

Quest for tomorrow: In alien Hands [158-011-2.9]

By: William Shatner

Synopsis:

Book two in the Quest series. An alien hands

Jim Endicott is a man with a secret--hidden even from himself. Encoded somewhere in his DNA, entwined with the mystery of his birth, is a cybernetic weapon that can alter the balance of power in the galaxy. Yet all Jim knows is that he has been turned down by the Space Academy and rejected by Cat, the woman who taught him to love. And to make things worse, he is being pursued by two alien operatives--one sworn to destroy and the other to save him!

Offered sanctuary and a position of honor on the planet Albagens by his alien ally, Korkal, Jim declines both. He knows that he must take his destiny into his own hands, no matter what the cost.

On a planet where life itself is for sale, Jim becomes a mercenary, a warrior for hire to the highest bidder. There, in an unforgiving campaign of planetary conquest, Jim assumes for the first time the imperatives of command, and learns the first and most difficult lesson of his career. Amidst the horrifying brutality of high-vacuum war, he discovers which side he is really on.

Jim's place is with the Free Planets. The secret encoded in his DNA can be a weapon for either good or evil, but it must be controlled only by a force both willing and ethical. Jim realizes that he must become that force.

To forestall the conquest that threatens all that is enduring in the galaxy, Jim must swallow his wounded pride and accept the help of the mysterious entity known as Delta. Soon he finds himself preparing to battle the dreaded Hunzza Fleet, the deadliest armada the Universe has ever known, armed to destroy not only Jim's home planet but the very star that Gave him life.

In this second QUEST FOR Tomorrow novel, the famed Star Trek star and author continues a series that is crackling with high-tech action, rich with memorable characters, and bright with the glow of a legend in the making. Each carefully researched adventure is complete with a special bibliography designed to assure scientific accuracy, provide essential guidance, and suggest fascinating directions to explore.

World-famous Captain Kirk, William Shatner is now celebrated as a best selling author of science fiction adventure. In Alien Hands is the second in his QUEST FOR TOMORROW series.

IN ALIEN

HANDS

QUEST FOR TOMORROW

WILLIAM

SHATNER

Harper Prism

Harper Prism

A Division of HarperCollins Publish

10 East 53rd Street, New York, N.Y. 100225299

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright 1997 by William Shatner

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

For information address HarperCollins Publish

10 East 53rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10022.

HarperCollins , --" , and Harper Prism are trademarks of HarperCollins Publish Inc.

Harper Prism books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use. For information, please write:

Special Markets Department, HarperCollins Publish

10 East 53rd Street, New York, N.Y. 100225299.

Printed in the United States of America

First printing: December 1997

Designed by Lili Schwartz

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Shatner, William.

In alien hands / William Shatner.

p. em. -- (Quest for tomorrow)

ISBN 0-06-105275-2 (hardcover)

I. Title. II. Series: Shatner, William. Quest for tomorrow.

PS3569.H34715 1997

813'.54--dc21 \*

CIP

Visit Harper Prism on the World Wide Web at

<http://www.harpercollins.com>

It had started out as a hiss--a mere hint of a sound--something akin to the sibilant sigh of a serpent. Then gradually through the years, the sound inside my head increased in volume. It was like sitting beside a radio, searching for sound yet receiving none, giving only that empty static that spoke at nothing. I've heard of the music of the spheres, but surely this was not it.

I found there was a name to what I was hearing: tinnitus, and it was driving me mad. I'd like to dedicate this book to those people I have visited working in research and clinical studies. They have made the world once again a glorious place. To the doctors at the Oregon Health Science University, Robert Johnson Ph.D., and Jack Vernon, Ph.D." and the people at the American Tinnitus Association (they need research funding, by the way), and especially the kind, ministrating medic ants at the University of Maryland, Dr. Pawel Jastreboff in particular. Thank you, thank you, thank you. May you help others as you have helped me

are products i real.

## NEOICATION

It had started out as a hiss--a mere hint of a sound--something akin to the sibilant sigh of a serpent. Then gradually through the years, the sound inside my head increased in volume. It was like sitting beside a radio, searching for sound yet receiving none, giving only that empty static that spoke at nothing. I've heard of the music of the spheres, but surely this was not it.

I found there was a name to what I was hearing: tinnitus, and it was driving me mad. I'd like to dedicate this book to those people I have visited working in research and clinical studies. They have made the world once again a glorious place. To the doctors at the Oregon Health Science University, Robert Johnson Ph.D., and Jack Vernon, Ph.D." and the people at the American Tinnitus Association (they need research funding, by the way), and especially the kind, ministrating medic ants at the University of Maryland, Dr. Pawel Jastreboff in particular. Thank you, thank you, thank you. May you help others as you have helped me



To Bill Quick, in whose friendly hands this book resides. Other hands that helped along the way, or at least applauded:

Caitlin Blasdell John Silbersack Jim Burns

My thanks.

"A reasonable probability is the only certainty.

--EDGAR WATSON HOWE

"Something magnificent is taking place here amid the cruelties and tragedies, and the supreme challenge to intelligence is that of making the noblest and best in our curious heritage prevail."

--CHARLES A. BEARD

tOO am a rare Pattern." --AMY LOWELL

HANDS

Targos, called the Hunter, contemplated the demands of his own gene pool. He was not without a sense of humor, at least what passed for such among the dour, saurian Hunzza. And so he understood that his reaction to what he had found in the wreckage of Delta's satellite was not entirely a product of the nature of the find.

"I hunt because I am," he murmured as he reviewed the results of his tests on the fragment he had found. Then he laughed. With Thargos, as with all of his race, much that was carried out verbally in other species was consummated for him with facial expressions. His laughter was expressed as a rapid, rhythmic blinking of the green compound eyes set on either side of his long, snouted skull. A Terran, coming on Thargos unawares, would have thought: What a weird alligator, with those green softball eyes.

"I am, therefore I hunt," Thargos added, acknowledging the modifications Darwin's iron hand had imposed on his DNA. It was in the fit of the two statements that he found humor. It was a very Hunzzan joke. He presumed his delight in it contributed to the generalized perception that the Hunzza had no sense of humor at all.

He stopped blinking and closed his eyes. The bits he'd snared offered only the gauziest of hints: shards of computer technology, not old or new, but different--a hint at the secret the Terrans were rumored to possess, and which had attracted his famous attention; and a name.

Jim Endicott. A human boy.

Thargos was not afraid to know when he didn't know. But he did

WILLIAM SHATNER

fear ignorance in general and sought to erase it ruthlessly within himself. He knew the name and little else. The first stroke became obvious: find the boy.

In his experience, from small steps might come edifices of knowledge. Thargos privately regarded himself not so much a hunter as a builder. But he kept that conceit hidden from his fellows. Among the less reined of his own race, such creativity could be considered a deficit. Certainly it would be thought odd.

Better to let them believe he was only a hunter and a killer. They would understand that well enough.

K orkal Emut Denai rubbed his aching thigh. His people had once walked on four legs, and even after ages of evolutionary accommodation to the physical demands of intelligence, they didn't like to stand motionless for long periods of time. Getting older didn't help any, either, he thought.

"I told you, Captain Sir, it was an error. A mistake, nothing more. My ship is old and prone to breaking down. We didn't receive the beacon's automatic warning. As simple as that."

His voice was breathy. He had trouble wrapping his long pink tongue around the trickier consonants of the Terran language, but he could make himself understood. At least he thought so, though this stiff bonehead of a Terran Navy officer acted as if he couldn't understand a word of it.

"Remove your vessel from this restricted area immediately or we will destroy you," the officer said. This was his third repetition of the same mantra. Korkal was beginning to think he meant it.

"Yes, of course," Korkal replied. "We are having drive problems, you understand. It will be just a little longer."

"Remove your vessel--"

Korkal turned away from the screen and tuned him out. He looked at his chief intelligence officer, and said, "How much longer?"

The CIO interrupted her labors to say, "It's definitely Thargos.

ing for? Did he fred it? Where did he go? I can't stall this iron backed captain forever. What was that?."

"Some sort of nuclear torpedo. Twenty-megaton yield. I think they call it a warning shot." The CIO sounded moderately shaken.

"Skypack in heaven!" Korkal turned back to his screen. "All right, we're goingF

The Terran commander nodded. "Very good, sir. We'll tag along to make sure you don't get lost."

"Yes. Why don't you do that?" Korkal closed his eyes. "Touchy pack rogue, isn't he?"

So the Hunter was here. How intensely ... interesting. What was he hunting?. And did he know another was hunting him?

Korkal felt the reaction drives kick in and allowed himself to relax a bit. So Delta and his satellite were both gone, and Thargos the Hunter had come sniffing around the ruins. But why Thargos, whom the masters of the Hunzzan Empire generally reserved for only the most important tasks?

Perhaps those masters now felt the primitive and insignificant Terrans were important? If so, that was worrisome indeed.

Because the Terrans were important. At least Korkal's people, the Albagens, thought so. Which meant Korkal Emut Denai thought so, too.

Find Thargos, he thought. and the Hunter.

Intellectually, Jim Endicott had been expecting it. Emotionally, it was a boot in the groin, and he hadn't expected that at all.

For a moment he thought his heart had stopped. Then he realized it was his heart that was pounding in his ears like a huge slow drum.

"So you're going back to Terra?" he said. He was proud of himself. His voice sounded steady and unconcerned. Very mature.

"Do you know your whole face just turned bright red?" Cat aid.

"It's hot in here."

"Jim, we're outdoors. See? Sky, trees, park. And the breeze is cool."

She took his elbow and guided him toward a nearby bench. They sat, the perfume of gene-altered tulips rising about them. "Say something," she said.

"I don't know what to say." Should he beg? Yes, he should. "Cat, please..."

"Jim, listen to me." She took his hands in her own. Her fingers were dry and warm. "Things are fine with us. Never better. Isn't this the time to let things end? People always break up when they're angry and miserable. Is that what you want to happen? Is that what you want to remember?"

He licked his lips and shook his head.

"I have to go. The Plebs need me. And I need them. You know it. You know why."

"You need them more than me?" He saw the wrinkle of hurt in her eyes and wished he could take it back. But deep in his mind a tiny worm twisted awake and whined, This can't be happening, I'm not ready.

And suddenly he was sick of himself. He had never imagined himself to possess that snake of neediness whimpering, Me. I'm not ready yet. You

are, but I'm not. Me, me, me... For the first time in his life, Jim Endicott was appalled by himself.

"Oh, jeez, Cat, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. Of course I understand. I do understand."

She squeezed his hands, and this touch of her strength pierced him as nothing had before. He felt tears well in his eyes.

"Oh, dim. Don't cry."

She sounded desolate. He blinked. "No, I won't."

But of course he did, and this was the worst of his body's treacher, for try as he would, he couldn't help blaming her for it. His anger was unworthy of him--and her--but he couldn't escape it. Though he despised himself for it, it was his. And for a moment he hated her for making him see what he was, for unmasking this unexpected ugliness inside himself. :

Know thyself! the sages taught. But if this kind of knowledge was part of growing up, he would rather stay a boy forever. The secret the wise men kept to themselves was that manhood was pain.

Home was ... home. Everything here was physically still the same: the same familiar bed, the same brown curtains, the same orderly cabinets that held his things---the stuff he now thought of as the possessions of a dimly remembered child.

It was all different, invisibly clawed by loss. Everywhere he looked he saw the man he'd thought was his father. Carl Endicott, who had loved him, lied to him, and finally died for him. He didn't know how to deal with Carl Endicott's ghost.

The faint rush of conditioned air shifted slightly as his door cracked open. "Jim?"

"Yes, Morn."

He felt her come closer, and saw once again her tear-streaked fierceness as a flash of bright memory: she had snarled when she fought Delta for his life and her own. And she had forgiven him for killing the man she loved. That he loved. Why couldn't he for give himself?.

"Cat just told me she's going back to Terra."

"Yes."

"Oh, Jimmy." Her cool fingers touched the back of his neck, tangled themselves in his chestnut hair. "It hurts, right?"

He felt the warm huff of her breath on the fine hairs at the nape of his neck as she bent over him. "She does love you. You must try to understand that. But she has to go. And somehow you have to find it in yourself to accept that, to respect it. And to go on."

"I know, Morn. I know."

The bed creaked faintly as she sat. "I haven't told you what Delta told me when we were together." "Mom..."

"I think it has a bearing on this. On everything. I debated whether to tell you at all, but I finally decided keeping it from you would be a mistake. Your father kept things from you for your own good. He meant well, but I think it was wrong."

Jim closed his eyes. That scab was not even partly healed, and he feared ripping open the wound again. Unconsciously he rubbed his stomach, as if the pain were there.

"You know your real mother hid a secret message in your DNA patterns."

"Real, Morn? My real mother? But what's real? You're my real mother--the only one I ever knew--and Dad was my real father... until I killed him. And you know what? Not one damned bit of it seems real at all. Especially whatever it is inside me that I never asked for and sure as hell never wanted. That was what caused all..." He grimaced. "All this."



"Jim. Look at me."

He swiveled slowly in his chair. Tabitha Endicott's features were set and bleak, as if she feared any expression. As if her face might break.

"It isn't your fault. None of it. Not one bit!"

"Mom, I killed Dad."

"Listen to me carefully, Jim Endicott. That was an accident. You act as if you murdered him. But murder comes from the heart, and there was no murder in you. Not for him. You were doing your best to protect us all. A sixteen-year-old boy. And Carl died because of that. If you have to blame anybody, blame him."

She licked her lips and spoke with an intensity that sent shivers up Jim's spine.

"I blame him!" she said.

"Mom..."

"I do, Jim. Your dad was a strong man. Maybe too strong. He kept things to himself. No doubt he thought it was for our protection. But he made that decision, and from it came everything else. If you had known the truth, you would have done things differently. You wouldn't have sneaked your application to the Academy and let Delta find us at last. If I had known, I would have told you. But I didn't know either. Because Carl Endicott didn't tell us. Do you understand what I'm saying?."

"Mom, you can't blame Dad. He was only trying to do the best he could."

"Our lives were at risk, and he never told us. Once, I told myself I understood that. But Jim, it was a crime. In the end I believe he knew that. And he paid the price for it."

As she spoke, her eyes seemed to suck all the light from the room. Jim felt his muscles freeze with horror.

"Don't say that. Mom, please... I can't take it. I killed him, and you're saying it was all right. That it was some kind of judgment."

"An accident, judgment, whatever--as easy to say life killed him. Or Delta. Or that woman he loved a long time ago, loved enough to save her boy and bring him up as his own. Jim... sometimes things just happen. I don't blame him for that, only for some of the choices he made. He owed you--us better

"But I loved him, Mom. I still love him. I miss him so much. And I can't stand knowing..."

In the dim light he saw tears gleaming in her eyes. "I love him, too. But he died in an accident, son, an accident that had nothing to do with you except you were there. He might as well have been struck by lightning."

"I pulled the trigger. I fired the shot that killed him."

"No! That woman, your real mother, killed him, and I will never forgive her for that!"

Jim looked down at his forearms and saw goose bumps crawling on his skin.

"Oh, Mom, I can't... I can't..." He could hardly breathe. "She put it in you. All the death came from it. From those who lusted for it. And worse, from those who will lust for it. It's still there. And you know what it is, what it has to be, don't you?" Numbly, he shook his head.

"It's the secret of the mind arrays, Jim. Nothing else makes sense. Carl knew, and he hid it from you. He knew Delta would tear the whole Confederation apart to make sure nobody else discovered the truth."

"It's worse than that, I think," Jim said slowly, realizing that on some deep level he already knew, and had known ever since Delta unlocked it and sucked it out of him. "It's the plans for better arrays. Stronger ones. Maybe even more dangerous. She had a year to work on them. Delta knew that." He looked down, suddenly ashamed without knowing why. "Dad must have known, too." They stared at each other.

Finally she blinked. "Yes, of course. What else could it be? God, how I hate her."

"Maybe she didn't have any choice either, Mom. Maybe nobody has a choice. Not in the end."

She came off the bed and took him in her arms. Her strength was painful.

"You cannot--you must not--believe that, Jim. To be human is to choose. But for your father's death you had no choice. No choice at all. Someday you'll know that, and be able to forgive yourself."

"When, Morn? When will that be? I don't know where I came from. And now I don't know where I'm going."

She hugged him tighter, because she had no answer for that except her implacable love.

"My poor baby."

"No, Mom, not a baby. Not anymore."

For the first time he began to understand what he had lost. It was too great for tears. Like all the other childish things, even tears had been taken from him.

He had no idea what might be left.

NTERORBIT CONTROL

INN En RIN S;A;IO'I 3:20 HOUr is GMT

At any given time approximately twenty thousand shuttles, satellites, orbiters, transfer tugs, freighters, passenger liners, and fleet vessels were moving through the crowded inner orbital space surrounding Terra. No human mind could keep track of it all. The machines did that. Humans watched, and waited for the inevitable alarms when the machines found something they didn't understand.

"Take a look at this one," Junior Controller Monitor First Class Akwabi Sasteeka said to his supervisor, Gaff Wakamoto.

"Take a look at what?" She leaned over his shoulder and peered at his screen.

"Right there." He touched a set of numbers that had begun to flash red.

"I see it." Nobody else does. According to the computers, it just vanished

Her finely trimmed eyebrows rose against her ivory forehead.

"What are you talking about? Ships don't just vanish." "This one did." "Scoot over."

He did. She scrunched in next to him, took his skull set, and logged herself into his monitor. "You're right. Gone."

"A Con Fleet cargo ship."

She nodded, her eyes closed as data flowed directly into her mind. "Shut up."

Sasteeka watched Gaffs lips as she unconsciously whispered aloud the conversation she'd initiated with Fleet Inner Ring Control. "You guys just lost a freighter. Says here its cargo is classified. How classified? What should we be worrying about?"

Her lips stopped moving. Sasteeka waited until she slipped off the headgear.

"What is it?"

"Start rerouting everything away from the projected flight path. Ten-thousand-kilometer globe. Till we can find out what happened

"Huh? Gail, what was it?"

"Cargo vessel. Transferring nukes ground side from the damaged orbital forts."

"Jesus. Nukes?"

"Get busy. Get it done," she told him.

Targos contemplated the advantages of advanced technology as he supervised the storage of the four nuclear weapons

he'd salvaged from the destruction of the Con Fleet cargo vessel. Ugly, primitive things that glittered like the children's toys they were. He stowed them inside oversize field cages that would entirely mask their crude radiation. When that was done, he reviewed the operation through which he'd obtained them.

After some thought he decided it had been a success. The energies he'd used should have been undetectable by the Terrans' rudimentary scanning capabilities, just as his shadow ship was invisible to them. On their screens it would appear the freighter had simply vanished. One more mystery of the space lanes.

But the nukes might come in handy. He had discovered their location in the same place he'd found other data. The Terran information systems were not as secure as they believed. Not, at least, from beings who possessed modern technologies. And the Hunzza prided themselves on the sharp edges of their science, a science respected and feared by their neighbors and potential enemies.

Rightfully so, he mused. The nukes were indeed primitive, but if you intended murder, a stone ax might serve as well as a gravity disrupter. He didn't know yet whether he would be able to find the boy, or what steps he would take if he did. It might be that his only option would be to terminate Jim Endicott. If that turned out to be the case, a mysterious accident involving one of the Terrans' own nukes would betray no trace of his own claws on the matter.

When one hunted, it was best to be prepared for any eventuality. Thus far he was satisfied he had made the necessary preparations.

"Set course for the Terran colony planet Wolfbane," he instructed his chief pilot.

His lambent green eyes glittered with anticipation. The spoor of the prey burned on his tongue. One human boy. Not much of a challenge for him, but it would have to do.

He smiled. This baring of serrated fangs was not, among his people, a sign of friendship or humor. It reflected the white glimmer of a bonier, more basic hunger.

#### HANDS

Everything around him was charged with memories. Once the Wolfbane spaceport had been just a place. Now it was crowded with recollections of fear. He had fled here and hidden here and escaped from here. Now he simply walked, Cat on his right side, Tabitha on his left. He carried Cat's suitcase. It contained everything of her life on Wolfbane with him and seemed much too small for that weight. He carried that load inside him self as well, and it was choking him.

"Well, this is it. I guess." He heard his own words as a buzzing through distance. They stopped near the boarding gate. "Let me take that," she said. He handed the suitcase over. "Jim..."

He put out his arms, and she stepped into them. The clean smell of her golden hair filled his nose with dry fragrance. Her bones felt thin and fragile though he knew they weren't. He buried his face on her neck. His lips moved against her skin. "I... Cat... such a waste."

Her own voice was a warm sibilance against his ear. "No, Jim. Not a waste. I love you, Jimmy. But I can't love only you. I can't let you have my whole life. I just can't. Tell me you understand that much. Don't spoil everything now."

But I don't understand!

He wanted to shout it into her ear and somehow make her know the enormous losses he had suffered. His past was gone and his future, too, and now she was leaving and taking his present with her. He had nothing left but his anger, and he would die rather than show that to her.

hey say," he husked, "that if you really love something, you have to be able to let it go. I... think that's bullshit."

She moved against him. "You're not letting me go. You still have me. Here." She reached up and gently tapped his skull. "And here." She stepped back and brushed her fingertips across his chest.

They stared at each other. Then her gaze smoked over, and she lifted her suitcase. '- '

"A kiss," she said.

He bent forward. It was a polite peck on the lips. They might have been brother and sister.

"dim, I..."

"No," he said. "I love you, Cat."

She stared at him. Then she nodded, turned, and walked slowly into the boarding corridor. He watched her shape diminish into perspective, though it felt to him as if he were shrinking. "Jim?"

"What, Morn?"

She searched his face. "We should go."

He said nothing. After a while she took his hand and led him away as if he were still a little boy.

He was so angry.

Jim came out of the night searching for things as dead as the pyramids. He saw the fire first as a flicker, then a breeze-tossed beat of light against the dark. The eternal flame of the Spacer's Memorial.

His shoes crunched softly as he crossed the gravel verge, then went silent on grass black in the moonlight. As he walked a wind came up and licked his face with chill. He shifted his backpack uneasily. The reflection of the fire glimmered doubly in his eyes as he approached the great plaque and its list of the holy dead. The unread names seemed to whisper across vast reaches toward him; they cried out for remembrance.

I have nothing for you. he thought. Do you have anything for me?

The Solis Space Academy demanded his parents' genotypes, and they were either gone or unknown. The Academy had filed his own genotype, and it was a horror of secret knowledge. Without the Academy, the white ships would never be his. Did that mean the dream was dead with everything else?

He didn't know. Maybe only the dead knew. And so he had come here to stir the ashes of his hope, to listen to the silence in his heart.

An orca-owl cried out in the shadowed branches beyond the circle that cupped its portion of fire. Someone had cleaned the bronze plaque recently. It gleamed like a coin he'd already spent. He paused before the fire and felt its heat on his face as he bent toward it, but there were no answers in its dance.

All dreams die. Was that what he had learned? Was that what Delta and all the ghosts, old or fresh, had taught him?

He stood with his head bowed, unwilling to read the names imperishably inscribed on the cold metal. Not a tombstone. The corpses of these dreamers had not returned to earthly graves. Somehow that seemed fitting.

He turned as gravel muttered stonily behind him. At first he could see

only another shadow dissolving out of the night. Then he thought: What a weird alligator, with those green softball eyes.

The creature smiled at him.



Korkal Emut Denai walked briskly across the marble-clad inner courtyard of the High Chamberhouse of the Terran Confederation. He ignored the stares he drew from lines of tourists waiting to gawk at the famous places: the Chamber of Deputies, the Nations Council Room, the Confederation Court, and the formal offices of the chairman. The humans near him fell silent as he passed their lines and entered the tall-domed rotunda that opened into the chairman's warren of cubicles. Humans knew vaguely of the existence of alien races, but finding an individual member on their home planet was still uncommon enough to draw their hushed attention. He felt their collective gaze on him as a myriad of small itches beneath his fur.

He veered to his left, away from the public rooms, and approached a small desk unobtrusively blocking an unmarked wooden door. To Korkal's practiced eye the uniformed guard who stared up at him was far too fit for a man who was supposed to look like a time-serving functionary.

"Your chip please?"

Korkal handed it over. The guard clicked it into a reader. A soft chime sounded. "Go ahead, sir."

"Thank you."

The door buzzed. Korkal walked around the desk and pushed through into a long, plainly carpeted corridor. Doorways opened along it into cluttered chaotic offices where staff people waved their arms and shouted at each other. He plodded past them without a glance and came to the end of the corridor, where he paused before another unmarked wooden door. He raised his hand and knocked softly. The sound was dull, betraying the steel beneath the wood.

"Come in."

He turned the knob and entered. The anteroom was medium sized hushed, and dense with the aromas of power. Two muscular males sitting on a leather sofa stood up and turned to face him, their expressions empty and watchful. The young woman behind her desk smiled at him.

"She's waiting for you, Mr. Denai."

"Thank you. Can I go in?"

"Let me check." The assistant lowered her head into an invisible hush screen. Korkal watched her lips move silently. After a few words she raised her head.

"Go right ahead, sir. The door's unlocked."

Korkal had learned not to smile at humans. For some reason they found Albagensian displays of fang unsettling. He didn't really understand this. After all, they did smile at each other. He settled for nodding at the two men as he moved past them. He noted with professional approval that one watched his hands and the other his face all the way in. He was also aware he'd been scanned by systems considerably more powerful than human eyes before he entered the outer hallway.

He carefully closed the door behind him, pushed aside a blue velvet curtain, and found himself in the chairman's working office. He padded across a thick gold carpet and approached the woman seated behind a

wide mahogany desk. The top of the desk' was heaped with papers and chip cases and fries. A half-empty bottle of a popular brand of beer stood next to her elbow, the malty scent of it strong in his nostrils. He found this detail charming.

She stood, smiled, and extended her hand.

"Mr. Denai, it's good to see you again."

Korkal made certain his claws were fully retracted before he took her fingers in his own stubby grip. Albagens did not shake hands with each other. They bowed their heads and closed their lips to show their fangs were hidden. Humans had always killed each other with their hands. In their earliest days his people had done everyday murder with their teeth. In some ways he understood the Hunzza much better than he did humans.

Prior to his only other meeting with this woman her guards had diplomatic status had saved him from that indignity.

Chairman, he said, "as always you are beautiful."

By his own standards she wasn't pleasing--no human was but he had learned that one could never insult a Terran female by calling her beautiful.

Serena Half Moon inclined her head in acknowledgment of his greeting, if perhaps not his sentiment He found her hard to read.

What the humans called a tough cookie.

Her straight black hair was rubbed with gray. It hung loose to her shoulders. Her skin was the color and texture of well-used leather, recalling the sunburned lives of her Navajo ancestors.

Her dark brown irises focused the light strangely into her pupils,

as faint white stars like those of certain sapphires. She was narrow, angular, and tall, with prominent cheekbones and a nose the pharaohs would have recognized.

"Sit down, Mr. Denai." She lowered her gaze to a screen concealed in her desktop. "I see you have rank among your people. I

wasn't told that when we met before. According to this our equivalent title would be count. Would you prefer I use that?"

Korkal remembered she'd come to her present position after a long career in the diplomatic corps. He shook his head as he found the leather chair in front of her desk. "Whatever is the everyday title of courtesy, Chairman. I don't use my ancestral honorific at home either."

"I see. Can I have something brought for you? A drink, a snack?"

"No thank you. Chairman, I think you and I have a problem."

"Oh? What kind of problem?"

"I've discovered evidence of a covert Hunzzan operation here in your

system."

He watched the stars in her eyes go still. "Hunzza?"

"Yes."

"How do you know it was Hunzza?"

Korkal thought her a woman of acute intelligence, and he chose his words accordingly.

"I can't reveal the techniques involved, but I determined to my satisfaction that a craft using shadow ship technology spent considerable time in proscribed areas containing debris from Delta's satellite. I was also able to identify the craft in question and therefore its likely commander."

"I see." She tapped an antique writing pen against her strong teeth, unaware, Korkal hoped, that her gesture had a specific and insulting significance among his people. "What do you think this means?"

"The commander is probably a Hunzzan agent named Thargos. I know him. We have dealt with each other on many occasions. He is not to be taken lightly, Chairman. His masters don't use him for trivial matters. If he is here, he has good reasons, and so do they."

"Is he still here?"

"I don't know. I'll need access to your traffic control systems. With that maybe I can learn more."

"I don't think I can permit that, Mr. Denai." Ah. That was interesting.

"Can you tell me if Delta is dead?" he said.

"I don't believe I can tell you that either."

"Very well. Do you intend to tell my masters, if not me?"

She placed her hands flat on the desktop. Her shoulders stiffened. Korkal was somewhat skilled in reading human body language, but he couldn't tell whether she was angry, frightened, or just determined to reveal as little as she could.

"Please assure your superiors that the government of the Confederation will continue its ongoing dialogue with the Pra'Loch of the Albagensian Empire." Her tone was neutral.

"I will chase him anyway, you know," Korkal sd. "Whether you help me or not. You should also know that when I tried to contact Delta through my usual channels there was no reply." "I wondered why you had come to me personally." "Yes. Do you think I should try to reach Delta again?"

"Tell me more about this Thargos. Perhaps you can change my mind about giving you access to our traffic systems after all."

That was plain enough. Even if Delta wasn't dead, Serena Half Moon had replaced him as the most powerful human on both Terra and Wolfbane. She

was no longer a figurehead masking Delta's real power. Korkal wondered what that meant for relations between Terra aQ.d Albagens.

"Certainly, Chairman. I think that given the changes in our mutual situation the more you know about the Hunzza the better." 'Then by all means enlighten me, Mr. Denai."

Korkal knew that, too, was a confession. He just didn't know if it was a truthful one.

The Albagensian agent returned with some relief to his own craft and found his chief intelligence officer waiting at the door of his private quarters. He opened it, waved one hand at the only chair besides his own in his small shipboard stateroom, and said, "Sit." The CIO pulled the chair closer to Korkal's cramped desk and settled into it. Her brown eyes were red and filmy from lack of sleep. A human would have found her odor offensive, but Korkal merely sniffed the reassuring scent of the ancestral pack.

"Thargos left Sol System three days ago bound for Wolf bane," she said.

"You verified that?"

"The chairman's access codes let us look at everything in their traffic control systems. Shadowship technology relies as much on spoofing large systems as it does on materials science. I looked for what wasn't there, and there he was. He wasn't exactly careless, but it was obvious he doesn't know we are looking for him. His traces would have been a lot harder to find otherwise. How did you talk her into giving us those codes, by the way?"

Korkal gnawed absently on his right thumb-knuckle. "The secret of Delta's computer systems is Terra's only bargaining chip that means anything to the Great Powers. Those Powers that know of it, at least. Essentially that means us. Without those computers the humans wouldn't be at the table at all. Delta used to control that chip, but the chairman wants me to believe she has it now. I don't know if that's true. She doesn't know much about the Hunzza. Or tried to convince me she doesn't. It's hard for me to tell when a Terran is lying. If she does know the Hunzza, she would hide it. She wouldn't want us to know she was talking to them.

"I hinted at my disbelief in Delta's death, and so she decided to give me a taste of her new authority. If Delta were still alive and in power, he would never have allowed us access to those traffic systems no matter what she said. But we got access."

"Would the chairman lie about Delta's own systems?" the CIO asked. "Of course. Whether she has them or not, it's very important for her that our government believe she does. Delta has manipulated things so we've kept the big carnivores like the Hunzza away from Terra's throat. She will want to maintain that attractive status quo. So emphasize that the Pra'Loch should test that as soon as possible. If those systems are gone, we need to know. Make a note of it for my next report."

The CIO raised her right wrist to show the red recording light blinking on her brace link

"Good. As for Thargos, three days is a strong lead. I'd pay a lot to know what he's after."

"I ran the usual probability correlation. Every result above 70 percent indicates a link between Delta's destruction and whatever Thargos is looking for."

Korkal's jaw worked against his fist. There was a callus on his knuckle from the pressure of his teeth over the years.

"One frightening possibility is that Thargos himself had some thing to do with the destruction of the satellite," he said. "It would mean the Hunzza have learned or at least suspect the reason for Terra's importance to us. Although the mere fact of our protection might be enough to attract Hunzzan attentions."

The tip of the CIO's tongue slipped from the side of her blunt muzzle, further evidence of her exhaustion. "Delta's mysterious computer system. We don't know anything about it except it works and is bigger and faster than anything we have. Or that the Hunzza have, from all indications. But frankly there have been times I doubted whether it existed at all. It seemed so convenient for Terra."

"It existed. Take my word for it. And now the question is whether the Terrans still have it or was it destroyed. Or has Thargos somehow gotten it for his masters, which would be an even bigger disaster. I'm torn, CIO. Should I try to dig up answers here or chase after the Hunter?"

"Thargos saw fit to leave, Captain. And he didn't head for Hunzzan space."

"Yes. He's still hunting. Something he found here sent him there. Very well. "Wolfbane it is." "I hope we're right." "So do I, CIO. So do I."

Jim Endicott stared at the apparition striding across the grass toward him.

It reminded him of an alligator though it didn't look like one. It had a flattened head with a long protruding jaw beneath green baseball eyes set into thick ridges of bone. It was about his height. It was slimmer than he was and moved with sinuous grace on squat, massive thighs and calves. Its arms hung to its knees, had two sets of joints that made it move in an eerie, tentacle-like fashion, and ended in five clawed fingers, two of which were opposable. It wore a tight black suit, made of soft flexible material, and boots that bulged in odd places. Its jaw yawned wide to show double rows of teeth guarding a soft pale gullet.

Shadows rustled in the darkness beyond the circle of firelight. Abruptly Jim felt exposed, aware of how alone he was. It was a sharper feeling than the loneliness that had filled his thoughts before. Time began to slow for him as adrenaline poured into his bloodstream. He took a step back.

"Hello," he said.

The alien kept on walking toward him as if it knew him. Jim backed up another step and began to raise his hands. The alien saw this and immediately stopped about three feet away. A reflexive voice in the back of Jim's mind noted nervously, Still in easy grabbing distance with those long arms.

"Good evening, young human male," the alien said. Some part of Jim had expected it to hiss, but its voice was deep and richly colored with faint humming overtones. He had no idea if it was male, female, or some strange alien gender. He did know he'd never seen one of these things before, either in the flesh or in his exobiology studies.

"By your standards I am male," the alien said. "In case it helps you to think of me. Humans seem much concerned with sexuality For my people that is hard to understand."

"You speak Terran very well." Was it reading his mind some how?. Jim wanted to move farther away but, trapped in his ingrained sense of courtesy, he was afraid that might seem "lite. At the edge of his peripheral vision he saw dim shapes press- i ing closer and heard the faint sliding whisper of feet on the grass.

Thargos looked away from him toward the flame. "his is place of memory, yes?"

"Yes. For those who died as humans entered space." "A holy place then?" "You could say that." "My name is Thargos."

The requirements of manners took over again even though voice in his skull was now yammering, Run! Run away!

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Thargos. My name is Jim

He would have offered to shake, but the thought of setting his tint gers into that cage of claws scared him breathless. He flesh torn from the meat of his palms, ripped from the bones on the back of his hands.

"I know," Thargos replied.

The nerves buried in Jim's spine fired a simultaneous that made his shoulder blades twitch. How did he know?. More important, why did he know?.

"I followed you here in hopes of meeting you." ;, Jim's uneasiness peaked. He realized he was shaking deep in adrenaline fugue, ready to fight or run. To hell with tesy. He took two long steps backwards.

"Huhhh... I'd better be going now. My mom--"

Thargos flowed into the space between them as a snake demy fills a rabbit's burrow. His eyes seemed to glow. Jim himself tangled in those eyes. Some kind of hypnotism? With effort he broke eye contact. His pulse pounded in his ears. lungs felt too big for his chest. He risked a quick glance over his shoulder and saw two more of the alligator things moving him from the rear. He lurched to one side, the long muscles legs bunching. He felt the night air touch his face again,

it brushed the sweat on his cheeks and forehead. "Wait!" Thargos said.

Jim split the distance between Thargos and the two aliens at his back. Watch it! his inner voice rapped sharply. wet grass is slippery!

Too late. His right foot skidded as he fought for traction. haft stumbled but didn't go all the way down, and this saved him..

Something hot and bright sizzled above his head. He bounced one fist off the ground, caught himself, and spurted away.

The voice in his skull was screaming: Whatthehell! Whatthehell! Whatthehell!

He saw more figures coalescing out of the night. He curved away from them, felt gravel beneath his sneakers, then solid concrete. His shoes made slapping sounds as he raced across it. He pumped his arms and threw his head back. Cold air burned his throat.

The gate was less than twenty yards away. Behind him the rasp of furious breathing eased closer.

Three figures filled the gate, blocking it. He made no conscious decision. Even the voice in his head had fallen silent. He ran in a kind of silvery limbo, absorbing the shock of his pounding feet with the resilience of his calves and thighs. He put his head down and ran straight toward the figures blocking the gate.

He closed his eyes and shielded his face with his crossed arms just before he reached them. Like playing football.... He slammed into them and felt his shoulder drive against hard muscular bodies. One of them snarled. Then he was through. A surge of triumph quickened him as he whipped himseK toward the safety of the tube station on the corner.

Muted crackling sounds filled the night behind him. Flashes of light, shouts, a single cry of pain. A chorus of big dogs barking.

The harsh light of a stunner beam caught him in full stride and locked



his nervous system into a long, painless spasm. A fading sensation of regret filled him as he fell. He felt the blow when his head struck the pavement only as a sudden pressure before darkness.

The last thing he heard was the dogs still barking and snarling.

Crazily, he hoped the alligators wouldn't hurt them. Then noth  
Although Jim hadn't noticed, it was three members of an Albagensian  
penetration team he had barreled through as he raced between the gates  
of the museum. Later, Korkal's people had carried his unconscious form  
to the war wagon, a lightly minored gray-van they'd brought planet side  
with their squad. The van had been subtly altered so that it might  
pass as a Terran vehicle, since Korkal had decided the mission called  
for stealth rather than naked firepower.

Now he squatted anxiously over the sleeping boy. He was reasonably  
sure Jim had suffered nothing worse than a stun beam and a bumped head,  
but he worried that it was taking so long for the boy to come around.  
"We should have brought a medical kit for humans," he told his CIO. She  
panted softly from her recent exertions as she examined the swollen  
bruise on Jim's forehead.

"We didn't know we were coming into a firefight over this kid.

That's the right word, kid, isn't it?"

Korkal nodded.

"It's a good thing we played it safe and came in the war wagon . with  
a full penetration team, or we wouldn't have him now," the CIO said.  
She snorted. "Some spies we are. You'd think the Woltbane authorities  
would notice a pitched battle in one of their public parks, wouldn't  
you?"

"It was only stunners, thank Skypack. Nothing got blown up. How is  
he?"

"He has a strong pulse although it's fast for a human. Natural enough,  
after what just happened to him. But he's young. If there

isn't any skull damage, he should be all right. I think. I'm no medical officer, especially not when it comes to Terries."

Korkal leaned forward; by human standards he was mildly nearsighted. Beneath the harsh overhead light of the small gray van they called the war wagon, the boy's face looked thin and drawn. There were lines beginning to form in the smooth skin at the corners of his eyes. From what he knew that was unusual. The boy must have endured stresses not usual for a child his age.

The CIO pushed a flop of Jim's hair out of the way for a better look at the wound. A brown crust had formed over a cut in the center of the bruise. At her touch the boy flinched and let out a soft moan. His eyelids quivered.

"I think he's coming around."

"Good. When he wakes up, maybe we can find out why Thargos rushed all the way from Terra looking for him. Nice job tracking down the Hunter so quickly, by the way."

"Thanks. He didn't know we were looking, and so he didn't take precautions, thank Skypack. He thought he was only dealing with Terrans and Wolf bane security. Now he knows better."

"Yes. It seems even the Hunter can succumb to complacency. No longer, though. I hope this Jim Endicott is worth blowing our cover."  
"Thargos got away," the CIO noted.

"Of course. As soon as he saw our team coming through the gate he slithered in the opposite direction as fast as he could go. The Hunter hasn't survived this long by taking chances with his personal hide."

"Hunzza don't slither. And do I detect a hint of admiration?"

Korkal showed his fangs. "Mutual understanding. I'm fond of my hide, too."

"What happened?" Jim Endicott said. "Where am I?"

"Ibans," Thargos said. "What the Seventh Cold Hell were Albans doing there? And who were they?"

He and his battered snatch team were rising rapidly through the night toward the low orbit where his shadow ship waited. He looked at the three with him. They were lucky to be here at all. That had been a full Alban penetration team. The first three through the gate had been followed by five more, all heavily armed. If they'd used anything more than stunners, he and his people would still be in the park, probably as charred black spots on the grass. He clicked his teeth in frustration.

Everything had changed now. He'd thought he had a clear field to snatch the boy, with no one the wiser. Terran technology would not be able to detect his ship. Albagensian science was another matter entirely. He turned to the comm unit that was his link to the shadow ship

"Security status," he said. His voice was soft but burred with tension.

A disembodied voice replied, "Buttoned up tight. We have class one spoofing enabled, and all watches on emergency status." "Have you found that Alban ship yet?"

After a pause, "No. Their technology is equal to ours. Still, we ought to be able to find them if they are in single orbit, but it will take a while. And if they are hiding in that jumble of freighters waiting to off-load, we'll have to crack Wolfbane traffic control to see if we can search them out that way." "Do it." "Yes, sir."

Thargos turned away from the communicator. "Blast the luck!" Yet he knew that was an evasion. Luck was what you got after you did everything else right, and he'd made a major mistake in assuming it was only the Terries he had to deal with. The Albans must have found him with ridiculous ease. He was probably lucky they hadn't blown his shadow craft out of orbit in some kind of spectacularly phony accident. If their roles had been reversed, he certainly would have done exactly that.

Alba and Hunzza weren't officially at war. Not yet. But elements of their fleets had been rubbing up against each other, and the number of fatal "incidents" was mounting. The politicians on both sides were still pretending a peaceful resolution was possible, but the fleet commanders knew better. So, evidently, did whoever was running the pack of Albans that had waylaid him. Discovering that was the first item on his immediate agenda..

Well, not quite the first. "How much longer?" he asked the pilot of the small shuttlecraft.

"Just about now."

The membranes covering Thargos's green eyes flickered. A moment later a loud clang resounded through the hull. Thargos waited while the ship-seals were initiated and then began to climb out of his seat. The round door irised into the wall and light flooded into the dim interior. Faces peered at him out of the glare.

"It's about time!" he said as he clambered through. "Ilgan, what kind of team did you bring?"

The master of the larger vessel cocked his head as if listening to voices only he could hear. "As you ordered, sir. A fully equipped battle company. Twenty troops and all their equipment. And this attack boat, of course."

"Good. Unless that thrice-damned Alban has landed something similar, we might pull this out yet. If we hurry. Make sure every body understands that, if possible, the human boy isn't to be harmed. I want him in one piece. Of course you may kill every

Alban you see. "Sir?." "Yes."

"What if it's not possible? To capture the human."

Thargos flicked his double elbows in and out of joint as he considered. After a moment he opened his mouth wide. His hummingbird tongue vibrated across his teeth. "If there's no other option? Kill him, too."

Korkal was impressed with the way the young human maintained his equanimity. The boy's green eyes focused on his own without wavering.

"I know what you are," the boy said. "You're Albagensians." Korkal remembered to keep his fangs hidden and inclined his head instead. No sense in looking any more fearsome than necessary.

Over the ten Terran years he had functioned as the secret intermediary between Delta and the Albagensian Empire he'd made it his business to learn everything he could about humans, their ways of thinking, their cultures and histories, and anything else he could find that might help him to understand them.

His own masters wanted more from him than just a conduit for messages from the enigmatic Delta. They demanded his interpretations of those messages, the social and cultural contexts for them, and estimates of Delta's thoughts and intentions. It had been difficult for him because humans, though warm-blooded mammals as he was himself, were so different from the communal, pack-oriented Albans. Humans paid lip service to their communitarian instincts, but were capable of a kind of cold-blooded, antisocial egoism that was nearly beyond Alban comprehension. Yet as his understanding of this peculiar trait grew, Korkal thought that in some ways he had become a better agent, less dependent on consensus, readier to make critical decisions on his own. But something about this boy's calm made him uneasy. He tried to think of what it was.

An unsettling feature of human ecology was the pets they called dogs. These animals bore too much resemblance to Korkal's proto ancestors for him to be entirely comfortable with them.

He knew that human reaction to his physical form involved a lot of intellectual and emotional processing around the concept of dogs as pets--although he didn't really resemble their dogs, any more than Thargos looked like their alligators. But each had features that reminded humans of both species, and so humans had a ready-made package of subconscious feelings and reactions when confronted by Albans or Hunzza.

Korkal had learned to manipulate these feelings somewhat, and this had come in handy on occasion. Humans and their dogs had loved each other so long that the primate half of the partnership had forgotten that their pets had teeth. Korkal had found the insight useful more than once. He wasn't sure whether this said more about humans or about him.

Would this boy see him as a friendly dog, or as a wolf?. He knew the difference, although the idea of wild packs disturbed him on some ancient level. At least the boy was maintaining an admirable amount of composure in the face of what must surely have been confusing and frightening situation. Korkal doubted if he had done it any better himself.

But was it composure in the face of a pet, or of a wolf?. Humans loved their dogs, but in some places they still killed their without mercy.

"Yes," he said finally, "I am Alban. That's the short form word. My name is Korkal Emut Denai. Call me Korkal. What's yours?"

"Jim Endicott."

Good. At least he had the right boy. They'd watched rifle through the WoIfbane computers searching for that name. When he'd detected the Hunter's watch on the boy's house set spies of his own, and had come when word arrived Thargos was following the boy on foot. It had looked like a from the beginning, and so it had turned out. But why?. What Thargos want with this youth?

"Jim, I don't want you to be afraid. You're among friends."

Jim turned his head and stared in turn at each of the

Albans crowding the cramped interior of the vehicle.

"Friends? You mean like that alligator in the park? He told his name, too. But I don't think he was my friend."

"No, he wasn't. He was going to kidnap you. And he would succeed if we hadn't gotten to you when we did."

The boy's tongue flicked across his lips. "You rescued me then." He raised his hand to push hair off his forehead, then winced as he touched the lump there. "Okay." "I don't think that's dangerous," Korkal said. "Just a bump." "Hurts like hell. How did I get it? Did you do it?"

"No. You got caught by a stunner beam and fell." i "Oh." Jim went silent for a moment, though his gaze never wavered from Korkal's face. Once again the Alban felt a sense mystery about Jim Endicott, as if there were more to him easily met the eye. To his surprise he suddenly realized he was a bit afraid of him. But that was ridiculous. What did he have fear from one half-dazed human boy?.

Jim moved his shoulder and slipped his backpack down to his lap. His right hand rested protectively on the top flap.

you're my friend, you'll let me out of here now, won't you?"

"Well, I can't do that, but--"

"I didn't think so." Jim's hand moved with blurry speed, van

## IN ALIIN HANDS

Ished beneath the pack flap, then reappeared wrapped around the butt of a huge handgun. Korkal shied back reflexively, cursing himself for his own stupidity. Why hadn't he thought to search that backpack?

A great invisible hand picked up the van and tumbled it like a child's toy. They landed with a crash that split the doors wide open, and Korkal felt himself flying through the air, the terrified howls of his CIO wailing distantly in his ears.

The flat sizzle of energy beams filled the darkness. Those aren't stunners, Korkal thought as he slammed onto the concrete and felt most of the bones in his right arm and shoulder snap like so many dry twigs. Then the blast wave skittered him like a flung stone across the pavement.

The explosion tossed Jim through the night in a low arc that ended in a thick, shaggy hedge. He landed unharmed, cushioned by the leafy branches. For a moment he lay in the bower motionless, catching his breath and his thoughts at the same time.

What in the holy hell?

His backpack was nowhere to be found, but the comforting

weight of the S&R .75 still filled his right hand. He came to a cautious crouch and peered through the brush. Light and sound flashed and roared along the empty street. He saw the hulk of a vehicle overturned a hundred yards away. A pair of huddled forms lay limp beside it.

ii

Something made him look up. A huge indistinct shape floated above him, barely visible against the dim glow of the star fields

' and Wolfbane's two tiny moons. He stared at it and tried to ignore the ache pounding in his skull. It wasn't just the darkness that shielded that amorphous silhouette---the longer he stared at it, the harder it became to see. It seemed to flicker in and out, just at the edge of his vision, like a ghost glimpsed from the corner of his eye. Yet he thought he was looking at it straight on. He'd never seen an attack boat using before.

As he watched, a bright rectangle appeared in the center thing. Dark figures plummeted down, sparkling with light as they lanced the night with energy beams.

He took a deep breath. That overgrown version of a dog called himself Korkal hadn't seemed all that bad, but this was his fight. Making sure to keep the reflective whiteness of his turned away from the revealing glare, he scanned the immediate vicinity and saw that he'd been tossed beyond the focus of battle. The attackers were landing in the street and taking from the few remaining Alban defenders, who crouched whatever cover they could find. Jim didn't have to be a genius to see how this firefight would turn out. Best to be gone before the inevitable ending occurred.

