

Diane Carey - Star Trek - Gateways 2 - Chainmail

Chapter One

Deep Space, Sagittarius Star Cluster

"keller. We're in."

A cloying jungle sensation of oily fingers brushed Nick Keller's shoulders as he lowered his communicator from his lips. He turned, braced, knees flexed, and expected to be struck from behind.

No one there. Just this prehensile smell moving across his skin.

Then why did he feel somebody's eyes? He was being watched.

And why hadn't he drawn his phaser? Wasn't that supposed to be the efficient Starfleet reflex action? When had things changed so much?

Challenger hadn't responded. Had they heard him? Was this place com-shielded? They'd barely been able to get a transporter beam to take a fix, and only into this one four-meter square. Everything else here was still a mystery. Scans just came back crying.

From a low-slung entry vestibule he moved into an excremental stink. His boots stuck in a marshy floor, obliging him to repossess his feet from the suction with each step. He brushed his nose and ended up only knuckling the self-adhesive fitted filter mask over his mouth and nostrils.

"Somebody piddled," he commented.

"Methane."

A few steps to Ms right, Search and Rescue Officer Sa-vannah Ring kept one eye on her science tricorder while picking through the mushy flooring. A Haz-Mat/First Response pack on her back caused her to stoop slightly even though she also wore a supportive emergency harness and belt. A pale green haze from some unseen light source turned her sangria hair into a helmet of lemonade.

"Don't take your mask off" she warned. "You won't last sixty seconds."

She moved ahead, off to the right, toward a corridor draped with silvery gauze curtains.

Keller stepped after her. He itched to lead the way, but Ring had the sci-tricorder and was better at reading it. Should a commander lead the way or keep his eyes open? What if he had to choose?

To his left, the sphinx-like presence of his tactical and security officer almost seemed at home in this pre-historic grotto. Zoa's golden skin, decorated with story tattoos on her shoulders and arms, and the hundreds of spaghetti braids framing her face were muted to bronze under the strange lighting. Her eyes, dots of inky blue without pupils, keenly scanned the surroundings. She blinked seldom, which created an almost doll-like demeanor. Her lined lips made no comment. Her only sounds were the soft jangle of two sheathless Rassua dirks on her belts, pinging against brass loops woven into the leather braiding of her leggings, and the ponk ponk of her sandals' thick soles. Every third step or so, her long toenails, curved tidily over the soles, snatched up a bit of moss and threw it into her path.

Too dang quiet... no throb of engines, no click of machinery, no murmur of airflow or whisk of hiding crewmen slipping behind die twisting silvery mesh as Keller brushed the curtains aside.

Savannah Ring ducked under another curtain and went ahead. "How about 'Colonial Guard'?"

Keller tasted the suggestion. "Nah, Belle Terre doesn't intend to be a colony any longer than it can get away with. Governor Pardonnet's got some big ideas about planetary autonomy. He wants full-fledged Fed-eration membership as soon as he can qualify for it"

"For sixty thousand people? Barely a city."

"Give'm time. Look at this interior decor... early mossbound."

"Not sure it's moss." Ring spoke from slightly ahead, one eye on her tricorder screen. "I'm not picking up any cell structure." She frowned at the readings. The in-strument's tiny screen flickered, unable to make up its mind. "I hope our boys put their masks on before they came over. If they came over."

"Their Plume disintegrated," Keller said tardy. "If they're not in here, they're not anywhere." As his stom-ach cramped with tension, he added, "I'm not ready to lose two crewmen."

She glanced at him. "Maybe it's our dues, Nick."

"Ain't paying."

The edge in his tone nearly tripped her. Ring stopped the glances and concentrated forward.

Before them lay a long swirling tube-like structure, more a cave than a ship's interior, but in fact they were on a ship. In their last communication with their first officer, Shucorion said the basic shape suggested old Kauld design. Then the two-man patroller he'd been flying went silent and...

Accept it. And apparently blew up. Outside, space glittered with microbits of the demolished craft. Amaz-ing that a two-man craft could have so many molecules to disrupt.

His stomach crawled. His hands were cold.

As he and Zoa followed Ring's tricorder scan toward the far end of this airlock, the silvery curtains fell be-hind them and the draping effect was taken over by sheets of something that looked like Spanish moss, hanging in layers from unseen heights between sec-tions. Where was the ceiling?

At least there was gravity. But why was there gravity? Who needed gravity? Where was the ship's complement?

They struggled into a greenish-silver cave of uniden-tifiable shapes, geometric forms, clearly not natural, though overgrown with a coat made up of shimmering leaves here, tiny hairs there, thick spores over there, as if some gardener had let otherworldly kudzu take over inside his house. No helm, no walkways, no seats or consoles, yet this was a space vessel and it was mov-ing, feller hungered to ask Shucorion why he thought this vessel might be Kauld, or might be masquerading as Kauld. But Shucorion was missing.

Hardly a month in command, and Keller had mis-placed his plainspoken first officer and his fanciful bosun, each newly appointed, each desperately needed.

Misplaced.

Lost... Shucorion was Blood, and he was talking about Kauld, and Keller didn't fool himself that the alliance between the two ancient warring cultures was temporary at best, an illusion at worst. He knew the Federation's push into the Ouster had upset an ages-old balance that had been about to tip in Kauld's favor. The Kauld were talking nice right now, but for how long? No matter what kind of overtures Keller made, he and his one ship were a very thin stick to hold Blood and Kauld apart. Had the stick snapped? Why did things have to be this way?

A methyl-green^ canopy of living stuff, or what seemed to be living, dipped over snaggletoothed structures that resembled more than anything else man-sized mounds of decaying cheese. Upon those grew lichen and some kind of coppery mushroom. Between them were masses of three-inch-wide bulbs with spines, and on each spine was a little glossy globe. Keller swore they were looking at him as he and Ring picked past.

'This place'll cure your hiccups,' he muttered. 'Never know you were in space if you didn't come from outside.'

Ring poked a probing finger at a piece of—was it machinery? 'There's something metallic under this coating. Reads as alloy.'

"What kind?"

"I'm picking up all kinds, all around us. Steel... manganese bronze... air-hardened steel... perminvar... pig iron... silicon steel... fused metal... cupronickel... silver leaf... what the hell?" She stopped reading off the list, cocked her hip in disgust, and grumbled, "The tricorder's having a hernia. Some of this stuff doesn't read as any kind of conventional compound, even though I'm getting some base-metallic traits, 'these bonds can't happen. There's got to be something wrong with this thing.'"

While she grumbled curses at her tricorder, Keller came up behind her and prodded the same formation, a tall cylindrical column sticking up out of the alabaster mesh. His finger went through a draping of hair-like fibers as soft as a woman's ponytail, and inside was something hard. "Is this some kind of tree?"

I

"In the Tin Man's imagination, maybe. I only read I metal." !

"Even this?" The soft stuff rolled in his hand. The only hint of metallic nature was the sheen over the curves of his fingers. It left a satiny film on his skin. Lubricant?

He dropped it, turned, and pointed at the nearest cheesy mound. "Over here. How does this stuff read? Stone?"

The tricorder paused as she redirected it. "Metal," she said. "Rings of various alloys ranging out from a copper core."

They turned together, and looked out at the widening hold of strange and inelegant shapes, hanging greenery and things recognizable as growing. The tricorder must be faulty, or blocked.

Keller wiped the sleeve of his maroon sweater across his right cheek. His face stung with chill. "How can we be hot and cold at the same time? My hands are clammy, but my face and my feet are freezing."

"It's cold," Ring said. "A little more moisture and it'd be snowing in here. You're just nervous."

Now at Keller's side, Zoa wasn't sweating at all, or cold either despite her bare tattooed arms. She peered at him with those dots as if waiting for him to say something smart

"If this is a transport," he attempted, "where's the crew and passengers?" His foot came down into some-thing soft, and stuck. "Cow pats. I'm back on the ranch."

Ring squinted down. "Santa Fe in the early Devo-nian, maybe. Gorgeous, isn't it?"

How could this Halloween vessel look good to her when two of their shipmates were missing?

Keller shivered. "Girl, you're odd."

Slightly before him, Ring ducked suddenly, only to find that the offending obstacle was only a shadow.

"Belle Terre Secret Service," she said as she moved forward. "No, you don't want just the planet Sagittar-ius Star Cluster Secret Service."

"Clunky."

"Keller's Cavaliers?"

"Please..."

"Nick's Knights."

"How long we been friends?"

"Um-going on six years."

"I quit after today." He took a few more steps. His tone wasn't very reassuring. His grumpy attempt to lighten the mood had done nothing for his own. Savannah's mood was always the same, give or take shifts toward passion. He thought again about drawing his sidearm, but without a visible threat he didn't want to shake up the others. Be-sides, he needed both hands to pick his way through this place without a fall. "We can't call ourselves 'Cavaliers,' anyway," he extended, a less than subtle apology for snapping at her. "The living-history guys on Belle Terre have a whole regiment of horse that call themselves that"

"Are you going to the war next month?"

"What war?"

"The Revolutionary reenactors and the Civil War ones challenged the Medieval warriors and that little stubborn bunch who call themselves Neo-Vikings. They want to stage a big battle on the meadow outside Port Bellamy "

"On that meadow? They won't even be able to see each other. There's perpetual fog in there."

"Weather's supposed to stabilize in the valley any minute. The war guys want to celebrate and all kill each other."

"I didn't hear about this."

"You've been neck-deep in the circuit trunks. The Revolutionaries promised to put away their firearms if the Medievalists don't use archery."

"Swords only?"

"I guess. It's all nonlethal anyway. Just a show."

"Hmm... kinda like to see the tactics of that."

'Thought you might. Since you like studying hist-" Abruptly, Ring stopped moving forward. Zoa passed Keller from behind and bumped into the other woman.

Something had changed in Ring's posture, the set of her shoulders. She no longer looked up, but fixed upon the tiny screen of the instrument in her hand.

Keller shoved past Zoa and peered over Ring's shoulder at the unhappy tricorder. "Bacteria?"

Tiny yellow spores clung to Ring's hair. "Only if it's bacteria with a heartbeat"

His hand trembled as Keller pulled out his communi-cator and adjusted it for maximum gain, short-range, then brought it to his lips. "Keller to Shucorion. Do you read?... Can you hear me? Come on, come on... make a good noise..."

The palm-sized box scrabbled, dutifully searching for a voice. None came. In this gauzy, monochromatic environment, all silvery yellows and greenie silvers, would he be able to spot someone like Shucorion, a man with deep blue skin, wearing a blue sweater and gray trousers? Would Shucorion's dark brown hair look as washed out as Savannah Ring's did? Would they be able to tell him from the shadows?

For the first time Keller looked down at "his own hand. More like grapefruit rind than flesh.

And at Zoa, poking at an object that might as well have been a roll of carpet stood up on one end. She still looked gold. The green was probably just afraid of her. Her leather suit, though, looked pumpkin orange in-stead of tanned.

/ should've noticed this.

Adjusting his perception for the weird colors, he moved forward again, hunting for a yellow or green lump instead of a gray or blue one. In his hand, the communicator didn't seem so cold anymore.

Silence in this place had a bitter echo as they tracked the tiny signal on which they pinned their hopes. He decided they were still in some kind of airlock. This vessel was clearly segmented, and this chamber was narrower than the vessel itself, so it had to be some kind of entry path. From here he could see mesh-draped chambers, one beyond the other, lying before them like an infinity mirror.

He touched the back of his hand to his own cheek. No more frosty sting. "Is it getting warmer in here? Maybe I'm adjusting."

"It warmers." Zoa's sharp-gravel voice startled him. Though she was hard to scare, even she seemed

spooked in this place. Usually she hardly moved as well as hardly spoke. Here, she constantly scanned and shifted, never staying in one spot for more than a few seconds.

Temperature was definitely above freezing now. While he wasn't close to comfortable, he could push down the shivering now and his hands had stopped aching. Still, not exactly a heat wave.

He checked his communicator. Channels open. Still receiving. No one was sending.

"There!" Savannah Ring lowered her tricorder and pointed forward.

Ten feet before them, at the edge of the marshy ex-cuse for a deck, a purplish twist lay crushed against a cheese mound, barely distinguishable as a torso and legs. The only real clue was the single two-foot braid of hair draped over a hunched shoulder.

"Aw, no-" Keller bolted forward, careless of obstacles that might be hidden in the drappings of mesh. He raked his way through with his guts in his throat.

But as he knelt and touched Shucorion's back and the ball of his shoulder, the Blood stirred. When he tried to push himself up on both elbows, Keller eagerly helped him.

"Don't move him!" Savannah Ring hurried to catch up. Zoa came right behind her.

Unwilling to massage the moment, Keller ignored her. He pulled Shucorion up until they could see each other. The Blood's blue skin was magenta in this odd lighting, but his eyes were the same clear teardrop-blue as always. Somehow the lighting here didn't change them. He blinked and squeezed them tight as if they were stinging. The side of his neck was scored with abrasions and a bloody scrape colored his jaw, but he was alive.

Alive! After an antimatter explosion!

"Shucorion, it's me!" Silly announcement-but Keller was so glad to see his first officer blinking at him that all professional templates drained out his socks. He grasped Shucorion by both arms in a way he hoped was reassuring, if urgent. "Where's Bonifay? Was he with you? Is he here?"

"Bonifay?... Bonifay-" Shucorion blinked, confused, then forced himself out of the fog and gestured toward the cavernous guts of the big vessel. "He must... have gone there. I ordered him to stay on the Plume-"* He clutched at Keller and rasped, "**I ordered him!"

"Where did he go? Tell me where!"

As Keller's demand rolled on a weak echo, Shucorion pointed out, away from them, into the long throat of the vessel.

Before his reaching hand, the wet-moir,* cavern gaped, unhelpful, dour, and deep.

Chapter Two Keller scrambled his brains to make sense of the past hour's events. Shucorion and Bonifay had been alone on a Blood Plume, supplying the small force of Blood ships cooperating with Keller and the colony on Belle Terre. The Blue Net was their own little ram fleet, Keller's attempt to appear stronger against the unstable Kauld. Now that the Federation had a presence in the Sagittarius Ouster, he was determined that the presence have some effect. After all, he and all the other colonial transplants had intruded on a very old struggle and upset the balance. All Kauld had been about to win their ancient

tug-of-war with Blood Many, when in steps the United Federation of Planets, all shiny and new, and all previous bets are can-celed. Blood saw a chance to side with the new guy. Kauld had cracked into a civil conflict of their own, some friendly, some very much otherwise. Politics. Yech.

Now Keller relied upon his Blue Net, a cluster of Blood Savages, each with a handful of smaller Plumes attached, spreading their presence out as wide as might be reasonable-nobody really knew what "reasonable" was-like an octopus in its hole puffing up and show-ing just its eyes. Don't touch me. I'm big.

But attacks still occurred. Kauld raiders, defying their own battlelords, had become posturing and bel-ligerent. Shucorion and Bonifay had broken off to in-vestigate this unexplained new intruder, picked up imexplainable readings, ventured too close hoping to explain them, and -been struck hard by what must be an automated system. Hot-blooded Bonifay led an escape into the ship that had struck them down. Maybe it hadn't seemed so crazy at the time.

And here they stood, without him.

"Did he have his mask on?" Keller held his breath.

"Oh..." Touching his own mask, Shucorion seemed only now to remember it was there. "Yes. We should have fought to save the Plume... we had contain-ment-"

He almost got the words "shutdown" out before he collapsed into a coughing fit Slipping against the sup-port of Keller's arm, Shucorion fought to sit up, though his legs were still folded in an awkward position. His clear filter mask fogged with his effort

As he struggled, a hand pressed to his chest, his head turned enough to notice Savannah Ring's tricorder humming over him. He lurched toward her and pushed the instrument down.

"Don't scan!" he wheezed. "Stop this!"

Ring drew back defensively, saving her tricorder from assault "Why?"

*The attack came when we-^scanned-for power source!.. turn it off!"

"Rim it off, Savannah," Keller supported.

Shucorion looked at him. "Where is Challenger?"

"Laying off about eight thousand kilometers. We couldn't read emissions, so we beamed in."

"We neither." Shucorion's fingers sank into Keller's supporting arm and he used the leverage to rearrange his legs.

"Slow " Keller cautioned.

"We picked up this vehicle... Bonifay read mass, but no power, no engines-----How does it move at all?" His eyes were desperate and confused, even angry with the unknown as he broke off for another coughing spell, a painful one.

"It's called inertia," Keller said, trying to sound con-fident.

**No-no," Shucorion insisted. "It came out of hyperlight speed-and slowed itself!"

"Then it's got a power source we haven't found yet, that's all."

"Keep Challenger away. When we moved near, we were-attacked. We must get out from here. This ship is dangerous-"

Ring offered, "It's not making any moves toward the frigate. Might be an automated proximity alert."

"No power," Shucorion wheezed, shaking his head. "No engines, yet it crippled us. The containment failed, and our-our... Bonifay should never have disobeyed me... this is very-bad-for him-"

"Take it easy," Keller soothed. "You're lucky to have escaped over here. Your Plume's antimatter field col-lapsed completely. We read the explosion." A shudder of relief ran up his spine and he paused. "Thought you were dead, shadow...."

They looked at each other. Shucorion's eyes were grim and haunted, as if he thought they were each gaz-ing at a doomed man.

What's wrong? Keller's question went unvoiced.

Whether he might've mustered die resolve to ask, he would never know. A loud sssshdonng clanged deep in the chambered ship, and echoed out to them. Zoa's thick-soled sandals clunked on the padded deck as she vaulted between them and the great indoors, but she was confronted only with another echo, another donnng, and then silence.

Then, a gentle gush of dry, warm air swelled into the corridor and made Keller's sandy hair flicker against his forehead. He tried to stand, but Shucorion kept hold of him.

"What changed?" Keller asked.

Annoyed that he had ordered the tricorder off and now wanted answers, Savannah Ring turned the scan-ner back on and squinted at the screen. "Oxygen. A lot of it. I'd say this monster just compensated for us."

"How civil..." When Ring reached for her mask, Keller snatched her wrist. "Me first"

He drew a long deep breath of the good stuff, let it out, drew a second one deeper, then pulled his mask away from his nose and mourn an inch, and sniffed.

Though the scent of methane still clung to the hairs on his hand, the overwhelming odor was diminished, replaced by a crisp mountain-air scent. How could an alien ship know what he needed?

He drew in another quick sniff. The heavy aroma of moss and moisture lay beneath the new air. Casting a nod at Ring, he watched as she took her own mask off and confirmed that he wasn't delirious or being baited.

"Think it's a bluff?" she asked.

"Don't know."

This was definitely better air than the meager filter could provide. The masks could keep them alive, but they weren't pleasant, nor did they last forever. If there was air, better breathe that and hold back the masks for emergencies.

He hooked his mask on his belt, then took Shucorion's off and did the same. "Keep them handy."

Zoa, however, snatched hers off and joyously threw it to the moss-furred deck.

"Brilliant," Ring grumbled. "There's foresight" She reveled in Zoa's caustic stare as she recovered the other woman's mask and tucked it into her medical pack.

"Can your transporter bring us out?" the Blood asked.

"Only if we're back in there, the way we came," Ring said, pointed back. "We couldn't read any deeper in."

Abruptly they all realized what that meant. When they looked at Keller, he felt like a chopped squid on a hook. Had he let them get cut off? His communicator was still cold as he drew it up and readjusted the gain. "Challenger, come in. This is Keller, come in."

They listened to a faint crackle. No response.

Rather than toy with their hopes by trying again, Keller tersely confirmed, "Cut off."

"Maybe we have to go back hi the vestibule to com-municate," Ring said.

"We should go back," Shucorion agreed.

Keller lowered his communicator. He left the channel open, in case things happened to be different ten yards in.

Spurred by their isolation, Shucorion tried to pull himself upright, using Keller's arm for leverage. He only half made it

"Stay here" Keller told him. "Catch your bream while we find Bonifay."

Even as he spoke, the words flaked away. Shucorion brought a knee under him, pushed off the furry wall, shuddered to his feet, and determined to move. "We must work," he insisted.

"You'll just slow us down." This also had no effect. Keller let him go a couple of pathetic steps, then slipped an arm around his dutiful-okay, stubborn- companion. "Kinda pigheaded, aren't you?"

"Thank you..." But he started off in the wrong di-rection, back into the entry corridor.

Pivoting bodily, Keller drew him around. "Whoa. This way."

'There are things I must explain-----I contacted the

Blood Fleet-

"Save your breath. We picked up the distress call."

**No, no-something more-

What could that mean? And what difference did it make right now which kind of signal got sent to which team of would-be rescuers? Keller determined to stay on course and that course was Bonifay.

"Concentrate on walking for now."

"Don't-don't scan!" Shucorion gasped as they moved into the next chamber. He reached for Ring's tricorder.

She stabbed him with a glare and sidestepped "Hand's off, stranger."

Feeling his oats from their fifty percent of victory, Keller surged forward, the weight of Shucorion giving him a sudden sense of power over this place. With Ring a few steps ahead and Zoa minding their flank, he urged the boarding party through a vaguely demarcated archway into the adjacent chamber.

Instantly Keller understood why he felt as if he were being patched. Zoa raised her arm and pointed upward, to each side.

"Persons," she announced.

Yes, persons-by the hundreds. Lining the bulk-heads, in rows at least three deep, stood phalanx after phalanx of people, male and female, young and old, their bodies, faces, hair, and clothing coated with bronze-green patina. Their eyes were open, gazing in random directions. Their physical positions were also random. Some stood, others sat, some knelt.

"Holy-!" Keller gulped. "Mannequins! Look at them all!"

He kept a tight grip on Shucorion, who had suddenly gone stiff and aghast.

"Gargoyles," Ring digested immediately. "This would make a great backyard...."

Keller cast her a bewildered glance. "Nosferat-you."

What a sight... there must be thousands of them!

Breathtakingly realistic, the nameless congregation mesmerized them with its silence and motionlessness, a cast of thousands held in a freeze-frame.

Zoa, completely spooked, was crouched with her knees flexed like a cat's, her back arched, her head swiveling and eyes wide. Her sandals were tipped up on the toes. Her long arching toenails dug into the moss. Her hands were on her Rassua blades as if to strike at the gaze of the sightless eyes.

"Humanoid, at least," Savannah Ring mentioned. "It's a start."

Only when his chest started hurting did Keller realize he was holding his breath. He forced air into his lungs. "They're in the club, all right... castings?"

"They're all different from each other." Ring pivoted to look at the rows of statues on the transverse bulk-head above them. "I don't see two alike."

"Effigies, then? Like in ancient Egypt... China... and on Tallus Nine..."

"Living hi the past again," Ring said.

Talking helped. The sound of his own voice anchored him as he convinced himself they were just statues, just life-sized carvings.

"How many are there?" he asked.

Without consulting her tricorder, Ring slowly said, "If there are statues three or four deep every fifteen or so inches all through the length of this ship, that's about nine thousand on this deck alone.**"

Keller fought the urge to retreat back into the entry corridor like a moray eel back into its crevice, though he couldn't help but protectively hold Shucorion back a little.

"It's a whole city!" he blurted, inspired. "Imagine sending out a huge ship with effigies of an entire city's people! Could it be a probe or a test? Tribute of some kind?"

In front of him Ring wobbled, waved both arms, and fell back to bump Shucorion. Her left foot had sunk to the calf in some kind of bog.

"The ground's not solid," she warned.

Feeling with the toe of his ranch boot, Keller stirred the surface of apple-green pond scum that looked exactly like Florida duckweed. And under it, liquid. "What is this? A moat?"

Covered from bank to bank by the duckweed, the pond lay perfectly still, indistinguishable from the stuff carpeting the deck.

"Can you read it?*" he asked. "Is it acidic or toxic- Savannah!"

Without waiting for the tricorder to make a decision, Ring simply plunged her arm into the goop and swirled it around. "Not acid"

Keller huffed his disapproval. "You don't quit that kind of thing, we'll end up fitting you with a hook."

Zoa prowled up beside them and scanned the chamber from port to starboard. "The mush is go wall-wall. We cross to hunt Bonifay."

Keller sought her alien eyes. "Can you see the edge more clearly than we can?*"

"I seed it."

"No way around?"

"No round."

"Savannah, can you read how deep-**"

By the time he turned, Ring was already in the pond, out about twelve feet, standing up to her hips in

yuck.

"It's about this deep," she said.

What could a sensible person do with a Savannah Ring in his pocket?

He cocked the hip that supported Shucorion and drawled, "Snakes, poison, unidentified waste products... don't bother you a bit, do they?"

Ring shrugged. 'I've got skin, don't I? This might be a contained ecosystem."

"You still reading just metal?"

"Everywhere. No other substance, 'cept us.'" Her Polynesian eyes fixed on him for a moment "You understand, this only means I'm not reading other substances. It doesn't mean they're not out there or in some kind of blanked field."

Her attempt to make him feel better only made him feel worse. "But you can read the four of us?"

Dashed, she simply nodded and admitted, "Mmmm."

"We should leave Bonifay to his fate" Shucorion murmured. "He made his choice... he must live or die with it"

Keller shook his head, annoyed at this stark reminder that Shucorion came from a planet with a truly different kind of survival than anything humanity had encountered. This wasn't the time to make an issue. 'Too utilitarian for me," he said. "We're not elephants looking for the mystical burial place. We try to save each other."

Shucorion glanced at him with a depth of meaning in his eyes. "It will not help him.**

Making an unpleasant sound in the back of his throat, Keller waded into the pond and drew Shucorion right in with him. They were both in up to the thighs before they reached the middle. "We're gonna sink, we're gonna drown, and a million years from now somebody'll wonder how these funny-looking bones with the round things on top got inside here. Four limbs, claws, and a tailbone, must be somebody's dog. Fido Keller, R.I.P. Anybody feel a croc?"

"Ask Zoa," Ring commented. "It's her natural environment."

"If Bonifay and I can work on the same bridge, you two can be in the same coven."

"This is reckless," Shucorion, short of breath and clearly exhausted, slipped against Keller on the bottom of the pond. "This place doesn't want us."

"Quit talking like that," Keller scolded. "Doesn't help. Before we lost contact with you, did you say something about the design of this ship?"

Shucorion glanced at him, and laudably tried to be of better value. "As we approached and took a visual confirmation, I saw shadows upon the hull that made me think of old Kauld design, from the last cycle."

"Are you sure about that?"

"No, not very. I would never rely on whimsy or coin-cidence. Some of this interior seems familiar... some valleys on my planet..."

"And some jungles on mine. Anything specific?"

"Nothing... and much is unfamiliar. I would not dare guess."

"I know you wouldn't. Sometimes a guess is all we've got, though. Watch yourself, now. Hold on to me. Don't want you drowning in duckweed."

On the other side of Shucorion, Zoa was swimming across instead of wading. Duckweed clung to her tightly muscled shoulders. She made the other side in just a few strokes, then turned to help pull Shucorion out. Ring climbed out and went to the nearest statue, the likeness of an elderly woman with one leg, gazing downward at her own hand. Without hesitation Ring prodded the statue.

"Hey, look at this stuff." She boldly peeled the gauzy shirt off the statue and fingered it. "It's not sculpted on. These are real clothes. Hey..."

She rumbled the silvery sheath in her hands, then spontaneously tossed it into the air. They watched as the garment puffed upward, slowed down almost immediately, then flipped and danced above Ring's head like eiderdown.

"Light as the air" Keller observed. "What's it made of?"

Ring snatched the floating shirt again, because it wasn't coming down anytime soon, and fingered it more attentively. "It's not knitted. These are tiny single loops of some kind." She tossed it into the air again, where it merrily twisted and drifted, but didn't come down. "Wonder if it's hot where they come from, if they need such lightweight protection?"

Zoa climbed out of the water and watched Ring play with the floating fabric. She did nothing to help Keller pull Shucorion out of the clinging duckweed. Ring glanced at her, annoyed, then turned to do the helping herself.

The simple moving of air by her shoulders caused the garment drifting behind her to flip toward Zoa and nearly catch itself on the formed braided mass of her hair. The Rassua woman showed instant affront by whipping up one of her two blades. The air flashed pistachio green in the weird light for an instant and the off-fensive tunic was stricken in midair, inches from Keller as he pulled himself out of the pond.

He flinched, ducked, and pushed Shucorion back out of the way of Zoa's sudden attack. He expected to see two hacked pieces of silver shirt driven to the ground. Instead, the garment was twisted around Zoa's blade. The insolence frustrated her. She hacked at the statue, now naked, whacking at its legs to free her weapon from the cloth.

Was she frustrated or afraid? Or just angry? Some people didn't like a dirty weapon.

The more she hacked, the tighter the fabric twisted on the thick Rassua blade. Why wasn't it being shredded? Keller reached out and snatched her by the elbow.

"Hold it!"

She didn't-and he nearly lost an ear. Only when he ducked and almost fell did she notice her new order and back away from her assault of the statue and its piece of clothing. The statue's iron like limb had been scored viciously by the weapon. Ring stepped in to examine the marks made in the leg, but Keller's interest stayed on the blade.

He knelt at Zoa's lowered weapon. The mesh fabric had twisted around the blade and held, without being cut. Not a thread hung loose. No slice or break showed anywhere on what seemed like nothing more than a piece of cloth.

Inspecting thread by thread, Keller unwound the garment from the blade, which in itself was thicker than any sword blade he'd ever seen before. He shook out the silvery shirt by its shoulders. It draped into perfect shape before him. Not a scratch. It could be used in a wedding.

The statue, though, had several hack marks in its thigh where Zoa had whacked so merrily, as if she'd cut at hard rubber. How had the leg been cut without any damage to the shirt?

Spontaneously he hung the shirt on the raised arm of the statue and stepped back a few feet.

"Stand clear," he ordered, and drew his phaser.

"What're you doing?" Shucorion asked.

With point-blank aim, Keller answered by firing.

The phaser whined a short burst. Its beam, white-green in this weird environment, struck the garment and should have completely disintegrated it.

Should have.

Instead the garment waved peaceably, absorbed the impact, and took the phaser hit like a sigh. Raw energy spread all over the fabric, dancing on every fibrous link, running around lost and wild.

Zoa raised her blade with both hands.

"No!" Keller shouted. "No."

He scooped up a layer of the mossy substance they'd been walking through, aimed, and tossed it. The ball struck the fritzing shirt, which wrapped instantly around it in a horrid embrace. A snap of bright destructive light forced Keller to shield his face. When he lowered his arm, his hand and sleeve were burned. At the feet of the statue, Ring was knocked over.

When Keller glanced over to be sure she wasn't hurt, their eyes met in incredulous comprehension. Together they looked again at the shirt, now hanging passively, its three-quarter arms wagging. A few last random sparkles flew from its wrists, but it was happy again.

Keller stared at the fabric. "Takes a phaser hit..."

"What was that?... Who's there?"

Still in the pond up to his knees, Keller looked up to see who had asked those questions.

"Never saw this coming.... Seems like the kind of- fate you'd-sense coming-"

His communicator!

He slapped at his belt until the communicator came up in his hands. In a moment's panic, he almost dropped it into the pond. "Bonifay! Where are you?"

"Can't move-my arms...."

The others realized what was happening and turned as Keller gripped his communicator with both hands.

"Zane, it's Nick! Listen to me! We're in the first chamber, the one with all the statues. Did you come through here? Tell us where you are!"

"Nick?"

"Yes! Describe what's around you!"

"Cast-iron Eden... is this where you go when you- die?"

Frustration clawed at him. Bonifay was alive some-where, close! He wanted to throw down the communi-cator, run furiously through this vessel, push aside these statues, and rip down the mesh drapes now that he knew for sure. Bonifay and Shucorion had escaped their damaged fighter and stumbled onto this unidenti-fied massive ship, and Bonifay was still lost!

"It's getting warmer...." Bonifay's voice-weak, groggy. "/ can't hold my arms up... anymore... /// get cut again...."

"Don't move!" Keller instructed. "We'll come to you. Tell us how to get there!"

He held his breath again and listened. A shuffling- might've been feet or fabric-and gasping, a horrible pained effort of fundamental human struggle. The sound pulled him to pieces.

He gripped the communicator with both hands. "*Zane!" he shouted. "Speak up! Directions!"

"They're all looking at me. I think they turned when-/ wasn't paying attention. Should've watched my step.... Can't breathe with this sticking through me...."

