the 624 to confront the intruders. A Wasp ground-assault vehicle was on its way from the ITAA base in West Doisy-Dyan. More gunfire had erupted. This time, however, it sounded much closer; in fact, it was coming from inside the terminal.

Cachester was appalled. What the hell did the boys think they were doing? This would really set things on the boil. He was glad he was getting out of here before the ITAA tried to crack down after this.

There was screaming and more gunshots; in fact, it was the sound of a regular slaughter. Someone ran into the control center with the news that "creatures" had broken into the Departures Lounge and were killing everyone there.

Creatures? Cachester's eyebrows rose at the word.

The news bearer was pale with terror. They were creatures, he was emphatic, he'd seen them, fortunately from the safe distance of the escalator well in Departures. They moved faster than any human being he'd ever seen. They were killing everyone.

At that point Cachester had decided to put discretion before valor, and he sprinted for the rear exit to the building. Emerging onto a sublevel beneath the departures area he saw something lean and gray, with the body of a child. It was pursuing two men and a woman who were running for their lives. It was armed with a peasant machete. It caught up to the older, slower of the men and bounded high for a moment, the machete swinging and neatly beheading the man with a single stroke.

The surviving man and the woman, both in the dress of business executives, scrambled around a corner with shrieks of terror. The thing bounded after them with an insectile rapidity.

Cachester had bolted like a terrified rabbit straight across the approach road and onto a ramp that fed down to the spaceport field level. There he had the good fortune to run into Private Forsht at the wheel of the Wasp ground-attack vehicle that was on its way to back up Basonth and his ground team.

Cachester got Forsht to stop and turned him around and took the Wasp back up the ramp and down the approach road to a distance he judged as safe, for the moment. Then he paused and decided to call Cowdray-Kara and pass on the news to Chang that her creatures were for real.

Chang made her decision.

"Captain, I want you to go back into the air-base, with the Wasp, and find out what the hell is going on in there."

Cachester did not reply.

"Captain, can you hear me?"

Cachester still did not reply; then he said, "I'm not receiving you very clearly, is something jamming the line?"

"Captain!" she yelled.

"Sorry, I can't hear a thing," Cachester said.

Luisa felt a blood vessel pounding in her forehead. "Cachester, stop this, now!"

"There's something wrong."

Cachester was gone, he'd broken commo. Luisa wanted to kill; she imagined throttling Captain Cachester. It made her feel fractionally better but no more.

CK Air&Space appeared beneath them. The Shark landed with its characteristic abruptness.

Caroline Reese was whisked away by a security detail to the waiting shuttle.

Darel Hopester was there, waiting to board. Hopester still wanted to come, despite the news from Doisy, which had already leaked network-wide.

What had been raging panic before was turning quickly into a convulsive, catastrophic chaos all over Wexel.

Hopester still wanted to come.

Chang was surprised once more by the glamo newsman.

"To Doisy? You want to get closer to this?" Luisa was impressed even more than surprised.

"Of course, that's where the story is."

"Well, well, an anchor who really doesn't mind getting his feet wet, not to mention cut off and eaten. This isn't a bunch of dumb Regulators we're going up against now."

"Yeah, I know that, but WEXnet really wants this story, and I have to take the opportunity if you'll give it to me."

Chang pondered this, but only for a moment. "Why the hell not? Let's take the newsman to the news, because this is either going to be great TV or we're going to be dead and it won't matter anyway, right?"

"Right, Colonel."

"And besides, it'll be a historical record, right? Get your cute ass onto my Shark, Hopester, and get it there fast because we leave in a minute and five seconds."

Hopester drew in a breath. He was visibly reconsidering.

"How great is the danger, Colonel? I mean, I should tell my wife."

"You heard, Mr. Hopester. There's just a few of them."

Hopester nodded and started out of the room.

"I hope you have plenty of disk," she said to his back. He turned, his face animated by a new excitement.

"We go live if we can. Direct satellite feed."

"Live? Has this all been live, Darel?" "No," he said, obviously wistful.

"Goddamn TV people," she snorted. "You're all crazy."

Then he was gone and she was in motion. The hatch to the roofpad cracked open to the code on her card and she was outside again. The Shark was revving quietly. It seemed to shudder at the sight of her as if exulting in the action to come. Did war machines feel excitement? she wondered for a moment, listening to it chugging away. There was a strange, high charge in her chest; her pulse was racing, but time seemed to be moving very slowly.

Get a grip, Luisa Chang! She heard an ancient drill sergeant's voice inside her head. War machines were machines, no more. They had software, not brains.

On her way across the pad she beeped Blake, who was in orbit with the first assault squad.

He was out of touch, in the radio chaos of hot reentry. Damn him! He'd dropped without waiting for

her order. He would be in Doisy-Dyan in a matter of minutes.

Concealing a surge of irritation, she jumped into the Shark and told the metallic monster to go.

Rotors thundered and the Shark went.

On full burn, with rotors retracted, the Shark was capable of a suborbital jump that would get them to Doisy-Dyan in less than half an hour. It would also leave them low on fuel at the other end.

Chang decided she didn't want Blake on his own down there for any longer than absolutely necessary. She sent the Shark into a shuttle-style boost, once they were clear of the terminals and the massed traffic. The rotors retracted and they were all jammed into their acceleration couches as they picked up speed.

A beep from the comms announced Captain Blake, now deploying in drop mode over Doisy-Dyan.

"We're at fifty thousand feet, pre-chutes deployed," he announced completely casually.

"Captain Blake, so good of you to check in. What the hell do you mean by dropping without orders to?"

"Sorry, sir, I thought situation demanded it."

"No song and dance, Blake, but you do that again and I will have you court-martialed without fail. Do you read me?"

Blake grunted his assent.

"Now listen up, Captain. I want you to drop along the south side of the field. Drop at combat speeds, there's an accurate sniper down there."

"Where's the enemy, Colonel?"

"As far as we can tell they're occupying parts of the terminal buildings."

Blake hesitated for a second. "Look, Colonel, in that case we should drop right onto the terminal building."

"Captain Blake, I don't need any heroics from you right now. There's no need to risk any men just yet. We'll deploy defensively around the field. If I need any heat applied, Yang can drop orbital fighters, or torpedo them from orbit even."

"Colonel, while the enemy are in such small numbers we should go in and get them. Before they can break out."

"I'm not risking men just yet. You'll drop to the south side of the field and form up in line."

"Colonel Chang, I'm having trouble hearing you," Blake said after a pregnant pause.

"Blake, stop that, don't you Dare!"

Something in her tone moved Blake to compromise. "We're dropping on the far side of the field,

Colonel, and then we'll form up and move on the terminal building."

"You drop on the south side and form up in line and you wait for my orders, you hear me, Captain Blake!"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, Chang out."

Major Yang from the orbiter was waiting.

"I have two fighters descending now, Colonel, ETA four minutes if you want."

"Hold off for now. I want an attack capability every five minutes from here on, can you do that?"

"Of course, Colonel, at combat strength of two fighters in each slot."

"Good, I'll be on the scene within the hour. We need to contain these things and if possible to capture them."

"Is that Directive 115, sir?"

"Yes, Major, it is. An attempt is to be made to capture them if the situation allows it."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then we incinerate them."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

FROM THE ROOF OF THE BLISTER THEY SLID DOWN, UNDETECTED, to the chopper-park platform. A group of people was filing aboard a nearby helicopter for the half-hour trip to the suburb of West Bream.

At the last moment they joined this group and pushed on board behind them.

It was a wide-body, with seats for eighteen people in the cabin. The hostess approached, a frown forming.

Rhem Kerwillig stepped forward and spoke quietly in her ear. "Listen, these two behind me have weapons and they will kill you at once if you do not let them stay aboard."

Her eyes flashed wide in fear. She'd been afraid this might happen today, as a result of the massive panic. Some crazies with guns would try and hijack the chopper.

She leaned back mentally to her survival training. She was supposed to pretend to cooperate. Then press the emergency button that would activate the chopper's defenses against gunmen. After that she'd have two seconds to hit the floor and the microwaves would fry the terrorists' heads. After which she'd be doing her best not to look at the bodies.

That's what they told them to do in training school and that's what she would do.

But the intruders had other ideas. Rhem gestured to her to come into the rear of the jet, where the hostess station made a hidden space.

Once she was there the Reena thing stepped close and grabbed her around the arms and held her immobile.

"Don't make a sound, otherwise I know they'll kill you," Rhem begged.

The chopper was already lifting away; the passengers were either intent on the windows or the TV screens in front of them. The Reena thing held her so hard it was impossible to touch any of the emergency buttons.

The tower park of Cowdray-Kara City faded behind them. Hostess Nanci felt totally helpless. Something had gone wrong here; this was not the way it was supposed to be.

The Battlemaster, meanwhile, had completed a scan of the control section of the helicopter. The hostess was the nominal pilot, a skill now reduced to simply typing in the chopper's destination on a small keypad. The controls were lodged in her station.

"Make change of destination," it said to her.

The hostess stared back at the Battlemaster. The woman holding her had the strength of several men; it was impossible to move, even to rock the woman back on her feet.

"Listen," Rhem Kerwillig whispered, "these people will kill you, I've seen them kill others."

"Where the hell are they from?" she hissed, close to complete panic.

"I don't know," Rhem said. "Just do what they say. Look, I'm trying to keep you alive, y'unnerstand?"

She fought down her urge to scream. She understood. In the training they had always told them that if for some reason one couldn't hit the emergency buttons one was to go along with the terrorists. One was to try not to excite them.

She was allowed to move to the little keypad computer station. She gave her thumbprint to the pad and then typed in the code to enter a new destination.

"All right, where do they want to go?"

She and Rhem were looking at the Battlemaster. It gulped, and the eyes seemed to pop in and out of the head.

"Get close to spaceport. Land close as possible," it rasped.

Hostess Nanci shivered; that voice just didn't sound human. Were these things people or some kind of cyborg device?

She compressed her lips. "Well, the closest we ever go to the spaceport is Bream Central. We set down there on a public

"How far is that from the spaceport?" Rhem said quickly.

"I don't know, but I can look for you. Here's a map."

If they were cyborgs, then the microwave defense beams would have little effect. They would kill her right then and there. Hostess Nanci refrained from hitting the emergency button and diving to the floor.

The Battlemaster memorized the map. From the pad at Bream Central to the Air&Space boundary was five kilometers. The spaceport part of the complex was situated at the focal point of the lines of huge booster cradles that fanned out to the south and west. From the closest part of the boundary fence to the spaceport buildings was a distance of four kilometers.

Ringed this side of the spaceport was a six-lane highway, doubtless choked with traffic trying to reach the terminal. Past the highway was the spaceport fence.

Quickly the Battlemaster contrasted this information with what it had previously memorized from its survey of the human databases.

Twenty minutes later they put down at the pad in Bream Central. The Battlemaster had decided not to slay the passengers. It waited, holding the hostess tight, in the darkened hostess station until the passengers had left.

The passengers were now milling about the pad, baffled at finding themselves in Bream Central instead of West Bream.

The Battlemaster snapped Hostess Nanci's neck and laid her body down gently on the floor of the station.

Then they exited and moved past the passengers and into the pad's lobby.

An airline official was bustling toward them. "What's happening?" the official said.

"We don't know," said Rhem. The others pushed on, moving quickly through the lobby and out the door. The official stared after them for a moment before he was engulfed by a circle of passengers who wanted to know why they weren't in West Bream.

Outside they found themselves in an open space, surrounded by parking structures. A four-lane road ran straight as a die toward the spaceport, where an elevated highway could be seen, forming a great snake of concrete surmounted by glittering traffic glued fast in gridlock. Beyond this rose the rust-red booster cradles of the shuttle field.

The four-lane road was lined with large one-story buildings, warehouses, and manufactories. The Battlemaster, by now familiar with many aspects of the human culture, surmised at once that this was a nonresidential district.

It was important to move on from here at the best possible speed, however. There were some taxis waiting near the chopper pad. Rhem explained their function; the Battlemaster recalled reading of them in its survey of transportation modes in the human culture.

Rhem signaled to the nearest and they rode swiftly down toward the spaceport.

The road ran out in a bank of dirt. A few grimy shacks were dug into this dirt. Above it rested the concrete feet of the highway's pylons. Beneath the highway were centuries of trash. A few scraggly weed trees struggled to survive in the junk. More shacks, with drug-addicted wretches lurking within, were set upon trails hacked through the debris and vegetation. Nets were set up above to prevent tossed bottles and other items from hitting the shacks below.

The driver wanted credit. Rhem gave him the Benuil card, but it was returned. The credit line had been used up; it was worthless. Rhem told the driver that he had no other source of credit and that it would be best for the driver to just go away.

The driver, a heavysset fellow with an orange curly beard, thrust himself from his vehicle, his hand reaching for his side arm. What had once been Reena was already beside him. Her fist speared the man in the throat.

He buckled. Her right foot connected to his ribs and he went down. In a second the Secondary Form had removed the side arm and held it ready to execute the man.

The Battlemaster was aware that many human eyes were on this scene. If they killed this human it would bring more attention to their trail.

It bade the Secondary Form refrain. It told Rhem to send the human on his way.

Rhem swallowed. Whatever it was that was inside Reena, it knew how to move a human body at astonishing speeds.

"Look," he managed; his throat was dry. "Get the fuck out of here while you still can, got that?"

The taxi driver was happy to escape with no more than a bruised throat and ribs. He drove away at high speed.

"Come." The Battlemaster beckoned them on through the tumbledown slum shacks and mounds of debris beneath the highway. The inhabitants drew back behind their doors and stilled their chatter as they passed.

The Battlemaster had reasoned from the beginning that it would be too difficult to infiltrate as passengers aboard a shuttle ship at this time of panic and social hysteria. Security everywhere would be heightened.

The booster-cradle field was protected by a smart fence, sunk two meters into the ground, with posts every two meters. The three meters aboveground was topped by sharp-wire.

However, there were storm drains set around the field. These were a meter wide and were protected by heavy steel grilles. They were a feature of the design of these fields and a weakness that the Battlemaster had noted. The Battlemaster knew that the fence was computer-controlled from a central node of authority. The steel grilles in the storm drains, however, were not so connected. They were simply passive devices.

Rhem Kerwillig was wilting badly by now. It had been hours since they had last eaten anything. He had been going for hours and hours with this endless tension and stress, surviving on the leash of these alien monstrosities that infested the bodies of Reena and Larshel.

He watched and was staggered as the two things took hold of the heavy steel grille over the storm drain.

They heaved at it. There was a long, tense moment, when nothing gave, and then the concrete around the grille began to crack and flake and suddenly gave way on one side and the grille came free.

The things quickly tore it loose.

Rhem wondered if any of the massed motorists, stuck solid in traffic fifty feet above them, had heard enough to become interested in what was going on in the dark cleft of the storm drain. He doubted it.

He also doubted that any human beings before had ever performed such a feat.

Then it was time to get on his hands and knees and crawl into the drain. He protested with a groan; he was exhausted, why didn't they just kill him and toss him aside? But they had not finished with Rhem Kerwillig; they shoved him down and goaded him into the storm drain.

Climbing the drain was just about worse than death. It was narrow and dark and terrifyingly claustrophobic, and whenever he slowed the things struck him from behind and forced him on. There were bugs in there, too, probably kachi. He felt them run over his hands and once or twice they crawled on his body and in his hair.

It seemed to take forever, but eventually he discerned a light ahead, and with bleeding, battered hands and knees he finally arrived in a pool of light, beneath another grating set in a well some five feet above.

The things reached up and took hold of the bars. They gave a mighty heave, and the grating gave way in one corner and sagged in.

The Larshel thing reached up and pulled the sagging corner down with a terrific squeal of tortured metal.

There was just room to wriggle through now. The Reena creature went first.

They shoved and pulled Rhem through. He found himself on the landing field, in the shadow of a booster blast cradle.

Great, he thought, now we get fried when the next shuttle boosts out of here.

Larshel's body heaved itself out and stood beside him. Reena was already dragging him across to the hatchline of the booster cradle.

They were right underneath, and the booster, fifty feet above their heads, was live and ready to go.

This fact was announced by a sudden shriek of exhaust as the left side Mv-nozzle was tested. The air became harsh. Reena scouted the hatchline.

"How we get in?" Larshel said to Rhem. Rhem sensed his death was imminent, either way. He'd seen Larshel's body kill that hostess; he knew there'd be no mercy for Rhem Kerwillig.

"The hatches are code-controlled. Unless you can pull them open by main strength, I don't know."

A good look at the locking bars that ran from top to bottom on each of the hatches convinced them that there was no way in thus.

"We climb." The Larshel form indicated the exterior skin of the mitt-shaped frame of the booster cradle.

Rhem gulped. "Look, I don't have much of a head for heights," he muttered.

It grabbed him and pushed him up to the top of the nearest hatch. The Reena thing was already there. There were hand-holds, and a ledge about waist high. And above that there was an instrument cluster.

Rhem climbed, pushed along from below.

With another shriek of exhaust the shuttle tested the right dorsal nay-nozzle. More exhaust gas fouled the air. Rhem coughed, until Larshel pushed him on, higher.

He was surprised at how quickly he went. He was also surprised to find himself still functioning. He'd thought he was going to collapse after that horrible climb through the tunnel.

But he'd found a second wind from somewhere.

He was going to need to lie down and sleep for a very long time soon, very soon.

Another attitude jet whooshed momentarily.

If he didn't get fried first, of course.

From this point on it became easier, since the trunk of the cradle joined the spreading "fingers" that held the shuttle in position. Between the fingers were walls of corrugated stretch-cover that were easy to climb. Then they were directly beneath the shuttle.

The Reena form was hurriedly searching the shuttle skin, looking for an access port of any kind.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

LONG BEFORE CHANG'S SHARK REACHED THE APPROACH PATH to Doisy-Dyan, it became apparent that there was something very strange going on.

The alien creatures were not keeping to the assumed plan. What was known of them had revealed a devastating military opponent that would attack relentlessly and aim for all the weak spots of a high-tech society.

But the attackers at the space base had suddenly faded away. A robot probe from Blake sent across the landing field drew no sniper fire. Blake reported this oddity at once to Chang, who urged a cautious continuation of the probe.

Then scouts went forward and reached the terminal buildings. They could see bodies scattered over the floors inside, but they found no sign of the creatures.

"They've gone," Blake reported.

"How?" Chang said simply. "Find out."

The Shark howled south, over the Ruinar Mountains and the bottomlands of old Pat-Do, Chang biting her nails with anxiety. The thought that these things might somehow escape her was too dreadful to contemplate. If everything was going to go to hell, taking her career with it, then she should at least get the catharsis of combat with these damn creatures.

Somehow it had all begun to seem like the perfect end to her career. A culmination of every stupid mistake she'd ever made. She'd go out in a blaze of gunfire, get a desk job, and live on her memories.

Now it seemed that even that was to be snatched away. Luisa had to wonder if she was fated to die of chronic disappointment.

They were on the approach path now and Chief Hafka was calling urgently.