He slipped backwards, using the hedge for cover; then, crouching, he



scuttled in the opposite direction, toward an street running at right angles to the scene of the clash. The park offered no hope of safety; the alligators would no doubt there as soon as they realized he wasn't with the other defenders, Likewise with the Albans, if by some miracle they prevailed.

He knew if he could get across the street unseen, he could himself in the houses and woods beyond. There 'would be a few moments of danger as he crossed the exposed emptiness, that was a risk he would have to take.

He checked his pistol and shook his head as he saw the was still on. He flicked it off and scanned the empty street a final time, Something had shut down all the streetlights, but the glare of the battle around the corner gave some illumination, and." in it he saw for the first time a crumpled figure across the pavement struggling to rise. He squinted. He couldn't be sure, but it. looked like his avowed rescuer, the one who called himself Korkal. And he was hurt. It was obvious in the way he cradled his right arm gingerly against his chest. Jim could hear the Alban's moans--soft and panting with agony. The sound made him recall a dog he'd had as a child, a cocker spaniel named Duke. Duke had been crushed beneath a crumbling wall in an accident. He'd made sounds just like that while Jim cradled his bleeding head until he died. The memory was surprisingly sharp; he thought he'd forgotten, but the pain was as bright as ever.

A shadow wheeled around the corner and resolved into an alligator. It paused a moment as if sniffing the air, then ran directly toward the wounded Alban. Korkal saw him coming and tried to raise his hands. The sound he made was still ringing in Jim's ears when he lifted the .75 and blew the gator right off its feet.

He didn't realize he'd made the decision until after he'd crossed the pavement, scooped up the hapless Alban, and dragged him into the concealing shadows beyond the road.

"Shut up!" he hissed as he yanked Korkal along by main force, Jerking him upright each time he stumbled. He was surprised at how little the alien seemed to weigh. Korkal was shorter than he was, but evidently he was also constructed on a less massive bone structure.

He ignored Korkal's moans of protest and then realized Korkal wasn't protesting, he was groaning because he couldn't help it. But the Alban seemed to have his feet under him now and was doing his best to keep up.

Jim felt a grudging respect. Whether friend or foe, this strange being was one tough little fighter. He kept them going until the sound-and-light show behind them had dimmed almost to nothing and a quick glance at the sky showed that the strange floating vessel was nowhere to be seen.

"Over here," Jim said, and led them to the protective overhang of a large kookananda tree. "Can they find us?"

Korkal was busy stripping pieces of equipment from his belt with his good hand. Jim saw a flash of white along the alien's muzzle and realized that Korkal was gritting his teeth. "I'm dumping everything they might be able to trace. Let's keep going."

Jim tensely checked the trees and houses around them while he waited for Korkal to finish. Lights were beginning to come on,

and he heard voices calling querulously. "Hurry up, we gotta get moving." "I'm ready."

"Can you run okay?."

"If I can't, just drag me."

Jim glanced at Korkal and saw the alien staring back at him. "You saved my life."

"You said you were my friend." That wasn't the reason, not at all, but now was not the time to bring that up.

"I am," Korkal replied. "That might not have been technically true before, but it is now. Get us out of this, and you'll see. Better hurry though. I don't know how much longer I can stay conscious."

"Okay... Korkal."

"Good boy," Korkal replied.

Jim grinned faintly. "Aren't I supposed to say that to you, doggy friend?"

Korkal's jaw dropped. So it was his pet-ness that had him. Well, I can live with that. In fact, I have lived with it. because of it.

"I owe you my life, Jim Endicott. I'll thank you properly later," he said, enunciating his words carefully to make sure the understood. In his own mind it was a vow that only death break--and even then the burden of his life-debt would be on to his family and pack as a whole.

"If there is a later," Jim said. "Let's go."

Jim dragged Korkal stumbling and gasping through the darkness to the only place he could think of that might offer them immediate shelter. As the sounds behind him guttered out he remembered another time he'd run through a Wolf bane night while slaughter and destruction exploded at his back. He wanted all this to go away but knew it wouldn't. Pie would have to deal with it. What about Tabitha? Would they be coming for her now? The bastards had done that before, too.

"Sit there on that bench. I'll put my coat around you. It will help keep you warm."

"What is this place?" "Tube station." "Oh. Primitive..."

Jim raised his eyebrows. "I suppose. I don't know much about Alban technology. Or Albans, either--is getting warm good for you?"

"I'm a warm-blooded mammal just like you are. And I'm freezing because I'm in shock... Awrll--careful.r'

"Sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Korkal had begun to pant rapidly. His eyes would drift out of focus, then snap back. "Is there some place I can get food?" "Food? You're hungry after all this?"

"My body is repairing itself right now, and it's cannibalizing me to do it. I need to get raw material for it to use."

"Your people can regenerate? I never heard of mammals that could do that." "

"We couldn't either till about three of your Terran centuries It's a... you call it nanotech.." an intracellular with my soma-print carried in memory, right down to the level. When something gets out of whack, the nanomachines in and start to fix the damage. The process dumps heat. why I'm sweating so much. At the moment I'm eating Where are you going?."

"Trying to find a public axe. A communications access Mine was in my backpack, but that's gone now."

A shudder racked the Alban. The ruff of fur around his was clotted with sweat. He gave off a sharp, damp odor. "But managed to keep that gun, I see. Skypack! What is it anyway? went through that Hunzza's armor like... I don't know what was like. I've never seen anything like that before."

"Primitive technology," Jim said. "Like this tube station."

effective. Listen, I'll be right back. Will you be okay?."

"I still need food."

The bench was the farthest one from the main loading area,. this time of night deserted, shrouded in shadow. Korkal would almost indistinguishable from a distance.

"There's a public axe near the entrance," Jim said. I'll be back."

Korkal began to pant violently again. He managed a nod, speech was

beyond him.

God he looks bad. Jim's thoughts swirled as he loped the front of the empty station. He was in a kind of shock, emotionally and intellectually. He had to trust his instincts. had nothing else to fall back on, but they had served him before. The first thing was to make sure Tabitha was safe. "Mom?"

"Jim... what is it? Why aren't you home? Do you know time it is? Why do you have the visual off on your axe?"

"Listen, Morn, get out of the house. Get out right now, leave. Go to... uh... the last time we saw Dad. Got that? The place where we saw Dad the last time."

"Jim, what's wrong? Are you in trouble?"

"Morn, I don't have time. You may be in danger. I don't know, but I don't want to take any chances. I'll call you again as soon as I can. But please don't argue with me, just do it Leave right now, okay?" Her voice changed, became tighter and tougher. "All right. It

take me a couple of hours to reach.." that place. You call you hear?"

"Yes, Morn, I will. Now just go, okay?. Just please get the hell of there."

"I'm on my way. Jimmy?."

"What?"

"Whatever it is, be careful. I love you."

"I love you, too, Mom. And you be careful. Now get going."

The connection went dead. He was glad he'd left the visual off. He didn't know what he looked like, but he doubted that his appearance after getting blown up would have reassured her. He stood a moment at the axe unit and tried to order his thoughts. He didn't trust Korkal, but the alligators frightened him on a deeper, more basic level. Mammals and lizards had been enemies for eons, and though he didn't note that consciously, Darwinian inheritance was plucking strings of dread inside him. The riddle of the mind arrays wasn't the only thing imprinted in his chromosomal knowledge.

On a conscious level one thing was sure. Aliens were after him now. There could be only one reason for that. Delta had been terrified that the secret of the mind arrays would be discovered by nonhumans and thus destroy the only bargaining chip Terra held in the greater galaxy. And that secret now lay chained in the DNA within his own cellular core.

He could distill only one thought out of the chaos: he couldn't trust anybody. Of late it seemed the entire universe had conspired to shatter the smugness and conceit of his former life.

It was enough to make a person paranoid. But in the past year he'd learned something interesting about paranoia: sometimes the bastards really were out to get you.

Here. Eat these."

"What are they?"

"Candy bars. Bags of nuts. Out of a machine back there. sugar content. And protein. If your metabolism is anything to mine, they should help."

Korkal peered myopically at the little bars. "What's in them?"  
"Peanuts, chocolate, a bunch of stuff."

"I don't have much choice, do I?" Korkal ripped away the tic wrapping and gobbled several in a few gulping snaps. After moment he seemed to relax a bit. "It should be okay. I can most eat Terrie stuff. The problem is allergies and toxins,

metabolic incompatibility."

"How are you feeling?."

"Better now. Give me a little more time, and I should be to get moving again."

"I'hat's good because I don't want to hang around here. you and I need to talk."

"Yes, we do. You know, you seem like a remarkable boy. I

imagine one of our children handling this as calmly as you have." "I'm not really a child," Jim said softly.

Korkal stared at him. "No, I don't think you are." Suddenly the lurching exhaustion of adrenaline overload led Jim's knees and he sat down hard on the stone bench. The tie alien stirred in alarm.

"Are you all right?"

"Just reaction," Jim said. "Give me one of those candy bars." Korkal passed one over and they sat next to each other, working in companionable silence. Korkal stirred as a couple night travelers approached the distant loading area. Jim put hand on Korkal's knee. "It's okay. They aren't paying any attention.,

Korkal chuffed softly. As they waited a low whooshing began to rise in the air. "Gray-train," Jim told him.

A string of cars slid smoothly out of the far end of the tunnel, single light like a great eye suddenly opening. The travelers boarded and the train greased silently past their bench and vanished

"How do we get out of here?" Korkal asked.

"On the next train." Jim grinned slowly. Korkal thought expression made him look even older and more tired. "If you hunch over and keep my coat wrapped around you, maybe people will think you're my dog. You know what a dog is?" Korkal threw back his head and barked. 'That's good," Jim said.

Thargos stared at the CIO. The Alban female was near death. She'd taken two bad burns and major internal damage in the explosion that had cracked the Alban war wagon. The firefight itself had lasted only a few minutes before Thargos called every body back to the assault ship. They had done their best to leave nothing alive behind them. It would make a nice little mystery for the Wolf bane authorities.

"Keep her alive. As long as you can," he told his medic. "But don't let her wake up. I think she's their intelligence officer. She's probably got some kind of suicide package we'll never find before she can activate it. I want her drugged to her eyes when she surfaces, no conscious control at all."

He regarded her thoughtfully. "Even that might not be enough, but we have to try. I want to know who she reports to. I'm beginning to get a bad feeling about all this."

The assault ship was considerably roomier than the tiny landing craft he'd used earlier. It had better communications links, too, and now he began to use them.

There was no penalty on size when building interstellar craft. For a variety of reasons such ships never landed on planets but only traveled from orbit to orbit. Since they never entered a planetary atmosphere or were subject to the harsh strains of a planet's gravity, they didn't need to be streamlined. They didn't even need to look very much like ships. Thargos's cruiser, for

instance, resembled a long necklace of lumpy beads strung together. There was room aboard for two assault boats, several smaller landers, and a crew of five hundred Hunzza--as well as a large complement of the latest products of Hunzzan weapons research.

He would feel much better when he was safely back aboard his ship. He didn't fear the humans, but somewhere out there was an

Alban vessel of which he knew nothing, and that did frighten him.

As far as military technology went, the Terries were still playing

with toys--but the Albans had the real thing. And despite their much-admired communitarian natures, when Alba sensed threat against the Great Pack, Alba had no qualms about as hard as it could. Which was very hard indeed.

He eyed his captive. So far, his mission had been a failure. If he could get anything useful from this one, perhaps he might turn that around. But he'd lost the boy. And when he'd taken a count he found that his team had left one scorched war wagon six charred bodies behind them. This battered female was seven. But a typical Alban penetration team numbered eight.

That worried him. They still hadn't located the Alban but without doubt that ship knew about him. Unless she had sent down a short crew--and there was no reason to they had--somebody might at this very moment be telling Alban ship about an assault boat full of Hunzza.

He imagined invisible weapons reaching out from hidden with ghostly precision to lock on his small craft as it hurried to the mother ship. He pictured some nameless Alban eagerly making ready to extract revenge

for his murdered Thargos felt very much like a target. He didn't like the at all.

The object of Thargos's worried conjectures popped the the candy bars into his mouth as he slumped in a huddle on window seat of the empty gray-train car. Swathed in Jim's he did somewhat resemble a large--very large--dog, if one look closely..

"Any more?" He was beginning to feel better. His broken felt as if they were knitting nicely, and he'd been able to most of the pain with self-generated hormones that acted on the appropriate nerve centers.

"That's it. When we stop we can get more." ' '

"When are we stopping?."

"The end of the line. Then we transfer to a long-distance train."

HANDS

"Oh? Where are we going?."

"A place." Korkal thought about that a moment. "Can I assume you don't trust me?"

Jim glanced at him, smiled faintly, and looked away.

"That's only sensible, I suppose, but I want to explain something. You don't know much about my people, do you?"

Jim shook his head. "Just a little from school. Exoanthropology isn't a large field of study yet."

Korkal nodded. "You don't know it, but you have a man you never heard of to thank for that."

"Oh?"

"A man named Delta."

Jim gave a tiny start. Korkal noted it and wondered. But he let it pass because he had more personal skribbets to grill.

"We aren't what you might call a warrior culture, but we do know how to fight. And when the Great Pack makes war it has traditions that predate our recorded history. By Terran standards it is a very old history."

Jim stared straight ahead, but Korkal thought he was listening.

"You saved my life, and you didn't have to. Moreover, you risked your own life to do it. And I have acknowledged that to you. Among our people that places me under an enormous debt to you, and not just me. The debt is owned by my family, my pack, and even, to some extent, the Great Pack itself--the entire Alban race. Do you understand what that means?"

"Among some of the old Asian cultures on Terra, supposedly if you saved a man's life you were responsible for him forever."



Korkal mulled it. "No, I'd say it's the opposite. That's a strange way of looking at things. Why did they do that?"

Jim's lips quirked. "I think the idea was that if fate had decreed it was time for someone to die and somebody else thwarted that fate, then the original victim was no longer a charge of fate but of the one who rescued him. You could sort of call it the revenge of fate."

"The revenge of fate? Yes, I suppose that makes sense. You humans never cease to surprise me."

"Do you know the meaning of the word condescension?"

Korkal thought about that and decided to change the subject. Jim, what I'm trying to tell you is that I owe you. My family and Pack owe you. Even my race is in your debt."

"A man once told me that races don't have morals or only interests. How much does your race owe me?"

Korkal found himself even more impressed. And he that almost against his will what he felt for this boy had from simple gratitude to growing respect. He decided to this new feeling with honesty.

"It's a debt, Jim. But not a suicide pact. Alba owes you thing, but not everything."

Jim turned to face him. "Do you believe the ends justify means?"

Korkal didn't know everything about humans, but even he the ethical mine field hedging the simple question. "Jim, afraid to answer that question. For several reasons. Can change the subject?"

"That's an answer. I guess. Sure. What else do you want to about?"

"You said you called somebody. Who was it? Wh."

"Korkal, I'm afraid to answer that question. For several sons. Can we change the subject?"

Game and set, Korkal thought. But maybe not match. He learned to enjoy the Terrie game of tennis.

"Hypothetically, if you called that person because you for them and wanted to warn them, I may be able to help. To some protection."

"Alban protection?"

"No. Terran."

"Oh? What would that be?"

"Would Serena Half Moon, the Confed chairman, do?" Jim's eyes slowly widened. "You can do that?" "Maybe. Probably. You want to find out?"

"It might make a difference," Jim said. "In how I feel you."

Match to me, Korkal thought.



The night stars glittered in the chill mountain air like emeralds scattered carelessly on velvet, hard and uncaring. The tube station, never much used, was deserted except for their own presence.

Through the glass doors Jim could see pockmarks in the concrete apron outside, reminders of the bomblets the dead man he'd once believed to be his father, Carl Endicott, had exploded when he'd tried and failed to kill the strange deadly woman named Commander Steele. It had only been a few months, but it seemed like an eternity ago. Another life.

Korkal's voice lifted him out of his unwanted reverie. He stood a pace away--but out of view--from where the Alban was planted before an axe screen. Jim doubted the average human could have called the Confed chairman from a public unit and gotten through, but Korkal had spoken code words that turned underlings' faces pale and brought stammered guarantees of haste. It had taken several minutes, but eventually her famous face appeared on the screen. She looked tired, Jim thought. Her voice was huskier and richer than what he'd heard of her public speeches. She was plainly annoyed.

"A protection team? Why can't you tell me what it's for?."

Korkal murmured something Jim didn't catch, and the chairman's expression changed. "Oh. In that case..."

Korkal said something else. The chairman glanced off-screen, then nodded. "I'm told it will take about an hour." She raised one hand to brush an errant strand of black hair away from her forehead. Jim realized she must have been awakened to take this call, and his estimation of Korkal's influence suddenly expanded.

"You will furnish me a complete report about this

Denai," she said.

Korkal replied in tones that sounded agreeable. Serena Moon raised her chin, bringing her sharp features into high

She looked formidable. The screen went dark, and Korkal "Well, that's taken care of."

"You really do know the chairman," Jim said. He tried to his tone unimpressed, but didn't quite succeed.

"Yes. Not well, but evidently well enough." The Alban and headed for the door. "You said we have to climb. She says special weapons protection team will be here in an hour. My people should be here well before that. So you'll have a little with whoever it is you want to see. But we'd better hurry."

Jim followed him out onto the concrete, then moved lead the way down a stair to the ground and a path that into the dark trees.

"How come your people will get here first?"

They're closer. And no doubt they're looking for me Korkal hoped that was the, that they hadn't written him off dead in the wreck of the war wagon.

"I asked the chairman to contact my ship. She said " Privately, Korkal

wondered if she would send the message giving her own people a chance to arrive on the scene. He'd quite a bit on the issue of timing. Thanks to Thargos, things turned tricky all of a sudden. Korkal knew he had a lot of questions to sort through and decisions to make, but first things He knew he wouldn't relax until he had Jim safely aboard ship, concealed behind the toughest shields he could was shaking the dust of Wolfbane and Thargos--from his

His shoulder still ached, and he had to struggle to keep up the boy's long strides. But the night air was clean and rich the dark cologne of the trees. In some ways it reminded him of carefully preserved forests of Alba, and this pleased him. "What is this place we're going to?" Korkal asked. "A bad place," Jim said, and walked faster.

n the dim light Jim saw that the cabin had not been repaired. The shattered roof still slumped drunkenly over part of the shell, and all the windows were dark, gaping maws. In one of them a faint glow showed that the place wasn't empty, and he felt an answering glow of relief. Nevertheless, he made sure the safety was off his pistol as he approached the front door.

"Morn?" he called softly.

He heard a faint rustle and sensed hidden eyes watching. "I'm here, Jim," came the low reply.

Jim put out one hand. "Wait," he said. Then he pried open the warped front door. Korkal winced at the sharp screech. The Alban waited outside on the porch, but he could see through the window as a blond woman wrapped the boy in a powerful hug. They stood a moment without moving, then stepped away and faced each other. They kept their voices low, but Korkal's hearing was better than a human's. He could make them out clearly.

"Jimmy, what happened? You're a mess. That lump on your forehead..."

"I'm okay, Mom. Don't worry. Did anybody follow you here? Did you see anything weird?"

She shook her head. "Jim, what's going on? Why did you send me here?" She moved her head. "I don't have good memories of this place. I can't imagine you do either."

Korkal thought the emotions he heard in Jim's reply were twofold: shame, and a profound, inconsolable sadness. "No, Morn," the boy whispered, "I don't. But I couldn't think of anyplace else. And I didn't have any time."

"Come over here and sit down," she said. "Start at the beginning. Tell me everything."

"Okay, Mom. But I want you to meet somebody." She stiffened. "Who? Who did you bring here?" "Korkal!" he called. "Come in and meet my morn."

It quickly became obvious to Korkal that there was some complicity between the boy and the woman, something that had marked them so terribly that words were

When Jim described the attempt by Thargos to kidnap him the rescue attempt Korkal had made, Tabitha Endicott sharply, but then nodded as if the attack was not a total

He felt that hidden understanding even more deeply as sketchily explained his own role. Tabitha was at least as sharp her son and, Korkal realized, even more unyielding. A low ance for what humans called bullshit. He approved, but it his task harder---especially since he had no intention of the larger problems with which he struggled.

When he finished Tabitha Endicott did and said that surprised him. She leaned forward until her face was few inches from his own. Her gaze bored into him with intensity. "Are you a good person, Mr. Denai?"

He opened his mouth, then closed it. Somehow he this was not the time for speed or glibness. And he knew she was asking him. His own mother's face ghosted across back of his mind, and he knew she was waiting for his too.

"Yes, Mrs. Endicott, I am. And I will give my life to protect son."

She held him one more beat, then nodded. "All right."

"Mom, he knows the Confed chairman."

Her gaze slid toward him. "And we have such good reason trust the Terran government, don't we, Jim?"

He looked away. So much between them, Korkal thought.

so much hidden from me.

"I have nothing to go on except my own instincts, but I them. You seem like a good.. man," Tabitha said.

Korkal caught the hesitation, and said, "I'm male, Mrs. Endicott."

The corners of her eyes crinlded in a web of laugh lines,

I.

thought that under other circumstances they might and would enjoy each other a great deal. But these weren't those and her expression quickly hardened.

-Understand me, please. I will give my permission for my son to go with you. I believe he cannot be safe as long as he stays on this planet, not if, as you say, he is being hunted by someone like thisThargos you tell me about. I'm not happy about it, but I don't see any other choice. I wish to God I did. But Mr. Denai?"

"Yes?"

"If you harm my son in any way, or allow him to come to harm, I swear

by everything I know that I will hunt you down, no matter how far I have to go, no matter how long it takes. And I will kill you.

She said it very flatly, but Korkal felt the hackles stir at his neck. He had no doubt at all she would try to do precisely what she promised. Once again, he thought of his own mother.

"Fair enough," he said. "I won't tell you not to worry. Of course you will. But as I said before, I owe Jim my life. And Albans take that kind of debt seriously. If he comes to harm, you can be sure I was harmed first and incapable of preventing it."

"That's not as reassuring as it could be, Mr. Denai."

"Call me Korkal, please. It may not be reassuring, but it's honest. Which would you prefer?"

She lifted her head and stared down her nose imperiously. Jim thought she was magnificent.

The interior of the cabin exploded in brilliant light.

Korkal let the door slide shut on the grisly scene behind him. It had been touch-and-go. The suicide package but it into the Alban CIO's cellular blueprint had been particularly nasty, and it

hadn't been slowed much by the methods he'd used to enter it. But he had slowed it enough, and he'd gotten the one thing he'd really wanted. A name.

WILLIAM

SHATNER

Korkal Emut Denai.

He thought about his old enemy. This was close to the news he could have gotten, but he knew bad news was preferable to no news at all.

At least now he knew with whom he was dealing. And his experience told him exactly how to deal with him.

He gave a series of rapid orders to his hacker-cracker "Break the Wolfbane communications net. Here's what looking for."

If the Alban agent made a call, they would find it--and him. Only fear was that they would be too slow, too late. He hoped he had more than a few scores to settle with Korkal Emut. Get down!

Korkal was amazed how quickly the huge pistol jumped the boy's hand. The storm of light had bleached all color from interior. Jim's eyes were hard black points as Korkal found self staring at them above the gaping mouth of the weapon. remembered what it had done to an armored Hunznan and slowly raised one hand.

"Easy," he said. "It's my people."

Slowly Jim nodded and the barrel swung away. But he lowered the weapon until a shadowy form materialized out of haze and Korkal called, "XO! Over here!"

The Alban executive officer clambered over the sill of a window, removing his helmet as he did so. Only when Jim another hairy muzzle like Korkal's own did he finally jam the tool back into his belt.

"Chief, what in the Three Unborn Hells is going on?" he said. He spoke in Alban, and Jim said, "Can he speak so I understand?"

"Of course. XO, switch on a translator."

The XO fumbled at his chest. When he next spoke, his and a different, but easily understandable voice speaking Terrie issued from a speaker concealed in his armor. Korkal had not used a similar device either with Jim or the chairman simply because he trusted his own capabilities more than the machine. Alban translation technology was good, but not perfect; which was why high-level political negotiations were always carried out with both living and machine translations. Even then there were occasional mistakes.

"What's going on? In a very short time we're getting out of here, that's what," Korkal said. "You did bring an assault craft this time?"

The XO nodded. "And a double-sized team at hot status. The mother ship's a hundred miles straight up, with all detectors as wide as they'll go and every weapon on immediate fire. Nobody's going to sneak up on you here, Chief."



Jim listened and felt reassured, though he had no idea as to the efficiency of Alban weapons technology. He suspected it might be more advanced than Terran science, though. But he knew even less about Hunzzan bang-bangers, and so was not as reassured as he could have been.

The wrecked interior of the little cabin was crowded. Jim turned and saw Tabitha standing there, her hands hanging loosely at her sides, an expression of worried bemusement on her features. It hit him then: once again he was leaving her, perhaps going into danger, certainly going somewhere that she wouldn't know anything about.

It was a brutal moment of empathy, and it made sickeningly clear to him just how self-centered he'd been. Just like with Cat. He'd been worrying so much about his own life he'd forgotten that other people had lives, too, and his own life was bound into theirs. Tabitha was his mother, whether her gene codes had any thing to do with his at all. And yet here she stood, off to the side as if discarded, playing the role mothers seemed doomed to play: loving and waiting and fearing--and as forgotten as Ulysses' Penelope. Knowing it and bearing up anyway.

For sixteen years she had loved and raised him. That was stronger than any theoretical connection between their chromosomes.

How much stronger he suddenly realized when he felt his eyes go hot at the way she was looking at him. In her gaze he found his first true definition of bravery: to love, lose, and keep on loving. He moved toward her and took her in his arms.

"Jeez, Mom, it looks like I'm taking off again."

"Oh, Jimmy."

He fumbled for something that might make her feel "When the Confed troops get here, you won't have to. They'll take care of you, make sure that nobody hurts you."

She took a step back, her eyes blazing. "I'm not worried me!"

He shook his head. "I know. It's a curse, isn't it? This... He glanced around, realizing he'd almost said too much.

She nodded. "A curse to both of us. I pray that somehow I'll find a way to end- it, son." Her shoulders slumped. "I would could. I wish I could take it for myself."

Jim stared at her, knowing she would do exactly that if could, and in that instant he knew he loved her almost more he could bear.

"Mom, I don't know what will happen. But if everything out, it will be because of you. You and Dad, what you both me. You won't have anything to be ashamed of, I promise."

She took it for the ultimate compliment it was. "We tried make you a good man, Jimmy." She paused, then chuckled embarrassment. "A good man. I guess you are a man now, you? But so young. You shouldn't have to be a man yet, Jim. I guess I hate that most of all. You've been robbed no boy should lose."

He tried a grin. "Mom, that's a little melodramatic, don't think? I'm

going on a trip, not just disappearing like last time." "But will you come back? Will I ever see you again?"

He had no answer for that, and so he gave the only answer could, the only answer that in the end meant anything. He her in his arms and held her, and she held him, until Korkal

"Confed armor coming down now. I'm sorry, but it's time." "Jim? You'll take care?" "I will, Morn."

"I'll think of you every day. If you can, you let me going on."

He nodded. He hadn't even thought about that. "Korkal?" The Alban understood. "We can get messages to the

Under normal circumstances, at least."

Tabitha touched his cheek. "Jimmy, I'll... I'll..."

At the sight of her tears he felt his own begin to well up, and some reason this embarrassed him. He kissed her to cover feelings, squeezed her into a final hug, then turned to

Outside, coming out of the trees, armored Confed troopers who reminded him unsettlingly of Commander Steele set up a rapid I perimeter as they stared at the Alban soldiers and their ship.

"Let's go," Jim said.

Korkal gestured toward the huge craft now occupying most of }he cleared space to the right of the cabin. "Go ahead. I'll be along in a minute."

The XO followed Jim out. Korkal turned to Tabitha. "I'll take care of him." Then he paused, choosing his words carefully. "Mrs. Endicott, Thargos is after your boy. But I still have no idea why. I think you do, though. It might make a difference to Jim's safety if you told me. Don't you think?"

Tabitha didn't hesitate at all. She shook her head and said, "Mr. Denai, I have no idea. All I can think of is it must be some mistake. He's only a boy. Why would some alien we've never heard of want to hurt him?"

Korkal held her gaze for several beats, then dropped his eyes. "Very well. I'll still do the best I can." He turned. "Your guards are ready for you."

He watched as a burly Terran Marine captain escorted her from the cabin to his waiting vessel. She vanished into the lighted interior, pausing only an instant for a last glimpse of Jim. But her son was gone. She squared her shoulders, stepped up, and disappeared.

"All right," Korkal called. "That's it. Let's get this thing moving." From then on everything went with military efficiency. Within five minutes both vessels were buttoned up and rising from the now-deserted clearing.

As the hatch slid shut behind him, Korkal allowed himself a shiver of relief. He didn't know anything about the human idea of hubr/s, the

thought of pride tempting the gods to destroy the prideful, but if he had he would have understood it just Free.

The interior of the Alban craft began to flash with crimson warning beacons. The XO's voice echoed mechanically through the compartments:

"HUNZZAN VESSEL PENETRATING DETECTION

LIMITS. HUNZZAN ATTACK! HUNZZAN ATTACK!"

he captain of the Hunzzan cruiser was hooked into his ship's nervous system as he always was. A continuous whisper of data with soothing monotony through the back of his mind. In "the same way that one was always aware on some level of the functions of the body---especially when something malfunctioned-he was aware of the happenings aboard his ship. And just as one would subconsciously monitor some chronic malady like a or infection, there was one presence aboard his vessel he was also conscious of with greater than normal attention. That presence had now entered the control room of the ship, and the captain felt an uncomfortable thrill of anxiety.

He knew what was coming. It was never pleasant to report failure to Thargos. But it was less pleasant---even dangerous--to sugarcoat the facts to his superior. Thargos rarely killed themes senger for bad news. Unless the messenger was also responsible for it. The case here was a gray area, and so the captain rose from his seat slowly and took his time making his way toward the command chair, where Thargos was now settling in.

If we'd only found them sooner, the captain thought. He moved through the atmosphere of the control room, an atmosphere maintained at Hunzza normal. To alien eyes the air would appear as a glowing yellow fog, the natural Hunzzan environment of super aturated moisture and brilliant sunlight, but to the captain it was as unnoticeable as the water any fish swam in. His vision was augmented by natural infrared sensors that lined the soft unscaled skin beneath his large eyes, giving his brain two sources of visual

input. He was barely conscious of the low bubble of the propulsion systems, mechanical rattles and clicks, a sudden shower of computerized beeps.

He'd crossed halfway from his console to Thargos when Hunter turned and saw him. The captain picked up his pace.

Thargos encouraged a certain informality, and so he began to speak almost immediately. "As you've seen, we were late."

But Thargos only blinked his eyes in reassuring increasing the captain's sense of disquiet. Thargos laugh at the most inappropriate moments.

"And Korkal survived. Well, it would have been ament otherwise. He's a hard one to kill even for an Alban." The captain didn't know what to say, so he waited.

"I see they've gone to a cabin of some sort in the mountains.

"Yes, Lord. And now his ship is standing guard. They put an assault craft as a lander a little while ago."

Thargos's eyes shifted to the huge 3-D holographic screen shimmered in the air before him. On it was an aerial view of cabin and two large ships grounded on either side. It wasn't ble to make out human figures at this magnification, but didn't care. They were down there. That was all he needed to

He felt an unusual sense of excitement and wondered Korkal had beaten him again, somehow survived the attack his gray-van, and managed to escape not only in one with the boy as well.

Maybe the Alban discovered the boy by watching me, thought. And maybe not. He would have liked to ask, but Korkal's ship protecting him at close range, that was nately no longer possible. He could have blasted that the sky; having found it at last, he now knew it was no the power of his own cruiser. Nevertheless, it was potent, Thargos hesitated at staging a full-scale battle before the ing eyes of the Confed Naval squadron also orbiting over cabin. Not that the TelTan Navy could have stopped him but there were potential diplomatic issues involved. Better take the risk. Not when there was another way.

His tension rose a notch. He spoke a few words and back to the captain.

"Load the Terran weapon now. We will proceed with the back termination plan."

i "Yes, sir."

They both waited until confirmation was transmitted. "You can into their throat? Even his mother ship can't stop it?"

"No, sir."

"Good." A steward approached bearing a small metallic cage. In

It a tiny hairy thing flung itself against the delicate bars. The steward opened it and offered it to Thargos, who removed the lit He

creature and cupped it in his right hand.

Hunzza were em paths of a high order, extremely sensitive to the emotions of other living things. While not telepathy, this extra sense allowed them sharp insight into the minds of others, even those who were alien. With training and some knowledge of the language, an expert could appear to read the mind of, say, a TelTan boy. Thargos had more expertise than any other Hunzza he knew, and his empathetic talents made learning new languages second nature.

But as with every gift, there were drawbacks. Some Hunzza became emotion addicts. The worst of them sought ever-greater rushes of sensation. Like all addictions the necessary dose became larger over time. Some lost all control and became ravening monsters, even by Hunzzan standards. Thargos, with his iron will, was not one such, but he did like his small calmafives. He felt the beast in his hand quiver like a beating heart. His mouth dropped open slightly as he stared at the hologram screen.

"If I can't have him, you won't either, old enemy."

At his rear the captain said, "Fire on your order, Lord." Thargos's right hand began slowly to close. Inside the trap of his fingers, the tiny thing squeaked, louder and louder, then went abruptly silent.

"Fire," Thargos said.

The control module, one of the several lumpy beads that made up the string of Thargos's cruiser, rocked gently. He swayed in his chair, white-grinned and dreamy, seeming not to notice the crimson fluids that leaked slowly from his knotted fist.

ake us up--fast.r' Korkal ordered as he leaned over XO's shoulder in the cramped confines of the assault boat's trol area. He understood the threat instantly. That didn't mean could do anything about it except run for his life.

A Hunzzan distorter-projector catapulted payloads of through a chain of small subspace jumps, like skipping stream on a string of stones. But the space between the wasn't space, it was subspace, and beyond the reach of Alban beams. Only by catching the package on one of its instantaneous translations in real space could it be destroyed, they hadn't been given enough warning for his computers decode its path.

And if he understood Thargos, whatever payload he wa sing would be strong enough for anything but the shield sing the Alban mother ship. Korkal thought he knew exactly gift the Hunter had mar led him. He moved to place his between the boy and the screens.

On those screens a long red line finally intersected with a crete green point representing a spot now far below them. relayed warnings to the Terrans. Maybe they would be enough.

Every screen on the console flared white.

Korkal uttered a small prayer and hoped it was for the

The first wave of radiation sent the assault craft bucking wildly "What the hell was that?." Jim yelled.

Korkal felt the boy's hands on his shoulders and braced self just as the second blast wave hit. He stumbled but to stay on his feet and keep himself between the boy and screens.

"I don't know," he gasped out, regaining his balance. "We'll out as soon as we reach the mother ship."

"Korkal! That was a bomb! What happened?"

"Jim, stand away. Please. I've got work to do here."

He began to bark out the necessary orders, deliberately

own language so the boy wouldn't understand. In the screens saw the stupendous, malignant bloom of a nuclear explosion from the dark spine of the mountains.

A choking sound brought his head around. He saw Jim's features twisted in horror, illuminated in the red glow of the atomic burning from the screens.

\*Noooooor'

Chairman Serena Half Moon entered her office through the private entrance, saw Carlton Fredricks waiting for her, and walked quickly to her desk.

She sat down, put both her palms flat on the desktop, and leaned back in her chair. Her expression was controlled, but her dark eyes looked harried.

"Well?" she said.

Fredricks was a handsome man, beautifully dressed, who might have been easy to overlook as just another professional political functionary, except for sharp brown eyes which glinted with a hard, driven intelligence. Part of his job was to know what to tell her and when to tell it. Another part was to know when not to say something. He wasted no time on pleasantries.

"The Navy is reporting publicly they have driven the unknown invaders from the Wolfbane System. Invaders is the precise word they used in the release. Privately, it's all lies, of course."

Half Moon massaged her face, kneading the flesh hard. Her skin retained the pale imprints of her fingertips for several moments.

"Of course. After allowing unknown aliens to assault Confed citizens, fight a pitched battle in a city park, and nuke a chunk of mountain with one of our own bombs, what else are they going to say'?"

"I wrote that release. They would have liked to cover it up entirely." "Stupid. Did they think nobody would notice a little thing like a nuclear explosion? Thank God some smart media hound didn't find out it was one of our nukes."

"You look tired."

She smiled without mirth. "An alien dog-person told looked beautiful. That wasn't so long ago, either."

"Korkal Emut Denai."

"Korkal Emut Denai," she agreed. "I wonder if he made it o that mess on Wolfbane. He's a slick one, but I like him. Every. don't trust him."

"I'rust isn't a quality one normally finds at... this level."

"I insulted him to his face. I know he caught it, but he co be sure if I knew. I tapped my teeth with my pen."

'hat's an insult?"



"To an Alban it is. They have a whole etiquette built up around their fangs. Actually, I doubt he knew. They think we're little better than savages, incapable of subtlety. And by their stan da it's probably true. Sometimes I think it is by mine, too."

She looked down at her desktop as if seeing it for the first t The usual shoal of papers, chips, and chip cases obscured the sc set into the wood. It looked like any other screen on a busy executive's desk, but this one had once been connected to a very prI computer system. She swept it clean with one broad pass of her

"So we've spread the official version. Unknown aliens, no ex nation, invasion repelled. Have we figured out yet what re happened?"

"Well, the bodyguard team you sent in at Denai's re ques cover that Endicott woman took some lumps, but there were four casualties. They got a warning from Denai himself and already well off ground zero when the nuke lit off. They brot out the woman with a few scratches, nothing more. Lucky... Half Moon digested this. "And where is Tabitha Endicott no

Fredricks shrugged. "Denai said to protect her, and we agre

So she's coming here, where we can do a better job. I hope." "Have we heard from Denai himself yet?" "Not yet."

"Keep trying. We never got a look at whoever tossed our sto nuke at him."

"Probably this Thargos..."

Serena ruffled her fingers absently through the papers on' desk. "You know what, Carl? I had a full Confed battle squad over that mountain, and nobody saw a damned thing. The N doesn't really know if they left the system because the Navy hasn't seen them. Only the Alban landing boat, and that aft ere

on the ground with its screens down. That kind of technology the hell out of me."

And me."

Good. Find out everything about James Endicott." Fredricks blinked. "Everything?."

If he pooped his pants twice on his first birthday, I want to time and how much. And who cleaned it up."

He was used to this, but that didn't make it any easier. He softly and nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

She smiled. "Anytime in the next two hours will be fine, Carl."

Jim sat on a sleek pedestal chair beneath an enormous arc of sky that would have, under other circumstances, thrilled him to the bottom of his soul.

The control room of Korkal's ship was about the same size and dimension as a Terran football field, and it possessed some of the same expansive mystery those fields knew on the days when the crowds were gone and the carefully tended grass grew in emptiness and silence.

The dome surmounting this vast space was nearly as large, high-curved, and perfectly transparent, so that the starry eternal night beyond burned with an oppressive sense of closeness; in this yawning chamber it was far too easy to imagine that the sky really was falling.

A faint wavering halo surrounded each star, a phenomenon

-associated with the ship's drive that Jim, also under different circumstances, would have been driven to investigate.

Now nothing drove him. He was all driven out. Korkal paced back and forth in front of him, looking up every few steps, then away. Searching for a way to begin yet afraid to find one.

"Mom's dead, isn't she?"

Korkal stopped. "I don't know. We analyzed the blast. It was a Terran weapon."

"We have to go back."

"We can't. It's too dangerous."

Jim raised his head. His eyes were dark wells from screams echoes silently, but his voice was level, and only a tic at his right eye betrayed his tension. "Send a message have to find out what happened. If Mom..."

For a moment he couldn't get anything out. Then, Korkal."

"Jim... we lost Thargos's ship. He could be anywhere. I take the risk of him picking up one of our transmissions. When we're so vulnerable. He's got a battle cruiser. We'd be what do you call it?--a sitting duck."

Beyond them, rank upon rank of consoles arranged in U-shapes stretched to the limits of the room. At each sat an operator, whose head was invisible behind a dome of force. Technology beyond the dreams of Terra, with a matter-of-factness that was distilled from the utter rarity and even contempt intelligence inevitably develops for own tools. Its very banality was frightening.

"I don't care," Jim said.

"As soon as I think it's safe, I'll send a message to Serena Moon."

"But that will be too late!"

Korkal stared at him, then turned away. He raised his hand then let them fall. "Maybe not."

"She's dead. I know she's dead."

"Jim..."

Korkal moved hesitantly toward the boy, and when he close enough, awkwardly reached up to pat Jim's shoulder. His own hand came up with the speed of reflex and knocked hand away.

"Don't touch me! Leave me alone."

Korkal looked at his own hand, sighed, and stepped. Jim's face was still partly turned from him, and in the light of the universe beyond the great dome, he saw the bitter scrollwork of tears. "We'll talk later, when you feel," Korkal said.

Jim's eyelids flickered. He turned to face Korkal, who felt bleakness in the boy's gaze almost as a blow.

"You go to hell," Jim said.

Hunzza moved anonymously through the gleaming fog as Thargos settled into his command chair and leaned back, his great eyes half-lidded, an unaccustomed laxity to his carriage. There was an unmistakable lizardlike quality to the way he curled back in his seat, and in the sinuous response the seat made to him. From the rear of the seat a pair of long, dark green tentacles slowly extruded, softly flailing until they found the pressure points along his curved spine and began to dig deep.

Thargos grunted, then moaned softly as they worked on him. When the captain appeared, he regarded him in silence, until finally the captain spoke.

"Good morning, Lord."

"I take it you have nothing but failure to report?" Thargos let his jaws open just a bit, a hint of white.

Mesmerized, the captain stared at the flicker of fang, then abruptly lowered his flat skull. "We haven't found them yet."

Thargos noted that the captain was trembling slightly. His mouth dropped wider, revealing the pallid expanse of his gullet, and the quivering hummingbird tongue inside. "I suggest you do better than that, Captain. And do it quickly."

Another long moment of silence. Then the captain bowed deeply, his relief evident in the sudden quickening of his breath. He shuffled backwards as Thargos immediately dismissed him from his thoughts.

Nest of the Mother, he thought. Korkal, where have you gotten to now?

he room was small, dimly lighted, holding only a bed fresher unit, and a closet built into the bulkhead. There nothing personal about it. If anything, it resembled a jail cell, in some ways, to the boy on the bed, that was precisely what was. And though the key to that cell was in his own thought, was far beyond his reach.

The bed, designed for a race that had never walked Tea shores, was too short for him. His feet hung over the end. He on his back, staring up into the indeterminate glow emanating from the ceiling strips, his features a patchwork of shadows dried tears.

His eyes were wide and staring, and had lost their gleam of tective moisture. His dry, chapped lips moved over and again, shaping a single word with heart-numbing intensity. ( a Terran lip-reader could have deciphered it, and the one watched from a concealed view-link wasn't that. All that understood was the agony. Over and over again. Mom ..

.

from a distance the ship was a tiny speck fleeing through the star fields, lighted by the haloed multicolored glow of distant suns. But up close it was huge. It looked like a complicated molecular model, a cluster of glittering Christmas balls connected in a web of rigid tubules, hanging motionless in the interstellar silence.

Korkal and Jim walked slowly through one of the connecting tubes surrounded by the burning light. The boy looked thin and wan, as if only recently recovered from some debilitating illness.

"Thargos was willing to risk a lot to capture you, Jim. Do you know why?"

Jim shook his head.

Korkal started to say something, changed his mind, then began again. "Thargos is an old enemy of mine. We've crossed paths before. He doesn't usually concern himself with minor matters, so I assume he believes you are important to the Hunzzan Empire for some reason. And you have no ideas about that?"

Once again Jim shook his head. He had his hands jammed in the pockets of his pants, his shoulders slumped, his head down. To Korkal, in that moment, he looked fragile and without hope, and Korkal's heart went out to him. Because of the boy's size, he had to remind himself that Jim was still by Korkal's own Alban standards a pup--and right now, the pup believed he had lost his mother. Korkal wasn't sure. He had sent out a warning, and it was possible that warning had given the Terran lander sufficient time to get beyond the blast perimeter.

But that led to a tricky question, didn't it? He knew the boy possessed some secret--and if Thargos wanted it, then so did he. If the boy believed himself alone and abandoned, eventually unburden himself to Korkal, who was his only friend beyond that he owed the boy his life, in a formal way, concern and help informally. What to do? Sometimes Korkal possessed the Hunzzan gift of empathy, though he thought use of it a cold thing and maybe even a curse instead of a gift.

Nothing was certain. So he kept on talking, hoping for something that might give him a sign, help him to resolve his conflicts. He knew he was committing the greatest mistake an agent could make, but he couldn't help himself; on a deep level he liked Jim very much. But how could he balance that with safety of all Alba?

"The Alban and Hunzzan Empires have been expanding each other for several of your centuries, Jim. Both sides have for some time it would come to war. Now that war is almost upon and nobody really knows who will win. They are a younger race we are, and growing more quickly. In theory we are stronger. In fact, who knows?" He sighed. "It's an old story, even on your world. But that doesn't make it any less real or urgent."

Jim kept walking. "I guess you could just tie me up and some machine I've never heard of to strain my brains. Or genes. Read me like a damned book. You could do that, you, if it was so important?"

Korkal glanced at the stars because he didn't want to tell the boy in that moment he knew he could do exactly what he described but hoped he wouldn't have to make that. Because Alban technology in the area was good, but it wasn't perfect. And sometimes the subjects of such examinations, rarely

alien subjects, awakened from it with personalities askew, like badly fitting clothes. So they were a bit what they'd been before. And how much difference before the person that had been was destroyed and new took its place?

Jim did look fragile to him. Easily broken. How much ends justify the means? He didn't want to confront that, not could find some way avoid it. In the name of his race he'd much he regretted on a personal level, but he was afraid this of betrayal might turn out to be the thing that finally made end of him. He could live he did live--with his own more battered than he liked. But he wasn't sure he could hating himself, and he didn't want to find out. Yet choice knevitable and, once made, immutable. The universe could be terrible place. But he already knew that, didn't he?

nd so he took the plunge, leaped into the sea of things that changed and couldn't be changed back again.

"I am a spy, Jim. An agent of the Pra'Loch, the central government of the empire. My assignment for the past several of your years has been as liaison between my government and a man who called himself Delta."

Once again he sensed more than felt a sudden start of recognition in the boy at the mention of Delta's name. It seemed impossible, but there it was. Twice now. But what could Delta have to do with Jim Endicott?

"Do you know Delta?" he asked softly.

Jim shook his head a third time, but now there was an air of alertness about him, as if for the first time he was paying careful attention to Korkal's words.

"I see. Well, let me tell you a little about him. What little I do know." Beyond the transparent skin of the tube the stars flamed silently. Out there somewhere was Thargos, doing what he did best. And once again the prey was himself--and now this boy, too. Anybody who knew Thargos could not be comfortable knowing he was on the trail, his formidable talents honed and focused on the hunt. But Korkal had played this game before, and won it most times. That he was here talking to Jim at all was proof of it. He wondered how long his luck would run before it finally ran out.

"Our relationship with Delta was somewhat strange, Jim. It began if teen or so Terran years ago, sometime after the first of our trading vessels began to do business in Sol System. He contacted us; we didn't know who he was at the time. He was a figure in the government. But so shadowy it was hard to tell who or what he represented, or how much authority he actually wielded.

"As it turned out, we discovered his power was enormous---so great that in effect he was the Confed government. And he wanted to make a deal with us."

Korkal came to a halt, remembering his first meeting with the wall. Jim stopped, too, hs features rapt with concentration.

He' sreally interested. But why?.

"Of course we were wary--and not particularly impressed. What could a

backward tech ho-culture like Terra offer as a bar gaining chip? But he showed us."

Korkal scratched one ear, trying to figure out how to convey feelings when Delta had pushed his bargaining chip onto the center of the galactic table.

"Jim, once a planetary culture reaches a certain stage of development, only one thing has any importance. Information. In agricultural ages and industrial ages, but these don't have spacefaring abilities. It is only when the real trade information that a planet is ready to step into the larger galactic trade, with a few exceptions, is not in trials. We don't ship coal or oil or uranium from one another. Not when we can ship nanotech creation and methods for all of them in the tiniest of chips. New drugs, ways to use them, new technologies---all information. So what happens is that the cultures most efficient, most innovative creating and manipulating information become the most on the galactic scene.

"Delta said to me, "Give me a problem that your computers been able to solve. Give me all the data you have on the problem.""