Keller pressed his lips tight, holding back another shout because it hadn't worked. "Zane, give us a course. Navigate us in there."

"From.. "

"From the pond. Did you cross the pond?*"

"The water was cold then... no, that's wrong.... It's not-not water. Don't file a false-report. They might try to drink it. Better just stop rambling on and on.... Y'know, I lost track of Blue-Boy... probably sprayed all over the sky... dumb Plume didn't have escape pods... sometimes I hate being right..."

Discouraged, Shucorion bent his shuddering legs, leaned on a cheesy mound, gripped its edge with both hands, and forced himself not to collapse. Zoa's dot-eyes watched him without her turning her head. She,

like Keller and Ring, listened intently to Bonifay's voice, trying to use it to judge his condition.

Bonifay was close, somewhere within the city-sized body of this vessel, in some chamber or corridor, down some tube or under a subfloor, hidden behind a crowd of statues or cocooned in silver mesh. The tricorder seemed confused, reading metal where there was obviously something else. If Bonifay didn't give them a clue, a detail, a road sign, they could step right over him and never know it

Bringing Shucorion had been a mistake. Keller realized now he should've sent the injured man back with Savannah, into the entryway where the Challenger could stick its one probing sensor and beam them out. Then he could concentrate on what might turn out to be a tricky and mysterious rescue.

A real captain would've known the difference, anticipated the trick and mystery.

Beating off the bite of his newest mistake, Keller narrowed his eyes and fought to think, to sift what he knew about Bonifay. What might move him? What would shake the daze?

"Zane," he began again, "we're lost. Can you bring us out?"

"Just turn around. Go back the... other... way and just... leave"

Keller met Ring's eyes. She shook her head, dispirited.

"We can't go back," he lied. "We have to come out your way. Bring us to where you are, and you can show us the way out."

"If you step on the grid, it'll snag you too. That's... that's no good."

"We won't step on it. Which way should we move?"

"Uh... oh, abeam to starboard... after that, bear to port, and, uh... what the hell? What the hell!"

Keller stalked uselessly. "Zane, what's wrong?"

"What-what?... Oh, no!-no, what is this! Get that away from me! What is it! What is it! Get away! "

"Phasers!" With his heart in his throat, Keller drew his weapon and charged into the next chamber, ready to fire on some unidentified assailant.

Communicator in one hand and the phaser in the other, he kicked his way through a stand of inch-wide spikes blocking his way. They rang like cymbals and fell into a heap. More metal! Singing in harmony with Bonifay's screams over the communicator!

"What the hell is this! Stop it! It's burning me! Stop doing that! Stop! Pull it out! Ouuuut out!"

Ready to attack or defend, Keller plunged through a curtain of white beads hanging from wires so thick he couldn't see through them. They jingled out of his way, leaving his sweater and trousers streaked with oily residue, and paid the price for rushing when the deck dropped out from under him.

His body turned like a wheel in open air, falling free. He slammed to his right side, legs flailing, and skidded down a terraced incline. Though he twisted hard and tried to stop his fall, each step was too shallow to dig his boots into and too slippery once he'd already started falling. He let out a strangled

shout of surprise and warning to the others, but too late.

Frosty yellow lighting blinded him for an instant, just before he landed on a hip and tumbled sideways, then sprawled on his stomach. His right elbow slammed into something that rang and echoed inside it-self, briefly clogging his mind with pain. A heavy weight glanced off his head and left shoulder, then landed on his leg-Zoa. As Keller raised his head, Sa-vannah skidded past him on her backside, burping "Ah-ah-ow-ow-ow!" on the terraced steps.

His hand shot out and caught the strap of her back-pack. When he hauled back she pirouetted sloppily and scratched to a halt on the last two steps. Her tricorder had beaten her by five feet and lay half-buried in silver feathers growing like grass.

At the top of the incline, Shucorion peered down at them, horrified. He'd held back, and thus was the only one who hadn't fallen. Keller felt stupid and clumsy under the gaze of the Blood man, who had been the avedon of a Blood Plume, commander of a fighter cluster in a war, when Keller was still putzing around secure Fed-eration space as a second officer. Now his blurt of action had caused what could easily have been a fatal fall.

He looked up into the pig-iron eyes of a man whose hair had been half shaved off, or burned off. They were in another chamber full of more statues, some crum-pled in misery and drama like the remains of Pompeii. What had happened to them? What story could they tell if he had time to listen?

"That's what I get for trying to Jim-Kirk it," he mut-tered.

Zoa glanced at him, didn't understand, and thus ig-nored his comment.

Rolling to his feet, he tested for solid ground, then ducked the nearest statue and kept moving to his left, with a glance over his shoulder at the others.

The coven was still right with him. A glance reported Shucorion picking his way down the incline. At that pace he'd be left behind. He'd have to take care of him-self for a while.

Was that smart? Should they stick together?

Slashing through a bushy structure that blocked his way, Keller broke into a curved section. But it curved to starboard. On the port side, a corrugated wall of metallic pipes stretched diagonally from the deck to as far up as Keller could see, then disappeared into more draping moss way up there.

"Aw, mercy!" he barked, angry, and shambled a few steps without direction. **Wouldn't this just make you spit!"

"So much for bearing to port," Ring intoned when she saw the barricade of rods. "Did we miss a door?"

Not only was there no way to go port, but there was no way to go anywhere. Though the chamber curved to starboard, it just came to a point and stopped. There was no exit.

Keller stumbled to the starboard side. Covered by a glitter of mushrooms that snapped at his touch, a snarl of thick roots obviously swept the whole starboard side, providing grottos for several dozen more statues and a perfect blockade against trespassers. This place had a sense of the ancient about it. The roots hi front were bright-copper-colored and newer than the black-ened, filthy mass tangled farther back. Kissing his fin-gers good-bye, he plunged his arm deep into the roots. He was up to his ear in it

before he realized he couldn't possibly reach whatever bulkhead might be back there.

He shook off the powder of broken mushrooms and raised his phaser. His hand was sweaty on the weapon. Blast his way through? That didn't make any sense. There was no hint of phaser fire here, no smoking port or sign of demolition, no smell of expended energy trying to find a place to dissipate. Bonifay hadn't shot his way out of here.

Ring came to his side and drew up close to one of the statues as if to dance with it. She peered into its face, her brows knotted and her lips pursed in analysis. Rather than using the science tricorder, she pulled out a basic medical scanner and began combing the statue's arms and glossy yellow tunic.

Only when Keller's communicator spoke again did he suddenly remember that the screaming on the other end had stopped. He still heard it in his mind.

"/ knew ghosts were real.... Nobody ever listens to me"

Bonifay's voice was a rag of gasps, but he sounded lucid now.

The ground crunched under Keller's boots. He moved away from the tangled wall.

*I'm listening, Zane," he solemnly promised.

"Nick? You still aboard this zoo?"

"Yes, we're making our way to you."

"Bad choice. I didn't believe-it could move without a power source-but it does. Registers no life-forms, but-you ever get that-feeling?"

"Got it right now," Keller admitted.

"Feelings are real, y'know. Ghosts^~just energy- science hasn't figured out yet. Who turned-up the heat in here?"

Keller looked at Zoa. Even she was sweating now. Yes, it getting hotter. Why?

"You better leave... I can't get loose... I think I'm bleeding... can't look, though... one's in my neck."

Dread raced up Keller's spine. "What's in your neck?"

"Some kind of thread... extra-fine... I think it's... razored. It cuts if I move."

"Are you alone?"

"I don't see anybody else... except these-green garden gnomes all over the place..."

**They're just carvings or effigies. Ignore'em and tell me how you got through the chamber that curved to starboard."

"No, you've gotta-go port."

"There's no way to go port in here."

"If-if I fall down, it's-all-over."

**Hold your position. We're closing in." Keller tried to sound like a leader, give Bonifay confidence, a reason to endure, but his own fear got him by the jaw and his voice cracked on the last syllable. Not very galvanizing. He cleared his throat and muddled on. "How did you get out of this chamber with the grottos and the organ-pipes?"

"Just a minute... I-remember that.... Let me think.... Doesn't it look-like-the perspective is off? Trees, mountains, bridges... but when you get close, they're only five feet tall, y'know? You know how a dream is-sort of 'off'?"

"Don't get distracted," Keller ordered. "Think about giving us directions."

"That'd make a good poem...." Bonifay gasped out every word. Seemed he was forcing himself to stay conscious. "Thinking dreams are, maybe, coming from the mattress..."

"Hang on." The communicator squished in Keller's sweaty palm. "Hang on, Zane...."

"Nick-" Ring's tone changed. She stepped back from the statue. Her hand lingered on the effigy's raised arm, its hand curved into a fist to hold a missing tool. She looked into its face, its squinting hematite eyes, and took another step back.

Quickly Keller covered the communicator. "Savan-nah! Forget about those scarecrows and concentrate on finding Bonifay!"

She lowered her voice to a near-whisper, the tenor significant as she met his gaze.

"These aren't scarecrows," she said. "They're not statues either. They're bodies."

Around them, dozens after dozens of ancient eyes peered at them from deep inside the knotted roots and grottos and curtains of mesh and forests of rods.

His lips parted in shock. No sound came out. His eyes tightened. What?

Newly tranquil, Ring drew a sustaining breath and let it out on a murmur. "This is a graveyard."

Awestricken, Keller scanned the innerscape. Every hair prickled on the back of his neck. A thousand pearly eyes gazed back in eerie testimonial. Each face seemed now to murmur its reason for being here.

After a moment, he corrected her phrase.

"Grave ship."

Chapter Three

"crackle! look! Look up! There's crackle!"

High in the sky, the strobes of lightning etched the biohaze. Random flickers spun, circled, and crossed overhead in response to the lightning.

"Seal the seams! Finish the Feast Grid! There's crackle!"

Riutta's urgent order sent several of the new hunters into near-panic. They and hundreds more hunters rushed to fit segments of woven gum into place under the pyrotechnic flash from above. Crackle lightning rippled through the biohaze in the upper atmosphere, warning them to hurry.

Fear was unvoiced, but obvious. There was no wink-ing eye, no steady hand. Vigilance offered no help, pru-dence no comfort. This was random order at work, battling the brainless chance with ritual and swift re-sponse. This was the hunt.

The Grid now filled up the center of the bleak hunt plain, and the plain went almost to the curve of the planet in all directions. Patterns of lightning in the high sky urged them on with toothy flashes growing more and more intense. Their fists, tight on the edges of the refined gum mats, were illuminated into tightest balls. The Feast Grid had to be carefully fitted, despite the hurry, or Living would lose the hunt to the planet.

"They're feeding," she predicted. "Arc spikes ready! Take positions!"

"The Feast Grid isn't fitted!" Luntee called over the boom of thunder. His darkest hair was rising into a charged ball, a sure sign of impending hunt Riutta felt the static electricity on her own shoulders and neck, but long ago had cut her hair, tighter but not tightest, into a short brush so that it would never be a signal. Everyone should cut their hair. Then no one would watch hair. Everyone would watch the biohaze, even those who were afraid to look up.

"The Grid isn't your job," she told him. "Get the arc spikes in tine."

Luntee mustered a glare and cocked his hip in defi-ance. "You're not an Elder yet, Riutta. You'll probably be chosen today and never be an Elder."

She gave her gum mat an extra kick against the other mats. It skidded into place. "Random order selected me to manage many hunts. If I'm chosen today, then some-one else will manage the hunts. There's simple order and reason about who is chosen. I've been ready for a long time."

Luntee's tighter eyes widened. "Random order says we should follow the Anointed to the Outside."

"It wasn't random. It was reckless," Riutta contra-dicted. "The Anointed were sent too soon."

"Soon? Look how many generations we've waited to go Outside!"

"We haven't even collected enough power to keep the Gateway open."

"After this hunt, we'll have enough!"

"One more free dancer is not enough. We belong here now. We know how to survive here. We should stay."

He put out a hand to strike her words away. "The rules say that if you're not killed in accidents, storms, or the hunt, then you were meant to go back Outside. The Anointed are the first to go!"

"I thought we were all meant to go."

Luntee bristled at her mocking. Still kneeling at the edge of the Feast Grid, Riutta pressed her elbow to her knee and peered up at him. Flashes of lightning and bio-haze sparkle outlined Luntee's thicker arms, his well-fed body, and she thought of her sons and daughters, thinner because she was still alive. Hunt after hunt, they ate last Luntee's family had eaten first for a long time now. Five family members taken in four consecutive hunts.

Perhaps he was embarrassed.

"How do we know what's Outside?" Riutta pointed out. "The Anointed should never have been sent. They can't signal to us. They can't defend themselves or tell us what the Outside is like. What if they're lost? How will we forgive ourselves?"

"They deserved to go home first," Luntee stated.

Sharply she said, "Home' is here now."

With static electricity making his hair into a silly tower over Luntee's head, the arc spiker leaned slightly to make his point "Home' is a growing, breathing planet, not a metal ball scoured to a gleam by air masses that never stop moving and lightning that never stops striking. We certainly didn't evolve here! Nothing did! Even the biohaze was trapped by the gravity and somehow stayed. It doesn't belong here anymore than the free dancers or Living People!"

"You should become a storyteller, Luntee, since you know so much."

Her calmness frustrated him. "The old records speak of other things, magic things!" he continued. "Places where there is more than light and lighter or dark and darker. Whole other ways to see everything around us! Something to eat besides candlefly pie and candlefly soup and smoked candlefly!" He spread his arms wide. "But first, before everything, we owe the Anointed their voyage. Who knows when things will go against us? If random choice changes its mind and we're forced to stay here, then at least we'll have done that."

Other hunters around them were working, but they were also listening. The argument of two people who had seen many hunts proved a magnetic attraction.

"To send them was to risk them," Riutta insisted. "And risk bringing attention to the Gateway before we're ready."

"We'll be ready today!" Luntee raised two fists to the sky as it roiled over their heads. "After this hunt we'll have enough energy stored to hold the Gateway open! Why should we have survived so many lifetimes if not to be stronger and go?"

"What will their advances be?" Riutta tried not to shout, yet gazed upward as if the answers were etched there. "I've studied the fragments of the first Living to come through the Gateway. The early texts describe things we have no way to understand. In all this time, what has changed there? They may be more powerful than we are. We may be the weaker when we go through."

The wind whipped Luntee's hair about his eyes. "Are you afraid to go Outside?"

This brought Riutta to her feet.

"Afraid?" she spat. "Line the arc spikes!"

He remained still before her, framed by sparkle and sky flashes. "Even if you aren't chosen, you won't be the one to decide whether this is the last hunt for the Gateway power. We still have three Elders before you."

Did he want a conflict? Here? Now? Was this an ex-cuse to fight? Perhaps fall off the Grid, where they couldn't be chosen?

She wouldn't risk that. She refused to tumble into his challenge.

"I'm relieved not to be deciding," she said. "Line the arc spikes."

With a sour frown, and driven by the flashes in the biohaze that now were coming faster and faster over-head, Luntee hurried away with his arms waving to the other arc spikers. Luntee was petty and enjoyed point-ing out the weaknesses of others, but he was almost an Elder, just as she was. Why would random order allow such a person to survive so many hunts?

Any doubts nipped at her. Was random order work-ing? Was there sense to the results of the hunt? Or was this something they told themselves to avoid being de-destroyed by their own minds when the choice was cruel?

From this part of the hunt plain, Riutta glimpsed dis-tant towers of the two nearest cities, dotted with static disks to ward off radiation from space, and huge domed facilities to store the hunt. Though energy storage had been building up for generations, candlefly processing was low these days. The last hunt had been too spare, because the one previous had been stingy. The Elders had cut off early, saved too many lives, and Living had hungered for a season. This time the free dancers would have to be satisfied, or they wouldn't come back.

She stood straight, her link shirt batting her bare knees in the wind. Her stubby hair gave no protection against the pellets of hail that relentlessly stung her scalp and shoulders. As she straightened, the puzzle of woven gum mats spread out before her in a huge circu-lar rug across the hunt plain. Gradually the open seams between the mats began to heal, creating a solid dark spot on the planet's polished pewter surface. As fine a Feasting Grid as she had ever seen.

On the edges of the Grid thousands of hunters, gath-ered from all the cities, awaited the signal to begin. Among them were arc spikers, candlefly pulpers, reac-tor clampers, netters, and of course the three Elders, each with his or her own job in the hunt. They had all trained for this day, but many had never seen a live hunt before. Many hunters would never see it again.

A hundred steps away were two of Riutta's children and seven of her nephews and nieces. The father-resem-blance showed itself crisply in the crowd. Her children and their cousins all had darkest hair, as her husband and his brother had possessed. When they were all standing together this way, the family line advertised itself.

How cowardly they looked, together in a bunch! Whole neighborhoods would be wiped out if everyone did that. She waved at them to break apart, to move out among the other hunters, go stand among strangers. She didn't want to shout If they didn't break up, she would-

No, they saw her now. Coy and properly scolded, they broke their huddle and blended into the throng of hunters lining the perimeter of the Feast Grid.

That done, she picked up her reactor clamp by both handles and positioned it more efficiently on the perimeter of the Feast Grid. She wanted to get a good grip when the time came.

With his arc spike wagging over his shoulder, Luntee returned to Riutta's segment of the Feast Grid and took position between her and the netters on this side. "Your son Donnastal is still doing it," he enjoyed telling her.

"Doing what?"

"Clustering"

"First, we haven't begun yet. Second, if he does clus-ter, he's terrified. It's his second hunt. The second hunt is always the most terrifying."

"Clustering won't help."

"No."

Luntee stood and waited for her to defend her son. He wanted an argument. She refused to discuss her family's behavior. The days had been better when she was the only one old enough to hunt. Then she could see to herself.

Today the plain was colder than usual, but brighter. A shimmer of frost showed across the scored and scratched mirrorscape. Immeasurably old, the plain had been polished flat by ice storms and flash waves, charred here and there by blister sites both new and ancient. They'd tried for generations to measure the age of the blisters, and generations later had given up. The harsh planet would not tell its age. After a while no one cared to know anymore. Once they'd learned to hunt and survive here, it didn't matter anymore what the planet was. They were on it, and they could live.

With her gaunt face tipped to the high sky, Riutta squinted into the hail between crackles of lightning and saw a mad sparking as billions of candleflies flew into a panic. They were being eaten.

Feeding season was the only time the schools of candleflies could be seen with the naked eye. Beau-tiful... uncounted pinprick lights flashed between the lightning ribbons. The sky exploded over and over.

Near enough to be seen from her spot were the three Elders in their long-sleeved darker tunics with lighter authority-bands on the upper arms. To be sure they gave the same order at the same time and be sure they agreed, they stood, within sight of each other. Riutta saw their eyes meet. A moment later, they all raised their arms at once, turned their hands inward, then outward.

"Shirts!*" the Elders cried. "Off!"

"Shirts off! Shirts off!" The call for action rippled all the way around the enormous grid, becoming a low mumble as it traveled. Around the perimeter of the Grid, thousands of men and women shed their link sheaths. Piles of silvery garments fluffed to the plain at their ankles.

When all stood naked, the three Elders cried again.

"Feast!"

The crowd of hunters roared, and charged onto the Feast Grid. Riutta ran with them, her long legs pump-ing, driving her toward the center of the Grid. Her forceful motions encouraged the first-time hunters around her. No one wanted to be embarrassed, so they rushed. Waving spikes or clamps or net launchers, or nothing at all, Living hunters swarmed from the pol-ished hunt plain onto the stubby woven gum of the Feast Grid. Their bodies were suddenly bright against the dark plate of nonconducting material, very precious on a planet where everything conducts. Each gum panel had been lovingly woven into a pattern by some artist or family, city official, tribe, or individual. Many de-picted hunts of the past, or images of the Outside, or other imagined places. There were several hundred in-dividual panels, and all had been laid out in previous hunts. There was no more nonconducting gum on the planet than what could be seen here today, so these very fibers had been woven and re woven many times, into many patterns and pictures over the generations. They were rushing across then* own history.

"Heat!" Luntee shouted, staring up into the biohaze. "There's heat! Free dancers!"

High up, through the biohaze of candleflies that pre-vented me planet from ever becoming fully dark or fully light, waves of heat rippled as if a giant spoon stirred the atmosphere and disturbed the electrical patterns.

"Heat!" the throng of naked hunters called, louder and louder. Spikes, net launchers, plugs and fists thumped the air to the chant's rhythm. "Heat! Heat! Heat! Heat!"

On Riutta's upturned face the hail turned to rain. Bands of hot air, high up, radiated visibly and melted the ice pellets into stinging rain. She didn't chant. In-stead she listened.

"Descending!" one of the Elders called.

High overhead, monstrous shadows began to swoop through the sparkle. Free dancers! Propelling them-selves through the atmosphere with energy-matter transfer! The descent!

The cry rolled across the expanse of the feast grid

"Descen...!"

"Des..." "... ing... ding!"

"send!" "Desc..." "-send...!"

"-ing" "sendi-"

"-ending!"

Only a few seconds now...

Riutta closed her eyes. Rain drained between the muscles of her corded neck. Rain came for only a few minutes in their lives, just before each hunt, and only when the free dancers released their heat to descend. It was a signal of everything that kept all Living alive-of heat, of candleflies and free dancers, of violent death, of feasting, collecting, and random order. The subtle bal-ance, and working to keep it, made this life tolerable.

Though she disagreed with the Elders about the Gateway, she did not envy them. Their duties were

heavy-to look at all the hunt ratios, the harvest data, population numbers, estimates of the candlefly swarms and the free-dancer herds, discussions with hunt ap-prentices, to review times in history when the herd de-pleted, which forced Living to hunt without taking yield, just to keep the herd growing and attract them back for the next time...

She tipped her face back and let the rain hammer her cheekbones. This would be her last few minutes. She would be chosen today. She hoped her sons, daughters, nephews and her niece were far enough away that they wouldn't have to watch her being taken. If she was cho-sen, her family would eat, mourn, and have pride.

Against the roar of thunder, she now heard the shriek of free dancers. The sound shredded her courage. She began to shake. The urge to turn and rush off the Feast Grid filled her chest until she could hardly breathe. How did the first-time hunters stand the pressure? She couldn't remember.

A raw blast of heat struck her face. Her eyes shot open. Her lips were pushed open by the force of the blast. She gasped, but couldn't get breath. The sky above her was blocked off by an enormous gel-like bladder dropping very sharply now as it released heat. Riutta heard the hundreds of gasps and felt the shud-ders of the hunters around her. Would anyone break?

The gigantic wrinkled bladder, darkening the sky now, tumbled past her, half full of air, half full of candleflies. It looped, parted its gory underseam, and folded completely inside out. The juicy underside ex-posed a forest of electrofloss that snapped in and out, in and out directly over her head-zzzztp zzzztp zzzzpt!

She was being tasted.

Shock floss crackled over Riutta's head and shoul-ders. Her eyes squinted and her lips peeled back. There it was-the metallic taste of near-death filling her mouth. For generations hunters had told of the taste, and she remembered it instantly. The choice was near. The choice was near!

Around her some of the hunters broke and dropped to their knees, covering their heads. Others raised their hands and tried to attract attention. Zzzztp-the terrible sound filled her skull as more and more enormous free dancers swept down to the bait and tumbled inside out to feed. They shrieked, whistled, and zapped, drowning out the background thunder. Even though Riutta had been through many hunts, the sheer size of the free dancers shocked her. Simple-bodied but huge, the dancers looped low and defied the assumption that something big couldn't possibly move fast.

Riutta raised her arms high. Take me!

Suddenly the free dancer overhead was slammed aside by an aggressive competitor. The first attacker slobbered aside, and the newcomer moved in to slam its floss to the gum mat, trapping the two hunters di-rectly to Riutta's left in a whipping cage. Instantly the floss began its glaring shock-glow. The two hunters in-side writhed, screamed, smoked, and were consumed in a direct matter-to-energy transfer.

The transfer burned Riutta's left arm, her neck, hip, and thighs. She held her position. Her teeth had turned to steel, her tongue to zinc paste. Take me!

More of the high-pitched screams erupted from across the Grid. And more from the right and center. Many hunters were snapped up within her sight, many more beyond. Moments became long, tedious as she waited for the order that they had given the free dancers enough and now it was the Living's turn to feast

Not far from her, the three Elders raised their arms all at once, and pointed at the free dancer over Riutta's head. "Nets!" they cried.

Riutta came out of her pose and ducked away from the electrofloss snapping at her side. "Nets!" she re-peated, and dived out of the way.

Other hunters also scrambled away as the nearest net gunners opened fire. Mesh nets sprayed high, arched overhead, and came down around the free dancer. The enormous creature felt the weight of the net, stopped its feeding, and instantly began to heat up, trying to rise. The net held it down. It shrieked and heated harder and harder, pressing upward.

At this terrible signal, the swooping herd of free dancers around the Grid broke off their feeding and scattered in confusion, and the Living hunters came out of their terror and concentrated on the one free dancer trapped by the nets. Massive amounts of raw power began to race around the fibers holding the creature down. It roared and snatched outward with its floss, killed five-six-seven more hunters, then tried to snatch at the net itself.

"Shirts! Shirts!" the Elders called.

With permission to try to protect themselves, the hunters scrambled toward the perimeters. Many died, agonized, in the stinging floss, but many more suc-ceeded in reaching the piles of link shirts left on the edge of the Grid. They yanked their shirts back on, scooped up the reactor clamps they'd left on the perimeter, and instantly raced back onto the Grid. Riutta found a shirt and pulled it on. With Luntee, also in his shirt, racing at her side back toward the trapped free dancer and the herd of inflated dancers still striking at the bait-the hunters who hadn't made it to their shirts.

"Spikes and clamps!" Riutta called out. Would Lun-tee and his spikers obey her?

Of course--they had to.

The free dancer frantically generated heat, trying to rise, and bloated itself against the net strands. Luntee and the other spikers moved in, speared the bladder in a hundred places between the net strands, and sliced it open. Streams of partially processed candleflies flooded out of the wounds and drained across the Feast Grid's gum panels. Several hunters instantly skidded and fell, slopping into the pasty matter. With horror Ri-utta noted that half of them were reactor clampers. If they didn't drain the power soon enough-if the free dancer rolled onto the metal plain-

"Get up!" she shouted, and plunged through the gush of candlefly paste. She skidded, slipped, pushed up again, and drove her clamp onto one of the net's strained cables.

Yes, cables-the net was not only a trap, but a con-duction device. With the reactor clamps in place and their holding cells on, the net began to drain energy di-rectly from the free dancer's bloated body and store it in its fibers. Energy from the sky, otherwise out of reach.

Feeling itself begin to die, the free dancer screamed to its herd, which now wheeled in midatmosphere over-head, confused and scattered. Having brains the size of toenails, none responded except in more panic.

Then, a sharp chorus of screams rolled across the Feast Grid. Riutta looked up, over, toward the edge of the Grid to her right.

A second free dancer! The Elders had tried to capture a second! Unthinkable!

Such greed and risk! Such unbridled hope! Two!

A comfortably pre-Elder, Riutta hadn't been in on this decision. This wild decision! They wanted to follow the Anointed to the Outside, but did they want it this much?

She stared for a shocked moment at the three Elders, the only people among Living whose clustering was acceptable because of its necessity. They were hurriedly consulting with each other—an emergency! The second free dancer had begun to snap its net!

Why had the Elders ordered a second capture? The resources of the hunters were too strained—even the thousands of hunters couldn't efficiently take two free dancers!

While the first captive wrinkled and began finally to deflate like a great dying lung, drained of both its raw energy and its candlefly harvest, the second was fighting ferociously. It inflated and heated itself against the net strands and began to rise.

"Clampers!" Riutta dislodged her reactor clamp while it was still hot. With her very action she demanded that those within sound of her voice do the same.

She ran with all her might, blessedly long-legged and strong. The dying free dancer lashed out with its shock floss, snapping at her and those who followed. Riutta felt unrefined energy skitter across her link shirt, rushing and spitting from link to link all around her body. Sparks flew with each stride as her knees snapped up, down, up, down. The shirt did its duty and protected her. Her elbows wagged from side to side with the weight of her reactor clamp.

The second free dancer radiated its newly generated heat across the Feast Grid. In its fly-sized brain it recognized the trouble it was in. The bladder brightened, glowed, and caused the net strands to overload against the strain. The energy had nowhere to go! Not enough reactor clamps! The free dancer was rising!

Riutta made a mad dive upward for the net strands with her clamp and caught one. Instantly it began to glow and channel energy out of the bladder and into the holding cells. At her sides Luntee and a flank of spikers knifed the free dancer's flesh as it bloated between the net strands. The wounds burst under the pressure of a luster-less sea of candlefly paste mat gushed around their legs.

But rather than coming down as it was drained, the vast wounded creature wheeled against the conduction net, swung wide toward the edge of the Grid, snapping at the hunters with its floss. Hunters protected by their shirts were knocked down, but the roaming energy did not ground. Others, though, still naked, fried in their tracks, their screams spreading under the howl of the free dancer.

The free dancer now abruptly rolled sideways and took the half-applied nets with it.

"Falling!" someone called—perhaps it was Luntee, or the hunter beside him. All around, shifted and unshirted hunters stumbled through the candlefly paste to get away from the creature as it pinwheeled. Beside Riutta a naked hunter was stricken by a wild strand of floss. Energy transferred instantly into him. His flesh turned crisp and he was cooked where he lay. His legs kicked, his face drew into silent agony, hum marks appeared on his neck and shoulders—he wasn't transferring! The wounded free dancer hadn't the strength to absorb him. Anointed!

An explosion blew Riutta off her feet. She slammed into the thick candlefly paste and felt the scratch of woven gum score her left arm and side. She scraped half-processed flies from her face and barked. Some-where the Elders were chanting directions. She heard them. Before her, more explosions rocketed across the plain's polished surface, blinding and deadly. Shock floss by the bundle was striking the unprotected plain!

In the tiny moment Riutta needed to push herself up on her elbows, the exhausted free dancer rolled completely over twice, mowing down dozens of hunters, and fell off the Feast Grid onto the bare metalliformed landscape.

Superlightning flashed from here to the mountains. Beneath the overwhelmed hunters the Feast Grid mats heaved upward on a roll of electrical power. Everyone went to his knees. Quicker than a blink the free dancer's lifetime of stored energy sizzled back into the planet in a single massive, wasteful transfer.

Riutta dug her long fingers into the mat and pulled to her feet. Her legs—they were burned.

She felt nothing from her wounds. Instead she stared at the gaudy flattened burn mark where a moment ago a bloated animal had rolled. The sheer speed with which the planet reclaimed energy astonished her again, as it always had. Sprawling out from the mark lay smaller ashy marks where brave hunters had died in their at-tempts to drag the dancer back onto the nonconducting mats. Farther out, the charge had done its killing, but left bodies for anointment.

Should she look for her children?

She couldn't turn to her side, to look over there, far down the Grid where her family members had been milling before the descent.

Her burned feet felt no pain when she stepped not around but forward toward the crisp death zone of the second free dancer. Behind her were the clamoring noises of other hunters dutifully draining the first capture of its energy and its candleflies harvest. When the beast sighed its dying heave, she sighed too. With so many hunters lost and so much risk, she wondered if this hunt had been a waste.

Luntee magically appeared beside her, gasping and frantic. ****Where are they! Where are they! Does anyone see them? All of you! And you there, come look for them! Help us look for them!***9

The last few words broke into a miserable sob. He stumbled ahead of Riutta. Hot ashes flew from his bare hands and feet. He dug and flailed, but there was nothing here but crisp residue of matter tried at the atomic level.

The horror of grounding and instant discharge left everyone

****Where are they!"** Luntee sobbed, stumbling. "Look! Look... look for them, please..."

Around him hundreds of stunned hunters wandered into the smoldering remains. Their legs were darkened with burn marks and boils, their hands also dark and stiff. Some had marks up to their necks which even now emitted tiny trails of smoke. Riutta's eyes tightened.

The others were still searching when she stopped at the edge of the Feast Grid, just before the place where the free dancer had rolled off.

She bent stiffly over and pushed her hand through a layer of hot black flakes. When she drew it back, she held in her grip several link shirts, airy and lightweight, dirty tiny black ashes caught between the links. They were so light that she had grasped over a dozen of them in one hand.