Luisa was surprised. The Committee for the Preservation of Society was after her scalp, and Hafka was in deep with them.

"Colonel Chang, I just heard that there's been some mayhem at the space base."

"Correct. We're trying to pin down the enemy right now."

"Is this Directive 115 stuff?"

"Damn right it is, Chief. I hope you can get your force mobilized and ready to assist us."

"I was asleep, they just called me. I don't even know what's been going on."

Chang brought him up to date. Hafka gulped.

"Then this bullshit is for real?"

Chang smote her forehead. "How many times do I have to tell you, Chief? I wouldn't call a Directive 115 emergency unless I was damn sure I was right about it. So get used to it, this is for real. There are up to ten enemy creatures on the loose in the space base. We can't find them and they've already killed maybe fifty people, maybe more."

Hafka was still groping; his mouth opened and closed but no words emerged.

Blake beeped in. The creatures had left the base by driving a fire truck through the fence on the city side of the base. They had forced the truck through and over the cars and ATVs that were still jammed there and then had taken it across country through woods and gardens in the direction of the river.

The fire truck had been found abandoned, in a rice paddy by the riverbank.

Doisy-Dyan was in view on the Shark's forescreen. Chang told Blake to follow the creatures and close up on them as fast as possible.

She brought up a schematic of that section of Doisy-Dyan. This was a suburban area, scattered with

small hamlets of brown brick. Narrow lanes snaked through vegetable gardens and small fields. The highway into the city was fringed by hotels and large apartment towers, but behind these towers the settlement thinned out quickly.

To the west the river, to the south the city.

Where might they have gone? And why would they abandon the terminal, unless they recognized the danger that it, and they with it, would be burned or even nuked?

The Shark swooped down over the paddies. On infrared it scanned the canals, the small, hive-shaped rice granaries that clustered on the lanes, the groves of panumpey and oak. A few specks were turned up, but they proved to be animals, children, and an old man shuffling along with a pole and two fifty-pound sacks of rice over his shoulders.

Chang told the Shark to get down low; it dropped to treetop height and whirred down winding lanes.

A chemo-tracer picked up some blood in the air. The Shark shifted to follow the trace.

Weapon pods unsheathed as the Shark got ready to do its thing. Fifty-millimeter cannon, called "people-mushers" by Shark skyjocks, swiveled in their mounts.

Ahead the hamlets gave way to a sprawling slum.

There was something big happening in that slum; it was apparent to everyone aboard the Shark.

Small-arms fire echoed from the slum alleys. A ferocious battle was going on in the streets there. The locals here were relatively well armed and living on hair-trigger emotions in light of the worldwide panic over alien beings.

The Battlemaster had not taken into account the native Wexel passion for small arms. The arrival of the battleforms had produced a stupendous gun battle up and down the main street.

Three of the things had been shot down and literally shot to fragments right on the street. Thousands of rounds of ammunition poured down on them.

Maybe a hundred people had lost their lives, mostly from getting shot by other people on the other side of the street or even blocks away.

The surviving battleforms pressed on, in a stolen truck, heading into the city of Doisy-Dyan.

Behind them the gunbattles raged on, however.

Chang circled in the Shark.

The sight of the big ITAA gunship aroused several people down below to open fire at once. It was a reflex; everyone hated the ITAA anyway. Bullets whanged off the Shark's tough hide.

Hopester kept ducking, not having the same faith in the ability of ITAA bulletproofing as Chang, who managed to do no more than wince occasionally when something hit the windscreen.

Finally the Shark's automatic missile defense activated, and it destroyed an incoming guided missile.

Luisa told it to get down lower. It kept requesting the opportunity to return fire until Luisa told it in a loud voice to shut up and it did.

Blake and his team were using small VTOL jump platforms, and they arrived on the scene not that long after.

By then Chang had released a couple of floaters, which, dodging bullets on sparrow-sized wings, were zipping through the slums up ahead and sending back video data.

It became apparent that there were only humans involved in the shooting.

"They've gone," said Chang, taken by surprise.

"Leap-frogged it and hit the city, I bet."

"After them."

"What are they up to?" Blake said.

"Well, it doesn't seem to be the spaceport, so the directive briefing is a complete screwup."

"What's next, Colonel?"

"Maybe their plans didn't work out. Now move out."

Blake barked orders to Cormondwyke and the rest. With the whoosh-crack of the jumpers filling the air with sound, they took off, heading low and fast around the neighborhoods involved in the gunfighting, which was now dying down as people came out of that first screaming fit of fight-or-flight shooting.

Miraculously no one shot at the troopers on the VTOL jumpers.

The Shark was first on the scene, of course, and this time there was much less firing as the Shark roared by overhead.

The streets below were normal, except for the hundreds of anxious upturned faces as people gazed up at the terrifying mass of the Shark patrolling past on thunderous rotors.

"I'm here and I'm not seeing anything but shoppers," Chang told Blake. "Fan out behind me, check areas to the side. Maybe they're trying to regroup before returning on the spaceport."

"Colonel, maybe we should just abandon the briefing."

"Captain Blake, better minds than ours have worked on this stuff, and they show that the spaceport has to be the number-one target for this enemy. Nothing else will do. Remember Saskatch."

"I don't know, Colonel, I think they're up to something."

"Get a move on, Captain; let's find the damn things, shall we, before they kill too many more people."

Chang cut out. She scanned the data the Shark was picking up. Nothing out of the normal struck her

eye.

Then the Shark sensors picked up audio on gunfire ahead. "Downtown," Jean Povet said. "There's fighting in the Medina."

Once more the Shark lifted and swooped ahead of Blake and the troopers on the jumpers.

There, amid the towers along the Medina, rose smoke. Glass was shattering off a facade and falling into the street from machine-gun fire.

The Shark had identified several targets. It displayed them on the screen.

In recesses, in doorways, beneath cars, behind a wall of furniture in a smashed storefront, crouched things that were not human. They exchanged gunfire with several small groups of Regulators who were ensconced in buildings with windows along the street.

A few bodies were scattered beneath the buildings. A fire was going in another one.

The computer images were windowed onscreen for Chang.

Darel Hopper came forward and sat beside her.

"There we are, Mr. Hopper, that's Directive 115 as we live and breathe."

The creatures bore a weird caricature of a human face, compressed and narrowed and rendered almost canine. They shifted position with a rapidity beyond the human. Fluttering from their foreheads were growths that looked like flowers.

Hopper licked his lips. "What can we do?"

Chang shrugged. "Kill them." She slapped the Shark's instrument panel.

"Permission to engage the enemy?"

"Given," she said.

The Shark unloaded.

A hail of fifty-millimeter shells swept the aliens away. Nine millimeter machine guns pecked over what remained.

Glass, dust, fragments of flesh and metal showered into the street from each enemy hiding place.

The Shark probed through the murk with infrared and lasers. Anything soft and moving it shot and shot many times.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

IT WAS OVER. THE SHARK SET DOWN WITH ITS USUAL BONE shaking thud in the middle of a small patch of grass known as the Parc Medina, and everyone clambered out.

Chang arranged for the Shark to refuel at DD ITAA base and then told it to return to the little Parc.

Chang found Darel Hopester and his camerawoman, Sig Lei, dancing along beside her. Hopester was taking this Live right across WEXnet 7 and then to all the other nets, planetwide. His voice was in his public mode, warm, reassuring yet newsy.

"Shattered glass is ankle-deep in some parts of the street here. I repeat, this is the Medina, the fashion hub of Doisy-Dyan, struck today by a murderous conflict with what are supposed to be alien lifeforms."

Hopester was pushing up beside her. "So, Colonel, is this it? Is the state of emergency over?"

Damn you, Hopester, how should I know?

She smiled; it was weirdly frightening to actually be on live TV with an audience of millions.

"We don't know yet, for sure. But the fighting here in Doisy-Dyan seems to be over."

There were troopers in the bulky armored suits of the orbital marine corps. They towered like giants on their exoskeletons. She recognized Cormondwyke.

Then Blake bounced in, with a crash and a hiss from his suit and skeleton.

"Colonel, we've checked pretty much the whole street here, and there doesn't seem to be any more of them."

"Thank you, Captain Blake."

"Cormondwyke's got something for us to take a look at now, you want to see it?"

"Of course."

She looked back; Hopester was right there.

"Uh, maybe you'd better get the viewers ready, Mr. Hopester. This may be pretty horrible."

Hopester just fed it all into the camera, warning the squeamish to turn their sets off right there.

Chang joined Blake down the street.

Shattered glass and wall ceramic was piled up. Parts of a car, fragmented by the Shark's big guns, were scattered through the shards.

Blake and Cormondwyke were examining a collection of pieces of one of the creatures. They had about two thirds of one roughly pieced together on a paisley sheet blown out of some luxury-hotel window. It was vaguely human, but elongated and too thin.

"Still can't find the legs; we think they may be buried somewhere down that way," Cormondwyke said quietly.

"What the hell is it?" she said, staring at the shattered face. The skull looked like it might even have

been human once, except that it had been compressed and elongated. A section of rib cage stood out sharply; the bones were dark gray, the flesh a pale pink.

"Far as we can tell it was a human being, a woman perhaps. But it's been transformed."

"By what?"

"This stuff." Using a rake, Comrondwyke pulled out some gray threads, then a darker thing the thickness of rope. He tugged hard and a length of this slipped out of the flesh in the dead thing's shoulder.

At intervals of an inch or so it was ringed with white tendrils. Membranes slid out with it, along with dark red blood.

"You can pull this stuff out of any piece of them," Blake said.

"That looks perfectly disgusting, gentlemen." Chang turned her head. Sig Lei caught the movement perfectly and then gave her a big wink. great TV!

"There's a brain like structure, too," said Blake. "Here."

He pushed over a pulpy, gray bag filled with a convoluted paste laced with blood vessels.

It had been shot completely away from the rest of the creature and had not been retracted.

Chang felt a shudder run down her spine.

"Directive 115 all right."

"You were right, Colonel," Blake said.

Hopester had Lei lens it all, but he kept his commentary very brief.

Comrondwyke turned to him and said in a loud voice, "Just think of having that in your body running things, telling you what to do, eh? A lot of gray slimy worms."

Hopester turned away.

Luisa was looking down the street; the incredible high tension of the past few days was starting to fade out of her. It was over and she'd made it! The things had attacked too soon, with inadequate strength. The planetary forces had been alerted and were ready. This would be no Saskatch-type horror.

"So Luisa." Hopester was talking. "Is this it, is it over?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Until we get reports of more activity I guess it is. But I'm not relaxing the directive; we have a lot of work yet to do."

"Your gunship got them all."

"Except for the three that were killed in Bo-Dui."

"Nine altogether."

"Yes, not that many really. But they've caused an awful lot of casualties as it is."

Chang looked back at the disgusting stuff that Cormondwyke was still puffing out of the body. It was slippery with a weird mucus, and a fishy smell.

Was this it? Was this all there was to it. . this collection of slimy worms...?

It didn't seem worth all the commotion to her. She wondered, half-disgusted, if the Shark on its own could have handled this whole thing.

The story seemed terribly pat.

Alien critter gets loose and wreaks havoc on distant farm. Then a small group of critters attacks space base far away and then abandons base after meeting some resistance and flees through heavily armed city until delayed enough for the Shark to catch up. At which point they were annihilated and that was that

Maybe they were all lucky to still be alive, but it seemed that the threat had been a whimper instead of a bang.

How had this wormy stuff managed to destroy a whole planet in that earlier era? What the hell really happened on Saskatch?

What were the people doing while this stuff took them over"?

No one would ever know, of course; there had been virtually no survivors.

Hopester was wrapping up a segment before the commercial break. Chang saw the light on Lei's minicam go blue.

"Good TV, Darel?"

He straightened up. "Great TV, Colonel. I want to thank you, on behalf of WEXnet 7, and everyone else on this planet, for what you've done."

"Well, thank you, Darel."

He was going to say something more but she held up a hand; Povel was beeping insistently in her ear.

"What is it, Jean?"

"Admiral Heidheim is on line for you, Colonel,"

"Thank you Jean. Hello, Admiral."

Hopester nodded; this was Luisa's area, it was time to butt out.

Heidheim sounded irritable. "What's going on, Chang? And where's Captain Cachester? We expected to pick him up hours ago."

"Well, sir, I'm not exactly sure I can give you an answer on either of those."

"What's that, Colonel? Are you telling me as planetary commander that you don't know what the hell is going on in your own command?"

Here we go again, thought Luisa. Back in the trenches of warfare with the Fleet.

"Well, Admiral, let me give you some answers. We had an assault on the ITAA space base here, as I'm sure you're aware."

"I am indeed and I want to see Cachester at once!"

"The assault group turned out to be small, and although they caused a lot of casualties they didn't try to hold the spaceport or even to steal a shuttle. They ran for it and wound up in downtown Doisy-Dyan, where they caused a lot of casualties and made a helluva mess but where we finally caught up with them and destroyed them."

"Destroyed them?"

"That's right, as of this moment we don't have any actives at all."

"They're all gone?"

Chang was savoring the moment. "I repeat, we have no actives."

Heldheim exploded. "This is supposed to be Directive 115.

And you're telling me it's all over?"

"Well, I don't know that but I strongly suspect as much."

"Great grieti We've got half the damn Sector Fleet on its way here, and all for nothing. All because some dirt colonel gets a case of frights in the night and starts hollering for Directive 115!"

Dirt colonel! Luisa sucked in a breath.

"It was a Directive 115 situation, sir. We have plenty of physical evidence."

"Well, you'd better have, Colonel, because I want to see it. I've been hearing things from Captain Cachester and Commodore Benx that are deeply disturbing, deeply disturbing. Do you hear me, Colonel?"

Chang felt her cheeks coloring.

"This has been a Directive 115 situation, sir, you will agree once you see this stuff. You've had the video by now?"

"We've some wormy looking stuff all right. Anyway, I want to continue this conversation in the privacy of my own office.

Get yourself to a shuttle, Colonel, and report to me in person aboard this ship as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir!" Chang hoped Tohoto and the others would be able to protect her.

"How soon can you be here?"

"How soon, Jean?" she whispered aside.

Povet asked the Strand, and whispered back, "Shuttle is ready at Doisy-Dyan field. Changeover at Orbiter Ten and second shuttle to Empress Wu. Total time elapsed will be three hours fifty-two minutes."

"I'll be there in less than four hours, Admiral."

"Good, now, where's Cachester? I want to see him and I want to see him soon."

"Well, Admiral, I'm afraid the last I spoke to Captain Cachester he was in a ground-attack vehicle just outside the space base. He broke contact then and we've heard nothing more."

Heldheim was obviously unhappy with this news. And in fact, he was severely conflicted.

On the one hand he was fairly astonished to find that there really had been some kind of animals or creatures involved. The video made that clear. On the other he was relieved that the Directive 115 emergency was over. And yet he would have liked to have seen some action, perhaps an orbital reduction of the planetary surface even. All this jumping around, mobilizing the Sector Fleet, complete disruption of normal operations. It needed something more.

Jean Povet was whispering to Chang again. "Colonel, I have Scopus Central on Deep Link."

"Admiral, I'm sorry but I've got Central Command on line."

Heldheim's face froze tight. Tohoto!

So his intelligence had been correct. This Chang was a plant from Central. They were after him, the bastards! They thought they could pull him down over this ridiculous penny-ante smuggling racket on Wexel. This was a chump change exercise that he allowed to reward worthy subordinate types, like Cachester.

"Colonel Chang here," Luisa said.

"Chang, this is Tohoto."

"Sector General, what can I do for you?"

"First you must accept our congratulations. We have seen breakdown of latest video transmission. There have been casualties but the menace has been contained. You did well."

"Thank you, Sector General."

"However, this is not entirely over."

"No, indeed not, sir, we still don't know the creatures' movements."

"Indeed, indeed. But we do have the witness, this Professor

Reese?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, I want her right away. Frigate Shaka will collect her from Empress Wu within six hours your time."

Jean Povet was whispering again. And the Sector General was still speaking.

"Colonel, I have Sergeant Lagedeen, he has some information I know you'll want to see."

"Excuse me, Sector General, one moment."

"What kind of info, Sergeant? I have the sector general on Deep Link."

"It concerns a credit card, one from that farm where we know there was an attack."

"The Benuil farm up in the Ruinarats."

"Right, there was an ATV missing from that farm which we have been unable to track. However, the South Kara police have just notified us that a check of the data banks shows that a credit card belonging to Jaad Benuil was used several times in South Kara state."

Chang pursed her lips. South Kara State was on the other side of the Ruinar Mountains from Doisy-Dyan. What might this mean?

"Jean, tell the Shark to get back here at once. Sector General, it appears we have a potential lead on more Directive 115 activity.,'

"What is it?" said Tohoto, plainly unused to being kept waiting on a Deep Link line for any reason.

Chang briefly explained and then asked for orders to countermand Heidheim's order that she present herself aboard Empress Wu.

Tohoto assented and passed them to Heidheim, who accepted with a stony face.

Chang ordered Blake and the rest of the assault squad to get aboard the Shark when it reappeared.

"Okay, Jean Povet, scramble on this. I want to see a schematic of the movements of that card."

"Right away, sir. Strand will have that for you momentarily."

With a tremendous thrum of rotors the Shark reappeared, and sank down onto the Parc. Chang hurried to board. Hopester was watching; he fell in behind, signaling to Lei to follow.

They slipped back on board the Shark right behind Cormondwyke and the strike team.

The Shark took off again and climbed away from the tower while Chang ascertained that there was enough fuel for another suborbital passage if that was needed.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

THERE WAS JUST ENOUGH SPACE, AND BARELY ENOUGH AIR IN the small cargo container, for Rhem and whatever it was that Reena and Larshel had become. The smell of Reena's burnt skin was horrible.

Reena had saved them by prying up one end of the shuttle's cargo hold door. The ship was already in boost mode; there was no going back, mainly because everything back there was getting extremely hot right then.

Rhem crawled inside. Larshel forced his way in and helped Reena in last. She'd been burned., there was the smell of roasted flesh in the air.

The shuttle was lifting off, the g-forces were rapidly increasing, the thunder of the engines filled the world.

Rhem felt his hair standing on end. The light in the cargo hold was dim, but it was enough to see that Reena was still moving around with virtually undiminished capacities, and yet her backside had been cooked to a crisp. Her clothing was mostly gone; the plastics had melted right onto her skin in places. How could she still be doing this? It was impossible; any human being would be lying down, screaming with pain.

Meanwhile, Larshel had broken into a cargo pod. Thousands of reels of tape-complex spilled out. A few reels popped and unwound. With a few brisk motions the Larshel thing dug the rest of the tapes out and pushed Rhem inside before following with the singed Reena.

Once inside the things managed to pull the cargo pod closed and sealed it airtight.

The g-forces crushed Rhem to the floor of the pod, but they didn't kill him. Soon the shuttle boosted clear of the atmosphere and entered low orbit. Rhem recovered a little, although breathing the fetid air was soon pretty disgusting.