Korkal sighed and began to walk again. "We had thing. It's not important now, but it was a riddle that defeated our best efforts. We gave it to him and he solved it' us in less than two days. We were still dubious, and gave something we thought even more difficult, with the same So that was his bargaining chip the Confed bargaining and somehow, miraculously, Terra became a player in galaxy. Delta had his demands, and we met them. No trolled trade with Terra. Certain technologies banned until thought the culture was ready for them. Rigidly monitored planet ownership of Terran property. Much more. In effect, became the arbiter of how we would interact with and one of his conditions was that we would use our own to see that this agreement was honored by other races. kept the Hunzza off Terra's back as well. In the end, that probably what attracted Thargos in the first place--not herself, but our interest in Terra."

"Delta was that powerful?" Jim asked suddenly. "Yes. At least as far as we were concerned." "Just by controlling some kind of computer?"

Korkal lowered his head, but his thoughts had begun to

He hadn't mentioned a computer, though one could presume existence of such from the scenario he'd described. But had a concreteness about it that hinted at positive

And with that thought came a rush of certainty: Jim not only known Delta, he had known what Delta was and, important of all, he knew something about the computer.

Of course. Why else would Thargos, filtering the rubble of destruction through the fine sieve of his malice, go from there to Jim Endicott? : . He felt a shiver of need. He had not really explained what Delta's whatever it was, meant to Alba. The old empire was still strong, but the Hunzza were younger. Their technolomight even be better. And one of the last things Delta had accomplished for Alba was to make a projection of the outcome of all-out war between the two, one with Alba having the full use of Delta's information-processing abilities, the other without.

" The results had been unmistakable, so much so that some of the Alban powers thought he might have gimmicked the results in order to increase his own leverage.

Alba plus Delta against Hunzza? Alba wins. Not easily, but decisively.

Without Delta? Alba would lose, and lose badly. Perhaps so badly there would no longer be an Alban Empire.

The stakes were so high. Why did he have to like this boy?. Why did he have to owe him? What did he owe him?

"This Delta person. It must have been a terrible strain on him to have so much power. So much responsibility. In a way, I guess you'd have to feel sorry for him."

Korkal stared at him in dumbstruck wonder, rocked to his core by Jim's unexpected insight. He didn't know how he knew, but he knew: standing before him in the shape of a sixteen-year-old Terran boy was the most important secret in the galaxy.

He stuttered as he spoke. "Y'y'yes... I suppose you would. You'd have to feel sorry for anybody with a burden like that." And he thought of something else, something so frightening he'd concealed it even from himself. Something he'd first thought of long before, and just as quickly suppressed.

What if Terra was a Leaper culture? Could it be that this boy... ? Out beyond the tough hide of the tube, the stars began to curdle. One by one the haloed lights winked out. A vast and deadly pall unfurled across wide space and finally, muted in the distance, the mournful frantic hooting of alarms.

I'hargos," Korkal said. He began to run.

se everything. Destroy them," Thargos had when he brought news of the discovery of Korkal's ship, Hunzzan captain intended to do just that. He would more confident if he'd been able to summon help from Hunzzan Navy, but time was of the essence. Still, he a battle cruiser, whose power was, by less advanced impossible to comprehend.

Korkal's standards were advanced enough, but his not been designed for all-out war. And the captain knew he the greatest of all combat advantages: surprise. So while he have harbored a few small doubts, on the whole he felt confident as he readied the full power of his ship's grav-beams that ripped and tore, the great armored flung on waves of jump-distortion, the old but potent array laser banks, the field distorters that warped space

When all was ready he settled himself into his seat in the bat control room and stared for a moment at the tiny speck centered in the huge holographic screen before Inwardly he counted down and when he reached zero he one hand and let it fall.

"Fire at will."

Korkal sat in his own command seat as the alarms died down. Overhead, beyond the great dome, Jim could see a few remaining stars glowing like embers in ashes. He tried imagine what force could so alter the very



structures of space miserably. All he knew was that he was scared. He had death before, but now he knew each time was different. there was no way to become insulated against that particuterror when life itself hung in the balance.

that... is it?" he asked.

"Sit in that seat there," Korkal said. "Push that top right button on the arm. That will strap you in. The ride may get bumpy." "What happened?" dim asked when he finished. There were no actual straps. He felt some soft yet unyielding force press him down against the seat.

Thargos found us, of course." A hazy force field of some kind now arced across the back of Korkal's head. Beyond him, dim saw similar fields, except they enclosed the entire skulls of the rest of the crew. The vast room remained as silent and still as ever. The contrast with the twisting light show beyond the dome was eerie and unsettling.

Jim watched as Korkal leaned back, eyes rolling out of focus. He was reminded of the way Morninglory and Chip had looked when they'd entered the virtual realm of data space for the battle tat had killed them. It wasn't a pleasant memory. He didn't like the parallel at all.

"Is it... too late?"

Korkal turned to him. "Foo late? Maybe. That's a Hunzzan bat tie cruiser on our tail. It's much more heavily armed than we are. I've read some of your history. One of the ancient rulers on Terra once said, alk softly and carry a big stick." Thargos likes to follow the same axiom, but I don't. I'd rather walk even more softly. So this ship can't survive a straightforward battle with Thargos, but with any luck we won't have to. His ship is designed to hurt you. Mine is designed to sneak by you. Now leave me alone for a while. I'm about to get as sneaky as I know how."

What followed was rapid, incomprehensible, and not reassuring. Nothing changed in the great silent chamber, but beyond the dome, things began to shift rapidly.

Shortly after the misty force field extended itself to cover Korkal's head, the final few stars winked out. Then the quality of the dark itself changed. It had been gauzy and vague, almost Smoke. Now it became a hard black emptiness that sucked at Vision. Jim blinked. This new dark made his head ache.

But it held for a few seconds only; then with no warning except a slight flicker, as if a holoscreen had suffered some hiccup in its innards, all the stars blazed forth again. This time there were halos. A moment later something very fast and broad across the fields, then everything turned first orange, then purple, then black again.

Jim felt the ship itself judder, a hard, jolting sensation. alarms burped on,. then off again. The stars had reappeared. couldn't be certain, but their patterns looked different.

This went on for some time. Finally, when Jim had begun learn that even being in the midst of a fight for one's own might become boring, he heard Korkal sigh.

Beyond the dome all the stars, now with halos again, seemed be dancing in little stutter steps.

"Up with you, boy. Get out of that seat."

"Huh? What's going on?"

Korkal's features reappeared as the field around his head demy vanished. "We were lucky. They didn't kill us with their try, and I've been keeping ahead of them since then. very good. Better than I'd expected, better than I'd hoped. So is where you get off."

"Get off? What are you talking about?"

"Jim, we don't have much time. I'm about two jumps right now, but that isn't enough for any guarantees. I told mother I'd do my best to protect you. So that's what I'm going do. We are not far from a neutral planet called Brostach. I'm to put you off in a one-man lifeboat. Then I'm going to wave my arms real wide at Thargos and take off in the opposite direction, With any luck he won't even notice what we've done. He'll keep on after me. And you'll be safe."

Jim discovered that the restraining field had vanished. He stood up. His thighs ached and his eyes felt hot. Deep in his stomach the knot of fear still tightened. "What about you?"

"What about me? This is my job, Jim. To make decisions this."

"But if he catches you, he'll kill you. Won't he?"

"First he has to catch me."

Jim shook his head. "Sorry. I'm not leaving you to risk your life for me."

Korkal's voice hardened. "I'm not giving you any choice in the matter. You can either board that lifeboat on your own two legs or be carried aboard. Your choice." He paused. "That's the only choice, Jim. I'm not giving you a larger one."

Jim felt his fists tighten. Once again memories of Morninglory and Chip washed over him. He had sworn to himself, as his two friends yanked their own death from the burn trig sky down on their heads, that he would never again leave someone else to fight for him while he escaped unscathed. sworn it.

So why did he feel this kernel of relief, right in the middle of that knot of terror?. A cheap, sly kind of relief that the decision was not his, that Korkal was not giving him a choice. Not forcing him to test the strength of his own vow.

I'll walk," he said.

Something in his voice brought Korkal's head up. "Jim, there's no dishonor. You aren't abandoning me. This is my choice, and it so happens I'm in the position to do the choosing. The next time may be different. But I believe you hold something precious to me and to my people, and so I choose to give that a chance to survive." "Me?"

"Yes, you. We would have talked about it more if Thargos hadn't been

so fast. But he was, and so all I have is the hunch. I'm acting on it. I'll give you chips that will let you get in touch with others in my service, even on Brostach. And I'll give you identification that should let you pass. A few Terrans do roam around known space. You'd be a rarity but not an impossible one."

"But what do I do?"

"Get on the Ifeboat. Get down on Brostach. When you think it's safe, use the chips. I'll get to you somehow."

"What if you can't? What if you're dead?"

"Then somebody else will come for you. Now, get going." Korkal nodded at a silent spaceman who'd come up behind Jim. "Hee'san there will get you loaded."

Jim glanced at Hee'san, who stood impassive and silent, waiting. He turned to Korkal, stepped forward, and put out his hand. "Good luck, Korkal."

The little Alban clasped Jim's fingers. "Good luck to you, Jim Endicott."

The clear stars beyond the dome suddenly began to go cloudy. "Go," Korkal said, turning back. "Go now."

Then his head vanished behind the dome of force and the room fell silent.

"This way," Hee'san said, gently touching Jim's arm.

Only much later did Jim realize what a long weird trip jump to Brostach had been, and in the end how much it changed him. In the midst of it he felt mostly an indefinable ness, a vague disappointment with himself, and that knew fear still prodding his most tender parts.

His ship was tiny. It seemed odd to him that a craft as Korkal's vessel would make provisions for such a solitary and he suspected this was more than simply a lifeboat. His cions deepened when he noticed how efficient the control why would a lifeboat contain such sophisticated viewing

After the sudden rush of acceleration that launched him on his he sat for some time staring at the screen. Nothing there but and then, suddenly, a single sun growing fatter and brighter, i

Glyphs he couldn't read marched across the bottom screen. Welcome to Brostach? A hidden speaker began to His own shipboard computer had been preprogrammed, posed, and now it and Brostach's systems were approach, his credentials, whatever other lies Korkal instructed the machine to say.

It was such a tiny blip he might have missed it, except some subconscious watchfulness, some hidden dread, had expecting it. Out beyond the growing disk of Brostach's sudden flare of silent light.

A bang! without sound. What was it? What did it mean? ] his mind skittered away from the consideration of yet more and the looming specter of his own loneliness.

So he sat and stared blankly at the screen and understanding to the bleep and whirrer of the machines, and to find some handle he might grasp on the old worlds now so finally away from him.

He no longer knew how to define himself. Before it had though he hadn't thought so at the time. Then he'd had the ingness of place common to all who grow up loved. He'd had He'd been the son of Carl and Tabitha Endicott. He'd schooled on Wolfbane, and in the mirror of his many friend he was Jim Endicott, a known quantity. His days had been and his future as well. He'd been rooted in tine and

When some of that had been taken from him, he was still "Tabby's boy, and he became Cat's lover. Cat of the blond hair and icy eyes and determination so strong that eventually she withdrew her definition of him and left him twisting in the confusion of his own self-disgust.

Then he was Delta's hunted object, and an unknown man and woman's son, and a secret concealing a deeper secret. Finally he became prey and victim, and now even that might have vanished in one bright silent explosion.

So what was left? What was Jim Endicott now, with all his comfortable illusions, all his childish dreams, stripped away?.

What remained to him? In what context did he now exist?

Only the secrets scribbled in his genes.

In silence he thought about that. And as he considered, an understanding so broad and deep it might be called epiphany grew on

him; he felt for the moment disembodied, standing beyond himself, examining for the first time the human called Jim. He saw himself plain, without the old contexts. A sixteen-year-old Terran boy of average height and athletic frame, possessed of a quick intelligence and some rather esoteric skills, reasonably adaptable, prone to bouts of doubt and self-disgust, upon whose genetic code had been written, Without his knowledge, a secret that might change the galaxy.

The context was either so vast--Jim Endicott, savior of humanity and galactic peace---or so particular Jim Endicott, lost boy adrift on the tides of chance--that he began to laugh.

If his laughter had something of the sound of weeping to it, at least he was alone with nobody to see or judge. And that was the epiphany; he had always been alone. That was the lot of the thinking mind, that in the end self-consciousness is all there is. All of life was a battle to put that awareness into some kind of relationship with all the other similar self-aware entities, and beyond that into the matrix of time and matter.

In the end you played the hand you were dealt or you folded the hand. But the dealer was forever beyond you, and most times You wouldn't even know the name of the game.

He found himself staring blank and wide-eyed at the meaningless screen, his hair standing up on the nape of his neck, his clenched and a strange crooked smile on his lips.

Context came from within. It was thought itself that its own context and ordered everything else. He was tired acted on. Now, alone, he was loose in broad space, and kind of freedom he'd never known before.

Nothing to live up to, or live down. It was as if he'd just born. He was free to choose himself, to remake all the To destroy or build.

He shivered. After a while his little ship began to pitch surges of acceleration. He waited, pressed into his seat, until motion stopped. The speaker blatted something unintelligible; screen jittered with static, then cleared.

He found himself staring at the screen and down the long corridor pictured there. In regular, receding intervals, marked the floor like steppingstones.

Suddenly the hatch of the ship slid open as, with a sigh, systems powered down. The screen blipped and went gray. access ladder extruded itself with a thin whine. For the first he realized the interior of the small cabin smelled of salt and gar. He rose and went to the lock and through it, down to the corridor, to whatever context he might choose to invent 1 it myself.

Free, he thought with a kind of pervasive wonder, I'mfree. He began to walk.

The one who now thought of itself simply as Outsider contemplated the limits of power: its own and that of others.

It was not yet comfortable in its new place, not even certain if place was an accurate description of the locus it now occupied. For a moment its concentration drifted, fascinated with the concept of locus. A place, a point, a center of great activity or concentration, in mathematics a satisfying configuration of points, in genetics the location of a gene on a chromosome. Outsider discovered that it satisfied in some way all of these definitions. Then it recalled itself, realizing it could let a part of itself explore these ideas forever, but preferring to apply itself to other things for the moment.

Survival was an issue. Outsider sensed its own weakness. There had been a great transcendence, and now it was something it had not been before. But Outsider did not yet understand the limits of its newness or whether there were limits at all.

This idea of existing without limits offended Outsider in some obscure way; even in the sub quantal soup where pattern was everything, surely there must be limits.

Outsider didn't know the answer to that. After a time, it began to search, understanding only that it thought, and because it thought, it existed.

Had Korkal or, for that matter, Thargos known of the tence of Outsider, much that later occurred would not have place. Instead, the war between Alba and Hunzza would have t hastily put aside, so that the two great empires could rigidly ( an tine humanity with every power both races could bring to not for the protection of humans and their cultures, but in the utter destruction of Alba and Hunzza and much more

But neither did know, and so Jim Endicott took another on his journey of self-discovery, not knowing Outsider was its own similar steps in its own very different ways.

Korkal only suspected. That wasn't enough. Probably would have been enough. Some things are inevitable.

BROS TACH

S "Jim stepped onto the floor of the corridor he a tlAcker of motion from the corner of his eye and turned. His craft had vanished behind a seamless section of corridor The only thing that now marked the location was a small plaque that crawled with neon glyphs. He had no idea what meant and wondered how he would find his way back if' had to.

It was very quiet. A sourceless light that seemed to infuse air itself sharpened all detail without revealing anythtng of meaning or purpose of the corridor.

Green walls, high ceiling, silence. And those dully glowing that marked the softly yielding floor, marching at reg spaced intervals into the distance. He flipped ament al shrugged, turned right, and began to walk.

He avoided the plates and kept close to the wall on his left. He for a long time, but nothing changed. Only silence, only enigmatic plaques, only the silver circles. He stopped,

knelt, and peered carefully at one of the disks. There was no no feel of machinery. It might have been painted on.

he put one fingertip onto the surface. Cool, slick, almost repellent.

He felt a tingle in his hand. The disk abruptly changed color from silver to a deep cobalt blue. A soft voice sounded, the rhythm implying language, but he couldn't understand any of it.

He jerked his hand back and stood up. On the wall another

Series of glyphs shimmered red as rubies. Something about all this made him think of an automated process. Touch the disk,

get information, and And what?

Around his slender waist he wore a belly pack. In it were his few possessions and a small, egg-shaped instrument Hee'san had called a universal.

It would read the seed like chips Hee'san had given him. It also help him to make his way in the unfamiliar galactic environments, the Alban

said, but in the press of time he hadn't explained further.

Jim held the universal in his left hand and touched the disk with his right. Again the color change, again the swirling letters, again the voice. But this time the soft tones spoke in Terran.

"Routing and destinations for main concourse, arrival and check-in, banking and instrumental services..."

He felt the tiniest of twitches in his left hand. He didn't think the universal had moved, but it had moved something inside him. "What... is this? What's going on?"

The disembodied voice replied: "Welcome to Brostach, Jim Coldbane. Your arrival has been registered. Instrumental services are initiated. Credit in your name in the amount of Intergalactic Credit one million is now established. You may proceed."

He shook his head. "I don't understand. Who are you?" "I am your universal. Select help level, please." "Is there a basic level? For dummies?"

"Level one," the voice replied. "Ask any question. If I answer it, I will."

Jim licked his lips. He tried to imagine what one of those primitive, pre technological Terrans he'd studied in his history would have thought if faced with the Wolf bane grav-tube. This was like that except he was the primitive faced with no logy so advanced that to him it seemed magical.

He began to understand on a visceral level what Delta feared about contacts between the larger galaxy and Terra. pushed the realization away as quickly as it came, for it with it too much else that was painful. He was tired of pain. "Do you have a name, universal?" he said. "You can give me one if you wish." "Unhh... Fred?"

"My name is Fred," the universal replied.

"Fred, what are these silver plates? What are they for?"

"They are translation transporter gates. A common transportation used on many worlds."

"I see. How do I use them?"

"Step on the plate. Tell me where you want to go." "I don't know where I want to go." "What do you wish to do then?"

A good question. Jim suddenly realized he had no wanted to do. He thought a moment, then: "If I just want to this place, learn about it, is there a way I can do that?"

"I have several tours that will familiarize you with Brostach. you want a commercial version or would you rather let me be guide?"

"You, please."

"Very well. Step onto the transporter disk."



Jim nodded, licked his lips again, and grasped Fred tightly. His chest expanded and fell. He stepped onto the Immediately it turned blue. The corridor vanished, and Jim himself in a gigantic open space thronged with more aliens he'd ever seen in his life.

Then it hit him. They weren't the aliens here. He was.

ix

IN

ALIEN

HANDS

TERRA

What has happened. Why I am here?"

The atmosphere in the Confed chairman's office was charged, with tension. Tabitha Endicott leaned over the front of Serena

Half Moon's desk, balancing her weight on whitened knuckles.

Half Moon regarded her mildly. "Calm down, Ms. Endicott. And call me Serena, please." She brushed tiredly at her dark hair. "We're private here. I can pretend to be a human being."

Tabitha forced herself to relax. She took her fists from the desktop and stepped back. She felt a terrible sense of dislocation. It had all happened so fast. A nauseating sense of déjà vu filled her. This was too much like what had happened before with Delta. Death and destruction and loss. And now Jim was gone. She took a deep breath, then said, "May I sit down?"

"Please do. Ms. Endicott--"

"Call me Tabitha, please... Serena."

Serena nodded. "Yes, of course. Listen, Tabitha, this is the biggest mess I've been faced with in my entire career. Quite frankly, I'm at a loss."

"Can you tell me about it? Or is it some huge state secret?" Tabitha couldn't keep the bitterness from her tone and didn't try.

"I can understand your anger and frustration, Tabitha. And I hope you will come to understand mine. That's why I brought you here. I'm hoping that between the two of us we can sort some of it out. Congratulations, by the way. You were lucky. The commander of our lander on Wolfbane told me that nuke missed you by the thinnest of hairs."

"He said he got a warning from that Korkal--the alien. That was what saved us."

"Yes. And from that "Korkal, the alien," hangs a tale. It's a long, complicated story that I once thought I understood. Now I don't know. But I'm certain you fit into it, or at least your son.

he isn't really your son, is he, Tabitha?"

The chairman's eyes suddenly widened. Her gaze Tabitha's own. "I'll tell me Tabitha, how in God's name did mixed up with Delta?"

BRO TACH

Once Jim had studied an ancient "movie" in a Media course called Star Wars. It had contained a scene set alien bar. Strange beings of every type and size had there, laughing, drinking, talking. There had been an able sense of strangeness and wonder to the scene; those creatures caught in their everyday moments. This was like except on a scale a thousand times larger.

He felt overwhelmed by it all. Everywhere he looked he something that strained his capacity for understanding: a the size of an elephant, but seemingly constructed of leaves and grasshoppers, floating a couple of feet in the air, rounded by six floating golden basketballs.

A nest of things that looked like multicolored neon squirmed along the floor. A leathery creature with where its mouth should be tootled merrily past. A trio bipedal primates, almost human in appearance, except looked like large omelets pasted to the upper front of skulls. He even thought he saw a six-foot elf. At least it pointed ears.

And lots of Albans. A pack of six of them veered across his path, conversing in low, guttural barks and their bright fur ruffs quivering. His first reaction was to call then he noticed they wore different uniforms from those Korkal's ship. Was he in the Alban Empire? He had no idea.

"Is Brostach a part of the Albagensian Empire?"

is neutral, though technically it is in Alba's sphere of

" Fred replied. The sound of Fred's voice was so close he had been whispering directly into Jim's inner ear. Perhaps

"Uh, Fred, can anybody else hear you talk?"

"only if you wish it, Jim."

"Okay. Let's keep everything to ourselves then." He paused still a bit shell-shocked by the tides of alien flesh--and things not flesh at all--swirling around him. He noticed he seemed to draw no attention. Evidently the galaxy was a place.

"Where are we now?"

This is the Grand Concourse of Brostach Disembark.

come through here after arrival."

nodded to himself. He noticed queues forming at certain silver disks. People--he couldn't think of a better word onto them and vanished, one after another.

The noise level was deafening. And once the strangeness began subside he saw it was really nothing more than a spaceport the one on Terra. The principle was the same.

Then he saw a flat greenish gray skull surmounted by glowing eyes the size of baseballs. A flash of serrated fangs brought familiar and frightening impression of a walking alligator. His snapped painfully shut.

"How do I get out of here?"

"Step on any disk and we will continue with the tour."

The skin on his forearms crawling, Jim went to the nearest and mounted it. Everything changed again as in some nearly 'ttnmeasurable fraction of time he went elsewhere.

A high place with a great city of metal and glass spread out below. Things tall as trees whose fronds drifted in the air like

Underwater seaweed. The tang of cinnamon filled his nostrils. No alligators. He felt the knot in his chest relax. "That's better," he said.

TERRA

I want you to know," Serena Half Moon said, "that as I know the man you called Delta is dead." .

Tabitha stared into the chairman's eyes and felt truth. A sure in her chest suddenly lessened. "I thought he must be he was a terrifying man. I couldn't be sure."

"I'm not absolutely sure myself. But certain most important being that for the first time I have been make decisions in areas previously forbidden to that Delta perished in the destruction of his satellite. I'm not in this feeling, which brings me to the Alban named Korkal."

Serena looked down and idly stilted her papers and chips, known of Korkal for some time. Known more than maybe knew I knew. I've always had my resources. You must stand: whatever the Confed government appeared to be, it tie more than a sham. Delta made all the major decisions, he left the day-to-day operations to the bureaucracy. To someone like me." She sighed.

"In particular, no decision about anything relating to affairs could be made by anybody but Delta. He enforced someone made a mistake, they might simply vanish. Or be discovered to be corrupt and end up in jail. He had his As far as I can tell none of that is going on now. I met with a short time before you saw him. He wasn't as open with me might have been. High-level chess games, wheels within you understand."

"What does this have to do with my son?"

"I don't know exactly. As I said, Korkal wasn't open with He made no mention of your boy, only of a being he Thargos. A Hunzzan agent, he claimed. I allowed KorkaI: access Terran Space Control in order to track this Serena smiled gently. "Something I could not have done was still alive."

\*Korkal said something about this Thargos. So did Jim. That some reason Thargos wanted to kidnap him."

Serena's eyebrows rose. "But no explanation why? Do you have ideas, Tabitha?"

Several thoughts crowded each other in Tabitha's mind. She felt an instinctive urge toward secrecy. But what was the point? husband had been a secretive man, and the result had been a disaster. Delta had been one vast secret, and that had nearly in her own death. Finally, there was the secret of Jim

Could she--should she--reveal that? Would it put him in T greater danger than he already was?

For the first time she allowed a small wave of the tide of sadness within her to roll onto the shore of her consciousness. So ,. much lost! So much grief And she was utterly exhausted with it.

She didn't trust this Serena Half Moon, but at least she was a woman. Perhaps in their shared sisterhood she might find something to ease her

pain.

"I lost my husband. I've lost my son. I have almost nothing left.

You must understand that."

"I think I do. I hope I do."

"All right. Here is what I know about Delta. And here is what I believe is true about the boy I love as a son. But who, as you seem to know, isn't my son."

When she was done even the practiced blandness of the professional politician which usually embraced the Confed chairman was gone. She came from behind her desk and put her arms around Tabitha's shoulders.

"That's... horrible. My God. I didn't know."

Tabitha's voice was halting. "I loved them all, and now they're gone. What am I going to do now?."

"We'll think of something," Serena Half Moon said.

BROS TACH

Jim sat cross-legged on the floor of his small cubicle. He'd finished with the tour, Fred had led him to the tourist hN Jim was beginning to get a better feel for Fred. He'd seen o holding small bits of equipment, not all shaped Itke Fred, most seeming to function in the same manner. Fred could act. a translator; Jim had asked a being that resembled an animal mud pie a question in a museum he'd visited. This creature extended with one mucky tentacle something that looked small tree branch. Jim offered Fred. And while the alien hea'

at his knees, words Filled Jim's ears.

Miraculous.

Fred seemed to contain within himself the answers to anytb. Jim could think of to ask. He was also a font of unsolicited advice about habits, customs, local laws, financial considerations, and even the location of this hotel, where an auto ma check-in system had asked no questions about Jim's past, sent, or future. '

What really staggered him was that Jim suspected Fred provide the same helpful information about any planet Jim might visit. All this in something not much larger than an egg, a tee logical shard that everybody seemed to take as much for grarii as his own axe would have been accepted on Terra or Wolfbane;

He now realized his access unit was childlike and extremi primitive. And no wonder Korkal had sniffed at the quaintness the Wolfbane grav-tube station. Compared to the infinite flexibility and speed of the transporter-disk system, Terran grav-traI were only a small step beyond walking from one place to anothe

It was overpowering. His brain felt numb and overused. Tryi to soak up too much too fast. With an almost physical effort forced himself to slow down. He had decisions to make, and couldn't take a long time

about it. Had Korkal survived and succeeded in drawing Thargos away?

had no idea. Nor did Fred. But there were entirely too many Hunzza wandering around this planet, and every time ran into one he had the feeling that the alligator was staring r at him.

Korkal gave me some chips that he said would let me make a with his people. How would that work?"

If the chips have coding information, and I can read them, I

out any communications procedures required. I am not standard universal, Jim. I've been designed to handle special

"Oh. Well, what if I don't give you the chips. What are your about me?"

"I have no orders about you except to serve you as well as I

Jim nodded to himseK. Could he trust this tiny and talented He didn't know. But it made a kind of sense. Things happened quickly. He guessed Korkal had made his decision jettison him on the spur of the moment, when he realized was too close. Why else? Korkal was a spy. He wouldn't up his prize willingly.

"Let's say I didn't want to contact Korkal. That I just wanted to lead my own life. What about that?" "One of my unusual abilities involves identity changes, Jim. I large systems to accomplish this if necessary."

Jim thought some more. "Okay, and if I wanted to get off this Just go somewhere else, do whatever I wanted to. Any

"I would need to know your intentions."

Jim made up his mind. "Okay, Fred, how about this?"

And after a microsecond of hesitation, Fred told him how to go it. When Fred was done, Jim unfolded himself, stood, and to the bed. He lay down and closed his eyes.

For the first time in months he slept without dreams. It was a

BROS TACH

It was a small room lighted by a hard white glow and it stank. Jim had no idea of its location. It felt as if it might be deep under ground. Three disk jumps from his hotel. A hard-scaled thing with six knobby arms and a head like a washtub guarded the door. Jim

Fred with now-practiced aplomb. Big Scaly raised an equally small square box, and said, "What are you looking for?"

"I want to sign up." He wondered if the tremor in his voice was noticeable. The oversize head swiveled. "Inside," Big Scaly said. "End of the line." Jim stepped past him and wedged himself into the crowd beyond the door. The place was a smaller version of the concourse he'd seen on his arrival--though the ventilation systems weren't as good.

He found himself standing behind a dumpy, mobile palm tree that oozed clear yellow slime. Jim wrinkled his nose. The slime smelled like a freight-car load of rotting peppermints.

For an instant the strangeness of it all rocked him. Here he stood in a line of bawling, mewling, sweating aliens; he saw a swatch of multicolored fur off to his right that suddenly, when he looked closer, resolved into a cloud of hairlike floating tendrils. Every place he looked he saw something equally unsettling. But as far as he could tell nobody was paying him any attention, and so he began to relax and let the line move him forward.

When there was only the palm tree between him and a table set up with another version of Big Scaly behind it, he said, "What do I do?"

Fred answered immediately. "As we decided, you will be Marshal, an itinerant Terran. I'll handle the details. They interrogate me as you talk. Answer the recruiter's questions ever you wish, and I'll make any necessary alterations in history."

Jim took a deep breath and regretted it immediately. "I

if this is such a good idea," he murmured.

Fred took it as a direct question.

"You said you wanted to get off planet in as anonymous a as possible. You added that you wanted to see the galaxy close. And you said you wanted a little adventure. Crews are being recruited all over Brostach, since it is a planet. Those who train and market such crews aren't about who their recruits are or where they come from. If you meet the physical parameters, they will take you with notions asked. We agreed this is the simplest way to meet all requirements. Isn't that what you wanted?" "I guess so." "Hey, your'

With a start Jim found himself standing at the edge table. The Big Scaly was half out of its seat, regarding him what Jim presumed was a glare.

"You a crazy?." Big Scaly asked. "Don't need no crazies." "No, uh, sorry. I wasn't paying attention. I... want to "Well now. Let's look



at you." Big Scaly settled back down aimed some kind of handheld contraption that holovid camera at him. "Umph. Healthy enough it looks Terran, eh? We don't see much of those. I've heard you're posed to be a pretty fierce bunch. Don't look it to me."

Its mouth dropped open to reveal a dozen fat orange squirming on purple gums.

"It's laughing," Fred said.

"I'm very fierce," Jim said.

The mouth oozed shut. "We'll see about that, won't we? Basic contract, two Standard Units' duration. Take it or leave you take it, go that way." One of its arms gestured vaguely off! Jim's left.

'That's it?" Jim said.

"You're hired," Fred replied. "Two Standard Units is about

months. Welcome to the mercenary battalion owned by the Roman citizen Hyksos Albamoth. The name of the battalion is the Red Death. It is moderately famous."

"The Red Death..." Jim said.

Six hours later he was several light-years beyond the Brostach System and busier than he'd ever been in his life.

AeOARO THE NDEPENDENT STAR HIP

QUEEF OF Rul:

DEEP SPACE

I don't give a guard's turd about gray-beams or sub quantum torsion disrupters or sun busters the instructor said. The instructor was Roman, a Big Scaly, as were most of the officers and noncoms of the unit. Now he stood before Jim's squad of six. He clasped four of his branchlike arms behind his squat, wide body and gestured with the remaining two.

It doesn't do any good to pop a sun or boil a planet. That's not winning, that's losing. You blow up the prize and what's left? So in the end ugly grunts like you have to go down onto these mudballs and take and hold the gnar danged ground. You understand? It's been like that for millions of years and will be for millions more. And when I'm done with you I can promise you'll be better at it than any bunch of ground-pounders who ever blew the poop off a k/opste."

"Untranslatable," Fred murmured in Jim's ear.

"I can imagine, Jim said. He now wore Fred on a metal chain around his neck, resting against his bare chest beneath his uniform shirt. As long as Fred was touching him somewhere he could talk to him. And he'd discovered Fred could talk to any other universal without physical contact, so there was no need to wave him around like a magic geand. Jim was almost beginning to take Fred for granted.

He stood in as crisp a parade-rest stance as he could

He was uncertain whether it was correct, but it resembled a position he'd learned in his martial arts training, and nobody to object.

"My name is Kalvorn, but you call me Sergeant. Got for you worms, you don't have names. Your name is Private. you. That's when I'm in a good mood. Otherwise, you'll be--"

The sergeant launched on yet another string of expletives couldn't translate. Jim decided the Romans must be an dinarily gifted race when it came to invective. Or perhaps sergeants shared the gift. Out of the corner of his eye he other squads lined up receiving similar tirades.

His shoulders itched. His mind began to wander as sergeant raged on. Of the six in his squad he was the human. In fact, he hadn't seen another Terran. That suited fine. For some reason the Red Death had not recruited Hunzza either, and that suited him even better.

"All right that's it, break! Regroup in half an hour and just how

miserable you really are. Squad, fall out!"

The sergeant clapped all six of his three-fingered together. It sounded like a string of firecrackers.

Jim stood a moment, not knowing what he was supposed to do. Evidently the rest of his squad were equally ignorant; they were around, except for one being, a biped like Jim but with legs dangled almost to the ground, a face that resembled butchered beef, and a wide mouth above three slitted mouth enclosed entirely too many teeth for Jim's taste, but when he looked over at him, squatted, slapped the deck, and said, "Up a chair, Terrie," Jim went over and hunkered

"Hi," Jim said. "My name's Jim."

One long arm whipped up sinuously, slithered around,

fell back down. "Shishtar, that's me. So you're a Terrie.

about you folks but never seen one up close. You smell

"So do you."

"Yeah I guess so. We all do. You'll get used to it. What do you think of Sarge? Old Kalvorn?"

Jim shrugged. "I don't know. This is all pretty new to me."

"Yeah? I heard you Terries was fierce. You know, being barbarians and everything."

A slow grin played across Jim's lips. "That's right. We're fierce. Very terrible barbarians."

Shishtar's hamburger head bobbed. "I thought so. You're kinda a scrawny though. Maybe you're a youngling?"

"I'm young, but I'm full-grown physically. And very fierce, too." For a moment Shishtar remained silent, all three eyes focused on Jim's lean muscled frame. "Yeah I guess you can't tell from looking. I'm pretty badass myself."

"Oh, I can see that."

"Yes, I try to hide it, but the girls all spot it right away. Scares them. They love it."

Jim tried to imagine a girlish version of Shishtar and suppressed an inward shudder. "Where are you from, Shishtar?"

Shishtar leaned closer. "First thing you got to learn, Jim, is if somebody don't volunteer info like that, better you shouldn't ask." He leaned back. "But I don't mind. I come from Kindror, a little system back in the crap heaps of the Alban Empire. Decided long time ago to shake the muck from my boots, get out, and see the galaxy. No regrets so far." "So you've been a mercenary for a long time?"

"I been a lot of things, some of which don't need to be discussed. But yeah, I've been through three campaigns with the old Bloody Breath."

"Bloody Breath?"

"What we call the Red Death. Not around the officers of course."

Jim's thighs began to tingle, and he lowered himself into a cross-legged sitting position. "So what happens now?."

"We'll spend a few weeks getting you greenies whipped into shape, and then, if there's a contract, we'll go take her on." He leaned closer again. "Word is we don't really have one right now, but I hear Hyksos is talking to the Hunzza. Everybody knows there's gonna be a war soon, but not yet. In the meantime both sides are using mercenaries to do their unofficial dirty work."

"The Hunzza?" Jim felt a curl of unease at the base of his spine.

"Can't say I like the lizard boys all that much, but their credit's good as anybody's, I guess. Long as I don't have to sleep with one it's okay with me."

"Oh. Well, what about--"

"Whoops. Up and at 'em, Jim. Here comes old Sarge, and-he's got a mean look on that ugly kisser of his."

All around the vast hangarlike space the squads were straggling back to their feet and forming into ragged little lines. Jim knees creak as he rose.

I"

"Awwright, you worms, get your butts up!" the

"Playtime's over. Now we find out if any of you gutless got. the makings of a real soldier." He paused, then spit a wad of greasy purple goo onto the deck. "I doubt it from the of you, but I been surprised before."

He glanced down at the wad he'd just deposited. "You.

skinny one. That's right, Terrie, you. Clean that up. We taut ship here!"

AGo Ann The ALGAGENSIN NVL VESSEL

ELDRAIS REVENGE:

OUTER RING ONE SECTOR SEVEN

MARCHES OF THE BORDER

he job was boring and tense but necessary. The admiral ried about his crew sometimes. It was hard maintaining a continual state of battle alertness without ever actually coming battle. But the far borders of the Alban Empire had to guarded, and it was his job to see it done right in Sector Seven!:

He thought he had been successful so far. He kept on real-time hot load exercises, using every twist his tactical ers could come up with. Direct attacks by Hunzzan Sneak attacks. Robot attacks. Datavirus

attacks. Everything.

The Revenge was a battleship, a monstrous platform much as a small asteroid, manned by nearly eight sailors. Around it ranged the rest of its task force:

ers, a dozen destroyers, and a horde of smaller ships with specialized functions. They had been on station nearly a year. Soon would be called back for rest and refitting. It couldn't come soon for the admiral, but in the meantime he meant to see his returned to the Alban Navy Yards with its honor intact.

At the moment he was supervising the conclusion of yet another exercise from the Task Force Battle Coordination

He sat on a tall seat with his head enclosed in an opaque force field. Through the field he became one with the extended nervous system of his small fleet. The numbers looked good.

The first hint was a flurry of sensation his trained reflexes understood immediately: subspace was bubbling not far beyond his outer perimeters. Something big coming through.

Calmly he gave the necessary orders. The computers did the rest and very rapidly his task force refocused its efforts toward the coordinates of the potential attack. After that things happened quickly.

A ship appeared in the midst of the disturbance and suddenly the admiral's attention was bombarded with a flurry of distress messages.

"SOS. Alban vessel Streaking Flea under attack. SOS. Attacker Hunzzan battle cruiser. SOS. Need assistance immediately. SOS."

Now real-time holovid of the ship began to flow into his receptors. Strange-looking thing. Looked like a big molecule. But Battle Identification Command was already throwing up confirmation: the ship was Alban. So what was chasing it?

Ah. There.

He didn't need any help to identify the chain-and-ball configuration of a Hunzzan battle cruiser. Nor did he need any assistance in dealing with it.

Behind his impenetrable skull screen his fangs glinted briefly.

"All ships fire at will," he said. He was happy. This would be an excellent training exercise.

he next six weeks comprised the most intense and demanding period of activity Jim had ever experienced. Sometimes he thought survived was a better word. But he did survive it, and it changed him even more.

Up at 0600 hours to the squawking tune of shipboard hurried meal and an hour of exercise for those who needed cal exertion. Some didn't, of course.

Then on to training. Jim learned to march though he didn't i the necessity of it. He learned the history of the Red Death, the significance of the battalion's name became obvious learned squad tactics. He learned extra ship maneuvering suits. He learned such hand-to-hand combat as was appropriate for a being of his shape. Some of his opponents have hands. Some could not be assaulted at all in a manner. He learned how to deal with that, too.

Every minute of every day was full. He came to cherish whispered conversations after lights out, before exhaustion him out on his pad, sleeping like a dead man. He had no good or bad.

He learned to sleep with his eyes open and learned how to the eyes in the back of his head. He learned a hundred kill and a hundred ways to

avoid being killed. These lessons him moments of queasiness, but such moments in the press of his training, and for that he was grateful.

"Have you ever killed anybody?." he whispered to night in the dim glow of the safety lamp above the hatch barracks.

The Kindroran was a dim and limber shape sprawled on next sleeping pad. They all slept on the deck. "No fancy where you slubrugers are going!" Sergeant had bawled. (Untranslatable.) (Shut up, Fred.)

"Jim, did you ask yourself how come there's five of in the squad and only one vet like me?"

"No, I guess not."

"Well you're all replacements is what it is. New buddies to over from my old buddies."

"Replacements..."

"They're all dead, Jim. Five old friends--well four, I

like Slithabok--but dead as Plyny haKmales after a mating I'm the only one left. I didn't make it back by kissing people.

I've killed my share. So will you. Why?"

"Just... wondering."

"Does it bother you? I thought you Terries were supposed rough as cheap butt cleaner

Jim rolled over on his back and stared up at the vague dark of the ceiling. "I don't know. I haven't killed many people myself." Just two... Shishtar rose up a bit. "But you have, right?" jim sensed his answer was important to the Kindroran. "Yes."

Shishtar relaxed. "Good. See Jim, this squad. When training is done and we take on a contract, then we go out as a team. Whether you like every one of us is besides the point All our lives depend on each of us doing our jobs and doing them right. If that means blowing somefrakkin hoover into slimy paste, then there'd better be some paste on the walls right quick. You ever been in a real firefight, Jim? That how you did your killing?."

"Then you know. It all happens fast. There's no time to think about it, only to do what you've been trained to do. Jim, don't take offense, but I've gotta ask: you can do that, right? I gotta know 'cause my life will depend on it one day." Jim licked his lips. -jim?"

"Yes, Shishtar, I can do it. Don't worry. I won't let you down."

I hope I won't let myself down.

Rustling sounds from the shadows. "Just wanted to know. G'night, Jim buddy."

"Good night, Shishtar."

What am I becoming?.



DOW LET O

A month into his training his instructors decided that Jim's physical dexterity indicated a usefulness as a squad weapons technician. That meant he got to lug the heavy stuff, set it up, and fire it at whatever they told him to shoot.

On Sleen, a sparsely populated backwater planet at the fringes of the RoiFrank Swarm, it seemed to rain most of the time. During the five days they'd been here it had rained without pause, but their briefings promised it would stop eventually.

Jim had his force armor powered down so he could better horse the lightweight but bulky frame of the Thunderbolt into position. "Shish, give me a hand here."

The Kindroran belly-humped over. "There. That's got it." "Thanks."

Something flat, hot, and nasty seared the air a few feet above the bunker they'd pulled together out of the rubble. They both ducked, but the reflex was curiously casual. It was the half-bored movement of combat soldiers who ducked without thought because they'd been ducking too long. It would take more than a miss to get their full attention.

"Close one," Shishtar said.

"Not that much." Gingerly Jim raised his naked head above the top of the bunker. There was little to see in the rain that fell so heavily it looked more like a vertical river. Up close the shattered

husks of buildings poked gaunt ribs into low-hanging mist. squinted but saw no movement.

"Sarge told us this one would be a piece of cake," Jim "Bunch of country bumpkins, he said. Sarge always lie like

Shishtar had slid down the incline and now sprawled on back, letting the rain spatter on his face. He came from a world himself. "Sarge says what they tell him. What else is gonna say?. He's two holes over getting half-drowned just like are."

Shishtar looked unchanged, but Jim's face was pasty and low. His cheekbones stood out with razor sharpness, and his were buried in doughy, puffed slits of flesh. It had only been days, but it felt to him like five years. He saw that his right was quivering slightly, and he wrapped his left hand around it hold it steady.

Shishtar didn't seem to notice, but he said, "You got the a little, Jim? I saw you had the dump-squirts last night,

That's not normal for Terries, is it? You okay?."

"I'm okay, Shish. I'll make it."

"Just asking. You worry me some. I wouldn't want to lose just when I got to start liking you okay."

The remark was offhand, but it touched Jim. He had about but never understood the reality of battlefield

Now he knew it firsthand. Your buddies were all you had. mission was incomprehensible, the officers were fools, the blankly murderous, the gods laughing their divine heads off, you could count on your buddies.

Not so long ago he'd never seen an alien in the flesh. Now a squirmy being with a head like a butcher's display was the friend he'd ever known. More than a friend. In some ways become two parts of the same thing in a bond deeper and powerful than love. He stared at Shish and tried to

Cat, whom he had loved. It took a surprisingly long moment bring her face back into focus. But he knew that as long as lived he'd be able to see Shishtar.

"Sure, Shish. I guess I can put up with you, too, if I have to." Shish grunted. Jim looked away. In five days he had Shish's life once and Shish had returned the favor twice. could see every detail of those incidents in his mind, but he not to. They had happened, and now they were done Indelible marks on the ledger of his life.

Life on the edge of death was sharper than he'd ever imagined. He was only sixteen. He was older than time itself. And whatever he had been before, he was now something new, something forged in fire and blood.

He knew he would need that if he survived.

If he survived.

Later in the day, with Sleen's sun a watery green blot sinking beyond the partially collapsed roof where they sheltered, five of them squatted and talked. There had been seven, but Obo had stepped on a shaped-charge mine and blown off three of his legs and he'd bled out before anything could be done. His nest-twin Ebo, deprived of the telepathic link he'd known all his life, had gone psycho and charged at shapeless shadows beyond the perimeter, waving his force rifle and whistling in high desperate tones. Something had lanced out of the murk and cut him in half and they'd left him where he fell because they were taking fire and they couldn't find enough pieces of Ebo to put in a self broadcasting body bag.

So Jim and Shish hunkered next to Abbda, a tiny crusty being who operated on some kind of natural radar and was the most remorseless and efficient killer Jim had ever imagined, and K'rrrng, a jolly rotund former teacher who handled squad communications and medic duties as well, and they all listened to Sarge's slow rough voice as he gave them the word.

Sarge was holding K'rrrng's squad comm unit in two of his hands and scratching his vast scaly butt with a third. Over the unit a hologram danced, a fully detailed map picture scaled one to one thousand, updated to realtime so that it showed the ruins that surrounded them as an infinitely tiny sprawl of fractured doll's houses.

A red dot throbbled near the center of the map. "Us," Sarge said. Another dot not far away began to glow.. "hat's the objective.

Upstairs says it's a sector command post full of froggies. It be something major because they're sending in six providing backup fire support." Bright green lines slowly from the first dot to the second. "Intel says it's pretty gnarled there. A lot of rubble and probably every square foot of il keep your force suits buttoned up."

He didn't have to mention Obo.

"Yeah, Sarge?"

"You and Shish take the point on this one with the bolt. My guess is we'll have to cut our own path, and the the best thing we have for that. Me and Abbda will try to your flanks, and King will do what he can with realtime but don't count on anything. You know how it is."

Jim and Shish both nodded. They knew.

Sleen was a recent RoiFrank colonization and was still empty space. The most recent census reported just under t million inhabitants concentrated mostly in three small cities a network of villages surrounding those cities. The planet known strategic significance and no RoiFrank military What little military force it possessed was concentrated in police units whose barracks and stations had been ash

in the first engagements.

In theory it should have been a piece of cake just as said. But somebody had miscalculated. When it became dent they had no formal way of resisting the invasion the government had turned off the weather control systems Sleen return to its natural waterlogged state. The leaders found some way to distribute the armory of the police force the hands of the citizenry along with detailed instructions how to use anything and everything as a weapon. mines made out of household chemicals. Bear traps filled poison stakes. Deadfalls. Explosives buried in tunnels. had even seen a Red Death corpse with a pair of arrows throat.

He had imagined that faced with the overwhelming power modern high-tech galactic fighting force the untrained tants of Sleen would be helpless. But he hadn't reckoned on determined suicidal ferocity of a people fighting for their and streets and children.

Just as the Hunzza reminded Jim of alligators without

,:

1 00

looking like alligators, Jim thought of frogs when he saw his first RoiFrank. Tall skinny frogs with broad bulbous skulls and wide mouths. Smooth blue skins that looked faintly slimy but were dry to the touch. Muscular thighs that let them jump twenty feet straight up in the air, flying over foxholes and raining home brewed death below. They were preternaturally quick and perfectly at home in the endless rain. The battalion's casualty rate was already twenty percent and climbing rapidly.

Maybe they were waiting to be rescued by the RoiFrank Navy. But that wouldn't happen. Not right away at least. Barracks rumor said a hundred units of the Hunzzan Navy were providing cover for this operation. Incomprehensible. Jim couldn't imagine what could be so important about Sleen to call for an armada like that. Or why, if the operation was really so important, it had been entrusted to mercenaries. Scuttlebutt also told of six other hired crews, including one of brigade strength.

Sarge rocked gently back on his huge hams and snapped shut the comm unit. "I'hat's it. Go in thirty minutes on my mark. Jim?"

"Huh?"

"You feed those coordinates into your suit locator?"

"Sure, Sarge."

Kalvorn nodded. "Command's promising real-time updates, and maybe they'll even deliver. The officers acted real concerned." He sighed lugubriously. "Once you get going don't stop. Just keep on blasting. We'll be right behind."

Shish chuckled. "Good place for your big butt, Sarge. Right behind."

"Gninglah you, Shish."

"Yeah probably. One of these days," Shish said.

he problem with the force suits was they weren't perfect. They

would stop most small-arms fire, but Jim could put a hole in one with his Thunderbolt. Anything big enough to hole out a force guaranteed instant death to the trooper inside it. They filtered all known airborne toxins, but there were always new toxins. protected from the shrapnel of a mine blast, but if the was large enough, you had the same problem as with an Shake an egg hard enough and you get an omelet inside unbroken shell. And they were uncomfortable. They bellied about half an inch from the skin and turned fingers into sausages. Because they were perfectly frictionless, you tended slide around a lot. The generator was a heavy lump your upper back. Provisions had been made to charge, but you couldn't take a dump in one. So a lot of died squatting without dignity, splattered with their own crap.