Slowly she began to drop them, one by one, until she held only two. These two were, unlike the others, long-sleeved and marked with light bands of authority. Where the third one was buried in this mess, she couldn't begin to wonder.

The message of these two shirts remained clear enough. Luntee froze in place and gaped at her, at her hands. Around them, Living hunters stopped their search and stared too. Realization crawled through the ranks.

Riutta squeezed the two shirts between her fingers. In her mind she heard the third shirt whimpering as bits of ash ran from it.

"The Elders..."

Chapter Four

"they're corpses."

Savannah Ring's blunt declaration forced Nick Keller to muffle the primordial shudder charging up his spine. He completely failed. Be the commander, be the leader, show the strength, display aplomb.

Forget it This place had him by the neck. The eyes of the dead hundreds in this chamber, from the former chambers and whatever lay beyond, were on him and weren't looking away, even if they were facing the other direction. His imagination went wild. He saw through their frozen hair, their limbs, their turned-away glances. Somehow they knew he was here, that their tomb had been disturbed by the living. All around them, tableaus of past lives were acted out, perhaps to the points of death. Many were held still in enactments of great drama-pas-sion, pain, joy, a 3-D stone frieze of life in the streets of some unnamed city. Pompeii in the last couple hours.

But more than that... there were more stories than just drama. Some of these displayed people were simply standing or sitting around, looking at a stone flower, reading a book, polishing a spear.

Spear? There was a clue he'd missed.

Could Savannah be just plain wrong? Keller's nerves said something else.

He felt Shucorion struggle up behind him, unsteady, shocked, cautiously silent Everything abruptly changed. Savannah suddenly liked it better here. Shucorion, worse.

Zoa... she actually blinked a couple of times. A sign of life? To make sure nobody mistook her for one of these... others?

"Anybody there?"

Keller shot out of the nightmare and took a couple of steps just to separate himself and his living companions from the stillness. He could barely feel his knees. He raised his communicator.

"Right here, right here," he assured. "We're closing in on you. Hold your position."

"No choice, believe me... I think I got the poem worked out... see, there's this little boy-" Suddenly Bonifay cut himself off with a fierce groan, wrenched by whatever was happening to him, and what a pitiful sound it was.

Empathy twisted a wince out of Keller. Around him the damnably directionless chamber offered no help. In his periphery he saw Zoa move again, lurking between the stony figures.

Nearby, Savannah didn't take a step. Instead she turned in place. The action put her a little nearer to the "person" behind her. In her hand the medical scanner flickered.

"They're also..." she began slowly, "... solid."

Instantly Keller latched onto her tone. "Explain that."

"No organs. No bodily cavities at all. They've all been filled with something."

"Embalmed?"

"Tilled up with something that turned hard. I think," she revised, "'molten*' might be a better term. And it turned to solid. Obviously they're not mummies, be-cause they look as good as they probably did in life."

"Some of them are pretty banged up, though. As if they died in accidents or disasters."

"But there's no desiccation like a mummy would have. They each weigh, I'd say... maybe a ton."

Keller stepped to the mannequin with the spear and squinted into its face.

"My God " he murmured, "we're in Pompeii...."

A woman, short-haired, the left side of her face blistered with a chicken-track scar from temple to neck. He had to tip his line of sight up a bit. She was a little taller, as tall as Shucorion. In fact, other than the children, most of these people were in the six-foot-or-better range. Despite that they didn't give a Klingon impression of bulk.

Very few were elderly. What did that mean?

"Can you date this place?" he asked. "How old are these... things?"

Ring shook her head in doubt at the confusing readings.

Keller's mind raced to add up what he saw, common denominators that might help scrape out answers. Some of these people had longer hair. Most cropped short, though. Judging from their wounds and thin build, their lives had been rough and spare. Their clothing was the same stuff as these veils hanging all over the chambers, soft as gauze but spun from fine metal.

"Are they statues or not?" he asked.

Savannah huffed irritably. She hated repeating her-self. "No, Nick. They've got skin and real hair. Real follicles and skin cells. Except that every cell has a metal nucleus now. The outer cell wall is still cell wall. These are the actual corpses, filled up with some kind of cold-molded emulsion that cured after it was put

in. Pretty soon after, I'd say. Whoever these people were, they wanted themselves and their relatives preserved." With a confirming glance at her scanner, she looked around with charmed appreciation. "A little better than cave art, aren't they?"

Keller floated backward until he bumped Shucorion. "What do you think?" he murmured. "**Could the interior of this ship be some kind of view of then-world?"

"Or where they thought they were going." Shucorion spoke very quietly, his dark brows drawn as he contemplated what he saw. "Some of this seems familiar... that bridge structure... those reeds... those spirals, shattered in that manner... I've seen such growth and such damage on my own planet"

"Doesn't mean much. We've got moss, reeds, and duckweed on mine."

"Suppose not..." He sank against a prefabricated rock formation, still weak and clearly still in pain. With his navy blue sweater, gray trousers, his sapphire complexion, watercolor eyes, and hair of deep raisin brown, he seemed too much in place in this monochromatic museum.

Immediately Keller slipped an arm around him and pulled him to his feet. "All right, we've all seen cemeteries. This is a rescue mission. Let's keep moving."

With his arm firmly around Shucorion, he pulled forward and with the other hand brought his communicator up again. "**Bonifay, we're still here. What's your condition?"

"Getting hot... God, I hate sweating. So messy... shouldn't 't have to die sticky... This whole place needs... a good cleaning... "

"Tell me where you are. Keep us moving toward you. We don't have any point of reference."

"First tombstone to the right... straight on till morning."

"Don't give up, Zane! We're close! Stay with me!" The weight of Shucorion against him caused both a drag and a motivation. To Shucorion he grumbled, "Keep up. The idea of contributing to this tomb makes my stomach roll. Zoa, get your phased We'll cut our way through if we have to!"

Savannah snapped around. "We shouldn't do that!"

"*We're not gonna wake anybody up, are we? Zoa!"

There was no answer. The metallic veils whispered, breeze-thin filaments responding to the air around them as it shifted. Warmer air than a moment ago gusted in from unidentified ducts. If there was air, if it was moving, then there was a source and there had to be power to manufacture it That meant there was even more to misplace than they were seeing.

"Zoa! Where'd she go? Savannah, did you see her leave?"

"I don't look at her any more than I have to."

"Quit meowing and help me look! Now we've got two of them lost Zoa!"

TANG TANG!

There she was, standing on top of a miniature mountain, ten feet over them, holding one of her Rassua blades by its suitcase-like handle. She'd apparently banged the blade against something to get their attention.

"Hun's in here!" And she pointed to her side.

At Keller's side, Shucorion piped, "She's found him!"

"I didn't even see her leave!" Keller let go of Shucorion and hustled after Zoa, climbing the artistic mountain on all fours like a bear.

Savannah vigorously kept up with him. "I was hoping a flytrap ate her."

Sure enough, at the top of the mountain was a claustrophobic sliver-thin opening from deck to ceiling. Zoa disappeared into the dark slot and Keller followed her in, his natural fears crushed by excitement. In just minutes he'd gone from believing his two companions were blown to cosmic dust to holding in his hands the chance to bring them both back to the Challenger, the clutter of bound-together salvage they called home. Still, victory wasn't quite in his hands. Not quite.

The narrow passage forced his shoulders sideways. The walls were warm, as if heated from the other side. Sweat moistened his neck under the lightweight knitted collar of his burgundy sweater, which was more or less pink in this light. This made him somehow very aware of the sweater, for a reason unknowable until he slipped out of the squeezebox and broke into a new chamber.

Here, the air was heavy and hot, hotter than in the other places, but dry enough to be more comfortable and easier to breathe. Not bright, the scoop-floored area was lit from some unrevealed source that imitated torchlight. Stalactites with a shaggy green coating hung from the ceiling all the way down to head height, making Keller duck several times until he could clearly see the whole chamber. The deck beneath him was scooped like a spoon. He quickly skidded halfway down, then stopped to assess the surroundings. Behind him, Savannah scraped to a stop. Before them, Zoa was almost to the bottom level.

On the other side of the scoop was a sweater identical to Keller's own. Now he realized why his attire was on his mind—he was looking for another one like it.

"Aw-!" A gasp flew from his lips before he clamped them and caught his voice. He managed to hold back the desperate crack of shock that would've done his crew no good.

Before them, Zane Bonifay stood, half-turned, in the middle of a section of gleaming tiled floor, completely unable to move. He was trapped by a shimmering glasslike globe of threads formed in midair around him, with one of his arms poised up as if he meant to defend himself, the other cast downward and slightly behind. The glossy threads made a shroud like cocoon around him, enticing in its way, horrific in their efficient capture of their prey. Most of the threads were simply looped around him, then frozen in place as if molten strings of glass had cooled in midair.

As Keller drew nearer, he saw the reason Bonifay wasn't stepping out of the cocoon. Some of the glassy threads had speared his body, gone right through his clothing, his flesh, and out the other side. Several were through his raised left arm, the hand that held the open communicator through which they'd been speaking all these minutes. He hadn't even been able to adjust the gain. Another wire had speared his left shoulder, a dozen through his thighs, and one through his throat under the right ear and out under his left jaw, with a trickle of blood to demonstrate its passage.

A ruinous grimace twisted Bonifay's youthful face. His Mediterranean buoyance and a clever charm were missing. His eyes pouched with pain as they followed Keller's approach with something less than hope. Against the commando sweater doubling as uniform wear on Challenger; his cheeks and neck were pale. In this strange lighting, the normally moss-khaki sweater came off mustardy and sickening.

**Zane..." Keller moved past Zoa, who had the in-stinct to let him go first. He held his phaser up, every nerve quivering. He didn't even remember raising his weapon.

"Don't shoot the web!" Bonifay gagged. 'It conducts!'"

How he knew that was a mystery. No point asking right now-or was there? Perhaps it had something to do with Bonifay's phaser, which lay on the floor at his feet. On his right leg, a stream of blood glowed against the black fabric, testifying to an effort to pull free of me threads. He apparently hadn't moved since. As Keller approached, Bonifay's exhausted eyes blinked a thousand pleas.

"Welcome to the-enchanted-kingdom."

The plea ate through their resolve like acid, both pa-thetic and noble. Keller motioned the others to stay back and came closer to the tether web.

"Don't-touch it!" Bonifay warned. "It's razored."

Each thread hummed like nerves in a vocal chord, sensitive to Keller's movements. Its harplike chime hurt his ears. He picked his way closer, step by moss-cupped step, until he came to the edge of the tiled flooring. Zane Bonifay's eyes followed every move-ment, but he couldn't even turn his head as Keller drew closer. A warning gagged out, a few words at a time.

"Don't-step-on the grid!"

Arms flared, Keller skidded to a halt. At his toes lay the glistening platinum-tiled floor, polished to mirror-shine, grouted in gold. In three places were puddles of shattered material where Bonifay had tried to cross. Was it glass?

"Don't step on it" Bonifay repeated, each word a struggle. "That's when they stitched me-" "Hush," Keller said. "Let me think about this."

"I was looking for-the-power-source... there's got to-be one-"

"Shh."

Embroidered into the grid of mirrored tiles was a calligraphy of bronze-colored loops and curves about a hand wide, pattern less, intersecting here and there. Beautiful artwork, but not very helpful. Yellow brick road? Though it seemed inviting, Keller didn't dare touch any part of the flooring.

Instead, he moved toward the outer edge of the grid, to a narrow imitation of a stone wall. Perhaps this was a model of something much larger on some distant world left behind by these people. For him it would provide a ladder to his shipmate. If it bore his weight...

Making the biggest bet he'd made in-well, actually only about a month-he got a grip on two of the stalac-tites overhead, raised one boot to the slabs, and began to navigate toward Bonifay.

Though the stones were uneven, the stalactites gave him balance. In his periphery Zoa imitated his move-ments on the other side of the web.

Together they closed on the center. Bonifay watched Keller pathetically as they finally came face-to-face. His normally enviable complexion was pasty, his eyes were fearful and wild, and his black hair had lost all the style he so fastidiously installed each day.

Carefully, very carefully, Keller reached through the spiraling threads, his fingers spread toward Bonifay-then blood spurted on them both. His right hand had caught a wire, between the thumb and forefinger. Just a touch, yet the cut was deep into the fleshy part of his hand. Any pressure at all and the wire would've gone all the way to his wrist.

Bonifay's gaze shifted downward. He managed not to move his head, lest the same fate come to his carotid artery from the wire in his neck. His lips drew back, quivered. "You better not try," he whispered. **Better leave me. Y'know, I didn't give you directions... I didn't want to-talk-to you."

"Then clam up." But Keller had learned from his mistake and tried again, this time getting in all the way to his shoulder. He cupped his hand under Bonifay's raised arm, just above the elbow, and took the weight

"Oh-thanks!" Bonifay closed his tearing eyes in relief and moaned. "Oh, thanks... thanks... I knew

I should've lit that extra candle this morning-----

Y'know, Nick, you try and try to-figure out your true destiny so you can-get it right when it comes... then it throws-it throws you a-

"If I believed in predestiny, I wouldn't even get up in the morning. We've got to do something about these wires that didn't go through him. Savannah, what if you-"

A finger of air whisked across his face, a flash of re-flected light He threw his free arm up at a shock of motion from the other side and a sharp crackle. Bits of broken metal showered his head, his shoulders, and stung his face.

Somehow he managed to keep a grip on Bonifay's arm. At his side, Zoa stood with her Rassua weapon in her hand. She had slashed the metallic strings. No or-ders, no guesses. Just zwack.

And the weapon-it had changed in her hand. No longer a single blade, a fan of knives made a great shin-ing half-circle inches from Keller's face. The suitcase- type handle suddenly made sense. She tipped the dan-gerous fan downward and her passionless face ap-peared above the blade tips. (

A gulp came up in Keller's throat Think ahead next time! I

"Zoa... lower those now and hold his arm. Savan-nah, are you close?"

"Almost there," Ring called, concentrating on her footwork. At five-feet-two she was having trouble keeping a grip on the slippery stalactites that had helped both Keller and Zoa get here. "Bonifay, what're you doing so deep in this tank?" she asked. "Sudden desire to shave your legs?"

"Nag, nag, nag." Pasty sweat sheeted Bonifay's face. "Seemed-like a derelict-on automatic... we moved in to investigate, then it hit us-with-some kind of- pulse bolt. I didn't get a-Temperance card this week,,

so I came aboard.... I should've read the Tower card more closely... seemed safe over here... didn't register any life forms..."

"It also registered no motive power," Keller re-minded. "Did you believe that?"

"No-the ship read as dead-no power at all-" He spoke fast, gulping out his words, determined to give over the most information he possibly could. "No power source-only some kind of weird emanation that doesn't compute-it shouldn't go! I can't figure out how it goes." I

"But it does," Keller said. <

"We were-tracking-its arrival course-" Bonifay caught his breath. His eyes cranked shut. "There's something... in my back," he admitted with obvious effort, like a child afraid to report that he'd broken something important. Fear chiseled at him, but he muf-fled it. "It's got me right through the... solar plexus chakra.... Could you have a look?"

Keller met his gaze briefly, took a grip on Bonifay that he hoped was supportive without hurting him, and leaned around to look.

Under Bonifay's, right ribs in the back, the sweater's knitted fabric had been sliced so cleanly that it wasn't even frayed. Protruding from the slice was a glasslike tube, one end embedded through his sweater and into his skin at a downward angle. Unlike the razor threads, this was a clear tube, thick as a man's little ringer.

Without making any judgments, he motioned for Sa-vannah to maneuver closer.

"You're the medic," he said. "What does that look like to you?"

"Intubation," she told him. "Might be in an artery. But there's nothing in it. Nothing flowing. No blood coming out either." She squinted into the veiled depths behind Bonifay. "I don't see where it's originating."

"Can you-get it out?" Bonifay's question was clini-cal, as if the answer didn't really matter.

"We'll get it out," Keller assured.

How? Just grab and yank? Without knowing any-thing? He peered back into the shimmer, wondering if maybe they could pull the other end.

Bonifay shuddered and stiffened with effort. "I'm- Fm gonna slip pretty soon...."

Careful not to jostle any of the razor tethers impaling Bonifay, Keller slipped an arm around his waist and said, "Lean on me. Savannah, can we cut the tube?"

She dug through her kit and came up with a utilitarian pair of clip-alls. "Sure, and after that, I'll give all these corpses a haircut."

Keller shot her a silent warning, but too late.

Typically, Bonifay didn't miss the comment His eyes flared with sudden perception. His breath turned choppy. 'They're dead? They're not sculptures? Are you-say-ing they're-they're bodies? This is a-morgue?"

"Just a little stroll through the natural condition," Savannah buttered over her mistake. She went after the razor wire in his throat first. When it snapped, he sucked in his breath hard and shuddered in place. Keller felt the pain and terror run through Bonifay's body as he held him tight.

"Get the other side, Savannah," Keller ordered.

Without commenting, Savannah snipped the exit end of the wire.

"Arms next," he said immediately. "Hold still, Zane."

"This-isn't good at all-" Bonifay choked, "to be in here... we shouldn't violate the dead..."

"They're not violated," Savannah mused as she systematically snipped the threads spearing the arm Zoa was still holding up. "They're all cooperating just fine."

"They-they don't like this-it's got to be on-their terms, not ours-they like to be asked first... what've I done... I've trespassed on the spectral plane!"

"Stop that," Keller broke in. "Give me some answers. What about all this green growth? Is the moss from moisture caught inside the ship?"

"Not m-m-moss," Bonifay stammered. "It's-all- metal. Everything here-is metal."

"I know plants when I see them."

"Not plants... just look like plants. Colored, molded, hammered-composites-brushed, pearlized... nothing but... fine forms of metal. Even the grid-looks like glass, but it's not. Every-" He gasped and stiff-ened as Savannah started on the wires in his thighs. His back arched in agony. Blood trickled from the wound in his neck, which still had the wire through the inside. His body shuddered with effort and exhaustion against Keller's. How long could he remain standing? If he slipped, the razor wires would slice his legs to sections.

Could they move him? What would the wire pieces remaining inside his body do to him? They could still shift, slice, pierce with every flex and step. Would he be cut to pieces while they dragged him out?

"Oh, look... he lived." Blinking, Bonifay panted out his new awareness. Shucorion had appeared in his line of vision. "I didn't-know for-sure-whether he followed me-"

From the bottom of the slope, Shucorion proclaimed, "You should not have been inside here to follow. I ordered you to stay, yet you took this risk!" He pointed at the contraption, then folded his arms around his bruised body and in a pained way added, "Now see where you stand."

Bonifay willed a scowl. "Or I could be sifting cosmic dust into your pocket!"

"Pipe down" Keller ordered. "Let's figure this out. Argue about details later."

While Zoa held Bonifay's arm and Savannah clipped at the other end of the thread in his thigh, and Shucorion kept uneasy watch from over there, Keller tried to bear Bonifay's weight without really moving him or holding on too harshly. The threads could be clipped, yes, but the tube sticking out of Bonifay's back... what could be done? This was no place for minor surgery. Why wasn't there a Starfleet regulation to cover this?

- / tsonitay twisted in undisguised agony as Savannah clipped at a wire in his right thigh. "Hurry up, will you?"

"No." Savannah was unaffected by his pitiful shudders.

Keller, though, was not only affected, but helping Bonifay shudder. "Almost done," he lied.

Bonifay had fixed his attention on Shucorion. "What's wrong-with the shadow?"

"He's hurt."

"I don't mean that... his aura is really yellow.. and he's looking at me funny."

"Just your magnetic personality."

"He's nervous."

"So'm I."

"He's got an idea about me...."

"Zane, knock it off, will you?"

"You might-have-to leave me-"

"Not a chance. Nobody else knows how to make your crystal ball work. All the stitches holding the frigate together'll pull apart" Keller pressed his face to his shoul-der to wipe a band of sweat off his cheek. It was instantly replaced by more. "Hot as a warp core in here...."

"Twenty percent increase in the last five minutes, I'd say," Savannah estimated. "My clothes are already dry."

Clip.

"Something's-different-in here," Bonifay gasped. "You can't-stay much-longer-"

"Don't tell me what I can't do," Keller stiffly said. "How many more of those, Savannah?"

"Dozen or so, both entry and exit wounds."

"Work faster."

At the bad news Bonifay moaned and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he abruptly gasped and stared out into die chamber. For an instant Keller thought Bonifay was gaping for some reason at Shucorion, but something had captured Savannah's attention too. Keller kept one hand on Bonifay and drew away enough for a clear view of the lower area in the cham-ber, the row of statues-bodies-behind Shucorion.

A few moments of silence trickled by, offset by the soft harping of the metal strings now mostly hanging free. Beside Keller, Zoa's sphinx-like face grew terrible with warning. -

Below them, arms began to rise. A dozen sets of shoulders flexed under the ghastly glow. Eyes like polished gemstones blinked slowly. Heads began to turn toward them.

They had an audience.

**Um..." Savannah's voice was rough. "Are you looking?"

With one hand on Bonifay, Keller stared down into the cemetery chamber. What he saw blew a shiver down his spine till he could hardly stand.

"Have mercy," he uttered. "They're coming back to life...."

Chapter Five on the sizzling Feast Grid, thousands of bewildered hunters stood and stared at Luntée and, beyond him, Riutta. With the heat energy from the dancer crash dissipating, cold wind moved in from the plain and brought with it the sting of metal sand shaved from the mountains. Beneath their burned feet, the ashes began to fly away and the fibrous Grid mats stiffened. The gum made a crackling sound, like the sky when the dancers fed

It had taken five hundred lifetimes to understand the physics of this place. Or so the rules remembered. This planet was a great distance from its star. Solar light was negligible, drowned by constant lightning. There were only days of more lightning and days of less, and never-ending thunder on this giant conduction machine.

For a while the first survivors believed someone would reopen the Gateway and come for them. They had lived off the trickle of reserved energy from their ships, and watched the massive explosions of dying dancers, and waited for someone to come.

After a thousand years of spare existence, picking at the corpses of crashed dancers, hope faded. When they were nearly to a point of despair, a few scientists lived long enough to realize they could reopen the portal themselves, someday, with enough energy stored.

For hundreds more lifetimes, they had built towers to harness and save raw energy from the skies. It hadn't worked very well. Free dancers were far more efficient at capturing energy than clumsy towers. Gradually the cleverest people suggested that the animals would descend for two reasons—to die, or to feed on the right bait.

The only bait was Living themselves. By standing on the nonconductive gum mats, the people could tempt down the energy-packed atmospheric harvesters, hold them down, and steal all they had. If the timing was right, the bladderlike animals would be gorged on those flickering biologies everyone saw but could not reach.

Down came the huge towers. The hunt developed organically into the scheme of survival. The most experienced hunters became the ones who decided when each step of the hunt should progress. Someday the current Elders, whoever they might be, would decide the time was right to open the Gateway and Living would return to the trails of black space Outside.

Though these were old stories, everyone relied upon them to push forward on this harsh planet. Cold wind, hot crash sites, a sparking sky, constant lightning, constant thunder, this inanimate place was meant to be a crash site for free dancers that fell dying from the upper atmosphere. Yet all Living had scratched out a pattern for survival where nothing was meant to live. They spent all their time preserving

candlefly and storing energy and hiding in shelters, and from time to time eligible hunters from every city risked death in the hunt to take fresh energy and candlefly harvest from the sky.

Obviously the Gateway was meant to be used, and not waited for. Otherwise, why hadn't those scientists been taken before their discoveries?

This was a world of light and lighter, dark and darker, bright and black, frost cold and glow hot, shadow and glare and dull, with and without luster. The old information told of more, of how things were different Outside. There was something to help see better, distinguish more accurately, a new way to perceive everything—depth, distance, nearness, detail, even each other's faces and eyes. There were stories of going out of the shelters and still being warm.

How odd that would seem.

Wind blew stinging metal chips against Riutta's face and neck. Her protective shirt fluttered about her body. How strange would life be somewhere else? Could they adjust again? How much had been exaggerated over the lifetimes? Was she afraid to go because Outside might be a disappointment?

Everyone among Living interpreted this world in his or her own way. Some were known as the ones who always took the best candleflies for themselves. Some tried to calculate the least likely place to be chosen during the hunt. Others were overly brave, knowing that if they were taken their families went to the front of every line. Sometimes hunters were so tired of the stress that they became suicidal and jumped into the floss, trying to be chosen quickly.

Nothing worked. Neither bravery nor fear worked. The choice was the choice, completely random. There was no better or worse place to stand.

Lunttee thought she was afraid to go Outside. Maybe she was.

Until now there had been comfort in what she knew, knew for certain. They lived on a planet that neither collected nor held radiation. The other side of the planet was blistering hot, making a world of storms, wind, and lightning caused by hot and cold air masses. They could breathe because the biosphere around the planet collected the sparse sunlight. All balance of life came from the candleflies and the tree dancers, the complex colonies of microbial life sharing them, and the raw energy they used.

That was life here. Simple. Live, have children, become a hunter, stand naked on the Grid to tempt the dancers down, feel the rain as heat was released and the descent began, and eventually be chosen or anointed. If a hunter survived more hunts than anyone else, he or she became an Elder and would be able to decide things. When an Elder died, the next most experienced hunter moved into that place. Simple.

She would rather face a hundred hunts than stand here now, holding the two link shirts of the Elders. As the ashes blew away and left a darkened spot on the planet's bare surface, the other link shirts were exposed a few at a time, those unclaimed and buried by the rolling dancer. Without a Living person inside it, a shirt simply behaved like a piece of the planet. Energy conducted straight through and grounded into the bare plain.

Among the debris many bodies were exposed, those who managed to pull their shirts back on, but whose shirts were overwhelmed. Even a link shirt couldn't manipulate so much direct transfer. The bodies hadn't been able to convert. Anointed.

A piece of fabric flipped at her heel. Startled, Riutta peered suddenly down. Uncommon sense of

direction had brought her to the right place, where the Elders had been standing before the call to run onto the Feast Grid. The third shirt of authority lay over her foot.

Three Elders chosen at one time. The dancer had rolled, and they had all been chosen.

Beside her, Luntee stood shuddering. Thousands of bereaved and terrified hunters shivered beyond him. They all looked at Riutta.

Ridiculously, Riutta found herself calculating the odds against such a strike. Never before had more than one Elder been taken in a hunt. Then the odds scared her and she stopped.

The Elders had thought the hunt might make history today. And it had.

"They were killed by their decision to take two. They gave their lives to make sure we have enough power to keep the Gateway open. We should go!"

"They were killed to make Riutta the senior Elder. We're not going."

"We've stored energy for thousands of lifetimes! This is the last hunt! We're ready to open the Gateway."

"The decision will be up to the new Elders."

*The chosen Elders already decided to go!"

"But why were they taken? To give Riutta the right to decide. And she doesn't want us to go!"

"Luntee is an Elder now. He can decide."

"Who is the third Elder?"

"Find the third Elder!"

"Signal the Cities! Find the third Elder!"

"It was unwise to send the Anointed through. Too much time has passed. Things are different here, different outside-"

"We should never have opened the Gateway!"

"Generations have waited to open it-"

"We don't even know why we're here!"

"We might be here because it's worse there. What if the first crossers were escaping?"

"Let Riutta decide!"

"Find the third Elder!"

"Has anyone contacted the Cities?"

"Riutta's the senior Elder anyway. The Elders may have been chosen today because their decision should stand, but Riutta should lead the expedition."

"I'm willing to let Riutta decide"

"I disagree!"

"Riutta! What do you say? Claim your shirt!"

After many cold minutes of bickering, the miserably aggrieved throng of hunters came to silence around her. Riutta hadn't said a word, yet there had been nothing but argument. Luntree was leading the argument against her, his cousins supporting him, her son and daughter and many others shouting back at them, others adding their own rumbles and grumps. All she heard clearly in her mind was the most resilient worry... What if it's worse there?

The harvest was tremendous. They had taken one very large free dancer and successfully drained all its energy and candleflies. Though the second had rolled and gone to ground, it had been drained of tons of candleflies. There would be plenty of food for a change. There was now enough energy to do what the Elders had planned before they'd been chosen, but also enough energy to make life on this planet much easier for a long time if it was not squandered on an ancient whim.

What was right? Why had they been taken at this critical time?

They waited for her to speak. They knew she was against going. She always had been.

Her own scorched hand swiped across her lips. The motion wakened her from her thoughts-the Elders' shirts still hung from her fingers. The surviving hunters were very still as she gave her first orders as an Elder.

"Take the fallen and prepare them to join the Anointed."

Decent. Orderly, and appropriate. But what did she mean? Even she wasn't sure.

She threw the two Elders' shirts to the gum mat, on top of the third.

"Then put power to the sled engines," she decided. "We'll open the Gateway and go Outside."

Chapter Six

The Grave Ship around them the graveyard shifted and flexed. Though not an eye bothered to blink, a half-dozen mummies down the middle aisle suddenly rediscovered their arms and legs, shoulders and necks. They moved toward Shucorion with sublime horror. To compound the nightmare, Shucorion didn't realize what was happening behind him.

"Great snakes-move!" Keller's brain divided between the trapped Zane Bonifay and his injured first officer about to be cornered down there. "Shucorion, move!"

Conditioned by a lifetime of disasters, Shucorion ducked and sidestepped the stony arm reaching toward him. His wounds betrayed him. He fell first to one knee, then both. The statues were lumbering up fast in the heat. A resinated woman bent nearly at the waist had seized Shucorion by the arm he put up to defend himself.

"Spooks in wonderland," Savannah rasped. With laudable resolve she continued her work on the strands stuck through Bonifay's body. "Now we know why it got hot in here."

Keller fought to keep his foothold. "Pompeii was never like this!"

At his other side, Zoa's stare was alarmingly like those of the reanimated bodies.

"Zoa, come out of it," he barked. "Security alert! Get your sidearm!"

He drew his own phaser and shifted right-Savannah was crouched in his way! He couldn't move back and maintain his foothold. Zoa went for her phaser but, un-accustomed to energy weapons in gun form, she fumbled and discovered an instant too late that she still had the Rassua blade fan in one hand and Bonifay's arm in the other. The blade fan Christmas-belled as she let go of Bonifay and snatched up the phaser from her belt. Fresh pain choked Bonifay when the weight of his arm hit his shoulder. Keller sidestepped back into place and stuck a hand between the fine tethers. A nasty slice opened up on the back of his wrist, but he kept Bonifay's arm from falling into the razor web.

Blood flowed all over his sweater sleeve. Against the bizarre pink glow on the knit his blood showed dark and gory. He was just as stuck as Bonifay!

"Zane, can you hold your own arm up?"

"Ah-God!"

"Copy that, stand by...."

Damnably far down the sculpted slope, six man-nequins thumped toward the web. Zoa danced to get a clear shot-she disappeared!

"Zoa! Aw, rollin' hell-" Keller craned sideways. "Where'd you go?"

She was down in a hole! Had it always been there?

"I failed." Her crayon-blue dot-eyes peered up at him from a good twelve feet down and she actually blinked once.

Bonifay grumbled, "You fell."

Manpower down by one!

*Try to climb out of there, please," Keller mildly mentioned.

"You've got to leave me and get out," Bonifay gagged. His face twisted in misery. "This is solemn retribution from the supersensual! The clairaudients on Canus Station warned me not to open that sacred box! Why do I do these things?"

"You've never been to Canus Station "

"In 1612!"

"Stay in me moment, please. Zoa!"

The razor tether hummed between them and the group assault on Shucorion. The second and third corpses had reached the Blood officer and were helping the dead lady pull him along the grid.

He couldn't wait. Time for some old-fashioned ranch target practice, pinch of Starfleet thrown in for flavor.

"Zane," Keller began, "hold very still."

The phaser was hot hi his right hand. He thumbed the setting-pure guesswork-brought the muzzle up to his cheek, and extended his arm slowly through the web's strands. Just like pointing a finger, Dad always said. He closed one eye, tilted his head, held his bream, and squeezed.

The weapon whined. A bright yellow stream speared the environment Around him the razor web flashed like tinsel until he was almost blind.

He flinched at his own shot the stream should've been red. Forgot how weird this place was! He made himself hold the grip on the trigger. The phaser heated up fast in this warm cloister. Its whine rang and rang.

The lady mummy took the hit in the forehead over her right eye. Before their eyes her short hair parted, grew a long furrow, and began to melt around her face.