They knew they'd reached the orbiter by the resumption of sounds, heavy thuds and clangs from all around them.

Aboard the orbiter the docking mechanisms opened the cargo bay, and they escaped into the cargo-access network.

In the light he saw that Reena's burnt skin had sloughed off. New pink skin had regrown beneath the burns. In a matter of minutes she was getting back to her naturally sensuous self, at least physically.

From the access network they broke into a maintenance well in the hab ventilation system. There they were able to rest temporarily. Rhem was asleep in a second or so.

He was shaken awake a little later. The Larshel creature had returned with frozen foodpax. Rhem wondered where it'd found them.

Still, nutrosteak, fries, and peas tasted great to Rhem no matter if it was frozen. He bit and chewed it as enthusiastically as the things, which swallowed it in large chunks. This gorging filled the little room with bizarre noises.

When they had eaten all the food, they rested. Rhem dropped instantly back to sleep.

He had no idea how long he slept, but all too soon he was shaken awake. The Reena thing was there. It had new clothes on, a set of maintenance overalls with spaceboots. She, or it, tugged impatiently on his arm. He followed her on a tortuous route through the innards of the orbiter.

Eventually they dropped into a small maintenance station, where a roof panel had been removed.

It was a narrow room with a multiscreen observer station at the end.

One crewman had been killed there. He had been a solidly built young man with reddish hair. Blood had gummed up on the floor. It had dried on a lot of the equipment in front of the crewman's station.

The other crewman was locked in a deadly embrace with the Larshel thing. Larshel was clutched close to the man, connected by a number of gray-white growths that sprouted from mouth and nose and the forearms. The crewman was surrounded in a mesh of similar growths, or tentacles, which writhed together slowly, like restive snakes.

As he watched the growths darkened and then sank into the meat of the doomed man.

The fellow's clothing had been stripped off his body none too gently and thrown aside. Larshel lay on top of him as if they were lovers. Then there was a whipping retraction; the snakelike tentacles pulled out of the man and vanished inside Larshel's body as he stood up.

Now the victim collapsed into a fetal ball and was placed to one side of the little room.

The Reena thing pointed to the screens. "What is happening? Find the information."

Rhem nudged the screen to television mode. Someone had been tuned to WEXnet 7, the premier newschannel, because up came their ongoing broadcast concerning the Directive 115 crisis.

Startling video of the dead things from Doisy-Dyan was being shown. The story of the Doisy-Dyan attack was the big news of the day. There was a lot of coverage.

Stunned, Rhem found himself catching up on the news. The disturbances in Doisy-Dyan had been the work of the creatures they had left back at the Penskava farmstead. These creatures were humans modified by wormlike alien lifeforms that could control and manipulate the human body, even change it, with complete ease.

Rhem stared at the Reena thing. That was it. They had taken over Reena and Larshel. That, that horror on the screen, that was what he was dealing with.

He found his mouth bad gone utterly dry.

This was the work of some terrible alien lifeform. They kept saying "Saskatch monster," and he thought of all the videos he'd seen involving monsters.

The Larshel thing returned with spacesuits; one still had someone in it, unconscious.

Rhem watched the Reena thing pull the man out of the suit and egg him. Tentacles grew out of Reena's

hands, mouth and nose. They invaded the man, who woke up and struggled briefly with hoarse croaks before his body was taken. Later he was placed next to the other, darkening in the corner.

Captain Cachester had managed a rather smooth return to the ranks of the ITAA military.

With Chang's sudden disappearance toward the north, the coast became clear and Cachester and Forsht drove the Wasp back into town and right up to the first shuttle that was being readied for takeoff from Doisy-Dyan spaceport.

Only when he was off the ground did he call Commodore Benx and tell him that he, Cachester, was obeying Heidheim's order and reporting in person to the Empress

Benx had merely snarled dismissively and turned back to the turmoil at CK Air&Space.

Then, aboard the orbiter, he had bumped somebody for the shuttle up the well to the Empress Wu.

Sitting there, feeling safe at last, he noticed that the woman sitting across the aisle was familiar. It annoyed him that he could not immediately identify her. She was blond, in mid-life, but he thought younger rather than older and a little heavy, a couple of kilos overweight perhaps.

Then it came to him; she was the one on the news video.

"You're Professor Reese, aren't you?" he said, leaning across toward her.

She had been sunk in gloomy introspection and was taken quite by surprise by this.

"Yes, how did you know?"

"They've got you spread all over the news; you're the one who dug the monster up."

"Actually, I didn't."

He snorted. "Come on, you're the one they've got. They're going to pin all this on you, that's the ITAA way."

He smiled at her, enjoying himself for the first time in days.

"The name is Cachester, by the way, Captain Cachester, commander of the Doisy-Dyan Space Center."

Her brow furrowed at that.

"I thought Colonel Chang was the commanding officer." He hissed and pulled back into his own seat and made a dismissive gesture.

"Chang is just the dirtside CO, the 624 OSF. Wexel is a Fleet Command posting; the planetary commander is normally Commodore Benx, to whom I report, myself. I'm normally second in command for the system."

Caroline was mused to a sullen amusement.

"So that's why they kept the shuttle waiting for you." He smiled faintly.

"You're in one hell of a lot of trouble, lady." "You bet I am."

"You're going to do time, ITAA time."

"You think I don't know that? Are you trying to gloat or something?"

He blinked.

"You're the one that's responsible, aren't you? Everything I've seen says you dug this thing up and kept it secret."

"No, I wasn't the one who dug it up. You don't understand, nobody understands."

He chuckled mirthlessly. "I'm afraid you're simply a traitor to your race. I don't know exactly what it is you've done, but those things killed a helluva lot of people. They are really going to make an example out of you."

With which cheering observation he slid back completely into his own seat and left her alone.

Chang's Shark zigzagged northward across South Kara State like some colossal metal dragonfly, as she tracked the now uncovered trail of the unknown creatures.

The news that "creatures" were about in South Kara stirred panic to new heights and brought in dozens of "creature sightings.

That there was reason to be afraid was revealed at the Penskava farmstead, high in the hills above Basking Springs. There they'd found the corpses of a family, men, women, and children, slaughtered for their aircraft.

Those aircraft had been traced to a swamp near Doisy-Dyan, where they'd been abandoned.

Then there was the credit card. A peculiar trail indeed; first it surfaced in Basking Springs, which was a spa town in southernmost Kara State. It had bought food and fuel for someone. It was an "open card," tagged to the vehicle and not to a person. No thumbprint was required to charge with it.

They had eaten a lot of food at one sitting. Then they had driven to CK City.

There the card had been used at Cowdray University, in the library for the required ID check.

Because Cowdray University operated under its own policing authority, the usage had not surfaced on the CKCPD computers. Cowdray University was another of the so-called no "co-opos" currently in litigation with the ITAA.

In Basking Springs there was little to learn. No one remembered anything at all about the passengers of the Benuil ATV.

The Shark lifted away and headed north.

Chang had already arrested the top management of Epoxo Banco. They were facing charges under

Directive 115, concerning their withholding of information relating to that credit card. All credit-card companies had been told to report anything under the name of Jaad Benuil, but Epoxo Banco was a "no coopo" corporation, currently in the toils of several lawsuits in ITAA Civil Court. They had decided to ignore the Directive 115 call they'd received.

Captain Blake at the Penskava farm gave Chang what details he and a team of investigators had gleaned from the remains. It seemed that everyone at the farm was accounted for: their bodies were all there, everyone had been killed. Nothing much had been damaged or even disturbed, except the gun cabinet.

Then Blake had lifted for orbit with his squad. Another squad was already dropping to replace them in Patash-Do.

Meanwhile they still had no idea where the people had been taken from to provide the raw material for those alien fighters that had run amok in Doisy-Dyan. It was known that that was the preferred mechanism for the creature's parasitism. There had been nine creatures killed. Some were so small and delicate in appearance that it had to be surmised that they had formerly been children.

Clearly the alien thing at the Karvur farm had been alone, although from interviews with the peasants there it was known that it had sought to convert at least one man before it was discovered and drove away.

It had then visited the Benuils' farm and taken the body of Beetris Benuil. She, at least, had not been found. It had driven their ATV across the mountains and down to the Penskava farm in the uplands above Basking Springs. There it had several companions, to tell by the tracks in the fields.

Then in Basking Springs it had used the credit card to buy fuel and food.

And then it had gone to the library, one thousand miles away. Chang's forehead furrowed. Information, it was after information.

Just then Povet cut in. "Colonel, that card usage in the library?"

"Yes?"

"It was for something called the Arntage Series, a complicated set of galactic star projections. Very detailed."

"Arntage? Now that presses a button somewhere. Strand, who was Arntage?"

"Rieben Arntage, the leading survivor of Saskatch. He was a wealthy star merchant. He financed for many years an intense search for the homestar of the alien lifeform."

"By all the-the damn thing is looking for the homeworld."

"Earth?"

"No, Jean, its homeworld."

"Oh, shit, sorry, sir. What if it finds it? Are there more of these things somewhere?"

"I hope not, I sincerely hope not."

Then Luisa was rooted to the spot by another idea.

"Obviously the alien is able to pass itself off as human somehow. It must be able to control someone without changing them outwardly that much."

"Oh, no-they can infiltrate us?"

"Call Tohoto, we have to tell Scopus Central."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

ADMIRAL HELDHEIM WAS A TALL, MASSIVELY BUILT MAN, A Stenhender from the Blue Planet. His face was normally pink, but in anger it turned red.

It was more red than pink when Captain Cachester finally walked into his stateroom aboard the Empress Wu. In fact, it was threatening to get very red indeed.

"Well, well, at last, Captain. I'm glad to see you finally." Cachester could hear the not-so-distant thunder in the admiral's voice.

"Believe me, Admiral, I came as soon as we could roll out a shuttle. Things are a complete mess down there."

There was a silence.

"Yes, so they seem to be. Well, there are questions to which I want answers, and they better be good answers."

"Well, of course, sir, anything I can help you with."

Heidheim's response was instant. "The account audit, what became of that?"

Even Stefan Cachester's head whined at that. After all they've been through in the past day or so, the admiral's first question was about the damn audit?

"Well, it's destroyed, for the present. They might restart it another day."

if they don't get Luisa Chang out of there, he thought, they probably would restart it.

Heldheim was smiling. "Your bomb idea, then, you pulled that off?"

Cachester nodded. Was this being taped? Was he being set up? Freezing hell but that showed you how you could not trust anybody in the ITAA. He thought he'd avoided ITAA court, too. It had been looking like he was going to make a clean getaway.

"Don't worry, you're not on video," Heidheim said, divining his subordinate's suspicions. "Quite natural to worry, I understand perfectly. We've all been worried about this thing. You know I always said this Wexel funding problem was going to hurt the Fleet, but they wouldn't listen to me. So we had to go by a

roundabout way to achieve the ITAA's ends, right?"

Cachester felt a degree of relief. Certainly Heidheim was implicating himself, if this was being taped.

"Only way to keep Wexel even semiquiet is to buy off the chieftains. Otherwise they're all on the warpath. Then there's the crime people."

Heidheim had his crafty, conspiratorial smile on now. The pink was back, the veins were subsiding on his forehead.

"And of course we have to recycle a little of that money for the boys who make things run, don't we?"

Again Cachester nodded, ever so slightly. Heldheim was almost singing now.

"But we can't let the needs of the good boys who make everything run become too large. We can't have them breaking the bank account for those little luxuries in life. That causes problems the ITAA can't solve easily."

"I understand, of course, sir. However, I think the whole matter is moot if Colonel Chang is going to be removed from the post after the Directive 115 thing."

"She's gone, I won't let them put her back there."

"Then the audit's a dead issue, and my people will insure that even the remains from the bombing will be further degraded to the point where none of it is useful. They'll have to start all over again. I mean there'll be no accounts for the last five years."

"Start all over again, heh heh, I like that. Good work, Cachester, have to keep the dirtside guessing. Damn them all! They don't have any idea how much it takes to keep all this going. The ITAA is the Fleet and they should damn well recognize that fact."

"Absolutely, sir. Couldn't agree more."

"This Chang was a ballbuster, I hear."

"Castrating bitch, sir, to be absolutely frank. A manhater if ever I saw one."

"Well, she says this thing is just about wrapped up. From what I've seen she had enough reason to call down the directive, but only just."

"I still find it hard to believe. I keep wondering if it was some bizarre hoax."

"A hoax? Are you crazy, there's something like five thousand dead as a result of this, maybe ten times that number in overall casualties. Cluster Center is in an uproar and I do believe we've even Deep Linked to Over-Cluster, If this is a hoax, then some hoaxers are going to pay with the rest of their lives."

"It's just so strange. I came up the well with the suspected perpetrator, this Professor Reese."

"Oh, yes? Interesting file her interrogation provided. Claims the thing was found by somebody called Karvur, a count in some feudalistic aristocracy down there."

"Wexel is like that, Admiral. It's a pretty feudal place."

"Anyway, it had been buried for a long time, eighty million years at least, perhaps much more."

Cachester wasn't interested much in old stuff.

"What'll happen to her?"

"The Reese woman? Oh, I would think she'll get sixty years, maybe get out in forty-five for good behavior."

"She'll be an old woman by then, no Extended Medical."

"You said it, no second and third centuries for her. Extreme poverty, too, in old age, probably dumped on some big ITAA taxpaying planet; Leshur or Danunox, for instance."

A whispery voice saturated in the air behind Heldheim's right ear. "We have Captain Ton of the Shaka on line for you, Admiral."

"Thank you, McKay. Captain Ton, this is Heidheim."

"Captain Ton reporting, sir. We have orders from Scopus Central, Tohoto's thumbprint, to pick up the suspect, Caroline Reese."

"Of course, Captain, we've been expecting you. The prisoner will be waiting for your pinnacle."

"Pinnacle will be launched at once."

"Good, Heidheim out."

The admiral turned back to Cachester.

"Well, that's that, I expect she'll end up at Leshur. They're taking her to Central. She'll be tried at High Scopus."

Cachester shook his head as if to say what a shame it all had been.

"So it really was Directive 115. After all this time."

"The real thing. Have you seen the video from Doisy-Dyan?"

"On the shuttle out that's all we watched. Disgusting stuff."

"Indeed. However, it does seem to have eased a rather tight situation for us with this Colonel Chang."

They chuckled together. Cachester was wondering whether to take early retirement. He had enough credit now to finance a very enjoyable life for himself. Some world that had extensive beaches and coral reefs. There was no need to run risks like this anymore.

And besides, there had been that unforgettable moment of true terror, when he had actually confronted one of the things.

"You know, I saw one. I was just a few feet away. This was at the spaceport. I had been in the command tower trying to make sense out of the attack. You see, I was actually waiting in Departures for the next shuttle when the attack came. I headed up to the control tower and found total chaos there. I was going down to the ground floor again when I saw one."

Heldheim was curious. Cachester sounded like he was telling the truth.

"Saw one? What happened?"

"It missed me, it was chasing these other people and I don't think it even saw me. Just pure luck, I guess. When it was gone I ran the other way and got away."

"You didn't have your side arm with you then?"

"No weapons, I was off duty."

"A lucky escape," Heldheim murmured. "Indeed, indeed." The fools at Central were in for a disappointment; they wouldn't be dragging Heldheim down this time, oh, no.

"Everything will be buried under this Directive 115 stuff, and you blew up the evidence anyway, excellent. I want you to take some leave; you'll have to take it on board the Wu, I'm afraid, but after a couple of weeks to rest up we'll talk again. We need to see what your next posting should be, eh?"

"Yes indeed, Admiral, that sounds perfect."

"Who knows, perhaps we'll be able to make whole new careers out of this Directive 115 stuff."

"New careers?"

"Speaking engagements, video stardom, it can all be ours."

Cachester's head was spinning when he got away at last.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

WHEN LUISA CHANG TOLD TOHOTO that SHE WAS AFRAID THE Directive 115 alien was able to infiltrate, the sector general's face became very grim.

"Too bad this had to happen," he said quietly.

She explained that it had used a fuel-company credit card as ID for library usage.

"What did it want in the library?" Tohoto said.

"It was looking for its homestar, at least that's the only conclusion I could come to. It ran through a big chunk of the Arntage Series of stellar-motion studies. They were put together by Rieben Arntage, who was one of the survivors of Saskatch."

"The homestar, eh. Too bad." Tohoto seemed to make some distant internal connection, pausing for a

second or two.

"Colonel, I want tightened security on all orbiters and all spacecraft in system your end. I will tell Heldheim myself. If anything else happens, report it to me at once. And, Colonel. . ."

"Yes, Sector General?"

"You have done a great job, Chang. I will commend you in the after-study. Great job." Tohoto cut out.

It sounded as if he was saying good-bye.

Suddenly a great fear filled her heart.

Had she just doomed the entire Wexel system, herself included? They could do it, oh so easily. If it was decided at OverCluster that the Wexel situation under Directive 115 had become too serious, because the Vang parasitic lifeform had infiltrated ITAA forces, then they would use the Starhammer and that would be that—a fiery death for the entire system.

But to Over-Cluster this would be better than the chance that the Vang Oormlikoowl could infiltrate human society and get loose in the starfields.

Luisa Chang caught her reflection in the mirror of the bathroom. She looked old, and very, very tired.

We may all have only a few hours to live, maybe less.

Luisa decided to waste no time. She sat down next to Darel Hopester and leaned over and whispered in his ear. "When we get to Air&Space, which will be very soon, I want to go immediately to a motel room and make love. How about you?"

He looked at her, stunned momentarily. She was military, and tough, but not this brutal.

"I think we all have only an hour or two left. The whole damn system is going to be wiped after that. I don't want to die alone."

Hopester's eyes widened. "How?"

"Starhammer," she whispered. "The thing seems to have infiltrated."

The blood drained out of his face.

"Infiltrated!"

"Look, none of this can go on TV. They're shutting down the orbiters and everything, right now, but it may be too late.

The decision will go to Over-Cluster. They have to balance one system, one planet, against the possible damage if that thing managed to get a Baada-drive ship."

"Starhammer?" He winced.

"The only sure way, before it's too late. It's part of Directive 115, the deep black part. I've seen the

whole thing, although I don't have clearance for all of it, but anyway it's there. When I told Tohoto just now he let me know that it could happen."

"My family?"

"What good will it do to tell them? As it is it'll come straight out of nowhere. The flash and then the end in a matter of a few seconds."

"Why did you tell me?"

"Because you owe me, because I want to have sex once more before I die, and because I want to have sex with you."

"Luisa-" he began.

"Don't start, just say yes."

He hesitated for a long moment as he considered it. Kathi and the kids would be scattered over east CKC. Once he told them, they would agonize, they would ask many questions that could not be answered. They would die together but anticipating it for an unknown number of hours.

Or he could forgo that last meeting and they would die with less suffering beforehand.

"What if you're wrong?" he said. "What if they don't do it?"

"Then you'll have broken the rules for once, but you can tell yourself it was in the line of duty. And you won't ever have to see me again, either, which is probably the case either way, since I think that I'm due to get lifted to Scopus Central now, if we all survive past the next few hours."