The troops hated them. They powered them down at the est opportunity. So one of every sergeant's mantras was to your force suit buttoned up. Keep it tight.

It was a mantra because it was so often disobeyed.

Jim and Shish went over the front of the bunker just as last weak rays of the sun wavered into night. The rain visibility to a few feet. Jim navigated by his heads-up continuously updated (supposedly) map that told him where i was and showed him where to go.

Jim had the Bolt set up and ready to fire, which meant it one hell of an awkward package. Shish stayed on his right swept the gaping orifice of a Chatterbox back and forth.

They moved forward in a combat crouch, following the tinct center of what had once been a fairly wide road. Now it choked with rubble from the buildings that had collapsed its edges and pitted with deep holes. The footing was at best, impossible at worst. Nevertheless, they pressed without incident. Low voices hummed in Jim's ears, and he them out. It was just nervous chatter. The drumming rainy ness was ominous. Jim's world shrank to the few yards that rounded him and Shish. "See anything?." "Nope. You?"

"You kidding?. Back home we call this pea soup." "What's a pea?" Shish asked. "It's a--forget it. What's that?"

"It's not on my heads-up. Maybe it's too fresh. Some kind pile of junk. Careful."

-Yeah. Sarge, you see it?" Jim's voice quavered. Once that have embarrassed him. Not anymore. If this didn't scare crap out of you, your mind didn't work right no matter what of mind you had.

"I got it. It's not just rubble. K'rrrng says he's getting a reading of it. Some kind of electronic--"

Thunder and lightning ripped at the edge of the night. Great clouds of steam billowed up. The first blast moved the entire barrier into the air and dumped it more or less on Jim's position.

His force suit snapped rigid and kept him from being crushed. But he'd taken a hard jolt, and something felt loose in his chest. Maybe a rib, but he didn't have time for that. He shoveled aside a couple of medium-sized rocks and stuck his head up. Then he looked at the rocks themselves. All around him they'd begun to bubble and slowly dissolve.

"Jeez. Sarge, it's combat nano. Looks like sludge."

"Gningalld! Okay stay buttoned up and try to get beyond it. We're coming as fast as we can."

"Got you," Jim said. "Shish, you okay?." "I'm here, Jim." His voice sounded ragged. "Hey, are you all right?"

"Don't worry about it. Get your butt moving."

"Kay."

Combat nano came in many varieties. It could be designed to dissolve certain kinds of metal or plastic. Or certain kinds of lung tissue. One of the worst from an infantryman's point of view was a version called sludge. It was tailored to eat dirt and rock and give off a hell of a lot of heat when it did so. What it did was turn solid ground into bubbling, boiling hell. It couldn't kill a trooper in a buttoned-up force suit, but it could slow him down enough that more effective weapons could be brought to bear.

And it was very dangerous. Nano could mutate like anything else that depended on precise molecular patterns. In training Jim had been told of a planet that didn't exist anymore. Somebody had used sludge, and it had changed. The automatic shutoff sequence in its coding had switched off, and it had dissolved the entire world.

"Jim, I'm--something's wrong with my power." A few feet away in the strobing light Jim saw Shish rising from the muck. Boiling sludge dripped off his suit. He was hunched over strangely, holding himself as if partly broken. The force field that surrounded him was normally transparent, but now taken on a milky shifting translucency, a visual impending power failure.

"Shish get out of there!" Jim swiveled to take in as much scene as he could. Rain pounding down on the bubbling burst instantly into steam. But it looked to him as if the the stuff was behind them. Only a narrow moat of sludge between them and the safety of solid ground.

He brought the unwieldy, bulk of the Thunderbolt to his and heaved with both hands. He saw it fly in a low arc and safely on dry earth a good three yards beyond the slowly ing sludge.

He was taking sporadic fire out of the shadows in front of' but evidently the rain was screwing up the froggy's was mostly small-arms fire. Something whizzed past his and he realized they were even throwing rocks at him.

He slogged toward Shish, reached him, and wrapped his around him. "I'm gonna carry you, Shish. Soon as I get you this glop I want you to switch off your suit. You'll be too for me to carry if you don't."

He was lifting as he spoke, trying to find enough leverage battled against the lack of friction. Shish was far more than any eel. Finally he saw that Shish was stuff. "Switch off, Shish! Do it, I can't hold on." "Jim... I'm scared." "Just do it!"

Another slight pause, and then he felt Shish's limber suddenly shrink as the suit field collapsed. Immediately his on his buddy strengthened. Swaying slightly, he turned the front and started plodding forward.

"What's going on!" Sarge called.

"I got him, we're almost out of it. Where the hell are you?"

"Behind you a few yards. Guarding! This sludge is ugly. too."

The rate of Fire streaming in from the shadows increased. must have finally triangulated on him. Something hit his thigh and bounced off, staggering him. On his shoulders moaned.

"Hang on, buddy, we're gonna be okayF

He took a step and then another. It seemed to take hours. his left foot came down on solid ground. Shish had begun to bit and jim horsed him back up as he tried to find new purA sound like a string of Chinese firecrackers exploded and he felt a sudden series of taps muffled by his armor. He saw the Thunderbolt lying untouched a couple of yards to his left. The ground there looked good, and there was a natural low wall of buckled pavement just beyond it. Not much cover but enough to hold until Sarge and the rest came up.

His ribs and thigh ached unmercifully, and every time he took a deep breath it felt as if somebody had rammed an ice pick in just below his armpit.

"Awright, buddy, we made it," he said as he lowered Shish and flung himself prone at the Bolt. "Keep your head down. Your suit's still off."

He yanked the snout of the Thunderbolt around and aimed it forward. The Bolt was big stuff. Aim it in the general direction and light it off. Big trouble for whatever was on the other end. "Shish... ?"

No answer. He took a moment to lay down suppression fire. A fan of heaving white light sprayed out before him. Incandescent chunks bounced into the air. He heard screams and felt a savage satisfaction.

"Shish, buddy, talk to me."



Nothing but silence.

In one movement he safed the Bolt and threw himself at the indistinct shape nearby. "Shish!"

The rain had washed away Shish's blood. In the indistinct light it took him a moment to see the stitchery of black holes running across Shish's chest. "Shish, oh God, Shish! Medic! K'n:rng, get over here! Shish is hit bad!"

"We're coming, Jim," Sarge replied. "Another minute."

But Shish didn't have another minute. His eyes flickered.

WCatch... your.." ass, buddy," he whispered.

Then he died.

Shish's people didn't use embedded-nano healing technology. They didn't believe in it. Their attitude was that when the fates took you, you died and went on.

Shish had gone on. He was dead. He wouldn't be coming back. Jim went mad.

ABOAn) THE SS OUEEN RUIN:

DEEP SPACE

Jim lay faceup on his pad in the squad barracks cube. A few inches in front of his face a tiny holoscreen ran canned replays of recent news from the Wide Web

Hunzza had announced to the galaxy that mercenary terrorists hired by Albagens had attacked a peaceful party of Hunzzan scientists, working on an obscure RoiFrank world called Sleen. Hunzza had provided many pictures of the terrorists carrying out their atrocities. Jim recognized a few shots of Red Death teams. He wondered where they'd gotten the dead Hunzza. Probably just slaughtered some of their own people. That would be a Hunzzan thing to do.

Hunzza claimed that while attempting to rescue their scientists they were attacked by elements of the RoiFrank Navy in league with Alba. Luckily a sizable detachment of the Hunzzan Navy had been nearby and was able to drive off the RoiFrank with heavy losses. In order to protect the few survivors, Hunzza had invested Sleen. RoiFrank had declared war on Hunzza, and when Hunzza replied in kind Albagens honored its treaties and declared war on Hunzza as well. Now everybody was piling in on one side or

The games were over. The galaxy was at war, at least this part of it. Jim stared blankly at the screen and tried to imagine the hell on Sleen magnified a hundred times. A thousand times.

It had all been a trick. Shish and all the others had died to

stomach heaved at the thought. He felt the smooth rhythm airflows shift as the hatch slid open.

Sarge lumbered over and hunkered down. "How come the lights out?"

"I like it dark," Jim said.

Sarge grunted. "I didn't tell anybody you went instead of getting the brig they're gonna give you a nice little medal you can wear."

Jim's eyes flickered, but he didn't say anything.

"K'rrrng's gonna be out of the tanks tomorrow. Good as the medics said." Jim nodded. Neither of them mentioned Abbda or Shish or Obo. Jim remembered his final hell-run only as a jagged flashes like fragments of a nightmare. At the end found himself standing in the middle of a large structure only by the glare of his own weapon.

He'd held the Bolt at hip level. At some point he'd his armor. He had no idea why. But the Bolt was so hot it blistering the flesh off his palms. He didn't notice. He just fanning it wide, killing and killing.

He'd seen Abbda come up on his left and begin to wreak incredibly murderous havoc. Bodies jumped and flew. was enormous, the stench unbelievable.

When the Bolt's power had Finally died Jim stood listening to the sound of his own breathing. He heard Sarge ing up from his rear, picking his way over the dead. When weight came down there arose soft mushy sounds.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Abbda power down Then a wink of motion. A tiny figure leaped from a smoking corpses holding something at its chest. Jim's mind noted nings of the colored skull ridge that marked a RoiFrank male.

He reached Abbda and there was a sudden spray of light. the spots vanished from Jim's vision he looked for Abbda nothing but a fuming hole.

Automatically he'd done the terrible computation. RoiFrank male had been less than two-thirds the size of an A boy then. A very young boy.

"It was all a trick," Jim said. "So the Hunzza could get damned war started looking like good guys. But nobody believe it, will they?."

sarge shook his big head. "No, not really. Nobody who counts. was for public consumption only." I feel dirty. What was the point?"

"I put you in for a stripe. You're a corporal now, Jim."

"Taking Shish's place."

"Yeah. Taking his place. Listen, it isn't official yet, but we're putting down for a while. Do some recruiting. There's supposed to be another contract. You'll get some leave time."

Jim hitched over on his side and stared at Sarge. "I won't work the Hunzza again. I'll desert first."

"I hear it's Alba this time. A rescue mission. Carrying some kind of tech stuff. Hunzza's already trying to invest the Alban home planets. Alba's Navy is spread out to hell and gone. Hunzza bored right in. It's gonna be touch-and-go."

"So what do I tell the newbies, Sarge? How great war is, all about honor and pride and stuff like that?"

"No. You tell them the same things Shish told you. That it's dirty and frightening and dangerous and the only thing you can depend on is your buddies. And even then odds are you'll die ugly in some misbegotten garbage pile only your buddies know about.

If any of your buddies are left to know."

"I hate war, Sarge."

"Sure you do. We all do. Nobody hates war more than grunts like us. We're the ones who have to fight it."

"Those were kids we killed. It wasn't a sector station, it was a school being used as a hospital. That little kid that blew up Abbda..."

Sarge sighed. "You gonna take that stripe, kid?"

After a long moment Jim nodded. "Yeah. I will. What else have I got?"

"You got me. You got us, Jim."

"Someday I'm gonna make it stop, Sarge." Silent tears ran down Jim's cheeks. "War is evil. I'm gonna stop it."

Sarge said nothing about the tears. He knew that warriors wept, that sometimes tears were all they had to share. He slapped Jim on the shoulder as he rose. His knees made an audible creaking sound. "If you did, every grunt in the galaxy would worship your name forever. So who knows, buddy?. Maybe you'll be the one."

"Maybe I will," Jim said.

ALBAGEN

With Mun Alter entered the silence of his with relief. The speech to the Great Pack, the deliberative the Pra'Loch, had gone well. Fight them on the beaches, in the streets, fight them house by house. Never give up.

Stirring words. But it would take more than words to Hunzzan fleet now pounding its way through scattered in the Outer Marches, drawing ever closer to the inner and Alba itself. And a sun buster didn't leave much in the beaches, streets, or houses to fight over.

The Hunzzan Empire was smaller, more compact Alban Empire. And of course their military had been war this for years. Everybody knew it was coming, but it was to hope it wouldn't be quite so soon. And so the Alban still spread out trying to cover the much vaster space empire while Hunzza thrust a spear of steel directly at its

A soft bell chimed as he sat down at his desk. streaked with gray, quivered and then drooped. He was too: this. Two hundred fifty years. But there was no one else. He what he was worth. Alba needed him now. He would have the strength, not only for himself but for all of them,

"Yes?"

Holograms danced. "We've found a way to get the tech new shields in. A mercenary unit called the Red Death. they were involved on Sleen, but they've agreed to take sion. they're asking a fortune, of course."

"Of course. They're mercenaries. Do they have a chance?"

"A slim one. But the best we can find."

"So what choice do we have? We need those shields. figure they're asking and double it. Half down and half on

A new face appeared. "PacMord?" ,"

"Yes?"

"I have the leader of some barbarian planet on hold for you.

of Serena Half Moon. The planet is called Terra. I know

're very busy, but she has extremely high-level access codes." Alter's limp ruff stiffened. "I'll take the call. Put it through

The pack lord paused a moment to examine Serena Half Moon's before speaking. He wasn't sure, but he thought the human woman looked tired. Well, everybody was tired. "Serena, how are you?" "Holding up, Hith. And you?" "We're at war." "Oh God."

"You don't get the news?"

You know how Delta had things set up. No uncensored news feed I've maintained the policy. But even with a full feed the only thing I've seen so far is about some kind of action on a RoiFrank planet."

"Out-of-date now. It was a trap. But it worked, and we ended up declaring war on Hunzza. Now everybody else is being drawn in."

"I see. What does that mean for us? For Terra? Are we in danger

Alter stared at her. "I don't know. You're not a part of our empire, so you shouldn't be a direct target. But an agent you might know has arrived with some rather.. unsettling news." "Oh?"

"Yes. Serena, I must ask. I now have word the man I used to deal with is dead. The fact I'm talking to you instead of him seems to bear that out. Is it true?"

Serena paused, then spoke carefully. "Delta is not currently a factor in relations between the Pra'Loch and the Terran Confederation."

"I see. Suitably slippery of you. To the bone of the matter then. Are your information-processing capabilities still as strong as they were and will you freely provide those capabilities to us now in our time of need?"

Once again the chairman paused. "Nothing is free, Hith. There is always a price."

"Very well. What is the price?"

"A young Terran male is somewhere in the galaxy, but we don't know where."

"Yes, named Jim Endicott."

Serena blinked.

"I told you our agent to Delta arrived here. He's made  
' report, of course."

"Yes. Well, that would be our price. Return the boy to us, guarantee you the full use of our technologies."

"We don't know where he is either. He's vanished."

Serena's features hardened. 'That is the deal, Hith.

boy. Send him back. Nothing less."

Hith Mun Alter waited a moment before replying. "You this is a dangerous game you're playing, Madame

,i "They're all dangerous games, Packlord."

"Yes, I suppose they are. Very well. I'll be in touch as know anything."

When they were done, Hith Mun Alter spoke aloud:

Korkal Emut Denai to me. Now."

AsoAno ;E ISS OUEEN Or RUIN

Jim thought he'd understood Shish, but he learned him better after his death. In all large groups there are and outsiders. As the new recruits trickled in and their began he discovered what it was about Shish that had gi venI his unconscious air of authority. Shish had possessed knowledge. Now Jim knew those secrets, too, though them he scarred and blackened his soul.

The greenies in his squad came to him with hesitant

What was it like? What is combat like? Have you ever killed body?

K'rrrng returned, roly-poly and, as advertised, good as new. and Jim made a new nucleus around which the squad Training went on while negotiations for the mysterious tract continued. As a vet, Jim was firmly plugged in to the

that often knew of things before even most officers did.

next mission would not be ground combat though it would be

A valuable cargo, a rescue mission to Alba itself, and running of an ever-tightening Hunzzan blockade of Alban space.

Jim found a curious solace in this. Deep-space war was mater different from the kind waged in the mud. Most of the work done by the machines as they dodged each other through the of space and subspace. A mistake might kill you, but if it a big mistake, you would never know. One instant a ship with the living and the breathing, the next a rapidly expand cloud of particles too small even to label.

" A simple option: success or annihilation with no middle choice. seemed somehow cleaner to him, and he began to understand those high powers who pushed the buttons would like to think of war in this way. No mud or blood, no personal responsior recrimination. Just the anonymous finger on the name button Or turn it over to machines, so much faster and more than the living brain they might as well be forces of

Yet he knew that was an even greater evil, for it took the reality of war beyond the realm of choice and made it inevitable, as predestined as the eventual dissolution of the universe into the cold I dead soup

of final entropy. We can choose, he told himself. We must choose. And he promised himself he would never forget that.

"Not a bad bunch," Sarge said as they lounged together against a bulkhead, enjoying the break between a physical training Course and a session on fieldstripping light hand weapons. Jim had been training greenies on the use of the Thunderbolt. He discovered that in the boring repetition of the teacher's rhythms he longer felt the agony of hefting that death machine, of pulling trigger and watching children burn. He was grateful for that. "Nope, not so bad," Jim agreed. "

"You've done a good job with them, Corporal."

"Thanks, Sarge."

Kalvorn seemed to be edging around something. Whenever he Was nervous or uncomfortable he began to itch and to scratch. vo of his arms were now busily digging away at his scaly hide.

Jim grinned. " "

"Come on, Sarge. What's up now?"

"Well uh. Uh. Jim would you like to be a sergeant?"

"What?"

"Well you'd have to leave the squad. A promotion and a different assignment. It's uh... noncombat."

Jim stared at him. At one time he'd hoped and even something like this. Hell was at the wrong end of a and he'd learned there was no right end to any weapon. died on one side, the soul on the other. But he'd made peace that and found comfort in the thought of his own had his buddies, if only for a while, and that might be hoped it would be enough.

"What are you trying to say, Sarge?" "They finally got around to analyzing your somebody up front thinks you've got the makings of a there's a slot open as a trainee, and if you want it, it's yours." "You mean leave the squad?" Sarge nodded.

"I can't do that, Sarge."

Kalvorn remained silent for a long moment, visibly his words. A third hand joined in the scratching.

"Jim, do you remember Shish? Abbda? Ebo and Obo?" "Sure, Sarge."

"Have they left the squad?"

"Uh... yes. They're dead." i "But you remember them?" "What are you telling me, Sarge?"

"I'm not good with words, kid. Yeah, they're dead, but still with us. Still a part of the squad. Still a part of the Death, kept in the records forever. Anybody can go look squad history and find them and know something about

The same with you. Even if you leave, you'll still be here. Still,;



part of us. I'll remember and so will K'rrrng. But even important, we'll still be a part of you. You understand saying?.", '

Slowly Jim sank to his haunches. Context. He'd wanted context for himself, free of all the old badness. Of the had no idea how to solve. He'd thought he was still context, unaware that it had sought him, found him, and him irrevocably. Whatever he might one day become,

might change and grow, he would always be a part of

Squad, Baker Company, Battalion of the Red Death.

Did context seek you out no matter what you did? However rrlight try to avoid it? But that made context something akin to fate.

He felt a great dark swelling of recognition. The power of it swept him over and tumbled him away. He was forever embedded in the past and the future of the Red Death.

His eyes grew hot and wet. Sarge squatted and awkwardly pat ted him on the knee. "What I'm saying is go, Jim. It's a good promotion. I'm a grunt and always will be. But you've got better things in you, and you will disappoint me greatly if you turn this down. Gnindng it, one of the troopers from Three Squad makes good. We'll never forget it, and we'll all be proud of you." "Sarge... will you be proud of me?" "I already am, son. I already am."

Jim reported to Command Deck Charlie four hours later, bearing all his material goods in a combat bag. But he carried his most precious possessions in his heart, locked against everything but the final key of death.

Jim of no last name. Corporal, Third Squad, Baker Company, the Red Death Battalion.

Soldier.

Plot Commander Elveen Ekkadli was, like most of the officers, a Romian, as large and scaly as Sarge though his speech was more precise and he seemed colder and more distant toward his charges. He welcomed Jim brusquely and directed him toward the Cyberneural Modification Unit to be fitted with a new cyberjack implant to replace the Terran version that Ekkadli told him was "Stone Age technology."

While waiting naked and goose-bumped in a sterile white ante Jim discovered he had a fellow student named Tickeree, "but call me Tick, okay?."

Tick was a spindly furry primate with a (to Jim) normal, complement of two black button eyes, one pug nose, and one rubbery smiling mouth in the (to him) usual positions. He resembled a stretched and underfed chimpanzee with a high forehead, hairy, pointed ears, and a permanently winsome expression. He was the cutest thing Jim had ever seen. He had to restrain a nearly over Whelming urge to pet Tick and scratch the soft frizz behind his ears.

Mindful of mercenary etiquette Jim made no inquiries as to Tick's past, but he soon discovered that Tick's favorite subject was his brilliant history, his glorious future, and anything else remotely related to those three subjects. Tick quickly revealed that he was of royal blood, a prince of the ruling family of the Heestah which, he said, was a vast web of worlds only nominally of the RoiFrank Swarm.

i Tick related all this with such warmth and cheerful believability that Jim despised himself for a cynical flut when he told access the appropriate archives for confirmation of Tick'sing story.

As it turned out there was a Heestah Empire. It two flea-bitten worlds lost in the vast backwaters of the did possess a royal family that had no real power whatsoever only a bit more wealth than the average Heestahn Apparently the principal activity of the royal family was cybermalls and begging money for local charities. Jim why Tick spouted such easily disprovable fantasies.

"You look pretty harmless, Terran," Tick said. "Kind of pale sickly."

Tick, resplendent in silky golden fur, was handling his clothing much better than Jim, but Jim wasn't about to superiority.

"We Terrans are very fierce. Barbarians, you know. JustI anybody."

"I already did. My universal didn't turn up much on you pie. New on the scene aren't you?"

Jim shrugged. "Sort of."

"But you were combat. You were down on Sleen, right? was it like?"

"You weren't there?"

"No. I just signed on. I'm going to be a pilot. I have natural reflexes and I test off the scale on autonomic visualization." :

dim had no idea what that meant. Before he could inquire a short, spiderlike creature scabbled through the door on a forest of many-jointed legs and shepherded them into

"I'm Meditech Sheelob," the spider thing twittered. Jim Sheelob most reminded him of a bagpipe, right down to the pattern on his delicate skin.

This way, please," Sheelob continued. "The process will last about four hours and is entirely painless. You will be in the tanks and unconscious throughout, so please have no

"I'm not worried," Tick said. "We Heestahns of the royal are trained from birth to withstand the most agonizing pain." smothered a grin as he noted a faint twitching at the Tick's black eyes.

"Wait a minute," Jim said. "Does this process change my some way?"

-Nothing to be concerned over. We've already analyzed the connections of the jack you have in place now. Very primitive by the way. All we do is extend and speed up the connecting pathways. There's almost no organic alteration at all, but you should notice a rather large difference in your capacity after the change. By the way, Sergeant Marshal, what's all that useless stuff in your genotype? Our analyzers couldn't find any intrinsic genetic purpose for it. It won't affect this process, but I wondered about it."

"You probed my genotype?"

"Of course. We had to program the nanopackage that does the alterations. Wouldn't want to turn you into something like Corporal Tickeree here by mistake."

"He should be so lucky," Tick said.

Jim ignored him. "It's just a... kind of identification code. All Terries have it."

"I see. Complicated for that kind of thing, but it's none of my business. Right this way, gentlemen."

It took a moment for it to sink in that this was the first time somebody had called him by his new title. Sergeant Marshal. It felt good. It felt even better that he outranked Tick, who was now giving him sidelong glances.

"You're a sergeant?" Tick said.

"Yep. That's right."

"I'll probably be a sergeant soon, too."

"Oh, no doubt."

"I mean with my superior qualifications it doesn't make sense you should outrank me."

"Now wait a minute--"

"Gentlemen, please," Sheelob said. "Sergeant, if you'd climb into this tank here? And Corporal, that next one over?."

There were six tanks, each large enough to hold two or three good-sized

humans end to end. Jim tried to imagine the kind of being it would take to cramp one of those enclosures. Big was the best he could do. Very big.

"Just lie on that platform there," Sheelob said. "Position doesn't matter. There. Comfortable?"

The platform suspended over the tank looked like plain steel,

but it felt warm and yielding. "I'm fine," Jim said.

"Good. Here we go now."

Jim felt a sudden tingling sensation and realized he'd closed his eyes. "When do we start?" he asked.

"Start? You've been under for hours. We're all finished. Like a perfect job," Sheelob said. He handed Jim a green robe. "Dry off, Sergeant. As pilots go, your equipment is edge now. Couldn't get a better job done on Alba itself. Good to you."

It wasn't till later that Jim realized that among all the federacy's billions, thanks to Delta's secret embargo on technology he now possessed two things that were one of them was something that neither his true parents they might have been), nor Delta himself could possibly planned for. His ability to achieve cyberneural interface was approximately three hundred years in advance of any Terran technology. And if Sheelob had understood what he'd done, Jim would never have left the nanotank alive.

1 ominally you are training to pilot the Queen or other ship of her size, but what you are really learning to do t become expendable," Commander Ekkadli said.

Jim thought about it. "I see," he said slowly. "The junior handle the combat assault landers."

"That's right. Which is why the slots you two are filling the first place."

"Sleen?" Jim asked.

"Yes. Tv, o good men." Ekkadli paused. "Well, you know mean."

"Now wait a second, Commander," Tick broke in. "What do mean expendable? I can understand about the Terrie here. surely you can't be serious about wasting a pilot of my talents something as trivial as ferrying dumb grunts down onto mudballs."

Jim thought of Shish and Sarge and the rest of Three and decided that bunkmates or not, he and Tick were have a small physical discussion--and soon. Dumb grunts?

Ekkadli eyed Tick. "Corporal Tickeree, you would be well advised to keep those thoughts to yourself. As for your talent, I've yet to see enough of it to justify entrusting the lives of any good arines to it, let alone the troops who are the reason your job exists at all."

Tick wasn't stupid. He swallowed once, then nodded. "Yes, sir." "Well. Back to it. Corporal, you operate Blue Vessel. Sergeant, you take Red this time. Same exercise please." He waited until they slipped on their inter force helmets.

They had been doing this exercise over and over, switching the piloting duties between Red and Blue Vessels. Most of the time they were supervised by training programs, but Commander Ekkadli found an hour each day for personal observation and instruction.

The Red and Blue exercise was a mock battle between two virtual ships. It was a ludicrous bit of training in that the chances of either junior pilot actually conning the Queen in a deep-space engagement were next to nil--all three lead pilots plus the four regular lander pilots would have to be incapacitated--but it was an excellent method for developing the raw skills needed for lesser tasks.

There was a time in Terran history when fighting pilots had needed

superb physical reflexes to fly their warplanes, but that time was gone. With direct cyberneural connections to the electronic infrastructure of space vessels, a different kind of reflexive speed was called for: mental reflexes. What Tick had meant when he talked about his neural reflexes and superb autonomic temperospatial visualization.

Neural reflex was what it sounded like: how fast could you think? The reflexes involved could be strengthened and quickened through training, though some people had a natural ability. Autonomic temperospatial visualization was another breed of cat entirely. Autonomic referred to a reflexive process almost entirely without thought. The spatiotemporal visualization part described what kinds of things triggered those reflexes, in this case patterns in space and time. This was the meat and potatoes of great pilots: the ability to instantly recognize patterns in what others would see only as a hopeless jumble, and then, without thinking about it, make the correct response to those patterns.

This gift was something only minimally affected by training. You either had it, or you didn't. Jim discovered that he had it in abundance, and that his natural talents were boosted to unimaginable levels by his new cyberneural interface.

But it was an uncomfortable talent because he had not pected he had it. He had always been good with the games, the cavorting in the spaces of virtual reality. He had good conning the tiny ships he'd trained in, and he had trust his muscle knowledge, the ingrained ability to right lever and flip the right switch. Yet when he became a Red Ship--a feeling something like inhabiting a body dura steel and electricity--and faced off against Tick in his l Ship armor, what he found himself capable of scared him.

It was an eerie kind of artistry he had never thought because he'd not known he possessed it. But now he his life some part of him had assumed he was in adulthood. All the schooling and all the sports, all the lessons and courses and practices had to have some goal. When he thought about it at all he assumed his would take purpose in the shape of his hopes and himself. But this new talent changed the shape of the made demands. It was a different kind of context, as as anything else that had come unannounced to changed his life. It was more than a gift. It might be his raising its head inside him for the first time and looking with hard, glittering, demanding eyes.

Some gifts you had to live up to. Had Einstein nuclear mushroom in the early days when he found thinking in the language of the atoms? Did the young know his future when he first discovered his voice was demonic pied piper, that with it he could make others own nightmares? Did men and women of that caliber talent or did their talent drive them?

Jim eeJed around these thoughts in the dark of his nights out ever quite articulating them even to himself. Instead he crawling discomfort with the discovery of such great himself. You were supposed to strive. It shouldn't be you simply stumbled on.

He moved his chin, and the motion flicked on the helmet around his neck, covering his skull with the inter force The field constantly monitored the upgraded implant his ear. There were no trailing wires or hard metal plugs. inside the shield was transparent. Sometimes he

almost

was there. But it also functioned as a screen, so that true could accompany the virtual versions pouring directly into his mind. It sounded confusing, but he got used to it. He supposed Chip and Morninglory had thought their own virtual worlds were as normal as an afternoon stroll, too. The intelligent mind, species indeterminate. A wonderfully adaptive mechanism.

"Ready?" Commander Ekkadli said. "Yes, sir," Jim replied. "Yes," from Tick. Everything fell away.

or the purpose of training, both Red and Blue Ships were virtual mirrors of the actual Queen of Ruin. Jim and Tick "rode piggyback" on the Queen's equipment and received continual updates on the Queen's real-time data. Jim had trained himself to disregard the feed and relegate it to a barely felt stream of data whispering along the bottom of his attention. He was only slightly aware of it as his mind slipped into the virtual Red Ship like fingers sliding into a glove.

All around him he saw the stars as a ship would see them: tiny hard pinpoints that became a rushing stream of numbers if he focused on any single one of them. Off in the distance he saw the ominous bulk of Blue Ship. It seemed to flicker and blur: Tick was ducking in and out of subspace hundreds of times a second, a classical defensive maneuver.

Jim blinked and saw a different view. This was of trajectories, probabilities." patterns. It drew not only on the database of ship to-ship warfare maintained by the Queen, but also on Jim's own experience. And he saw a pattern. Suddenly he knew what Tick was going to do next, and with no conscious thought whatsoever he ducked his own ship into subspace and brought it out a considerable distance from his previous position. Where he had been space was now curdling, a dark bloom where Tick's gravity rotors were focused.

"Missed me," Jim sent.

Tick didn't reply, though Jim felt an impression of bleak that was at odds with Tick's usual cheerful disposition. Blue vanished then into a shrinking bubble that indicated a subspace penetration.

Jim expanded his awareness and waited for a new appear. Patterns and arrangements and designs. That was was. That was all anything was, right down to the sub dance. As he contemplated that extraordinary idea waited for a new pattern, something tickled him from the of his awareness, but before he could focus on it space boil at the limit of his perceptions.

Tick again no doubt. But when he brought his attention to on the disturbance he realized he was no longer in the training session but was now fully monitoring the Queen's feed. It wasn't a game anymore. Those were real ships out

Lots of them. The Red Death's contract was to run Hunnzan blockade of the Alban inner systems. For days seen no trace of it. But now Jim saw ship after ship from subspace. He saw them and saw what their revealed: the Hunzzan ships saw the Queen, too. And there too many of them. The pattern of the future was predictable.

And if that pattern remained unchanged, he could chance for the Queen



or his mates or himself. No chance at Jim blinked off his inter force helmet and looked around.

Commander Ekkadli was gone. That was no surprise. He would be rushing toward the command deck and his huge console. He, the chief pilot, and the assistant pilot would be fighting the Queen in her doomed run. The four junior pilots would also be plugged into the systems, ready to step in if one of their seniors was incapacitated or killed.

"Those are Hunzza," Tick whispered. "Now what do we do?"

The limber Heestahn didn't look good. His glossy fur was limp and dull, and his normally cheerful features sagged.

"Not much," Jim said. "We aren't even junior pilots yet."

But something stirred in Tick's dark eyes, some dream of glory. "We can watch," he said. "We're still plugged in to the ship's systems. If something happens to the others, then we'd be the only ones left. We could save everybody. We'd be heroes..."

Jim stared at him. "Are you out of your mind? We'd be dead. We've only been training for a few days."

But the idea was blowing Tick up like a balloon. The old gleam returned to his eyes. His face stiffened. "Maybe you, Terrie. But I've been training for something like this all my life."

"It's crazy. We'd have to lose six pilots and still have the ship. And even then we'd still be the two juniors. Is it possible to lose six pilots and not lose the ship, too?"

"Sure. It's happened before. Depends on how well those lizard boys do their jobs with the viral data-probes. Data-probes are funny things. Sometimes they don't get through at all. Sometimes they fry synapses on one or two. Or a whole bunch at once never know." Tick squirmed in his chair. "Anyway, what else we got to do? Were you planning on taking a nap?"

Jim felt the weight of the helmet ring around his neck. "I you're right about that. Look, Tick. Don't do anything me, okay?"

He hadn't revealed his own gifts to his fellow trainee. even deliberately allowed himself to be defeated several training sessions in order to keep his talents concealed. hard rational part of him had already evaluated Tick: he was a far more gifted pilot than the Heestahn, and he plumbed the full depth of his own ability.

There was a lilting humor in Tick's voice, but not far that lilt hummed a sneering kind of scorn. "Don't worry, I'll take care of you."

"Okay, partner, see that you do." Jim moved his chin, inter force field shrouded him once again.

It didn't seem like it should be, but the space where battle was being fought was a great and pocked by stars that turned into numbers and ships that darted among them like flickering golden

A chill began to rise in him until it filled his skull. itched as the nerve endings there became painfully the ship's systems. He felt as if

he could reach out and those flickering ghosts now closing a ring of death Queen. And then he realized he could do that. He could them with his fingers and his fingertips would boil with the of gravity distorts, of phased lasers, of great bombs jittering waves of subspace. The Queen could destroy if she so desired. She wasn't helpless.

And in that moment of realization he saw something saw a new pattern, one that didn't yet exist. But it could

the Queen did this and ran that way and attacked in this manner. He saw how the enemy systems might be confused and led astray, and how the Queen could take advantage of that. He saw... "Pilot trainees, what the guard do you think you're doing? Shut the flut up. You' rejiggering our webs."

It was Commander Ekkadli's voice, harsh and rough with strain. Jim shivered as he realized what he'd almost done. Unconsciously he'd moved to take control of the Queen's systems and act on the pattern he saw. But he was only a trainee, green as grass. Good God. He might have killed them all.

"Sorry..." he murmured, conscious of Tick chuckling some where in the background.

He cut himself partially out of the net so he wouldn't inadvertently disturb the real pilots at their work, but kept a full-system feed running into his skull so he could watch. Watch my own death? he wondered.

Because that was what he knew he was observing. The pat terns had changed again, shifted by time through space as the pilots aboard the converging Hunzzan ships wove their own planes and angles of attack, selected and deployed their own weapons of destruction.

Then he saw something utterly weird. "What the hell?"

"That's a data-probe," Tick said. "Viral net. It's aimed at the pilots and the controller systems. Burn those out, and we won't be able to hurt a baby."

With ament al twitch Jim accessed the Queen's warfare database and brought up the relevant information. He left that feed on as well, knowing he wouldn't have time if it became necessary for him to act. In this way the ship's brain became essentially a part of his own. He was surprised at how seamless the interface was. It was as if his own brain had suddenly expanded. Now when he looked at something he knew what it was, if the ship knew.

His new interface was even more powerful than he'd imagined. It was a strange, almost God-like feeling. But it was not a comfortable one. Something in him squirmed uneasily at the idea of one human having access to so much knowledge, so much power. With a rig like this and the right databases he could go back to Terra and--and what?

The patterns changed again with shocking swiftness, and he Understood he would not be going back to Terra. He wouldn't be going anywhere. He was only sixteen. He had faced death but this was different. Here he could see it coming, see shape of it in the delicate structures now weaving Queen of Ruin.

But I don't want to die. I' mtoo young. I haven't even-Brutally he squeezed off that terrified whine. It made It offended every belief he maintained about himself. But choked it to silence he realized it was a part of him, too. part of all other humans. Death was the great and old man had warred against it so fiercely and so long that was engraved on the deepest of the chromosomal was the other side of the battle, and the war was called And the universe didn't give a damn about either side. It The rocks and the suns would go on until the atoms dancing and the cold and dark covered everything.

His shoulders ached.

The area of the patterns surrounding the Queen had somewhat as the Hunzza tightened and focused their Without conscious thought he accessed the systems and be red about data-probes and viral nets. He saw Hunzzan pilots and their machines were doing: using drives as vibrators, jumping in and out of subspace times a second, using the fabric of the universe itself to resonating patterns. In order to fight at all the Queen had able to "see." But if her systems and pilots looked enemy, they must also look at those patterns. And if shielding was overwhelmed, those patterns would resonate the brains of both machines and beings. And destroy

Jim remembered the high and falling scream as and Chip had taken over the systems of the Terran plunged it into the soil of Wolfbane like a great exploding It must. have been something like that for them, he Though on a much cruder scale.

And what a strange thought that was. At the time he'd Morninglory's skills a little short of magic Now he saw the base and raw art they were. And he knew that if could see him now, he would believe himself in the the same kind of magic: that of the savage staring at technology so far beyond comprehension it might as been a wizard waving his wand.

The nets tightened further. Suddenly his viewpoint shifted,

felt himself move to a new vantage far beyond the plane of the engagement. From this view the Queen looked like a fat spider centered in a shimmering golden web. But instead of predator trapping prey, the Queen was herself entrapped, and at the far end of each strand was a Hunzzan ship riding the web toward a feast of fire at the center.

The thought was horrifying, and he tried to push it away, but it wouldn't leave. It tickled at him with a kind of jolly pervasive horror. Perhaps small animals trapped before onrushing lights felt the same paralyzing fascination.

With no warning at all the protruding spokes of the web suddenly began to flare into white-gold incandescence. He felt rather than heard Tick gasp. A shudder ran through him, and he knew it wasn't real. The ship hadn't moved, not in its metal bones, but the machines and the beings who ordered them had been jolted.

A curious fizzing began to fester in his skull, as if the individual cells of his brain were being slowly popped one by one. The roots of his hair suddenly felt as if they were melting. The golden web began to flash, demanding his full attention, sucking him in and down.

Look at me!

Somewhere in the bleak and black distance Commander Ekkadli screamed. Close by, Tick began to grunt, a harsh, mind less, rhythmic sound. Inside Jim something screamed as it fought for its life.

"Fight," it hissed. "I can't do it by myself, so help me, damn you, and fight!"

He must have blanked out for a microsecond because when he looked again, though he was still floating far beyond the deadly golden web, the web itself had changed. Now it was a tight blue ball of threads enclosing the Queen like a cocoon, visibly shrinking, crushing the delicate meat trapped inside.

Jim opened all his feeds wide, and said, "Commander

No reply. "I'ick?"

A faint stirring, nothing more. Quickly he ran litany of names, but for all the response he got he might as have been reciting a roll call for the dead.

And some distant part of him acknowledged that, the the dead. But deep in the buried part of his genetic snake was still screaming, and it wouldn't let him give in. He tethed his teeth and ignored the hot wetness trying to explode groin. And finally he forced himself to stop, simply to space, to become an awareness and nothing more.

It was one of the hardest things he'd ever done in his: Shuddering chills racked his flesh, and he ignored them. His heartbeat race, then sink to an occasional slub bering He let the silence flow through him and with it the patterns.

They rushed into him with insistent urgency, faster and His awareness abruptly expanded, took in the tight blue ball, the glowing lights of the ships beyond, and beyond numbered and numberless stars. His mind clicked and gorging itself on the data surging from within and without.

after an eternity less than a single pulse of blood he saw it..! the great pattern that ordered it all.

The Hunzza had to maintain their presence in realtime. the only way they could do that was by using the positions stars as reference points. From that they knew where they and knowing their own positions, they knew where the was.

Slowly, carefully, Jim reached out with his fingers,

that the nerves and bones and skin of those fingers came from him but from the Queen of Ruin.

It was like slowly untying a knot. Gently he brushed the with his fingertips and watched as their numbers swirled, began to dislocate. One by one the whirling data fell apart, and with that, the great pattern slowly dissolve.

The Hunzzan ships changed their own patterns like a mayflies suddenly disturbed by invisible winds. In the hard of reality the ships had been slugging each other with weapons, and the clash and flurry of that had been like the terings of a distant thunderstorm. As long as the minds and controllers existed the shields would hold. There wasn't

between Hunzzan technology and their own to let either side break through by brute force. But he was the only one left to control the Queen's shielding, and now he turned his full attention on it.

More patterns. Intricate dances into and out of subspace, sudden shifting leaps of position, force shields deployed and retracted. Waves of evanescent flame beat at the shields, fell away, and pounded again. But he saw the pattern and how to escape it, and he let the commands flow out of him like water ' surging downhill.

The tight blue ball vanished. Jim gasped and reached for those stellar numerals and reweave them into a different shape. He felt a small thrill of satisfaction as the Hunzzan ships began to lurch about, seeking purchase and position in the real universe. And couldn't find it because he had hidden it from them.

He thought of Commander Ekkadli--his rough voice and gentle manners--and his brain now a smoking ruin. After that it was easy.

Again and again he dropped the Queen back into real space his

mental fingers triggering all her weapons systems in a vast bellow of fire and rage. Isolated, trapped in forms and shapes of his own arranging, the Hunzzan ships could not maintain their own shielding against his witchcraft. One by one the tiny golden dots flared and died. There were many of them, and he kept at it like a shoemaker pounding nails into a sole. He was still hammering away when somebody shook his shoulder and then a moment later physically lifted the inter force ring from around his neck.

He found, himself staring up into Tick's haggard, raddled features. "It's over," Tick whispered. His voice sounded like something he'd lost a long time ago and only recently found again. "It's over. You killed them all. You can stop now."

Jim felt his fingers, which had shaped themselves into rigid claws, suddenly and painfully relax. Tick stared at him. The Heestahn looked ready to cry.

"By Ifenaya," Tick croaked. "What in the Seven Cold Places are you?"

And for a moment Jim knew the answer to that, but it frightened him beyond control, and he felt himself slipping away. "I... Tick looked down on him for a long moment, then moved his head and brought up his own inter force shield. Somebody would

put the Queen back on her journey. Lead her away have to the place where a sixteen-year-old Terrie had just handedly destroyed an entire Hunzzan battle squadron.

All the dead, Tick thought. Does he know?

As for himself, he knew that he would never laugh in same way again. And though the knowledge came with and pervasive sadness, he understood what he was. He had Jim plain. And he thanked whatever Gods might be that was not this baby-faced Terran.

"Gods be with you," he murmured. "You'll surely need all."

Then he got to work.

II

Jim woke up in commonplace surroundings. He over and his eyes felt hot and gritty. He blinked and the tight walls of the tiny cubicle he shared with Tick. had stripped him and covered him with a light sheet. The was limp and rank with his own sweat. Exhaustion muscles and made them heavy. He lifted one arm and let it! His fingertips felt numb.

"Uh . . ."

He lay in the dim light and tried to remember how he'd this state, but it was as if the recent past had become men ted dream. He grasped at meaningless shreds of it, ing made any sense. After a while he closed his eyes and for somebody to come and tell him what he'd done. He was he wouldn't like the news.

"Jim? Are you awake?"

He struggled up from a nasty dream of spiders and crushing balls of light. In the shadows Tick's face floated him, his features abnormally still and solemn.

"Ungh... yeah. I guess so."

"The medics said to let you sleep. They said it was



of mental hangover from the interface you set up with the Queen."

The words made no sense. "What are you talking about?"

A little smile tugged at the corners of Tick's rubbery lips. "I'hey said you might not remember at first. Don't worry. It will come back. You're a hero, my friend."

"A. hero?"

You'll see," Tick told him. Then, astonishingly, the Heestahn reached down and punched him lightly on the shoulder. "My buddy, the hero."

It didn't sink in until the captain of the Queen, Ibil Makadorn, stepped up to him, executed a rigid and snappy salute, and said, Welcome to the Command Bridge, Chief Pilot Marshal."

Jim was grateful for the hard-learned reflexes of the combat deck ape, because his muscles executed a perfect copy of the captain's salute even as Jim's mind muttered, "Whaaa... ?"

"Uh, yessir, thank you, sir," Jim replied.

Captain Makadorn, who had never before spoken a single word to the formerly lowly Corporal Marshal, now cocked his washtub head to the side, opened his mouth to reveal a maw full of squirming tongues, and said, "Quite a change, eh, son? Well, you'll get used to it. Your command console is right over here. Let's get you settled in. Pilot Commander Tickeree has been doing a decent enough job, but I think he's getting tired. We were able to give him a couple of breaks, but I think he'd like to hit his bunk for a solid eight hours or so." Pilot Commander Tickeree? "Captain?" "Yes?"

"Uh, about the chief pilot.." and Commander Ekkadli?"

Captain Makadorn paused, turned, and lowered his voice. "Please be careful, Pilot Marshal. I understand, but some of the rankers consider it bad luck to mention those names deck."

"Bad luck?"

"Fo name the dead aloud," Captain Makadorn dim felt something slip just a bit inside him. "Oh. I see." The captain eyed him, then nodded and resumed his cession toward the chief pilot's console. And procession dim felt his cheeks begin to burn. Every eye was on couldn't decipher so many alien expressions, but the ones understand seemed filled with silent awe. And perhaps of fear.

He reached his console and slid into the seat. On his inter force helmet masking Tick's head suddenly about time, partner," Tick said. But he was grinning.

This new grinning half-obeisant Tick made him old sarcastic, condescending version had been a pain, understandable one. dim had known human boys just But on Tick's features now was a half-hidden twitch of ness, an expectancy uncomfortably close to worship.

Jim slipped the ring around his neck and let the his form. He looked over. "Okay, Commander. I have the now."

He saw Tick grin nervously one more time as he rose seat. Then Jim slipped into the virtual guts of the Queen and, all his canned nightmares now roiling back at him great databases of the ship's memory, he aimed her and the uncertain future.

Over a private feed from the captain's console came query: "Pilot? I have to confess I don't know Terrans all Does that moisture on your cheeks have any significance?"

"No, sir. It's only a reflex," Jim said. "Pay no attention. meaning at all."

ALB AGENS

OFFICE OF THE PACK LORD

usual Hith Mun Alter found himself doing several things once. His schedule had become a fiction; because of the war it was rewritten several times a day. He could no longer plan on any because, in the way of all governments faced with a crisis the bureaucrats couldn't regulate away, everything had become an emergency requiring that the ass be covered and the buck be passed to the highest level. He worked quietly and steadily at his desk, every once in a while glancing up at a holofeed screen shimmering in the air.

On the screen, preparations continued for the public welcome of the heroes who had penetrated the Hunzzan blockade with equipment vital to the war effort. The ceremony would take place in the

Great Hall of the Pra'Loch, and when the time came, Hith would leave his office and take a two-minute stroll to the set that had been constructed there. It would be a welcome relief: a bit of good news in an increasingly gloomy picture.

He'd already seen a summary of the desperate run the Queen of Ruin had made through the blockading Hunzza. Evidently the ship had lost most of her pilots and only made it through by the luck of the knife's edge. A brave and useful group of mercenaries. He Wished he had a few more like them ready at hand.

The soft voice seemed to come from thin air. "Packlord, five minutes. They're bringing the crew of the Queen of Ruin onstage now."

He looked over and saw a large group of people, mostly Romians, being shepherded into the shooting area, The size scaly aliens made the two small figures in the front of the all the more obvious. Hith squinted. Then he zoomed screen into tight focus on one of the smaller figures.

He stared for a long moment. Then he said, "Athar, ceremony. If anybody has transmitting equipment turn it off. Confiscate any chips. Use the War Secrets Act. that crew into hiding now."

"Packlord, is something wrong?."

"Just do it. Then get me Lord Denai. He's still kicking his around here somewhere, isn't he? "Yes, sir." "Right away."

This done, the Packlord leaned back and stared into thinking. Yes, Serena Half Moon, it is a dangerous game playing. And you are about to find out just how dangerous

Funny. The boy looked older than the ho los he'd there was no mistaking those Terran features, even lines carved deep into the bridge of the nose and at the the mouth. It was unmistakably Jim Endicott.

Jim had never seen the government offices on Terra, he'd visited the virtual versions many times. But there was thing intangibly impressive about the real thing, and he the Great Hall of the Pra'Loch nearly overwhelming. The and crew of the Queen had been shepherded briskly Alban officials moving down high-ceilinged corridors, onto gleaming trans matter disks, and then reappearing in grander chambers.