Melt? Her head should've been sliced off!

A pearly skull appeared. Her face heated up and paled like a cameo. Though the two behind her let go of Shucorion and moved around him, the woman con-tinued to drag him along the deck. And she was about to melt all over him!

Immediately Keller eased off the nigger. The phaser cooled slightly.

"Too bad/* Savannah commented. "Going for the heart?"

"Dang it all. I was thinking to knock her over." So much for pointing a finger. He thumbed the weapon's setting to full disrupt. "Shucorion, would you turn loose of that lady so I can shoot her?"

Shucorion threw a ridiculous glance over his shoul-der and pulled harder.

"Last thread." A snip punctuated Savannah's words. "The only thing left is the tube in his back."

"Clear these threads," Keller ordered. "I've about had it with this place."

She was already pulling on her protective gloves. The coated palms allowed her to scoop up several strands at a time like a horse's tail and pull them clear while Keller held Bonifay's arm up and out of the way. Now that the threads were out of his body, the procedure sped up.

But the mannequins kept shambling toward them. Something about their deliberate, programmed motions clicked all at once in his mind. Their fingers, their un-focused eyes, lips frozen in expressionlessness...

The phaser in his hand was ready to fire again, this time on full, ready to disintegrate its target. Would it

work in this environment of unrecorded compounds and living metal? Was this the time for experiments?

Another idea clicked. He acted on it

"Shucorion," he called evenly, "stop resisting. Stop fighting her."

The desperate glance came again, laced with conviction that the Earthling had finally flipped.

"Fm serious," Keller activated. He widened his eyes at Shucorion to drive home his point.

With some effort Shucorion capped his natural impulses, held his breath, and went limp. His arm sagged in the dead woman's grasp. What was left of her head wagged in satisfaction and she bent for a more secure hold. He grimaced at the attention, but didn't resist. In seconds he was neatly deposited out of the aisle and between two clusters of big mushrooms. The woman straightened, flexed her half-melted neck, and joined the five others.

"Move clear right now." Keller kept a firm grip on Bonifay and turned his head. "Zoa, are you up here yet?"

"Slippy sides, dang't." Her voice was gravelly. She'd taken to hacking herself handholds one at a time with the point of her Rassua blade, now collapsed back into one unit. Flash after flash, her golden arms flexed mightily, the tattoos of past adventures coming back to life, as if this place weren't surreal enough.

"They've stopped coming at us," Savannah mentioned. She tried to appear cool, but her voice had gone to a monotone. "They're doing something..."

The metallic people stretched out their fingers, turning to one of the stalactites at the edge of the tiled grid.

Each of them picked a stalactite and pressed his or her fingertips in a flared position to the structure.

"Nick," Savannah snapped, "look at this, look, look, look-"

The tube in Bonifay's back came to life, shifting and coiling as bubble-filled liquid moved out of the bulk-head and flowed down toward him.

"What is that stuff?" Keller demanded. In his arms Bonifay twisted pathetically to look for himself.

Savannah followed the mercurial liquid with her finger. Her eyes widened.

"If this reaches him," she bluntly said, "he's dead."

Halfway up out of the hole, Zoa paused and stared at the stuff crawling through the tube. As Keller cranked to get a better look, Savannah finished her terse assessment

"I think it's an embalming machine."

"Zane, brace yourself! I need my hands!" As his announcement echoed, Keller took a chance and released Bonifay. "Zoa! Blades!"

Below, the Rassua woman got a grip on something with one hand and stabilized herself. Her other

shoulder reflected a band of light as she tossed one of her blade fans into the air. Her leap of faith gave Keller a confident surge.

The blade turned only once overhead. With a wild reach he snatched it out of the air, almost losing fingers to the move. He had no idea how to make the blades separate into a fan, so he didn't try. He gripped the handle with both hands and sliced recklessly downward.

Luckily Savannah Ring anticipated his move and was clear when the blade slammed through the tube in Bonifay's back. Keller's clumsy whack sheared the tube and almost took Bonifay's hipbone off at the tip.

Abruptly free and exhausted, Bonifay sagged into their grip. Keller dug in and shoved both Bonifay and Savannah out of the way with a ferocious push.

"Get him out of here!"

He jumped off the row of stones he'd been standing on and landed flat-footed on the signal grid. The glasslike coating shattered under his soles. Spider veins spread out from each foot. Above his head, the razor web shivered and whined, hunting for a body to ensnare. At the same instant, the six mummies turned in confusion, let go of the stalactites that were obviously some kind of control panels, and all shifted toward Keller.

Shucorion struggled to his feet "Why are you doing that!?"

"Move in the other direction!"

Since the trap had already been sprung on Bonifay, the web didn't know what to do. Keller was able to avoid the strings. The unblinking mummies began to close on him—and only him.

"Get back to that vestibule where we beamed in! Zoa, get'em out! No arguments, Savannah!"

Zoa pulled herself out of the hole, took Bonifay by the body, and hoisted him like a sack of grain. Off they went, down the slope toward Shucorion.

The gap between Keller and his crew inflated. The mummies had picked up on him and only him, and lost their interest in Bonifay and Shucorion. The tangence of attraction gave him a sense of control.

Despite the rockets of dissent in Savannah's eyes as the crew shuffled through the yellow-silver environment the way they'd come in, Keller didn't wait around to hear the prosecution. If he gave them a chance to protest, precious seconds would be lost. How persistent would these ambulatories be? How attached were they to their machine?

"Keep going!"

His call echoed. He tripped on something slippery, though he didn't know it until his knee rang off a blunt surface and pain sent him spinning. With his eyes crinkled and his teeth gritted, he banked off a sculpted tree, glanced back at the stony faces growing nearer, gathered his legs, and leaped wildly.

Chilly air struck his face; then something solid struck the side of his head. For an instant he was blinded, dizzy, rolling and disoriented, as if he'd been put inside an accelerator and spun. This ship had more ups and downs than a Jefferies tube.

He landed hard on his left thigh, both legs bent, slumped in a forest of glossy orange spires twisting well overhead. Cold air looped around the turtleneck at his throat as if he'd been caught in a big cold grip. Zoa had fallen into a hole. Was this the same place?

The spires turned and turned. Keller pressed a hand to his eyes. His fingers on both sides were numb. Nau-sea surged up in his gut, forcing him to fight it back down. Was he unconscious? How long? Seconds? Min-utes? Long enough for the others to get out?

He forced himself to sit up and craned to look over his shoulder. No sign of whatever hole he had come through... must be some kind of trapdoor into a completely undiscovered area. There was no portal or hatch behind him, no telltale frame or hissing pressurizers.

Gathering his collection of new bruises, he crawled to his feet and shook his head clear. Was his sidearm still with him? Yes, in his hand. Trouble was, he couldn't feel his fingers.

As he looked at the weapon and his hand, pain hit his right arm and radiated out from the funny bone. He sucked a wince and held his breath. When the arm started to throb, he could breathe again and think. De-termined to hang on to the phaser, he gripped his right wrist while he scouted the place.

This chamber was clearly different. The colors were warmer, the landscape coppery, burnished, with less embellishment and almost no artistry. His sweater appeared closer to its deep burgundy under the lighting here. The metals seemed more in raw form than in the other places. Was it unfinished? Or had efficiency stepped in at some point later?

His first step brought him out of the spire forest He'd thought he was deeper in. The height was some kind of illusion, the spires neither as tall nor as bulky as they appeared. Though he thought the spires towered over his head, he now saw that they were only a couple of meters higher, but tapered and tilted to create a sense of height. It was an architectural dick.

He took another step forward. Two more mummies appeared between the spires. Worn to a nub, Keller brandished his phaser at them.

They weren't moving. A man and a woman. Roughly the same height, clothes pretty much alike, simple sheaths, belted. Peaceful as river rocks, they stood guard over each other. The man held some kind of hefty clamp. The woman gazed off into a pretend distance.

Was this how it had been for them? In the place they came from? A person passes away for some reason, is brought to this vehicle, laid on that grid... and those who died before revive and bring the newcomer into their fold? No music, no pipes, no ceremony other than the march of the inexpressive?

And the ooze, that liquid flowing toward Bonifay down the tube, must be the compound hardened inside each of them. It filled up their bodily cavities, arteries, veins, and even converted the molecular structure of their skin and hair into this fossilized form. And here they stood for thousands of years, tributes to them-selves, acting as then- own gravestones.

Or maybe his instincts were on overload.

"Challenger to Commander Keller. Do you read?"

Keller choked and jumped a meter. His heart thudded in his chest. He snapped up his communicator and gasped, "Keller, aye! Quinones, is that you? Scared me silly!"

"Sorry, sir." A woman's voice crackled through the instrument, broken by static. "We just broke the com blanket, sir. At least partly. We put a Dunbar booster on the system, but it won't hold. I was about to send a search party."

"No, no! Don't send anybody else!" Keller started speaking fast. A Dunbar booster! "And don't close on this vessel. It's automated to protect itself. The board-ing party's on its way to the outer perimeter where we beamed hi before. Pick up their coordinates and beam them out, understand?"

The communicator squeaked once and went silent

"Quinones? Can you hear me?"

He paused. Nothing happened. A little static, then more nothing.

"Quinones, do you read?"

A shiver came out in his voice. Would they be able to get through again? The boosted gain would fry the frigate's system in just a few minutes. A pile of parts, fitted in a hurry, could only talk to each other so long without choking.

"Nick!" Savannah Ring's voice broke on the com-municator this time. "Where are you? 'Your communi-cator's not giving me a homing trace."

"I'm stuck in a side chamber. Did you get Zane out?"

"Challenger just confirmed a beam-in. Sounds like the boys and the Zoa constrictor got out."

Anger hardened his features. "What about you? Aren't you out? I ordered you to evacuate!"

"Not my job. Search and rescue, remember? These compliants have settled down now that they can't find anything to embalm. Seems like they have a perimeter limit."

"They're a little less compliant than the average corpse,* he muttered, rubbing his bruised knee. "Don't take any chances. Beam out. I'll take care of myself."

"Do you remember what you went through? Did you fall or go sideways? "

Agony. Someday she'd follow one damned order and he'd encase it hi plasticine and show it around to folks.

"I heard a sliding sound," he remembered. "Can't be more than a few steps from you."

"Stay put. I'm looking."

"Look for a way to open a door and keep it open, but don't come through till you're sure you won't be trapped with me. Are you in contact with the ship?"

"Patchy."

"Have them ask Zane what do to."

"As wounded as he is? He could barely sell me my own shoes"

Keller shrugged. "He's the only one who knows how to make those twisted circuits make sense of each other-holy Moses!"

"What's wrong?"

But Ring's words hung in the hot air.

Before Keller stood another metal mummy, realistic to the hair, face, irises in the eyes, this one so familiar that his heart pounded in his chest. His hand shot out, touched the arm-cool, formed muscles, veins... Keller heard himself take a sharp breath.

The familiar face gazed back at him with dark agate eyes cupped in lashes, thick straight hair resting on its shoulders, the cheekbones-

He shrank from the body-statue. Though he struggled to breathe, his lungs wouldn't cooperate. If he'd been gut-punched the hit couldn't have knocked him harder. His right hand continued its shaky pass over the metal arm. His left hand, though, and he raised communicator again.

Speaking-that was another matter.

A third voice vibrated up his hand.

"This is Challenger. Quinones here. We think the gain's stable now, sir. Sir? Commander?"

The eyes glowed like polished agate. The hair was long, unbound, and seemed to be cast of a different metal from the skin, which had been lovingly buffed and seemed as good as new.

He would've liked to step back a little more. His feet wouldn't move.

"Commander Keller? "

"Is Shucorion there?" Keller choked out. "Is he on board?"

"Haven't seen him yet, sir," the security officer answered. "There was a rescue beam-out, but I don't have a report yet. Hey, Gyler, anybody seen Mr. Shucorion? Have the transporter worn report who came in"

Keller's imagination went wild with possibilities, the kind that only made sense in a place where nothing else did. The exercise scared him to the bone.

"Sir, I'm trying to patch you through to sickbay. We're having someprob-"

"Sickbay. Shucorion speaking. How may I help?"

Whew-weak, but not turned to pewter. Keller's aching eyes squeezed shut for an instant. His knees rattled. "You just did," he huffed.

"Pardon me?"

"Just glad to hear your voice, is all...."

"Hey, sheriff, you down in this pit?" Her boots nois-ily crunching closer, Savannah Ring broke through to him and rounded the spires, already talking. "I found a sliding door with a trip switch right next to-aw!"

She let out a shriek. Keller shot both hands toward her and grabbed her by the head, one palm over her mouth, the other pressing his communicator to the back of her skull. She almost staggered into another mummy.

"Don't say anything!" he hissed. "Stop squeaking!"

"Buffzts-!"

"Shh!"

"Is something else wrong?" Shucorion asked from the safety of the frigate.

Another bleat slipped out of Savannah's mouth be-tween Keller's fingers.

Incredible.

"We'll try to get out of here," Keller stammered into the communicator. "Got... sidetracked."

"Shall I return ? Do you need help ? "

"No!" both Keller and Savannah bolted.

Keller eyed Savannah down ferociously. "No, don't come, don't send anybody else, we'll get out on our own." When Savannah mffi again, he grabbed her tighter. "Shh!" Into his communicator he made a dry-mouthed excuse. "Just stand by over there. Take care of yourself and Bonifay."

"When you return, we must discuss Bonifay's ac-tions. Are you sure you can get out?"

"We'll... we'll... we'll get out. The residents are settling down. I think we can evacuate if we don't trip any more switches. Contact somebody and see if you can get readings on this thing's motive power. Find out if it's being pushed or tracted or what."

Risking loss of the thready gain, he powered down the communicator just to get a moment without any possibility of being overheard, and swung to Savannah.

"Now don't let on," he warned.

Her palms wagged before him. "You mean not tell him he's got a mummified twin in this tomb?"

With a sweaty hand rubbing over his mouth, Keller muttered, "I don't want to tell him..."

"How can you ignore this!"

"I'm-believe me-Pm not ignoring this!"

"How can it be here? It looks just like him!"

"I don't know, Savannah... what if I tell him and it upsets the balance?"

**What if you don't and it upsets it more? If this isn't a statue of Shucorion, then it's at least Blood. What a resemblance!"

"How can you know that?" Keller asked. "You can't tell from skin color... otherwise this guy's just humanoid. If his innards don't tell you anything, he could be Orion or Vendikan for all we can tell." He circled the embalmed man with suspicion running high. "If these are Blood corpses on a ship that looks Kauld, the whole sector could break out in conflict again. We don't need that. Let's figure this out before we start trouble."

"You're talking about your first officer."

*I know, Savannah, I know...."

Since no mystical answers descended from on high to enhance his commanderlike facade of wisdom, they both fell silent for a few moments while Keller thought and thought.

"Let's start with... do you still have a good gain from the ship? Can you tie that tricorder into the main-frame and get a reading on the age of any of this? Do some comparisons?"

She shrugged. "I'll try. Don't know how accurate it'll be. The mainframe's still skittish."

"Do your best."

Having asked, he had to now stand here and wait while she worked. And this fellow over here also seemed willing to wait. Fine as detailed waxwork, the statue-uh, mannequin-mummy-how could any-body get used to this? The dead were supposed to be buried or boxed or cremated or something de-cent! This one just stood there and gazed at him the same as Shucorion did. Literally the same. Even that little half-a-smile, like it thought Keller was funny to watch.

The chamber, spired and moin6-draped, set itself apart from the other chambers. This one had pearly spires, but no torture areas for petrification. In fact, there were very few of the standing dead here. Only their friend here and the other two.

"Mmmm," Savannah uttered, tormenting her tri-corder. "Well, we can rule out any idea that this is a modified Kauld battlebarge or any design from avail-able Blood or Kauld technology."

Keller spun around. "Why?"

Her Tahitian eyes squinted. A lock of russet hair fell between them. "Some of these bodies are pretty fresh, metallically speaking, but the majority are old enough to be historic relics. And they've been in place a long time. No signs of disturbance in their mountings or the stuff around them"

"Except us."

"Right. Until us, I doubt they've been bothered at all. The bulkhead in here and the ones behind it, right down to the perimeter of space, are pulling dates in the thou-sand-year range. Younger parts might be additions or repairs, but even those are old. The Kauld didn't have battlebarges more than eighty years

ago."

"There goes that theory."

"Why did Shucorion think it looked like old Kauld, then?"

"There are only so many good designs to go around. Dang, I hate averages," Keller grumbled, unsatisfied. "Tell me how old Shucorion's brother here is."

Turning to the subject, Savannah scanned its face. "More like his uncle. See the bracketing of the mouth? Crease across the forehead? I'd give him a few years on Shucorion. Lips are thinner too. And there's a slight slope across the-

"I didn't ask for an art critic. Analyze, analyze."

"Give me some space, magpie." She shouldered him back.

Though her attitude managed to shuttle down the tension level for him, damnable seconds passed into good minutes before she was ready to report. She cali-brated and recalibrated her readings, double-checked, confirmed, started over and did the whole thing fresh.

Finally her dartlike brows went up and down and she looked into the eyes of the petrified corpse. "According to everything I can pick up here, he's been cooperating for about eleven thousand years. Error of fifty either way"

"Eleven thousand?" He shook his head and ended up in a grimace of doubt. "Naw... are you sure about all this? From what we saw in there, isn't it more likely they're some kind of android instead of corpses? Maybe it's not their skin."

She impaled him with a look. "It is skin. This is his hair. The follicles are still intact. These are real dead people, and most of them have been dead for thousands of years."

"Mercy..." ;

He eyed the man who so strikingly resembled his alien first officer. Just how alien was Shucorion?

"He's glossier than the others. Except the others in this room-they look different too. Are they made of something newer? They're more polished. Brushed."

Savannah responded with an immediate skin scrap-ing on the twin. The reading came back instantly, as if the little reader were hitting a stride. "Older. These are probably the oldest of all."

With a glance around at the ultimate occult, Keller hunched his shoulders. "Do you get the idea this room is special?"

She sighed tightly. "Subjective. Could be our imagi-nations playing on us. It's just so comfortable here."

"Thank you, Morticia."

Again she gave her attention to the face that so dis-turbed them both and threw everything they'd seen so far into a whole new bucket. "I think we should station this down in auxiliary control. Play with the crew's

minds. Tell them Shucorion turned to rock. And it's a virus. Has he breathed on them lately?"

Keller held up a finger to stop her. "I don't want him to find out yet, understand?"

"I get it," she said. "I just don't agree. He might know something about this."

"He'd have told us if anything looked familiar. He's as out of place as the rest of us. Just got a feeling to keep quiet right now."

"The real question is why it looks like him "

"Could it be a coincidence?"

"Nick, if I painted Shucorion with silica resin you couldn't tell them apart. Except for the brackets and the crease in his brow and the slope of his nose... maybe the cheekbones are a little too-

"You work on it quietly. The answer'll probably show up when we find out where this vessel came from. Maybe there's a genetic connection with the Blood."

"We could determine that if we had any idea what these people's original skin color was. That's the primary dissimilarity between Blood or Kauld and most other basic humanoid physiology. There's no blue human."

Holding up a hand, Keller drew a breath. "Ten things at a time. I'm about to give a pack of orders and since I'm not likely to pay much attention, you'll have to re-member'em."

"Deal."

"First, get those strings out of Zane. Second, when we get back I want an exhaustive trace of the path of this vehicle. Where did it come from? How did it just appear in scouted space? Third, bring in a limited team and secure this place. Block off any of those grids and look for other trip switches. Fourth, keep Shucorion out of here, but show him any new data you get, not allow-ing him to happen to see this guy. In fact, keep all the Blood crew members out until further notice. I don't want any wild rumors. Fourth-

"Fifth."

"Yen, fifth, figure out its weapons and sensors. Why did it attack Bonifay and Shucorion in their Plume?

How come it only lets us beam into that one area? What kind of a sphere of defense has it got? Auto-mated? Or is somebody hiding behind the walls peep-ing at us?"

Savannah glanced around, tantalized. "Ooohh..." His hand hooked her arm. He drew her toward what he hoped was still a way out "That's my morning. Pickin' around a smelly old tomb with a herd of medal-lion-headed marionettes... some log entry this'll make."

Chapter Seven

The United Federation Frigate Challenger theoretically, and in the regard of the colonists she guarded, the Composite Frigate Challenger was a new ship. The word "composite," though, was a eu-phemism. In function, she was a discordant puzzle of sections and systems from dismantled vessels, all of which had been dragged from hell to Belle Terre be-fore being parted out. In the weeks since Keller had ordered

her contrived, hoping to put up a front and scare off anyone cooking the idea to tamper with the planet or its precious resources, the frigate had performed in an eccentric, wild manner. She was strong, fitted with a Blood warp core and muscular towing engines-the "mules" that had hauled thousands of colonists here. She possessed state-of-the-art systems from Starfleet and a dozen other sources. Since invention is a constant rolling process, though, the systems frequently argued and about thirty percent of the time put their noses in the air, demanding the other guy give in. Burnouts, overloads, and viral collapses rock-eted around the ship's guts on a daily basis. Hourly they discovered some new problem and had to figure a way around it. Keller and Bonifay usually spent two watches out of three every day putting out spot-fires and learning how to reroute power from a button to the thing they wanted to happen when the button got pushed. ;

When Keller needed power and presence, however, the ship stuck her chin out, picked up her skirts, and always seemed to go where he wanted her to go. Since nobody but the crew knew she had anything but basic shakedown problems, her appearance on a scene of skirmish was usually effective. So far.

The transporters, fitted together piecemeal from a dozen other units, were unhappy machines. They operated, but residual nausea was a side effect Keller kept forgetting to fight when he beamed in and out. When he materialized on the pad, his guts twisted like rubber-bands and didn't exactly spring back into shape when he saw Shucorion waiting for him, still ashy from their ordeal, at the base of the platform steps.

Savannah paused at the edge of the platform, locked her gaze on Shucorion's sapphire complexion and pale expressive eyes-back to Sagittarius Cluster normal after the weird lighting in the grave ship-then unlocked and thumped past him without a word. The poker face of a puppy.

Perplexed, Shucorion watched her go. He expected a remark and was surprised not to get one. Though Keller tried to descend the pad snappishly and exude confidence, the bottom step had other ideas. He stumbled. By the time he straightened, Shucorion was at one side and another form had moved out from behind-a media recorder unit was halfway down Keller's throat before he realized there was someone else in the room.

He swayed back and waved the media unit off. "Mr. Zapf, please! This isn't the time!"

Behind the recorder unit an egg-shaped face popped up at about chin-level, wearing anti-intensity goggles, a knitted hat, baggy trousers and a deeply contrived swagger. "It's always the time for the public to be informed," the little man's deep and dramatic voice proclaimed. "Everything that happens here is history. History is the making. And you're part of it At the cusp. Bracing your determined jaw into the storms of new-"

"No, no, no storms today. Clear out of the transporter area, would you, and give me a chance to check on my injured officers. Not asking too much, eh?"

The lower lip poked out "Captain Keller, you agreed with the Office of the Governor, Belle Terre Colonial Law Enforcement Statute Zeta-B, to my being aboard this ship. To record any and all significant undertakings for the planetary archives. Secure these historic moments for use as training footage for future patriots and the heroes of law enforcement. I'm a trusted archivist."

Keller's bruised hip cocked under his hand. "You're a newshound, Mr. Zapf. We got no news yet. We picked up a derelict, is all, and got potshotted by its auto defense. No casualties. Disappear, or I'll pitch you in that bay and make it happen. And don't call me 'captain.' "

To date he was running about sixty-forty at handling Seth Zapf. Letting his shoulder speak for him, he took Shucorion by the elbow and angled deeper into the transporter room. "Feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you. I must speak to you about Bonifay's actions aboard the Plume."

Out of the corner of his mouth, Keller whispered, "Not yet Have we picked up any source of motive power on that monster?"

"Monsters?" Seth Zapf interrupted from the transporter room door. He clicked on his recorder. "Describe diem, please/*

Shucorion, who didn't understand sensationalism at all, eyed the little man but continued his report. "I'm sorry. We can't find a source. It seems to have no engines."

"No engines," Keller mused. "Under power, with no source."

"When Bonifay and I were trapped in the crippled Plume," Shucorion altered, "I forward a call to the nearest Blood patrol. They responded. Though they were too far to rescue us, I was in contact with them when Bonifay abandoned the Plume."

'I know" Keller soothed. "We've got to organize the Blue Net with better area coverage and see if we can't upgrade their speed-to-consumption ratios."

"But they maybe-"

Keller silenced him with a grip on his arm. Zapf was right over there. His damned recorder probe was still flickering.

"Mr. Zapf, I told you not to use activated devices on board," Keller spoke up. "You can report, but you can't eavesdrop. Do your sniffing on the lower decks."

"The people have a right to know, Captain."

"No, they don't." He took away the device and handed it to the kid at the transporter. "Midshipman, put this in your quarters, under guard."

"Yes, Commander!"

"I knew we shoulda never brought the media." Keller pulled Shucorion toward the door, bat drilled Zapf with final clarity. "Don't call me 'captain.' "

"How can we make those switches trip-proof while we work?"

"Quadruple safeties-on all the hatches-and evacu-ate the area so the motion sensors don't-activate... and reinforce the gag-swivel appliances."

"But we're out of lubricant.**

"Use the fire-retardant-ow!"

"Why can't we just adjust our load with the walker claw?"

"Not-strong enough for overloads."

"Where do we keep the backup gravbalancers?"

A clutter of voices.

In Challenger's garish excuse for a sickbay, a crinkly blue ball of steriles hovered beside the treatment couch. Somewhere inside the crinkles, behind a safety shield, Savannah Ring's head was tilted almost sideways. Her gloved hands worked incomprehensibly on the back part of Bonifay's thigh, just above the knee.

With Shucorion close behind, Keller stepped into the medical area and found himself hi a crowd. A half-dozen assorted crewmen were already here, loaded with questions gathered during Bonifay's absence.

"The clews on the head-wall in the armory vault won't take those bolts you gave me," someone was say-ing. "What do you want me to use instead?"

"Cannibalize the bolts out of the-longitudinal band-ings in the Rover strake dry stores. Those-can be-cold-riveted into place... mmm..."

When the crowd parted, Keller found himself awash in instant pity. The questions abruptly ended as he and Shucorion stepped through a mutter of welcome-sirs and mornin'-commanders, and finally got a look at the whole scene.

Wearing only a thermal blanket and his black Starfleet-issue T-shirt, Bonifay lay on his side in a per-fection of agony. He winced and moaned with every shift of Savannah's shoulders, his hands knotted under his chin, sad eyes wincing through a fence of black hair. Every few seconds his fingers flexed as if grasping for relief, or dug at the edge of the couch. Bloodied metal strings thin as human hairs lay discarded on the deck under him, more than a dozen at first glance.

Despite all that, Bonifay struggled through the an-swers. At first he didn't see Keller come up at his feet, because his eyes were focused on a small screen on the wall monitors busily working. It showed some kind of archaeological dig in a sunny environment. Bonifay's attention fixed on the screen as he battled to distract himself from the pain.

"We-always move cargo in-zero-G " he struggled. "Gravbalancers-are in the tool alley-starboard- aft..."

One of the crewmen started to ask yet another ques-tion, but held back when Keller and Shucorion moved forward along the med couch. At Bonifay's side, Keller's stomach pinched tight and an involuntary groan of empathy popped from his lips.

"Aw..." All he could offer was a firm touch and hoped Bonifay's arm wasn't one of the tender places. "Gypsy, you're a wreck."

"Kill me... strangle me..."

"Aw, sorry... Savannah, can you give him some anesthetic?"

"I did, some. Options are limited here."

"Can't you take the edge off mis?"

"I know my limitations," she bit sharply.

Yellow alert-scanning frustration.

A moment later she admitted, "I'm not so great at anesthesia. He'll tough it out I'm almost done."

"Where's the sterile field emitter?*"

"We don't have one,*" Bonifay answered for her.

Keller scowled. "I got it from the wreck of the mercy ship myself!"

"Turned up faulty."

"Didn't we have two of those lined up?"

"You should've asked me when I was alive...."

No point discussing what they didn't have, at least not now. Rather than pester Bonifay with stock ques-tions, Keller dropped the subject. He glanced behind him at the other crewmen, each needing the answer to some problem only Bonifay could answer.

"Folks, let's give Mr. Bonifay some time to recover. Is there anything that can't wait an hour?"

There was only one answer, even though it might be a lie. "No, sir," muttered the crowd in various degrees of conviction. Still, he was forced to jerk a thumb to-ward the door before they actually got the message and filed out, to leave the officers alone in the little bay.

'Thanks..' Bonifay dug his fingers into the couch, huffed a grunt of relief, and continued to focus on the wall monitor. "Now I can-concentrate-on something important-"

"What're you watching?" Keller asked.

**Zapf just received-the new-warp twenty news-reels-from Earth."

"Already? They weren't due for three more weeks "

**Mmm... somebody finally got permission to-ex-cavate the-sunken settlement with the Roman villa they found under-the Turkish basin..."

"Fits,*" Keller offered, "since we just got back from Pompeii."

"Mmm..." Valiantly enduring the pain, Bonifay didn't take his eyes off the ancient ruins. "They haven't gotten to my house yet."

Out of the present, into something-else. Keller peered at him, but Bonifay was completely involved in the excavation footage. With a connective glance at Sa-vannah, Keller clamped his lips and didn't comment.

Instead he watched Savannah as she worked. She was the perfect kind of person for fieldwork, even if they weren't in the field. Her touchiness, Keller knew, came from the lack of proper equipment and not necessarily Bonifay's pain. Her patient's suffering didn't come into play. She tolerated it as part of the program, expected Bonifay to bite the bullet, and didn't let discomfort affect the treatment one way or the other. If it hurt, it hurt

Which quite apparently it did.

"Maybe we should take him back to the clinic on Belle Terre," Keller suggested.

"I'm almost done," she grumbled. "Take a breath, Zane. It's no worse than having a baby."

"How would you know?" His complexion dusty, Bonifay gritted his bright teeth and sucked in a searing breath. He couldn't hold it, and was overtaken by shudders of pain.

"You sure about the anesthetic?" Keller asked, trying to talk over Bonifay to Savannah. "Seems like there should be--"

"Look, there are two facts in my business," she laid out. "One, you can't keep people from getting hurt. Two, you can't keep from hurting people." Her gloved hand appeared with a long bloodied metallic string in a pair of pincers. "Last one."

Keller bit his lip and kept his comment to himself. Beside him, Shucorion worked to control his own expression.

"Good job, Savannah," Keller offered. "In the Great Someday, I'll send you to the colony for advanced training. Maybe get a ship's doctor back."

"Someday. When we get ten minutes hi a row."

Time to stop helping. He stood with both hands on Bonifay, to offer what little support he had to give. It was therapy for himself, too, to have a grip on a living shipmate and not be standing over a loss. Residual fear for Zane Bonifay still clawed at him—that horrid, help-less feeling. Year after year before this, his assignment on the Starfleet Patrol Cruiser Peleliu had been a comfortable life, with plenty of everything, always within spit-distance of any help they needed. He'd been third officer, then second, buffered by the primary command structure ahead of him. The same captain, the same CO, a familiar unit, a stable crew complement, month by month, for four years in secured space. Always a starbase within flight range, other ships passing constantly, trade-offs, shore leaves, extra help, crew swaps, a real doctor and nurse on staff, well-stocked galley, well-stocked sickbay... thus he'd been spoiled. This life hi starvation mode had him by the neck. He'd built a ship, but Challenger was still forty percent facade, a pretense of completion, just for show.

Until today the deprivations of frontier life had been tricky, picky, and irritating enough. This was the first time a crewman actually suffered hi his hands because of what they didn't have.

"What's the matter with you?" Bonifay suddenly asked. He was looking at Shucorion. "You got a problem."

Keller looked at Shucorion, but he couldn't read his first officer's contemplative expression.

After a few seconds of silence, Shucorion interrupted the solemn nastiness of the moment and admitted, "There is a complication...."

What was that tone all about? Suddenly a cluster of little shadows from the past hour clicked into place as he realized Shucorion wasn't just recovering-he was nervous. >

"Let's hear it," Keller encouraged.

"Yes..." Shucorion eyed Bonifay. "You'll have to arrest him."