Suddenly Hopester gave her a nod. "You've got it all worked out, then."

"I have."

"I think you're right; I can't even reach them all in less than an hour. If they're going to destroy Wexel then there's no point terrifying them for their last minutes."

The Shark swooped in to Air&Space and Chang went off duty. Only Povet and Sergeant Lagedeen had her beeper number. Povet, too, was going off duty, so Lagedeen, down in Doisy-Dyan, was "minding the baby" for the next few hours.

At the Hotel Splendide Chang made love with a fury that was just about frightening to Darel Hopester. Somehow he forgot that death was hanging over all of them and lost himself in the passion of the moment.

Once or twice he thought of Kathi, and afterward he felt an immense pang of sorrow that he might never see her again, or the kids.

Torn apart forever, incinerated just miles away from each other. At that moment he wished that Kathi's soft body lay next to him instead of the hard, lean body of Colonel Luisa Chang.

But then the feeling subsided and he lay there, awake but dazed, waiting for the imagined death. Vaguely he wondered if he shouldn't go out and get a bottle of vodka; getting drunk might be a big help

in this situation.

Out of the dark came an urgent beep from Chang's commo. With a curse she arose and slipped it to her ear.

"All right, what's so important that you have to call me now?" It was Lagedeen; he was sympathetic.

"I bet you're getting tired of this, eh, sir? Hate to interrupt you but, well, there's been an outbreak of Directive 115 on Orbiter Three."

"On the orbiter? Oh, shit, it's not over."

Hopester was staring at her. "It's not over?" he mouthed.

She looked at him. She could only tell him if she took him with her. She made a decision. Maybe it would save his life.

"You're going to orbit," she said.

He smiled. "I beg to disagree. I'm not a slave, you know. I can ask the authorities to rescue me from bondage at any time."

"No joke, Darel, there's more of them, they're on Orbiter Three. We're in combat right now and you will get there in time to shoot the first video if you come with me."

Hopester was shaking his head, pale suddenly.

"There's more? We didn't get them all?"

"No, we didn't."

"And they're fighting aboard the orbiter?"

"Correct. Come on, Darel, let's go."

"What about the Starhammer?"

"I don't know, this won't help us with Over-Cluster Command. But we have to carry on, don't have a choice."

She was dressing, fast. He hesitated a moment longer and then he put on his clothes.

The Shark appeared above the Hotel Splendide and lifted them off on hookline. A few minutes later they were lifting away in a shuttle from Air&Space.

Commodore Benx made no objections this time to the disruption in his schedule.

Benx had had a change of heart concerning all this, ever since he'd seen that video from Doisy-Dyan.

THE COCOONS HAD BEEN CAREFULLY HIDDEN IN MAINTENANCE lockers. They had ripened, undisturbed.

The hatching was synchronized and soon two battleforms virtually identical, were standing there together in the dark.

Gently, carefully they reached out to touch each other. Polyps expanded and burst and an odd succession of odors passed between the two, identifying, communicating.

They were preprogrammed to destroy, to kill any living thing they encountered. Beyond that they were the simplest Military Form, inexperienced but equipped with all the complex artificial instincts of all Imperial Military Form.

Outside the maintenance well they were drawn to the sounds of people moving around in a corridor above. They struck up into the ceiling, but there was a ceram bulkhead that withstood them.

Quickly they hunted along the maintenance catwalk for an entrance to the larger corridor above.

Many, many enemy creatures lurked there. All such creatures were to be destroyed.

Soon they found what they were looking for, and with it a woman in the brown oversuit of the maintenance squad. She was checking for the source of a loud sound reported in this maintenance section.

She'd opened a hatch from a storeroom into the maintenance space.

The things hurried toward her, skeletal, glistening, horrors from some nightmare of the pit.

She had turned back to close the hatch behind her and never saw them.

The things leapt on her and killed her with stabbing motions from their horn-covered hands. Then they passed through the open hatch into the orbiter hab-interior.

ITAA orbiters of this class were equipped with spinning toroidal habzones with three full-pressure decks and low-pressure maintenance decks above and below. The docking structures were centered on the hub in the low-gravity section.

The battleforms were now active on C deck. They moved through the space killing everyone they met. No one was armed, and without guns human beings were virtually helpless against these things. They stabbed people, they beheaded them, and they gutted the occasional man who fought back hard enough to stop them in their first effort to kill him.

The orbiter reacted with a convulsion of panic. Alarms wailed; men and women spilled out of their quarters. Nobody knew what was happening and most suspected a hab-break of some kind at first, but the unwelcome news from C deck soon penetrated, and everyone that could tried to reach A deck and the access to the docking bays.

A squad of six men from the 624 OSF was called together by the orbiter commander, Captain Vorontzov. They were sent down to C deck in a priority elevator, wearing full battle armor with sixty-shot magazines loaded with habsafe nonpenetration rounds, mostly plastifrags.

Unfortunately they didn't kill the things when they first made contact. The troopers were nervous; they fired too soon. A couple of glancing hits were achieved but the things took immediate evasive action, knowing full well the danger of ballistic weapons. They vanished into an office section, broke through into a fire stairwell, and climbed to B deck.

Somewhere on that climb they ran into Officer Suderian, whom they killed and from whom they obtained one of the automatic submachine guns with sixty rounds of ammunition.

They burst onto B deck and slaughtered a small crowd of people, mostly panicked dirtsideers, who were jammed up around the elevators.

Finally the men from Suderian's squad caught up with them and a gunfight broke out. The things retreated using their ammunition sparingly, with efficient Imperial technique on display.

They retreated around the hab. Another squad was sent down to take them from the rear.

Somehow they sensed it and evaded by breaking through into the maintenance section again and reaching A deck, where thousands of terrified people were jammed up. There was nowhere else to go, since the shuttles could only take off a few hundred a minute, and there were nowhere near enough shuttles in the whole system to take off this overload of panicked people.

Captain Blake and his team had reached Orbiter Three by this point, and they managed to get to the break-in point within a few minutes, but by then dozens more were dead and a panicky mob was running down the corridors while the things hacked at it from the rear, pulling people down and stabbing them through the chest.

Blake and Cormondwyke setup a curtain of fire. The screaming mob flung itself flat on the deck. The things retreated, holding each corner as long as possible unless heavy fragmentation grenades were used to push them back.

Other squads were sent to take positions behind them.

Eventually they were pinned down in Crazy Lou's, a restaurant complex featuring four distinctive "eatery modules"- upscale-Franco, Mexamerican, Hot-Wok, and sushi-arranged around a circle. There was one main entrance, and the outer wall was of pseudo stucco and strong enough to deflect the plastif frags.

At this point it was a standoff. Blake fired antipersonnel gas into the restaurants, but the things ignored it.

Blake completed a full security cordon surrounding the restraplex and sat back and waited. He knew it would be a ticklish job to winkle these critters out.

Fortunately for him the decision was shifted upstairs.

Chang's shuttle docked with Orbiter Three, and she took over command of the situation from Blake. Heidheim was plugged in by video and was none too happy with the situation.

His constant presence in her ear was making Luisa Chang feel pretty savage. She'd been off duty, waiting for the end in the arms of a handsome man, and now this!

This was a Fleet problem now anyway. The dirtsideers had taken care of the aliens on their side; the Fleet should take care of the topside problem.

That thought was even more disturbing. Heidheim might destroy the orbiter and take the Empress WU outsystem. Especially if he realized that Tohoto and Scopus Central were poised to use the Starhammer on the entire system.

Empress Wu could escape the holocaust as long as there was a few minutes' warning. Enough time to engage the Baada drives and complete time phase-shift, but Heldheim would probably prefer to initiate before things got dangerous. So he would look for the easiest way out of the situation.

She shook her head; time to concentrate on the immediate problem.

They came out of the elevator on B deck and clapped on respirators. The air was heavy with the stink of AP gas.

Blake and Cormondwyke were waiting for her. What video they had was from an armored "rat" that had scuttled inside Crazy Lou's restaurants. Tables and chairs and equipment had been torn free and stacked up in a mass in the central rotunda. A quick movement to the left at the limit of the camera's range. The rat swiveled. A bipedal form was upon it and then the rat stopped sending video as a chair came slashing down upon it.

"Phew, that was fast."

Blake nodded. "Damn things are pretty fearsome in this situation. No Shark."

"Well, Captain, that's where we come in, isn't it?"

"We can't get at them without taking casualties. Lots of casualties, I'm afraid."

"Gas has no effect?"

"None whatsoever as far as we can see."

"We'll have to get some men in there and take them out personally."

"Casualties."

"What do you suggest, Blake?"

"Hold them in there until they die or surrender."

There was no time for that, but she couldn't let Blake know. "What if there's another outbreak? We don't know how much of this we're facing. What if these two get out again?"

"How much?" he reacted as if stung.

"We don't know, Captain, we don't know what the fuck we're up against here. Because of some damned ITAA-haters in South Kara we don't know what to do or where they'll strike next."

"Shit, if we have to go in and get them we're going to take casualties. You should see the body of Officer Suderian. Looks like he was cut up with swords."

"Yeah, I know, their hands and fingers are like knives when they close them up."

Heldheim was badgering her.

"Chang, what are you going to do? I want some effective action taken immediately. I want that orbiter cleansed of this alien filth and I want it done now."

"Admiral, we're just debating how to go about doing it. It's going to cost lives, though."

"Colonel, how you do it! don't care, just hurry up. You know what I will have to do if you don't suppress this thing damn quickly. You also must be aware of what Scopus Central is thinking. I have a class-A warship and a crew of three hundred to think about in such a case."

Three hundred set against the billions who would die. She shrugged. Fleet officers were strange, and none were stranger than admirals.

"I understand, Admiral; we who are about to die salute you."

Chang cut out her end. Heidheim snorted and withdrew into silence at his own end.

"All right, Captain Blake, to horse. We've got to take them out now. Who do we have to take point?"

Blake looked at her with leveled eyes.

"Cormondwyke!" he snapped.

And a minute later Cormondwyke led the squad straight at the front door.

Their skeletons crashed in unison as they got moving.

They smashed through the doors. The thing with Suderian's gun opened up, but the plastif frags were no good against battle armor.

One of the creatures was visible in the Hot-Wok; it slid through a door into the kitchen area.

Cormondwyke jumped in pursuit.

In the kitchen the thing turned at bay. It shoved a refrigerator at Cormondwyke as he came through the door and pinned him back against the wall. Woks came crashing down on the floor, and then Gustin burst in and raked the thing with gunfire and knocked it away before it could crush Cormondwyke.

Cormondwyke emerged, with nothing worse than a bloody nose, from behind the fridge.

The thing had crawled under and behind the stove.

Jose came in behind Gustin. The two of them knelt down and fired plastif frags under the stove, which in the Hot-Wok was long and narrow, without ovens.

The thing crashed through garbage cans and a rubber flap door opened.

Gustin and Jose rose up and advanced, firing as they went.

The thing's body was lying on the floor, smashed beyond use by plastif frags. Sharp spines were rising under the skin, and with a sudden explosive effect the body was abandoned by another thing, with an off-white coloration, like braided worms or snakes. Jose and Gustin emptied their magazines into it, after which it moved no more.

The other one they found hidden in an oven in the Brasserie.

Cormondwyke pulled down the door and tossed in a grenade, and then closed the door again. The explosion shook the Brasserie, but the oven contained the frags and most of the smoke.

When they pulled down the door again the thing was utterly dead and the parasitic monster within it was dead as well.

Chang reported to Heidheim and told Povet to tell Tohoto that the orbiter problem had been neutralized.

Darel Hopester was there, filming everything.

"Is this it now? Did you kill all of it?"

Chang had a horrible thought.

"I hope so, Darel, excuse me." She turned aside and beeped for Heidheim.

"Yes, Colonel Chang, I saw it, your people did a good job clearing up that mess."

"Thank you, Admiral, but I'm concerned. Our enemy always uses a diversionary attack to cover his main move. I don't think this was the main move."

"What makes you think otherwise, Colonel?"

"There was no point to this attack. It's the same as the attack on Doisy-Dyan. They didn't hold the objective, they didn't achieve anything concrete, but they did divert our attention while they infiltrated in CK City."

"So what's next, Colonel?"

"Admiral, I think you should order an emergency shakedown of the Empress Wu."

Heidheim sniffed audibly; dirtsideers trying to tell him what to do with his own ship, the nerve, the sheer bloody nerve of it.

"Thank you for your observations, Colonel, but I think my ship is sufficiently secure."

"Can you be certain, Admiral?"

"Of course, of course. Chang, I think you can go off duty again. I expect there'll be new orders for you

from Scopus Central very shortly. Heidheim out."

Luisa wanted to scream. But she wouldn't. Instead she reached for a call to Tohoto. There was no time to waste if she was right.

And if she was it might already be too late.

"Jean, while I'm talking to Tohoto get Captain Ton of the Shaka on line if you can."

"Right away, Colonel."

CHAPTER FORTY

THE PLEASANT BUT FIRM-MANNERED YOUNG ORDERLY PASSED Caroline Reese the word that it was time to get ready. The Shaka was within shuttle range and she was to be moved at once.

Dully, Caroline got to her feet and followed the orderly out of the brig. Technically she was supposed to be handcuffed to the orderly, but under the circumstances he had decided not to bother. She wasn't about to try and make a break for it; there was nowhere to go to, anyway.

The ITAA-issue gray overalls felt cold and dry on her skin. She knew that this was all she'd be wearing for decades from now on. It was a saddening thought, but then, she'd had a lot of those just lately.

Suicide would be easier than this. But somehow she couldn't bring herself to seriously contemplate suicide just yet. There'd be plenty of time for that later.

The Shaka would take her across the vastness of deep space to Scopus Central, in the heart of the cluster. There she would face more interrogation, then a trial and then many decades of imprisonment.

She could imagine the grim life with its spartan meals, narrow cell, and harrowing boredom. ITAA prison was designed to be primarily punitive, not rehabilitative. ITAA crimes were not the sort committed by the troubled or the poor.

It was incredible to her that all this trouble had flowed from a single bad decision. A thing so slight that it made her want to rage against the fates. Why, she wanted to shriek, why did she meet that damned Count Karvur? Why had she ever listened for a moment to his mad dreams?

They rode a small security elevator to deck five. There they could transfer to a larger elevator to the shuttle dock.

They waited. Elevators were coming up, it wouldn't be long. A red light began flashing on the wall. A red chevron-shaped light that was set three meters up. There were others. Suddenly, with shocking loudness, an alarm blared.

"What's happening?" she said, a terrible dread suddenly alive in her.

The orderly didn't know.

"Condition red!" a loudspeaker shouted. "Condition red!"

People were scrambling. There was gunfire, loud, shattering, from a hallway off the elevator bank. People were running in the opposite direction.

An emergency hatch burst open on the sidewall. Several men in ITAA uniform staggered out.

"It's all over on deck four, you can't go down there," they yelled.

"Get on the elevators. . . don't go down!" Elevators opened, people rushed in. Reese found herself inside, the orderly still outside.

The doors closed and she rose. Why was it "all over on deck four"?

Voices babbled around her and the dread increased. Something very weird had happened on deck four; something was killing people down there.

None of the men from deck four was in the elevator car, however, so there was nothing more specific yet.

They emerged on the shuttle deck. The lights were flashing here, too, but men in ITAA uniform were moving around in purposeful ways.

There was a large crowd and it was getting restive.

The calm voices of the loudspeakers directed the crowd to the lines at gates twelve and fourteen. She joined the line to gate twelve. She was alone, there was no reason not to try and just ride away from all this.

She had a very strong desire to be on the next shuttle out.

All sorts of horrors were flittering through her mind. That stuff, that hideous stuff in those bodies down there, that was what she had helped bring into the universe once again.

She recalled the helpless blob, a jellyfish attached to some wires, that she had helped dig out of the Karavian sandstones. It had been less than two weeks ago and yet it seemed an aeon. That blob had become what? A terror that might go forth into the human era and destroy everything.

The line was moving slowly. They were tracking IDs, still trying to maintain security. It was holding things up.

A man and a woman were arguing at the front of the line. The man was furious. He was cursing the outwardly placid young people who manned the departure gate. They were doing a good job of remaining impassive in the face of the man's bluster. They still wanted his ID or his thumbprint.

But something was wrong. There was a woman screaming somewhere to the left. Caroline looked wildly around; what was it?

There was a loud groaning sound and a sharp snap. The floor bounced under her feet.

A section of the deck, a hidden maintenance door, was hurled open, smashing an elderly woman beneath it like a mouse in a spring trap. Caroline felt her heart freeze. Tentacles, pink-skinned tentacles as thick as a man's leg, writhed out into the room. Caroline felt her guts turn over and her bladder let go

in mortal terror.

The tentacles grabbed people, the way a mantis grabs beetles.

It was abrupt; the movements to strike were precise, guided by the flower growths that sprouted around the tips of the tentacles.

People screamed as they clawed their way over each other, their screams Dopplered away as they vanished down the maintenance port to an unguessable but horrible death.

As tentacles seized people and carried them off, other tentacles fought to get through the struggling thicket of those that already jammed the hatch.

Another section of flooring was coming up. The carpet rose up and then ripped wide open. Tentacles burst forth.

The crowd surged away instinctively. Caroline tripped, and was saved by an elevator that chose that moment to open. She fell on her side halfway into the car.

Reflexively she wriggled inside and rolled to the sidewall.

Tentacles as thick as men's legs darted past the doors.

A man was running for the elevator; he had ten feet to go. He screamed something at her as their eyes met.

Then a tentacle, like an earthworm a foot thick, wrapped itself around his chest and plucked him off the floor, stifling his despairing scream.

He was upside down, arms flailing when he was pulled into a throng of topsy-turvy people being dragged down into the maintenance well. Then the doors closed and the elevator went down.

"Up!" shrieked Caroline in horror, scrambling to her feet.

The elevator skipped a deck and opened again. Human screams echoed. People were running toward the elevator. But the tentacles were there, seizing them from behind.

The doors began to close. Caroline stood there frozen. A woman was at the doors; Caroline saw her hands flash out to hold the doors back.

Then a man in ITAA Fleet uniform grabbed the woman and pushed her aside and thrust himself through the door, which closed behind him.

It was Captain Cachester.

The elevator started up. Caroline stared at him with horror in her eyes.

"You didn't have to do that!" she raged.

He was wild, his breath coming in acute gasps.

"Shut the fuck up!" he screamed. "You're the one who started this! You're the one we have to thank for this."

He subsided into an inarticulate fury and lashed out at her suddenly with a fist. She ducked instinctively and he hit her forehead with his knuckles.

She was knocked into the elevator wall and the whole lift wobbled slightly. Cachester screamed in agony and clutched his broken band. Caroline reached out for support and touched the buttons.

The elevator opened again. It was a maintenance section, mostly dark. There was just the hum of machinery. And something else. Something big that moved nearby.