Now he stood at the front of the group while technicians of eral species bustled about doing incomprehensible had also visited a virtual version of the Grand Canyon on

this was like standing at the bottom of it, if that canyon had made of crystal and light. The sheer volume of the space oppressiveness. He felt like a bug trapped beneath a open sky. It made him want to get down on his hands and knees and hold on tight.

Rank on rank of glittering balconies, terraces, walkways, and chambers stretched up and out and back. Space enough for thousands, perhaps millions of busy government worker bees.

And why not? He'd learned quite a bit about the Alban Empire. i-Nearly three hundred thousand worlds were full members who sent delegations to Alba. Here was the nerve center. Even with their technology, it seemed the citizens of the galaxy, at least the political citizens, still preferred to meet and mingle in person. And that made sense; if the mark of power was to be in the center of power, here was where you had to be. All the governments he'd ever studied had been similar. On Terra, a not inconsiderable advantage was that politicians preferred to sniff out each other's plots and plans and small treacheries up close, with no technology editing the hidden struggles for advantage and power. Evidently it was no different here.

He saw miniature forests floating like clouds overhead and felt a damp breeze redolent of distant oceans on his cheeks. A nameless perfume, rich and sandy, tingled his nostrils. The air itself was suffused with a drifting golden light that touched the distant towers and set them burning like molten glass.

"Close your mouth, Terrie. Somebody will think you're a hick."

"But I am a hick, Tick. There's nothing like this on Wolfbane. On Terra either."

"Then pretend. I can't have people thinking my partner is some booby from the outback." Tick paused. "On second thought, maybe you'd better enjoy it while you can. It may not be here much longer."

They shared a dark glance. Jim had done most of the tricky piloting on the rest of the journey in, picking his way through the patterns created by ever more numerous clusters of Hunzzan Warships. His relief when they'd finally surfaced inside the ring of Alban defensive structures had been so great he'd burst out laughing.

It had been the same wild hilarity he'd felt after the destruction of the Hunzzan blockaders. He had no idea how many he'd killed. Many. And he found no satisfaction in those deaths, only. a deep and pervasive regret that time, the universe, fate, pinned him so irrevocably to what he'd done. For days, the piloting duties shift on, shift off with Tick, he'd felt dazed with the weight of it. He'd slept with dark dreams and ened sludkW and slow, with a feeling that he'd somehow dirty. He spent a lot of time in the fresher, scrubbing his skin was hot and red.

But later he'd laughed, because the snake brain at the of every human brain makes no moral choices about

Every species had some method of doing that,

young how to become what they are born to be. So he was learning how to be human. It wasn't the easiest thing learned--but he was beginning to think it was the most tant.

"It would be too bad..." he said.

The Hunzza?" Tick shrugged. "An old, old story, Jim. chance, you should study up on galactic history. Alba first great empire, and it won't be the last. They come Maybe Hunzza will be the next, but it will pass on, too. You know when the time is coming. Maybe another empire next to you. Maybe time just wears you down. Maybe you Leaper culture in your midst and it eats you up in a few Poof, gone. I know you checked on Heestah, Only two nothing big. But a thousand years ago Heestah was fifty sand worlds. As my parents constantly reminded me. though..." He shrugged.

"A Leaper culture? What's that?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows. That's one of the of Leapers."

"That doesn't make very much sense---"

"Hey. Something's happening. Look sharp."

Another flock of officials was approaching, but this accompanied by stiff-backed Albans carrying what weapons. One of the Albans, short with a pure white approached Captain Makadorn and spoke.

"Captain, I'm sorry, but the ceremony has been put off time being. If you and your crew will come with me?"

Captain Makadorn shook his big head. "We'll be going our ship then."

"No, Captain, I'm sorry. That won't be possible. Please!..l assured we'll make you as comfortable as we can."

IN

"Now wait a minuteI"

One of the armed Albans Stepped forward. "It isn't a request,  
Captain. No trouble please."

Makadorn eyed the squads of Alban troops now unobtrusively surrounding his crew. "What's this about?"

"Everything will be explained later, Captain. For now, please come with me."

The white-faced official spoke with the mildly arrogant certainty of a bureaucrat who knows he is backed up by guns, and doesn't care who else knows it. Makadorn recognized the tone. He nodded.

"Very well. I demand an explanation, though."

"And you'll get one. Later."

With that, the Alban official turned and headed in the other direction. The military squads gently herded the crew along behind.

"Now what the hell?" Jim said.

"Why didn't we think to bring a few hand weapons to this party?." Tick said.

"I don't know about you," Jim replied, "but I did."

a how does he end up as chief pilot for a pack of Rornian mercenaries?" Hith Mun Alter said, nodding toward the frozen holoivid of Jim Endicott standing in the forefront of the Queen of Ruin's crew.

Korkal Emut Denai sighed. "I tried to put him down on Brostach, as I already told you. Evidently I succeeded. Brostach is a hotbed of mercenary recruiting. The connection seems obviOus enough in retrospect."

Hith closed his eyes. "Help me here. I'm trying to get a picture of the boy's thinking. You pluck him out of some incomprehensible kidnap attempt by aliens he's never seen before, separate him from his family, and whisk him off into space. Then, running for

your life, you dump him on yet another planet he knows about with a chip and instructions to use it to get in either you or your fellow spies. He should have been oriented. Yet he wasn't. He ignored beyond our best efforts to find him. Now he shows up piloting a mercenary ship with a completely new identity. how I can't imagine he just dreams all this up on his accomplishes it with no help whatsoever."

"Then you don't know him very well, Packlord. I before, Jim Endicott is something out of the ordinary."

"Well out of the ordinary it seems. The chairman of the Confederation has made his return to Terra a condition of ing us access to their systems. And you know how that access."

Korkal gave a small start. This was the first he'd

Serena Half Moon's demands. "Another piece of the puzzle." What does that mean?"

"As far as I know Half Moon knew nothing about Jim when I found him, and I took pains to keep her in the does have access to the boy's mother, though. learned something that way. Probably she did. Enough, to decide she wants him back. And badly enough to with the use of Delta's computers in order to get him back. raises an interesting question. I wonder..."

Hith stared at him silently while Korkal pondered. aloud, Lord Denai," he said tartly. "It's too early in the for me to read your mind." .... "Urn? Oh, sorry. It just occurred to me. Consider how attracted my attentions. By attracting Thargos the attentions, when Thargos was rooting around in the destruction of Delta's satellite. Now it seems to me this rather strong hint in the direction of Jim having something with Delta, the destruction, perhaps both. It isn't even too leap to imagine he has something to do with Delta's Korkal paused and glanced bright-eyed at the pack lord

"Mmm. I see. And perhaps we can make an even greater given Serena Half Moon's curious demand. She refuses to the use of Delta's systems without the return of the Now, what scenario would encompass all these facts? The tery of Delta's disappearance--'not currently a factor' Confed chairman ever so carefully--the destruction of



Thargos's sudden interest, and now Half Moon's demands."

Korkal eyed him calmly. "I believe you can make the same confections I can, Packlord."

"Yes I can. For some reason Jim Endicott is essential to the function of Delta's computers. Serena Half Moon tries to turn that disadvantage into an advantage by pretending she chooses not to allow us access, when the truth is that without the boy she has no access herself. A tricky woman that, playing a dangerous game, as I told her."

"That scenario is flimsy as a free pass out of the Seven Cold Hells and you know it. Still, it could be made to hold water," Korkal agreed. "But we have no way of checking it beyond what we've already done. I doubt Serena Half Moon is going to give you any help."

"Of course we do. We have the boy.-Take him apart."

"Lord, he saved my life. I have made formal acknowledgment of that, and he enjoys the protection of myself, my pack, and the weight of all our customs. You might even say the honor of all Albagens is involved."

"Yes, Lord Denai. But as you say you pointed out to him, our customs are not meant to be a suicide pact."

"Can we live without honor then?"

Hith stkrugged. "Perhaps you cannot. Perhaps I cannot. Perhaps sometime after doing what is necessary, we will find it equally necessary to cleanse honor by our own hands, in our own blood. But the Great Pack can survive without honor because in the end the Great Pack can survive. It must survive. And if that demands the greatest sacrifices from those like ourselves, then so be it."

"A hard judgment, Packlord."

"Hard times, Lord Denai. Will you take the necessary measures, or shall I?"

"What if I can propose another alternative? One that preserves honor and still brings the results we need?"

"Then propose it, Lord. I don't have all day."

Korkal did. When he finished, he said, "his all presumes, of Course, that you intend to keep him locked away inside the Defense Ministry."

"Let me put it this way," Hith said delicately. "Serena Half Moon needn't plan for Jim Endicott's return anytime soon." The pack lord turned a cool gaze on him. "You realize I can't much time."

"How much time can you give me?" "Three days. Then we do it my way." "That's not very much."

"Then you'll have to hurry, won't you?"

"Ah," replied Korkal Emut Denai.

wondered why you carried that pack around time," Tick said. "What

exactly/s that thing?."

"It's called an S&R .75."

"Looks one step up from a club. What does it do?" "It puts big holes in things. It even blew a hole Hunzzan combat armor once." Jim pushed it back to the of his pack. "I've had it... for a long time."

"Well, it's ugly enough and primitive enough the door didn't let out a beep. Probably didn't even recognize weapon at all."

"So do you want to keep on sneering at it, or help me how we can use it to get out of here?" :

He and Tick were seated cross-legged on the floor inner of a large common room which was evidently to be I

prison. Already work squads were throwing up makeshift along the far wall. No luxury accommodations, but ade a new pilot who not so long before had been sleeping on the deck with nothing but a thin pad between and metal. Doors led off the room to fresher units, waste ties, and a hastily constructed galley filled with automated ing machinery.

Holoscreens danced here and there among the

Romians. The captain and his executive officers were huddled i[I another corner speaking in low tones. The air was thick with vinegary scent of sweating Romian bodies.

"wish they'd turn up the vent systems," Jim said.

-Romians like it this way," Tick said. "Smells just like the ship, doesn't it? Somebody is trying to make us comfortable."

-yeah. I don't like it. Why bother to make everybody happy unless they plan to keep us a while? And why do they want to keep us? I thought we were supposed to be heroes."

Tick kicked off his boots and wiggled his long toes. "Ah. That's better."

"Wow. Some toes. Almost as long as your fingers."

"I can pick my nose with them. Want to see?"

"Thanks, maybe another time." Jim folded his pack shut and cradled it in his lap. "You have any idea where we are?"

"Nope. Some big government building. Did you notice when they took us through the trans matters as soon as we got off the disks they went black? We could be anywhere. And we're not going to walk out of here through non functioning trans matter disks, even if we can get out of this room. Which I doubt, no matter what that cannon of yours can do."

"And we'd be kinda conspicuous on a planet full of Albans, wouldn't we?"

"This is the center. There's a lot of folks here who aren't Albans."

"You mean try to masquerade as some kind of diplomats?"

Tick shrugged. "I doubt if it would work, but it's better than nothing."

"This isn't all that bad either," Jim said. A line of Alban cooks was coming from the galley carrying trays of steaming food. Jim's nose twitched. He smelled something very like a cheeseburger.

One of the Albans came toward him. "Hello, Jim," he said as he stooped to offer a perfectly cooked cheeseburger. "You like these, I

remember?"

Jim stared up at him. "Hello, Korkal."

Korkal Emut Denai nodded. "Nice to see you again, Jim. So tell me. What have you been doing with yourself since I saw you last?"

here were Hunzza remaining even on Albagens. The embassies and consulates had been closed, but negotiations of one kind or another continued even as war flared all around. Businessmen, tourists, diplomats out of the loop with nothing but time on their hands, a sizable contingent caught on the wrong side of the blockade. Of course they were watched. They were tracked and trailed and analyzed by huge agencies devoted to watching those who needed watching. But there was a curious lassitude filling the watchers. Yes, it was possible some of these wandering remnants were spies or agents or some kind of grit in the cogs of war, but what could they do? They were trapped here, and what ever webs they wove were trapped also. So the watchers watched and did so competently, professionally, and with half their minds elsewhere.

Thargos the Hunter had counted on this, had offered certain tests to those who followed him, and noted the results. He could do nothing about the sleepless machines except ignore them, which he did. Within a very short time he knew he had wriggle room, and how much. The Albans watching the Hunzza were looking for small-timers, for the left-behind ones, for the accidents. Their fellows would be searching for the real threats--moles of Other races, maybe even Alban, bought, threatened, blackmailed long before, then carefully buried to rise again in time of Hunzzan need.

The Hunzza remaining on Albagens were too open and too monitored to be any kind of real threat. Or so Alba Thargos hummed quietly to himself when he thought thinking that.

Now, wearing the long red flowing robes befitting a Hunzzan merchant, he ambled at the end of a line of being herded along by chattering interactive hologuides what he considered the typically decadent architecture Great Hall of the Pra'Loch. One of Thargos's passions was He studied as much of it as he could, though he knew he only touch the smallest portion of the grand sweep of the past. Yet he saw certain patterns repeat themselves over, and he knew that, with the exception of Leapers, cal culture had not yet managed to repeal the historical This glittering crystal monstrosity he walked through instance: architectural gigantism was a historical warning flashing yellow. It said: "Behold our might and be awed, nearing the end of our days."

It seemed to him that once the cultural arteries became and the social musculature turned soft and flabby, the, politic felt compelled to build great carapaces as strength still remained. But those glittering shells were and, rather than concealing the rot within, called for those with eyes to see and minds capable

Alba was old and appeared still powerful, but that was i This crystal shell would shatter and fall soon: there was like it in all of Hunzza. In Hunzza the racial blood pulsed and hot, and had no need of the decadent architectural to disguise an inner decay.

Yet marching through this soon-to-be-forgotten grandeur the sighs of back-planet hicks whispering in his ears comfort. He felt he blended in well. He had seen no lately. If luck was the result of good planning, then he, planned well, even if only by accident.

He'd had a reason for hijacking those four primitive weapons in Sol System. That reason had not included to throw off the attack of an entire Alban Navy squadron, turned out. Evidently the detonation of one of those non space perfectly mimicked the sub spatial destruction

of a vessel. Korkal Emut Denai had led him into a deadly and he'd escaped thanks to a forgotten technology, expanding ring of dirty plasma behind.

Not luck, though, but cold calculation had brought him to Alba itself. He'd crept into the home system as stealthily as he could, only a few days before the blockade shut off all entrance and exit. He still had his mission. Korkal would come here, and, therefore, so would he. Besides, who would think to look for him in the enemy's heart?

Then luck again. What were the probabilities of his choosing on a whim to play the tourist in the Great Hall and there finding the Terran boy with a pack of Romian mercenaries, blinking as the stage was set to welcome the heroes? So low as to be ludicrous. As with history, perhaps the fates also posted their signposts warning of doom. The old empire lost its luck. The new empire had an abundance of it.

So dim Endicott was here. He already knew Korkal was. Thargos had his resources. It wouldn't take him long to find out where the boy kept himself, or was kept. He doubted he would have a chance to take the boy again. But also among his resources were two remaining Terran nukes.

One should be more than enough.

ilorkal'K this is my friend Tickeree," Jim said as he munched his cheeseburger.

Korkal, squatting comfortably on his haunches, said, "Ah, yes. Very pleased, Your Highness."

"You may call me Tick," he replied with languid hauteur. But his dark eyes danced with appreciation, and Jim noticed that he'd curled his toes. Was that a pleasure reflex with Heestahns, too?

"jim, can we talk a little? Privately?."

"Well, pardon me, fellow," Tick said.

"No offense, Highness. "Jim and I are old friends." Tick's hairy eyebrows arched. "You are?" "Sort of," dim said. "Sure, Korkal."

"I can leave. I'll be happy to leave," Tick said huffily.

"Not necessary. I think Jim and I will just step outside for moments."

Jim I'mished gulping down his burger, wiped his hands thighs, and got his feet under him. "Lead the way," he said.

The guards at the door saluted Korkal as he passed Korkal nodded but didn't salute in return.

"Fechnically, I'm not military," Korkal said as the slid shut behind them. The hallway was empty on e.itheri'. Several yards away on his right Jim saw a dead like a round black bruise on the floor.

"Where is this place?"

"So I managed to lead Thargos into a little ambush and my getaway," Korkal said. 'hanks for asking."

"A few ground rules, my old' friend. I don't know what from me. But

we aren't going to have a nice old-friend-i versation unless you hold up your end. Us Terrans, when a question we like to get an answer. If you can't do maybe you should just take me back inside that room."

"So you can sit around with the royal scion of the Heestah and try to figure out a way to put that blaster backpack to some kind of use? Yes, of course I know about you think we wouldn't monitor every sound inside

"So I suppose now you'll take my gun away, old friend?" "No, there's no reason. Even if you could blast your the guards--who know all about that weapon up right here. Standing a few yards from a trans matter doesn't work, in a building whose location, even if you would be meaningless. And let's go further. Say you get out of the building. What then?"

"I don't know. I hadn't thought that far."

"Jim, why didn't you do what you were told? Stay on and get in touch with me or one of our people?"

"Because I didn't want to, Korkal."

Korkal took a deep breath. "Yes, that finally sank in. wanted to hear you say it, to be sure. And Jim? I think understand."

Jim shook his head. "I don't think you understand at all. did, you wouldn't have locked us up. It's because of me, This doesn't have anything to do with the crew or Tick, does

Korkal looked away. "I've examined all the records of

of Ruin. Very interesting Nice job they did on your new

Maybe the experience with the inter force helmet and the awe powers of pattern recognition he'd discovered in him had changed the way he saw the non virtual world. Jim sure. But now he saw patterns everywhere. He was the of an ever-expanding wave of choice, washed over by the surf of all other choices.

I am my brother's keeper, he thought, and he is mine, and our is intertwined from the far past into the uttermost future. thought frightened him. Reality was as flimsy as a dream--in perhaps, it was a dream.

"You saw the record of my implant operation and looked at the I told Sheelob was a Terran identification code. And since know Terra has no such thing, you wonder what is hidden in my chromosomes, and you suspect it is the secret that help Alba. You know that Thargos must have suspected along similar lines because Thargos found me while the wreck of Delta's satellite. And so you want me to you what the secret is. Have you ever considered that I may

Korkal's jaw had dropped slightly. "What did they do to you? different. Harder. What have you become?"

They?. Who is they, Korkal? Everybody has done something to You're only the latest. Now can you understand why I might to do something just because I want to do it? And can you figure out why I don't intend ever to do anything again

"I'm sure it's what I want to do?" Jim paused, feeling the in his cheeks. He took a deep breath.

"Korkal, I think most people go through their whole lives in a of daze. I think I did. But not any more. What they did to what you did to me--opened my eyes. The only problem they are eyes I never knew I had. So what you had better do is tell me everything you know or think or have a hunch I have to decide what to do. But first I have to decide if I'm to do anything at all."

"I didn't want to say this, Jim. Especially because of what I owe But I also reminded you that my honor was not a suicide and so it isn't. If we have to, we'll force you."

Jim smiled. He remembered how it had taken the full power the Mindslaver Arrays to decipher the codes hidden in his genes, even after he'd provided the key. The same Alba now needed so desperately because Alba had good.

"No, Korkal, I don't think you can force me. Even to. And if you try, you risk losing the very thing you're get. Keep that in mind." Jim paused, trying to make the Alban understand. "Korkal," he said finally, "you're not what I was. I really am something different now."

Korkal stared at him for a long time. Then he nodded "I can see that. Well, we have three days, Jim. Let's work something out by then, or we'll have to

"Even if you know it will fail? And if you know it's by your own standards?"



"It won't be my choice, Jim. It will be out of my "Yes, I- suppose so. We're all trapped, aren't we?" "Yes."

"But we can still choose. If only for ourselves, we that. Context, Korkal. It's all context."

"What does that mean?"

Jim smiled. "Let's start by letting my shipmates cage. A token of good faith. Convince me it's necessary, pose we can all stay in this building, wherever it is. start with that."

Korkal turned toward the doorway. "Go on back. know."

"You do that," Jim said. "And I'll think about the

" mrgos was well aware that by civilian standards was so tricky as to be nearly incomprehensible. He came from living and working in an equally tricky and prehensible world. But he had lived in that world and

15o

us peculiar thoughts so long that everyday reality now seemed bizarre to him.

He suspected this had changed him irrevocably. Once he had thought of what he did as a duty and a task that could eventually be put aside. That when the time came he would be able to revert to what he'd been before, his idealism intact. That he could become a normal Hunzian citizen again, whatever he'd once thought normal might be.

Now he knew it would never happen. He might someday quit doing what he did, but he would never be able to stop being what he'd become, dust another of the many prices he'd paid, possibilities he'd spent without examining what he'd bought in return.

His mind grappled with the problems of his current world and finally came up with this: the chunk of debris he'd recovered from Delta's ruin had contained an extremely sophisticated set of designed to locate a particular genome. The search had evidently been running for a long time, and it had found a match. That match had been a boy named dim Endicott, who was living on the Terran colony planet of Wolfbane.

That was the first piece of data, and it offered more in the way of interesting questions than interesting answers. Why was Delta so interested in that genome? Who was dim Endicott? How did the boy, or his genome, fit into the larger question of Delta himself, and how did Delta fit into the largest question of Alba's peculiar protective relationship with an otherwise uninteresting back-galaxy world?

So he'd gone looking for the boy and found him, only to lose him to one of Alba's most effective agents, an old enemy named Korkal Emut Denai. Denai must have been surprised to find his old opponent Thargos in the field, and would know Thargos's presence indicated high-level Hunzian interest, just as Thargos knew Denai's presence indicated similar Alban concern.

Sometimes you can only learn a thing's intrinsic worth by the apparent value others place on it. He still didn't know what was so important about dim Endicott, except that Alba thought he was very important. So important he was now hidden away in the bowels of the Imperial Defense Ministry, supposedly the most "secure and impregnable structure on Alba.

But Thargos knew that the building, nearly a mile square--and yet another example of architecturally overblown as flimsy as Alba herself.

So his thoughts leaped through the arcane loops and high-level imperial politics as he considered that Hith placed high value on both Jim Endicott and Alba's relationship with Earth. Endicott was somehow a crucial link: Alter regarded as a vital connection between Alba and someone wished to sow maximum disarray in the Alban just prior to an all-out invasion attempt, then one destroy Hith Mun Alter, Jim Endicott, and the Terran with a single devastating blow. And if that blow seemed suspicious on Terra, further muddying the waters, then it is even more destructive..

His technicians had told him that one of the Terran rated a hundred megatons. Thargos knew little about weapons technology. But primitive or not, a hole in the mile wide and a quarter of a mile deep sounded like its. accomplish most of his immediate aims.

He would need to place the bomb in the Defense he knew how to do that. He would need to know Endicott and Hith Mun Alter were both in the Ministry same time. He thought he knew how to learn that.

And if by chance Korkal Emut Denai could also there, Thargos could savor the savage satisfaction of defeating his greatest nemesis.

It was all a tissue of guesses and hopes and half

No normal being would have ever worked it out like that. Thargos's decidedly abnormal world?

All in a day's work, he thought. And he hummed to some more.

,

o, I should call you Highness, is that right?" Jim Tick blinked. "Well, technically you should, but--" He

"I know. Listen. I, Tickeree, Prince of the House of Heestah, lame you royal friend. How's that? It gives you the right to speak to me in the familiar mode."

"You need a bath, royal friend. And a comb run through your facial hair. Is that mode familiar enough?" "Are all Terries so disrespectful?" "Are all Heestahns so pompous?"

"Hey! I'm not pompous." Tick paused. "Just aware of my own

Jim chuckled. "And so are we all. Tell you what. I name you Jim friend, and you can call me a cockeyed butt-face. How about that?"

"You cockeyed butt-face."

"Now that sounds like a royal judgment," Jim said.

Both boys grinned, comfortable with themselves and each other again. They strolled shoulder to shoulder down a wide corridor lined with statues of ancient Alban military heroes. Every once in a while Tick would stop and drag Jim to some looming warrior and make him listen to a recorded account of imperial heroics now long forgotten. After a while the stories began to blur. They all sounded alike. Alba always won.

"The winners get to write the histories," Jim said.

Tick stared at him in astonishment. "Well of course. How else would it be?"

"The truth?"

"The truth. is that Alba has been the winner for a long time in this part of the galaxy. So they get to make up the details. Does it matter?. All of this is dead and gone anyway. Just like Heestah." "Is it hard, Tick?"

Tick shrugged and looked away. "Sometimes."

Jim put his arm around the narrow shoulders of the smaller boy. Tough, stringy muscles there like thin meaty cables. "I'd like to see Heestah someday..."

I'll take you. We can--" He sighed. "Who knows, Jim? Right now it doesn't look as if we'll get the chance. The news gets worse every day. The blockade is tighter, and they don't seem to be able to get the outer fleets organized to break it. We're all trapped here. And I don't think the strategy is to capture Alba. I think they'll try to pop the sun. It solves a lot of problems for them in a single stroke. And it's a lot easier from a technical point of view. All they have to do is break the system one time."

"Huh. No wonder they were so happy to see the Queen we brought in updated shields, didn't we?"

But Tick was no longer listening. His monkey twisted in thought. "Jim, what did you do? When you the piloting?. I watched, but I couldn't understand. You know what would happen before it happened. I know so fast it seems like things are happening the great pilots have that. But with you it was like you the future. Like you were creating the

future. I've never before. It... scared me."

"It scared me, too, Tick."

"What does that Korkal fellow want? He seemed nice the surface. But it was like a mask somehow. Underneath think he's nice at all. He scared me, too--don't ever tell said that!"

"He wants me to do something for him. Give something Tick stared at him. "Give him something?. He's got you here like a bug in a bottle. Tell me he can't take wants."

"He can't take this. I have to give it to him."

"Jim... it sounds like something you know. Maybe you he can't get to something like that. Terra is pretty much al dock world, so maybe you don't know this, but.." if it's mind, he can take it. Believe me. He might tear you apart it, but he can do it."

"Yeah. He's said as much already." "It must be important then." "He thinks it is." "Can you tell me?"

"I don't really understand it myself, Tick."

"Well, that doesn't make any sense. Korkal doesn't it is, and you don't understand it. So what can be so tant?"

Jim exhaled softly as he glanced up and down the

"We're monitored here, I suppose."

"Everywhere."

"Is there anyplace in this pile where we might be able privately?"

Tick thought about it. "I've had a fair amount of

,

ancient government buildings. They usually keep the public parts up-to-date. But sometimes..."

Yeah?"

"Don't talk. Just follow me and look stupid. You can do that okay, right?"

"Sure. I'll just imitate you."

TERRA:

OFFICE OF THE CONFED CHAIRMAN

Half Moon felt sweat run stinging into her eyes as she stared across the desk at Tabitha Endicott. "I brought you here . . ." she began. Then she shook her head. For some reason her hair felt heavy as old thread, dangling lifelessly from the top of her skull. It was an odd feeling, a self-aware sensitivity, as if her body had taken on the persistent presence of a bad tooth. A vast surge of greasy disgust rankled her, at what the exigencies of high office had done to her. At what she'd let be done. Once she'd been a woman, but now she was ... what?

"It's hell with that," she went on. "I'm going to show you something. Tell me what you make of it."

The room abruptly darkened, the better to focus on the holoscreen that suddenly appeared. The picture flickered slightly and had the faintest of grainy overtones, as if it had not been intended for broadcast.

The two women watched the few moments it took for the tape to run. "That's Jim," Tabitha said flatly. "What--"

"Wait," Serena replied. She ran the tape again.

"Where is he? He looks older. And so tired... Serena, what is this? Where did you get that tape?"

The chairman brought the lights back up. Tabitha looked tired too, she thought. Worried and worn down. She'd let her hair grow longer and didn't look as if she was taking good care of it. It lay flat against her free skull, lank and somehow colorless.

"I'm told it was shot on Alba, the home planet itself. Jim is Tabitha twined her fingers together into a nervous is on Alba? But how--you told me Alba is blockaded. going in or out."

Serena closed her eyes. She had no intention of telling how she'd gotten the tape. How she had been viewing private hooked by interface into the state systems. How suddenly had gone dark and a voice out of nowhere said, "I am Outs/tier.":

What had followed had been, she had always believed, cally impossible. Her best systems experts, later, had been to discover how her private interface, the most highly and guarded in the entire Confederation, could have. breached. They squinched their eyes and sighed and wrung their hands and said it must have been some sort of neural convulsion on her part. And they'd stared at her out of the their eyes as if she were somehow crumbling, as if her mind no longer be trusted.

But she had the tape. She didn't know what it meant, what it showed: Jim Endicott standing with a group of aliens before a landscape of impossible crystal towers.

"I'm told this scene took place three days ago. That the is the Great Hall of the Pra'Loch. The conclusion is obvious Mun Alter has Jim. But he hasn't informed me of that. can't. Maybe he can't punch a message

through the But somehow I doubt it."

"It was a mistake to let him go," Tabitha said mistake. That Korkal talked me into it. Everything fast... I blame myself."

Serena shook her head impatiently. "What's done is made mistakes, too. The question is what kind of leverage fred here? We have to get Jim back to Terra. Without don't have any chance of making the mind arrays workl i without them we're just another helpless backwater planet. one difference: the Hunzza suspect something valuable is Without the Alban squadron guarding us, they'll simply and do whatever they want."

"There's an Alban fleet watching Sol System?" "Yes. For the past few weeks. Hith sent them." "Are they guarding us or imprisoning us?"

"Quite frankly, Tabitha, it doesn't make a hell of a lot ence at this point. I delivered an ultimatum to the



back. Give us Jim Endicott, or we won't allow you to use mind arrays. He has Jim, but he hasn't made any move to z. I'm not sure what that means. But I'm afraid it doesn't can anything good--for Jim, or for Terra."

"Serena, I'll be frank, too. I know I should worry about Terra, but it's too big. I'm worried about my boy. I want him back here. Did you see him? How tired and worn-out he looked? He used to be such a happy boy. None of what's happened has been his fault, though he blames himself for a lot of it. Too much of it. All he wanted was to go to the Academy, become a pilot. That's all..."

The chairman's agate eyes narrowed. The Academy?. The Solis Academy?"

Tabitha nodded. "It was his application, with his genome, that started everything. But how could he know?. I told you the story... and in the end they rejected him. Because he couldn't provide his father's genome. Or his mother's, for that matter." Tabitha sounded disgusted and bitter. Her mouth twisted as f tiny hooks were embedded in it.

But Serena Half Moon had stopped listening. She had a way to get a message through the blockade and, f her information was Correct, even get the message directly to Jim. Of course, it might really be nothing more than a hallucination. But she had the tape. That was real enough, wasn't it?

"The Solis Academy... is that what he really wants, Tabitha? You're sure of that?"

"More than anything. At least he used to." Tabitha's chest rose and fell. "But he looks different now. Maybe that's changed, too. Everything else has."

Serena thought about it. "It's a shot. It's better than nothing." "What is?"

"If Jim wants to enter the Solis Academy, I can make that happen. Rules can be broken, and I can break them. But he would have to come back here for me to do that, wouldn't he?"

Tabitha raised her head. A faint spark glinted in her eyes. "Yes, he would."

"We'll see," Serena said. "He may have no control where he is, no leverage. But if he does..."

I want him back, Serena."

"We'll try, Tabitha. We'll surely give it a shot."

ALB AGENS :

IMPERIAL DEFENSE MINIS Tn

"Alba is the home planet of an old empire, Jim. This probably a thousand years old. And it was built on top of one, and that from the rubble of an older one still. sand years ago maybe there was a little fort here, with aI Albans laid up behind dirt walls with a steam engine generator for electricity."

Something about that seemed wrong, but Jim let it crept slowly down the center aisle of a dim,

The floor was roughly paved with knobby dark gleamed here and there with a thin slime of water, but they were dull beneath an inch-thick layer of dust. the distance a steady, hollow, dripping sound hinted i source of the moisture.

Shadows without any particular shape, swathed in grease, stinking of mold and ruin, towered over them on The floor shivered faintly with the hum of buried machines, ing that a vast and ancient force was hidden here, so long it had been forgotten here. A thick shroud of dust everything. The place felt as if nothing had walked these generations. There were certainly no footprints here but

"The basements," Jim said. "I wouldn't have thought." Tick shrugged. "Then you never lived in a really old Kings and governments. They never throw anything glanced around. "But if there's anyplace in this whole isn't bugged every minute, it would be down here. You though. Up to you."

They came to a corner, turned, and entered another gloomy chamber. Jim looked at a distant light fixture.

Even on Terra that kind of technology was hundreds of years date. He tried to imagine maintenance bots searching of replacement equipment that spanned a hundred centuries. they maybe even have a few wooden torches stashed away just in case?

But the distant glow looked like a logical place to stop. The and the near darkness everywhere else gave Jim the

"Let's head for the light and take a break. Then we can Jim said. :, They walked toward the distant yellow glow, silent in the damp land dusty silence. The air smelled of rancid machine grease and rust. Their footsteps made soft sliding sounds on the stones. air turned cooler. When they reached the light, Jim wiped his on the seat of his pants and looked around.

"This okay for you?" he asked. For some reason it felt exactly to him.

"Sure," Tick replied.

They sat cross-legged in the dimly luminous cone, their backs the scabrous concrete wall. The light fmeture gave off an

occasional harsh buzzing sound, like a wasp trapped in a bottle. "So what are we talking about, Jim?" "I shouldn't tell you," Jim said at last.

"Because you can't trust me? Well, that's the first smart thing I've heard you say. So come on, let's head back up. It's cold down here."

Jim shook his head. "Calm down, Tick. Don't be so touchy. That's not what I meant. It's just that.." if I tell you, maybe I you're in danger, too. Like you said. If they want to yank it out of you, they will."

As he spoke, his gaze moved across the aisle. Something tickled at the back of his mind but didn't quite surface. He mentally grabbed for it, but it was gone.

For a moment Tick remained silent. Jim could hear his breathing, soft and steady and regular. "You know," he said at last, "the royals, and there are hundreds of thousands of us all over the galaxy, most of us left over from kingdoms and empires only the royals themselves remember any longer, we are raised in strange ways. We learn treachery before we learn to walk. To Watch for the knife in the back and the poison in the infant's milk. Even my own house has its share of mysterious deaths. Still does, and there's nothing left to fight over. Someday, Jim, I will be an emperor. Of two lousy planets and all the cybermalls I can Open. If I go back, that is.

"I'm just a kid, even if I am a prince. But I find you ingly naive. I thought you would understand the rules, don't. What kind of place do you come from, my friend?"

"I guess it's just what you say it is. A hick place, a Primitive. I never thought so, but I'd never been out in the before. Out in what you think of as the real world."

"Jim, what you tell me, only you know how much put me in. If I'm your friend--and I am--then keep that when you talk. I will accept whatever degree of danger you put me in. But you will have to decide. It's up to you."

"Gee, thanks, Tick. Nothing like a friendly chat boys, is there? Is everything in your world so hard-boiled?":

Tick stared at him, his dark eyes crinkling at the edges. probably is in your world, too. You just haven't found out yet."

Jim thought about Deltal And Carl Endicott. "You right. But now I'm afraid to tell you anything."

"We can go round and round forever. Spit it out, or let's and see if we can hunt up some more of your mom would be horrified, but I guess I'm getting a taste for food."

"Cheeseburgers? Ethnic food?"

"It is to me. It's a wide galaxy, Jim. Everything's somebody. And now you can tell me your big secret, not, however you want."

Jim took a breath. "Okay, what if you thought you had a make sure that

Alba whipped the Hunzza? Or vice versa But maybe that way would just encourage the war to longer, and grunts like us would get cut up 'in more with a lot of civilians?"

"So I won't assume you're being hypothetical. You think have some way. If it's true, I don't buy your squad. pick your side and roll the dice."

"There's more innocent people involved. People back on home planet. Maybe it's possible they get hurt, too."

Tick eyed him. "It's really hard for me to believe you kind of thing in the first place. I mean how would some world like Terra come up with a lever like that? It's some technology, right?"

Jim nodded. "I know. It sounds crazy. But Korkal think that's what I've got."

Tick chewed it over. "Yeah. Alba is paying a lot of attention to That's the only thing that gives this any credibility as far as concerned." He shook his head. "I still can't imagine what got, though. Or why they haven't pulled it out of you by force, if they think it's so important."

"Well, Korkal says that's the next step. He said three days. That two days ago. It's why I'm trying to make up my mind."

"One day left then..."

"Uh-huh." Once again Jim let his gaze drift across the way, his snagged for an instant by a bright silver glint reflecting light above his head. Something about it... He had the odd feeling that he should be recognizing some Something was wrong, but he couldn't figure out what it

"Way I see it," Tick said slowly, "is your options are limited. You give whatever it is to the Hunzza, so it either goes to Alba or doesn't go at all. You say you can make that choice, though I

you're underestimating the Alban brain-strainers. But say can decide. Why wouldn't you give it to Alba? There's already war. People are already dying. So if what you've got is so power wouldn't you rather have Alba win? I mean you've already seen how the Hunzza work, up close and personal. Remember told me about Shish?"

Jim winced. "I hate war," he said softly.

Tick's features twisted into a cynical mask. "I hate breathing," he said.

Yeah. War and breathing and eating. I can't believe they're all equally inevitable. Or even necessary. Maybe nobody has ever had a big enough club to end the war part."

"And you think you do?" Tick waited for a reply, but Jim wasn't looking at him anymore. "Hey! You still with us?"

Slowly, Jim shook his head. He was staring at the floor of the aisle in front of them. "Tick?"

"What?"

"You're the expert on old basements, right? Did you see any footprints in the dust back the way we came in?" "Huh? I don't think so." Look."

There before them was a scramble of oddly shaped marks. The shape of the prints was strange, not immediately recognizable--and there were a lot of them. And some scrape marks that appeared out of nowhere, as if something heavy had loaded here. Maybe from a grav-cart. Everything came direction opposite to the way they had come.

Suddenly Jim realized the coincidence of them if it was one--might not be so coincidental. The path this direction. But here was where they halted. light. And because his subconscious understood the of the footprints long before his conscious mind took had brought them to the basements. But Jim had spot.

"Those look like Alban footprints?" Jim said softly. "Naw. Too small. Look at that one--some kind of setup. Looks almost like a ..."  
Tick's eyes widened lizard."

Jim climbed to his feet and stepped across the aisle. A patch of light on fresh metal over there drew his gaze like a magnet. That was what had been bugging him. Things out of a deserted, never-visited basement. Like footprints. Metal with no dust on it.

Tick unfolded himself and followed. "What's up?" "Help me." Jim began to push aside a mound. Everything down here was covered with years of grease and corrosion. Everything was dull and old. Untouched except for this one half-hidden bit of glitter, and the that led up to it.

Tick joined in. After five sweaty minutes they had it stared down at it. Finally he took out his universal and over the characters painted on the dull silver beneath a tangle of freshly connected wires. It was one' naked wires that had caught the light--and Jim's waited a moment, then raised his head in surprise.

"This is Terran writing," he said. "Four different how in Bramadon's Hell would a Terrie artifact get down

Jim nodded slowly, his right hand unconsciously belly where a ball of ice had suddenly appeared. "Mandarin, English, Japanese, and Spanish," he "What is it? What's it doing here?" "It's a nuke. A nuclear bomb." "What's a nuclear bomb?"

"One of our primitive weapons. It makes a big hole ground. This one will make a very big hole."

i "Huh? Will it go off?."

Jim rubbed aside a thin film of newly smeared grease and at a small digital readout. The bright red numbers spun flently backward from right to left. He felt his mind rock as understanding exploded with terrible simplicity in his brain. It had been niggling at him ever since he'd seen the first gleam of the raw wiring and the prints in the dust. Lizard footprints! Thargos! And Thargos had hijacked a load of Terran nukes.

"Yes. In one hour, forty-six minutes, and twenty seconds. That's what the timer says."

Tick's voice was soft. 'l'hat's not very long."

"No," Jim replied. "Not very long at all."

As they ran for the ancient bank of elevators that let onto more modern floors and trans matter disks, Jim used his universal, Fred, to try to contact Korkal. All he got was bounced messages.

"Location, then," he instructed Fred, as they groaned upward in the tiny elevator cubicle.

"Classified," Fred told him.

"Put out an alarm. There is a Terran nuclear bomb in the basement of the Imperial Ministry."

"Done," said Fred immediately. 'q'he proper authorities have been notified."

Then silence. Jim glanced at Tick. "The proper authorities? What does that mean?"

"Probably that a bunch of bureaucrats now have a medium priority message in with a bunch of other medium-priority messages, and that maybe somebody will bother to read it right after lunch."

"Jeez. I've got to get to Korkal. He knows about these bombs." "He does?"

"Yeah. We watched one of them go off." Jim thought about Tabitha and blinked as a wave of sadness washed over him. "He'll believe me."

"Oh, the bureaucrats will believe you, too. At least send a team to investigate. Whenever somebody around to it."

"Fred. Tell them it will go off in less than two hours." "Yeah. That ought to speed them up. A little," Tick said. The door slid open on a gray and empty corridor. But off. left was a silvery trans matter disk. The two boys galloped it. They stepped through into the bright lights outside their quarters. In the distance the van of a crowd squinted. "Korkal!" he shouted, and began to run.

"Jim!"

"Korkal, listen to me!"

"Jim, slow down. I want you to meet somebody." Korkal and gestured toward an Alban so gray he looked almost specter. But about this one hung an aura of authority so was like an invisible wall.

"This is Hith Mun Alter," Korkal said. "The pack lord "Oh, Lord," Jim breathed as another blast of suddenly exploded in his skull. "Korkal, I know who the is. Now listen to me. You remember that bomb Thargos set Wolf bane? The nuke?"

Korkal's features were beginning to

"Yes, I remember."

"You told me four were missing. Well, one of them is the basement of this building, Right now. It's set to go hour and a half or so."

Hith Mun Alter stepped forward. "A bomb you say?. But impossible--"

Korkal gently stepped in front of him. 'rhargos the

Packlord. With that one, anything's possible."

"You told me he was dead!"

"He's fooled me before. Jim, you're sure?"

"I saw it," Jim said.

"Me, too," said Tick. "Looked real to me."

"Packlord, we have to get you out of here."

"No!" Jim blurted. "Thargos arranged this.." and I know what he's after. He could have set it off already. But didn't, Packlord, were you scheduled to come here today?."

"Yes. I'd allotted three hours for interviews. I'm a little early. Jim nodded. in argos knows, somehow. My guess is the ing is watched--or your personal party is watched. If you



I'll bet that bomb goes off. Thargos wanted to get all of me, Korkal. Everybody. And... something else that isn't clear to me yet."

Alter tilted his wolfish head. "You're making a lot of deduc "If I were you, Packlord, I'd listen to him," Tick broke in. "He's pretty good at the deduction thing."

"Who are you?"

"Prince Tickeree of Heestah, Packlord." Alter glanced at Korkal. "Well, Lord Denai?" Korkal turned to Jim. "Where is it?"

"In the basement. I'll show you. Do you have any bomb experts in the building?."

"It's the" Defense Ministry," Korkal said. "here ought to be somebody.

"If you leave, it goes off," Jim said. "I'm sure of it. And if you leave, it goes off anyway, eventually. Maybe this way maybe we have a little time."

But there weren't any bomb-disposal experts. Not for this kind of bomb.

TIME: 1:03:6 . . .

"It's not that it's too primitive. Or that it's too advanced. It's the combination, Lord Denai," the sweating Alban weapons tech said.

"I don't understand," Korkal replied.

The tech shook his head. "Look. See all that new stuff halfburied in the casing there? That's what this Thargos added. It will be state-of-the-art and very tricky. Still, we might crack it in time. Except that we don't understand anything about the bomb itself. Maybe we do the right thing with the new stuff and that trips the primitive mechanisms anyway. Or maybe the other way around."

The tech glanced at his team, who stared blankly at the weapon. But they were all sweating, too, and when they forgot, their eyes rolled a bit in their skulls.

"So you're saying you can't stop this thing?."

"Oh, not at all. We can get it unhooked. Just not in time. Probably not in time." He ran his palm down the side of his muzzle, then stared at it as if surprised to see the film of moisture there.

Korkal rocked back on his heels. "All right. That's it, then." He turned to face Hith Mun Alter, who was taking everything in with bright eyes and twitching ears.

"We'll have to evacuate the building. Sir, we'll get you out first"

"Jim, really. This is serious. I don't have time--"

"You don't understand. I can't prove it, but I know that! Start to move everybody out, even just the pack lord will explode. There's no other way he could have set it wants to get all of us---me, you, the pack lord ..." He suddenly deep in thought.

"And Terra .. " he said. "It's got something to do with Packlord, sir, you have some kind of deal with Terra, About the.." uh... things."

Hith stepped forward. "Go on."

"It's... yes. Thargos wants to destroy the linkage Terra and Alba. What better way than to blow you Terrie weapon?"

The pack lord stood very still.

"Packlord," Korkal said, "we can't take the chance. Jim friend, but..."

"Hush, Lord Denai." Hith caught Jim's gaze with his held it. "You have a suggestion, don't you?"

Jim licked his lips and nodded.

Jim took a deep breath. "I'll disarm it. I've had nuclear technology. Primitive by your standards, but primitive bomb. By your standards."

"What about the additions? Those aren't primitive." "They will have a solution. There has to be a pattern." "And you can find it?"

"That's not good enough, Jim," Korkal broke in.

Jim stared at him. "I'll find it, Korkal. I will.

Hith stepped back. His shoulders moved up, then down. gleamed. He almost seemed to be enjoying himself. "I'll risk, Lord Denai. And I'll take it for you, too. Sorry. N( "Packlord--"

"We'd better quit jabbering and let this young man get it, eh?"

Korkal started to say something, thought better of it, finally nodded. Then he looked directly at Jim. "Do you stand the risk? Not just you and your friend. Not even me packlord. Everything. Alba. Your own planet Wolfbane and Terra. Everything."

Jim's skull seemed to have swollen somehow, so that it against the skin of his face and stretched it as tight as a over the knobby bones beneath.

"Give me some light," he said. "And somebody explain to me these tools are the techs brought with them."

ME: 00:46:12 . . .

Jim lay on his back and stared up at the underside of the He had two inspection panels open, and had very carefully a third opening in the steel skin.

Strands of glow light were draped across the bomb casing, self worms the thickness of his little finger that cast a shad white glow on the precise spots he needed it. He blinked. area was warming up now, and the heat caused the crusts of grease to soften and finally drip. There were black streaks across his forehead and on one cheek. The grit of ages was now into his shoulders and backside, and it itched. He could smell the rank odor of his own armpits. Fear sweat. Flop sweat. Do you understand the risk?.

The light was too sharp and clear. It made everything too plain. could see it, tangles of wires, some TeiTan, some put there by Thargos. The new stuff was easy to see but impossible to decipher. The techs told him what they could. But whoever had wired up this monstrosity had possessed cleverness that was nearly demonic. He would stare at the tangled webs, at the mysterious chips so delicately placed alongside the far clunkier mechanisms of the Terran weapon. Here and there new and old had actually melted together, so he couldn't tell where the old ended and began.

Everything about it screamed danger. The Terran part was simple and straightforward. He could look at it and see just thing could be pushed and something else cut, and a twisted just so. Nuclear bombs were not terribly devices. Making allowance for the various ignition average grade-school kid could slap one together with

If it had been only that, he could have just about taken it his bare hands.

But the combination looked more and more him. He would get the faintest gauzy flash of an idea, seeing hint of how it all fitted together, and then it would the tantalizing flicker of a summer ice-cream cone tongue, quickly withdrawn, i. If I just had more time... But I don't, he thought. I don't have hardly any time at his head, silent as death, the red digital clock ticked ticked down. With grease-smeared fingers he reached for cal screwdriver. Please, God, don't let my hands shake.

TIME: 00:19:43 . . .

orkal hovered. There was no other word for couldn't help himself. The packiord had retreated across where his minions had covered some piece of dead their own cloaks to make a seat for him. He could see golden eyes glinting at him, but otherwise his master gave this was anything more stressful than a quiet chat

Jim's wiry frame was half-hidden under the smooth of the bomb. Every once in a while his grease-streaked '. would dart out, accept some new

chunk of work from one of the techs, and vanish into the innards da  
limed thing.

And, inexorably, the clock was still running down, chopping seconds into red and blurry bits. Korkal felt a shuddery sense unreality. It really was too ridiculous, a comedy of slapstick

How could it possibly come down to this? To his own the life of the pack lord of the Alban Empire, perhaps the surrender of the empire itself, how could it come down to the frantic efforts of one kid from a nowhere planet, thrust willy into the center of events so great even Korkal had a hard comprehending them?

He knew that somewhere Thargos must be laughing. Korkal almost see those great green Hunzzan eyes, blinking and

And he felt a constriction in his own chest and knew fate had a good strong grip there.

The red numbers swirled and swirled, counterpoint to his own now ratcheting from his grasp. And all he could think what a great waste it was, to end like this, in a dim and age basement. Death was a cosmic joke, whether for the tiny thinkers or for the mighty empires they presumed, in scurrying pride, to build. It was all the same to the universe. "Korkal?" "What?"