"Damn!" Bonifay's head popped up. "I knew he had a strange idea!"

Though troubled, Shucorion was uncomfortably steady in his conviction. "He deserted his post. I ordered him to stay. He evacuated in spite of my order."

Instantly angry, Bonifay struggled, "We were losing control over the power plant! We tried to keep it patched together-" He choked through a wave of pain.

Keller's grip lost its tenderness. "Lay still and give me your story."

"Lie... not lay." Bonifay drew a lungful and rammed through the rest of the explanation. "We were losing. We sent distress calls-we didn't know if they got through, the Plume was breaking up, about to kill us. The Ship of the Dead looked derelict-seemed airtight, pressure was right, we weren't gonna pop when we opened the lock-didn't look like it would blow up, so I docked and that's where I went. We'd have died, and-we didn't"

He collapsed, exhausted. Behind him, Savannah kept working, but flicked her eyes off Keller a couple of times.

Shucorion insisted, "He went against a direct order to stay and fight for our patrol ship. He has broken the rule of any service."

His voice was stable, many-layered, evenly tempered. He paused and let them all absorb his deeper meaning before finishing his announcement.

"A Hand of Blood Savages is on its way to us," he proclaimed. "They will take him"

Chapter Eight

"have you gone wild?" Keller bellowed.

Behind the couch, Savannah Ring jolted. A shock of fresh agony shot through Bonifay, who gulped and almost rolled off the table.

Keller caught him and held him through the explosions in his own skull. An instant headache grabbed him by the eyeballs.

Shucorion waited until Bonifay's spasm passed, but not long.

"Agreement is everything," the Blood officer went on, undeniable in the force of his experience.

"Any-one's refusal to work threatens everyone. In these days, the danger is worse than ever it has been.

Ships are big-ger, faster, with more weapons, and Federation comes With even newer technology. If my people drop our guard and the rules of work slacken-

*I didn't refuse to do work!" Bonifay squalled.

Keller held him in place. "Nobody's saying you did."

"He's saying it!"

"That's not what he means." He looked at Shucorion. "Is it?"

With both caution and disdain, Shucorion met his glare. "He left his post. Blood Many will not tolerate such an abandonment."

"What business do they have in this?" Keller roared. "You're stationed on Challenger now, not with them!"

Shucorion's expressive eyes hardened as if this were some kind of insult "You cannot order me not to report," he protested, *to hold secrets from my own people. This is a condition of the extended fleet you 'borrowed.' "

Fiercely Keller challenged, "When did I agree to that!"

"In the Bond of Support. The alliance." Frustrated by Keller's anger and Bonifay's completely defiant scowl, Shucorion held an imploring hand between Keller and himself. "You were asked to be part of the negotiations between Federation and Blood Many-

"I was not! Yes, I was...."

"Yes. You were. You remanded the duty to Governor Pardonnet He made an agreement to follow Blood rules on Blood ships."

Keller beat down the ringing in his head. Was the temperature changing in here now too? "I had my own ship to fit out in order to defend Belle Terre and your planet!" His teeth gritted as he added, "A good com-mander delegates!"

"But a good commander checks," Shucorion said. "You forgot to check. Governor Pardonnet did his best, but he is not a farer of space nor a soldier. Belle Terre needed Blood support and he saw no harm. But yours is an alien culture with alien morals. You have come into our Cluster and you must work to understand us. To Blood, agreement is everything. Discipline is ex-pected. This is how we have survived "

Fishing for a way to make all this simple and clear, Shucorion lowered his voice to tame the moment.

I am your voice, he added. "Would you let him dis-obey you?"

He was right. Military discipline existed for good reason, tempered by thousands of years in a thousand cultures. All over the known galaxy, the process had come out nearly the same, a Roman-army process of orders and assumptions of duty. Men had been weak and cracked, but most held to the standard.

What had affected Bonifay? Had weakness figured in? Fear? Defiance? The fact that he just didn't like

Shucorion?

Ship's business Keller could handle. Political complications, legal twists-this had never been his place as third or second officer. He had been a first officer for a matter of days before seizing command from an un-stable captain. Just days... he knew what a first officer was supposed to do, but he'd never really done it. Certainly captaincy had been even more steps away, a post of such sorcery that he had never coveted it. Collecting details and problems and handing them updeck was a whole other way of life. He'd never handled sweeping problems. Now what?

Shucorion had been appointed by Keller, had agreed to act as first officer on Challenger, had been asked to come and help, take a secondary position even though he had been a full avedon, a captain in his own planet's fleet. Keller had given his stamp of approval to Shucorion in view of the entire Star Cluster of Sagittarius. To disobey one was the same as disobeying the other.

But Shucorion wasn't Starfleet. He had been all his life in a war situation. In a culture ever seeking the reliable, driven by damage and tempered by deprivation such as Keller had never experienced, he had risen to command of a warship during a patchy and cyclical conflict with very few constants. Though they weren't militaristic people at heart, like Klingons or Romulans, Blood Many had developed an exaggerated scaffold of behavior in order to hack out a future against fee odds. Self-preservation had been beaten back and replaced by the structure of supports. They depended upon each other's participation in it Shucorion peered outside of the structure more than most of his people, but he still clung to it with all fours. He wouldn't gamble, he wouldn't guess, and he wouldn't hope.

And so far, he hadn't lied.

Complications ran crazy in Keller's head. Shock number four hundred this week-it was no myth, old joke, or simple adage that a ship commander really did have to be in two places at once.

What other orders have I agreed not to give?

Before him Shucorion waited, watching the color go out of Keller's cheeks and his green eyes change to comprehension.

"Blood Many fear becoming second-rate," the Blood said. "We have managed for generations not to be dominated by All Kauld, yet in this day we're helping someone else dominate us."

He paused. When he spoke again, his voice much quieter, even Savannah stopped working. Shucorion, though, fixed his gaze only on the one man who would make the difference.

"Such a thread is thin, Mr. Keller. If you protect Bonifay from Blood judgment, this will be taken as proof that your Federation means sooner or later to dominate us."

"Ridiculous," Keller spat.

Shucorion was ready. "I've been reviewing your Federation. The galaxy is far more dangerous than my direst imaginings of it. There are waning civilizations, monsters, mysteries-it amazes me that people survive. You do so with the same principles as Blood on our world of deprivation and disasters. Discipline. When there is not enough food, nature demands we kill the next man and take his food. Discipline stops us. It tames us to take back our hands and let ourselves starve because it is his turn to eat. Do you think it is Blood nature to struggle as we do? To go without sleep? Food? Work until' we die? 'Hold on to the end' is a rule all Blood understand because each Blood knows the man next to him

will obey. Some will die, but we will all have a chance. If one runs, all will run. All will die."

Keller felt his jaw tighten. "I'm supposed to let Bonifay be taken because you want things tidy?*"

"Loose ends will whip." Shucorion paused a moment, then looked again at Bonifay, with something like sentiment or regret. "I understand... self-preservation is not weakness of character. It must be actively, forcefully counteracted. Otherwise, we can lose everything. And we, out here, can lose everything."

With a slight inflection on the one important big word, he drove home his point.

None of the Starfleet people could argue. They all knew that was the deal going in-Bonifay couldn't hide behind the dodge that he hadn't signed up for this. They had, all of them. It was the common clause in militaries throughout history, from star to shining star.

"It is the same with you, your Starfleet, the navies and squadrons that gave it structure. You have the calls of duty, the rights over wrongs, layers upon layers of structure-and the foundation of all this is finally the threat Blood ships are under Blood law. Desertion calls for particular action-

"I didn't desert you," Bonifay grumbled.

Shucorion looked at him. "We should have fought to maintain the Plume."

"It was about to blow up."

"It may not have had we stayed!" A volcanic rush of anger came up in Shucorion's voice as he looked again to Keller, not without some sympathy. "You have a reputation here now. There is much work for you to come up to that reputation. You are important here. You will issue an opinion by day, and people will live and die by it at night. On the Plume, my order was not to go. If you let him disobey an order, if you let him disobey my order-

Shooting him a bitter glare, Keller warned, "Don't pressure me."

But Shucorion's air-gray eyes, dark-lashed and serious, were steady in his conviction. "I must nourish your strength, not your compassion. You've chosen me to do it."

Keller pushed away from the couch, aware of Savannah's silent eyes and Bonifay's refusal to look at him. He felt supremely isolated Everybody out here was a maverick except him. He was the only one who hadn't been planning to stay at Belle Terre. All the others- Zoa, Zane, Savannah, the colonists-had come because they thought this would be a place that didn't have any rules, where they could make up their own. And who did they run into? The Blood. Rule-o-rama.

Shucorion had done his homework. Severe and sometimes unfair discipline had resulted in the most powerful and efficient naval units in history. All sailors and spacefarers understood and accepted that the last thing they wanted was not being able to trust the man next to them to stand firm in the face of the enemy. They knew goof-offs would weaken their fabric and sooner or later- they'd all be dead. The rules were important because they could control so little in their environment. A captain who wasn't stern, even harsh, wasn't trusted. It took one element of uncertainty out of a nearly unbearable way of life.

A battle situation, their ship dying around them-if Shucorion and Bonifay hadn't been near enough to raft with another vessel, they'd have had to stay and fight for the Plume and probably died there. Keller would have to ask that of them day by day out here, on Chal-lenger, mad stallion that it was. Who could

predict when the Blood core might decide to buck the Starfleet guidance system or the mercenary coolants? Any day the Belle Terre treaty could collapse or some renegade faction in the Cluster could take out a contract on the new guys, or the Kauld civil war might go sour. His life, his crew's, their ship carried only so much cache, even among the human population of Belle Terre, and certainly among Blood and Kauld and anybody who lived or lurked in the suburbs of Sagittarius.

Didn't he have to ask them every day, wasn't it his obligation, to lay their lives on the line, no matter how near they might be to an escape route?

His innards puckered up. How had this happened? How had he gone from second mate in secure space to the marshal of mayhem? Never before had he encountered a situation for which Starfleet had no ready regulation, no nearby support, or superior to consult?

"This is just... wretched," he muttered through the stranglehold. He turned with an acrid gaze to Shucorion. "They're not out to punish Bonifay, are they? They're out to test me. Aren't they?"

The Blood's expression mellowed. "Of course they are."

"There's got to be some way around this."

Shucorion simply shook his head, but only once. "Blood will not stand for exceptions, especially not from Keller. We hold you in great esteem for your bravery and innovation, but it is fragile. You are still a stranger. My people are already having difficulty being secondary in our own star cluster. We vastly outnumber Federation here, yet we are all in secondary posts. The legend of Keller is the only force holding us with you. If you want my people to take your orders, then you must show them why. If you let my orders be disobeyed, if you protect him, all your words about treating us as equals will dissolve. You have planets watching you. Planets."

The plural came out clearly enough and bit Keller in the nose. As if one planet weren't enough! How many people was that? How many conversations in public and private? How many mutterings in the night, secret prayers, reassurances to children and cries for hope?

Dragging the weight of his own image, Keller fixed his eyes on Bonifay, lying helpless as Savannah closed his wounds, and saw quite clearly the much bigger wound.

He sighed. "Some pep talk."

Chapter Nine the ship smelled a certain comforting way. Industrial lubricants, insulation, heating elements, oiled spark tarps, cleaning fluids... work soup.

The climb up through the access companionways from the transporter room to the bridge made for a nostalgic tour. Keller had never visited most of the ships whose parts had contributed to the construction of Challenger, but as he ducked his head and skimmed past the scored and stressed pieces, bolted with old bolts, welded with reconstituted solder, scratched with the names of engineers, ensigns, midshipmen, artisans, and every manner of person who tears down and refabricates, he heard the echoes of them: aspirations, the effort of every mind and hand on the seventy ships of the Belle Terre Expedition. During these last few weeks as Challenger had been hurriedly fitted out, he and Bosun Zane Bonifay, Savannah Ring, Zoa, and everyone else who had traveled from Federation space, had become convinced that every one of the seventy vessels making that historic journey had contributed at least one piece, bolt or conduit or wire.

Maybe it was fantasy, but the reality wouldn't be too far off. They'd cannibalized to the last decimal, building a ship that could launch, fly, fight, load, haul, tow, and land, with traits of everything they could think to con-jure up. Down to the moss-green, burgundy, or dark blue commando sweaters that doubled as their idea of a uni-form, everything here had been bequeathed from some other vessel sacrificed to the settling of Belle Terre.

She was part Blood too-her hyperlight core had been taken from Shucorion's Plume, destroyed by the Peleliu's unstable captain. Challenger was officially a new ship, but in pure fact she was a resurrection.

Belle Terre's commitment lived here, too, right here in these scored bits. All these parts and sections, transmuted from scattered salvage into a single vessel, were a mark of forward determination. This frigate was the body of the colonists decision not to turn back, not ever. The transport ships were in the Sagittarius Star Ouster for good now, in the forms of their homes, barns, utility buildings, and gasping little towns and spaceports, and in this mongrel ship. The weather-racked struggle on Belle Terre would be their future, and Challenger would strike out to defend them, with a little situational help from the much less advanced Blood fleet She would put on a show of strength while her crew learned how to make her go forward without knocking themselves to their knees.

Always seemed Zane Bonifay was nuts, talking about the spirits and whispers of individuals both alive and dead, murmuring through the bones of this com-posite frigate... and maybe it was just the effect of the grave ship, but as Nick Keller climbed through the companionways in the vessel's neck, over and up through the primary hull made from the primaries of two wrecked hard-fighting Starfleet ships, he heard those whispers. He felt the breath of the people who had died securing Belle Terre, their families and ship-mates who still depended upon him and this frigate, a partnership still in the forge.

He was glad to avoid the main corridors. They were narrow and intimate. He didn't feel like greeting any-one. He wanted to pick his way through the ship's veins and be left alone. The tornado was swirling around him, and all he could do was snatch at it here and there. Governor Pardonnet had made an agreement with Blood Many. Did that mean Keller had to accept every paragraph? How powerful was a treaty out here, where there were yet no laws, no diplomats, no tables of dis-cussion, no due process?

This was a lawless sector. How would things ever improve if they didn't follow the laws they made up themselves?

But with so few people knowing the rules yet, and more being made up by the day, everyone on the ship would be in the klink for one reason or another if he went strictly by the book, or whatever was left of it Keller had broken four Starfleet regulations before breakfast just to get the Blue Net supplied for another couple of weeks. There weren't enough people qualified in this patchwork crew to hold fighting posts on the bridge, not enough with basic engineering skills, never mind creative improvisers-not enough even to keep the laundry done.

And Shucorion wanted Bonifay put away for appear-ance's sake?

During the last thirty feet to the bridge, the tube was narrower than any other on the ship. The maze of shoulder-width veins gave them access to thousands of mismatched circuits and a pathway through the ship in case the psychopathic turbolifts acted up. He liked the tubes. They were personal. This last stretch was tight, though, took some getting used to.

His head popped out of the hatch forward of the sci-deck, in the command arena just port of the pilot station. The football-shaped sci-deck stood four feet higher than the command deck, flanked by stumpy steps both forward and aft of it Up there were the engi-neering master systems monitor and the science

station, neatly fenced off by a wrist-high curved metal wall punched with quatrefoil designs. Like everything else on board, the screen had come off one of the Expedition ships, in fact one of the most elegant of them—the Coroner Ship Twilight Sentinel. There was something sadly Gothic and yet stately about the burnished bronze screen with its beet-red caprail, like having a piece of a cathedral. The screen was his favorite part of the bridge. The Twilight Sentinel had been the kind of ship nobody wants to see coming, but everyone appreciates for its grace and its duty. No one wants a funeral home around, until it becomes the last chance for comfort. And then, you want a little class.

"Oh-mercy," he winced aloud. Aches thundered across his back and thighs as he climbed the last rung of the ladder hatch and stepped out onto the carpet. The burgundy low-nap was already worn, but of course it had started out that way.

He leaned on the slanted chip bank of the pilot's pul-pit and pressed his other hand to a bruised hip. He straightened more carefully the second time and hoped nobody noticed.

Nobody did. Up on the sci-deck, Lucy Quinones was picking at the science readouts, probably trying to figure out the question of the day—the grave ship's power source. Her dirty-blond hair obscured her face, but her posture suggested frustration. No answers yet.

Across the work theatre from where Keller stood, Zoa manned her post on the crescent-shaped quarter-deck, at the tactical/weapons pulpit. Her control desk was swung out so the operator could face forward and see the main screen without turning. The other stations up there—mule engine/impulse drive and communications—were unmanned, therefore closed up tight, making curved bulges under the brightly colored systems monitors that ringed the workstations. Beneath each desk, a pivoting stool with a fold-down lumbar support waited for occupation. Since this wasn't a very roomy bridge, desk stations that swung out of the way made for easier movement.

Okay, admit it to yourself, Commander, sir. Easier evacuation, easier to abandon ship. At least know why you've got what you've got.

And admit you like it here.

He did like it. This place was roguishly mismatched, the same as her crew. There was something unpolished about it, like a rough ranch landscape or a wild horse. A little dirty, a little wild, quite a lot untamed about the black, khaki, and navy blue panels, the dark red carpet down here, blue up there, the access steps obviously from two different sources, the curved ladder to the sci-deck from a third. The ship had patchwork guts, patchwork skin, patchwork skeleton, and crazy-quilt looks on the inside and outside. The people who built her so quickly had done a good job trying for uniformity, trying to stick with earthy colors with roots in militaria. The only renegade was the forest green command chair with brass studs on its arms. Keller had no idea which ship had donated it to the cause, but certainly not one of the Starfleet ships.

Maybe he liked the goofy-looking bridge because it didn't demand Starfleet perfection of him. It didn't have any itself.

Over beside the kidney-shaped navigation/sensor post on this lower deck, Savannah Ring was pulling her boots on over the legs of a bright red one-piece envirosuit. Now, that looked more like somebody who was about to invade a foreign environment.

He came around the helm behind her, and for a moment paused to commune with their figurehead, the commemorative coin mounted like a standing lollipop on the nav desk. The historic coin, which the

famous Chief Engineer Scott had called a hood ornament," had been struck in the memory of the Space Shuttle Challenger from Earth's first century space flight- just a bit of an inspiration here and now.

When Keller stepped into her periphery, Savannah yelped, spun around, and dropped her helmet. "Scared me!"

He grinned. "Next time I'll pop out of a deck box and break into 'The Michigan Rag/ What're you doing up here?"

"I didn't want to broadcast all over the frigate that we're going back. The boarding party is fitted out and we're ready to reengage the tomb ship. I've got four men, plus me, no Blood, no non-Starfleet."

Keller glanced up at the tactical post, where Zoa sat picking at her weapons alignment programs. "And no sphinx?"

"No, thanks." She picked up the recon helmet "Her IQ and her breast size are the same."

"I dunno... Zoa's pretty good backup." At her expression he gave up before starting, and instead surveyed her plump body in the service suit and harness. "You look fetching hi that rig."

"Precious, aren't I?" She stretched out one arm and surveyed the red outer garment's temperature-taming and cut-resistant fabric. "Those barbs'll never spear through this stuff."

He grimaced at the memory of Bonifay in the razor cocoon. "Don't get cocky. I'd prefer you be careful and nobody gets caught in a trap. Avoid disturbing those bodies."

"How can I analyze them if I can't disturb them?"

"Just walk up and ask what the devil they're doing here."

"They'll just ask what I'm doing here and I won't have an answer."

"Give 'em the old *Go to the brig or go to Belle Terre' story."

"The truth? Hell no."

"How's Bonifay?"

"He's off the table," she said with a sigh. "**Last I saw, he was meditating in front of a pile of bay leaves on fire in a petri dish."

"What for?"

"To level his karma and cast a spell."

"On me, probably."

"I didn't ask. Pretty excruciating episode."

"Details, woman, details."

"Oh, few miles of internal injuries from those wires and the tube, some general contusions, a bump on the head... I sealed the lacerations in his organs, but he'll hurt for a while. From here on it's better to heal naturally than have me rooting around in there without so-phisticated equipment" She adjusted the utility harness over her protective suit and clipped it into place. "Or a medical license/" she muttered without looking at him.

His own legs ached as he sank into the command chair's forgiving leather and watched her adjust the suit's built-in sensors. They'd both made mistakes the first time over to that tomb. The boarding party should all have been wearing more protection than just the O2 masks. He'd never ordered a search and-rescue mission before. She'd never led one. Oh, they knew all the pro-cedures, but they'd been in a hurry. Was that an excuse or a reason? Somehow the emergency of a warp explo-sion on the two-man scout carrying their shipmates had blown away precaution.

I've got to make sure that never happens again. Our slip is showing.

Or was there such thing as moving too slowly? Not being impulsive enough in an emergency situation? So far, impulse hadn't been his problem. He'd impulsively dislodged his own captain from command. He'd impul-sively built this ship and impulsively set up a picket de-fense. How long before it didn't work anymore?

Did Savannah feel the same? They should discuss their errors... they should. A captain should...

His throat closed up. He couldn't ask.

On the sci-deck, Quinones was glancing at them, but didn't interrupt. She plainly had no report yet and didn't even want to start a conversation that would put her on the spot. Fine. When she had information, he'd be the first to know. Badgering the crew with demands for a report wouldn't do a bit of good.

"Y'know, Nick," Savannah began again as she picked at the sensors on her helmet, "sooner or later, you'll have to use the lifts."

His throat tightened. "I use the lifts."

Wisely she batted her eyes at him. "Ever since Derek died trapped in Peleliu^ you've avoided them."*

A sudden heat rose under his skin. "You just don't see me when I use them. I use them.**

She lowered her voice. "The shaft was damaged. The track was completely dislodged. It wasn't your fault. I couldn't get to him in time, any more than it was my fault"*

"I know, Savannah."

"You don't think it was my fault he died that way, do you?"

"No, no. No."

"Then why blame-"

He reached out and pressed a finger to her lips. "Hush. Go on your mission. Report directly back to me. I'll carry a communicator if I leave the bridge."*

She pulled on her surveillance helmet with its portable bridge of optical scanners. "We'll talk."

"No, we won't"

With a noncommittal shrug, she clunked up to the crescent deck. To get to the turbolift she passed her own station, the MEL pulpit-medical, environmental, life-support. It was situated almost directly aft of the main screen, next to the off-center lift doors. He wanted her to go there instead of into the turbolift. He pressed his lips tight and watched her go in an almost hungry manner. He didn't want to send her back to that ship. Or even into the lift.

Don't get into this. Can't think that way. She 'U come out again.

A few moments later the lift door opened and Keller turned, expecting Shucorion and another confrontation. Instead, a disheveled wraith shuddered out of the archway.

"Aw," he moaned. **Zane..." Keller said.

He reached up to take Bonifay's arm, not sure where the wounds were or whether he would inflict more harm than help.

"Thanks-" By inches Bonifay winced his way into Keller's supporting grip. "I've got... a whole body... of paper cuts."

"Ouch" Keller empathized. "Why don't you go below and lay down?"

"Won't help... And it's 'lie' down. Quit getting it wrong."

"Sorry."

"Oh--oh, angels... oh..." Racked by spasms through his cut innards and legs, Bonifay let Keller lower him from the crescent deck to the nav chair with-out even trying to hide his misery. Once gingerly seated, he drew a long breath, shuddered it out, and fought to steady himself. "Oh... thanks... ooof."

Keller held him gently in place. **Who were you casting the spell on?"

"Can't tell you..."

"Spoil it, huh?"

"Rupture the energy flow." Bonifay blinked up at him. "You planning to take disciplinary action against me?"

Maybe the question was too direct, but Keller realized now that he should have expected it.

"Don't you think you deserve it?" he asked.

Bonifay pressed his elbow to the console and leaned - heavily. "Was I supposed to die for him? At his word? When did I become subject to his order?"

"When he accepted the position of executive officer on this ship, that's when."

Bonifay didn't buy the stern tone. "You can't just wave a wand and make him Starfleet"

"Maybe not," Keller said, suddenly ominous, "but we're a long, long way from Starfleet."

"We had an alternative right next to us. There was a way to survive! If his people are so good at survival, why didn't he understand what I was telling him?"

"His judgment was to stay aboard."

"I'm supposed to die for him?"

The room suddenly seemed small. Keller lowered his volume. "Yes," he said. "That's what it comes down to. You've been through Starfleet basic. You know as well as I do, if the order is 'stay and die'... yes, that's what you do. To do anything else is desertion. We're following Starfleet guidelines--"

"Blueberry's not Starfleet at all"

Another step over the line. Or was this slippage because Keller himself had been slack in demanding protocol behavior?

"You be respectful," he scolded. "He's my first officer."

Bonifay started to speak, but writhed abruptly and gripped the edge of the console, his youthful face twisted. When the spasm passed he looked up again. "Then why's he on Blood patrollers all the time instead of here? He hasn't exactly been doing first-officer duty. And who's been doing it? I have. You haven't had to deal with a single non-command problem."

"I know," Keller offered, "I know you have. This is more than a one-ship detail. Small supply vessels come and go from Belle Terre on almost a daily basis and Challenger can't protect that lifeline alone, even if our systems were all working right. We need the Blue Net. Shucorion's the thread holding it together."

"He can't serve on more than one ship at--"

Keller stopped him. "I'm not engaging in this conversation with you again. Our situation requires us all to do more than one job. You can't ask for proper arrangements, then want elasticity when it's convenient. Maybe you were both right, I don't know. What can I say when Shucorion claims you didn't follow a direct order not to abandon ship?"

"His orders!"

"His are mine. You know that."

"You didn't give any orders about that." Unwilling to fold when he thought he was right, Bonifay wasn't intimidated by either rank or procedure. His brows screwed together and he demanded, "What order of yours did I disobey? There wasn't a ship left to abandon. Are you telling me none of us can make a field decision without checking with Lord High You? Our ship was dead, the other ship was there, I went there. I tried to get him to follow me--"

"He's not supposed to take your orders!"

The turbolift again broke their argument, but again it wasn't Shucorion. In came terminally cheery red-haired Steward Calleo, a volunteer transplanted from the Hotel Ship Uncle Jake's Pocket, a fellow with the inner peace of a natural-born cabin boy. Whistling some tune, Calleo thumped down the bridge steps with a covered food tray in hand.

"Afternoon, Commander," he greeted. "I just came from the spectroscopy desk. Mr. Shucorion confirms no source of power on the mystery ship, but steady movement from some kind of energy trail that bends back into space. No idea what kind of energy it is. Readable, but it won't analyze. Sensors won't focus on it for some reason. Mr. Shucorion's trying to narrow the trace back to a source. He says he'll transfer the data to the bridge in a few minutes."

At Shucorion's name, Keller fought a bristle. "Understood, Max. Mighty Starfleet reporting for a civilian."

"Glad to serve, sir. Gotta earn my crew sweater, don't I."

"You're wearing it."

Calico's round face broke into a grin. "Still gotta earn it, sir."

Why hadn't Shucorion contacted him on the com system? Maybe he didn't want anyone to hear the questions in his voice.

Or maybe he didn't want to hear Keller's.

Calleo popped out the folding legs of the tray and pulled the cover off a plate of Nick-friendly finger food. "Got some lunch for you, sir. There you go."

Keller eyed the unappetizing clutter of not particularly freeze-dried fruit, processed meat, and a grilled cheese sandwich with preserved bread.

*Thanks, not hungry."

"You're never hungry, sir." Calleo thudded his thick midsection merrily. "You need some beef on you, sir. If you ever get injured in the line of duty, it'll do you good to have a few pounds on you for recovery. This here, this is insurance."

"He's right," Bonifay stuck in. "You won't do the rest of us very well either if you don't take care of yourself."

Keller shifted his feet and flicked a finger at Calleo. "Carry on, will you?"

The steward smiled. "Aye aye. Ring the bell if you need anything at all, sir, anything." He thumped back up the steps to the lift, his duty well done. Unfortunately the tension he had been about to take with him swarmed back in as he passed Shucorion at the lift door.

"Afternoon, sir" Calleo lilted. He sidestepped, and disappeared.

Now Shucorion stood there alone, gazing down at Keller, and at Bonifay at the nav pulpit. After a pause, he came down to the command center. Typically, he neither minced words nor wasted time.

"You must have him arrested," he said to Keller. "He must not be on the bridge. Why is he here?"

"Because I need him," Keller said firmly. "You do too. He's the ship's bosun. We'll discuss this in... in the turbolift"

When the turbolift doors closed, and Keller had cut the circuit. Shucorion frowned. "What has his duty to do with this? He sorts things."

" 'Sorts'?" Keller almost laughed-almost Instead he shook his head and skewered the Blood with a leer of clarification. "Oh, no, no, no. He's the wizard of a mysterious puzzle. If a bosun gets off a ship, everybody else is confused for a long, long time. And that's a stan-dard starbase-built ship where everything is the way the plans say. On Challenger, he's the only one who knows the answers to a thousand questions we ask on every watch just to keep this ship pointing forward. Boy- you're not wrong very often, but when you are, you don't toy around, do you?"

"If such is so," Shucorion pestered, brows down, "why did you let him go with me on the Plume? If he is so critical, he should never be off this vessel."

When had Shucorion become a prosecutor?

Caught in his mistake, Keller stared down at his feet for a moment "It was a supply mission. That's part of his job. You got distracted to the grave ship. Doesn't make it a bad call. I'm about to resent these questions."

"Blood Many will question you, not I." Shucorion plucked a couple of dried cherries and passed them to Keller. "The Savage Hand is on its way. They'll arrive after the next Blind lifts-"

"They can heave to and wait" In a small act of defi-ance, Killer smooshed the rubbery cherries between his fingers. The clue gave him a timetable-the Blood fleet would show up some time after the coming Gamma Night ended and the sensor blackout lifted. Gamma Night was usually a problem, darkening all their sen-sors for ten hours out of every thirty, but today it bought him time.

"Bonifay's actions are a private problem," he said, "inside these bulkheads. It's my first officer who was disobeyed."

"In the eyes of Blood Many, it was a full Plume avedon who was disobeyed."

"Just put your feathers down, all right?"

"I'm not feathering." Shucorion handed him half of the grilled cheese sandwich. "I simply explain how this will be seen. You have a reputation now. It must be nur-tured for the bettering of all."

Without turning his head Keller shifted his eyes to him. "Doesn't mean one of my officers gets put on public trial."

"The senior avedon coming here is Delytharen. In his entire life, he has never gone against a rule. I am a mad renegade compared to him. When he comes aboard-"

"They're not coming aboard."

Silence followed Keller's statement, but the kind that meant a lot of words.

Shucorion's expression contradicted what Keller had too easily declared. He just stood and waited for Keller to get the idea.

And he did.

Was this one of those other things to which he had "agreed" by proxy? Boarding privileges?

"I must warn you," Shucorion continued, "Delytharen will expect him in chains."

Bonifay turned and looked at them. So did Quinones and Zoa. The subtle shuffle changed everything.

Keller eyed Shucorion with warning. **We don't use chains."

"You have chains in your history. Shall I remind you how to make them?"

"Look, don't make threats."

"Bonifay must be confined. I implore you to make an appearance."

"He's in custody right here. He's not leaving the ship."

With an annoyed sigh, Shucorion shook his head. Not enough. His voice became deathly quiet and deeply per-sonal. "You frighten me... these are reckless ways."

"I need him," he insisted.

Since the friendly way hadn't worked, Shucorion tilted his head meaningfully and spoke from an angle of great strength. "Do you need the nineteen Blood in your crew?"

The sentence struck home, square in the middle of Keller's chest. There it was, the real threat. Would they go back to their planet and speak of what they had seen here? An injustice in Blood perception?

Out of forty tireless Blood crewmen who had come with Shucorion when their Plume was destroyed, nine-teen were still here in the frigate's crew. The others had been disseminated into the Blue Net with their jump on training about Challenger's procedures. They weren't really gone-they had now served a Federation ship, and that never went away. They had helped build her, put their sweat and hopes into her, and they were al-ways in contact, usually through Shucorion.

Their point of view revealed itself in Shucorion's pale eyes. The great Keller had caught a reputation big-ger than his britches for throwing together a battleship out of sticks, parts, and assorted smells, to stand up against All Kauld's strongest battlelord... and after all that, he was also the cowboy who had stood up with the Kauld and been willing to put himself and his ship on the line for them too. Reputation? Yes, he had one. He hadn't wanted any at all, but here it was, sitting on his head, with all its quills. He hadn't even noticed it crawl up there. All of a sudden, one day a couple of weeks ago, mere it was.