They froze. To one side Caroline had a good view of it, and her throat constricted at the sight. A baglike thing the size of a room, that pulsed and wobbled like a stomach in the throes of digestion. Tubes ran out of the ceiling down to the bag; the tubes were a meter thick. More tubes grew out of the thing's base, looking like immense, coiled tree roots.

The elevator closed and rose, unnoticed. It passed the next deck and then Cachester jammed it with the emergency button.

"We have to think this out. Where can we go?"

Her forehead hurt, her head was spinning from panic. She could feel her own breath coming in gasps. Time seemed to be passing very, very slowly.

"I don't know," she said finally.

Cachester paced like a caged rat on amphetamines. Suddenly he said, "Look, we have to get out of the elevator."

"Why? Where can we go?"

He stared at her. He had no idea.

The elevator rocked suddenly. Something was brushing past it. Caroline visualized something like that awful bag thing, or the tentacles. The brushing, rubbing went on for several long seconds, and the elevator rocked to and for gently. Then it ceased.

"What are we going to do?" whispered Cachester, still clutching his damaged fist. He'd cracked the first knuckle on his index finger and it really hurt. In the harsh white elevator light his face seemed sunken, his wits shattered.

"Are there emergency escape hatches on this ship?" Caroline said suddenly.

"Yes, every ship has them. Should be at the deck end, by the outer habwall."

She visualized that. "Then we need to get out on a deck that's safe and get to the far end of the corridors. The elevator shafts are set in the center of each segment, right?"

He saw what she was getting to. "Right."

"The problem is, which deck is safe?"

He looked at her, his head shaking slightly from side to side.

She had an idea. "The deck with that huge thing on it. That seemed quiet apart from that one thing. It didn't take any notice of the fact that the elevator opened there."

"You're mad," he said.

"Look, I'll get out and you stay and go where you want." His eyes glittered in response and his head continued to bob back and forth, but he said nothing.

She tried to recall where that maintenance floor had been. Which decks was it between? They couldn't afford a mistake.

"It was between three and four, wasn't it?"

He stared back.

She hit the button.

They went down.

The door opened. It was still dark and somewhat humid. An odd spicy smell, like that of an alien ocean, filled the air. The bag thing wobbled and jerked, filled to bursting with human bodies that were being digested at enormous speed to provide the growth and energy required by the Battlemaster in its enormous tentacular assault form.

Caroline hesitated. If she ran out there, would it see her and hunt her down?

Peristaltic waves bulged and wobbled down the tubes. She edged out of the elevator and moved away, back to the wall, taking tiny steps.

Cachester was watching her, holding the elevator door open. The bag shuddered and kicked but no tentacles appeared. She ran for the maintenance corridor and made it and turned the corner.

Emboldened, Cachester slipped after her.

The maintenance corridor was empty, lit by small spotlights every fifty meters. Nothing interrupted their progress and they reached the end wall. True to prediction, an emergency hatch was fitted into the wall.

There was a protective case around the mechanism handle; once you broke the case you had four seconds to move the handle or the thing would jam up tight.

On the wall beside it were a set of evac-bag dispensers.

Caroline pressed the activating patch and evac bags shot out. She grabbed one and pulled it free and stepped into the feet, then yanked it over her head and around her shoulders, just as she'd seen people do in the movies.

She broke the case on the hatch handle and yanked it down. The hatch opened with a hiss and she

bundled inside. Cachester followed.

"You realize that our only hope is that someone sees us evac and picks us up. We've got about two hours," he said.

"That's more than we've got on this ship."

They pulled the bags tight and activated their air recyclers.

The outer hatch opened and they were swept out into the void of interplanetary space.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

THINGS HAD BECOME PROGRESSIVELY MORE AND MORE HAZY for Rhem Kerwillig since the Reena thing had let him loot a pharmacy stockroom on deck three.

They'd gotten access through the back, ripping out the ventilation duct. They were looking for food and broke into the pharmacy, mistaking it for the fast-foodery next door.

While the Reena thing corrected the mistake, Rhem grabbed up handfuls of tranx and mooders. He started swallowing them in handfuls and washing them down with soda pop snatched from the fast-food joint.

Meanwhile the big change began. Rhem wasn't quite sure when it started, except that he remembered when they brought back the first man to the maintenance room they'd taken over.

The Larshel thing wrapped itself in a deadly embrace around this man, and a forest of wiry tentacles grew out of Larshel's body and wrapped around the man. Larshel's body swelled enormously and became progressively less and less human looking. The other man's body disappeared.

The man made sounds like a steam engine for a little while, suppressed, choked off by the tentacles probing his throat.

Then the Reena thing had really started bringing more people back, snatched surreptitiously from the populated decks of the Empress Wu.

They were all added to whatever it was that Larshel had become, something that looked like a pink-skinned whale by that point.

Before Rhem's wondering eyes they had been subsumed, reorganized, digested, who knew what, and the "whale" became enormous, filling most of the maintenance room. Rhem was crowded up close to it; there wasn't much space left. Its weird stink, salty, sweet, filled his nostrils. It was like a warm, tropical ocean, covered in candy.

Weird growths, like mouths, erupted from its top and fitted themselves over the ventilation ducts to suck in more air. Despite its size the thing's breathing rate was very high; air whooshed in and out at a tremendous rate.

From the great pink-skinned blob grew more tentacles, at first a dozen or so, no thicker than a garden hose, without suckers or any adornment. They were extremely active tentacles and seemed able to grow

to any length required.

Then there were dozens more, and many of them sported flowerlike growths. They grew thicker very quickly, until they were writhing out the door as thick as pythons.

Rhem kept taking pills. There was ancilophen, a stimulant that he found particularly enjoyable at this point. There was also something unpronounceable on yellow triangles that developed this wonderful mood of happy-go-lucky laissez-faire.

The tentacles became vaguely amusing, shoving past him and around him, never touching him, and then wriggling out the door like endless snakes. He chuckled at the sight of them; they were so busy, so active, such odd looking things.

Reena came back with more people. In particular he remembered a woman in a purple evening gown snatched from the women's room on deck four. The woman woke up for a moment, just as she was being cocooned in a mat of tentacles. Her eyes looked at Rhem, who was swigging cherriade and gazing at her blankly. She shrieked briefly and disappeared under the mobile tentacles. Her shrieks ended on a high squeal.

There had been something extraordinary about her eyes, but Rhem was too fogged in to know what exactly it had been.

Now a growth sprouted out of the pink wall close to his head. It made soft suckling sounds as it grew in about a minute to the size of a soccer ball. Flower things grew from it with terrible rapidity. Then a circular hole, a sphincter, grew across the end.

Abruptly the sphincter made whistling, cooing noises and dribbled a pale colorless fluid.

Rhem swigged cherriade and wished he had some whiskey handy. This situation was getting too weird for pills alone.

The whistling subsided and the thing spoke to him.

Rhem jumped at the sound of his name, splurged out with wet smacking sounds between each slowly enunciated word.

"You will be witness. For me, Battlemaster of the Empire. You will tell what happened."

"Witness?" Empire?

"You know this word?"

"Yeah, sure, but what am I supposed to be witnessing?"

"Everything that I have done. You have seen it. You will see more. You will remember it and inform your superiors. If you live. Let them know that they were defeated by the ultimate nervous system."

Rhem noticed absently that tentacles were surging out the doors and down the hallways, down every hole. There were tentacles surging away. Something big was taking shape.

Was that what they were, then? Just nerves, and things to feed and control nerves with?

But then wasn't that true of all animal life?

Rhem reached in his pocket for more of those little yellow triangles

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

LUISA CHANG WAS LOOKING THROUGH A REPORT ON THE investigations of the Arntage Series conducted by the suspected alien visitor to Cowdray University. She had a private minicabin to herself and the Strand, aboard a long-range shuttle that was closing in fast on the Empress Wu.

On the forward viewscreen selection the Wu could be seen already, in computer-enhanced mode: a moon of heavy metal, etched with the dark voids around each of the four huge modules that made up the ship's spherical body.

Chang was running through the star charts from the Arntage Series and examining the patterns of magnification and tracking that the customer at the university library using the identity of Jaad Benuil had followed.

The central stars on each projection were a small cluster, roughly spherical in shape and about twenty light-years across. There had once been a trio of blue-white giants, but these had long since disappeared. All the biggest stars had become dwarfs or neutron stars since then, and only the yellow, orange, and red stars remained.

This cluster had held together for a long time, orbiting the galactic center for billions of years. It was a long way off, too, beyond the Orion arm, inward to the center.

The cluster had been examined in detail several times by the Benuil creditcard customer. The homeworld of the Directive 115 alien had to be located there.

Following her report to Scopus Central, Chang had been ordered to rendezvous with the Empress Wu immediately, with as much of the 624 OSF as was available. If necessary the Wu was to be seized in a military action. Admiral Heldheim was to be placed under arrest, and with him a certain Captain Cachester.

While she unshipped from the orbiter and began climbing the gravity well, Tohoto and his colleagues began the negotiations with Fleet High Command that would cover this emergency and the need to remove the obstreperous Heldheim.

Before Tohoto could finish that process there came the electrifying news. Something was attacking the Empress Wu, but what it was hard to understand.

The people on the bridge there were caught flat-footed, not expecting anything. The tentacles grabbed them before the first alarms even began blaring.

Beyond the Wu's control network chaos broke out. The ship's AI went down. All contact with the computer section was lost.

Somebody managed to scream something into the comms channels about "tentacles," but then all contact with the Empress Wu was lost.

A few minutes later there were mayday signals coming from personnel evac units drifting in the Wu's wake while the ominous silence from the ship itself continued.

Closest ship to the Wu was the long-range jumper Shaka. Shaka's armament included nuclear weapons, and these were ordered readied at once.

At the same time, Captain Ton was informed that a Captain Cachester was the nearest person in an evac bag.

Tracking pods were fired ahead. A rescue unit brought in Cachester and a woman who was floating not far from him.

Luisa Chang's shuttle altered course to avoid the Empress Wu.

Tohoto ordered Chang to get aboard the Shaka immediately.

Shaka was very close; the shuttle shifted orbit and closed on

Chang joined the rest of the system, and Scopus Cluster command, in watching open-mouthed as the Empress Wu floated there, silent and inscrutable.

Chang had told Tohoto that she was convinced it was seeking its homeworld.

Tohoto agreed; so, more importantly, did Uni-Ten-One, the Cluster Command resident AI.

The cluster that Chang had noticed was targeted. Two sector battle fleets were mobilized and sent on to that cluster.

Meanwhile the nuclear torpedoes were sent hurtling in toward the Empress Wu.

A few seconds later they were detected by the Battlemaster, who knew the doom they represented.

The Battlemaster was now the central component of a vast tentacular assault form, a krakenoid thing the size of a blimp, filling more and more of the internal space of the Empress Wu as it consumed the humans aboard and their food stores.

The ship was under its control, but there were vital codes missing. Only the ship's commander could know the Baadadrive initiation codes and the weapons-initiation codes. This the Battlemaster knew from the ITAA Methods of Command manual, which it had read from cover to cover just recently.

Rhem Kerwillig was told to find the ship commander. After a look over the huddled crew persons taken from the bridge, Rhem decided that Heldheim had to be the top dog. He had on the white and gray uniform of the high brass, and he had three little sunbursts in gold on his lapel. Nobody else had gold on their uniforms.

Rhem pointed him out.

A tentacle flashed past him into the small room in which the crew were penned up. With a wail of terror Admiral Heldheim was plucked up and dangled by one leg in front of a wall of pink flesh that completely occupied the rest of the room.

Rhem meanwhile was digging a soda out of the ice chest that the Reena creature had brought back for him.

Since the soccer ball "head" had pronounced him to be the "witness," conditions had improved. The Reena thing had brought him whatever he asked for. Beer and bologna had been his latest request.

He found another cherriade and cracked it open.

"To the `witness,' " he said in toasting himself.

Heldheim was gurgling.

Rhem knew what the Battlemaster wanted, despite the chemically induced haze he was floating in.

Heldheim was getting purple in the face. "Better put him down," Rhem said to the soccer ball.

Flower growths flexed.

The tentacle relaxed and lowered Heldheim to the floor and set him upright.

"Who are you?" Heldheim babbled.

"Doesn't matter who I am, friend. You were on the bridge and you have to be the commanding officer of this ship."

Heldheim shuddered; suddenly he knew what was coming.

"It wants to know the Baada-drive actuation codes."

"Oh, no, no, I can't give those up."

Rhem swigged cherriade and wished he had that beer.

"Look, if you don't tell it what it wants to know it will hurt you. Believe me when I tell you that it knows how to hurt someone. I've heard people scream at the top of their lungs for as long as ten minutes at a time. Can you imagine that?"

The admiral sobbed, holding his face in his hands.

The tentacle slithered around his middle and gripped him tight.

Heldheim begged for his life.

Rhem waved at him and spoke to the Battlemaster. "He wants to live. "

The sphincter spoke suddenly, in shocking, wet sibilants.

"Give me codes, now."

Heldheim's eyes bugged out of his head. After he got his breath back he looked at Rhem.

"What the hell is it?" he whispered.

"It calls itself a Battlemaster, that's all I know. It's changed shape several times."

The tentacle gripped tight again.

With heavy heart and quavering voice Heldheim gave up the thirteen digit number.

A few moments later, seconds away from nuclear destruction, the Empress Wu went into Baada drive and spun out of the Wexel system and away through the mesh lines of space and time.

The nuclear torpedoes did not detonate.

Instead the Shaka's tracking pods framed the Wu's precise Baada "direction" and energy dump. Within a half minute Shaka jumped in pursuit. There was not a second to waste. It was imperative that Shaka get to wherever the Empress Wu had gone before Wu jumped again, because then they would lose the direction and have only the energy dump to measure, and they would never find Wu again with only one of those parameters.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

THE EMPRESS WU JUMPED FORTY LIGHT-YEARS, SIDEWAYS across the cluster. Shaka followed seconds later and emerged in a red-dwarf system with no planets.

Almost as soon as Shaka appeared close by, the Wu jumped again. Shaka was only just able to get coordinates before jumping. She squibbed out the message in high-speed blurt at jump time to Scopus Central and emerged again in a binary system. Two hot young giant stars blazed only a few hundred million clicks away.

Empress Wu was jumping again, with a spray of nuclear-tipped torpedoes moving away from her position.

Shaka neutralized the nearest missiles and hung on in pursuit. She dropped high-speed blurt behind with each jump, but as the chase moved farther away from the Scopus cluster she left behind all effective assistance from the ITAA military.

In the small, crowded bridge Chang felt her heart sink as she watched the schematic of their flight across the galaxy.

They were heading in the opposite direction from the cluster that had so interested the wielder of the Benuil credit card.

She realized with a sick feeling that she'd been taken, hooked once again on a deceptive lure. Always this opponent moved behind a feint, a diversionary attack or a false trail. So far she had fallen for it every time.

Meanwhile relations with Captain Ton were not the best. The Shaka was not a large ship; she had a crew of six and little spare accommodation. Her role in combat was high-speed system streaking. With two squads of the 624 OSF in full combat armor on board, the ship was stuffed. Add to that Chang and

her entourage, which still included Darel Hopenster, who continued filming everything, and the ship was jam-packed.

Captain Ton had his own prejudices, and dirtside colonels who were beating up on Fleet Officers were one of his pet hates. Cachester's tale of woe concerning Colonel Chang was enough to make Ton's hair stand on end.

Nor did he care for the sight and sound of heavysset space marines in combat gear clanking around his ship.

And yet he was a serious man and he understood that these were serious times. This was not the moment to carry on the good fight between Fleet and dirtside.

And yet there was something about this Chang that was very hard to take. She had a definite attitude. He knew she came with a red-hot combat record and everything, but no Fleet captain could easily accept taking orders from a dirtside colonel, especially one who carried on as if she were ordained to command.

Chang made no allowances and gave orders like she expected them obeyed, unquestioningly.

On top of all this resentment, he was still swallowing his utter astonishment at finding that this whole Directive 115 thing was for real.

And now the Wu had been hijacked. Admiral Heldheim had either gone mad or had been taken over by some alien lifeform that had gotten his ship's drive codes directly from his brain.

Ton knew that no Fleet admiral would give up his codes before he gave up his life.

The absolutely worst moment had been shortly after Chang came aboard, when she took him aside and chewed him out for picking up the people in the evac bags. The fact that it turned out to be Cachester himself along with the prime suspect in the creation of the Directive 115 threat, Professor Reese, in those bags had made no difference at that point.

Chang was obsessed with infiltration just then. They could have lost the Shaka just as easily as the Wu. Eventually she was mollified somewhat by the result of the interrogations of Reese and Cachester.

"A krakenoid form, " Chang said in wonder.

"A body dispersed around the interior of the whole ship. "

"Something like that infested the Starhammer once. It was very weak because it had been dormant for aeons, cut off from the outside world. "

Empress Wu jumped again and they only just caught her direction path before she was gone. Once more they jumped in pursuit, a vast distance this time, causing a huge energy dump.

They emerged in a small system; a dim red dwarf held a handful of planets around it. It was not a star that had ever been visited by either humans or laowon.

Empress Wu was in orbit around the second planet, an Earth sized orb that was dark except for ice patches at the poles.

There were no missiles this time.

"What do we have on the primary?" Chang asked the Shaka's ruling AI software.

"Very little in catalogue. We are outside the ITAA-mapped region of the galaxy on red-dwarf level. Nearest marker stars are 0009-13A and 0009677; both are at least five hundred lightyears from here. "

"Anything else?"

"It appears to be an irregular dwarf. There are scorch marks all over this system. The inner planets have been baked. "

"There was a nova. "

"Perhaps many."

"So an irregular dwarf, the remains of a nova flash star."

"The planet we're approaching has little if any atmosphere. It's rock with a sprinkling of ice at the poles. Atmosphere breakdown gives carbon dioxide as primary component, 70 percent approximately. Nitrogen 29 percent; other trace gases fill in the rest. "

Captain Ton was incredulous. "Is this it? Is this the homeworld of the alien lifeform?"

They stared at the bleak, dead world on the viewscreen.

"More confirmation on those atmosphere readings, although we are now expecting a full one-percent oxygen level. Temperatures on the dark side are pretty low; the CO₂ freezes out in places. "

Chang whispered, "This is what the Starhammer can do to a solar system. This was the home system to our enemy. It died a billion years ago. "

The Empress Wu disappeared behind the dead planet as Shaka approached, but before she vanished a shuttle launch was detected.

"Shuttle away, four degrees' separation at this distance."

"We are in the same orbit as the Empress Wu now."

"That's it, there they go. "

Chang stared hard at the screen. Did the thing that controlled the Wu know they still followed it? Had it been watching to see them flash into existence each time they'd jumped? Or had it been simply laying another deceptive path?

And now was this its real attempt to land?

And why was it landing here, on this dead world, unless it truly was the homeworld?

"Track that shuttle," Ton barked. "How about getting some of these troopers into motion, Colonel. We

could use some room on this ship. "

"I don't think that's the shuttle our enemy will use. This will be the feint. He always feints, every time, that's the rule."