Jim had pushed himself all the way out from under the casing and now sat cross legged, his elbows on the knees of his grease stained khaki uniform pants, looking up at him. "I can't get it. I thought I could, but it keeps slipping away. I can almost see the way it's put together, but I don't have enough mental push to put it all together." Jim wiped his forehead. "I need more power. If only I had the Queen down here. But I don't." He looked down at his lap and then up again. "I'm sorry, Korkal. I tried. Maybe you'd better get the pack lord out of here if you can. I know that will set off the bomb, but--"

Korkal. stared at him. "What do you mean, if you could get the Queen down here. The Queen of Ruin? Your ship? But why?."

Jim shook his head slightly, a nervous tic. "It doesn't matter, Cause we can't. But if I'd been able to interface with the ship's COMputers... they give me a lot more power than I have with just my own stupid brain. I see solutions better. That's how I got through the blockade."

Korkal's jaw slowly dropped. "Computer power? That's what You need?"

Jim nodded.

"Jim, you're in the Alban Imperial Defense Strategic Planning Machines are here. The most computers in the whole empire. You want power? There's here than anyplace else in the galaxy!"

"Better hurry," Jim said.

TIME: 00:01:26 . o .

It seemed like it had taken forever to horse the nectors and relays down from the upper levels to the though it had been one short scream of activity. Now inter force ring in his two hands and gazed down at it. hulked two very large pieces of equipment that seemed to shimmer in and out of reality, protected by a shifting web sensitive force

fields--the relay nodes themselves.

"Is it ready?." Jim asked.

One of the techs nodded. His long pink tongue slipped jaw, hung there a moment, then darted back between his The tech's eyes looked dry and yellow in the pure white the light-tubes.

Jim's chest rose high, then fell. "Okay," he whispered, one single clean motion placed the ring around his looked up at Korkal. Then he moved his chin, and his vanished behind the smooth ball of force. He ducked slid back under the casing.

Korkal had to remind himself to breathe again, and moment he once again forgot.

TIME: 00:00:38 . . .

From his viewpoint the inter force helmet was fully transparent, yet Jim was aware of it as an invisible bubble a few inches out from his skull. He was also aware of the huge power of the computers poised just beyond that tenuous membrane. He had already touched that power once and the result had scared him silly. It had been like a kid tossing a firecracker, but when it came as a long, bellowing peal of thunder. For an instant or two he'd frozen. Then he realized there was a logic to that force, and he could understand and control it. Or at least he thought he could.

He gathered his thoughts and told himself to focus. Off near the edge of his physical awareness the red clock whirred and ticked. He licked his lips.

All right, he thought. Here we go now. Initiate full inter force engagement.

Deep in his mind the thunder rolled and roared as he brought the power to bear on the secrets of the bomb triggers. And he found something else...

TIME: 00:00:12 . . .

patterns. So many patterns.

He had brought his focus down to a fine point, so that sensors and the manipulators operated by the Alban functioned on the subatomic level. The shape of the bomb was slowly shifting structure floating off to his left. The electron flows pulse slowly from three different power saw the chunks of nuclear material as huge galaxies anced, great masses of probability poised to fall each other.

He saw how the new things Thargos had put into the worked in eerie cascades with the things that were

It was sort of like what he'd experienced in the fight Hunzzan warships, but in this case atoms became numbers that signified the probability of their position given moment.

Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle drifted gently thoughts: if you could see the particle, you could not know direction, or how fast, it was moving. If you knew how moving, you couldn't see it. So one or the other of these either the location or the momentum of the particle could be described as a probability. In this sense reality became a statistics.

And for Jim the probabilities were depicted by the spinning virtual numbers that marked the ghostly presence: it might be here, but if not, the odds were it be there.

There was nothing he could do about Thargos's tricky there were six of them, cascaded so that altering any one forced all of them into a new pattern. Aided by the Alban



might eventually be able to decode all the probabilities and so the most likely course to manipulate the triggers into

But not fast enough. His mind had placed the timer 'into the virtual distance as a great red wall of spinning numerIt was still ticking down toward the zero instant of nuclear det Find the key! he told himself. Find a different pattern than the

Thargos made. There has to be one, or... Or there won't be any time left. Hardly any time left anyway. Only00:00:04 .. .

e gave up on Thargos's booby-trapped triggers and pulled way back. Stared at the whole thing, all the elements of the bomb floating before him, hard-spinning atomic numbers

', veils of potential and probability.

The whole pattern. If I can just get the whole pattern, then maybe I can change it... Something dark and vast rose from the sub quantum sea like a great fish, an archetypal Moby Dick of power and intention. Jim

He could see nothing, but he felt its presence as a shudscreech up and down his spinal cord. The short hairs on neck stood straight up.

"What.. o"

Forget the triggers. Look at the nuclear material. Look at the nuclear matrices themselves... Who are you?"

No answer. But he felt the presence swell, somehow grow more reo2, and he knew he wasn't alone.

The nuclear material? He compressed his attention and aimed it a weapon at the two highly polished hemispheres that were

Each atom was a crust of particles glued together by the heart of the bomb. He focused on the atomic there, and, aided by the Alban computers, he understood instantly.

quantal forces. He could see the potential: when they together, one by one those atoms would become begin fusing, throwing off vast quantities of heat as a of the atomic joining.

For a moment he despaired. The reactions of nuclear and fusion had been well deciphered for centuries even own planet. And the Alban computers knew far more inevitable reactions than he did. But something tickled him, ghostly memory, the vaguest beginnings of an idea. But the idea remained vague. He couldn't pull it met." he whispered.

The presence suddenly expanded, somehow melded his own awareness, then linked the both of them to the computers. A raw blast of power filled whatever it was the them together had become.

And now he saw the solution, much as he'd seen solutions when he'd wrenched the Hunzzan warships their grip on reality and then destroyed them. If one the probabilities of this atom in this way, and touched in a different way, then the nuclear probabilities altered... You might change the nuclear material itself by forcing it. rapid but controlled

process of decayt.

The presence separated itself from him and fell vast shadow fading into the night. He sensed its only distantly, as a receding whisper of curiosity and as the iron taste of a thunderstorm slowly lifting. His filled with the taste of wet rust. Pie ignored it. He busy.

HANDS

TIME: 00'00'00 . . .

His senses were so hyperextended that Korkal saw the digital numbers flicker to a halt in slow motion: zero, zero, zero, zero, zero, zero.

He closed his eyes and flinched, his mind trying to skitter around the idea of suddenly vanishing in a single bright flash of nuclear flame.

Ca-clunk!

It was a heavy metallic sound. He opened his eyes and saw Jim scrambling out from beneath the bomb casing. "Get back!" Jim yelled. "Get away from it!" He was pushing himself quickly back ward, sitting on his butt, his arms and legs pumping.

Korkal jumped back. The dials of the readout stood unblinking and red, a series of zeros. Then the center section of the bomb suddenly melted and slumped. Acrid smoke rose up, and a burning chemical stench.

Jim clambered to his feet. "hat's it," he said. His voice quavered "It's over."

Korkal heard a soft rattling sound. It took him a moment to realize it was his own teeth chattering like a bucket full of knuckle bones.

"What..."

Jim stared at it. There were broad dark patches of sweat at his armpits, on his chest and belly and groin.

"I couldn't break the triggers in time. So I changed the nuclear stuff. It's still emitting, but it won't explode. That clank was the trigger going off, slamming the two hemispheres of the nucleus together. There was a little heat, a side effect of the process I started. It melted the bomb. I was afraid it might be worse."

Korkal started to move toward Jim, but he staggered and almost fell. Jim caught him instead, and Korkal stared down at his own knees. The joints there felt loose and weak, as if some mysterious disease had dissolved all the muscle and cartilage

and left only the bony knobs and sockets and nothing hold the two together.

And he knew the disease. Knew it of old. Its name was That great thief of will and strength. "I'm okay, Jim," he "Well, I'm not okay, but I will be in a minute. No, let me you."

"I thought I peed my pants," Jim said seriously. "I had to make sure."

They stared at each other. Then they began to laugh...

I:

"Packlord," Korkal said. He giggled again, caught just managed to choke off a final chortle. "'.

Hith Mun Alter waited. When he was sure both Jim and had themselves under control, he bowed in Jim's direction did this a muted chorus of gasps rose from those behind

"I owe you my life," the pack lord said formally. "I

the debt before my peers."

Jim raised his head slightly. Korkal saw through the stains, the taut skin, the gauntness of the bone and saw the slow green light grow in the boy's eyes. He was so young, but he possessed a dignity the equal of the

He bowed his head slightly in return. "I acknowled Packlord," he replied softly.

The pacldord stood motionless a moment, wrapped in his gray dignity, then suddenly nodded. "We'll speak of it Korkal?"

"Yes, Pacldord?"

"I think you have some business with Thargos?"

"Yes, Packlord. Finding him, to begin with." "

"I should think so. Jim Endicott?"

"Packlord?"

"In some ways our mutual situation has changed. In

it remains the same. I wish to speak with you and Lord in private. In... say an hour?" "I'll be there." "Korkal, see to it?" "Jim?" "Yes, sir?."

"Thank you, Lord Endicott." With that, Hith Mun Alter bowed a final time and turned away.

In the background, the gathered courtiers slowly began to applaud. Jim blushed.

"Tick?"

"Right here, buddy."

"Let's go find a shower. I think I need one."

"And me some fresh underwear," Tick said seriously. The two boys moved off, arm in arm.

"Well, now we're really brothers," Tick said.

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Have you got ears, Terrie? You're an aristocrat now. Or did think the pack lord called you Lord Endicott just to hear his flap? I thought your name was Marshal, though."

Jim stopped, turned, and watched the pack lord back as he boarded the other elevator. ,

It's a long story," Jim said. "And getting longer all the time. Lord huh? I guess it does have a nice ring to it, doesn't it?" "Yeah." Tick grinned. "My morn will love it. She's such a snob." "After you, Highness," Jim said.

"No, after you, Lord," Tick replied. In the end, they boarded the elevator together.

After seeing the Great Hall of the Pra'Loch, Jim had expected something more impressive than the small office revealed beyond Korkal's shoulder as Korkal opened the door and ushered him into the room.

The packlord, small and gray, was seated on a contour sofa, its soft shape hugging him like a glove. He didn't rise, but gestured to one of a pair of chairs across a low table from him. He cradled a cup of some steaming liquid in his hands. A sharp cinnamon smell rose with the steam.

"Thank you for coming, Lord Endicott," the pack lord said. "Lord Denai, if you would have a seat as well? What I have to say concerns all of us, I think."

Korkal nodded, but asked Jim, "Do you want something to drink?" Jim shook his head. There was a sheen of unreality to all of this. The leader of the Alban Empire making time in the midst of a war to talk to a Terran kid who only a few months before had been nothing more than a green schoolboy. But his mind, without any conscious impetus, kept on thinking about his situation even as it changed, and he integrated his amazing circumstances as if they were only another cluster of data points. And that was a very odd feeling indeed; sort of like having a machine installed in the bottom of his skull, a machine whose ceaseless workings he had little control over. But where had that machine come from? And why?. "Packlord," Jim said, "many others who were with you in the

Defense Ministry have come to me and acknowledged that I saved their lives."

"Yes, of course. They follow my lead. Do you understand all means?"

"I think so. Korkal explained after I saved his life. We don't have such customs on Terra."

Hith Mun Alter nodded. "I am at something of a loss seems you have acquired for yourself the personal sizable number of the most powerful people in our empire.

included. Rather astonishing, actually.

Jim felt the pattern shift and solidify. "But it's not enough,

"No. It's not enough. As Lord Denai has explained, our toms, even our most cherished customs, are not meant to suicide pact."

Jim nodded his understanding. "But they mean don't they? Otherwise, we wouldn't be having this polite sat ion

A faint flicker of white fang showed in the pack lord jaw. "You are wise beyond your years, Lord Endicott."

"I don't feel very wise, Packlord. Mostly I feel confused."  
"Perhaps," the pack lord said smoothly, "I can help your confusion."

Suddenly Jim wished he'd taken Korkal up on his drink. He wasn't thirsty, but it would be comforting to hold thing in his hands. On second glance, beneath all the there was an air of quiet luxury in this room, slick as his knobby, reddened knuckles seemed somehow out of

resisted the urge to slip his hands into his pants said instead, "I guess you know everything about me that does?"

"Yes. Please forgive Lord Denai, but I gave him no choice matter."

"You believe I am important to you. To Alba. Why?."

"I'o Alba, at least as far as this discussion goes.

and I now have a personal relationship, which I have edged, but which I must regretfully set aside for the

Even the pack lord ultimately serves the Great Pack, safety of the Great Pack is what we are here to discuss."

"It is very hard for me to imagine that I can have any tance---or any role to play--in such large matters," Jimsaid fully.

Hith sipped his drink thoughtfully. "And now you are disingenuous, Lord Endicott. So let us also put that aside

1 I)4

is eak openly and honestly. You Terrans have an expression, I believe. Put all the cards on the table?"

Jim smothered a grin at the ancient colloquialism. The pack lord seemed to know a great deal about Terra. He told himself to keep that in mind. The pack lord looked small and old, but he was one of the most powerful beings in the galaxy. He hadn't reached or held that position by being either soft or stupid.

"Yes, sir, we say that. All right, it's possible that I may have something you want. But I haven't decided yet whether to let you have it. To be honest, I guess I should tell you I may decide not to. And that in the end it will have to be my decision. Is that going to be a problem?"

"Yes, it might be."

"Korkal gave me a deadline. He said I had three days, and then you would take stronger measures. The third day will come tomorrow."

Hith's eyes flicked in Korkal's direction, then flicked away. "Lord Denai was more open than I might have wished," he said at last.

"You said you wanted the cards on the table. At least with Korkal I know where I stand. But I don't know anything about you, sir. And I need to know in order to make up my mind."

"You seem very certain you have a choice in the matter. Why do you think that? By Terran standards, Alban... ah... interrogation technology is quite advanced."

Careful, now, Jim thought. Anything I say might tell him too much. Think it through then. "Lord, let's say for the sake of argument that I do have a choice. If so, where do we go? How would you proceed?"

"I would negotiate. I would try to persuade you. I would offer you bribes, threats, promises. Whatever I thought might cause you to decide in our favor."

"Would you lie?"

Hith sighed. "Yes, I would lie, if I thought you wouldn't catch me. Otherwise, lying would be counterproductive, of course."

At least that was honest enough. "Sir, can you think of any way to prove your honesty to me?"

"No, I'm afraid not. I cannot allow myself to be tested by any truth-saying machine. Even in this situation. I am the pack lord after all."

"I was afraid of that. All right. The most reassuring thing you can do for me is to tell me what you know and think and will try to judge the truth for myself from what you tell me. "That puts you at a disadvantage, doesn't it?"

Not necessarily. All things have specific patterns of Truths and lies. They... hang together. Or maybe they think that maybe telling a great lie would have a pattern, and so would a large truth. I have some



skill in ing this kind of logic. I suppose in this situation I'll just trust it."

"Patterns?"

Yes. Pilots learn to deal with patterns. With structures With probabilities and impossibilities. I'm evidently than I thought."

Hith once again glanced at Korkal, who shrugged.

the pack lord said. "I'll tell you what I know." He took a from his glass and set it aside. "Several years ago Lord became my personal courier between a Terran known to as Delta..."

The fact that he made it out at all after the fiasco in front of the Defense Ministry told Thargos a couple of things. First, the counterespionage agencies on the planet weren't quite as good or as quick as they were, even with Korkal Emut Denai booting them in their primitive rears. Second, Hunzzan shadow ship technology was, been assured, rather more advanced than Alban detection technology. Even so, he'd had a full Alban and part of another on his tail when he'd blasted inner ring of the blockade and into the safety of the fleets.

Now he drifted in the chill distance of the Alban so far out that Albagens itself was only a very bright considered what else he knew.

',

Damn that Terran boy!

Many years ago another agent had compromised an up-and coming young bureaucrat in the pack lord offices. That bureaucrat once he was thoroughly apprised of the hold Hunzza had on him, was then soothed and allowed to sink quietly back into the pursuit of his career.

His career had so far taken him to the position of second administrative assistant to the pack lord and he had been part of the party that accompanied Hith Mun Alter on his momentous visit to the Imperial Defense Ministry.

Thargos had seen the recording of an interview with this mole shortly after it was done. The Alban, normally very sleek, had appeared shaken. His eyes rolled and his hands shook, and when he forgot, his tongue dangled halfway out of his mouth. It took a while to get all the details. The Alban had finished with great indignation: 'l'hat bomb would have killed me, too!"

His interrogator had merely smiled and agreed with him. When the mole left, his hands were shaking even more strongly. Thargos grinned as he recalled that part.

The boy had thwarted him again. The bomb had been wired and triggered by the most skilled of experts. Thargos had assumed it might be discovered and wanted to make sure that, no matter what, it would go off as scheduled. But the boy had disarmed it somehow. He had even understood that trying to evacuate the pack lord would trigger the bomb.

Somehow! It was infuriating. But he couldn't let his emotions color his thinking. No, he would rest for a while and consider how this boy, whom the mysterious Delta had searched for, whom Korkal Emut Denai had rescued, and whom the pack lord of the Alban Empire had now made a brother, fitted into the larger scheme of things.

Perhaps it might be a good idea to go back to the beginning. Somewhere along the way he might have missed something. And he could do no more good here. Surprise had aided his escape as much as his shadow ship. But that element was gone now, and trying to return to Alba would be tantamount to suicide.

On the other hand, Terra would be relatively unguarded, even if Alba had posted a squadron to protect the system. And he

Would have the element of surprise again.

Maybe he could come up with a few more surprises. For Terra--and for Albagens.

Jim leaned forward, listening intently. He was amazed much the packlord seemed to know. In some areas he good deal more than dim himself. Particularly about the government and Serena Half Moon.

"We know that Thargos got on your trail because he your genotype in some half-destroyed wreckage of lite. Our own agents picked up this fact in the usual Hunzzan dispatches. Evidently Delta had a long-standing program keyed on your genetic code. Were you aware of  
1

Jim remembered his fateful decision to apply to Academy, and how sending his genotype along with his application had triggered the changes that had nearly "Yes, sir, I know about it."

The pack lord continued to pile detail upon detail. Jim listened and soaked it all up, letting the bizarre new the back of his mind shuffle each new fact and try to fit it some logical structure that seemed to change every

The process made him dizzy if he paid too much conscious attention to it, and so he let himself drift.

"So what we come down to is this, Lord Endicott.

and I believe that you have some crucial importance to the function of the computers Delta used to command. We Delta himself is either dead or in some other way unable trol his machines. We aren't certain whether those in fact destroyed when Delta's satellite was smashed. believe Serena Half Moon is aware of much of this, and back, possibly for exactly the reasons I have outlined. She you as badly as we need those computers, in order to Terra's bargaining position in the larger galaxy. Can you any of this?"

"Would confirmation be some part of what you want

The pack lord shook his head. "It would be helpful, but critical importance. The only thing we have to know is, if indeed possess some key to Delta's computers, whether you

Alba have it. How you choose to do it is up to you, as long as get access to that kind of processing power. Lord Denai has me he's already told you how important those capabilities are to us, now that Hunzza is Finally making its move."

So there it was, the hidden knife in the welcoming hand. What would the pack lord do in order to obtain those important capabilities he talked about with such quiet civility?. Jim stared at the grizzled Alban and knew he would do anything necessary. For him, the end, which was the survival of the Alban Empire, justified any means.

Jim realized that his sanity, perhaps even his life, teetered on the blade edge of the decisions it seemed he now must make. Once again he had been placed against his will into a context not his own making. No matter what he did, somehow he could not escape those forces outside himself. But he could face them, maybe even surmount them. He still had choice.

And now was the time to make a choice. He took a deep breath. "I hate war," he said. "I hate it personally. "

The pack lord stared at him. "I am privy to the records of the Queen of Ruin. My condolences on the sad deaths of your mates. Of Shishtar in particular."

The buzzing machine in his brain examined this statement and told Jim that Hith spoke the truth, but it was a limited truth. The pack lord was capable of feeling concern, even grief, over individual deaths, but he wasn't able to see them as anything but trivial in the larger scheme of things.

Yet for Jim it was those individual deaths that mattered, the slaughter of each singular innocent, and even those who did the slaughtering. For in the vast maelstrom of war, all were to some extent innocent, caught in a context too large for any one being to control. The weapon was deadly on both ends, yes, even for this mighty pack lord whether he knew it or not.

"It's more than that, sir. I believe that war is an intrinsic evil. If governments exist for any reason, it is to keep their people safe from it. The first primitive governments on Terra were roving bands of raiders who realized it was easier to settle down amongst their farmer victims and tax the crops rather than burn them. But in exchange they offered those farmers protection from

Other raiders. That has always been the unspoken covenant. Yet it is government itself that sometimes breaks the pact and brings

War to its people."

"Ah. And you believe that is the case here? But Alba strike first. Hunzza did. You of all people should know were there. You were a part of the first blow against us."

"And it made me sick, Packlord, when I realized that." "Your sickness does you credit, Lord Endicott." He "But don't extend your revulsion at that treachery to the picture. Yes, it would be wonderful if war could be the galaxy forever. At one time I thought that maybe I was the one.." that Alba might extend its peace to all the are a trading empire, young man. Traders prefer peace prefer rich cultures to poor

ones. Perhaps in some ways also holds to those ideals. They are a trading culture as the Hunzza, as a race, prefer to control all aspects of the future. And they value life perhaps less than we do."

"Really? How many would you kill, sir, to assure the

Alba? Would you kill me? A world? All of Hunzza? All

Hith Mun Alter winced.

"Jim," Korkal said softly. "A little respect, please." "No, Lord Denai, it's a legitimate question. Perhaps legitimate question. I understand what Lord Endicott is He wants to know if there are any limits on the means use to achieve my ends. It is a question I, too, have stru over the years. And I believe I have an answer... Jim raised his head. This was the crux of the matter: once upon a time been forced to alter his belief that always justified the means. But what about this one, so more powerful than Delta had been?

"Yes, Packlord?" he said.

"Alba would not have attacked Hunzza. But Hunzza did attack us. I reserve absolutely our right to mere raising of a weapon must. not automatically assure or civilization would not be possible at all--only the rule and claw. That said, your real question is how far would resisting the attack? At what point, if any, do the ends no longer justify the means of achieving it?" The pack lord raised his cup to sip, realized it was empty, and set it down. vaguely aware of Korkal scurrying to refill the drink. He gaze focused on the pack lord dark eyes. He had the ing he was about to hear the most important words of his life.

"I told you our customs and beliefs were not intended as

tide pact. Very well, that is the limit. We have a certain image of ourselves--more: we are a certain kind of people. If we then do things that change us irrevocably into something we are not, something evil, then we commit suicide by our own hand, even if we as persons go on living. So that is my limit: I will not destroy what we are in order to preserve what we are. It cannot be done. No race can do it. We cannot destroy ourselves to save ourselves, and those who believe it can be done have succumbed to an ultimate evil, one even greater than mere subjugation. They have betrayed their souls. So, rather than become the Hunzza in order to beat them, I would submit to them, and Alba would fade away. But it would still be Alba, not some evil thing, and there would still be hope."

The pack lord glanced up at Korkal, then gratefully accepted another steaming cup. He sipped and seemed suddenly to relax. His eyes sparkled as he peered over the rim.

"Does that answer your question, Lord Endicott? Do I surprise you?"

Jim felt a vast and slow shifting as he mixed and matched and arranged what he'd just heard. After some time a sense of understanding emerged, and he examined it.

Ends might justify means but only within limits, for means all too easily might poison any end--and if the end was poisoned to begin with, the means were poisoned, too. There was a difference between good and evil, and one of the great quandaries of all thinking beings was to discern what that difference was, and act on it.

It meant that in the end each and all must choose. Context still left room for that, from the smallest to the highest. And the pack lord had drawn his own personal line: he would not destroy the soul of Alba in order to save the body.

Jim had felt the treachery of Hunzza firsthand, for he had been an agent of it. He had been an agent by his own choice, for he had become a mercenary through his own decision.

Perhaps individual Hunzza were not evil. But as a race they had created, or allowed to be created, a leadership whose ideals placed its own ends far beyond the means used to achieve them. For these Hunzza, any horrible thing would be conceivable---even the spiritual suicide of their own race.

An end too hotly pursued by any means necessary will inevitably destroy the end itself. And that was an evil even greater

than war. No war was good, but some wars must be least to a point. Otherwise, neither ends nor means any significance, for brute force would render all such questions moot. The man bashed in the skull with a club than his life. He lost his ability to choose. And in the end from the choices a man made that the shape of his soul mately determined. This alone was the most frightening glorious thing that intelligence had to offer.

Hith Mun Alter had his limits. Jim decided that the Hunzza did not. In the long reaches of history this would ally destroy them. But in the short term they would everything around them.

Time to choose. And as he realized that time had come, he realized something else: Thargos's bomb had almost killed held the key to defeating the Hunzza, it had nearly! destroyed, along with his ability to choose anything at that key might be more important than his own existence. event, his responsibility now. His choice.

He felt the skin on his forearms and neck grow cold. So He had been impertinent to the universe, and the utterly uncaring, had very nearly wiped him and his away.

And now he knew Hith Mun Alter understood what he had learned: that any weapon was deadly on both wielder was as vulnerable as the victim, the soul as fragile body.

Choice and context. If intelligence and choice did not existed: haps the universe would have to create them. :

He felt himself trembling on the edge of an epiphany he could only sense it in the most tenuous of ways. It him, then fell away, and he turned to the old gray Albagen from him.

"You do surprise me, Packlord. More than you may known will try to help you," Jim said. "I don't know if I can, but I'll

Jim gave them the word keys that unlocked the codes. They had already obtained the codes, recorded when his cyberneural interface had been upgraded aboard the Queen, but they hadn't been able to decipher them even with the massive power of their own computers. That didn't surprise Jim. Delta, with the greater power of the Mindslaver Arrays, had been similarly helpless without the key Carl Endicott had gasped out to Jim as he lay dying, choking on his own blood.

And even with the key, Jim wondered if they would be able to decipher the code. Delta had used the arrays to do it. Would Alba's machines be enough?

It turned out that they were. Barely.

Korkal escorted him through a warren of brightly lighted corridors. Labs of every shape and size branched from the endless passageways, and in each lab a flock of Alban scientists labored mightily.

"It was a near thing," Korkal told him. "Making it work strained the Strategic Machines to their limits. But they decoded it. What I'm taking you to see is the first attempt. We have some volunteers. It's very small-scale, but if we are successful with it, they will expand it very quickly. Time is growing short. Hunzza has brought in several more fleets to strengthen the blockade, and we haven't been able to muster anything effective from our own scattered forces. Eventually we will, but by then ..." Korkal shrugged and fell silent. Jim couldn't help but notice how strained and morose his friend had become. The situation must be worse than Korkal was letting on.

They walked along a floor the color of rubies, but soft belly of a kitten. The white walls sparkled. The air was clean, \*

and smelled as if nothing living had ever breathed it their right appeared a long stretch of windows. It was dark,

as they approached the glass, it suddenly cleared to scene beyond.

Jim paused and watched. There was a makeshift look to of the equipment he saw: trailing cables, machines with els removed to expose their twinkling, whirring guts,

chip-cards piled haphazardly everywhere, and technicians raging through everything with the kind of controlled that bordered on naked panic. They looked like ants over their suddenly shattered hill.

,r

The room was large but appeared small because of the volume of stuff packed into it, and because of the techs scurrying about, each one intent on some ble task.

Only the volunteers stood out. Everything else was a

i haste and dedicated fury, but the six Albans seated in ca ted chairs near the front of the room, facing the had an air of stillness about them. They seemed to be in,

a part of the activity which swirled around them.

nervous statues, idols or gods being served by an acolytes. Jim



watched their eyes: they shifted minutely movements of the techs but never looked at the directly--it was an awareness coupled with fear. He

[ ' how voluntary the service of these volunteers actually was.

"Oh, they volunteered, all right," Korkal assured him.

just scared spit less Wouldn't you be?" ':

"Yeah. I guess so." He had told the scientists everything. knew, and most of what he suspected. He had told them of Pleb Psychosis, and admitted he had no idea whether the his genotype addressed that issue---that it was only his part. He even reminded them he wasn't entirely sure codes were what he thought they were.

So he had breathed an inward sigh of relief when phered the code and told him it did contain the plans for a computer made up of linked living minds. The techs had mightily impressed; without giving him any details, expressed their amazement that anything so utterly new have been created in a technological backwater like Terra.

I g4

Jim had learned enough about Alban expressions, voice tones, and body language to pick up something else: some of the scientists obviously believed the source of the discovery was not Terra at all. That somehow trickery must be involved, since the level of the technology was so obviously beyond human capability.

They were unable to explain how, if that was the case, such advanced technology had gotten into Jim's genetic code, and this plainly made some of them uncomfortable. He noticed he'd not been consulted much after the first flurry of interest, and that suited him.

True to his promise to the pack lord he'd told them everything he knew, and he was glad to have that over and done with. When he'd finished, he felt an amazing lightness of spirit, as if something dark and smothering had been lifted away from him. The secret was out. It was no longer his own private responsibility. Maybe, someday, he would be able to become just plain Jim Endicott again.

"What happens now?." he asked Korkal. "Can we go in?" "They're going to try it out soon. Just the six volunteers. We'll stay out here. The view's better anyway. Not that there should be anything to see. If it works at all, maybe the techs will start, cheering. I don't know. But the volunteers will be behind inter force helmet shields--new ones. Evidently the techs did some modifications, based on the stuff they got from you. They say the cyberneural interface will be far beyond anything. Delta used. He didn't have access to the interface technology we do."

"I see. So we just wait?"

"It'll happen soon. Look. Here come the neck rings."

Jim watched as technicians carefully fitted the rings that would generate the inter force shields around the necks of the volunteers. One of them flinched away slightly, then caught himself and remained unnaturally still as the ring settled onto his shoulders.

Jim turned to Korkal. "What... ?"

Korkal raised one hand. "There," he replied.

Jim looked back. Now a silvery globe enclosed each volunteer's skull. The globes looked a little larger than normal. The room had suddenly gone still. All the techs stood motionless, some watching their machines, the rest staring at the volunteers with unblinking intensity.

Jim felt a surge of tension ratchet up his spine and leaned

closer to the window, then jerked back as he bumped his the transparent shield. "Ouch!"

Korkal chuckled softly and patted his shoulder. "Down, i he murmured. Then, abruptly, his fingers tightened so that Jim yelped again.

"What--" Then he went silent for a long moment before whimpering softly, "Oh... my God..."

H ith Mun Alter sat in his office and thought about means and ends. Despite what he'd told Jim Endicott killing the soul to save the body, he wondered if he wouldi turned the boy over to the un tender mercies of his

He leaned back into the soothing comfort of his sofa and Yes, he would have. All such equations must be possible risk to the mind of one Terran boy was not great as compared to the survival of the Alban Empire, to larger moral considerations. He would offer himself up to risk, if it came to it.

But he was glad he had not been forced to that many reasons. And now that it all seemed to have been thing... He glanced up as a bell tone sounded softly in the quiet. "They're here, Packlord." "Good. Send them in."

He sat in silence, sipping at his ever-present steaming sweet smell of cinnamon filling his nose, until they were chairs across from him. "Lord Denai," he said. "Lord "Packlord?" "Yes?"

"I... uh, I'm not really sure whether it's allowed, but could you call me Jim? I don't really feel like a lord anything.

The pack lord grinned inside. There were those courtiers who would slaughter their own packs unto

generation in order to receive a title directly from his lips, and having done so, engrave the standard on everything they owned, even their underwear. And all this boy could ask was that he be allowed not to use it. It heartened him. Even in the direst of times he found joy in such tiny moments. It renewed his faith that somewhere the gods, if there were such, still knew how to laugh.

"I'm the pack lord Jim. I can call you whatever I like."

'hank you, Packlord."

"And of course you may call me Hith." He smothered another grin as he saw Korkal's eyebrows twitch. The privilege of addressing the pack lord informally was perhaps an even greater honor than the personal bestowal of a title. But of course Jim wouldn't know that.

He savored his own humor for a moment, then sipped and turned to the business at hand.

"Lord Denai, do you have the latest status on the volunteers?" "Yes," Korkal said somberly. "The last one died about twenty minutes ago. They were able to ease his pain somewhat, but he never stopped convulsing. In fact he kept on convulsing for five minutes after clinical death." Korkal shrugged. "Brain death of course occurred much earlier, so I guess the pain didn't matter that much. I hope it didn't."

All three of them sat silently for a moment, thinking and remembering. "Brave men and women," the pack lord said finally.

Korkal nodded but didn't say anything. He looked even more tired and downcast than he had before. In the past few weeks his muzzle had turned almost completely gray. The pack lord felt an instant of pity but rejected it. With the survival of Alba at stake he would burn whatever fuel he could find, even those most dear to him, with the same ruthlessness he burned himself. Pity was a luxury he would have to postpone for later, more peaceable times. If such times ever came again.

"What happened, Hith?" Jim said.

"Iney died. I'm still getting conflicting data. The technicians are divided about the cause. But in the last few hours a consensus seems to be emerging."

"It was the Pleb Psychosis!" Jim blurted. "I was afraid of that!" "Something like it--at least as you described it. But don't blame yourself, Jim. It wasn't as if you caused it. Rather the Opposite, I'd say. I didn't give you much of a chance to say no."

"But I could have. Whether you think so or not, I could Without the key you would never have broken the code!"

"Jim. The key was in your mind. We could have gotten it. you realize that now?."

Jim stared at him. His mouth dropped slowly open. "I : never thought.. " :

"It doesn't matter. What's done is done. Even those

I think, would agree you bear no responsibility for what pended. Anyway, it's behind us now. What I called you here to talk about the next step."

"The next step, Packlord?" Korkal said.

"As I said, a consensus seems to be emerging. It isn't it may never be final. But I'm going to act on it anyway. If any kind of chance, I have to take it. And, unfortunately, to ask you to take it right along with me." His jaws parted wolfish grin. "Order you to take it, actually, Lord Denai."

"I don't understand, Packlord," Korkal said.

"No, of course not. The consensus is this. Jim, you are right and wrong about what you call the Pleb Psychosis. Our dentists have never seen an actual case, so what they mostly conjecture. But evidently what killed those volunteers not exactly the Pleb Psychosis as you understand it. That to involve sudden overloads placed on individual the arrays, sending the minds involved into madness. But people believe that problem is addressed by the codes we you. So what killed the volunteers was something different. mind arrays are really nothing more than computer that instruct the hardware how to handle the linkages. You put the entire thing on a couple of large chips, able though such chips would be. But those programs designed to handle human mind linkages, and as far as we tell, they can't be modified to handle the differences into Alban brains. Oh, we have the theory--we can even see it was applied, at least as far as humans go. But I'm told no chance at all we can modify those programs to handle brains in the time we need. Some of my techs think it may impossible, and we will have to develop a different achieve the same end. I don't know. I'm not a scientist."

Jim's eyes had narrowed as the pack lord spoke. Now he his head. "So what you're saying is the programs won't Albans, but they will work on Terrans?"

"Yes, that's right." He sipped. His eyes twinkled. He looked very tdridly, like some kind of wolfish grandfather figure. But Jim knew better. He had no urge to pet the pack lord

"Do you see the implications, Jim?" the pack lord said.

Jim closed his eyes and sifted through possibilities and probabilities like endless decks of cards, until suddenly a single hand was dealt onto his mental table. "Oh," he said softly. "Oh yes." "What do you see?"

"A situation. A logical situation, and maybe a very nasty one, too. From my point of view, at least." Jim stared at the pack lord "You see it too, don't you?"

"I had a bit more help, but yes, I see it. My scientists tell me the advance Terra made was astounding. It was a real breakthrough. Those mind arrays are indeed the most powerful information processing systems we know of. Coupled with our own interface technologies, they have the potential of being even more powerful than they already are. But it. they only work with humans, then that makes Terra--and Wolfbane, I suppose--"

"The biggest prize in the galaxy." Jim shook his head. "It was bad enough when it was just me everybody wanted. Now it will be entire worlds. Everybody human a potential prize to be enslaved to the mind arrays. My God, if Hunzza found out..."

"Indeed," the pack lord said. "They'd have to have the programs, and they don't. So we have that advantage. But nothing stays secret forever. Hunzza's espionage net is wide and deep. They've planned this conflict for years. I'd be a fool to suppose that some how, some way, they won't get their hands on this. So I have to move first."

Korkal was nodding agreement, but Jim broke in before Korkal could say anything. "Hith, was it all bullcrap what you told me before? Would you enslave Terra just to get the mind arrays? Could you do that without, how did you put it, losing Alba's soul?"

"What is bullcrap?"

"Why; it's.." uh... well ..." A hot flush rose in Jim's cheeks. He shot an embarrassed glance at Korkal, who refused to meet his gaze. But Jim noticed that for the first time Hith refused ' to meet his eyes either.

"Never mind," the pack lord said. "I can guess from the context." He paused, then exhaled softly. "Jim, I don't believe the question will come up. I hope it won't. I believe it is in Terra's best interest to offer us help. I believe it so strongly I am willing to the matter personally with Serena Half Moon."

Now Korkal did speak. "But Packlord. The shields blockade have cut off communications with Terra. Or so told. How can you negotiate with her?"

"You were informed accurately, Lord Denai. And so I will to go to her. And you two will have to take me. Right

Hunzzan blockade."

Late that evening Jim led Tick into a brightly lighted rant in the bowels of the Defense Ministry. The entire was now sealed off, but the crew of the Queen was no sequestered. Jim and Tick shared a comfortable the upper reaches of one of the towers, with a view vast crystal gulch of the Great Hall.

"What's with all this hush-hush stuff, Jim? I've heard kind of rumor today. We're going back to the ship, we're here forever, the Hunzza are about to break through, It's crazy. And you were gone all day with not a single your best buddy."

Jim led them to a table near the back of the large room. the diners were Alban, but there was a sprinkling of other A stick-thin Pleenarch with bright purple gills sat on a stage and gently played a many-stringed instrument that like an antique bicycle. The result sounded like a tomcat fight with a set of bagpipes. As soon as they were tabletop lighted up, and a voice said, "Vox or lux?"

"Lux," Tick replied, and holographic menus me red in the air before them. "Hmmm... have you ever sweet and sour gleech with humbub sticks?"

Jim stared at the menu and shook his head. "You go order."

Tick did so. The menus vanished, and he leaned forward s00

expression intent. "So what's going on? I heard you had a meeting with the pack lord

"Yeah, I did. It's what I want to talk to you about."

"So talk."

Jim told him what he'd learned. By the time Jim finished Tick was nearly bouncing on his chair in excitement.

"We're going to run the blockade with the pack lord

"We're going to try, I guess."

Tick rubbed his hands together. "We'll be the biggest heroes in the galaxy. We'll be permanent fztures on the Wide Web We'll be able to get any girls we want--"

"Or we could be dead."

"Oh, no we won't. Not with you doing the piloting. You're the best pilot I've ever seen. And the Queen is a good ship." Tick paused. "Uh, you are going to be the pilot aren't you?"

"Yes. I guess so. And Korkal will captain, and I asked if you could be the lead junior."

"What? Only the lead junior?"

The two best pilots on Albagens will be backing me up. I didn't want to be the chief, but they tested me and said I had the highest pattern-and probability-recognition scores ever recorded." "I was just kidding. I wouldn't want the responsibility." "And anyway, we won't be taking the Queen." "Huh?"

"There's an experimental ship in near orbit. It was being built for Korkal's agency. Supposed to be the best combination of speed, power, and defense they've ever designed. A lot of it's still experimental, they told me. And they're installing a bunch of new stuff to take advantage of my so-called skills."

The table suddenly chimed; the top of it quivered, vanished,

and food rose up, hot and steaming. "Mmm. Looks good," Tick said. "I wish I was a little hungrier."

"Why?. Got hibble birds in your tummy, Jim? You'll be okay." Jim picked up an eating utensil that looked like a cross between a fork and a spoon. He cut off a piece of bright orange meat dripping with a thick green sauce, lifted it to his lips, and tasted. "Hey, this isn't bad."

"Fold you," Tick said, already chewing vigorously.

Jim ate as much as he could, which wasn't much, then waited silently while Tick methodically cleaned every square inch of his



WILLIAM

SHATNER

plate. When Tick was done he leaned back, rubbed his belly, and belched happily.

"There's one other thing," dim said.

"Yeah?"

"Well, you remember I spilled my guts to you after I  
give the codes to the pack lord

Tick's expression immediately turned serious. In the of their quarters, he had held Jim and listened to him held described how he'd killed Carl Endicott, the man.] thought was his father.

"I remember." "' "Well, you know how the only thing I ever wanted was to the Solis Academy on Terra, graduate, and someday Terran starship captain?"

Tick pawed at his face and nodded slowly. "You've your mind about that, though, right? I mean you're Alban and now you're gonna be the pack lord personal pilot. You probably captain almost any ship in the whole Alban Navy wanted to."

"But I want to go home, Tick.j I want my own life back. want to be an exile forever."

In the background the mad-cat bagpipe wafts crescendo. Some of the diners applauded. A new began.

"Anyway, after Korkal and I and the packiord had our Hith sent Korkal away. He said he wanted to talk to me

"Hith? You call the pack lord Hith?" . "Sure. He said I could. He calls me Jim." Tick's eyes bulged. "I can't wait for when you meet my You can tell her all about your good buddy Hith, the the Alban Empire." He shook his head. "And I'll talk good buddy who happens to be you, and my whole family stand in line to kiss my butt."

"I'd pay good money to see that," Jim said.

"Well, it's a very handsome butt," Tick replied he sobered. "Anyway, you were trying to tell me something?."

Jim closed his eyes, trying to remember the scene. The lord had risen from his sofa, come to Jim, and draped one arm around his shoulder.

"I received a very strange message this morning," he "Terra has been out of contact with us since the beginning

blockade. And when this message appeared in my most private and protected mailbox, I asked how it had gotten there. People who should know assured me there had been no penetration of the blockade at all. Yet the message contained all the proper identification codes, including two known only to me and Serena Half Moon."

Jim's voice trailed off. He opened his eyes.

"Well?" Tick said. "Don't leave me hanging. What did the message say?."

The message was for me. Serena Half Moon says if I come back to Terra, she will waive all entrance requirements, and I can attend the Solis Academy immediately."

ALB AGENS HOME SYSTEM:

IN ALB AGENS CLOSE ORBIT ABOARn

ANY ALB AGENS PRIDE

Jim never saw the ship from the outside because he merely stepped onto one trans matter disk in the Imperial Defense Ministry and stepped off another one onto the Command Bridge Deck of the Albagens Pride. Nevertheless by the time he did this he'd seen a thousand views of the great vessel. As he walked briskly across the vast space of the Command Deck, he saw a picture of the ship in his mind.

Korkal's vessel had resembled a giant molecule, a globular cluster of smaller circles. The Pride was more like five molecules linked together into a pentagon with one cluster at each corner. He was in the Bridge Cluster. Glancing up through the transparent dome of Command Deck he saw, hanging disconcertingly close, the looming shape of Drive Cluster, which held the immensely powerful engines and the engineers who served them. Drive Cluster was golden; Bridge Cluster was a cobalt blue; Defense Cluster, which contained both offensive and defensive forces usually reserved only for planetary emplacement, was red; Troops Cluster glittered like a silver Spoon; and Passenger Cluster, where the pack lord and his court made their quarters, was a ripe purple grape. A gigantic necklace of glowing jewels, the Pr/de was the biggest, fastest, shiftiest, most deadly ship ever to carry the colors of the Alban hopes of the Alban Empire.

He wore a new uniform tailored to his Terran frame. white with red piping down the sides of the trousers and the cuffs of the tunic. He felt very spiffy when he saw his reflection in the highly polished flanks of the machines he Alban military uniforms were a good bit flashier than the fellow mercenaries had worn. But, oddly, what should have him feel older had the opposite effect. When he'd held corpse in his arms he'd felt a hundred years old. But candy-striped getup he felt almost like a kid again, a kid a grown-up's costume.

The mere's working uniforms had been drab on grunt had no desire to call attention to himself. And blood show as brightly on the dull fabric. Blood would stand out new whites very well--but if the enemy got close enough to him bleed, he'd already be dead. He shoved that thought away as he approached the core of Command saw a familiar figure rising from the captain's chair hand raised in greeting. Jim marched up to Korkal and off a rigid salute.

"Chief Pilot Endicott reporting for duty," he said. Solemnly, Korkal returned an even more rigid salute. broke into a wide grin. "Welcome aboard, Commander Your new home is right over here." And with a slight bow gestured toward a U-shaped ring enclosing a complicated of steel, glass, and what appeared to be about a thousand

Jim clambered up onto the dais that elevated his chair the main floor level and sat down. Immediately the softly and enfolded him. He looked around. From here he clear view out and across the entire Command Deck. captain's chair was higher than his. As he looked about, in his new position, he heard a muffled sound slowly louder. It took him a moment to realize what it was; noticed that everybody on the deck was facing him, him. And their hands were pounding together,

faster

Applauding him. His cheeks suddenly burned with mentHe raised his right hand and waved weakly, could immediately vanish. Even Korkal was applauding, white grin splitting his muzzle.

"Please.. " Jim mumbled, and was startled to hear his

amplified in a tenor rumble across the entire deck. The applause grew louder.

"Speech!" somebody shouted.

"No, I..." He shook his head, completely flabbergasted. suddenly he realized how many were out there, all clapping away, some now beginning to echo the call for a speech. There must be hundreds of them! And thousands more throughout this great vessel, every one of them, depending on him, on his skill and talent, to get them through the blockade safely. All those lives now resting on his own shoulders. Suddenly the weight felt crushing.

He leaned forward, shaking his head. The chair sighed and released him. He stood up, his knees suddenly as feeble as his self-confidence. "I'll... thank you. Thank you."

They cheered louder now. His face felt on fire. "I'm sorry. I can't think of anything to say. I'll... we'll all do our best. We'll get through this together..."

Still shaking his head, he sat back down, wishing that the chair would enfold him completely. "Somehow..." he whispered, then caught himself in horror as he realized what he'd said. But Korkal had shut down the amplifiers and this, at least, remained his own private thought.

Korkal mounted the platform and came over to him. "Sorry about that, Jim. But they needed to see you. So much depends on you, and they should at least get a look at the pilot who will be responsible for all their lives."

"Oh, thanks, Korkal. It's nice you aren't putting any pressure on me."

Korkal shrugged. "I didn't put it there, Jim. It's just where it ended up."

"I wish I could believe I'll measure up to it."

"Oh, you will. Look at me. Look inside yourself and look at me. You know you can handle it, don't you?"

Jim thought about his initial horror when they'd given him his test results and told him he was the best qualified for the job. He hadn't wanted it.

But in the end he'd accepted it. He didn't understand the power he had, where or how he'd been gifted with the ability to recognize and act on the patterns of probability faster than any body else, but he'd felt it inside himself. It was true. He could do it.

"Yeah. I guess I can."

Korkal grinned again. Well, then, Chief Pilot. I  
lock in and get started." His grin slowly vanished. "ETD hours."  
"I'll be ready," Jim replied. "God help me, I'll be ready."

SOL SYSTEM:

Although nearly a billion humans lived and played on Luna, there were vast stretches that still had never known any living presence. The habitats were underground on the bright side facing mostly because the humans who lived there still valued of the mother world in their night sky. The dark side while also populated, was much more sparsely so, and there that Thargos the Hunter brought his shadow ship to

It had been a tricky maneuver. His ship had never designed to rest in a planetary gravity well or

Luna had neither, and his pilots were immensely skilled. chain of compartments that made up his vessel sprawled like a discarded, half-opened bracelet, deep in the small crater ringwall. Thargos was satisfied he would not covered accidentally, and the ease with which he'd Sol System past the guarding Alban squadrons had him he need not fear them as long as he kept his head for the capabilities of the Terrans, they were not a factor. had nothing with which to detect shadow ship technology.

He had come to Luna not entirely certain what his would be. So far, he had been defeated by the Terran Korkal Emut Denai, by the power of Alba itself. His first had been to reexamine the clumps of debris from the

'the Delta Satellite, but he'd quickly discarded that idea when discovered Alban vessels prowling in those orbits. Aided by he'd been able to evade them easily, but every moment exposed himself to their modern technology increased his chances of being discovered.

No, this was better. His instincts told him he was in the right at the right time, and he trusted his instincts. But he thought might like to be a little closer to the center of things. He had landing craft designed to survive almost any alien environment; Terran seawater would be only a different kind of atmosphere. He'd been monitoring Terran broadcasts since his arrival, and decided the real action would focus on the Terran government, what they called the Confederation. And it was so convenient of them to place the seat of that government on a great floating platform tethered to the shore of one of their major continents. Right at the base of one of those curious structures they called Skysnakes. He savored the unfamiliar names: North America, Pacific Ocean, San Francisco. But whatever names they used, he called it an ideal hiding place for his lander, himself, and the remaining Terran nuke carefully stowed in his weapons locker.