Nineteen Blood. Out of a crew of forty-six, on a ship that needed fifty-five.

"We'll make some kind of arrangement with your friend Dell-Delinn-what'd you say his name was?"

'Ttelytharen. No arrangement will be possible."

Keller shifted his glare sharply again. This time he held up a warning finger.

"Never tell me what can't be done," he said. Keller stepped back out onto the bridge.

All around them the subtle beeps and tingles of a working ship murmured in constant struggle to find parity. Lateral and graviton sensor array readouts, accelerometers, optical gyros, inertia dampers, constant surveillance, homing processors and internal diagnostics for damage control-and there was almost always damage of some kind, frequently self-inflicted.

He turned away from Shucorion, pivoting his chair more to port than necessary. On the main screen before them, the grave ship floated along its unspecified path. Pretending nothing was wrong or out of order... acting like it came through these parts every day. For the first time he took a good look at the design. Its long hull was a blotch of reds and browns, with added green decorations that looked like stuck-on Spanish moss waving mindlessly and giving the ship a shaggy appearance, like some kind of floating anemone. Why would a ship need hair?

The outside looks like the inside, he realized as his brain began to relax. As if it's growing, organic, even though it isn't

For a moment his eyes shifted to the starboard tactical screen at Zoa's shoulder. He peered past her helmet of braids at the picture of Challenger. He hadn't seen the ship from the outside in a few weeks, trapped in here instead, working. That was normal-crewmen rarely saw their own ships from the outside. One of the little ironies of service aboard.

Challenger also floated free in space, according to the virtual-reality scope showing the ship's attitude, using an artificial idea of up and down. The frigate was a bastardization of Starfleet design. Her saucer hull and engineering hull had come from Peleliu, fitted together with a neck salvaged from two private ships. The precious warp nacelles, ghosts from the CST Beowulf, were mounted below the engineering cigar, not above, mounted on odd-looking fanned strokes from the Pathfinder American Rover. The colors were like this bridge-khaki neck, gray and cream mismatched plates all over the main, the blue Rover strokes, and the radiation-resistant black-hat pot lid. Yes, this ship looked like herself inside and out, just as the tomb ship did.

So whoever had built that flying graveyard knew something about crew sensibilities-that you had to feel at home in or out. There were aesthetics involved.

Or was he reading too much out of his own perceptions? Was his imagination taking off?

He looked again at the main screen, determined to be more clinical. On the forward section of the tomb ship were a pair of lobster-claw units-he had to admit they resembled the javelin launchers on the Kauld battle-barges. But there the resemblance ended. The grave ship had hundreds of pieces and segments no Kauld ship possessed, and plainly hadn't been intended for battle. It couldn't turn in a small enough radius to be useful in close quarters, and there were no signs of mounted attack arrays. Of course, that might not mean anything. It had, after all, destroyed a Blood Plume with one burst.

Burst of what?

"Sir, the mystery ship!" Lucy Quinones turned quickly and grasped the sci-deck rail with one hand, men pointed at the forward screen with the other. "It's changing course!"

All eyes turned to the forward screen. The grave ship's bow had begun to slowly swing away from them.

With his elbows pressed to the chair's leather arms, Keller leaned forward. "Confirm that"

"Increasing speed too!** Quinones called. She danced from foot to foot as her hands focused the instruments. "Course, zero four-two, speed coming to warp one point three, still increasing!"

"Nick, be aware," Bonifay quickly said, "if it goes to warp we could lose it We're not stable enough for hot pursuit"

"The boarding party!" Keller pushed out of his chair.

He just couldn't command sitting down. Instantly he swung around and struck the com unit on the side of his chair. "Keller to Ring. Do you read? Shucorion, yel-low alert!"

Up on the sci-deck Shucorion already had his hand on the shipwide. "Yellow alert All hands, yellow alert"

"Keller to boarding party, do you read us?"

"Ring. Is this monstrosity doing something?"

"Affirmative, seems to be changing course. What's your condition?"

"Skin scrapings, hair samples, and filling up our tricorder's with area scans for analysis later"

"Get back to the main vestibule for beam-out We've gone to yellow alert. If we go to red, we won't be able to beam you in through our shields, so I want you back here now."

"We just got started!"

"Signal us when you're ready."

"Roger that."

"Alert the transporter room. What's the heading on that ship now?"

"Still coming about..." Bonifay squinted into the guidance opticals.

Keller stepped to the unmanned helm and watched the changes on the dual feed. "Okay, bow's still swinging... slowing... midship... course is now... three-two-eight" He looked up at the grave ship's flank as the vessel moved away. "Directly for Whistler and Mother!"

Bonifay's breathing turned choppy. "And from here, it'll go right through the Occult Star System to get there. Damn! All our planets are right there in a row."

That might or might not be bad, but the idea of a foreign object plowing straight toward population centers was a good reason to be nervous. Keller glanced at Shucorion up on the sci-deck. Suddenly they all had the same stake in this, despite not even knowing what that meant.

"We don't know anybody's in danger yet," he pointed out. "It's just one ship. Doesn't even have a crew."

Out the corner ;of his mouth Bonifay muttered, "Wouldn't exactly say that..."

"Hush. Maintain yellow alert."

Once again he looked at Shucorion, this time for longer. The Blood stood at the science pulpit, his eyes fixed on the main screen's vision of the grave ship. He looked supremely fitting up there today for some rea-son, with his blue sweater, sapphire skin, and long braid of brown hair hanging over one shoulder, all framed by the ship's barbecue black bridge dome. The cobalt-obsidian dome didn't gleam or even reflect, ex-cept where a light from the embedded matrices hit it just right and caused a ghostly hint of deep blue. It seemed to fold around Shucorion as lake water en-velopes a swimmer.

"Pompeii's increasing speed." Bonifay was sweating now. Would he blurt the truth about the grave ship? That it was filled with alien corpses able to self-animate to a purpose? Keller realized he hadn't given Bonifay any framework of what to say or keep private, nor did the bosun know about the echo of Shucorion over there. He could only hope Bonifay's natural in-stincts would serve with silence.

He snapped back forward and kept himself on his own course. "Throw the mules on it," he ordered. "Full traction."

When Bonifay tried to push himself up and go to the mule station on the starboard crescent deck, Keller put a hand on his shoulder and kept him at the nav/sensory. "Quinones, you do it.*"

"Aye, sir!" She flew down the curved steps and ran around the crescent to the mules. "It'll take at least ninety seconds!"

"Understood," Keller uttered.

Shucorion hurried up to the sci-deck and took her place at the science pulpit

Instantly Keller saw the holes in his fabric. "Zane, call below and get us somebody to man engineering and the helm."

"I'll man the helm, if you quit holding me down."

"Stay put. I'll do it myself."

"You shouldn't. You're in command."

"Just call somebody who can drive."

**Nobody can drive a six-headed dragon," Bonifay grumbled. "Bridge to auxiliary. Ensign Creighton and Crewman Itytek, get up here pronto to man the master and helm "

"Creighton, on my way, bridge."

"Itytek. Acknowledged."

Careful that the com system was off, Keller asked, "Can Itytek drive?"

Bonifay managed a stiff nod. "If we go to warp, he's the best we've got left for the Blood core."

"Okay."

Not the best, but the best they had left. Fine line. Most of the Blood soldiers who had come with Shuco-rion had dispersed to the Blue Net with their new knowledge of Starfleet methods for crowd control. Itytek would probably be competent at piloting the ship, but uninspired-a trait common to cautious

Blood. Competence was fine for getting around. Trou-ble needed inspiration. A touch for the wheel, for the body of the ship under you.

But Keller knew Zane was right. If he were on the helm, he wouldn't be doing the job he was supposed to be doing. A commander couldn't have attention that cleanly divided. Both jobs would suffer.

"Nick!" Fighting die obviously sharp pains in his limbs and back, Bonifay pressed his wrists to the con-sole and winced through his readings. "I think we just found out where the mausoleum came from!"

"Let's have it."

"Open space, no characteristic bodies, bearing three-two-seven by nine-four-four, on a clean line aft of the original course, no identifiable spatial bodies nearby, no buoys or projectors-it's a window or a transport point with no discernible coordinates!"

Keller peered over Bonifay's shoulder at the sensor screens as they jumped and gibbered. "Then how could you possibly pin down where it is?"

Bonifay looked up at the main screen and squinted. "Because something else is coming through!"

His claim bolted through the bridge like a bomb. Keller reached to snatch it down before it destroyed their concentration.

"Shift the main screen, Zane. Full magnification. Let's see this thing."

The main screen faded from its view of the grave ship and focused on a section of open space. Particle clouds and ion storms raced past as the magnification drew them forward and picked a spot. At first space held only the natural beauty of this fresh frontier, the bright panorama of an active star cluster.

Something was changing-there! In the middle of open space, a shape began to take form itself seemingly out of space dust.

At Keller's left side, Shucorion floated down the for-ward ladder steps, gripping the handrail for dear life. He stared at the sight before them. His eyes were wide, brows drawn, and his shoulders tightened.

He was barely breathing. "The Gateway!"

Chapter Ten what they saw was a belt of segments bolted together in a circle, jewelry for a really big lady. The necklace hung in space where no unmoving object should be, and despite no source of power to work against solar winds and the forces of gravity from spatial bodies, the thing held its position. Until this morning, Keller had pretty much thought he knew metal and non-metal when he saw it, but their experience on the grave ship had thrown all his confidence sideways a couple of feet

The necklace read four thousand feet tall, almost that wide-not very big in spatial terms. Unlike most things in space, it had a definite up and down, and from here was slightly tilted, and slowly wheeling. Did it have a back and front? Was this the front?

"Mercy," Keller muttered. "King Kong's bicycle chain."

"Looks don't mean much," Bonifay commented. Having just come off a ship that looked like a swamp, with plants made of metal, he touched his sensors and fine-tuned the readings, focusing on what appeared to be steel with a sparkle coating. The object hung against the depths of night, winking in the distant light of Belle Terre's sun, the star they called Occult.

At Bonifay's side Keller leaned over the nav, but didn't take his eyes off the necklace. "Where'd it come from? Why didn't we pick it up before?"

"Wasn't there. Unless it was cloaked." Bonifay looked past him to Shucorion, who stood on the sci-deck staring at the screen. "Ask Blue Boy. Something's going on with him."

Up on the sci-deck, Shucorion's grip on the rail had turned his hands from blue to gray, knuckles nearly white. Was he breathing?

That stance was getting recognizable-Shucorion suddenly still, waiting to see whether or not disaster would strike. Such a pause for decision might have been common to the Blood, or just a trait Shucorion had learned as a blast engineer on his planet, a place so often stricken by forces of space and nature that the whole existence was devoted to arrival at the next day alive.

Keller stepped to the base of the sci-deck and threaded his fingers through a quatrefoil cutout. "You recognize this thing?"

"I thought-" Shucorion's gasp was almost inaudible. *I thought it was a myth!"

*Is there a legend? Any information we can use today?"

"Legend?... legend... no. History. I thought they were deluded... daring to hope..."

With one eye on the forward screen Keller jumped to the steps and brought himself almost to Shucorion's eye level but didn't invade the sci-deck. Together they watched the glittery chain of bolted segments. *Tell me quick."

Shaken by the tone, Shucorion muddled out of the trance of shock.

"In my father's time," he began with effort, "the suns crossed and the cycle brought us war with Kauld... again... it was the third cycle in my father's life. He was a sanitation specialist..."

When memories flooded in again, Keller looked up. "I'm impressed. That's a critical enough job in places where you don't have earthquakes and storms every third day."

"Yes... he was valued highly. Very studious man... he always saw implications before they struck, followed every trail of possibility back, forward... any way it led."

He paused. This time he forced himself to recover from the nostalgia, or fear, or whatever had a grip on him. He seemed to realize it wasn't helping.

"When the cycles came, my father went to fight. He was leading a small Blood feeder fleet when they were set upon by a Kauld battlebarge and pursued toward our solar system. According to the survivors, he turned his fleet and tempted the battlebarge away. Survivors told conflicting tales... one of the tales involved a structure they called Gateway... the Gateway-a freestanding spatial window through which my father escaped with his half of the fleet. The Kauld barge followed them in. Apparently the doorway closed. They were never seen again. A single rescue mission reported... nothing at all. The Gateway had vanished, if it ever..."

When Shucorion's voice pittered away, Keller clamped his lips shut as eerie evidence began to collect. Torn between captain's duties and mate's duties-both of which he wanted very much to do-he broke his attentiveness with the space necklace and instead looked up at Shucorion.

"What was his name?" he asked.

Shucorion struggled for a moment "Ennengand."

His father. Keller instantly grasped the thunderous implications of what he had just heard, and what he had so recently seen. His father...

"Sorry, shadow." He punctuated his sympathy, however unhelpful, with a grip on Shucorion's arm. In a way he was apologizing ahead of time for what he suspected might soon come.

His eyes tightened at the touch, but Shucorion couldn't manage a response. Slowly he lowered into the chair at the engineering desk, bringing him down to the level where Keller stood on the steps. He still gripped the rail, his arm tense under Keller's hand.

"I thought it was a myth," he murmured.

For several seconds, together in silence, they watched the links roll slowly. Keller forced himself to think about the other things going on at this moment-a captain's trick, and one he rarely had to do as second mate of Peleliu, a skill that still came hard for him. The boarding party was over there, the Pompeii coming under traction, and now this new structure had popped up. Which one should get his fullest attention?

"Where did they get the name 'Gateway'?" he asked, fishing for ownership or responsibility. "Did they make it up?"

"Some said it was an even older legend, from lost times. But it was risky to believe that, so most never did. With so much doubt, those who recalled the legend ceased to tell it. There was no use in perpetuating it... I only recall because the report was given to my mother. She cherished it to her very death."

"They have logs? Records?"

"There were in those times no recordings of visions in space," Shucorion finished. With his story out, he seemed agitated and exhausted at the same time. "They were considered wasteful. Unnecessary. We have only the words and the pictures they make in our minds. Pictures of... matter."

The Gateway wheeled in space, very slowly. There was dignity in its slowness. Whatever its mysterious purpose, it was willing to wait.

"How long ago was this?" Keller asked. **Earth stan-dard!*

Shucorion's lips pressed as he tried to mink past what certainly seemed a difficult personal encounter.
"Perhaps... twenty years."

"Wake up-" Bonifay snapped. "Something's com-ing through mat thing!"

Keller clunked off the steps and hurried to his side. "Are you sure? What do you see?"

"The colors are different The sparkles are more ac-tive."

"Doesn't look any different to me-----Have you got a lock on a solid object? Energy?"

*Tm telling you, I sense a change."

Irritated, Keller demanded, "Do the sensors sense it?"

Bonifay's shoulders trembled with physical and mental effort and he turned to him. "Nick, something wicked mis way comes. You can believe me or not."

But now he could see what Bonifay had sensed with raw instinct In the middle of the necklace, there was a presence coming through, freckles of polished bronze and gold in the weak sunlight and the kiss of the stars. f

Ships. Somebody else's ships. What are you? Who's there ?

'Translators on. Open a hailing frequency. In fact, open them all.*'

As Quinones reached for the communications con-trols at the next pulpit, Keller eyed the big necklace filling the main screen and the squabble in the middle of it. As yet he couldn't tell the construction of what-ever those things were.

"All frequencies are open, sir," Quinones said. "Translators are on."

She was excited. It came out in her voice, and in the exuberant stretch she made to reach the communica-tions board from her seat at the mule desk.

Somehow they had to get mis bridge better staffed.

Clearing his throat, Keller took a shaky step and willed his voice over the expanse of space.

'This is the United Federation Frigate Challen-ger. You're about to enter space claimed under die Treaty of Belle Terre. Identify yourselves and your purpose.'

Now they'd wait.

A handful of seconds went by.

The Gateway glowed in the middle. The flecks of bronze and gold grew more solid. Moving closer.

"Bonifay, come here," he began, and looped his hands around the bosun's arm. "Take the helm."

"You're going to move us?"

"Just be ready."

"Butltytek-"

"He's not here yet. Come on, I'll help you."

After he shifted Bonifay to the helm pulpit, some-thing lit in Keller's mind, a snigger of warning or perhaps just simple caution. He wasn't ready to tip all his hands yet

He stepped to port and tapped the sci-deck grid. Up there, Shucorion still sat staring at the main screen.

Another tap. "Shadow, go below and make sure the warps are powered up and the Blood core's stable. I want to be able to increase speed without any over-loads."

Keller prudently didn't mention whether or not he wanted to chase somebody or get away from some-body. Or that he wasn't ready for Shucorion to see what he and Ring had discovered over there.

Through a raw throat Shucorion agreed, "I will.** He seemed relieved to stand, to be given a reason to go to engineering and suspend whatever plucked at his heart With a series of exhausted movements he came down the aft sci-deck ladder and hurried to the turbolift.

When he was gone, Keller asked, "Any signal from the boarding party?"

"None yet," Bonifay said. Then he looked up. "Why'd you send him below?"

"To check the warp core, like I said."

Bonifay's black eyes scoured him.

Self-conscious, Keller twitched and kept his gaze forward. Bonifay was still watching him. He felt Zoa's blinkless shifting eyes, the Fleet faith of Quinones, the absence of Savannah Ring at MEL, and the ghost of Shucorion's reactivated grief. They were all depending on him.

"Hush, Zane," he murmured.

X)n the quarterdeck, Quinones swiveled in her chair. "Mule traction locked on to the Pompeii, sir. Sorry to take so long, but the circuits-

"Understood. Bear down. Slow the Pompeii's prog-ress. Bonifay, astern one-third."

"One-third astern.*"

The repeats and "sirs" of protocol were like his grandmother's blanket Much of the misfit crew didn't have those habits yet and Keller hadn't insisted on them. The Blood transferees, the Federation volunteers from Belle Terre, and those from other ships had enough to worry about going through basic. Trained Fleet officers like Quinones were prizes here. And she wasn't planning to stay much longer.

At least she was here now.

The bleeps and whirs around the bridge intensified as the towing engines took a bite. Either at warp speed or sublight, Challenger's mule engines could pull the fillings out of God's teeth.

The thrum of effort rose around them. The frigate pressed upward against Keller's legs, shuddered deeply, then wallowed.

"Pompeii's resisting," Bonifay said.

"Maintain."

Vibrations burbled through the deck into Keller's boots, his heels and knees, his thighs and arms. He stiff-ened, helping Challenger find the concentration of pur-pose in her mismatched parts and the veins of energy find their way. These systems had yet to be tested. Would they break down? Would his luck run out here and now?

"Adjust azimuth," he said, adding up the angles in his head, "point seven degrees."

"Point seven." At his elbow, Bonifay barely got the response out

With one hand gripping the back of Bonifay's chair, Keller pushed the toes of his cowboy boots into the car-pet. He gritted his teeth and spread his fingers.

Lack be damned-there had to be more here man just stuck-together salvage. There had to be. This ship was built of a thousand dreams... there had to be more!

"Come on, calico," he murmured, "find your bones... "

Skittish and untempered, the ship plucked what she needed out of the million bolts and clews and fakery she was made of. The mule engines dug in. She pressed against Keller's feet, took a bite on space, and stub-borned into a turn.

"Thank God," Quinones whispered.

Bonifay gripped the helm. "Nobody sneeze...."

Held breaths, crinkled shoulders, anticipation of a seizure that would leave the ship powerless in the path of oncoming menace-Keller felt them all from the crew.

But he got another message too. One from the ship. Though she thrummed with strain, the frigate didn't flut-ter once she'd taken mat bite. Shouldering into her load like a plowhorse against the yoke, she knew what she wanted Wild or not, she had a job and she liked working.

**Don't worry," he assured softly. "She knows how to paddle her own canoe."

Every ship has to be built a certain way for a certain purpose, but how well that purpose is executed shows itself only in durability and stress, and might be years down the tine. They knew the frigate well enough, bolt for bolt, because they had built her. But how well she would prove out remained to be seen. Today they'd see a little.

The grave ship was larger by half than Challenger, with an unexplained power source, immeasurable by sensors or any guesswork.

Challenger began to whine, then quickly to scream as mechanical strain grew and grew.

"Redline!" Bonifay warned.

"Maintain."

Could they make such a big ship stop its forward progress? Once done, could they hold it? Was this a show of bravado, just to prove he could master that monster? Or this monster?

Before he knew it, Keller was in over his head. The frigate tipped up under him like a horse with its heels down. It raised its head, flared its nostrils to the sky, slipped, then recovered.

Keller glanced up at the black hat-somehow he felt the spirit of the ship was up there, pasted into place with the memory of those who had died when Peleliu fought her last fight. This hull was most of that hull, and he still felt the old attachments.

"Come on, calico," he murmured, "pull"

The frigate slipped again, pitching the crew back-ward Keller almost fell, but caught a hand on Bonifay's chair and managed only a clumsy stagger. The powerful mule engines were compensating like crazy, finding power from places there weren't even places.

"Power shutdown, deck twelve!" Quinones shouted over the snarl of strain,

"Evacuate."

"Deck twelve, bridge! Evacuate and secure! Evacu-ate!"

The grave ship turned in space, pivoted on its axis, turned on its side, and careened completely around until its bow faced the frigate. The ships were on two different planes now, like tumbled toys on a black carpet

"Sublight guidance just blew!" Quinones reported, gasping out the words.

She wanted him to break it off-he could tell.

Deliberately he didn't respond or even glance at her.

Warning klaxons started ringing from every system. Half the monitors on the bridge flickered and shot down. Overhead lights dropped to bare haze. Emergency worklights came on, casting a yellow haze on their feet. Keller thought immediately of the grave ship's interior and the otherworldly lighting that had so disoriented him.

The engineering board on the sci-deck crackled like a campfire. His eyes' shifted from the main screen to the lollipop on the nav station, the tiny symbol of their accomplishment-the Shuttle Challenger coin stubbornly standing there on its stick. In his mind he saw the homely muscle of a ship lifting its black pot lid to viciously putt against a bigger dog, the fan-shaped Rover strakes leaning down to the duckwing nacelles below, warning lights flickering all over her outer hull and flush vents angrily spewing funnels of residual plasma. The crew hunkered down, waiting for the hull to implode around them.

Bonifay twisted to give Keller his favorite emergency expression. "You're crazy!"

"But you mean that in a good way," Keller added, and actually smiled.

With a shake of his head Bonifay smiled too and dug into his controls, compensating like mad.

Suddenly half the noise dropped off. Systems began to settle down. Had they cracked?

No! The grave ship had lowered its power levels!

Joyously Keller declared, "Mules, hell. They're pit bulls!"

"Did it!" Half out of his chair, Bonifay hammered the controls, going for stabilization. "Grave ship's re-laxing its power by two-thirds. Still got some thrust, though-"

"Adjust traction and keep holding."

"Traction's barely holding, sir," Quinones reported, "but we're managing to keep Pompeii in place."

"Understood. We can't keep this up forever." He reached back and tapped the com on his chair. "Keller to boarding party. Ring, are you in position for transport?"

On the main screen, the bolts of the metallic circle sparkled blighter. Flickers raced around its frame and reminded him of new-fallen snow hi sunlight, or the stuff mat makes fool's gold shine.

He boosted the com. "Savannah, come in."

Nothing.

Was it a communications blackout or was the board-ing party in trouble?

He shifted his weight uneasily. "Great snakes... why can't one thing go right?"

His answer came not hi the form of a reassuring voice from a shipmate or from the boarding party, but in the grating screech of metal against metal. He clapped his hand to his ears and stumbled behind the command chair. Before him, Zane Bonifay huddled in shock at the nav/sensory. Over there, Zoa and Quinones were both pressed against the quadritronics ring. The drilling noise grew louder, a maddening whine that shook the primary hull.

"Dang--what is that!"

No one knew. His only answer was a hard bonk on the hull, a sound that seemed to come from everywhere.

Keller looked up at the black hat. "Somebody knocked?"

Then Quinones yelped, "Sir, Pompeii just grabbed us!"

"Main screen!"

The main changed, abandoned the Gateway and switched back to the shaggy green grave ship-which

was now turned with its bow directly toward Challenger and appeared to be only inches away!

"How'd it get so close!" he demanded.

"Faulty reading," Bonifay told him, obviously irritated at the equipment failure.

The frigate began to shake under them. The turbolift door scratched open and Dean Creighton and the Blood crewman Iyteck stumbled through the terrible noise, then fell over each other on the shuddering quarterdeck.

Keller made a grab for Iyteck and ended up making things worse. "Take the helm! Aft thrusters! Shake us loose!"

But Iyteck never made it to the helm to carry out that order.

The drill noise grew immediately louder, cutting off Keller's last word. In his hands Iyteck tried to get to his feet and come down the steps when the starboard bulk-head just forward of the sci-deck cracked like a mirror. Through it came a three-sided silver spine like a musketeer's rapier, and it didn't stop coming.

Chapter Eleven there was no hilt, no end. The metallic spine shot across the bridge in an instant, from starboard forward to port aft, past Bonifay's head, tore Iyteck out of Keller's hands and carried him to the lift doors, where it skewered him into place and kept on going.

Creighton hit the deck under the communications pulpit. Quinones squawked and tumbled out of her chair. The shish-kebab tine thundered with vibration and began to cut the two ends of the bridge into shards around its puncture points, goring Iyteck's body in a most ghastly way. Purple blood splattered, his arms, legs, and head convulsed—Keller could only hope mercy was with them and Iyteck was already gone.

Seconds were lost to horror. The mule engines rumbled with strain as the ship bucked against the forces that held it. She knew this was wrong, deadly.

"Javelin?" The long vibrating tine wagged toward Keller's left arm as he ducked. It nearly sliced him in half.

"Don't touch it, Nick!" Thrown violently from the helm, Bonifay huddled on the deck.

"Is this what it hit you with?"

"No!"

"Can you get back to the helm?"

"Uh... yeah..."

The razored quill made a vicious noise. It shivered like a giant nerve and hacked at the wounds it made in the ship's body.

The instant Bonifay's hand crawled to the helm's slanted desk, Keller called, "Boost thrusters! Zoa, tar-get the source on then* hull!"

Damn, the noise! The big stiletto continued to hum and cut. Two puncture wounds in the impaled hull got bigger, sucking air out into space through the holes. Automatic sealant blew into the perforations, instantly hardened, and was almost as quickly sanded away by the three-sided spine. Challenger had been run through.

On top of the quill's scream came the whine of phasers. At point-blank range the weapons arrays opened up on the Pompeii. Zoa's golden face was tight as she held the trigger down, fired, and fired again, and again.

Beneath the silver auger as it oscillated above him, Bonifay peeked up over the helm's wrist roll "New contacts! At least sixteen!"

He wasn't surprised. He'd known instinctively some-thing was coming. If no one else believed him he was at least going to believe himself.

Keller scrambled to the other side of the command chair, continued to duck the deliberate reaming of his ship, and tried to see what Bonifay saw on the helm's auxiliary monitor screens.

Fighting the helm, Bonifay called, "You better re-lease traction! We can't reverse against our own engine power!"

"Quinones, release tractor beams! Zoa, cease fire! Cease firer

Had she heard him?

Yes, the phasers broke contact

Terrified, the dutiful Quinones put one hand on the chair she'd been thrown out of and dragged herself toward the mule desk, through a punishing spray of fresh air from the compensators, mixed with fire retardant and bits of hardened sealant. The gouts of blowing matter and air clouded the bridge within sec-onds. Keller stumbled to his feet and waved wildly, trying to see.

"Traction off, sir!*" Quinones called.

One thing done.

But how could they back up? Challenger was im-paled and being held between Pompeii's lobster claws. Those claws were some kind of capture device, a trap. Keller scorned himself for not taking them for what they looked like in the first place instead of something fancy, technical or decorative. Sometimes a snake's tongue is a snake's tongue.

If he didn't get that drill out of the hull, it would maul the primary hull to crumbs. The horrifying sight froze his hands for a few seconds, until he realized everyone was expecting an order from him that would save them. He had no idea what kind of miracle to work. An eighty-foot metal stiletto piercing the ship- what could he do? What could he possibly do? Wait for mercy?

"Everybody down! Keep your heads down! Zane, stay on the deck!"

Accounting for each of them one by one, he ducked his own head and scrambled for the equipment locker under the sci-deck. The click-magnet door depressed slightly under his frantic hand, then popped

open with a lie of conformity. He threw himself inside and dug through the bosun's box-it was here, it was here somewhere! When his hand closed around a recogniz-able handle, he hauled himself out with a utility phaser saw. His teeth gritted-the saw was heavy and hard to control, like a wild-eyed animal. He leaned back against the skittering tool, twisted hard, launched him-self forward, and hit the trigger.

The limited-range saw lit up in his hands, its bright maw reaching for something to cut He squinted against the pain in his eyes, but there was no time for goggles.

At his elbow, Bonifay threw up an arm to shield his face. Keller turned his back to him, trying to protect him, and drove forward to contact the razor quill.

Sparks exploded across the bridge in a massive bulb. They danced in the smoke and burned Keller's face and hands, then blew past him to burn Bonifay. His arms strained, his back knotted, and his teeth grided until his neck grew hard and a fierce growl bellowed out. Before him the razor quill roared back against the cutting torch of the saw and smashed against the emit-ter guards on the top and bottom of the tool's business end. Pieces of the curved cups hit Keller's face and nearly blinded him. He turned his head to shield one eye, but kept to the work despite the buck and whine of contact

Was it cutting? Was it having any effect at all? What kind of metal could stand up to this punishment! A heavy-duty phaser saw!

'We've got approach!'

Bonifay. Did he mean the new contacts or the grave ship?

Pompeii couldn't get any closer. Must be the other one.

Nick Keller sucked one stiff breath and shouted. "Red alert! Battle stations!"

Chapter Twelve

"TURN around! Turn, turn! It's a horror! This is wrong! It's supposed to be wondrous!"

As Luntee howled his astoundment and waved his hands before his face to drive away what he saw, Riutta gagged out her response.

"It is wondrous-----Look up, Luntee, and think!"

"Hideous... hideous, hideous!"

Carrying them dutifully, the spinner sailed through the Gateway without even a bump or flutter. They could have been skating a hunt plain on the planet.

Living who manned the spinner, though, endured shock after shock-around them the universe altered it-self instantly. Almost everything that could change im-mediate-ly did.

Riutta clung to the vertical rods supporting the body of the spinner. Look up and think. Around her other Living farers choked and fell, screamed and pitifully gripped to the bolted seats. A few more stood in a stu-por, as if they had been Anointed.

"Turn us!" Luntee screamed. "Turn! Turn! We'll be lost!"

His voice tumbled in Riutta's head. She pulled her stare from the transparent of open space and looked down at Luntee himself, for he had changed. Every other person around her had changed too, but she stared at Luntee as he cowered beside her. She focused on him and fought to adjust to completely new experiences. His skin-what had happened to it? It no longer looked like the continuous platinum plains, but a field of tiny segments joined with the finest of etching. She clearly saw blood pulse through his veins, and saw the depth of his horrified eyes. She never knew eyes had depth. She could see his fears as if looking through ice!

Where they came from, they could trust what they saw and felt. Surfaces were dependable. Their world was brittle, glassy, harsh-edged, toneless. The only stories of other places, with growth and variation and texture, came from the old records, the very most old. Only in the dimmest valleys of their imaginations could they summon these haunting.

But at the instant their spinners flushed through the Gateway, they suddenly discovered a hundred unused senses. Her arms and legs were tingling, floating, but her feet were still on the floor. Inside her body there seemed now to be solid weights where once there had been organs. While her limbs tingled and her innards turned, Riutta fought to stay upright. Her companions tumbled and crawled and clung to their drive boards, lost in the swarm of physical shocks. She looked down at her hands.

Her own skin, her arms and shoulders, her hands and legs had changed as if she had painted herself with wax and sprayed metalflake across the curing coat. A million fine creases and marks that had never been there before-she now saw them all on her knuckles and wrists, and saw the veins carrying life through her body, to her thumb and all three fingers. She saw where the bones were, things that were usually seen only after great tragedy, when a Living body had been torn violently from itself. Such things were not meant for looking. Had they always been there? Were they a secret of the Gateway? Or was this a test of Living resolve?