"Feints?"

"It's ingenious, I mean it has to work at least fifty percent of the time no matter what. Every time he strikes he sets up a feint, a demonstration, even a suicide attack. "

"Suicide attack, how many of them are there?"

"The alien is protean, changeable, it changes shape depending on what sort of material it has to hand. And it's omniparasitic. It adapts to parasitize any sufficiently large animal. It converts humans en masse into the other things we've found. "

"But this thing on the Wu is enormous, what did it use there? "

"Obviously it combined a lot of people somehow. Or ate them and grew this thing with the tentacles, I don't know. We'll never know unless we can defeat it somehow and capture it. "

"Why this visit to a dead world?"

"This has to be the homeworld. It went home. "

"Home. " Ton mouthed the word.

There were still no missiles or mines.

"He's not making any hostile moves," Ton said: "Does that mean he's given up?"

They tracked the shuttle down to the ground. It made a rough landing on a plain covered in smoothed debris.

On high magnification they watched the shuttle far below. The thin atmosphere left everything very clear.

Nothing moved after the shuttle came to rest, no doors opened.

The Shaka sped past, two hundred miles up.

Ton was glowering at Chang, his screens, his crew, just about everything. Chang left the bridge; until the next shuttle was spotted, if there was a next shuttle, she had time for something with pseudo caffeine in it. As well as another square of ancilophen. She needed something right away; these Fleet officers were about to drive her completely crazy.

The Shaka's little lounge area, of course, was filled with members of Blake's squad, who were returning their skeletal, something that filled the air with metallic hiss and crunch.

Luisa grabbed some instacaf, hot cappuccino style. She got a seat at the end of the space, as far away from the troopers as possible, and dug out the ancilophen dispenser.

Hopester came over, his face and eyes strangely bright.

She sipped cappuccino and swallowed.

Poor Darel; he'd lost his whole life now. They were so far from Wexel that relativistic effects made it unlikely he would ever see his family again, only their descendants. If he ever made it back to Wexel at all.

"I'm afraid this turned out to be more than we expected," she said by way of an apology for kidnapping the poor man and dragging him across the galaxy.

"I signed on, I guess. I don't know, I haven't been able to think about all that yet. I mean, I'll never see them again; I can't face that yet. "

Chang nodded, wondering why she couldn't commiserate more. Was she jealous of that family life, was that her problem? She'd always said she didn't need that, she'd believed that the ITAA was enough. And yet she knew how dreadfully attractive the human nuclear family could be. She would never be a mother now, and that was something that recently she had found hard to think about honestly.

"We're all alone out here, aren't we?" Hopester said unexpectedly.

"Correct."

"What about the sector fleets?"

"Never get here in time. Whatever happens is up to us and us alone."

"Just this little ship against the Empress Wu?"

"Let's hope Captain Ton is skilled enough, eh?"

"It doesn't seem like we gave it much of a challenge. I mean, it's been winning all along the line, hasn't it?" Hopester sounded genuinely angry now.

Chang sighed; unfortunately there was a lot of truth to what he'd said.

"We have to find it and we have to stop it doing whatever it's trying to do. As to whether it's winning, I can't tell you, Mr. Hopester; I guess we haven't done that well so far. Our enemy is clever and skilled beyond anything we understand. "

This admission seemed to calm him somewhat.

"What does it want here?"

"Unknown, absolutely unknown. Superweapon that it knows about? Message in a bottle for Mama? Your guess is as good as mine. "

"Mama? Do they have mothers?"

She laughed, choked up on the cappuccino for a moment, and almost spilled some on her uniform.

"I don't know, Mr. Hopester, I really don't."

A beep from the bridge summoned her. She was sure she knew what it would be.

A shuttle had detached some time before and had landed on the surface. There were tracks beside it: four sets of humanoid tracks, people in spaceboots.

"You were right, this appears to be the real attempt to land. "

"They came down early, this was launched before we even reached this system."

"Where's the monster, then?" Ton said.

"The krakenoid form will be on the Empress Wu just waiting for us to show ourselves."

"It thinks we have followed it, then?"

"I think it knows we had to." "It seems very confident." Chang nodded.

"He has the initiative, and he knows what he's doing. We don't have the haziest notion.

" She turned away, signaling to Povet to approach and calling Blake on the commo.

"Blake here. "

"Captain, what's our status for an immediate drop?"

"All units are effective and ready to go."

"Scramble. "

Chang headed out of the bridge.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

ALTHOUGH HE HAD A SENSE THAT ENORMOUS EVENTS WERE IN motion around him, Rhem Kerwillig's ability to comprehend the situation had slipped somewhat. In the general excitement he had taken too many of the little yellow triangles.

When Admiral Heldheim endeavored to ask him questions, Rhem was unable to think straight long enough to answer him. Any answer at all seemed fatuous. He kept getting the giggles.

Heldheim gave up in irritation after a few minutes, convinced that the fellow was insane. The whole situation was insane; Heldheim wasn't clear about a lot of things.

One thing was clear to Rhem, however: no matter what happened, his old life on Wexel was over. Everyone he had ever known would be dead long before he could see them again.

Meanwhile, events moved swiftly. A series of wrenching Baada-drive shifts occurred. Rhem and

Heldheim were given just enough warning to get into webbed seats before it began.

And as it went on, the vast pink body that occupied half the Wu's bridge grew a seven-foot-long projection like a gargantuan penis. Straight out of a wall of meat nine feet high came this bump that lengthened like an enormous watermelon, pulsing and wobbling.

Rhem was astonished anew; the thing grew out to be the size of a giant man in a matter of minutes. There were throbbing processes shuddering within it; the whole thing shook as if bursting with life.

Then it began to shrink and compress, and the surface darkened from pink to deep red and almost to black. The motions subsided and then ceased altogether.

Finally, with a cracking and a slight struggle this shape split open to disgorge something new.

Rhem's gaze was riveted to the thing that emerged. A completely new form of life.

It was bipedal but it had no arms and no head. A line of tentacles, whippy and smooth, sprouted from the shoulder regions. These tentacles were of several different widths and lengths; some were trunklike, others were more like twigs, or ferns.

Overall the skin was a deep pink, streaked with gray, a pattern that Rhem had seen before. The "head" was no more than a bump along the upper surface. From it sprouted two clusters of the flowerlike things.

Rhem giggled at the sight of the empty crotch. There were no visible sex organs.

Green polyps swelled suddenly out of the chest region, and an odd saltsweet smell filled the air.

A circular sphincter opened in the same region and the weird, but now all too familiar voice of the thing hissed and spluttered at him once again.

Coincidentally the soccer-ball "head" had been reabsorbed into the pink mass of the main body of the alien flesh.

Rhem was dry-mouthed; although he had long since abandoned any attempt to understand what was going on, this fresh development was so bizarre he was left utterly amazed. Somehow he had thought that the huge shape the thing had taken would be the final form.

"We are going to leave ship and go down to surface of planet," it said slowly with several long pauses between syllables.

Rhem stared at it, then found his tongue.

"Where are we?" he said, and then giggled a little at the absurdity of a concept as elaborate as "where" or "we" or even, for that matter, "are. "

"This is point of destiny, " the thing said. "You will be witness here. This was homeworld. "

"Right," Rhem said. This was the sharp place, where what came before might be sundered forever from what would come afterward.

Heldheim, who had been shivering in the corner shadows during this exchange, coughed on the

salt-sweet gas the creature was suddenly emitting.

The pink wall contracted, tentacles shifted, and doors were opened.

The flower organs wobbled; one turned toward him. Rhem was suddenly certain now that they were optical organs.

"What about him?" Rhem said, pointing to the admiral. The orange flower things quivered slightly.

"Both will come and witness. You will wear spacesuits. "

"Wear spacesuits, of course, what else would one want to wear to witness in."

Reena, or the thing that looked like Reena, said simply, "Move. "

As they passed Rhem noticed that Reena's face and body were showing signs of wear. She had gone from lush beauty to haggard old age in a matter of a few days.

Still, the body functioned and would for a while longer; then ghosht would be required and a new host would have to be found. That would be a bad time for either Rhem or the admiral.

The ship itself was untouched, merely empty of people. Here and there furniture was smashed or overturned, but for the most part it was simply still and silent.

At the docking bay they found a spacesuit locker and suited up. The alien thing put on a suit, too, and so did Reena.

Then they boarded a shuttle, which was activated and waiting.

Soon after that the shuttle detached from the ship and dropped into reentry mode. There were no windows and the viewscreens were down, so Rhem and Heldheim had no idea where they were going.

Soon the shuttle was shuddering and wobbling down through the upper atmosphere. Rhem was frightened by this and kept imagining being burned to atoms in a shuttle accident.

"Well, theres atmosphere here, but it can't be one that we can breathe or we wouldn't need suits," Heldheim commented.

That made Rhem think of dying in the depths of some dark, alien atmosphere. It was not a comfortable thing to think about.

Then the ride smoothed out and continued uninterrupted until they made ground contact and bumped and banged across a smooth plain that went on for many, many miles. By that time they were aware that they had landed on a large body, the gravity was planetary heavy. This was no watermoon, no roid, and obviously no habitat built by cost-conscious humans.

Before they entered the airlock the Reena thing made them carry in two pieces of equipment, a portable rock drill and a power hammer that folded into a carrying box.

The air hissed out of the airlock and they strode out into a thin wind that swept fine dust across a dark, empty plain. The light was dim; the small red sun hovered high overhead. The dust whipped past on its

eternal erosive mission. It was hard to see much more than thirty meters in any direction.

The Battlemaster, however, knew exactly where it was heading and started off at a brisk stride.

For a moment Heldheim entertained the notion of running somewhere, anywhere that was away from these terrible creatures.

Rhem saw Heldheims face, and saw the calculation there. He caught the admiral by the arm and pressed his helmet against the admiral's.

"Can you hear me?" he shouted.

"Yes," the admiral bellowed back. "You don't have to shout. "

"You can't escape them, they're much too fast. Believe me, I've seen them. They'll run you down and kill you."

Heldheim abandoned his crazy notion.

The plain was rock, not ice, and though it was cold it was not the cold of an ice moon. The gravity was massive, at least one g and perhaps more. They trudged forward through the dust. The hammer in its big steel box became a real burden after a while, and Rhem dropped behind. Reena dropped back to chivy him, and, sweating, he stepped up his pace once more.

Then the dust thinned out, temporarily, and they saw more clearly where they were. The plain was actually a flat surface on the top of a ridge, or a mountain; it was impossible to tell how far away they were from the lower surface they could see. Another ridge was visible in one direction and a third in the other. Directly ahead the plain rolled on unbroken, but behind them there was a vast fracture and a fault line which had split the ridge across and raised one side fifty feet higher than the other.

The shuttle's lights burned through the murk; it crouched like a hot, venomous insect in front of that rock wall.

Another break in the plain showed just ahead. A depression had formed and a large section had sheared away and fallen to one side of the ridge.

There were caves here, lots of them, showing as dark patches against the deep gray color of the rock.

In fact, the entire surface was porous, as filled with holes as a sponge. They clambered over brittle rock ledges and reached a row of major openings, each five or six meters in diameter.

The Battlemaster hesitated briefly here and inspected several of these caves before selecting one.

Heldheim and Kerwillig were herded inside. The suit lights came on automatically and illuminated the smooth interior surface of the cave; it curved away ahead to unknown destinations.

Heldheim pressed helmets. "This is not a natural formation," he said. "The walls are too smooth."

Rhem shrugged-something new to marvel at. Except that the yellow triangles were wearing off now, and he wasn't going to be able to take any more while he was in the spacesuit. There was an empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. His head hurt. He was afraid again, with that nagging terror of death that

just wouldn't go away. The full nightmare descending over him once again.

After several minutes' steady progress the tunnel began to descend. It wound around itself several times in a spiral. Then it opened out into a large space, itself pocked by pits several feet deep and wide that were cut or etched into the floor.

They walked on between these and entered a cavern laced with complex structures with an organic look to them, almost as if they were the bones of some enormous organism long since dead.

Perhaps they were; Rhem knew there didn't seem to be any limitation on the size of the critter that the things could inhabit.

Abruptly they came on an interruption. A fault had shifted the ground here.

Now the hammer and rock drill came into play.

The Reena thing took the hydraulic hammer and applied it to the fault surface. Rock was smashed and scattered, yet the sound was faint in the thin cold air. Broken rock was kicked back into the tunnel, where it began to form heaps.

After a while the hammer produced a passage several feet deep. Still there was nothing but blank rock ahead.

The other thing, the pink creature with no head, took up the rock drill.

Rhem could only imagine that it was operating the arms of the spacesuit with the tentacles bunched together. The suit-mitts moved quite naturally, however. Maybe it grew some hands for the occasion.

Together the two creatures worked in the hole they had made. Eventually they stopped; dust blew out of the hole and they backed out.

Rhem and Heldheim were pulled in and prodded down through a narrow passage cut through the rock.

At the far end they emerged in another tunnel, a continuation of the earlier one.

It soon opened out into a vast space, in the center of which was a circular pit that sank out of sight into stygian gloom for an unknown distance. The pit was the size of a football field.

Heldheim stood on the edge and shone a wrist light downward. At its full intensity they could see that the cavity went down for miles.

Around it spiraled a gallery, and this they began to trudge down.

"What the hell is this place?" Heldheim said, touching helmets again.

"How should I know?" Rhem said. "I just wish the elevators were working. My feet are killing me again."

Down they went, winding around and around this enormous pool of darkness, descending into a vast labyrinth of enormous hallways, some of which were filled with twisted shapes, like the skeletons of enormous insects.

Rhem could not know it but as they progressed a strange set of emotions went through the Battlemaster.

Sadness, great sadness, and a terrible pride, for here was the evidence of the ruin of everything in the heart of the glory of the Empire.

The great Batrachian enemy had triumphed in the end. As the Battlemaster had feared at the time. The superweapon had overcome everything.

And here the very gods had been brought down, and their temples laid waste.

There could be only one answer for the Battlemaster now and it knew it, but that could not divert its steps an iota. The end of all things had to be seen and recorded. The end must be witnessed by the two humans.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

IT WAS INEVITABLE IN SUCH CRAMPED QUARTERS AS THE SHAKA'S tiny habospace that Luisa would bump into Cachester as she came out of the head.

Cachester looked decidedly unwell. He was wearing one of the emergency spacesuits with the helmet pushed back.

Her look of derision aroused his ire. The smooth facade cracked completely.

"If we'd snuffed this damn thing out in the beginning we wouldn't be in this position," he said with a sudden vehemence.

She pursed her lips, then shrugged.

"Unfortunately that's true. We've made a lot of mistakes and the damn thing doesn't seem to make any."

"If our dirtside colleagues were a bit quicker to act in a genuine emergency and weren't concentrating all their efforts on trying to bust Fleet officers, maybe we wouldn't have made so many damned mistakes in the first place," he said, raising his voice.

"Captain," she growled; "you never understood, did you? I wasn't trying to bust Fleet officers, I wasn't even trying to bust you, I was there to help bring about a complete change in the ITAA relationship with Wexel. It has to change, no matter what happens in the aftermath of this."

"I know what you were up to, Ton told me. You've even got Central leaning all over Heldheim. "

"I think Admiral Heldheim has other problems right now," she said between gritted teeth. Why did this man always succeed in making her crazy with anger? Cachester paled. Heldheim had been taken by the thing. What would they find Heldheim turned into? If they survived this terrible situation, that is; stalking the Empress Wu was a near suicidal thing to do for a small ship like Shaka. Cachester understood perfectly how such a conflict could end.

Heldheim had given up the Baada-drive codes; presumably he had given up the weapons codes, too, so the thing definitely had him, he couldn't have gotten out like Cachester had in an evac bag.

Cachester could still see those huge tentacles, darting through the people, seizing them, whisking them away.

Chang dropped it and hurried down ramp to the shuttles. The Shaka carried three small drop craft moored in a narrow docking bay that was slung beneath the habospace.

The ships were part lifeboat, part shuttle. However, they didn't carry enough fuel to get back from the surface of the planet below. They would be stuck down there until other, bigger ships showed up that could deal with the Empress Wu and drop a shuttle with sufficient boost to pick them up and get back to orbit.

Chang climbed into the first shuttle. Jean Povet was already there. They had the Schlesinger rifles, the explosive packs, and two respiration-unit refreshers to give the units they wore in their suits an almost indefinite supply of breathable air.

A second shuttle was to follow with Hopester and Ensigns Diaz and Orshem, the Shaka's two-man security unit who had volunteered to join Chang on this drop. They had side arms and combat-worthy commo systems. All were in full spacesuit.

Whether they'd be a help or a liability was unknowable, but Chang still felt a shade better about the drop ahead having a couple more guns along. This was not the combat she had ever had in mind.

The enemy wasn't invincible. She had to keep reminding herself that they could be stopped. They were just very hard to kill.

No sooner did they get the drop signal than the Shaka's alarms blared.

The whole ship shook violently.

Empress Wu had suddenly performed an extremely dangerous maneuver and jumped from one side to the other of the planet below. She was above the horizon now, behind Shaka.

This time they were very close; Wu's primary lasers cut into Shaka's Baada modules. Ton took the ship into emergency Baada-drive procedure but wasn't quick enough. One module was cut too badly to configure, and the drives were rendered useless.

"Abandon ship!" the commo system blared.

People were running into the drop-ship bay.

Chang saw Cachester among the leaders.

"How much room do we have?" she said, opening the hatch.

"We can get in three, I'd say."

"Let's hope we got fuel enough to get down alive with three," Luisa said.

There was a heavy thud, and a tremendous shock ran through the docking bay.

"One of the modules must have detached," said Povet in her usual calm way.

Vacproof bulkheads were slamming shut all over the remainder of the habspace in a roar of steel slamming steel.

The docking bay floor was rippling.

Chang grabbed somebody, a man in a white uniform, no spacesuit. "Get in," she shrieked and shoved him inside.

Another man bulled past her and dove inside. There was no time for anyone else; Chang yanked the hatch shut and they blew free.

Just in time, the whole habspace was suddenly starkly illuminated by the green flash of the primary laser aboard Empress Wu.

Shaka died in that instant, along with Captain Ton and everyone who was left on the bridge.

The drop ships tumbled free. One and Two were each carrying four people. Three was carrying six, including a near gibbering Captain Cachester.

Aboard the second ship was Caroline Reese, who had learned somewhere along the line to be a survivor.

When she'd seen Cachester put on one of the emergency suits, she'd gone immediately to the suit dispenser in the drop-ship bay and put on a suit and checked the seals and the respiration unit.

She assumed that Cachester knew something and she suspected it had to do with the Empress Wu.

When the call had come she'd been way ahead of it, having positioned herself near the entrance to the drop-ship bay.

Now she clutched herself with her arms and prayed to the gods of her ancestors that they would get down in one piece.