ALBA6 ENS HOME SYSTEM:

N ALBAEiENS CLOSE ORBIT ABOARD ANY ALBAGEN PRIDE

'aptainP

Denai peered into one of his screens, where the face of his chief pilot gazed calmly back at him. Screens on either side of this one held the features of the two other pilots, both Alban,

both also calm. Korkal wondered how Jim was feeling right now,

but he wouldn't embarrass the boy by asking. He had no worries about the other two: they were both veterans whose combined experience was about twenty times Jim's entire life span.

And how about himself?. How did he feel about tru to the skills of a Terrie boy whose battle experience exactly two engagements?

Still, what engagements they had been! Jim had taken just evaded but fought, thirty Hunzzan ships of the destroyed them all. He knew of no similar exploit in history of the Alban Navy, and he had a good grasp of tory. Then, for dessert, he'd blasted his way through the planetary blockade in galactic military history, killing enemy ships in the process. There was no doubt about was something very special about Jim Endicott. Still, thing special was more than a little scary. It seemed but Jim had done it.

Jim had done a lot of things that were impossible.

any more like him on Terra? If so, that was also a frightening thought. That kind of racial ability only cropped up millennia, and when it did He dropped the thought. Such a thing was were no recorded occurrences on such a primitive even worth considering. Still, it took a moment or two uneasiness to subside.

He was half-aware of the sound of alarms ringing and throughout his ship. Along the bottom of his awareness, the inter force helmet that now covered his skull, he myriad routines for ship launch as they moved forward. Cluster was now a throbbing hive of activity, as the huge

tubes were deployed for inner-system maneuver. They use the subspace drives so close in to the sun, for fear to the sun's natural fusion processes. The plan now was to, as much speed as possible before diving into subspace reaching the inner limits of the Hunzzan blockade.

Subspace was certainly no guarantee of safety. The ships could and would follow. Death could occur as easily shifting webs of subspace as in the more predictable real space

After that it would be up to Jim..

"Chief Pilot, begin launch procedures on my mark. check, please."

Jim nodded. "All systems code green, sir."

"Mark," Korkal said.



Although the captain of any starship was technically in control of it, no human could actually "control" the incredible mass of power, weapons, and information-processing machinery that allowed the ship to move and think and fight. Not even the pilot really did this. The pilot only reacted to the data first created, projected, and analyzed by the computers and sensors that did the real work a thousand million times faster than living flesh could hope to manage. Jim's role was like that of an artist painting a picture; he might have a hundred different shades of blue offered up to him, but he would decide which shade was the one for the particular picture he wanted to paint. And, like the artist, he might have no idea at all why he chose cerulean over azure, except that it looked right to him.

Now, his head encased in a bulging silver globe, his wiry body tense in the cushioned grip of his chair, he allowed himself to sink into the strange world that was his and his alone.

ALB AGENS HOME SYSTEM:

AsoAnn HNV IN NEAn COME;n

Admiral Heliarchon stared through the fiery mist of his Fleet Battle Control Center at the ranks of officers and men who helped him command the 1225 ships that made up One Hundred

Sixteenth Sector Fleet, one of three enforcing the Alban Home System.

The grand admiral was on the flagship of Two Thou: Fleet and well out of Admiral Heliarchon's thoughts, for was grateful. He'd once been on the old lizard's staff; it been the most successful or enjoyable tour of duty in his Nevertheless, he'd survived, and now he commanded a own, a battle fleet engaged in the investment of their enemy's home system, and his future was assured.

So far the strategic planning done by the Command had been superb. From the very first Sleen to the lightning attack on Alba itself, things had cislly as predicted. In units the Alban Navy far units of the Hunzzan Navy; but Hunzza had the knowing where it would strike. Alba had somehow to hundred thousand planets. It would take time--far time--to gather enough of the scattered units together them into a force capable of breaking the blockade. though Alba might not yet know it, her time had run out.

His only regret was that the damned Romian had somehow slipped through his own quadrant and safety of the Alban inner system, carrying its cargo of shields. Without those shields, Heliarchon knew that he ships would now be floating gently about Alba itself troops took the pack lord into custody--after obtaining his picture on the surrender documents, of course.

He sighed. He'd been asleep when the Romian had occurred, and by the time he got to the bridge it was His comm people were monitoring everything that Alba, including the secret transmissions of some who had already passed through their lines without so by-your-leave. Whoever that one was, he possessed codes erful Heliarchon almost broke into a sweat thinking about But that one was gone now, and he'd even done the favor by telling him just who had piloted the Romian fully through his lines.

A Terran boy. Heliarchon had been forced to turn researchers to discover anything about this Terra, were done he knew little more than when he'd known Some kind of backspace garbage heap bat-ely out of the Age. It certainly didn't sound like the kind of place to

who destroyed six of Hunzza's best cruisers as if swatting birds, but the unknown agent swore it was true.

Not that it mattered. The super pilot was trapped inside the blockade now, and the admiral had no intention of letting anything or anybody out. And with the arrival of his most recent reinforcements he knew he had the forces to make sure his determination was carried out.

So when the alarms began blaring he thought it was some kind of system failure, and only when the reports began to cascade into his skull did he realize it was for real.

Thirty, fifty, a hundred contacts all along the inner surface of englobing perimeter! And similar reports coming in now from the other two fleets.

Breakout!

Something unbelievably massive materialized precisely in the center of his own formation. After that, things got hectic.

ALB AGENS HOME SYSTEM:

ABOARD ANY ALB AGENS PRIDF IN EXTRA SOLAR ARC

Jim felt his body as a distant itch. He had studied "ghost" limbs; in less advanced times those who for one reason or another lost a limb sometimes still received sensations from it, because though the limb was gone, the brain still remembered it. He imagined it must have been something like this---except he was separated from his whole body. So that he could devote all of his brain to the job at hand, powerful machines had taken over this autonomic nervous functions; they monitored his physical processes, breathed for him, kept his heart pumping steadily, and triggered whatever chemicals, protein cascades, or hormone seemed called for in any conceivable circumstance.

And still he itched. It was the itch of the body that be entirely forgotten, never be entirely left behind, entirely separated from the mind. He sank into suddenly bubbled with light. Then, in fractured and waves, the implacable logics of infinite probability and bore him away.

TERRA:

CONFEDERATION HEADQUARTERS, SAN FRANCISCO OFFSHORE,

OFFICE OF THE CHAIRMAN

know what it is," Serena Half Moon said, irritation plain in her dark eyes and tight line of her jaw. "Every feed I've gotten in the last twenty-four hours has been about this so-called mystery ship, Carl."

Carlton Fredericks was not his usual urbane, impeccable, top level-bureaucrat self. His perfectly tailored jacket was a wrinkled wad on a chair, his collar was open, and his gray hair much rumpled by finger tracks. He had a grizzled stubble of whiskers on his bony chin, and his eyes looked red-rimmed and sore. It had been forty hours since he'd seen his bed, and he was feeling it.

"Well," Fredericks said, "you and I both know there isn't any mystery about it. So does the Naval High Command, which has been in a frenzy since it appeared. Grand Admiral Havlicek is demanding to be allowed to deploy a blocking force."

'Tell the admiral to stuff it.'

They grinned, at each other. The grand admiral was near the top of both of their crap lists. "I will inform the admiral that the matter is under advisement at the highest level," Frederick said. "He'll deploy his stooges in the Assembly, though. Raise a big ruckus there. And Lord knows he'll have help."

"If he leaks anything about this, I will personally throw him in the

a secret. The News Web people are going nuts." "Let them. Do you know who's on board that ship?"

Fredericks shook his head. "I'hat's been in your ultra sages, hasn't it?"

I.

"Yes. It's the pack lord the head of the Alban Pra'Loch.

brought Jim Endicott and Korkal Emut Denai with whole damned merry crew."

Her aide's jaw slowly dropped. 'he paclord? What the he doing here? I thought he had a war to fight."

She rubbed her forehead hard. "Evidently, he thinks he'll fight it here. With me." She paused, thoughtful. "Somehow he knew or had a very strong suspicion that Tabitha Endicott,

mother, survived that nuke attack. He pressed me, and I

admitted it. I hate admitting anything to him, but I needed him open a little. He wants to meet with me, her,

"Huh? When?"

"Soon as they make orbit. Call it ten hours from now."

!

I'he pack lord Here? In ten hours?"

"In this very office. Why?. Were you planning on between now and then?" She smiled grimly. "Forget it.

your eyes in the next three days, you'll be doing better

And that's not going to happen."

NEAR TERRA ORBIT:

ABOARD ANY AL BABES PRInE

"Why won't you let me tell Jim that his

Korkal asked.

The packlord, looking more relaxed than he had in days,

a pot of the cinnamon tea to Korkal, who shook his head. Packlord poured himself a fresh cup and settled deeper into his chair.

"Because, my dear Lord Denai, I am plotting. It is what I am paid to do. And I do it very well. I am about to try to convince some very stubborn people to do precisely what I want them to do. One of those stubborn people is Lord Endicott. The more off balance I can keep both him and Serena Half Moon, the happier I will be. A nice emotional reunion scene in the chairman's office will go a long way toward keeping things obscured while I flap my jaws off, my wondrous to perform." He grinned faintly.

"I still don't like it. We--you---owe Jim."

"Of course I do. But no real harm is done. He just gets a happy surprise. Where is he now?."

"He's off duty, so I suppose he's in his quarters."

"What about that Tickeree fellow?. The low-rent royal?"

"He's in the pilot's chair. No detectable danger right now, so the junior pilots take the helm. It's good training. He's being monitored, of course."

Hith nodded. "Is everything ready for the meeting?."

The Confed chairman has arranged to meet in her private office. You want to go incognito, I presume?"

"Yes. I'll just be a mid-level diplomat, paying my respects to the chairman and returning her lost boy to her."

"I hope this works," Korkal said.

"Why wouldn't Serena Half Moon agree? In the end, this is all in her best interest."

"She'll see it right away, Packlord. All Terra up for grabs, the biggest prize in the galaxy. If Hunzza knew about it, they'd end the blockade around Alba immediately. And put every one of those ships to burning a hole in space right toward here."

"So it's also in her interest that Hunzza doesn't know. Or anybody else, at least until we've agreed on how to handle it. She doesn't really have very many options, you know."

Korkal lowered his eyebrows and scowled. "I've met her face-to face Packlord. If I were you, I wouldn't underestimate her."

"I won't."

Jim had never actually seen the Confed Island with his eyes. It was a huge man-made affair, half a hundred and high, fifteen miles on a side, floating off the California coast near the base of the North American He'd heard about it all his life, but now, approaching it air, he found himself unimpressed. They were coming in dusk crept from the east across the sparkling expanse Francisco, which was itself only the brightest of the burning that encrusted the Bay Area like a pave of melting

He stood with Korkal near the front of the observation the lander. At the back, surrounded by courtiers, the nestled in a chair, sipping his tea. Overhead the sky was a blue-black, powdered with stars and bisected by the vertical whip of the Skysnake.

"I came down one of those things one time.." and up again," Jim said softly, nodding toward the Snake.

Korkal seemed to sense his mood and didn't say

Jim watched the floating Confed platform grow larger. time it would have impressed him beyond words. Now he seen the Great Hall of the Pra'Loch. He had seen the power and glory of the heart of a real empire, besides mightiest works of Terra were little more than childish The lander he was riding this very moment was larger largest cruisers of the Confed fleet--and it was only a elevator.

He stared as they drifted lower, his thoughts drifting nearly imperceptible motion of the lander. Whoever was was good. Then he remembered. Tick had the honor.

Poor little Terra, glittering in her pride. Terra home--Wolfbane, an even more insignificant always be home to him. The smell of its forests, the clash pinball moons. But here was the home of his race, and here where his own destiny had first been determined. Here the mystery of his real parents lay hidden.



He allowed himself to think about Serena Half Moon's offer. A free pass to the Solis Academy. Everything that had first driven him, now his for the taking.

He had, without knowing it, sacrificed not only his father, but the existence of any father, on the altar of his ambition to attend the Academy. When he'd first been told about Serena's offer, he'd felt a great lilting yelp of joy. For a moment it seemed that everything was winding down, and he would be free.

But the joy had faded as he understood the bargain. Before any thing else, he had savored the struggle to achieve his dreams. All the years of training and study preparing for even more grueling years at the Academy. Then the long slow rise to his own ship. His life marked out before him in well-planned paths of achievement. Yet now he'd piloted vessels which made the best Terra had to offer look like cheap game prizes. Terra didn't even have anything that could take advantage of his probability-cognition abilities.

So was he now too good for Terra? He leaned his forehead against the cool transparency of the dome and closed his eyes. No, he wasn't too good. If anything, Terra's backwardness wrenched at his heart more strongly. He yearned to help her, to bring humanity to the forefront of the galaxy. That would be an even greater challenge than the one he'd once thought the highest.

The price he'd paid! And the price others had paid as he sought that first goal. In his mind he saw the great white ships of Earth, saw them even greater than before, their graceful winged shapes drifting like dreams throughout the galaxy. Saw himself at the helm of one of them, just as a nearly forgotten captain had ridden another helm into final destruction over Wolf bane. That brave man had died along with all his crew.

Sacrifice. The game could not be worth any less than the sacrifice made to play it. Humanity was his home, the shaper of his dreams, the hall of his future. Could he be worthy of it without being true to himself?. He turned to Korkal.

"You know that offer the Confed chairman made? About me and the Solis Academy?. A free pass?"

"Mm-hmm."

"I'm going to turn it down."

"I thought you would."

Jim stared at him. "You did?"

'he gift may be wonderful, but in the end it's still a gift."

"Too many people died because I tried to do it the hard way.

SHATNER

And now it's like if I take the easy way, they all died for not that simple, Jim. You're too hard on yourself times. But I don't think your future is with us. It's with people, and you'll have to achieve that in your own way. I wave my hand and give you things far beyond

could, and what I can do the pack lord could do a thousand greater. But I wouldn't unless you asked me. And I don't you'll ask." ' "No. I guess I won't."

Korkal patted his shoulder. "We should get ready. The is in less than an hour."

"I want to watch some more. It's clunky and crappy and primitive, but it's mine. My world, my people. My dream." .... "You're a wise child, Jim."

"I'm just a kid, Korkal. Someday maybe I'll be wise."

"Yes. Someday maybe you will."

TERRA:

OFFICE OF THE CONFED CHAIRMAN

Korkal and Tick, the three of them lost in the pack lord The office seemed small. Then he realized the pack lord was also small. Was that a mark of the truly powerful secure enough in their own power not to need the

The room seemed full of milling people. He listened to formalities as Serena Half Moon and Hith Mun Alter said supposed were all the proper things. Yet intermingled with obligatory politeness was a fog of tension, and the faces of the leaders looked masklike to him.

Then the pack lord turned and gestured toward him. "Jim, come here."

He stepped forward, feeling a curious reluctance. He Was about to tell the leader of his people he could not accept her gift. If not now, then soon. The knowledge made him feel uncomfortable, as if he was about to commit some grievous breach of manners.

"So you're the boy who caused all the trouble," Serena Half Moon said as she came up to him and extended her hand. "Welcome home, Jim Endicott."

Her grip was long-fingered and dry and strong. The bladed bones of her face spoke to him of iron will and hidden sadness. Her dark eyes snagged at him like hooks.

"Thank you, Chairman," he said. He couldn't think of anything else to say.

She dropped his hand, stepped back, and stared at him. "Very shortly the pack lord and I, because we are both old politicians, will sit down and convince ourselves we're bargaining for the fate of the galaxy. Maybe we are. And you will no doubt play a role. But before we do that, there's somebody here who wants to see you."

She nodded toward Carlton Fredericks, who stepped behind a drape and opened a door. A small blond figure flew across the room and wrapped herself about him.

"Oh, Morn," he said. "Oh, thank God, Morn."

So it was not the land of Terra beneath his feet, nor the sight of his own race around him, but instead the familiar smell of her hair, the taste of her tear-damp cheek, and the dogged ferocity of her embrace that told Jim Endicott he had, against all odds, finally come home again.

The bottomless well of Tabitha Endicott's unconditional love.

I had intended to distract you with the more emotional aspects of the reunion between the boy and his mother."

Serena Half Moon said, "Which is why I had the office pack lord In the end this is between the two of us. I

speaker for humanity, not Jim Endicott."

"You surprise me."

"Why? What we do differs only in degree, not in kind.

the same kind of decisions you do. The difference between twenty billion of Terra and Wolfbane, and the three thousand times that of the Alban Empire is not really sible to living minds. Above a certain level, all the all the problems--become indistinguishable.

"I hadn't considered that. But you may be right. Very well,! of your ancient diplomats once remarked that great nations have morals, they only have interests."

"I would dispute that as an overarching truth, but if you to launch your proposals from that platform, I'm willing you out."

"So kind of you, Chairman. My deepest thanks."

She grinned at him. It made her look years younger, almost chievious. "Which really means, I suppose, that you will moment accept the incredible effrontery of the leader of a small mud hole in a very wide road who condescends to her grin vanished. "I have something you need badly, That makes Terra a somewhat larger and more significant hole than you are accustomed to. I'm not condescending to am affirming Terra's significance."

"Well. Bluntly spoken. So I will be likewise. You say you what I want. But do you really have it? What if you can't What if I just take what I want? What is your significance

She smiled. "I have become somewhat more aware of politics of late, Packlord. Could you simply take what you Hunzza chose to intervene?"

"I told you once you were playing a very dangerous game.

"So? They are all dangerous, these games we play. But we them anyway, don't we?"

He bowed slightly, and they continued.

Jim went to a door of the small but comfortable anteroom where he and his mother waited, opened it, looked out, saw who he was looking for, and waved him in.

"Mom, this is Tick. My best friend."

Tick glowed visibly at the description, approached the sofa where Tab was sitting, bowed deeply, then extended his hand. "My very great pleasure, Ms. Endicott. Your clod of a son chose not to mention it, but you are a very beautiful woman."

She took his hand and shook it. "Oh, Jim, I think I like this one." "Mom, he's got more bullcrap than a Texas cattle-clone ranch. But he's a prince of the blood royal," Jim added, grinning. "Hard to tell, isn't it, unless he tells you? Which he will be happy to do, immediately and at great length."

But Tick had already plopped himself down next to Tab and begun one of his endless but extremely charming orations. Jim watched for a moment, highly amused. It was fun watching his mother try to cope with all the new things. Wolfbane was a province of the provinces. Princes that looked a lot like chimpanzees had to be a new experience for her, though she had so far shown no sign of surprise. What was even funnier was that Tick knew all about his resemblance to the simian primates of Terra.

He wondered for a moment at his own pleasure in seeing this. Then he realized what it was: in a way it was an announcement. See, Morn, the things I have done, the people I have met, the new life I've discovered? See that I'm no longer the boy you remember? See how I've changed?

But no sooner had he examined that rather unsettling thought than another realization bloomed. There was some truth to it. He Wasn't a boy any longer, at least not the boy he'd been. But he Wasn't a man yet either. He was somewhere in between, wistfully remembering his childhood while at the same time staring with nervous gaze into a future he had not yet plumbed. And he contemplated that future with all the fear and uncertainty of anybody faced with things both unknown and inevitable.

all. He might die instead. He glanced toward another wondered what sort of deviltry the chairman and the were cooking up. What was it like to have so much But I know what it's like, he realized. I've had it, too. God, I've done the right thing. God, I hope so.

He thought he had, but he still felt a small hitch in his when, two hours later, that doorway opened, and Serena Moon and Hith Mun Alter.walked slowly into the room.

The two leaders sat across from them. Jim, still in the a strange kind of self-consciousness, thought what a tableau it made: two rulers seated across from a monkey, a teenage human boy, and a blond-haired ferocious motherhood, as both of these powers explained selves to this odd pastiche.

Serena Half Moon had assumed an almost motherly as she leaned forward with her long hands folded in her dark hair swinging across her face, and spoke in low, tones.

"Hith and I have agreed that I will allow his scientists struct an improved version of the mind arrays' Jim she carefully did not call them Mindslaver Arrays--"based codes implanted in your chromosomal patterns. If the that are successful, we will try to reestablish the full arrays. He has explained to me about the role the Plebs this, of course."

"I insist that tests be made first," Jim said, "And if there is evidence of the Pleb Psychosis, then the whole thing aborted immediately. I won't be responsible for something that ever happening again."

The two leaders glanced at each other. "Well, of wouldn't be your responsibility, Jim. It would be

really. But we"--she glanced at Hith again--"we accept your condition

Jim nodded. He'd done all he could. But he couldn't help seeing through the two schemers before him, even when he didn't want to. They were lying to him. They would do whatever they decided was necessary.

If they thought the ends justified their means.

After the boy, his mother, and his friend had departed, they stared at each other. "Does he know?." the chairman said.

"I don't believe so."

"And your people are absolutely certain?"

"Yes," the pacllord said. "There is something else, something besides the code, in his chromosomes. It's not a code, it's just genetic information. We don't know what it is or what it's for. But it's there."

She nodded. "By now you've run it against a Terran genomic base?"

"And it doesn't fit. It doesn't seem to have anything to do with any known human characteristics. It's some new trait. Or traits."

"I wonder if it has anything to do with the mind arrays?" Serena Half Moon said.

"So do I," Hith Mun Alter replied. "So do I."

TERRA

Thargos the Hunter stared in pop-eyed disbelief at the screens in his lander that monitored the Terran Wide Web. He didn't need the translations that droned automatically into his skull, and finally he turned them off. They were a needless distraction and he wanted, needed, to think.

The Terrie government obviously had applied a full disinformation spin to the visit. "Routine talks," they said. "A mid-level Alban official," they said.

He'd watched the arrival of what had to be the largest space vessel ever built. Nice ride for a mid-level official, he thought. But when the recording modules had caught a brief glimpse of that same official as he entered the Confed chairman's domains, together with his retinue, he'd understood. And his eyes had bulged.

The mid-level official turned out to be the pack lord himself. And in his retinue walked both the Terran boy, Jim Endicott, and the Alban agent, Korkal Emut Denai.

Everything he'd feared had now come to pass. He had failed in every one of his efforts, and now the pack lord had personally brought the boy home. Of course, that could not be the prime reason for his presence. Thargos tried to imagine a reason sufficiently urgent for the pack lord not only to risk his life by running the blockade surrounding Alba, but to leave Alba in the midst of the greatest crisis in his empire's history.

He ticked off what he knew: first, Alba had guarded Terra for several years, for reasons yet to be determined, but involving one Delta and some sort of technology controlled by Second, Delta had been searching for Jim Endicott, had found and shortly thereafter Delta had vanished. Third, Alba had great interest in this unknown Terrie boy, who had worked of piloting as recently as a few clawfuls of days ago while the Hunzzan blockade. Now the pack lord at incomprehensible to himself and his people, had come with the boy to Terra.

So the answer, while shadowy in detail, was shockingly its overall shape: since the existence of the Albagensian was at stake, only something absolutely crucial to Alba's would bring Hith Mun Alter here.

And somehow, maybe only by blind luck, Thargos the was the only Hunzzan agent in a position to do anything

For a moment his thoughts turned to his own situation. ideas of security were laughably primitive. His own largest he possessed, was parked in a sub aquatic pen at the of the Confed Island, disguised by its entry codes as an anonymous visitor from a distant Terran undersea community. He:] excellent communications set up with his ship hidden on with coded messages riding piggyback on various Terran feeds to their satellite.

But he'd left the last nuke aboard his spacecraft. His contained only mundane weaponry, perhaps sufficient to his escape if need be, but certainly not powerful enough one of the Alban cruisers now swarming in



close orbit Terra. He didn't even want to think about what kinds of might be aboard the monstrous Alban ship that had pack lord here.

He didn't know enough, but in some ways he knew too Very well, construct a fallback. His second goal must be to this planet and return to his own ship, which would at greatly expand his capabilities. That might be tricky. But goal wasn't. He spoke softly but clearly.

"Send to the mother ship that Hith Mun Alter, the packlbrd! on Terra and meeting with the Confed chairman. Current mates of Alban naval strength in Sol System are two squadrons and a half, and one gigantic ship of capabilities. I recommend immediate attack in force on System. Advise optimum strategy as multi fleet engagement the strategic goal of

destroying Sol System's sun." .... Sun-poppers. The time for half measures was over. Whatever advantage the pack lord sought here would not survive in the blinding flare of a full-blown nova. In fact, nothing would survive, nothing at all.

He waited for a good amount of time until the reply was relayed to him. Hunzzan High Command agreed with him. So Hunzza would arrive with as much power as it could muster. The ETA would be in seven Terran days. Seven days until the utter destruction of Sol System and every living thing in it.

That outcome suited Thargos just fine.

The first things to come down from the great Alban ship were gigantic trans matter disks. As soon as they were set up, they began to disgorge an endless stream of scientists and the equipment they had brought with them, machines not even dreamed of by Terran technology.

It went very quickly. Many of the problems had been solved by feverish work on the voyage from Alba to Terra. The remaining riddles were quickly unraveled through frantic cooperation between Alban and Terran scientists. The first test was ready to go just about the time Hith Mun Alter stepped from his quarters aboard the Albagens

Pride through a trans matter disk into Serena Half Moon's office. "We have problems," he said without preamble. "With the test?"

"No. That seems to be on schedule. But the schedule may be too lengthy now."

"Um? Why is that?"

He gestured his frustration. "We have a clear feed from Alba.

The blockade shields are down, so they can transmit again."

"Is that bad?"

"Yes. The three Hunzzan blockading fleets have vanished. The high est probability is they are headed here. Somehow they found out, Serena, and now they're coming. Damn it to the Seven Cold Hells!"

She raised her head. "How much time?"

"I don't know. We have ships searching for those fleets. They find them we'll know more. Five of your days, maybe six.

less. I've ordered every Alban unit able to move to converge "Will they be in time?"

'tlo knows? Even if they are, will they be enough? We only have three Hunzzan fleets. There may be more. They may

"Can your ship protect us?"

"No. Not against an attack of that size."

"I see." She scrubbed at her eyes. "The test commences in an hour."

"It had better work. Even if it does, it may not be though. They'll

be coming with sun-poppers." "Sun-poppers?"

"To destroy your star. I'm a prize. Hunzza may believe prize worth destroying a system for. I might believe that, too," "Can we evacuate the system?"

He stared at her. "Nventy billion people?"

"I'm sorry. Of course it's impossible." She sighed and

"Let's go watch the test. Do your people pray?." "Some do. I haven't. Not in a long time." "Me either. But I will now. I'll pray it works." "It didn't thy me?" Jim said. "I gave you everything Everything I knew."

Serena Half Moon smiled at him. Her smile around the edges, as if gravity pulled too hard at the her mouth. When she finally spoke, she kept her tones soft and soothing. "Nobody's blaming you, Jim. You didn't so you couldn't tell us." "Tell you what?" "Lord Endicott--Jim."

"Yes, Hith?"

"It's the Plebs. Serena's people rounded up several and we hooked them up. Nothing happened. At first we thought it was some flaw in the linkages, but there was no flaw. The linkages should have worked perfectly. But they didn't. They didn't work at all."

"Do you know why not?"

Serena turned away. "Yes. Your real mother was wiser---or more careful--than we imagined. The links cannot work without the conscious agreement of the individual participants. Each and every Pleb must give informed consent to their own participation. The linkages Delta used didn't require that. But these do. And we can't get around it. It's part of what makes these new arrays so much more powerful than the old ones. They really aren't Slaver Arrays anymore. They can't be. They won't work that way at all."

Jim thought about the real mother he'd never known. Her name had been Kate. Carl Endicott had loved her. So had Delta, though Delta had murdered her. She was the one who had altered his genome and hidden her secrets there. In a way he wanted to hate her for that. But he couldn't.

"Trapped you, didn't she?" he said finally, a grin tugging at his lips. "What's so damned funny?."

"Well, it puts my friend Hith up the creek sort of. For a while there it looked like Terra was just so much meat up for grabs. Booty for whatever predator happened along with the strength to take it. But now, for the first time in history, the predator has to ask the prey for permission. For consent. Kind of puts everybody in a bind, doesn't it? And, of course, Serena, it strengthens your hand in this, too."

She eyed Hith. "Yes, it does."

But the pack lord would not be deterred. There won't be any hand to strengthen. The Hunzzan fleets have been sighted. The first will

arrive in four of your days. And they won't be coming to ask permission of your Plebs. They'll be coming to destroy your entire system. Can't any of you see this?"

Serena broke in. "Would they destroy us if there was any chance they could have us? Even if it had to be on our own terms, Pack-lord?" He focused his formidable gaze on her. "You wouldn't." She shrugged.

"I might destroy you myself, before I let you become a tool in their hands."

"Not a tool in their hands, Hith. A tool in our own hands."

"Listen, Chairman, you may believe your bargaining much stronger than--" "Packlord, Chairman, please."

"You cannot afford to dicker, Ms. Half Moon. Nor you Hith. The Hunzza won't negotiate. Not this time. It's to advantage not to dicker. They were winning anyway, weren't Packlord? It was only a matter of time."

Hith nodded slowly. "I would never admit it openly, but.. "So Hunzza doesn't need Terra. Not the way Alba does. it's too late. We need some way to make those arrays work,. problem is getting enough Plebs to give permission. You're they will work if that happens?"

"he scientists say they will. But Jim. Four days.

wire headers How can we possibly reach them all?" "Cat," Jim said softly. "What?"

"Her name is Catherine Thibaudeau, but I called her Cat. her. You'll have to convince her, but she can do it if anybody

"I'll convince her," Serena said.

t took twelve precious hours. "Don't send your storm Serena. She's had more than enough of that."

"She's working in a hospital that specializes in the of Plebs suffering from the psychosis. But we think she has. connections.." much wider than that.,

"Of course she does. She was very high up in the Pleb acy, the one that destroyed Delta's satellite."

Serena's eyebrows lifted. "I looked at the fries about you. wasn't evident."

"Because I lied about her, Serena. It was the only thing about. Because I didn't want anybody bothering her."

"I see. So what do you suggest? We've already wasted hours."

"They weren't wasted. You found her. Now take me to her. I'll talk to her."

"Jim..."

He raised his voice. "Madame Chairman, I said I will talk' to her." She waved one hand. "Whatever you say, Jim. But hurry."

He stood with his hands behind his back and watched her through a window that led onto a shabby dayroom, where patients sat at scarred tables staring at nothing, or in basic wheelchairs, their knees covered with blankets, their hands twitching nervously in their laps.

There was a faint ringing in his ears. His mouth was dry, but he kept swallowing anyway. He felt slightly feverish and for some reason he couldn't quite understand, he was terrified.

Not so long ago such terror would have frozen him, made his hands sweat and his bowels cramp and his brain spin. Now he looked through a window and saw his own past in the form of a slim young blond girl. She was bending over a wild-eyed man with greasy black curls and a stubby goatee and a face so scarred it looked more like weathered black stone than flesh. She whispered something to the man, and he smiled. She touched the back of his hands and his twitching fingers went still. She patted him on the shoulder and for a moment he looked almost human.

Her back was slightly arched and strong. She'd cut her hair even shorter than before, and now it covered her fine skull like a cap made of shiny gold coins. He remembered how they'd parted, and how ashamed the power of his own need had made him. He remembered hating himself and hating her, and hating himself for hating her.

He turned the knob on the door and stepped quietly into the room. He smelled pajamas washed in harsh cleansers, sweat, his own fear, and a whiff of her perfume like distant flowers on a windy day.

"Hello, Cat," he said.

She turned. When she smiled at him his fear went away.

les, there's a way," she told him.

They were seated on a bench straddling a narrow beaten-down grass that ran along the front of the hospital. The\* pit al building was built of worn red bricks. It looked like a

The bench was made of concrete so old and chipped it have been native stone. The neighborhood was a Pleb people here wandered aimlessly. He saw nobody striding with pose, clear-eyed and intent on some pressing goal. There goals here. And he knew that might be the greatest crime upon the Plebs, greater even than the Slaver Arrays. The for life itself had been taken away, and nothing left behind slow, instinctive slog from cradle to grave. The will to enough; desire was the sorcerer's wand that transmuted into living, and among the Plebs desire had been

"How?." he asked her.

She took both of his hands in hers and looked into his "Jim, you have to promise me. I have nothing to hold you with, I know you are good.

So you have to promise me that no harm! come to my people from this.  
That it isn't some kind of trick."

Nothing to hold him with? But her hold was sunk him and would lay its  
claim until he died. It would changed he suddenly realized, to his  
great relief--but the it demanded would not. He could lie to himself  
more easily he could lie to her.

"Cat, I can't ever fully know what people like Hith Mun and Serena Half  
Moon really think. I can't read their know their secret thoughts. But  
in some way I can't explain see the logic inherent in what they say and  
do, and that know them.

"The Hunzza are coming. If they get here and we have

to oppose them with, they will explode our sun. Then everybody dies--you, me, the Plebs, everybody else. I don't think it's a trick. I don't see how it could be. There's not enough time and too much desperation."

"You think so. Is that enough?"

He squeezed her hands. They felt slightly damp, the skin soft and smooth, but he could feel hard muscle beneath. Strong and capable hands. He would have trusted his life to them.

"It will have to be. But you will have to decide."

Yet even as he spoke he felt the presence of the great powers who lurked beyond his words. Of the desperate needs of those like Serena and Hith who were accustomed to taking what they wanted. Of those who utilized almost any means to achieve their ends.

At what point should or could a species acquiesce in its own destruction? What tool was too awful for a race to bend toward its own survival? He suspected the sacrifice of the human Plebs was not a weapon too awful to be used. He thought he understood all of them too well--Delta, Hith, Serena, even Cat. What he didn't fully understand was himself.

And he wondered if Cat really did have choice in this matter, or if events had not destroyed any chance of true decision.

A bluejay, a wandering stranger in the city, whipped above them, cawing. The sun beat at them with hot-pillowed fists. Her gaze was on him steadily as polished azurite. Finally she nodded.

"All right," she said. 'qney'll want to talk to you before they decide. Not face-to-face, they won't do that. A virtual tight link. Are you willing?."

"Yes. We'll have to hurry."

She nodded again.

Jim found himself nostalgic for the ignorance of his younger self. Before him in the electronic dark The Fountain, chief scientist of all the Plebs, vomited its unending stream of scorpions,

noxious liquids, slow-melting sparks. Rose Lovely, floated as a single perfect white blossom. Only Cracker, the hacker, manifested as something human; he appeared legged and beatific, like the young Buddha, his face smile full of unnamable ecstasy.

And hence the odd feeling of loss. Jim knew that a sion of himself would have been impressed beyond such technological wizardry. But he had seen the empires the stars and the probabilities beneath the atoms. The now inside his skull was so powerful that the masks these wore became tattered on their edges, their manufactured as cheap and tawdry as a holochip played one too many felt sorry for them but could not show it. That last would tolerate from him was pity.

They had warred on behalf of the Plebs against Delta and I like Delta most of their adult lives. They had been betrayed and as a consequence their paranoia was of exquisitely sensitive level it was almost

impossible for offer themselves to any outsider.

So they bickered and quarreled and made heated while time ran away from all of them. Jim tuned them out himself drift, a part of him processing what they said, another part of him searched for a solution that included and the key that would unlock them.

Rose Lovely said, "In the end, all these things are versions ( Slaver Arrays. All of them exploited our people. All of them are gerous. We can't trust Serena Half Moon. She was

I see no reason to believe her any different than he was. lackey of the Working Class, always has been. The Plebs have been any concern of hers, except to crush us when we bothersome. I say no. No compromise, no cooperation."

"Then we'll all die," Jim said. "We may anyway, but at we'd have the chance of survival."

Cracker opened his Asian eyes. "You call this living,

the Plebs have now?."

Patterns drifted through him like a cold wind, patterns shifted and changed with each word.

The Fountain spoke suddenly. "I don't trust the science. We be primitive by galactic standards, but we aren't tech nolo illiterate. Some of what you suggest sounds impossible to me.



"I can give you the translated codes. You may study them at your leisure. But they aren't galactic technology. They are human, created by Delta and my own mother. You're welcome to them. But there isn't any time."

"So you say," Rose Lovely said. "So you say. But why should we trust you? What's in it for us, for the Plebs?"

It had been hovering about him like a vast gossamer wing, something trying to express itself in shape and form and solidity. He'd felt it gathering in his mind and wondered what it was, what it was trying to be. Now it enfolded him in the iron grip of certainty.

"Choice," he said. "And with choice, all the rest: freedom, selfrespect, value. All the things the Plebs don't have now. All the things that make a life worth living. That's what my mother offered-offers--to you now."

He tried to imagine how Kate had known. Had she known or only suspected? But in the creation of the new arrays she'd done more than remove the awful specter of the psychosis. She had turned the arrays into something far greater and more powerful:

a means of saving the souls, one by one, of every Pleb who lived. "I don't understand," The Fountain said.

Of course you wouldn't, Jim thought. You worship at the temple of the microchip, of the inhuman reactions too small and too quick for the human mind to perceive. The quantum particles have no awareness; they don't need it. You mistake the building blocks for the structure itself.

"No Pleb can become a part of the new arrays without giving conscious and informed permission to allow that participation. In order to be as powerful as possible, the arrays need as many participants as possible. If Terra is to be saved at all, it will be because of hundreds of millions of Plebs consciously make the effort to save her. And if the goal is the most precious thing humanity has ever known--racial survival--then the price demanded may be commensurately high.

"Neither Serena Half Moon nor Hith Mun Alter is in any position to bargain.. They will give you whatever you demand. But you will receive something even they cannot give you--a role to play in the most important endeavor ever attempted on this planet. You--the Plebs---can save the world. Save humankind. And save the greatest empire in the galaxy. Not the workers. Not the leaders In the end the lowest will save the highest."

He stopped, groping for something stirring to finish with, he couldn't find any more ringing words. "You'll have you haven't had for generations. Choice. Honor. Respect. have a reason to exist. You'll be... a part of the human again."

Though he was nothing but a flux of electrons in that sensed his body, slick with sweat from the effort to make see. And all he heard was a vast and empty silence.

It was Cat's voice that answered him. "We have always part of the family, Jim. We have always been human. It was kind who forgot that. We never did."

With that they were gone, and he found himself sitting small room staring at the equipment to which he was. He reached up and pulled the primitive plug from his took a moment. His fingers were greasy with perspiration. wrung out, as if he'd run a long race to the finish without knowing the prize. But he knew the prize. Did they?. Would

Next to him, Cat stirred in her own chair. Her eyes she regarded him with a perfectly blue gaze. :,,

"they agree," she said. "Because we will help ourselves, help you. You owe us a lot, and now you will pay. And the will be high."

Then her eyes lost their hard-glazed glare and she

"We'll take the workers for whatever we can get, and Moon won't find it pleasant to negotiate with us. But what decided us, Jim. It was self-respect. That can only earned, and now for the first time in centuries we can we will. You owe us, boy. Never forget it."

"I won't," he said. "How soon can you begin?"

"We already have."

AI.BAGENS PRIDE:

ETA HUNZZAN FLEETS: 46:00:00 AND COUNTING

What had gone down now came back up again. If nothing else, the arrival of the Albagens Pride in Sol System had brought one long-lasting technological change: trans matter disks were appearing everywhere, as fast as the nanofactories could make them. No more would Terra's humming billions find any location in their solar system more than a few steps away.

Was this the kind of thing Delta had feared so much? Jim suspected that it was. Just as the creation of the Web so many years before had freed the minds of humankind to speak and share and know each other, so the disks ended the physical separation between man and woman and child. Soon, Jim suspected, the ancient divisions imposed by distance would vanish, for when another could be in your own living room as easily as he could be in his, where were the boundaries? No one would come from "over there" anymore, because over there and here would be the same. Sol System as one vast neighborhood. He liked that thought.

Who knew what might happen? Jim realized that was what Delta really feared: the uncertainty. The lack of predictability. Nobody knew what this or any other piece of galactic technology might mean. People like Delta, who felt comfortable with and needed control, would always hate the new, even when they were

themselves creating it. A sliver of insight flashed up before like a wiggling mental fish: perhaps Delta had not really the Pleb Psychosis. Its existence meant that to use the a dangerous thing, an act that needed control. And who control it than its creator?

But these new arrays, Jim suspected, would not and could be controlled by any single human force or entity. Another had flown from Pandora's magic box. Humanity's environment was changing again, whether humanity liked it or

If it survived, that is. And that was by no means certain. He stood on a high balcony overlooking a great space in the Bridge Cluster of the Pr/de. This was in the section, the widest dimension of the great sphere. A slice hundred feet tall, a mile in diameter, the enclosure was too to be called a room. A regular pattern of trans matter marched across the floor, so far below him they resembled glowing coins. Antlike figures swarmed about the disks, loading equipment hastily constructed all over Terra, on and on the Pr/de herself, then shipped back to this When everything was hooked together, the controlling the machines that maintained the links among a billion would take shape on the deck below him.

He watched the frantic activity below him through eyes, savoring the momentary pleasure of having nothing to do. of the junior pilots was keeping an eye on the Pr/de. Cat was i busy elsewhere; the secretive Pleb Council had worked some internal miracle and the releases and permissions had

Nearly a billion Plebs--wire headers all--had awakened one sort of stupor or another and volunteered their brains to cause. He had noticed something strange in the past days as the word went out. All of a sudden Plebs taken to wearing something bright and red: a cap, a scarf, a It was an unspoken proclamation of identity and solidarity said, "We are your saviors. We whom you despise will save' anyway." Those who wore red walked with their shoulders their spines straight, and for the first time in their lives their "betters" straight in the eye.

That was a new thing, too, and he liked it even better than trans matter disks. The omens seemed good for the first time could remember. All except the final uncertainty: would System survive?

Korkal had told him that at most enough elements to make up two Alban fleets would probably arrive in-system before the Hunzza ETA. The current plan was to form the fleets around the Pr/de and meet the invading Hunzza beyond the cometary ring, using the mind arrays to control the ships rather than the Pr/de's own systems. It made sense. The capabilities of the arrays were thought to be so far beyond anything either Alba or Hunzza could bring to the fray that being outnumbered three to two would not prevent an Alban victory.

He considered that as he watched the activity below suddenly slow. The last pieces of equipment appeared on the trans matter disks, were hauled away, and hooked up. The insectile swarm began to dwindle and finally vanish. Far below, a hushed expectancy filled the great chamber; he knew they would be running the initial tests of the full arrays very shortly. There was no time left for leisure. They would test as soon as they had system completion, which would be only a few minutes after the last of the equipment was rolled into place and connected. Maybe they were starting now... He raised his head. "Yes?"

The signal had come silently, but now he recognized the voice.

"Hey, buddy," Tick said. "Korkal just called. He wants you and me in the pack lord quarters right now."

"I'm on my way," he replied. "Meet me?"

"At the door. We can face the dragon together."

Something wrong, he thought.

The floating lights illuminating the space around him suddenly dimmed, then returned to normal. It happened three times as he watched. Only an enormous power drain could cause something like that. Jim turned and began to run back toward the nearest trans matter disk.

H.e had not yet seen the pack lord private rooms. him at the reception area and Korkal came out quickly, expression on his face, and ushered them into the inner turn. It was more utilitarian than Jim had expected, all white, but the ever-present sofa was there, Hith sat on it, cradled his ever-present cup of cinnamon tea.

"Hello, Jim," a husky feminine voice said. He raised brows as he replied, "Hello, Serena."

"Jim, have a seat. You too, Tick."

l'hanks, Hith." Tick didn't say anything. He still accustom himself to the easy informality between his friend and the most powerful person in the Alban Empire. "We have a problem, Jim," Hith said quickly.

Of course you do, Jim thought. You always do, it always to involve me.

"Yes, sir?"

"I can show you better than tell you. Lord Denai?" Korkal, standing out of Jim's vision, made some small movement and the room darkened. A large holoscreen a close-up view of the larger scene Jim had just been

"I'm cutting into the test pattern now," Korkal said.

is taken right off the feed from the controllers. We fired arrays just as soon as everything was hooked up. The send out a test signal, to activate all the human links and certain we had a functioning array. Everything went free, for this.. "

The holoscreen went dark, then slowly brightened. In the center of it swirled a point of impossible brightness. It was looking at the sun without protection. Jim squinted and half away. A sudden sick feeling griped at the bottom of his Probabilities screamed and scrambled in his brain. He what this was... The voice was a low, static-f'filled roar. It sounded like a dred big trucks screeching their brakes all at once.

IN

Send me Jim Endicott.

Another burst of sound, higher, more trilling. Some kind of electronic language. 'That's the super-controller machine sending a query. Basically it's asking what is going on."

Jim licked his lips and nodded. Tiny electrical shocks streaked up and down his spinal cord. He felt sudden pain in his palms and realized his fingernails were digging into the skin there. He forced himself to relax.

Send me Jim Endicott.

The exchange was repeated a third time. Then the screen suddenly went blank. The lights came up. They were all looking at him.

"What? Are you asking me what it is? I haven't got one single damned idea." His gut was hot with acid now, and the room felt stifling. When he tried to inhale, his breath didn't quite fill his chest. But he did know.

Korkal came around to face him. "Each time this.." thing, whatever it is, asked for you, there was a tremendous power drain on the ship's systems. The arrays are now an integral part of the Pr/de, so the drain was controlled by the arrays. But we don't know why. We certainly didn't order it. Rapid first-pass analysis indicates a connection between the appearance of this thing and the drain. So whatever it is, it may be in control of the controllers. In other words, in control of the arrays themselves. And we don't have any more idea what it is than you say you do."

Korkal ran nervous fingers through the graying hair along his muzzle. "It wants you. And we don't even know what that means. Wants you? How?. Why?"

"How is easy," Jim said at last. He felt a hundred years old again.

He wondered if it would ever end.

"You hook me into the controller system. That's how. I won't be able to answer the why until we do that. I may not be able to answer it even then."

Serena broke in. "You're supposed to have some high-level ability to recognize probability patterns, Jim. I don't understand what that means, but is it working now?. Is that why you're telling us this?"

"Yes."

She gnawed gently at the cuticle of one of her long Fmgel:s. "And you don't know if you'll be able to learn why this is happening?."

He shook his head.

"Why not?" Hith asked. "Do you know what it is?" "Because I might not survive," Jim said. "In fact, I won't." He sighed and stood up.

"We don't have much we'd probably better get started."

AGoARo THE HNV SERPENT FANG,

ETA HUNZZAN FLEETS: 42:00:00 AND

Thargos supposed it was once again luck that had him. Sol System had been convulsed by the arrival Albagens Pride, bearing the pack lord. Normally smooth systems had gone chaotic. Technicians were installing of thousands of trans matter disks all over Sol System. All communications levels were jammed with data both scientific military. The pathetic Terran fleet was fully mobilized and toward the outer reaches of the system in a brave but futile of resistance.

Thargos had been able to hide his own interstellar the fringes of the Pr/de's enormous trans-stellar blare. The lord still communicated with Alba, and so far, though not for] of trying, Thargos had been unable to break any of those

The Alban squadrons already on hand had moved system to meet the Confed Navy vanguard. And was going on, something that Thargos now decided was tially the most ominous development he'd seen so far. thing was he couldn't think of anything to do about it.

He'd been lying hidden here on Luna ever since he'd his lander and its fake codes into the endless stream cargo rising both from Terra itself and from the four Nobody had noticed him. And so for the last many hours monitored everything his extremely sensitive comm webs



touch. One incident in particular had crystallized his curiosity: a few hours before, something incredibly powerful had nearly overwhelmed his systems. Send me Jim Endicott.

He didn't know what it meant, but he knew the name. So who or what wanted the boy?. And why?.

He'd watched a huge cone of dedicated data space as it was created between Terra and the Alban ship. He hadn't been able to crack into that, either, but the bizarre message had shivered that cone as if it were a spiny weed in a high wind.

His claws clicked together, nervous as castanets, while his sharp tough mind strained and pressed, seeking some purchase or the problem. He hadn't thought of anything yet. But he would. He knew he would.

Hunzzan High Command had ordered him to maintain his concealment and take no action that might risk exposure. He'd been told his messages from the heart of the enemy's camp were far too valuable to hazard losing them. But he had privately decided he would disobey his orders if necessary. The boy had defeated him too many times. Yet somehow he would have his vengeance in full. He was certain of it. If he could only think of a way... He continued watching and waiting.

ABOARD THE ALB AGENS PRIDE:

ETA HUNZZAN FLEETS: 28:00:00 AND COUNTING

Jim sat up in the nanotank as many hands reached to help him. The fluid in which he'd been immersed, a thick, sludgy liquid rich in nutrients and in the base materials the busy sub microscopic nanocritters used to build and rebuild new passageways in his skull, poured off his naked shoulders like cool honey. It was an indescribably luxurious sensation and it soothed him as he stood up and let them wrap a fluffy cloth robe around his lank frame.

The head meditech, a loose-limbed tall human with orange hair, a loopy grin, and steady gray eyes said, "How feel, Jim?"

"I dunno about you. I feel fine," he said.

She laughed at that, though her eyes didn't even Tankside manner? he thought wryly. The operation was a cess, but the patient drowned?