She raised her eyes and pushed her hands down. At her side, Luntee trembled and sobbed and searched for his hands. Others were looking at each other and gasping. They looked monstrous, distorted to each other. Some looked at their own hands and screamed. On the other side, her cousin Untuxx valiantly struggled to understand what the instruments were trying to tell him. The spinner itself knew more physical shocks, but only read what came to it and interpreted information for them to use. Untuxx at least tried to use that information.

Touch everything!" she called. "Touch to know how close or far! Use your hands!*"

"Riutta!*" Untuxx rasped out. "The Anointed are calling to us!"

The spinner had provided one thing they could depend upon-a signal through space.

Summoning the depth of will that had never failed her, Riutta forced herself to cling to that one thing. "You have contact with the Anointed?"

"Yes!""

Seizing this tidbit, Riutta deliberately controlled her voice. Shouting would not serve. They were in this place now and must adjust.

"Stay on this plane," she said. "Track the Anointed. What sort of signal do we receive from them?"

"They say we..., they say they're Linking with us!"

Untuxx took Riutta's example and modified his own volume, though he still trembled and sucked his breath. "How can they say that? We're nowhere near them!"

He was the only one other than Riutta who was not overwhelmed to a stupor. Around them, others continued to shriek in fright each time they opened their eyes or tried to stand. Some lay upon the floor and rolled and moaned like sick children.

Luntee, though, had dragged himself to his feet and stood with his knees bent and both hands out before him. He tried to touch what he saw in space through the transparent

"We've come to the wrong place!" he gagged. "Please-turnaround!"

"You've faced seventeen hunts,* Riutta sharply said. "Stand and face this!"

"The hunt is normal! This-this-"

"The Anointed are speaking to us. This is where they are. We must keep on this plane. Look for familiar things. Here-darkest And this--lighter. Look at the familiar and ignore what is between. You wanted to be here, Lun-tee. We're both Elders now. Stand and be here! Look and tell me-do you think this might be... color?"

Tears puddled Luntee's astonished eyes. His teeth were gnashed, his shoulders hunched, his hands out He was physically ill.

Step by step, Riutta battled to judge distance, even from her hands to the mechanisms before her. They seemed to loom up against her, though still arm's length away. On the transparents, the vista of space had a thousand depths, some as near as her nose, other formations impossibly distant Which was real? Which should she trust? How could she make a judgment? How should she order the spinners to move?

She closed her eyes briefly and bumped her knuckle along the mechanism until her fingers found the signal generator.

"Link the spinners!" she called. "Or we'll lose each other in this sensory maze."

Untuxx tried to obey her command, but kept missing the automatic link control. After a long struggle, he pressed his hands to his face and sank against the drive box, overwhelmed.,

Even in the cusp of confusion and an overloaded mind, Luntee was the one who acted. He raised his hand before his face until it touched his cheek and he forced his brain to make sense of his own fingers. From there he moved his hand slowly away, directly from his face to the link control until he touched the mechanism. Once he felt the metal on his fingers, he closed his eyes to block out the wildness. His face scrunched with effort Without watching, he manipulated the control until the automatic reaction began.

The spinner hummed with more energy and fired its six component engines. Would they balance? Would the power systems still operate here? Draw energy properly, as before it entered the Gateway?

Clinging to the sustenance that Luntee had recovered some, Riutta held her breath. If he in his fears could adjust, then others could also. The other spinner leaders were probably also urging their Living to work through the disorientation.

"The Anointed!" Untuxx grunted "The barge says it has been breached! Someone has broken in!"

"Why would anyone be in space?" Riutta challenged. "You must be wrong."

"Then why do they say they're linking?" Luntee shuddered. "Too much wrong..."

She had no answer. Her own vision was confused enough. She took a moment to make sense of what she was seeing. Through the transparent^, a panorama of spectacles shimmered madly. Clouds and stars, bands and bubbles, nebulae and bejewelments by the billions seemed to occupy the same area, to compete for attention, to come forward and sink back without design, without order.

Was there random order here? Could she count on that, at least?

There were things here she thought were mentioned in the old records, but they were not as she had pictured them in her mind. Perhaps that brilliance was a star, this intensity an explosion those particles space dust-but so complex! They weren't all the same size or distance, nor even the same dark or lightness. Something else was happening here. Color? Dimension? The old words that made no sense to Living? Were these things... those things?

"They claim a link," Luntee gasped out, each word a spit His tortured eyes fixed on the information coming in as the spinner sifted space. "Is there someone else there? They can only link with us-"

"If someone else is there," Riutta said, "we will ask why."

"Ask? We will take action!"

"Not yet Not until I know more."

"We have waited generations. Take action!"

"No."

"If we had brought Croash, he would have agreed with me."

"Bring all the Elders to this side? That would be reckless. And I am senior on this side."

"We're all new Elders," Luntee struggled. "You must consider my counsel."

"I have, and rejected it. You wouldn't want me to be reckless-T

"No! But do what random order says."

"Order has not been revealed. Caution is better.)*

Luntee wiped his eyes, then shaded them with one hand from the debilitation around them. "Why would we be here now? We would have been turned away if action would be wrong."

Riutta covered her own eyes for a moment It helped, but did not wipe out the feeling of lightness and continuation. She would, and he would, soon be forced to look at this great area and continue to look. "Random order will explain itself," she said. "Why we were made to struggle, why we were allowed

back, and why now. When we find^-"

"There!" Untuxx choked. One hand was on the drive box, the other pressed to his brushy hair as if to hold his mind inside.

Riutta's own stubbly hair was moist with sweat. It had been a long time since she had been so warm—since she left her mother's dome for her first hunt, all those descendings ago. Here, through the Gateway, even the reaction of the spinner to its own engines was unrecognizable. Ambient heat came off the slanted flankings and warmed the Living crew, heat never felt before by a spinner.

She would have to lower the warmth, later. For now, they would have to think through the comfort.

They fought for footing as the spinner followed the given order to find and to link with the other spinners, to form one large body with which they could move through space to the Anointed, then discover where the original Living who came through the Gateway had begun, and whether Living descendants had a purpose here.

She hoped not. They possessed a perfectly good planet, with air to breathe and a way to eat and build. They should have stayed there.

But the old urge to return through the Gateway had to be put to rest. Too many generations had held the goal, had stood in the hunt to collect energy for the Gateway's activation. A great action of historic significance would be needed to quell such a drive, something so momentous that future generations of Living would never question its finality. Like the hunt, once begun this adventure would have to be played out to its own end.

If the Anointed had come to some dire end, purpose-less and wasted, this would certainly be a stunning first step.

Yet Riutta hoped this would not be so. The Anointed deserved better than waste.

"There! I see them! I see the Anointed!" Luntex's shout shocked Riutta out of her thoughts.

This was like being in a drugged state, this magical place with its sights and sensations. Her limbs felt light and empty, as if there were no muscle, bone, no sinew. Her organs turned with nausea. She glanced at Luntex, then quickly looked away. The detail hurt her eyes—his skin, his hair, the terror in his face. Even the spackled panorama out there was easier to digest than the phantoms she and her companions appeared to each other.

Yes, she could see the barge of the Anointed now. Look at it! Its long sheaths of gift-drapery floated, weightless, in space as if stimulated by the electrical field of a hunt! The barge looked enraged, animated, much different than during the uncounted generations it had sat on its planet-bound pedestal, central to all the hunt plains. This precious fixture of then: planet and history now rode the wild lanes of space, with its blanket of gift-drapings flying like a free dancer's floss.

She wondered if the gravity generators inside the Anointed ship were working properly, holding the Anointed in place as they had been so lovingly arranged. Were the sculptures and artwork undamaged? The representations of the ancient planets still in place? Or had the shock of space broken everything?

How reassuring to see the Anointed again! For all of their lives, and all their ancestors' lives, the ageless barge had been on its pedestal, until the Elders decided the time had come for them to travel. At least the

Gate-way had brought the spinners to the Anointed and not sent them each off to some unexplained destination where they would be forever wandering.

"A second contact," Untuxx reported "Another ves-sel!"

"Strangers!" Luntee growled. "The Anointed are linking with strangers!"

Untuxx seemed in physical agony. "The stranger ship is pierced, Riutta! The Anointed are causing trou-ble!"

Horrified, Riutta slammed both her hands forward on the top of the drive box. She stared at what she had caused, the last thing Living ever wanted.

"Trouble!" she gasped. "Trouble in space!"

Chapter Thirteen

Blood Savage Nine, Prime of the Savage Hand Blue Net Patrol

*the blind is descending, Avedon."

"Curse the Blind... slow all progress. Drop from dynadrive. Signal the other avedons to slow."

Avedon of the Hand Delytharen paced the cylindrical interior of his Savage, glancing up at the Blood men above him.

A few steps along the curve of the cylinder, the anx-ious young officer Camarith twitched and paced. Camarith was never calm, always afraid of things that might go wrong.

The gravity cyclones would have to be charged soon. At rest, the Plume Savage spun dependably, creating natural gravity. Cyclone spinners provided a solution to movement at dynadrive. There had to be gravity, or there would be no light speeds.

Now they were really in the dark.

The stone-colored interior of the Savage was a calm-ing environment, a pleasant side effect of recycled paint, which always came in planet-basic colors. Against it the blue skin and solid-block vests, tunics, or wraps of his companions were the only colors. Some different blues, some browns, a green or two... Blood farers wore what was available. If a man was cold, he might coil a length of fabric around his legs or arms and therefore be wearing more color, but there was no unity of style as displayed by Human farers in the recordings Federation had provided.

Missing the lower part of his right arm, Delytharen looked at the simple rust-brown clothing he wore and beat down sensations of inadequacy, sustained only by the crossed strap around his remaining wrist that marked him Avedon of a Savage Hand. The crossed strap was meant to be an honor, but he was cautious to not think too well of himself. Many had turned down the rigorous duty of commanding five Plume Savages, including Shucorion.

And his little strap would not impress Human. Those recordings from Federation were majestic, tapes of beau-tiful military organizations, marching and fighting, each in its own special attire, entertaining delighted spectators, recalling with great pride their histories. Unlike many avedons, Delytharen had studied these

recordings kindly provided by the very open Federation, and made his officers study them. During his Blind, he might look again.

He had once thought a Savage was a large vessel, because each was big enough to hold eight Plumes. Since the coming of Federation to the star cluster, these assumptions had been destroyed. Though Kauld had been superior to Blood, with their thick-bodied, long-hulled Marauder battlebarges, now came people who were superior to Kauld. Federation's ships were not afraid of size or power. Challenger, they said, was nowhere near their largest battleship, and Challenger was much bigger than a Savage, much more powerful.

So Shucorion had communicated while setting up the Blue Net. Thus far it had proven true.

A thrill ran Delytharen's remaining arm at the idea of seeing the frigate for himself. Until now he had been part of the Blue Net, guarding and supporting trade between Blood and Belle Terre, gently pushing down surges from unhappy Kauld. As the nearest Savages on his side of their solar system, Delytharen's Hand had received the cry of distress from Shucorion in a Blood Plume. After passing along the information that they had taken the signal and would answer, the five Savages were most of the way to answering the call, but now the Blind had come down around them. To travel faster than light during the Blind was a mission of complete desperation, too much to ask for the lives of Shucorion and his companion, who were both probably already dead.

He rubbed the stump of his missing arm, not so much for the feeling as just habit, to give his other hand a duty.

"This is shameful," he uttered. "We should have progressed farther before the Blind. We should have engaged more speed. We've been of no use."

"Do you think Keller rescued Shucorion and this criminal Bonifay?"

"I would be guessing, Camarith."

Within the frame of woody hair, lighter man most Blood, Camarith's expression crumpled. "Oh... forgive me."

Delytharen smiled at his young assistant "You haven't guessed yet It's always better when farers are kept from dying in space. Keller may have found them.

He would be the kind of man who finds them. He does nothing arbitrary."

Camarith nodded, squeezing his hands closed, open, closed, open. "What is he like? Is he an interesting person?"

"I have yet to meet him," Delytharen said. "I've been curious... I've never met any Human person. These Humans crossed unbelievable distance, more distance than Blood believed could be crossed. When they came, they moved moons to make their planet livable, and they've done well to survive upon it since coming here. They must be powerful and determined people... can you imagine what their civilization must be like? 'Federation'... someday I would like to witness such a blizzard of achievement."

He believed the stories because he had evidence. In a matter of two seasons, Keller of Federation had hammered into place an organized defense mechanism for Blood, Kauld, and Federation planets. The planet Belle Terre was supposedly his only official consideration, yet he had opened his consideration to

include Blood Many, and even their enemies, All Kauld. There was confusion and strife now upon Kauld world, for Kauld had never experienced such enemies as Federation and some were ashamed while others were suspicious. These were bitter seeds.

Blood Many had made a bond with Belle Terre, in large part because they had no good alternative. Avedon Shucorion had provided an unusual explanation- Human had found a way to succeed without conquest For "Blood, living in the shadow of Kauld closing in upon them, the chance to go unconquered was a gift Blood had not expected.

Such magnanimous treatment required a stylish response. He'd been thinking about this since the distress flash came.

"The agreement,*' he began, "says we show 'all pos-sible respect* to each other between the Blue Net and the frigate. To Human what would that mean? Who should stand in which position? What will he expect? Who shall receive the criminal? Camarith, you're the specialist on the governor's agreement Read through it and through it Use the banks of information given to us about Federation and its history. Study the formal ways. We must have a proper procedure for greeting Keller, for receiving the criminal, offering assistance... make sure our attire is correct Then drill the men in their proper behavior. A man of Keller's stature could never succeed without attending every detail-"

An alarm interrupted him. Danger lights began to ro-tate.

"Avedon!" Camarith pushed Delytharen out of the way in his passion to get to the communication bars. "A new signal! A distress flash from Challenger!"

"From Challenger? Are you sure?"

"It possesses Shucorion's personal encoding. He says they're being attacked!"

Always careful, Delytharen leaned closer to the bars. "Is it an echo of the previous signal?"

"No, this one is new. It suggests danger to Chal-lenger, not to a Blood Savage."

"But you say it comes from Shucorion?" The avedon straightened. "Then he was rescued after all...."

Camarith looked up at him desperately. "Should we believe the signal? A second attack before we've even responded to the first?"

Delytharen scowled at himself. "Our tardiness is my fault Yes, we must believe the signal, of course. Shucorion is known for repeated risking, but he never lies. A danger to Challenger... loss of the strongest fighting vessel would be disastrous for all our planets. What does the agreement say in this case?"

"It says response to catastrophic emergency will be made with all possible speed."

"Is there anything in the agreement about suspending emergency response during the Blind?"

"No... not specifically," Camarith said. "I assumed it to be implied, since movement during the Blind is so-"

"All possible. Not all safe, all cautious, all sensible. A man like Keller would use every power he possessed to respond if we were in danger. Yes... we'll go now."

"Dynadrive through the Blind? For this much dis-tance?"

"'All possible*' means 'all possible.* Keller agreed to protect our planet. He stopped the Kauld scourge. He formed us into a working fleet taken seriously by everyone. Once we were isolated Plumes with Savages scattered like debris. Now we are the Blue Net and we have respect. Even Kauld show us respect now. We must show Keller that nothing, not our lives, not the Build, will keep us from upholding the governor's agreement*'

"Yes, Avedon."

"Of all the random decisions our destiny should make... that a reckless wildman like Shucorion should end up with Keller. What must he think of us! What obscene twist puts a radical at Keller's side?*"

The other men were listening to him, just as Camarith was, but Camarith was the only one authorized to respond unless directly addressed. Still, Delytharen's frequent vocalizations of his thoughts were a characteristic of his command. He didn't care if they heard him. His thoughts were always better outside of his head.

"How long" he mused, "before Keller becomes dis-illusioned with Shucorion? Before he decides he should never have made a bonding agreement with Blood Many? We have much to correct in his vision of us. He'll need real Blood standing by him. You and I, and this Savage Hand, will correct everything. Bring forth our best navigators for sensor darkness. Power the dynadrive. We'll use our preprogrammed chartings. Pre-prepare to read star heat upon the hull and adjust with each degree. Bring your friend Tinklaur here. He has a talent for reading gases and spectral information. Pay special attention to space-dust density in this area, and solar-light shifts. Get ready for strict calculations.*9

"Yes, Avedon!" Camarith scrambled up and down the curved bulkhead to execute those orders. He was in a panic. He had never traversed the Blind at light speed before.

"We should learn to say 'warp speed' instead of 'dynadrive,'" Delytharen commented. "Let us begin to practice."

This time Camarith could only nod and motion to the men at the drive base to keep working. They were frightened too.

Delytharen, though, had committed himself and no longer worried. Slowly he began pacing again, thinking far ahead into the darkness.

"We'll show Keller that Shucorion is the exception and he can trust us after all. This single performance will bring us high in his mind. We can show him different Blood! Challenger will have the help he needs hours earlier than he expects/'

As Camarith twitched about transferring the new order to the rest of the farers, and men began hurriedly to shuffle from one position to another, Delytharen watched the instruments around him struggle to tease information from the sensor darkness. They could easily die in this endeavor.

He steadied himself for the coming troubles of maneuvering through the Blind. This would be a tedious effort, but he was ready to have pride about it. He motioned Camarith and the others to hurry, to bring their specialists in navigation forward, quickly. This was a good struggle, a good opportunity for Blood to shine.

"After all is made stable for our Mends,*' he mused, "the accused man Bonifay will be received properly, will be properly judged, and properly he will be put to death.*"

Challenger

At red alert, the frigate shifted to emergency status in-board and out. All through the ship the day lights turned off and the efficient red lights came on, allowing human eyes to remain adjusted no matter where they looked, beautiful and eerie at the same time.

Specialized systems popped on-at least, those that could find their way home-but full deflector shields couldn't engage with the grave ship's lobster claws in direct contact and this big drill boring through the pri-mary hull. In his mind Nick Keller saw the crackling blue and yellow sheets of energy trying to find each other past the obstacles. He felt them through his boot soles. What a light show it must be out mere! What a fury of energy out of control!

The hull vibrated with alert mode. Challenger would take care of herself out there, fight dirty and give the at-tacker a frigate version of hellfire.

In here the story wasn't so good for the telling. Keller's brown hair flopped forward and pricked at his eyes until they watered. The phaser saw whined in his hands. He fought the demon's vein with phased light and sheer muscle until he thought his arms would shear off. He couldn't feel his hands anymore. Numbness crawled to his elbows. His bent knees were scorched. The fibers of his pants and sleeves glowed and smoked. Any moment he would light up.

And the saw was completely silly against the con-struction of the spindle. He wasn't making a scratch, wasn't even affecting the vibration's rhythm. What else could he do? How could he stop it? The ship would be cut up around them.

Evacuate the saucer section? Were the lower decks any better off? The turbolift was smashed-could they find their way through the maze of tubes? Could Bonifay climb in his condition?

His mind clattering, Keller bore down on his task. If he couldn't cut the damned thing, maybe he could bend it!

He never got the chance.

Just steps from where he made his ferocious stand, the air itself began to sparkle. He saw the change in his periphery and thought it was his own eyes being burned out of their sockets, but it got bigger.

He dared a glance. The air on the port deck turned gauzy in one spot; men a glaring sparkle appeared and flashed brightly twice before expanding in an instant Over the port deck hatch, a man-sized portal blew into existence, with metallic edges in bolted segments-just like the Gateway! For a second Keller thought it was an insane echo, a mirage, of what showed on the main screen.

Then somebody came through it

Out of the surprise doorway stepped a tall individual, gaunt-faced, quick-eyed, a humanoid being with varie-gated skin of purple and gray dapples and tightly cropped hair the color of eggplant, moving like a cat

Once she was through, the micro-gateway folded up and disappeared with an artistic flash.

Keller stared through the sparks and smoke created by his phaser saw's relationship with the spindle. Was it-? Yes, a woman! Hard to tell-she wore some kind of cut-and-stuffed body padding on her chest and hips, cut into a geometric pattern something like lightning. Under the padding was a simple shift

A shift-silver and lightweight, the same as those on the tomb ship! Just like those mummies were wearing!

Ah-hah! Keller shouted, but his voice was stolen away by the phaser saw and the screaming spindle.

The woman shifted her strange colorless eyes to the razor quill.

Off to his right a metallic rasp rang in his ear. His skull boomed. Even more quickly than it had spun its way in, the razor quill disengaged from the hit door and Itytek's unfortunate remains. It dropped Itytek on the crescent, whizzed past Keller's saw, buzzed a final time, and slurped back into the hole it had made for it-self in the port bulkhead.

Just like that-gone!

Suddenly overtired with nothing to cut, the phaser saw blew itself out and instantly went dead. The force of its abrupt discharge flung Keller backward. He spiraled into the sci-deck locker hatch. Over the jangle in his ears he shouted new commands.

"Break all contact! Full shields!"

The helm! Bonifay was lost in a gout of smoke.

The phaser saw dumped on the deck. Keller stum-bled forward. "Zane!"

Under the helm chair, Bonifay's elbow flashed in a puff near the deck. "Nick, are you burned?*"

"I don't know.*" Keller eyed the intruder, but she wasn't making any moves. He divided his mind be-tween her and the ship that had to keep them all alive.

Bonifay clutched at him for both their sakes. "You took a whipping!"

"Come on. Back us off, dead slow." Eyeing the alien woman, he hauled Bonifay up and deposited him back at the helm. "Creighton!"

"Sir..." The burly ensign crawled out from under the communications pulpit and around Itytek's gaudy remains.

"Make sure those punctures are sealed off. Quinones, check MEL! Stabilize life-support"

Had anyone other than Itytek been killed? What was the damage on the rest of the ship? Had other sections been perforated?

But the first question was standing ten feet from him on the port deck, right next to the gaudy wound in the ship. Automatic sealants hissed beside the intruder, fill-ing the hole. The woman didn't seem to care or even notice. She seemed both unimpressed and dazzled by what she saw around her.

Dry-mouthed and gasping, Keller pressed his hands to Bonifay's shoulders and quietly ordered, "Intruder alert."

"Mmm-hm," Bonifay acknowledged.

They were on their own anyway. Security couldn't get up here without finding their way through the maze of capillaries in the ship, which would take crucial minutes longer than the smashed turbolift would've taken.

Were the shields still up? How had this woman come on board with the shields up?

"Try to contact Ring," he added.

Bonifay nodded.

His legs chattering under him, Keller stepped out from behind the helm. He put himself between the woman and Bonifay. On the deck over mere his utility saw bubbled sadly, wanting its battery recharged.

Zoa was down on the main foredeck! She had her fan blade out and she was stalking the intruder!

Keller's hand shot out "Zoa! Hold off!"

She didn't like it, but she held back.

The intruder simply stared at Zoa. They were two of the most unlike women Keller had ever seen. The intruder's long limbs were hardly cousins of Zoa's compact muscular body, nor was her silvery sheath and geometric padding anything like the leather straps Zoa called day clothes. Her rubbery footwear, obviously poured or molded, was nothing like the clunky Rassua sandals and curving toe talons. Zoa's hair was braided into a wide bronze fan framing her sphinx-like face, but the intruder bore only a stiff purple stubble, completely unadorned. She'd had a hard life, Keller guessed.

The gaunt-faced woman was unimpressed with Zoa's threats or theatrics. Keller had no idea how she might have defended herself. There was no sign of a weapon. Her milky eyes shifted to him only after he moved between her and the sci-deck, which she was intently scanning. Her eyes were more reptilian than human, but had a softened quality and long thick eyelashes on * the top and bottom.

No-that wasn't fair. There was nothing reptilian about her, as he got used to the obvious intelligence in her eyes. The pupils were in the shape of a little four-pointed star, and the rest was a milky coating over green or blue. After a few moments they didn't look like a lizard's anymore. A little getting-used-to took care of things.

Keller leaned into his question. "Did you make the spindle retract?"

The woman didn't answer right away.

"The link," she said. "Yes."

One down, thirty million to go. At least she understood him.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Do you have a name?"

"Riutta."

Two down. --\

A rush of relief cooled Keller's fever. If they had names, he could go forward from here and find other things in common. He drew a sustaining breath. Before he had a chance to speak, the alien woman raised her hands to touch a passing tendril of smoke, as if she'd never seen such a thing before. Only now did Keller notice that her hands were missing the pinky finger and were almost as slim as her wrists, making her arms seem long and spearlike.

He logged that away and stayed on track.

**My name is Nick Keller. Are those your transport ships?"

"Spinners."

On the main screen was a panoramic view of the Gateway, and between it and Challenger now moved a cluster of alien flying machines. They were small ships, each with a set of mandibles off the bow and some kind of arched leggy extensions on the sides, and they were pulling closer and closer to each other until Keller thought they'd collide.

They did, but instead of doing damage the pickers grabbed hold of each other and began to knit into a single unit. Before his eyes the scatter of individual vessels no bigger than shuttlecraft galvanized into one ship more massive than the frigate.

He'd said "transport" and she had agreed. Did that mean they weren't fighters? His attempt to suck out a clue hadn't really worked. He still didn't know.

The woman peered around the bridge. She blinked often, as if having to focus and refocus her eyes. Clearly nothing was familiar to her. The technology made no sense—she didn't pause over any console or monitor, but did fix on the bridge rail as if it might be important. The flickering of diagnostic lights made her flinch.

Though Keller tried to make something of that, he remembered how he had behaved on the grave ship, how many takes he needed to accept the statues, then comprehend that they were bodies, and that they still had their strings attached.

Finding no interest in the bridge tech, Riutta faced Keller again. "The Anointed have been disturbed. Why did you attempt to link with them?"

Were shrugs universal? He tried one.

"We applied our tractor beams," he said.

"Were you attacking?"

**No-no. The *Anointed* tried to change course toward a populated area."

"Why would you care?"

"I have people aboard the Anointed ship. I tried to stop it from leaving."

"The Anointed cannot be stopped. Why are you in " space? Why?"

"We... work here. We guard the populated area."

"Where are you going?"

Keller glanced at Bonifay, but the bosun seemed equally confused. To the woman, he attempted, "I'm not particularly going anywhere. We live on the ship.**"

"Why?"

"Uh... it's helpful. People live on planets, the plan-ets interact, and we help. We also protect"

"You struck at the Anointed?"

Slippery ground. Careful, or the foot ends up in the mouth.

He ticked his tips. "We had to turn our weapons on the barge when it-" What word had she used? "-linked with us. But we understand now that was a mistake."

"Why do you have weapons?" she asked. "Why?"

At his elbow, Bonifay sucked a quick warning breath.

"Ships always carry weapons," Keller said. "For a variety of reasons."

"You'll kill? Or others will kill you?"

Aware of the eyes of his crew, he lowered his voice to a tone of soft honesty. "It happens."

Please don't ask why....

Almost an afterthought, but as a way to reduce the tension on the bridge, he waggled his finger at Zoa and motioned her back up to the crescent deck. Better snip that fuse while he had the chance.

Zoa didn't tike it, but she went.

Riutta continued sizing up the surroundings, but now she was looking at the people, not the instruments. She stared at Lucy Quinones and Dean Creighton without a care for politeness or explanation, the way a child stares. And Itytek's body-she surveyed it without even a flicker of apology. She had things to learn and meant to learn them. Her sense of purpose was clear, though the purpose itself remained a mystery.

Keller tried to learn too. Riutta didn't seem to feel responsible for Itytek's death, or any other injury that might've happened here. A thorn of resentment poked up in his stomach. He pushed it down. Was it possible she thought all this was his fault?

"What do you call this?" She put her hand on the bridge rail, testing as if it might bite.

"It's the caprail."

"Of course it's a rail," she said. "This..." Her narrow hand moved across the polished surface. "What do you call this?" 4

Having already given the only answer that made sense, Keller stood with his lips parted and nothing coming out. What did she want?

"It's red," Bonifay abruptly spoke up. "It's a color.**"

Riutta leaned to get a better look. "Color..."

She seemed to know the word, revere it, and be completely enthralled with what she saw.

While she was distracted, Keller dug a hand into Bonifay's wrist. "How'd you know that?"

The bosun shrugged with his other hand. "I noticed she doesn't have any."

Pretty good noticing-Keller actually thought Riutta was plenty colorful, with her skin's variegated grays and blues and her purple hair, but now that he thought about it, everything including her clothes and eyes were in the monochromatic cool spectrum. Gray, blue, silver, milk.

"Red," Riutta played back. She rubbed her hand on the rail, then looked at her hand to see if the color came off. When it didn't, she straightened. "Living have been gone a long time," she said. "This choice to leave a good planet and cause trouble in space, this is what gave Living five hundred generations of misery."

"Living?" Keller interrupted. "Your lives?"

Bonifay leaned toward him. "I think she means the Living. Name for themselves."

"Oh..." He cleared his throat and addressed Riutta again with gentle phrases. "We welcome the Living to our space. Can you help us get our Mends back?"

The woman's small eyes narrowed. "Why?"

His heart skipped. "They're not harming anything- anyone over there. We were trying to learn."

"The Anointed will defend themselves."

"Is that why it attacked us?"

"Attacked? They were Linking with you."

"Linking... you mean docking? Joining?"

"Yes."

"Explains it-" He glanced at Bonifay. "**Case of mistaken identity."

"Well, they're dead," Bonifay muttered. "Judgment's probably off."

Control, control... how good was he at diplomacy? In front of him was a woman from a completely

un-known civilization in a place they hadn't identified, through that looking glass in space, who had influence over the ship where his crewmates were now appar-ently trapped. Step lightly.

"Can you help us?" he asked again, more slowly this time, with more emphasis.

Riutta considered the question and didn't respond immediately, as if Keller might have the situation re-versed. She was sizing him up too. Her eyes squinted across the bridge, trying to add up what she saw with what he had so far told her. Was he lying? Would he be-tray her? She had those decisions to make. So far all she knew was that Keller and his crew had broken into her private cemetery and rifled around. What would she think when she found Keller had destroyed the em-balming machine and melted a lady's face?

"Nikelor," she began, "my spinners will link with the

Anointed. None of yours will ever go there again. I will go to the Anointed now."

On an impulse Keller blurted, "Take me with you this time!"

"Nick!" Bonifay shot halfway out of his chair before the pain stopped him, but he managed to get Keller's elbow.

**Hush," Keller snapped. To Riutta he quickly said, "My people won't* recognize you. They may try to de-fend themselves. You'll need me to make sure mat doesn't happen."

Without acknowledging his proposal in any particular way, except perhaps the lack of response, Riutta turned away from bun. She made no particular movements or signals, no motions with her hands or any equipment Indeed she appeared to carry none at all. She was as simple a being as Keller had ever seen walking.

The micro-gate appeared again near the port bulk-head For an instant it looked like a hole in the side of the bridge, but a brief pause showed it in fact to be out from the wall about three feet Keller looked behind it and could see the bulkhead. A person could easily walk around the window. It wasn't a hole in anything at all, except air.

Inside the door-sized necklace of metal segments was a tidy framed view of the ulterior of the grave ship, with its bedazzled brassy growth, dripping metal moss, and rows of pewter mummies in grottoes. At the sight Quinones let out a horrified squeak. Creighton uttered a swear word. Zoa pulled her blades. Otherwise every-thing was peachy.

Bonifay pulled on his arm. "What're you doing!"

Keller threw him a charity glance. "All I can mink of. After I'm gone, get Shucorion up here."

"Don't go through that tiling!"

With a firm hand Keller pressed him back into his seat. "Pipe down. We've got shipmates over th-"

"Look!"

The micro-gate framed a moving form now-one of the boarding party in his helmet and envirosuit. Then in front of him Savannah Ring and another suited crew-man straightened up, peering through the linked

frame. Tyce and Ellis, Keller guessed from what he could see of their faces.

He glanced at Riutta distrustfully and realized the next step was his.

"Ring, front and center." He reached through and wiggled his fingers.

Staring at Riutta, Savannah hesitated, but took the offer and tested her footing. She stepped through onto the bridge, wavered a moment and got her balance. Keller passed her behind him and reached through to get Tyce and Ellis, then looked to see if anybody else was there. The scents and bizarre lighting of the grave ship, along with the thousand eyes of mummified aliens, gave him the crawly creepies.

"Where are the others?" he asked. "There are two more."

Riutta didn't touch the micro-gate, but somehow it changed to another chamber, opening just steps from Biologist Manteo and Midshipman VanAlden in the middle of collecting whatever they were after.