The dark world below threw up a great shining crescent dead ahead. They were flying into the daylight. High ice clouds glittered along the rim of the crescent. The thing seemed like a vast sword, a scimitar of the gods waiting to cut the line of fate in two.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

THE SHUTTLE DESCENT WAS FAST AND THE LANDING WAS HARD. All the way Luisa had wondered if the Wu would strike them down with that terrible laser.

It never came. Perhaps they were too hard to see amid all the breakage of the Shaka as it fell into the thin atmosphere and crashed, burning, in a thousand-kilom-long swath across the surface. Perhaps their enemy wanted them to land, to make sure of them on the ground. Perhaps they were no longer worth bothering with.

She wanted to land as close as possible to the site where the second shuttle from the Empress Wu had landed, and fortunately it was still well within the range of the drop ships and they were able to make a pass high overhead and get a good video fix on the shuttle and surrounding terrain. It was set on the flat top of a high ridge, one of many in this region. Then they spiraled down to land nearby.

The other two drop-ship shuttles from the Shaka were following Chang's lead and came in to land shortly afterward.

They were on top of a long, sinuous ridge formation that dominated the surrounding terrain. Something about the way it coiled back and forth made Chang think of ancient burial mounds in Ohio, from the prehistoric period on the North American continent.

There were other ridges, spaced about ten kilometers apart, all over the surface in this section of the planet, but none was as tall or massive as this one.

Occasionally when the dust cleared momentarily there would be a startling glimpse of the surrounding terrain. Steep slopes rose up for thousands of meters above a dark, abyssal plain far below.

Jagged rifts and canyons with vertical walls a mile deep or more cut into the sides of these ridge formations. And yet the ridgetop itself was level and fairly smooth, and the landing was relatively easy.

Chang stood up, noted the strength of the gravity here, and used a command key to open the seals on the emergency evac airlock.

The shuttle software began apologizing for the bouncy landing before Chang reached over and turned its audio off.

"Time to get moving," she said quietly. In the back of her mind she wondered how Captain Blake would handle a mess like this. Blake, she decided, would go straight in with whatever he had and take the enemy on as quickly as possible. Shock him with the speed and fierceness of the attack.

"Ready, Colonel." Povet had her Schlesinger hooked into her harness above the hip, while a flat case of the DX3 explosive was attached over her shoulder. Clips for the Schlesinger dangled all over the front.

The two men, neither of whom had spacesuits, stared at them in wonder.

"Why are you going out there?" said the one in the white.

"Job to do," Chang said with desperate, studied nonchalance.

"You're going to go out and fight it, is that it? Just a couple of women?" the white overalls said.

"Dirtsiders are crazy, I always knew it," the second man said.

Chang's eyes snapped at that. "Shut your mouth, mister. We're not dirt-siders, we're the 624 OSF, and we can take care of you assholes without having to work up a sweat."

Both men had a couple of inches on Luisa Chang, but when she moved forward they both gave ground.

Chang snorted; this was stupid. Jean Povet was opening the small emergency airlock they would use to keep the atmosphere in the drop ship.

They left the men behind and clambered out into the freezing winds. There they switched on their flare lights to guide the other shuttles down and waited while they landed.

The third one came in hard and fast, broke its undercarriage, and slid across the flat surface until it ran into a fault line. Chang and Povet dropped everything and ran across the plateau top toward it.

The habseal on the crashed ship had blown; the front section was crumpled up. There were just two survivors, Captain Cachester and Flight Engineer Pentofski. The others had been without suits.

Chang just shook her head grimly. Cachester seemed to be one of those creatures of terrestrial origin that were impossible to exterminate, like the cockroach and the rat.

"If your commo's working, please respond, are you both all right?" she said.

"Well, Colonel, I guess we ought to thank you for showing such concern, but in the circumstances I'll leave out the courtesies. I'm alive but that's about it," Cachester said.

"I'm okay," the flight engineer said with a baffled look. The last few hours of experienced time had turned his world completely upside down.

"What about the others?"

"All dead."

Chang wasn't in a position to waste time. She turned back to the second shuttle, which lay in the opposite direction. The dust was getting thicker by the minute; the thin wind was picking up velocity, a dust storm was coming in.

From the second shuttle came four figures in suits: the two security men from Shaka, then Darel Hopester and a woman. Chang felt a surge of surprise when she saw that it was Caroline Reese.

"Well, well, nice of you to drop in for the finale," she said after a moment.

Reese had undergone a transformation of sorts. She'd lost some of her bitterness. Constant exposure to death and deprivation had hardened her in ways she'd never dreamed of.

"I wouldn't have missed the end of this for a couple of worlds," she chuckled sadly. "I guess I have to see it through to the end, fate or something. "

"Fate, right," Luisa replied. "I've been thinking about fate quite a lot recently. There must be something more to the concept than I had previously considered possible."

Chang checked commo channels with everyone.

"All right people, heres what we have to do. There are some caves way over there, past the Wu's shuttle. The tracks lead to the caves, so we're going to follow them. "

"Oh, no, you can count me out of that," Cachester said. "I'm not getting down in some hole in the

ground with that alien. I've seen those things, they're deadly."

Chang waited a beat before replying.

"All right, Captain Cachester is not coming with us. He is going to sit it out on the surface and keep his Fleetside ass nice and safe. "

She looked around at the others. The Fleet ensigns looked uncomfortable, but they were young and foolish; neither would back out now. They avoided looking at Cachester.

Even Cachester's insufferable insouciance wilted in this situation.

"Look," he exclaimed, "this is crazy. You can't go down there and destroy this thing on your own. There'll be a sector fleet here soon enough. They can pick us up and put down a major force to handle this. That's the proper way to deal with this situation. "

The ensigns shuffled and looked away. They were Fleet officers and they knew the truth.

"All right," Chang continued. "Were on the surface of a dead planet in the back of beyond. We've dropped the coordinates down the Deep Link, so help is on the way, but over these distances relativistic effects are going to turn minutes into weeks, so who knows how long we'll have to go it alone. We can't leave this to chance, even if we don't have the force levels wed like to have."

"Force levels? Do we honestly have any kind of chance?" Hopester said. "I don't mean with the alien, but just of staying alive anyway. I mean how long will our air supply last?"

"There's enough food and water in the emergency packs on the three ships to last us a couple of months quite easily, three or four if we take it very carefully. And the air refreshers will keep the suits functioning for years. I think the two ships will also refresh for quite a long time. So we can make it, yes, if we can survive the alien."

"Then why antagonize it?" Cachester said in frustration. "Leave the damn thing alone and it might let us live. "

Chang had had enough. "Because, Captain, we have to find out what the hell it's doing and stop it. There's more than just our lives to think about. There's the rest of the human race. We botch this once more and we may lose the lot, this thing will take over."

The ensigns had seen the video evidence concerning the alien's preferred method of parasitism. They stiffened; everything rested on this, including the honor of the Fleet.

Flight Engineer Pentofski wavered. He was terrified at this degree of proximity to the alien horror. He had no desire whatsoever to go down under the ground in pursuit of it. But he could not think of himself as a coward, and so he stayed beside the young security ensigns.

Cachester mumbled something and turned away, alone but determined in his cowardice.

Hopester said nothing but stayed where he was. He knew now that his old life was over, utterly gone from him. Everything now depended on how this menace was dealt with. His job was to film it all for as long as that was possible. A sense of duty filled him up and helped him push aside his anguished thoughts of his lost family.

"What about the big ship?" said Caroline Reese.

"Can't do anything about that," said Chang. "Out of my control. If she stays here when the sector fleet shows up then they'll destroy her. If she gets away then this whole thing goes on, until she's hunted down and finished. "

"What do you think it's trying to do?" said Reese.

How the hell should I know, Luisa wanted to scream, I'm a soldier, not a scientist.

She caught Jean Povet's eyes fixed on her through her suit mask.

"This is the homeworld of its kind; you tell me, Professor," she said after a moment.

Reese grunted and turned her helmet away.

They set out soon afterward, leaving Cachester behind.

They passed the Wu's shuttle and checked it for supplies. It was well stocked with everything and had enough fuel to regain orbital speed.

"That's an improvement on our situation, then," Chang said to Povet. "We might be able to make it for six months with that extra food and water. "

"Doesn't it suggest that the enemy isn't planning to stay here forever?"

"Uh-huh, it does. He's planning to go on somewhere. I think we have to stop him."

"We'll give it a shot, Colonel, can't say more than that."

"Ever been in combat, Jean?"

"No, Colonel, this is my first time."

"Well, it isn't as bad as they say it is. You get over being frightened pretty quick, and the time passes in a blink. "

"Heh, heh," Povet chuckled, "sounds like going to the dentist. "

Chang shook her head. Perhaps Povet didn't need any little encouraging words; she was one of the most placid, even tempered people Chang had ever met. Perhaps all this was just business as normal to the Jean Povets of the worlds.

Luisa licked her lips, which were very dry. It certainly didn't seem like business as normal to her; this was a matter of doom and extinction. The galaxy teetered here, all balanced on a slender point, them and it. And it was all up to her to come up with a way to defeat the damned thing.

They reached the caves indicated by analysis of the high-level video they'd shot. The tracks were confusing here; one set wandered around to all the cave entrances. But after some careful surveying of the footprints, Chang selected one cave into which at least three of the creatures had gone.

The cave had very smooth walls. Debris had piled up on the floor, and the ceiling above had many fine cracks running through it.

After a short distance the tunnel sloped downward and spiraled like a corkscrew.

By then they were all aware that this was no natural phenomenon.

Then abruptly they were in a larger space, itself pocked by pits several feet deep. This space then opened into a cavern filled with what looked like the colossal bones of along-extinct monster.

Once more the passage shrank, until it was a tunnel again, about ten meters wide. Abruptly it came to a halt, cut off by a wall of rock. A fault line had developed here and shifted many meters in one direction. And yet in the center of the blockage was a hole, and round it on the floor lay heaps of rubble and rock. The hole was a meter and a half wide, enough to allow a man in a suit through.

Something had bored through here, and recently.

"This way, we're getting warm," Chang said.

They went on . . . and emerged in a continuation of the tunnel. This soon opened into a much larger space, in the center of which was a vast pit brimmed with inky darkness.

Cautiously they approached the edge of the pit.

"Lights out, everyone, the control is in the palm of the right hand. We'll use my ankle lights to see the edge by. I don't want anyone who's already here to see us. "

Far below, tiny pinpricks in the distance, were lights, suit lights, in motion, climbing down the spiral gallery that wound around this gargantuan pit. They flickered on and off as they passed from one opening to the next along the gallery wall.

"There they are," Povet said, handing a set of binoculars to Luisa.

Even at full magnification there was nothing more to be seen than four suited figures, glimpsed through the oval holes in the side of the gallery.

"All right, people, move back from the edge, then put on ankle lights and we'll start down. "

Hopester hesitated at the opening to the gallery.

"I suppose this is the best course of action. "

"It's the only one open to us right now. Unless you think we should wait out there with Cachester. "

"No, of course not. We have to go on."

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

THROUGH THE HALLS OF DEAD ANTIQUITY THEY TRUDGED, DEEP within the reef

structure of the Highest of the High.

Here was the source, the genetic spring from which had come all parts and panoplies of the Empire of the Gods. Here those gods had wallowed, secure, magnificent, omnipotent.

But now the end of all things was revealed to the Battlemaster.

They strode the sacred floor of the vault of glory, but all glory had long since fled this place. Except for the haunting vibration of the ancient days, there was nothing here but dust and rubble.

A vast fault had even cut off one end of the space, bringing down in collapse a dozen floors of apostle chambers.

Through the deep tubs and feeding pools, where once only the most exquisite hot muds and delicious foods had coursed, there was just dust, and in one tub the mummified corpse of an isolated manytapper. Frozen where it had fallen a billion years before.

Here in the reef structure it had floated, safe even from tectonic subsumption, since the great reefs were built to float above the geologic processes of the homeworld, and thus outlasted every other feature of the ancient time.

To Rhem and Heldheim it looked like a seal formed from tar that had then dried and withered in the sun.

The Battlemaster touched the dead thing gently, turning it over to examine the underside carefully.

An exalted manytapper, a servant of the Highest of the High. Hard emotions swelled in the heart of the Battlemaster.

"Witness this," it said to the humans. "This was a servant of the Highest. "

They passed the tubs of glory, deep pits like empty swimming pools, with drifts of dust in their centers.

"Witness this," it said to the humans. "This was once the lying place of the Highest Forms, they who were above all others. "

Rhem Kerwillig was getting the idea. The thing that called itself "Battlemaster" was having a religious experience. It kept talking about these huge ruins with words of extreme reverence. This was like the Forest of Batum to the Batumites, or a shrine for the Habitans.

"The holy of holies, eh?" he said.

With a terrible sadness the Battlemaster pressed on. They strode through the great hangar like space until they reached an enormous door, an entrance thirty meters wide, and went on into an even vaster space than that they had left behind.

And here was the sovereign lagoon, and in it the withered remains of the Highest Forms, a crowded jumble of blackened, twisted shapes, interlocked around the Origin Form itself.

Desiccated flesh forms crunched as the Battlemaster strode into the mass, heaving things apart to reach the center.

And there, fused together, were the Originals, manubria extended in the death agonies. Here they lay, the last survivors of an empire of genetic control and terror that had run roughshod over dozens of solar systems, exterminating all other life.

To this twisted mess of gray ropes the Battlemaster paid final homage.

Now was the end revealed in these tattered wisps. Roasted alive in their glorious envelope of luxury mud, consumed by the avenging fire kicked up by the Batrachian superweapon, they had then been preserved for aeons by the silence and the thin atmosphere in this deep, protected place.

Rhem stared at the things; images of worms and snakes, and things studded with what looked like tongues made of tar, ran through his mind. It was vaguely disgusting, like the charred black entrails of some enormous animal.

And yet this was something that made the Battlemaster worshipful. Rhem had always wondered what the "thing" was with religion. He had never felt its call himself; primal human atheism was his creed. But now he felt the awe and reverence that imbued the alien creature that had enslaved him.

All of this huge thing they had climbed down inside was like a city of some kind. And this was a cathedral, or a temple perhaps.

But it was all dead, all dead long ago.

"Now witness the Highest Forms, see the glorious ones where they are fallen," the Battlemaster's voice spluttered. It gestured to the things it stood among.

Glorious ones? "These were your rulers?" said Rhem.

"Human concept does not express well. These were origin of Empire, these were Gods."

Somewhere at the back of Rhem's addled wits there was a memory of history class at social school. A teacher talking about "God-Kings" of human antiquity, showing them video concerning the Great Pyramids in Egypt.

"We had 'em, too, God-Kings. Built pyramids for them, killed each other for them."

The Battlemaster was not interested.

"Witness this, and then come. We return to surface."

"We're going back? All that way?"

"We must go. You are witnesses now. You have seen what was the center of all intelligence, all strength, all majesty. This was the beginning of the higher nervous system."

The words had a weird ring to them.

"You really believed in it all, didn't you?" Rhem said, misunderstanding the nature of the Battlemaster. "You believed you were a superior lifeform. "

"Human concept system does not well describe."

"This was it, wasn't it? This was your homeworld. "

"Yes."

"And these were the ruling lifeforms, and they recruited you and they sent you out to destroy everything else that lived for them. "

"Expansion was prerogative of higher nervous system. "

"But something went wrong, your homeworld was destroyed, everyone was killed, except you. "

"Long ago. No life existed on your planet then. The galaxy would have been ours."

Rhem felt a sense of triumph; he was finally coming to an understanding of all this.

"You're all alone, then. The last of your kind. "

"Yes, this is possible." Even this must be faced.

"What are you going to do now?"

There was no hesitation. "End everything. Nothing will be desecrated by humans who come after. "

"You're going to kill yourself?"

To this the Battlemaster made no reply.

"How do you intend to do it?" said Rhem, unfazed. In fact, Rhem would have been perfectly happy to help.

"We will set the controls for the heart of the sun."

"What?"

"Move," the Reena thing said.

Back through the sacred chambers of the dead gods they stumbled.

"God-Kings?" said Heldheim.

"Yeah, that's what held this together, it was all a religion. The rulers were the Gods."

"Do not talk on radio channel," the Reena thing said, giving Heldheim a hard shove.

They reached the great spiral ramp and started up it. The suit lights picked out the mouths of the openings on the interior side, like an ascending series of eyes filled with nothingness.

The climb was a long one, and Rhem sank into a semiconscious stupor after half an hour of it. When this was over, if it ever was over, and he got back to civilization again, he planned to rent a hotel room

and stay in it for a full month, sleeping, just getting the ache out of his poor, abused feet.

Abruptly there was commotion. Bullets whipped past over their heads by less than an inch.

Rhem ducked with the good instincts of the dubtiger and hit the floor hard enough to knock the breath out of his body.

Things moved in a blur. The Battlemaster jumped up the sidewall of the gallery and slid through one of the many holes that pierced it.

Heldheim was lucky at first, but the Reena thing was not because it took the bullet that would have cut through the admiral's head. Reena's body absorbed three rounds and fell facedown on the ramp.

Heldheim ran and then tripped and rolled down the surface to a point behind Rhem, who was just below the line of sight of whoever was shooting at them.

"Who the fuck is that?" Rhem screamed over the radio on the all-channel setting.

The shooting ceased.

"Who is this talking?" a woman's voice said.

"Name's Rhem Kerwillig, and I'm here with Admiral Heldheim. "

"Admiral, you're alive?" The voice expressed incredulity,

"Yes," Heldheim said with renewed hope for survival.

"Who did we hit, then? And what are you doing here?"

"You hit somebody who used to be human," said Rhem bitterly. "I knew her then, oh, how I knew her. But these fucking things took over her body. She was, I don't know how to say it, she was completely changed, I mean she was gone, she died. Something else was living in her. "

"How do we know they didn't take over your body?"

Rhem swallowed hard; he hadn't thought of that. What if they just killed him to be sure?

"Oh, shit, I don't know. I don't know anything about this. I was just holed up, outside the law, and this thing came in and made me go with it. And it killed everybody else, 'cept Larshel, it took him over like it took over Reena. And since then I've seen stuff, oh, man, I don't know how to say it. I mean, you wouldn't believe the weird shit I have seen. "

"Yeah, don't try right now. Just answer questions. "

"Yeah, fine with me. "

Suddenly the form of Reena jumped and twitched and her suit seemed to explode outward. Something white and gray moved across the surface of the ramp toward Rhem and Heldheim with the speed of a striking snake.

They screamed and hurled themselves away, and Rhem was the quicker by a good meter. He moved with the speed of instinct, like a rat dodging a rattlesnake.

The thing was on Heldheim's suit. It tore a way inside, through the seam under the right arm, frantic to get to warm flesh.

Heldheim tried to stop it with his left hand. It broke his wrist with a pair of small tentacles, and then it was inside and on his skin.

Heldheim was up on his knees and shrieking for mother and mercy and all the other things that people shriek for when such agony as this is applied. His shrieks rang over the comms channels as his body was invaded and taken as hostform.

"What the fuck is happening?" Chang screamed.