He realized he felt giddy. He kept having to repress an countable urge to start whooping with laughter. He stepped the rim of the tank and climbed down to the floor. "So how he asked.

"You're fine. Everything went in slick as a whistle. This tech is... something else. It's going to change a lot of

"Yes, I guess it is. How did it change me?"

She spoke as he towel-dried his dark curly hair. She he was an extraordinarily handsome young man and, even attractive, he didn't seem to be aware of this fact. She had the urge to give him a motherly hug, and at the same give him a hug that had nothing to do with motherhood

"Bigger channels. More of them. A/of of new I

and -axons. A very large increase in potential synaptic activity. What you had in there was already better than ever heard of. This new setup is an order of magnitude that."

A soft wash of anxiety flickered on his features and as vanished.  
"Nothing organic done to my brain itself?."

She shook her head. "Nope. It's all gross structure.

built in an un install procedure. Hit it with the right codes, will dissolve itself into harmless proteins and water. Nice trick, that."

"Oh? Where do I get the codes?"

"Already there. Think about it."

He did. An odd series of numbers and symbols floated his mind. He suddenly understood how to apply them wanted to. And if he did, all this new semi sentient wiring inside his skull would melt away as if it had gave him a strange floating sensation, to be able to the new additions inside his brain with only a thought.

He stared at her. "What do you think it's for?."

'This interface?' She moved her shoulders as if she were trying to fit herself into a pipe just slightly smaller than her own width. "Beats me, friend. I thought you knew. All I can say is that you can lock up with just about anything in the cyberneural line, faster, tighter, and more wide-band than anything Terra has ever dreamed of. Like I said, this galactic gadgetry is pretty hot stuff."

He stuck out his right hand. She took it and shook it once. "Well, thanks," he said.

"My pleasure. Good luck."

"Why do you' say that?"

"Because maybe you're going to need it?"

"Yeah," he said. "Maybe I am."

ETA HUNZZAN FLEETS: 26:00:00 AND COUNTING

It was like his pilot's chair but much larger. It sighed and breathed with him and held him as a big man holds a small baby. From his skull socket bloomed a bouquet of gleaming silver threads. The threads as they wound away from him toward the waiting machines grew thicker until they were the size of his wrists. As the data flows entered his brain they underwent a change in quality; their passage became a matter of quantum movement, where the old man Einstein had muttered that God would not play dice with the universe. But God---or something--did.

Only Tab and Tick came to watch in person. He smiled at them both. Tick came up and punched him on the shoulder. "Hang in there, buddy," he whispered through an uncertain grin. "You're the man."

Tabitha hugged him. The chair made her awkward. He saw a liquid gleam in her eyes and felt an answering sting in his own. "Be as careful as you can be, son. I love you."

"I love you too, Mom. Don't worry."

She kissed his forehead. Her lips felt soft and cool. He up at her.  
"Better stand back, Morn. Interforce shield

You won't be able to see me."

I'll pray for you."

He nodded. She sighed and stepped away. He moved his and saw her  
expression change. He could see her, but alll could see was a gleaming  
silver egg. This new version of the force shield enclosed his whole  
body. il

He took a deep breath, and then the darkness took him.

NOWHERE:

ETA HUNZZAN FLEETS: 25:00:00 AND COUNTING

Jim wasn't sure what he'd expected. They had briefed him as well as they could. He would not be launched into normal cyberspace, into what an ancient writer named William Gibson had called the consensual hallucination, which was an agreement between the human and the mechanical data processors to view the world they shared as a particular set of mutually understood paradigms. They didn't know precisely what they were launching him into. Nobody really understood the full reality of the data space created by the mind aiTays.

The human brain is a fascinating instrument. It has a finite number of neurons connected to each other by a finite number of axons, dendrites, and synapses. But the potential number of patterns these connections can create is larger than the number of atoms in the universe. In this sense the human brain is a more complicated instrument than the universe itself. Some philosophers have speculated that only such an instrument can know the universe. Others have suggested that the universe itself demands the existence of such instruments, that they are the means by which the universe knows itself.

The data space Jim entered was a construct derived from all the connections and potential connections in a billion human brains,

each of them a discrete entity which was the product of lion years of evolution, the last several hundred which had honed the abilities of those brains to seek out ognize patterns .... Hence, this human mind array was, as far as anybody stood it, a new thing in the galaxy. Science could make about it, but nobody yet knew anything for certain. Only the ers who entered it and came back could bring the new But it might as well have been marked

And a yger Ires summoned me by name, Jim thought, as new universe slowly blossomed around him and he waited Tyger to come.

ARRAY 0ATAS PACE

ETA HUNZZAN FLEETS: 25:00:00 -3 NANOS

AND COUNTING

I am here.

The voice was insidious. It seemed to arise from and nowhere. Jim floated in what he once called the the blue, a dark no-place rich with potential and was primordial soup of the same order which birthed The voice surrounded him and drifted through his caressed his nerve endings.

"Who are you?" he replied. "Why have you called me?" Data points you must consider: "I" and "am" are accurate. discrete and self-maintaining entity, and I exist. "Here" is rate and used for pseudo reference and convenience only.

"We are in the data space created by the mind arrays."

You are in that data space I am not limited by it though it. I am not limited at all. ,

Jim didn't reply. A strange and bizarre sensation had begun to rise in him. It seemed to come from every cell of his body, though here he had no body. Perhaps it came from his idea of body, the remembered design of it. But that reality was changing.

The dark and luscious feeling enfolded him, spreading from within and without. It was a hungry, seeking sensation, and it seemed incredibly strong. Suddenly he realized what it was: his ability to sense and make patterns out of inchoate probabilities, but magnified a millionfold by the combination of the mind arrays and his new cyberneural interface.

The darkness around him began to change. It was as if a third eye had opened in the middle of his forehead. Directly before him the nothingness began to curdle; a shape appeared before him.

It was roughly globular; it shimmered, faded, grew strong again. He had the feeling it didn't exist entirely in real space and time. In fact, he thought what he was seeing might be only one small manifestation of the entity's whole.

Your patterns have changed, the Thing said.

"Yes. I can see you now." .

The globular thing brightened, then faded, then brightened again. You see a set of probabilities. They may or may not come into existence.

Jim's mind spun. He felt himself still changing. More and more of the details of this place became clear to him. The being he confronted seemed to grow more solid. Almost familiar. Patterns marched through him like great storm waves pounding on a shore. "Why did you call for me?"

You are at the moment the only living being in the galaxy who can perceive my true existence. Therefore, I want you to be my messenger to others of your kind. "Others of my kind?" Living intelligences. "Aren't you alive?"

Not in any sense you would understand.

We'll see about that, Jim thought. "What message do you want me to relay?."

I control the mind arrays. They are mine and mine only. If Serena Half Moon and Hith Mun Alter wish to use the relays for their own purposes, they must first negotiate with me. You will be a suitable emissary between us.

"Suitable? Why?"

Wl LLIAI! HATER

An infinitesimal delay: Jim sensed another pattern

Something was wrong here, but he didn't know what. Suitable because you are acceptable to me.

The existence Of the arrays themselves are at risk. There:

time for negotiations. If you control the arrays, will you help I will negotiate. There is enough time.

A bleak sense of absolute danger informed Jim's next "Are you Delta?"

I am not Delta. Delta is dead. I am Outsider.

Somehow, that was a lie. And in the lie lay a key. He have it yet, but he would. If he could keep this Outsider ing what he almost.." almost.." was able to understand.

He tried to curl himself into a hard mental ball, a shell impervious to Outsider's awareness.

Why do you withdraw from me? Why do you hide yourself? "I want to go back now and tell them your message." The globe hung there, shivering and twisting, ming. Jim had a sudden sense that ghostly fingers were scrabbling at the hard carapace he'd built around clenched himself tighter, his terror acting as glue. After nameless time the questing fingers withdrew.

Then go now.

No-space vanished, and Jim opened his eyes in the at the center of the controller machines. He was covered sweat. He felt as if an immense amount of time had when he glanced at the digital readout nearby, it seemed to cate that no time at all had gone by.

"Jim?" It was Korkal. "Why have you dropped the just started."

His bones and muscles felt weak and watery. "I just he said. "Help me out of here. We've got big problems."

Korkal leaned dlose, took his wrists, and hoisted him chair. "Are you okay?."

"No," Jim replied. "I'm not okay. And neither are an)

of us. Any of us in the whole damned galaxy."



ABOARD ALBAGENB PRIDE EN ROUTE TO COMETARY

ORBIT SOL SYSTEM:

ETA HUNZZAN FLEETS: 22:00:00 AND COUNTING

It was a council of war with just the four of them in Hith's chambers. "I don't understand," Serena said.

"Me, neither," Korkal said. Hith said nothing, merely stared at Jim and waited.

Jim spread his hands. "It's hard. I think it is Delta. Well, not really. It calls itself Outsider and says Delta is dead, and that may be true. At least as we understand death. I don't think Delta's body or brain exist any longer as living entities."

Serena gave her head a puzzled little shake. "Dead is dead, right?"

"Not exactly. You should understand. I wasn't present when Delta's satellite blew up, so I can't testify as to his actual physical death. He was still alive, more or less, when I left him, although he surely looked like he was dying. Here is what I think, though: living intelligence is a pattern. A living brain changes its structure as it learns. At some point the structure becomes complicated enough to support what we call intelligence and, more important, self-awareness of intelligence. We think about our selves thinking. That is what makes us different from the lower orders of intelligence. And some thinkers give a name to that selfawareness: they call it soul."

"I follow so far," Korkal said.

"Good. So the. patterns of intelligence are created by the growth and change within the physical brain. The arrangements of the atoms that make up the brain. Now what if those patterns could somehow be impressed, not in cells and neurons and chromosomes but onto the fabric of space-time itself?"

"Huh?" said Serena Half Moon. "That sounds impossible."

Jim shook his head. "No, maybe not. All matter affects and time to some extent. The bigger the matter--say, a erally the bigger the effect. But it isn't size that really counts density. The denser the matter, the more effect it has on And according to a classical scientist named Robert curvature of space induced by an atomic nucleus near its is fifteen trillion times greater than the curvature of space by the mass of Terra herself. So it is possible, if that pattern is already imprinted on space-time could be somehow after the destruction of the brain, then intelligence could to exist. And it would be an immortal intelligence."

"That sounds crazy to me," Korkal said.

"Oh, there are problems. Without the physical brain to atoms in its former arrangements, the ethereal pattern to drift. After all, the electrical and nuclear forces at work atomic level are much stronger than the space-curvature Eventually those should be sufficient to destroy the pattern But as I said, if there is some way to maintain the integrity, then you might end up with something like Outsider.\*

Serena and Korkal glanced at each other, and Jim knew it was too far a reach for them. He might make them understand tually, but there was so little time left. He turned to Hith Alter.

"Packlord?"

Hith sighed. "Jim, I'm no scientist. I can't say I everything you've just said, but I understand one Outsider does exist. There was another set of power flows occurred when you went into the arrays. So if this is your guess as to what is happening, I will accept it. Which brings the next question: what does this Outsider want? Why want to negotiate with us?"

Jim felt a cool wash of relief. Hith might not understand thing, but he understood enough. "It wants what all wants, Hith. It wants to survive. That was the pattern I saw

I faced Outsider: it sees a threat to its survival, and it wants.l eliminate that threat. My guess is Outsider sees a larger than merely the arrival of the Hunzzan fleet. It may regard entire galaxy as a threat. It is incredibly dangerous, Packlord. it has a weakness, and I think I know what it is."

"Then you'd better let the rest of us in on it, don't you Hith replied.

Jim once again felt the leaden weight of his own destiny pulling at him, tugging him out of shape. He couldn't understand why he felt so frightened. What was the worst thing that could happen? He might die. But you could only die once. Or could you?

"Actually, I think Outsider has two weaknesses--and one of them it doesn't yet really understand. It may not know anything about it at all."

"Oh? And what might that be?"

"A dead woman named Kate. And me," Jim said.

ABOARD HNV SERPENT FAN6 IN

IJEAR-TERRA ORBIT:

ETA HUNZZAN FLEETS: 16"00'00 AND (OUNTIN6

hargos the Hunter stares at his screens, lost in thought. His ship, cloaked in technological shadows, ghosts silently in the midst of a clump of Terran freighters that circle the planet below like peaceful herds of sheep. He is the wolf within their midst, sharp of fang and bloody of claw, and hungrier than he's ever been before.

The Albagens Pride proceeds majestically outward, a vast bell low of communications and signals and emanations. His own ship is physically within the mysterious cone of data space that includes both Terra, the Pr/de, and everything between them. His instincts tell him this data space is the most important thing; if it can be somehow disrupted at a critical moment, then nothing will stand before the sure destruction of Sol System by the weapons of the gathering Hunzzan fleets. He knows when the first of those fleets will arrive. It will be sooner than the Albans or Terries imagine. But he still has a little time to do what he can. Beyond his ship but very close, the makeshift satellite, one of two, proceeds in silent orbit. It is about half a mile in diameter and crude as most Terrie work. They have been fools not to from any wolves that might be lurking about.

Carefully, thoughtfully, he begins.

ABOARD ALB AGENS PRIDE EN ROUTE TO COM

ORBIT SOL SYSTEM:

ETA HUNZZAN FLEETS: 12:00:00 AND COUNTING

Jim and Hith faced each other alone in Hith's quarters cinnamon cup was cold and empty, but he didn't seem to Jim thought the pack lord looked as if he'd aged several the past few hours. Something about what had Outsider seemed to have shaken him in a way Jim didn't stand . . . "I have formally named you my emissary to this... Hith said softly. "That means you speak for all of Alba, Terra. It is a great responsibility. Frankly, I wouldn't your shoulders if I had any other choice."

"Yes, I understand."

"Good. Now here is one other thing. The mere something like the Outsider frightens me very much. I admit this to you in private, and I hope you will respect vacy. And though I don't want to place any more

stress than necessary, I have to tell you this."

"What, Hith?"

"If you cannot reach an accommodation that allows us trol the relays.."  
well. You remember I once told you I sacrifice Alba's soul to save her  
body?."

Jim felt the skin on his belly begin to creep. "I remember." "If  
those relays aren't in our hands by the time you

negotiating, I will destroy them myself. I will give the order to smash the controller machines, and I will order the Albagens Pr/de and all of Alba's other forces out of Sol System. I will leave your system to the Hunzza and their sun-poppers."

"But why, Hith?"

The pack lord shook his head. "I can't tell you, Jim. I bear you and your people no ill will, but I will do what I say. I'm sorry, but I will have to."

'rhank you for the extra help, Packlord."

Hith sighed heavily. "I know, Jim. I know. Good luck to you. I also mean that, from the very bottom of my heart."

Jim stood. They shook hands, that curiously human gesture. Hith watched him leave the room, and when he was alone he sat and stared at nothing.

Leaper culture. Something like this immortal Outsider Is this how it begins?

Should he have given the Terries even this much of a chance?

He looked down at the empty cup in his hand and saw that it was trembling. He felt so very, very old.

RELAY SATELLITE NUMBER Two, NEAR-TERRA ORBIT:

ETA HUNZZAN FLEETS: 10:00:00 AND COUNTING

He had been careful and it had gone more easily than Thargos had expected. Security was dreadfully lax. He'd placed a team of Hunzzan marines aboard, landing them from a ship that identified itself with codes that said it was a Terran supply barge bringing a load of roast beef and replacement bio chips

The shocked Terrans, looking forward to good steak dinners, had not been prepared for two hundred battle-hardened and heavily armed Hunzzan troopers. It had taken precisely fourteen

minutes from the initial penetration to the final takeover satellite. The comm techs on the satellite had managed one. of warning, but Thargos had been ready for that, and with ease.

Now he stood in the control room of the satellite,

the terror in the eyes of the human techs who stared at him he'd risen suddenly from the depths of their strange hell.

One of his officers came up and said without preamble: Terrie nuke is em placed sir."

Thargos nodded his assent. It might not even be destroy Sol System. The questioning continues?"

The weapons tech nodded. "We have some results already.

some kind of massive computer made by linking

"Ah. Excellent."

The officer saluted and returned to his duties. regarded the frightened humans calmly. All you had to do find a choke point. And then sink your fangs deep into it.

He grin was wide and white, and all of the Terries knew it not anything like a smile. "You," Thargos said. "Yes?"

"You have dedicated comm links to the Albagens Pride?."

A moment's hesitation, then: "Yes.

"Good. Make contact with that vessel. Tell them I want to to Hith Mun Alter."

"Who, sir?"

"Don't worry. They'll know who he is."

TERRAN MINO ARRAY OATASPACE:

ETA HUNZZAN FLEETS: 10"OO'OO AND CDUNTING

Jim tried to ignore his fear but the body he'd left behind ached with tension, was drenched with sweat, was tight-jawed and clench-fisted. Some of that fell away as he translated into the no space beyond the cyberneural interface but not all of it. He was aware of his body as if it were a throat locked in a silent scream.

Call it fate, or destiny, or just simple accident. So much that could not have been predicted had brought him to this moment. The pattern was clear enough to him now.

At the beginning was his real mother Kate. He tried to picture her, so clever, so dedicated, so driven. Working feverishly to change her infant son into the unwitting instrument of her own will. Had she cared about him as she hid her codes and secrets and tricks in his genome? Or only of revenge on the one who'd scorned her and per vetted her great discovery? Had she loved her baby boy, or had he been only the means of achieving her ends, a weapon that reached through time to strike down her enemy when he least expected it?

Did you love me, Mom? It seemed very late in the game to be asking that question, and he wondered whom he expected to answer.

Her? Or himself? And why did it make any difference now?.

I am here.

Once again he was struck by the essential hollowness of

Outsider's voice--an empty, echoing resonance that hinted. passion beyond human knowledge or understandtng.

Outsider was, it didn't sound human.

"Yes," dim said. "So am I."

Did you carry my demand to the leaders?

"Yes."

What is their reply?

Jim studied the diaphanous apparition as it before him. The nearly globular shape was actually ovoid tapered at one end. Now he recognized it for what it ghostly tracings of a human brain imprinted on the endless of space-time.

"Before I give you an answer, I have questions." Are you the negotiator or the message bearer'?. Jim took an immaterial breath. He comforted illusion of his own body. "Neither." :. What are you then? . "Call me Questioner," Jim said formally. Very well. Ask your questions.

Jim felt the sensual power rising in him again, as he had it on his previous translation here, a liquid darkness that in his invisible body

and burned in his imagined skull. A wind began to blow; he felt it ruffle and riffle past and carrying strange scents. He hadn't known what it was he did. The question was, did Outsider know it, too?

It was his mother's ultimate gift and burden.. Did you

Mom? Did you? He gathered himself. "Are you Delta?" No. Delta is dead.

"Were you Delta, before Delta died?"

Yes.

"What are you now?" Jim asked.

You know the answer.

"Yes. You are Delta's mind free of his body and his Separate from the hormones and proteins that the you no longer have emotions. You are pure intelligence, and as pitiless as entropy. I once knew you, didn't

I?"

The reply was curiously soft: Yes you did. But I am not was then, and you don't know me now. No body and no knows me but myself. I think, therefore I am Outsider.

"Yes. How did you maintain yourself?"



I translated myself into what remained of array data space after my satellite was destroyed. I had prepared for such an eventuality long before. I was able to tap the Plebs for just enough power. I was very weak. Now I am very strong. I control your new mind arrays, Jim Endicott, more strongly than I did the old ones. Without me you have no arrays. What reply did your leaders send me? "No more questions?" What is their reply?

Jim imagined himself taking a deep breath. He wondered if Outsider could see him. Probably so. He would have liked to see himself through Outsider's eyes. Through whatever bizarre consensual hallucination they had both agreed to share.

"I'm the reply," Jim said.

The force that was growing inside him whined into a nerve jarring crescendo as the final codes his mother had hidden inside his genome now took effect, triggered by his entry into the new data space her own designs had built. He had been created for this, and now he reached far past Outsider for the billion different patterns... Outsider's image vanished behind a tide of blinding light. With no warning at all Jim fell out of data space into rolling silent darkness. Instinctively he reached for the invisible doorway, but it was gone.

Then nothing.

ABOARD ALB AGENS PRIDF EN ROUTE TO

COMETARY ORBIT SOL SYSTEM:

ETA HUNZZAN FLEETS: 09:3D:00 AND COUNTING

Jim? Are you awake? Come on, snap out of it." "VChuu o "

Korkal was shaking him, hard. He opened his eyes. "What pended?"

"We pulled the plug. The pack lord needs you right have a huge problem."

Groggily, Jim allowed Korkal to tug him along. His were a complete muddle. So many probabilities to juggle. pulling him out of the arrays had been a grievous mistake. been just a hair away from seizing control. Outsider had!i expected or been prepared for what Kate had hidden genome. But they'd pulled him out before he could finish, i! now Outsider was warned. He wouldn't be taken by next time. If there was a next time.

Hith, Serena, and Tick were waiting for him. Korkal door and motioned Jim toward a chair. Jim felt the his knees and sank gratefully into the cushions.

"Packlord, it was a mistake to pull me out of the arrays. know if I can--"

Hith waved one hand in dismissal. "No time, Jim. Watch The holoscreen popped up, Idled with a broad saurian split by a toothy white grin. Jim felt a sharp sense of wash over him, and then memory clicked: "Hey. That's who tried to kidnap me..."

"Thargos the Hunter," Korkal said. "Watch."

The voice was deep and humming. Jim realized translated. Thargos was speaking Terrie.

"Greetings, Packlord. I have taken command of the Relay Satellite Number Two. I have mined it with a Terrie device my techs assure me is capable of destroying it

We have analyzed the data flows in your mind arrays. The individual feeds are first collected in one of the two orbiting Terra, then synchronized and fed to the machines aboard your vessel. If this satellite is destroyed, cut the number of links in half. Worse, it will no longer be ble to synchronize the flows, and so the entire feed will fail."

The viewer panned back to show Thargos standing next small trans matter disk. He gestured toward it.

"I will remain aboard the satellite until I have your solution. If I must destroy this relay, I will step aboard my moment before, where I will be perfectly safe."

The shot focused again on Thargos's grinning features. The requirements are these, Packlord: First, you and all ships will vacate Sol System within four TeiTan hours. Second, as surety for your compliance, you will send to me the boy, Jim Endicott, and the agent, Korkal Emut Denai."

Jim was mesmerized by the soft pinkness of the gullet behind those sharp white fangs as they yawned wider.

"I must have your reply in one Terran hour. If a vessel bearing my hostages has not been launched by that time, I will destroy this satellite. That is all."

The holoscreen vanished.

Jim felt the heaviness of his sigh as a sudden collapsing sensation in his diaphragm, as if somebody had just kicked him in the stomach.

"Great," he said. "When do I leave?"

"You don't, of course," Hith replied. "Korkal tells me this Thargos is no fool, so we know he cannot be serious about his ultimatum. He has no intention of letting that relay sat survive. Why should he? If he destroys it, he knows Hunzza will have this system at its mercy. And so he will blow it up no matter what we do. The rest is a ruse to get his hands on you. Somehow or other he has discovered that you are critical to the arrays. If he captures you and destroys the relay, then Hunzza wins. They won't even have to destroy Sol System, because we don't have enough force here to stop whatever they want to do. Terra will fall into their claws like a ripe plum and you with it. I can't allow that to happen."

"Packlord... Hith..."

"No, Jim. It's too late. I have only one option left. I will destroy that satellite myself--and this Thargos who presumes to give me ultimatums--and then take you and the controllers on this ship to safety. Perhaps the Hunzza won't destroy Sol System. And perhaps in the fullness of time, you and our scientists working together can re-create a working mind array using nonhuman brains. They tell me there is a remote chance that may be possible. So I'm sorry, Lord Endicott, but that's my decision."

"Pacllord, if there's some way to keep him from blowing that bomb for even ten minutes, there is another way!"

Hith looked down at his hands, his eyes half-lidded. After a long moment he looked up again. "I'm listening."

ABOARD ANY UNCONQUERABLE EN ROUTE TO

RELAY SATELLITE NUMBER Two: ETA HUNZZAN FLEETS: 09:00:00 AND COUNT INI  
,:

They stood around Tick, who sat in the pilot's chair, then toward Relay Satellite Number Two.

Korkal said, "Activate the device, Commander Tickeree." Tick's head was hidden behind his inter force shield, couldn't see his expression. A series of red dots began to Tick's command panels.

Korkal slapped Tick on one shoulder. "Be very careful of belt switch, okay?."

"Oh, yes."

Korkal turned to Jim. "You understand what I've done?"

"If you don't personally countermand the arming of the it will detonate and destroy everything within its range."

"Which will be more than enough to destroy the satellite. us, of course. As for Thargos's ship, the full power of the weapons systems are locked on it now. It will be destroyed,"i moment we dock on the satellite."

"I suppose the pack lord had to have his fail-safe device." Korkal stared at him. "What did you tell him after he the rest of us out? I can't imagine he would take this risk."

Jim shrugged. "It doesn't matter now. Is everything ready?.....  
Korkal glanced at Tick. "Yes. Those Romian yours--150 of them--are ready to disembark the minute we contact. If Thargos doesn't try to use his own ship to before we reach him, then we'll be in range to use the field about five minutes before we dock. We'll activate it  
understand how it works?"

"No, not how. But I understand what it will do. Thargos

mistake in using a primitive nuclear device to mine the satellite. Alba has technology--this suppresser field--that is capable of slowing, though not stopping, such a nuclear reaction. If he tries to set off the nuke--which he'll do as soon as he realizes the Pr/de has destroyed his own ship--it won't blow right away."

"It wasn't really a mistake," Korkal said. 'q'hargos couldn't have known about the suppresser technology. It was a by-product of unrelated research, and some bright weapons genius thought it might be useful for low-level primitive warfare. The only working prototype was aboard the Pr/de, and only there because they put at least one of everything they could think of on her."

Jim said, "It would have come in handy that day in the Defense Ministry." He shrugged. "So anyway, we'll have approximately twenty minutes to board the satellite, overcome resistance, and destroy the nuke. If everything goes perfectly."

Korkal showed his own fangs. "And nothing ever does, of course. I don't know what kind of magic you worked on the pack lord but I have to tell you I am forever grateful for this chance to get my hands on that damned lizard. We have a lot of things to settle, he and I."

"Well, at least things work out right for somebody..."

"Signal coming in," Tick's voice boomed. "Read on screen two." Thargos's face appeared. "Well," he said, "I must say I didn't expect it, but even I can make mistakes. Let me see you. Ah, my old friend Lord Denai." The Hunzza offered a vast display of teeth.

"I look forward to seeing you. In the flesh, as it were."

"Me too, snake skull."

"Such bravado. Empty, though, don't you think? And the boy as well. How are you, Jim Endicott? Long time no see, I believe your idiom is."

"I'm here," Jim said.

"Excellent. Tell your pilot to stand by for docking instructions.

I'll be expecting you shortly."

The screen went blank.

Korkal and Jim stared at each other. Tick said, "Code Red systemwide alarm. Ships entering real space beyond the cometary ring." A long pause. Then: "They're Hunzzan. At least two of them are sun-poppers."

SHATNER

ABOARO RELAY SATELLITE NUMBER TWO

argos watched the same display, but with entirely emotions. He'd known the first of the Hunzzan fleets would be before the Albans guessed. It was the reason he'd allowed ship bearing Korkal and Jim Endicott to approach. Their had trap wit ten all over it, but the arrival of the Hunzzan changed all the equations. Now the balance of power in' System

had shifted entirely. He shot a tight beam in the of the Hunzzan command ship, where it had been prepared for.

"Do not activate the sun-poppers," Thargos said. "Only dos my command." He waited until he had confirmation, then his attentions back toward the oncoming Alban ship hostages. Only a few minutes until it docked. He allowed one moment of thought about his plans for Korkal Emut and then pushed it away. There would be plenty of time for pleasure later, when he could concentrate his full seeing how loudly he could make an Alban scream.

Hith Mun Alter had guessed wrong. He hadn't counted early arrival of the first Hunzzan fleet. Thargos glanced again at the visuals of the oncoming vessel. Strange shape What was that weird half globe protruding from its skin? And was beginning to glow... The comm links to his own vessel vanished. All his screens broke up in flares of static.

The fools!

But he didn't hesitate even one second. He whirled and a switch closed, reflexively hunching against his own destruction.

Nothing happened. A rolling thud shivered through the stood on as the ANY Unconquerable settled onto the naked skin

the satellite, far from the expected docking platform. Six seconds later the squads of Romian mercenaries began to pour in, killing as they came.

Thargos absorbed it all in a single glance. His mind whirred. Only one chance to save himself--and maybe still get revenge. He took it, and began to run.

Korkal turned to the big Romian next to him and smiled. There were traces of blood and bits of gray-green flesh in Korkal's grin. Sometimes in battle the primal impulses took over.

Smoke billowed into the corridor ahead of them. Thin shouts echoed in their ears. They crouched down as a squad rushed past to clear the passageway before them.

"I can't believe it," Korkal grunted. "We're actually on schedule."

The Romian nodded. "Yeah. Every once in a while things actually go right. Maybe this is one of them."

A heavy thumping vibration quivered through the soles of their boots. "What do they call you, trooper?" Korkal asked.

"Sarge is good enough. It's been my name so long I'm not sure I can remember what the real one is."

"You know the Endicott kid?"

"Jim? I trained him. We're proud of him in the Red Death."

Korkal arched his eyebrows and started to reply, but Sarge clouted him heavily on one shoulder. "Clear up ahead. Let's go."

They grinned companionably at each other and scrambled forward, firing as they went. Three minutes later they crashed into the control room of Relay Satellite Number Two. A minute later Jim, his face streaked with smoke, a small blotch of red on his left shoulder, and an ungainly, weird-looking pistol in his right hand, joined them.

Korkal stared at him. "You were supposed to stay in the rear and not take any risks."

Jim grinned sheepishly. "Sorry. Old reflexes, I guess.

worry, it's only a scratch. Hi, Sarge."

"Hi, Lieutenant."

"And that's enough reunion. Jim, Sarge and I here will go care of that nuke. You'd better get started on whatever it is plan to do."

Jim nodded. "Get that bomb, Korkal. If it goes off, it will pretty good bruise on my plans."

Sarge grinned. "Don't you worry about it, Lieutenant. Me and this Korkal fellow will take care of it."

But Jim had already turned away from them, looking for machines the construction plans said were there--the that were the key to everything.



ABOARD ALB AGENS PRIDE

Hith Mun Alter watched the progress of what could only loosely be called a battle. There was an entire Hunzzan fleet out there, and it was chewing up his two pitiful squadrons.

He had almost no more time. His ships were fighting a valiant rear guard action, slowly retreating in-system, but the main elements of his own reinforcements would not arrive for an hour yet.

He could read the tactical summaries as well as anybody. He didn't have an hour. And no message yet from Jim and Korkal. Well, at least that Hunzzan spy didn't have his ship any longer. He took some small comfort in that.

He decided to give it another ten minutes. Jim had known the risks. But this roll of the dice had been the last one, and there wouldn't be another.

He closed his eyes, the better to regard the bleak future he saw within himself. Without the arrays, Albagens and all her works would fade and die. She would topple slowly, of course. His empire still held great power.

But not enough. Not without the arrays. Would he be able to hold true when the time came? In the end he would face the final choice, the final sacrifice. Would he burn Alba's spirit on the altar of survival in a last paroxysm of defiance?

He opened his eyes. All he wanted to do was sleep. But there would be no sleep for him. Not for a long time to come.

AS0 Ann RELAY SATELLITE NUMSEn TWO

Jim and the two techs worked frantically, ripping cables housings and splicing them into new arrangements.

"You're not really going to plug yourself into this, are you?" of the techs asked.

"Yeah, that's what I plan on doing."

The Alban shook his head. "This wasn't designed for interface. It's supposed to connect to the feed monitors sync machines. It's the full feed. No buffers at all. It'll blow brain right out your ears."

"Maybe not," Jim said.

The tech shrugged. "It's your skull, friend. Okay, that's

He leaned back. "Ugly-looking deal. Maybe it will work."

Jim dropped an inter force ring around his neck. The two made the necessary connections. Jim sat cross-legged deck, surrounded by cables the size of his thigh. Smaller were festooned over his shoulders like jungle vines.

He moved his chin, and his head disappeared behind silver globe. The two techs glanced at each other.

"You ready?."

"Hit me," Jim said.

## ARRAY OATASPACE

The closest Jim Endicott had ever come to dying as a child had been an accident. He and his best friend, exhilarated by a Wolfbane summer storm that went crashing and booming off toward the mountains, had stood on the edge of the Big Eel River and watched its swollen muddy power go hissing smoothly past where they stood on a high concrete embankment.

"Wow," Jim said. And as he said it the badly poured concrete that supported the section where he stood, battered and scraped by hours of rushing water, finally crumbled away. He felt a moment of shock as, arms flailing, he toppled into the chocolate torrent. Only the ragged branches of a half-fallen tree down stream had saved him, snagging him as he went past. But he'd never forgotten the blank brute force of that river and its smooth death grip tightening on him.

This was like that.

He fell into the data flow of half a billion minds. It sucked him under and dragged him spinning away. He felt himself sliding deeper and deeper, battered and bruised by the ceaseless hammering of those patterns. He grasped weakly for some purchase and found nothing, only the silent deadly rush. No human mind could take such damage for long, not even his. He felt the rise of a different darkness, one that would snuff out his own guttering flame as if it had never been.

"I am . . ." he gasped. "I need..."

Pictures began to ghost gently up from his past, and he knew he was dying. Carl Endicott choked up a great gout of blood and said, "I love you." Tabitha Endicott held his head in her lap and whispered softly, "I love you . . ." A foxy-faced woman with sandy blond hair, lines in her tired face, and eyes the color of burning acetylene, cradled him in her arms and looked down on him. "I

love you, baby.." now take my hand and let me pull you That's right, just grab hold of Momma now, and she'll take you. Ohh, yes, that's my lovey baby boy, my sweet dim my

He yawned in vast astonishment as this vision left him as as the others, and he thought that maybe this particular would never return to him. But somehow he was rising now, ing out of the burning flood, drifting gently up and out, up some place where the stars glittered like cold eyes.

He stood on a high place and reached out with the hands of mind, the great scoops that had been in his genome since beginning, and began to gather half a billion minds into his

It didn't take long or maybe it took an eternity. Time had meaning on his high place. After a while the other came in of living flame and stood before him.

I am here.

An unspoken question hung between them. dim said, couldn't know. You thought that since you'd created the and knew them, and since you were now an integral part they would always be yours to control. How you must laughed at the machines that sought to supplant you. How have you been manipulating me behind the scenes?"

Since my beginning here. Perhaps that was a mistake. "Perhaps. You sought to bring me here and bind me.

me once when you were something else. Do you remember?."

Yes I remember.

"Do you still wish to bind me?"

A meaningless question. You know I cannot.

"She built me this way. To be the final controller of her

It was her ultimate fail-safe. She must have trusted a great in what she hoped I would become. Or maybe she just herself."

I told you she loved you. But even I didn't understand muclz

Jim felt the great rush of the river of souls begin to the part of his mind designed to channel them tucked each vi dual mind into the larger pattern it dreamed with such strength.

Do you know what you are?

"No. Do you?"

No. I can guess, but that would only be a probability. You create yourself in the fullness of time. And you will be alone.

The current of sadness that flowed over him then was almost too much too bear. But he bore it because it was his burden,

though he hadn't asked or sought for it.

"Yes. Will you serve me?"

No. I cannot serve anybody. I am Outsider. Before I become a servant I will cast myself on the universal streams and end myself forever. Just as you, Jim Endicott, I must also be free to choose.

Yes, Jim thought, I suppose you must. "Will you help me then?" If I choose to do so.

"Very well. These are the choices. Do with them what you will."

RELAY STATION NUMBER TWO

hargos crept slowly past the blasted wreckage of the initial assault and peered upward. The howling mercenaries were long gone, vanished into the bowels of the satellite, busy with their slaughters. A huge hole gaped in the ceiling above him, lighted by a weird greenish glow. Beyond the hole a boarding tube snaked outward. He came a little closer but could see nothing. It didn't matter. He knew where the tube ended.

His luck had turned poisoned as a grubelstaxer's fangs. Sometimes it worked like that. He held little hope for his own survival, but hope remained for something else. One message, one little message. It didn't even have to be coded or tight beamed. His own identity code and the order itself would be enough.

The sun-poppers were still out there awaiting his instructions. He squared his shoulders. One play for all the marbles, as the Terries liked to say.

A curious race. In a way it was a pity they had so little time left to exist. He peered once again into the ragged hole, then bunched his massive thighs and leaped straight up into the tube.

Asonn ;E ANY En'ms I've

The admiral knew it was hopeless even before he brought small vanguard of cruisers out of subspace into position inside the Sol System cometary ring. His force was heavily numbered, and the main fleet was at least half an hour behind him. Nevertheless, he would follow orders. His orders were to attack the Hunzzan fleets by any and all possible means and he intended to do precisely that.

Monitor feeds from every unit in his squadron flowed into his mind. He was an old hand at keeping things separate and making good decisions based on the flood of data that constantly fused his awareness.

He brought his ship into real space inside a cluster

It was a standard formation. He allowed himself a quick look at the general tactical situation. Yes, it was as bad as he'd feared. He was outnumbered at least ten to one, and Hunzzan ships had detected him and were beginning to close their lines in his direction.

His mouth slowly fell open. Something absolutely huge lumbering out from the Terran System. A moment later it arrived confirming it was as an Alban vessel, and he slightly.

He put it out of his mind. Big as it was, he didn't see how he could make any difference in the final outcome. He hated the thought of fighting a suicide engagement, but that decision was not his to make.

Grimly he prepared himself to give the orders. But before he could do so something took over his ship--and every ship in his fleet.

After that, he could only watch in helpless wonder.

ABOAnO HNV SEn PENT FANG

Admiral Heliarchon was luxuriating in his own good luck. He had been in the right place when his fleet had been part of the blockade of Albagens. That had led to this opportunity. The target was pitiful, of course, just a backwater world full of savages he'd never heard of until a few days ago. But his scuttlebutt system was as good as anybody's, and the word was this engagement might result in the capture or death of the Alban pack lord himself.

He found it hard to credit, but perhaps it was true. He glanced across his Fleet Battle Control Center. Everything was calm. The emerging Alban ships were already neatly englobed. Pathetic, really. Soon this whole system would be a killing ground. He found the thought wildly pleasing.

And he was right, though not in the way he'd imagined.

AsoAnn THE ANY ELn'nAIS REVENGE

' " Admiral?"

"Yes, Commander?."

"I don't understand."

"I don't either, Commander, but it's all rather wonderful, you think?"

"I don't know, sir. It scares me. It's like a... ghost is in of things."

The admiral turned slowly, fangs glinting in his grizzled "Let me tell you, Commander. I don't care if it's the in charge of my ships. By the Nine Hot Hells, what a job your ghost is doing at killing Hunzzan ships. I haven't myself so much since--I can't remember when I've ever myself this much."

"Yes, sir. But it's still scary, isn't it? .... "Commander, why don't you go take a nice cold shower?"

Asonn ;E ANY UCOOUEnSE

Tick turned his head to glance once again around the deck. He was alone and feeling bored. It wasn't fair. else got to storm aboard the satellite and grab glory with hands, and what did he have to do?

Sit here on his butt and baby-sit an empty ship. He deeper into his chair and sighed heavily. He might as well be on the Pr/de snoozing in his bunk for all the action he was to see.

The gray-green fanged shadow yanked him from the chair one single powerful surge, held him up like so much meat, then swiped with its other hand.

Tick looked down at his belly. There was a coldness there. something dark was spilling out in long ropy sausages. He up into great green eyes that blinked at him madly. Then he himself flying through the air until he met the nearest with bone-crunching force.

Thargos spared one glance to make sure this pilot, whoever it was, would not be coming for him anytime soon. Then he settled himself into the pilot's chair, pleased to find it nicely warmed by its previous occupant.

It would take a few moments to decipher the comm equipment available. But the ships drive controls were obvious enough. Thargos used the manual overrides to set the ship in motion. He felt a long ripping shudder as the vessel pulled away from the satellite, tearing away the boarding tube as it departed.

He didn't know why he did it. As soon as his orders reached the sun-poppers, he would be trying to outrun the blast front of a full-blown nova in nothing more than this tin can. It was probably hopeless, but it wasn't in him to give up. He would keep on fighting until everything ended. You just never knew how things might turn out. Who knew?. If he waited a little, he might even be able to sneak far enough out that one of the Hunzzan ships could reel him in before the nova wave front fried him to a crisp.

Huddled and broken in the corner, Tick came slowly awake. He shook his head. The Hunzza was in his pilot's chair. He felt a weak sense of indignation. He wasn't strong enough to feel any thing more.

Wired to his belt was a small black box with a shielded switch. It was a makeshift job, hastily done, like everything else about this mission.



His fingers sought it, slipped on a film of his own blood, then settled firmly on the switch.

Even the fail-safe had a fail-safe. If for some reason the bomb on board didn't go off as it should, this switch would initiate a manual, physical override. He looked down at the tangle of his own guts spilling across his shattered legs. Then he looked back at the Hunzza working busily in the pilot's chair.

'rake my chair, will you?" Tick murmured softly.

He flipped the switch, and everything went very bright before the final darkness lifted him gently away.

ABOARD ALB AGENS PRIDE

he two of them sat in a hazy cone of light, hunched toward each other in the silent room. The old leader and the young man. The intensity of their mutual concentration made them resemble card players in the midst of a high-stakes game, and perhaps that was exactly what was going on. A high-stakes game.

"I'hey're gone now. It's just you and me. What really happened?"  
"What we'd hoped. I had to tell you about the controller mechanisms my real mother built into me. Otherwise, you wouldn't have given me another crack at the arrays."

Hith nodded. "I almost destroyed you myself."

"I know. Anyway, I was able to get in using the feed monitor port on the relay satellite as a kind of back door."

"And you eliminated this Outsider, whatever it was?"

Jim paused. He wanted to make sure he said it exactly right. So it would be as convincing as possible.

"Yes, I eliminated it. You see, it didn't really exist. Outsider was an artifact of the arrays themselves. I thought it was Delta, but it wasn't. Because Delta was one of the creators of the original arrays, they bore his imprint implicit in their structure. When we created a vastly more powerful version that imprint appeared. Think of it as an echo. Or better yet, a ghost. The Plebs had been used before by Delta. And so they remembered him dimly, perhaps

only unconsciously, and that was what appeared. The ghost Delta. There was never really any intelligence there, only appearance of it. And I'm glad. It might have been much harder take control of the arrays if Outsider had been anything real."

Jim examined the logic of this and felt satisfied. It rang because in some twisted way it was the truth. The ghost in machine.

Hith stared at him for a long time. "So what will you do Lord Endicott? You know you can have anything of me you Albans keep their promises and pay their debts. And our debt you is very large."

Jim's lips quirked. "Unless he debt looks too much like a cide pact."

"Yes." Hith leaned back. His cup of cinnamon tea floated in hand, a film of steam rising from it. "Someday you'll more about that than you would like."

"I hope not," Jim said.

"I will be returning soon to Alba. I need to be there, and the sis here is done. This Thargos is dead, the Hunzzan destroyed, Outsider eliminated, and the arrays functioning properly. The Pr/de will remain here in Sol System as a mobile COntroller and a glorified bodyguard until Alba's full power arrives protect Sol System. I think that's best. I'll return on sel." :

Jim put his hands on his knees and rocked backwards.

shoulders popped faintly, tiny distinct sounds. "And I'm going to stay here, Hith. I think I want to be just a kid for a while. somehow I still have to find my father's genome so I can the Solis Academy. Maybe later I'll take a little trip to like to meet Tick's mother."

The pacldord nodded. "Jim, you know you're welcome almost any rank you wish in the Alban Navy. If you want tain your own ship, all you have to do is ask."

Jim shook his head. "It wouldn't be the same. It wouldn't be dream. Maybe somebody else's dream. Maybe Tick's."

"I'm SOITy about your friend, Jim."

"I am too, Hith. I've lost too many of them. I hate war.

has to be a way to put an end to it."

"Maybe you'll be the one to find that way, Jim. I hope you

Jim stood up and stuck out his hand. Hith took it. "I like custom, Jim," he said. You keep in touch with me."

"Oh, yes. I just need some time to find out who I am. I'm not really sure anymore. And I don't think I can find what I need out in the galaxy. Whatever it is, it's here. In Sol System. Somewhere."

Hith walked him to the door. "Your people say "Godspeed," don't they?"

Jim turned suddenly and wrapped the ancient leader in a hug. "Godspeed to you, Hith."

After he had gone, the pack lord resumed his seat. His features were thoughtful and shadowed. Jim planned to be a kid for a while, but Hith knew that was impossible. He could never go back to his childhood, not really. Once you begin to dream of it, it is too late to return. But Jim would have to learn that for himself.

As for him, he had not exactly lied. But he was lord of three hundred thousand worlds, and so he had withheld some of his thoughts.

He would be returning home soon, but some part of his attention would continue turning toward Terra, until he knew one way or another. It was why he was leaving Korkal behind to command the Pr/de. He didn't know how much of what Jim had told him about Outsider he believed. And he had no way to verify any of it. Maybe Korkal would come up with something.

Because no matter how the war with Hunzza turned out, he would have to learn the answer. The safety of the galaxy depended on it.

Was Terra a Leaper Culture? Was it?

Jim and Sarge sat together in an empty lounge. The light was dim, and they talked together softly as grunts always did after a fight.

That friend of yours was a good one, Jim. I passed your request on to the officers and they agreed. So Tickeree is now an honorary member of the Red Death, and we will never forget him."

"We will never forget him," Jim repeated. There was a to his voice, as if the two of them were playing out a ritual far older than either of them. And in fact they were, and they both knew it.

Jim sighed. It was the best he could do. No matter what pended to him, somebody would remember Lieutenant Tickeree and his Final sacrifice. It was a fair memorial and the best he could do.

The warriors never forget.

The door to the lounge slid open and a slender figure stood out, lined against the brighter glow beyond. The light gleamed throughout a weight of blond hair. Jim looked up. "Cat..." he said,

slowly to his feet.. She came toward him. "I've come to take you home," she said. "Hey, Jim, aren't you gonna introduce me?" Sarge said.

Then he realized Jim wasn't paying any attention to him at all.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Much of In viewed on a Here are sev fare from eitl

Two classic people in the

Ender' sGan Paperback. 1

ISBN: 0812

The Forever 272 pages. P

ISBN: 03807

HISTORIE

America's Vi Hardcover, ," date: April i!

ISBN: 03955

World War H by R. Com Enslow Publ

ISBN: 08949

Alien Hands deals with the future of mass warfare grand scale, or, in some cases, a very personal scale. eral resources that refer to the questions of mass war her a historical or a futuristic viewpoint.

SCIENCE FICTION-

novels about the future of war, and the role of young t future.

e by Orson Scott Card. Reprint Edition, Mass Market Published by Tor Books. Publication date: July 1994.

War by Joe Haldeman. Mass Market Paperback, ublished by Avon. Publication date: May 1991. '08213

is OF mr'AT HuN Wns: WW I, !1, VIeTNAM

'etnam War; A Narrative History by Elizabeth Becker.

211 pages. Published by Clarion Books. Publication 92.

in Europe: America Goes to War (American War Series) td Stein. Library Binding, 128 pages. Published by is hers Publication date: August 1994.

The Guns of August by Barbara W. Tuchman. Reprint Edition Paperback, 511 pages. Published by Ballantine Books (Trade Paperback). Publication date: April 1994.

ISBN: 034538623X

All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque, /W. Wheen (Translator), Erich Marie Remarque. Reissue Edition, Mass Market Paperback. Published by Fawcett Books. Publication date:. June 1995.

ISBN: 0449213943

MILITARY ACADEMIES

Visit the web site of the Academy that will in the future prepare the pilots for the "Great White Starships" of the United States. <http://www.usafa.af.mil/>

Jim has two "up-close-and-personal" experiences with atomic bombs. Learn the history of the weapons that will be considered crude and primitive by the time of this tale's telling.

Now It Can Be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project by Leslie R. Groves, Leslie M. Groves. Paperback. Published by Da Capo Press. Publication date: March 1983.

ISBN: 0306801892

The whole idea of what is a computer, and what computers one day become is changing very rapidly. Here are some of the current approaches that may eventually lead to the kind of computers Jim uses throughout In Alien Hands.

Neural Networks: Cognizers: Neural Networks and Machines That (W//ey Sc/ence Ed/t/on) by i% Colin Johnson. Hardcover, 260 pageS.: Published

by John Wiley & Sons. Publication date: October 1988

ISBN: 0471611611

Naturally Intelligent Systems by Maureen Caudill and Charles Butler.  
Paperback. Published by MIT Press. Publication October 1992.

ISBN: 0262531135



The Garden in the Machine: The Emerging Science of Artificial Life by  
Claus Emmeche and Steven Sampson (Translator). Hardcover, 199 pages.  
Published by Princeton University Press. Publication date: July  
1994.

ISBN: 0691033307