"It's on him, that thing, it came out of Reena and it's on him. Oh, shit, I saw it, it's inside his fucking suit! I saw it get in. "

Heldheim was springing about with the desperate energy of a bucking bronco as his screams ascended into shrill whistles of agony.

"Fire!" Chang said.

Bullets smashed the helmet and sent a fountain of red spray across the ramp surface.

It evaporated in seconds into the thin cold gas around them.

"Move, Rhem Kerwillig, before it can get after you!" the same woman's voice said.

Rhem needed no further urging; he sprinted toward them.

Behind him Heldheim's body came back to life and began to hop after him. More gunfire smashed it down and tossed both it and the dying Secondary Form inside it back down the ramp.

Rhem looked back and then slowed his pace. The thing was dead; not even the alien horror could live through that.

The people with guns were coming out of concealment. The woman was urging them to extreme caution.

"There's still one unaccounted for, where the hell is it?"

Rhem pointed to the eye-shaped opening on the inner wall of the gallery. "That's the one that used to be Larshel, it went into the pit through there. "

"It went through one of those openings?"

"Yes."

"Shit, it's climbing past us. Damn it, but it is just so damned, fucking tricky!"

Two of the figures carrying guns scrambled into the nearest hole and leaned out over the pit, playing their lights upward and then downward.

"Missed him, it got past us!"

"What's it trying to do?" a second woman said.

"It told us we were witnesses. We had to go back to the surface. It's gonna set the controls for the heart of the sun. "

"It said that to you? It talks?"

"You bet it talks. This was its homeworld, it took us to see the Gods."

"The Gods?"

"God-Kings then, I don't know. Anyway, they're all dead and they've been dead for a long time. "

Chang understood. "It's trying to get back to the Wu. Then it's going to jump the Wu into the primary, set off a supernova. "

"Oh, shit. "

"We better hurry. Move it, everyone, back to the surface, we've got to stop it from getting away. "

But even as they ran up the ramp, Chang knew she had been beaten again. The thing had got past her and was no doubt moving up the ramp much more quickly than she could.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

THEY RAN, THEY SCRAMBLED, BUT IT WAS STILL MORE THAN an hour before they staggered out of the caves and recovered the surface of the dead homeworld of the Gods of Axone-Neurone.

The shuttle from the Wu was gone.

Chang squatted down in despair, her breath echoing harshly inside her suit.

Neither of the drop ships could get off the surface, so they were stuck. If the Wu did what she expected it would do, they would die here when the primary exploded.

Caroline Reese understood all this perfectly well; she, too, felt a familiar sense of utter despair. This was the end, then, of their lives, in total waste, when they had so much strange and terrible information to give to the rest of humanity. It would all disappear with them. This left her feeling intensely angry and at the same time ready to laugh. It was inexplicable but there it was. The universe was a helluva place to live in, and it was just as bad to die in, too.

And then abruptly there came new hope. The comms crackled into life and Captain Thama of the frigate Essex broke in.

Essex was the advance guard of the Fleet, and she was insystem and close by the dead planet and in fact had already launched her pinnace boat for a rescue snatch from the surface, responding to the maydays from the Shaka's drop boats.

Chang moved across to the second drop boat and went inside through the evac lock. She turned on the boat's pilot commo station and got video of Captain Thama, a brown-skinned fulesian male with a serious demeanor.

Chang had no time for ceremonies. "Captain Thama, I'm Colonel Luisa Chang. I've got something that has to be relayed to Fleet Command. "

"Yes, Colonel, anything we can do."

Chang wondered, Was it possible? A Fleet captain prepared to cooperate for once-maybe her luck had changed.

"Tell them to hold off. If they come insystem the alien is going to jump the Empress Wu right into the center of the primary. It'll take it supernova and we'll lose everything here. Maybe even some ships from the Fleet. "

"Right away, Colonel Chang, your message is going on Deep Link now," came the response.

A moment later Thama was back. "Will you be ready for pickup by the pinnace in twelve minutes' time?"

"Damn right we'll be ready. Just tell them to make it snappy and be ready to jump at a moment's notice. That thing may not be waiting for the fleet to arrive before it jumps the Wu. "

Thama gulped; he had a thin neck and his adam's apple bobbed up and down.

"Oh, and one more thing," said Chang. "We have two men without spacesuits, so I hope that pinnace has some spares so we can get them out of the ship they're in without having to run a relay. "

"There are extra suits aboard the pinnace, Colonel, I'm sending instructions to the boat now. " Thama shifted slightly and looked away and then back to his conversation screen.

"All right, Colonel, got a reply off Deep Link for you. It says, 'Hold your position until pickup from Essex. Fleet Command will decide the course of subsequent action. The enemy is to be captured if at all possible. If that is not possible it is to be destroyed by combined Fleet action.' "

"Oh, no," groaned Chang. "Who's giving those orders?"

"That'll be Fleet Command, Colonel, Admiral Careno."

"If he comes in with the fleet I'm sure the alien will jump the Wu straightaway. It won't risk being disabled and captured. "

Seeing the look of disbelief on Thama's face, Chang hastened to try to explain.

"We've got a man here that we rescued from the thing. For some reason it never touched him. Told him he was to be a 'witness.' It told him what it was going to do."

"It told him?" said Thama. That was new to him; in his briefing the aliens only killed and destroyed, they never spoke to their victims. They certainly never let anyone live long in their proximity.

"It took him and Admiral Heldheim as prisoners down to the most sacred place on this burned-out old planet. Right inside this mountain I'm standing on."

"Are you saying Admiral Heldheim was alive?"

"He was alive until about an hour ago. He was killed by the aliens then in their usual manner. We then shot his body to fragments to make sure we killed the thing that was inside it. "

Thama's eyes were bulging. They had shot the body of a sector fleet admiral into fragments? And that admiral had given up his ship's Baada initiation codes? Thama gasped for air.

"This man was in the company of the alien?"

"Yes, and I realize he has to go into quarantine. We all have to go into quarantine. Probably you will, too, it's all under Directive 115. "

"Shit," said Thama, who glanced to one side as he sought some information from a side screen. "Damn it, you're right. Just my luck."

"It won't be so bad; luxury habitat."

"Quarantine with nobody but ITAA, oh, yeah, great."

Chang changed the subject. "The other thing is that this is probably the alien homeworld. We need to study it, in case this ever happens again. But we're going to lose it if he jumps the Wu into the sun. "

But Thama was still cursing his luck. "Quarantine, and who knows for how long? Shit. "

Chang felt the old irritations at work once more.

"Look, Thama, you'll get paid full salary all the while you're lounging in the pool and playing tennis and golf. It'll just be an extended vacation."

"All those medical tests"

"Shut it, Captain, I don't want to hear any more whining from Fleet officers. "

That got his attention; his eyes narrowed.

"Look, it's the damned thing's homeworld. We need to try and keep it for research purposes. "

"I don't know, Colonel. I'll pass your comments out on the Deep Link. If Fleet Admiral has any message for you I will relay it at once. Now, if you'll get ready for the pinnacle I have to get on to some other things."

Chang turned around with a heavy sigh. She could only hope that the Fleet Command would pass her recommendations up the Deep Link to Over-Cluster. And then she could only hope that Over-Cluster

would not make them a political football. And then, that they would act on them instantaneously, and by that time this whole place would probably be gone in supernova fire.

Virtually dazed, she opened the airlock; the thin air brought in more dust. She forgot the Schlesinger, leaving it hanging on the back of the chair.

Povet and the others were waiting for her.

"Well, we're due for pickup in a few minutes. They're going to land a pinnace right in here, so we'd better take shelter inside the drop ships. Then we need to move ass and get on board and get the hell out of here. "

"The alien is going to take the primary supernova, isn't he?" Povet said suddenly.

Trust Povet to have worked it out.

"The alien gives every indication of intending to suicide and to take every last trace of his race into nothingness with him, or it, or whatever the hell it is."

"Shit," Rhem Kerwillig said. "I hope that boat gets here in time. "

He sounded so calm, though it was primarily from exhaustion, that Chang wondered if he'd caught a case of phlegmatism from Jean Povet.

Just then Povet looked up and started to move; one hand pulled her Schlesinger up into firing position, the other slapped around the front grip.

But there was a burst of firing from behind them and Povet was hit and crumpled up and went down.

Chang was already diving away, and she already knew who was shooting and who was to blame for letting him.

Whoever had her Schlesinger didn't know how to use it all that well; Povet and Pentofski were his only victims on the first pass.

Then the ensigns were firing back with their side arms, and the gunman ducked back into the second drop ship, where he'd been hidden.

"You fool, you can't get away with this," screamed Chang into the commo as she scrambled around to the side of the ship.

"Fuck you, Colonel," came the chilling response. "You'll be dead and I'll get away and no one will ever find any evidence anyway, and if they do they'll have to believe that it was the alien thing, the one that's hiding in that man you brought back. "

There was a tinge of madness in his voice.

"Captain Cachester, we need that man, we need to know everything he knows about this thing, don't you see that?"

"Shut up, Colonel, You said yourself the fucking thing's going to kill itself. Let it, and then all this will be

over. "

The Schlesinger fired again, a quiet sound in that thin air, but the detonations of the armor-piercing rounds it was firing were clear enough. Rock flew, and so did Ensign Diaz, who was hit in the face mask and killed instantly when he showed himself to get in a shot.

The other ensign, Orshem, stayed low, too frightened to move.

Cachester shifted out of the hatch and pursued the others around the drop ship. It was the only cover, other than the broken rock at the fault line.

They played a deadly game now, Cachester stalking around the drop ship while they did their best to keep it between them and him.

Cachester wasn't listening to any further entreaties. He was too far in now, they had to die.

He ran, the Schlesinger spraying bullets. Kerwillig and Hopester stayed ahead of him and he missed them.

Luisa Chang had folded herself into the gap between the drop boat's main propulsion tubes.

When Cachester ran past she slipped out behind him and dove into him from behind, knocking his legs out from under him and bringing him down.

He went down but he kept the Schlesinger; it was still firing as he fell and bounced on the ground. Chang took bullets in her left leg and her right hand.

The pain was terrible; her leg was gone. The suit resealed itself in seconds and she was still alive, but she knew her leg was gone, and when she lifted her right arm she knew her hand was smashed, too. Then there was just the pain.

Cachester was on one knee, swinging the gun down to aim at her.

Her time was up, it seemed. How futile, how sickeningly hateful it was to die at the hands of this accursed idiot Cachester.

He fired, but before he had the aim, and the first bullets went wide.

The clip was finished.

With a curse, Cachester tore it out and searched for another.

Chang crawled toward him.

Cachester had another clip, but he fumbled it and it fell into the dust. He screamed curses and bent down to pick it up.

Chang was almost there. With her good hand she reached out to get a grip on his boot. She was hoping to be able to swing her right leg around and kick him somewhere in the crotch area.

Cachester had other troubles, though. Caroline Reese had thrown herself at him and knocked him

away from the ammo clip. With a snarl of rage he swung the Schlesinger like a club at her helmet and knocked her down. She rolled away, her helmet cracked but not broken.

Cachester groped for the clip, found it, and shoved it into the Schlesinger. He pressed the stud, but nothing happened.

Chang sprawled there, her leg hurting more than she had ever dreamed anything could hurt; she was done, nothing left to give.

The clip was still not in position correctly. Cachester screamed a curse, yanked it down and reinserted it and pressed it home until it clicked.

The curses changed to cries of triumph as he swung it up and aimed down at Chang.

Luisa felt her heart freeze.

And then another spacesuited figure appeared and struck the Schlesinger away and put Ensign Diaz's side arm against Cachester's chest and fired.

Cachester seemed to implode, collapsing away from Luisa's viewpoint and disappearing.

It was Darel Hopper; his face was tight with the tension, his eyes staring. He dropped the side arm suddenly and knelt beside her.

"Luisa." The look in his eyes was almost worth the pain.

"Well done, Mr. Hopper," she managed to say before she fainted.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

GREAT SHIPS OF SPACE HURTTLED INTO THE SYSTEM OF THE SMALL red sun. Like newborn moons of war they blinked into view far above the dead world of the self-styled Gods of Axone-Neurone.

Their names were like glittering shards of human history at its hottest Bellerophon, Sennacherib, Tiberius, and Lehard. With them came the breath of human warfare, for they were the end result of a lengthy line of innovations and improvements that stretched back to the days of ancient Greece.

They came in the way of all Baada-drive ships; one moment they were not there and the next they were. They dumped grav waves and fired attitude thrusters to control spin while they selected orbital paths around the dark second planet.

On their arrival turned the tide of history; on this alien strand would all be decided for the duration of humanity's existence.

Watching them with emotionless optics was the Battlemaster.

From the bridge of the Empress Wu the Battlemaster initiated the great ship's Baada drives. It knew that these other huge ships were as deadly as the one it controlled. It could not fight them and it could not outrun a fleet equipped with the smaller, faster models like the Essex, which could be seen boosting into

hyperbolic orbit outbound from the planet below.

A shuttle rose to meet the ship. The Battlemaster waited. That shuttle had to make safe harbor first, before the next move.

There was a high skirling song in the Battlemaster's mind; it had lived to see remarkable things. It had survived beyond all calculable lifespan, and there was nothing left of the old world except for sacred fragments that could only be defiled by the overpowering might of the humans.

It was almost time.

Luisa Chang woke up on the pinnacle during the boost to Essex; the pain from her smashed-up thigh was too much just then for the pseudomorphine to overcome.

She screamed for a while.

Then the boost phase was over and they were in free-fall and the pain subsided enough so she didn't feel the need to scream, but every time her ruined leg touched the webbing it sent cascades of agony through her body.

Sweat had pooled in her suit; it was suddenly cold, and she shivered.

Suddenly there was someone standing beside her. Not Jean Povet, whom she expected, but Professor Reese.

"Hello, Colonel," said the big, soft blonde who had started this thing, just a few incredible days before.

"What are you doing here?" Luisa said. The woman seemed all to blur at the edges. Chang realized she was loaded with pseudomorphine.

"Where's Povet?" she mumbled.

Reese leaned forward to hear more clearly. "Povet was shot, remember? "

"Oh, shit. " The memories slammed home. Chang felt a spike of mortification thrusting right through her. It was all her fault.

"Anyway, Povet is alive."

"Alive? Oh, thank you, thank you." Luisa felt the tension relaxing. Povet was alive.

"What's going on?" she whispered at last.

"Povet is doing pretty well, I've got her in the other emergency medicouch. Cachester and her, then you. You're going to make it, I think; vital signs are good. The med software gives you better chances than Cachester, anyway. "

"Well, that's good news, I guess."

"Essex is picking us up in two minutes. The rest of the Fleet is jumping insystem now. "

"Damn, and the Wu?"

"Still there, in a lower orbit, right now on the very edge of our horizon. "

Professor Reese leaned over; she seemed quite calm and almost relaxed.

"Povet's going to be all right?"

"She has two chest wounds; one lung collapsed, but the other's still going strong. She made it through boost phase, so she can make it through the rest. As will you, Colonel Chang. I think you must be very tough, Colonel; you must be as tough as old saddles, if you don't mind me saying so."

"What would it matter if I did mind?" Chang said before she gave a little shriek as the chair's webbing impacted the medipack around her shattered leg.

"Shit, but I wish this didn't hurt so bad. "

Reese sympathized.

"This boat doesn't have any more painkillers or I'd have given them to you."

No wonder she felt she was wobbling around on a cloud.

"What about the other ones, Diaz, Pentofski."

"Dead, I'm afraid, so Cachester will go up on murder charges."

"Where's Hopester?"

"Sitting forward, with the other one. They're both in a state of shock; I guess I'm in one, too, but I just don't know it." Reese wore a sad smile.

"Well, Professor, you probably took twenty years off your sentence back there. You risked your life and you saved mine. "

Reese was nodding, carrying on some internal conversation for a few moments; finally she said, "Except that before they can even sentence me at all we have to get out of here alive. What are our chances of that, Colonel?"

The Essex was looming up on the forward viewscreen like some gargantuan gray football.

"Just pray that Thama's got his initiation codes in place so he can jump quickly."

And then they were in the docking pathway and were taken aboard.

The pinnacle rattled and bumped through the access tube to the docking bay. They were able to float out.

Luisa was destined for the low-grav medcenter and two orderlies were there to float her away, along with the unconscious Povet and Cachester.

She spoke briefly to Thama, but the captain was preoccupied with the effort of keeping the Wu in sight through the Essex's probes. So far the great battleship continued to ride peacefully in orbit. She had not responded to the probes, not even one that came within a thousand kilometers of her.

Luisa fought off the med team's attempts to sedate her. She demanded ancilophen injections and more painkillers.

They protested that she would damage her nerve tissues with so much ancilophen.

"Damn the fucking nerve tissues, I have a job to finish!" she grated.

They gave her the ancilophen. Someone set up a portable screen set by her bed. On the viewscreen the Empress Wu continued to float against the darkness like a great spherical jewel cut from dark amber.

Thama came on line suddenly; his face was tight, he licked his lips nervously.

"Sector Fleet is insystem," he said. "Admiral Careno has ordered lead ships to open fire and disable the Wu. "

Chang shut her eyes; the ineffable stupidity of Fleet commanders continued unabated.

"Initiate your drive sequence, Captain. There won't be much time.

"Once initiated we will have to follow through to jump. If you're wrong then we will be breaking Fleet discipline. I'll face a court-martial. So will you. "

"But not until after quarantine, Captain," she murmured.

Thama looked at her and then laughed. He choked it back after a few seconds.

"Initiate Baada sequence," he said.

Chang wondered if she'd been had once more. The thing was tricky, there was always a feint.

Except that she had the words Rhem Kerwillig said it had used. That man wasn't making this up, no chance, he'd been through hell and back, no reason to make anything up.

What if it didn't suicide? What if it tried to run?

And then the Fleet battleships Tiberius and Sennacherzb opened fire with their main armament.

The Wu twitched and was gone. Frantically probes sought her destination and measured the energy dump.

Then equally frantic calls for Baada initiation ran through the fleet.

The dim, red primary wobbled.

The grav waves hit first, and every ship insystem knew immediately what was coming.

One by one they initiated drive and spun outsystem on emergency jump trajectories that would scatter

the fleet over a cubic parsec or more.

Essex was one of the first and thus carried her contents to safety. But for the largest vessels this was a problem. To reach Baada point might take them minutes.

Aboard the flagship Eisenhower Admiral Careno bellowed for immediate drive initiation. Fingers stabbed in codes, computer systems delivered progress in state-of-the-art speeds, and minutes crawled by with a dreadful finality.

The primary flashed and then exploded into a small supernova, consuming much of its remaining mass in a last brilliant display against the backdrop of the jeweled, uncaring universe.

A huge tide of superheated plasma and gas came surging out of the system's center, crisping and annihilating everything in its path. The inner planet went first, devoured in less than a minute; the second planet went, too, scorched by the flash and now dismembered in tremendous violence as its rocks returned to dust and hot gas and flowed on, outward to the void.

END