"Come on, boys," Keller called. "Step through. Move. Come on! Manteo, on your feet!"

The dumbfounded crewmen abandoned their work, glanced at each other, stumbled to their feet, and after that tittle commitment had no choice but to accept their CO's order, or at least accept that it really was Keller talking to them and not an illusion. Manteo got through the micro-gate without help, but VanAlden tripped on the lower segments and landed flat on his belly at Riutta's feet Keller quickly hauled him out of the way and herded them all behind the command chair. One by one they took off their helmets and bunked at the change in lighting.

Only Savannah Ring had the nerve to step back to Keller's side. "Wow... who's your girlfriend?" she whispered.

"New neighbors. You all right?*"

Ring's quick eyes flashed as she took in the new information all around them, including the scene on the main screen showing the new arrivals. "We're good..."

"We're well," Bonifay corrected.

"Us too." To Keller she murmured, "Got a lot of new stuff... what happened to your clothes? And your hands? And-him?"

She'd noticed Itytek, lying mutilated on the crescent

"A close encounter," Keller truncated. "Hush a minute."

Pushing."

Riutta had moved directly to the micro-gate without the hesitation of die boarding party. She placed her hand on a side segment and leaned inside to have a look around.

Could she see the damage Keller himself had done? What would she do when she found the wrecked ma-chine with its shattered tiles? The mummies he'd been forced to lash out against? Was there a good excuse for poking around private property? Would Riutta buy the explanation of a rescue mission?

Seemed flimsy now.

"Why don't you stay on your own planet?" she asked without looking at him.

Keller paused. Was that a loaded question? Rhetorical or not? He couldn't tell from her tone.

"It's our nature to expand," he attempted. "It's every-body's nature. After all, why did you come through the Gateway?"

"Because of the one great mission." She spoke the words as if they were themselves an explanation. With that announcement she stepped through the micro-gate, feeling her way carefully step by step. With the set of her body she hinted that she didn't trust what she saw.

"Wait!" Keller bolted to the micro-gate again. When Riutta turned to look, he asked, "What is the great mission?"

Her milky eyes were passive and unambiguous. "It is what we are here to find out," she said "I will take care of mine. You will take care of yours. We will be separate."

She backed up a step, turned, and moved to the side, out of their view, apparently going to check on the Anointed

Anointed... what did that mean? He wished he'd asked

Savannah peered through the micro-gate where Riutta had stood "Was that a warning?"

"Get back!" Bonifay blurted.

As Keller pulled Savannah toward him, the micro-gate spiraled down to a dot, twinkled, turned over once with a sense of purpose, and winked out. Where it had been just an instant ago, the deck hatch folded open and Shucorion reappeared, with absolutely no idea of what he had almost bumped his head into.

He climbed out, scanned the terrible damage, the twirled ends of smoke being sucked out the ventilators, the rather befuddled boarding party, and quickly focused on the scorch marks still smoldering on Keller's clothing and hands.

"What occurred here?" He took Keller by the arm and patted out a smolder. "Are you injured?*"

Must look worse than it felt. Round the fringe, I guess. Got the boarding party back. You just missed a show",

"Yes, but-" Itytek's body was hard for Shucorion to miss from his position on the deck, and now through the clutter of crewmen and the clearing wisps of smoke he saw what was left of one of his own Blood crew, as well as the telltale destruction of the lift doors. "What occurred?"

Keller glanced at Itytek. "Some kind of monster spike came through from the grave ship." What were those red lights in his eyes? Oh-of course. He glanced back at Creighton and made frivolous eye contact "Dean, secure from red alert, will you... maintain general quarters and stand by. Scramble some damage control. See if you can find out what happened to the shields.**"

"Secure from red alert, maintain general quarters, damage control, shields, sir."

The red lights of emergency alert changed to the day lights of normal work life.

"Thanks," Keller said, glancing at Creighton. "Good job, Dean. Lucy, you too, very good."

You too, Commander" Quinones pushed out a smile, "What else was he forgetting?"

Shucorion was looking at the port flank, the scar of invasion from that side, and added up that something had flung itself all the way across the expanse of the bridge. "A javelin?"

"No, bigger!" Bonifay blurted "You should've seen it! Turned out to be a docking mechanism we're not set up to receive! You should've seen what Nick did! He got that phaser saw over there and went after this thing, and got his hands all burned and then this window pops open right here on the bridge, and it looked just like that huge one outside, except small! Just like magic it twirled and plink-opened right up, right through our deflectors, and this alien woman came out with funny eyes and tie-dyed skin and Nick stepped right in her face! He fired the first shot and ordered her to give back the boarding party and she waved her hands and incanted the window and here they are! Just like a song!"

A groan pushed out of Keller's throat "Zane..."

"Wait till Seth Zapf hears about this!"

"Oh, agony..."

"And out there, right there, all these little spiked ships came out of the Gateway and bundled up together into one composite operation-you can see it out there now! Then this woman went into the window, into Pompeii with all the metal people, and she tried to make a speech or a threat, but Nick-and twinkled-rolled over-could just tell-she had this look of total-" ,

The words tumbled and strayed off any sensible pattern. Suddenly drugged by sheer relief, Keller pressed scattered fingers to his face and somehow got them all up there at the same time. A film of sweat glazed his palm. His head howled on the inside, ears still buzzing. The buzz got louder, Bonifay's voice more distant. Then the tunnel vision closed in. His balance warbled and his knees folded. He reached out for the arm of the command chair to steady himself-it was there, wasn't it? Wasn't it in the middle of the command deck? It was here yesterday.

He heard Savannah speak, something short and quick, and felt Shucorion's grip around his body. His brain flooded with fuzz. His feet moved, but he wasn't moving them. The bridge tipped up on a side, wheeled fore to aft, and swam around. By the time it came back, the green leather command chair had folded around his thighs.

"Put your head down, sheriff."

Savannah. Head down? What would that look like to the crew? Ridiculous. He replaced the idea with a few long deliberate breaths and let them out slowly, until the light-headedness lost its grip.

When the black curtain slowly opened before his eyes, Shucorion still had a firm grip on him and somebody had shoved a survival flask of enriched mint-flavored water into his hand. Working against the tremble in his arms and shoulders, he indulged in a swig.

"Pretty tasty for water," he commented. Another few seconds passed, and after that he could see everybody again. "Oh, there you all are... quit flying around the dome.**"

Were his feet still there? Yep. Way down there, spread all over the riser. Hate to lose those. The Durango boots were pretty precious way out in the middle of this wide open space.

"I'm fine," he claimed. He was getting too much at-tention. All his energy was over there on the deck next to the pathetic phaser saw. In a lump. He'd have to con-jure up more.

Another swig cleared his head more. He blinked up at Shucorion, sad and worried at his side, and Savan-nah, who was taking his pulse.

He pulled his wrist out of her grip. "I'm better now.**"

"You need treatment," Savannah contended. "You turned three shades of gray just now. You could be in shock."

"Oh, cripe, honey, I'm beyond shock." He looked at Shucorion. "What's the condition below? Any other ca-sualties?"

Disturbed, Shucorion sighed heavily. "No other dam-age or casualties. The core and engines are ready, We tried to reach you. We could hear and feel the attack, but no one answered when we called you."

"Couldn't hear. The thing made a godawful jangle. My ears are still buzzing." He pointed at the forward screen, at the bubble of alien ships gathered between them and the grave ship. "See those clustered pickers out there? Apparently the Pompeii belongs to those people."

Eyes blue-shaded and dark brows drawn, Shucorion gave one more look at the afterdeck, at Itytek's pitiful body. A cracked light from the dome cast an orange band across his mahogany hair. "You should be aware," he said. "When we heard nothing from you, I sent a call of distress."

If he hadn't been in a chair, Keller would've stum-bled. He gnarled his fingers into Shucorion's sleeve, not in a nice way. "You sent-you mean another one? A different one?"

"Yes, another one."

"Who'd you call!"

"A general distress signal. Most likely the nearest Blood Hand will intercept it I thought the bridge was-"

"Your friend Dely-something?"

"I don't know him personally... probably him, yes."

Throwing his hands in the air, Keller bellowed, "Just because we're-don't send-you-you... you've got to quit doing that! Why do you send signals without permission? That's crazy!"

"Crazy?... crazy..." Genuinely baffled, Shucorion frowned his frustration. "Why would you not want a signal to be sent? If we were being torn apart-"

"It's my job to decide when to complicate things!" Keller wailed. "Sending a Mayday might not be the

thing to do!"

"Why would it ^not?"

"Because-I don't know-maybe I don't want to draw somebody else into trouble. Maybe I want to handle things myself until I know what's going on. You may have put five Blood crews in unnecessary danger!"

"But I have an obligation to alert Blood of our-**

Keller cut him off with a swipe of his hand. "It's not the right decision unless / decide it's right! There might be important things you don't know about the problem. You're going to have to stop doing these things! You have to wait until I say. When I'm dead, then you can say."

Everyone had fallen silent around him. No one moved or even shifted. The boarding party held their helmets tensely.

Maybe his tone sounded different outside his head than inside. Maybe he sounded mad.

Maybe he was.

Shucorion stood before him, also still, but with a hardness in his expression that might be disagreement, or might be defiance.

Some things couldn't be done from a chair. Keller pushed himself to his feet in a way that warned no one to help him. Still unsteady from the knees down, he kept a grip on the chair's arm and lowered his voice.

This way he made much more impact than when he had shouted.

"This isn't going to be the way this ship runs," he warned. "We'll be rewriting some agreements. One of them is about you. You're not a Blood avedon here. Here, you work for me."

Chapter Fourteen

'they live in a metal desert.'

A cryptic sentence. Savannah Ring knew what she was saying and waited for Nick Keller to see the image in his mind before she went on.

He knew she was painting a picture in his mind on purpose with her silence. They had known each other long enough for her to give him a panorama with one word.

The small sickbay was a cloistered area. Savannah had it pretty much to herself most of the time. A few crewmen were trained in emergency medical treatment, but only as a hobby.

Generally, she thrived in solitude. Unconscious patients or the cooperative dearly departed were preferred customers.

She had come back with a cornucopia of new information. Tyce and Manteo had struck gold on the biological data, and Savannah herself had stumbled onto a loaded databank-no mistake. She'd brought back a history of the Living, as told by the Living.

Not unusual, really, for people to stock their ships with information about themselves and their home-worlds. Everybody in the Federation did it. The unusual part had to do with how much she could decipher, and how quickly. She'd sprayed Keller's burned hands with a quickie treatment right there on the bridge, then vanished to sickbay to analyze her findings and called Keller in record time.

Now he was down here, stalking the diagnostic couch while she sat upon the couch with her legs folded like a kid and twitched to tell what she knew. ^

"It's a planet virtually made of ores and natural alloys," she launched. "Every kind of compressed compound or base ore you can imagine, just like the grave ship. We wondered why there's nothing but metal on Pompeii, even the things that look like planets and moss-it's because they don't have anything else to build with. They built the insides of that ship to look like the place they think they came from. Someplace here/*

"Where here? Which planets?"

"No idea. They don't use names for places. Space is just 'outside.' There's no sign of charting or tracking. They don't know where they're going. They came from someplace other than the planet they've been living on for generations. And it's been a fight to live here."

Relieved that she'd found so much, yet also overwhelmed, Keller folded his arms to hold in the rising fears. "How'd you hammer this out so fast?"

Perhaps he secretly hoped she was wrong, making mistakes, not translating correctly.

Savannah read his mind and gave him the short answer. "Normally, even with computer help, it would take a couple of days to translate and decipher a completely alien language, but it didn't. My tricorder recognized this even without the mainframe tie-in. The Living language is a mixture."

"Of Blood and Kauld, F U bet"

She surveyed him, curious and entertained. "How'd you know?"

He wasn't sure how he knew. In a Zane-like strike of intuition, he tugged on the only thread he had.

"The mummy... the one who looks like Shucorion... it's some* kind of binding tie. I don't believe in coincidences or long-lost twins or magical doubles."

"I don't either," she said, "and you're right. Another piece of evidence is this: men: place was never meant to have life. Life organisms might've stumbled or fallen in and managed to muddle along, but it's all simple forms. As far as the Living know, they're the only complex life-form. They're obviously not natural to their planet. I think they came from here."

"What about the hands?"

"Okay, that was my fault," she admitted. "I missed it. Should've seen it the first time we were over there. Those mummies, some of them have five digits and some only have four. I mean, three fingers and a thumb."

"Riutta's got three and a thumb."

"I know. Some of them, the tittle finger is shorter and some have a kind of stub there. The younger ones don't have any sign of a finger there. The grave ship is an evolutionary tour! It's frozen archaeological evi-dence on the hoof. Blood and Kauld... then later, the Living. Confirms how long it's been. Changes like this take thousands of years."

Keller pursed his lips and decided to play naughty. "It's only been twenty years since Shucorion's father went through."

"I can track the gripping strength if you want The

Living needed good grips to survive over there. If you're going to be a blacksmith or a metalworker, you need power. Small fingers are good for tactile work, but they needed strength. They sacrificed a finger and the remaining ones got stronger/*

"They don't look like Blood or Kauld either. Their eyes-"

"And the mottled skin;" she broke in. "I know, it's different Those are just cosmetic. Well, the eyes proba-bly aren't, but I'm telling you those people have ge-netic ties to Blood and Kauld."

"Let me ask you this," Keller altered. "Turn it around. Could those changes have taken place naturally in twenty years?"

"Not a chance."

"Oh... okay... if the planet's made of metal, how do they live? You've gotta eat, don't you? Does your databank say anything about that?"

"Lots. They hunt a large breed of animal that lives over there." She spread her hands demonstratively. "A big one, a biological nuclear plant-massive amounts of power! These animals free-float in the atmosphere, feeding on some kind of high-flying krill or plankton. They go up and down by generating heat or releasing it. The planet's metal, so the animals don't have any rea-son to come down. The people have to tease them down."

"How?" Keller asked. "What's the bait? How do the animals know to come down and get their necks wrung?"

Her eyes widened expressively and she indulged in an evil grin. "It's a fantastic anthropological trick! The creatures only come down for two reasons-to die, or to feed on the Living. The people have to ex-pose themselves naked on nonconducting pads. Huge woven rubber fields the size of whole cities! Isn't that enticing?"

"Oh, charming, yeh... the animals are heat-seekers of some kind, then?"

"I don't know. Or they see electromagnetic fields hi the Living's bodies. Every being has a way of sensing its own food. They sense aliveness on the planet, so they get tempted down." Suddenly she snapped her fingers. "Maybe that explains the skin colors! Pigment develops because that's what you need. Who knows-maybe the flying floaty monsters can see her skin better than yours or mine or Shadow's. Maybe she radiates more electromagnet-ism"

Keller tightened his arms into a knot, which made him wince. His hands were still reddened and bruised Somehow the pain kept him alert "They stab these things, shoot them, or what?"

"When the creature comes down, they throw a conducting net over it and suck the thing dry in a direct matter-to-energy conversion. Direct! Can you imagine knowing how to do that with a whole phaser bank? They have to make these rubber flats to stand on. If the animal lands on the planet's bare surface, it's like a wire that immediately goes to ground and the energy is lost back into the planet-whack! Life on this planet really exists in the upper atmosphere. Nothing could possibly evolve there. A whole lot of people are taken in these hunts. They could easily defend themselves, but if they don't let the animals feed, they stop coming down. They might be related to Shucorion's folks, but compared to the Living, Blood and Kauld are soft-boiled. And your girlfriend? The one with the eyes? Guess what-she's an Elder."

"An 'Elder'?" he belted out "She couldn't be more than thirty-five!"

"Over there she's the wizened old matriarch. Thirty-five is getting up there. The way they get along, most people don't make it through very many hunts. They get to be Elders by continuing to live. Not by beliefs or lightness or cheating or power brokering or the usual methods. Seems they can't afford arguments, because there are only two or three Elders at a time."

"How many people are we talking about?"

"I don't know that. We can crunch some numbers, but it would only be guessing. We don't have any way to know how many people were taken over thousands of years of hunts. Or when the hunts actually started. Or-"

A wave of his hand stopped her. "Got it," he said, "got it Does it say what the Anointed are?"

"Those are the people who live to die natural deaths. To the Living, 'natural' is almost anything where you don't get sucked up in the hunt Accidents, stillbirth, illness, old age, or wounds. Even wounds from the hunt If there's a body left when you die, no matter how you die, you're Anointed." She crooked a thumb, indicating the great outdoors. "We found a whole chamber with nothing but babies and advanced embryos. It's a tough culture, Nick. There weren't very many of them, considering thousands of years."

"Mercy," Keller empathized. "So the Living-the ones left-they scrape an existence from this metal planet by hunting these atmospheric fliers. How do the fliers know to come down low enough to get snagged?" He held up a hand. "I know that one... bears know when the salmon run. If the salmon don't run, the bears stop coming"

She nodded. "The Living have to let the bears take some food so they'll come back the next time. All they have to offer is themselves. They had to balance between enough energy to stay alive and saving energy to open that big interstellar embolism."

"What?"

"That's what it says. They opened the Gateway on purpose. It took generation after generation of putting aside energy. They've got a complex system of food distribution-whose family eats first and why... if they have a spare hunt, half of them could starve and set their plans back a couple of generations. If I'm reading this right, those things weren't uncommon in their history."

Cupping a hand over his mouth almost as if to hide, Keller grimaced in empathy. "Oh, dear..."

They fell silent and wrestled a few moments with the surge of visuals racing through their imaginations.

Bar-ren silver landscapes, glistening bronze mountains, zinc spirals instead of trees, and a sea of ball bearings.

"The Anointed were the first through the Gateway," he spoke up. "Could it have been sending signals to Riutta?"

"I don't know that answer," Savannah said.

He plowed on. "If Riutta's an Elder, and there are only a couple of them, she must've made the decision to come here!*"

"Think so? How does that help?"

Immediately he thought of something more impor-tant "And why did she think this was the time? What do they want here?"

He could ask all he wanted The only response he got was a log of the question he should've asked Riutta while he had the chance. Guesses were cheap. Until now he had clung tightly to the facts and figures of putting together a fighting ship and a defensive fleet to guard the almost constant shipping of supplies, food, and critical personnel between Blood and Belle Terre. The job was hard, all-consuming, and in its way thera-peutic for an overwhelmed second mate who was better off keeping his hands busy.

Busy? No problem.

This racket of figuring out motivations and what made people tick and who would tick together and who wouldn't-might as well take a spoon and dig out his guts, rearrange them a little to the left.

"Savannah," he said, his voice gravelly as he scouted her posture, "cough it up. I see it in your lack of a re-flection." When she hesitated, he loaded the question and fired it. "Why does that one man look so much like Shucorion?"

"Okay, call me crazy," Savannah said with a nod, "but I think Doppel and Ganger are directly related. I could run specific DNA and PGL tests and give you a-"

"Hell, yes!"

I'll have to bring the Shadow down here. With Blood and Kauld, because of the chromosome arrange-ment, physical attributes are passed only through the male side. Their looks change much more slowly than human genealogy. Their genetics are less complex than ours, less varied. It's a survival mechanism for an ex-tremely spare environment where the men have to be gone lots of the time. Women always know their own babies. Men don't This is the only way for the man to be sure. You can see how this might evolve, all the sons and daughters looking like the fathers. I think some-how-"

"You think Shucorion's a direct descendant of this man? All right, then why couldn't it be his father?"

"Eleven thousand years, Nick," she reminded. "I'm not wrong."

"No, no... not saying you are. You tested this man. He's eleven thousand years old."

"Yes," she said clearly. "In fact, this particular man is one of the oldest. I took dozens of scrapings while I was there."

"Does any of your data say anything at all about what they're doing here? Why they came and what they hope to accomplish?"

She shook her head. "I looked for that. I knew you'd ask. Far as I can tell, they ask themselves that question all the time. There's a lot about purpose and rules and direction, and there seems to be something important about sending their Anointed through as a herald of coming things. What comes after, we don't know. I don't think they know either."

"And the Anointed aren't likely to tell us, are they?"

"Oh, they're doing what they can...."

"Why can't these things be simple?" Keller started pacing pointlessly. "Why can't years just be years? What if then: years are really eleven thousand minutes? I spent my whole career in or near Federation space. Everybody knows what a year or a week or a day is. Shucorion and his people went out of their way to adjust and do Federation standard just so we wouldn't have to get used to a new thing. We ought to just hail Riutta and tell her it's not eleven thousand years any-more, it's eleven thousand minutes."

The diagnostic couch creaked as Savannah leaned back and did her Cleopatra imitation. "You done?"

"Well... grumble, complain, grouse. Now I'm done."

Bad style, hiding something so important from his exec. Until now Keller had been hell-bent on not getting any answers. This whole episode was off-beat by a bar.

Why is there something on an alien ship that looks like you?

"All right..."

"Want me to call him?"

"Naw, some things are better in person. Know where he is?"

"Right down the hall. He mustered some Blood guys to repair the bridge and he was about to help, but I ordered him to his quarters for some sleep. As long as we're in Gamma Night, y'know..."

Keller nodded. Gamma Night. A few hours of still-ness before the Savage Hand could navigate through.

"Stand by," he decided. 'Til go get him."

The officers' quarters on Challenger were spare enough to make even the deprivation-oriented Blood feel at home. In fact, the only exclusive amenity Keller and Shucorion got, as commander and executive officer, was privacy. Instead of two crewmen to a room, the senior officers had a little bitty wedge with a bunk and private shower and an outer office with a computer desk, separated by a retractable room divider. On ships where prestige wasn't a factor, saving of space certainly was. Challenger was decidedly one of those ships.

Keller buzzed at Shucorion's door, but it wasn't Shucorion who answered. Instead the man who came to the door was Milesark, a Blood magnetologist, timid and friendly, with a bad limp from a very old hip injury. "Commander," Milesark said, rather uneasily. "Hey," Keller greeted. "Shucorion in here?" "Yes..."

will you be here now, Mr. Keller?" "I guess." Whatever that meant. He stepped into the tiny office, dark except for a worklight at the desk. And that single light shone on a surprise. "Well, look at this!"

He pulled his hands out of his pockets and leaned over a startlingly accurate scale model of the Chal-lenger. Over two feet long, the model was almost fin-ished, complete with her "flying buttresses"-the Rover strokes, fanned stalks on each side that held the nacelles down and back-the charcoaly black hat, and every crease and line between the hull plates lovingly etched in. Even the bolts in the plates were there. Along with all the perfections were the many imperfections specific to this ship. Her mismatched parts, bargain-basement ports, windows, wales, and bracers were applied every which way to get the job done. The model fastidiously repli-cated every goofy establishment From what he could tell, there was nothing left to be done to the model but the task Milespark had been doing just now-installing a tiny but impressive UFP standard on the khaki-colored dorsal neck section so those in this new sector could tell they were from out of town. The closer he looked, the more detail came out and the more infectious the effect

A rush of affection softened his whole being. There it was, the metal hole in space that kept them all alive. Kinda looked like a starship that'd been through a laun-dry press.

"Isn't this sweet," he commented. "Liable to win the Ugly Ship contest... danged if she doesn't stand there proud as a chickenhawk... You do this on your own?*"

**Mr. Bonifay ordered it," Milespark answered. **He was trying to explain to us about installing the optical cameras along the lower hull, but the schematics weren't detailed enough. He wished for us to have a very clear perception of the outer skin before he sent us outboard to work. Avedon Shucorion thought a scale representation would help us. You can see here and here where we installed the cameras."

He pointed to a row of triangular ports along each side of the engineering section.

"Kinda nice to have around too," Keller commented. "I can see myself inside this window. Polishin' m'boots. Someday I gotta get a real job/* He flopped a hand on Milespark's knobby shoulder. "You oughta sign this. It's a work of art, ranger."

"My thanks." Milespark stepped toward the door. "If you'll be here now, Commander, I'll go for my meal."

"What's stopping you? Dismissed."

The model ship hypnotized him for several long sec-onds as he walked her decks and ran his ringers along the nacelles. He wished he could stay here longer, maybe do some work on her himself. Funny how work-ing on the big one was work, but working on the little one was fun.

"Shucorion, you 'wake?" When no one responded, he stepped around the room divider into the dark area and looked at the bunk. "Your friend out here's really got-"

There was no one in the bunk. He stepped toward it to confirm what his adjusting eyes told him. His toe snagged on a solid bulk at his feet.

He drew back. "Computer, worklights!"

A polite pair of amber functional flicked on, not bright enough to blind him, but enough to see Shu-corion

crumpled on the deck on his side, turned away.

"Oh, God-" He dropped and pulled Shucorion over.

The Blood rolled without resistance and flopped onto his back, his arm hooked lifelessly over Keller's. Now the breath that had stuck in Keller's gullet came out in a gasp.

Where once Shucorion's eyes were soft gray, between the ring of dark lashes they were completely blacked out, as if drowned in ink.

In a rush of panic Keller grasped Shucorion at the throat, searching for some sign of life.

There was none. Nothing.

Chapter Fifteen shaking like spider silk, Keller backed off until his spine bumped the divider. Shallow involuntary breaths racked his chest. With an icy hand he jabbed at the communications panel and managed to speak.

"Keller to sickbay, emergency!"

"Ring here."

"There's-something-wrong with Shucorion... Savannah, I think he's dead."

"Don't jostle him. I'll be right there"

Those eyes... black and glazed, featureless.

Keller pressed his knotted fists into his thighs. He wanted to kneel there again, do something to help, hammer Shucorion's chest or push breath into his lungs, do something heroic. A hidden awareness told him those actions would do no good.

Accident? Sickness? Should he run after Milespark and accuse him of murder? What was so wrong on this ship, to come to this?

Worse than the prospect of facing the Blood Hand was the spectre of facing them alone.

He suddenly felt alone as a desert stone.

The outer door thumped and Savannah appeared at his side.

"He's..." Keller tried to speak, but it caught tight behind his lips. "No pulse-"

His midsection knotted up.

Savannah knelt, and put her medical touch to Shucorion's bizarre eyes. She pressed two fingers between his neck and left shoulder.

"He's got a pulse," she said. Why was she so casual?

"Not breathing," Keller pointed out

**Not much," she confirmed.

"Look at his eyes...."

"I see them." She hooked a strand of her redwood hair behind one ear in a damnably pleasant motion. "It's normal. He's asleep."

With his feet somewhere below, Keller managed a step. "Come on, Savannah..."

She looked up at him. "He's fine, Nick. This is how they sleep. Haven't you noticed?"

She checked Shucorion's eyes again, but seemed satisfied. The Blood just sprawled there beneath her hands, without a flinch.

"It's almost a coma," she said. "On their planet they have to work so hard and so much, they evolved this efficient pattern. They're awake for four or five days at a time, sometimes longer. Then, when they finally crash, it's only about four hours of deep intense sleep. They go into this hibernation state and it's the devil to wake them up. It's nearly a complete metabolic shutdown. I had poor Dimion on life-support before I realized he was taking a nap."

"What about-the eyes?"

"Natural light blocking." She rested her arm on her knee and analyzed Keller. "You don't have much experience with aliens, do you?"

"What's... he doing on the... damn deck? Why isn't he in his rack?"

"They don't like beds. Not accustomed to them."

"Holy Moses... what if there's a fire or-7"

"You really haven't noticed?"

"No!"

"This is why they never leave each other alone during the shutdown period. Blood sleep in mutually protective groups. Never alone."

"So this is why I see them snoozing in the corridors and all over engineering."

She nodded. "Sure, so the others can keep working. Blood don't waste time. Sitting around on guard while somebody sleeps is a waste. So they keep at work and sleep wherever the other guys are working. On their planet they live in big lodges instead of houses. They even have what you and I might call hotels, where anybody can go in and sleep, where there's always a watcher on duty. At least one person is awake at any given time, in case there's a quake and your lodge starts falling down or a flood-"

"They have a designated stay-awaker?"

"Always"

With a gush of relief, Keller sat down on the bunk and pressed a hand to his face. Why hadn't he noticed this? In all these weeks-but then, he and Shucorion had been rotating watches and were constantly working on some fritzing system the rest of the time. He'd never taken notice of when or where anybody else went on or off duty. That was the concern of the department heads and watch leaders, not the commander. He'd forced himself to stop doing that job as part of learning his new role.

And wasn't he good at it?

Shucorion had always been around when Keller needed him. It never occurred to him to notice whether the other guy got enough sleep. **Crickets," he grum-bled. "This whole day stinks tike low tide... second time in one day, I find him crinkled up on the deck, half dead..."

He flinched when Shucorion inhaled with a sudden jolt and let out a stressful groan, then shifted and flexed his arms and legs like a child waking up at Keller's feet

"Here he comes," Savannah mentioned. She politely retracted her hands.

They both watched as the Blood held the next big bream longer than seemed comfortable, and blinked once. The black paste over his eyes broke at the pupil and sank back toward the lashes, sheeting off like oil His eyes cleared to their normal almost human appear-ance. He blinked again, more consciously mis time, and focused on Savannah, then Keller. Their presence perplexed him.

"My greetings..."

Keller sighed roughly. "Hi, sport"

He reached down and took Shucorion by the wrist to lever him up to a sitting position on the deck. The long brown braid flopped over Shucorion's shoulder as he sat up and shook off the drowse. Here they were, all camped out like Pocahontas and a couple of mountain men.

"You all right?" Keller asked. His heart pittered in his ears.

Shucorion didn't understand, but amiably responded, "Much better, thank you."

"That's some survival method you've got."

"Which method?"

"This... your... I... I ought to kick you right in the asteroids."

Perplexed, Shucorion glanced at Savannah. "Would it help."

"Never mind," Keller said. **Why don't you sit up here. We've got something to show you."

The impolite deck creaked under his Durangos as he stood and gave Shucorion the place on the bunk. Shu-corion accepted help to get to his feet, a clue that this coma-sleep took some shedding.

His hands cold, Keller unlatched the room divider and folded it back out of the way, making the office and bunk area into one unit so they could all see the three monitor screens beside the desk. "Savannah, would you transfer the... those recordings over to these screens, please?"

"The what? Oh... sure." She moved to sit at the desk and work around the nifty model of the frigate.

Keller turned again to Shucorion. "I tried not to let all the cats out of the bag," he explained feebly, "until I knew what was going on, but now I'm after my own tail. I should've told you right away." He paused now, and sighed again. "Guess I hoped to protect you the way Derek Hahn used to protect me "

"Derikan?" Shucorion attempted to repeat

Keller felt Savannah's scoping gaze, though he ignored her. "Derek Hahn. Our exec on Peleliu. We were together four years-" He cut himself off. "Doesn't matter. Turn it on, Savannah."

She wasn't one for ceremony. Some buttons, pressure pads, a little tuning, and the critical tricorder recording presented itself on the largest wall screen available, a medical diagnostic readout right next to the physio scanner.

Keller watched to make sure the right image came up.

It did, just as eerie and mystical as hours ago.

He ticked off a few seconds for effect

Quietly he asked, "Is this your father?"

Talk about rude awakenings. Shucorion's enviable sapphire complexion lost a couple of facets. He stopped breathing-and stared until his lungs nearly had a spasm and he sucked a chop of air. Good thing he was sitting down. Emotions passed so quickly on his face that Keller could scarcely tag them before they were swept away by the next ones. Confusion, amazement, horror, nostalgia, shock, disbelief, belief, disbelief again-zoom.

At first Keller just wanted to know what was going on, and anybody's feelings be damned. Now, as he looked at the effect on Shucorion of this totally unexpected personal avalanche, the sight was pitiful enough to melt the mountain.

Time out Not everything had to happen at light speed. This was sadder than he expected.

"I'm sorry," he offered. "I hate doing this to you."

Shucorion dredged up a ragged voice. "What happened to him..."

Better choose the right words. Softly Keller explained, "He's been preserved. Like the rest of the people there."

"Where did you find... this?"

"In the room I fell into. Some sort of special chamber. I'd say your father went through that Gateway and made an impression on somebody."

Unimaginative and literal-minded, Shucorion plainly couldn't figure the implications of what he saw. He had no romance about him and could only think in straight lines. There didn't seem to be any here.

"I didn't want to show you this yet, but I need answers. And there's more. Might disturb you some."

Offering a little shrug of invitation, Shucorion sighed. He was already plenty disturbed by the effigy on the screen.

"Savannah," Keller invited, "go ahead and tell him."

She pointed at the mummy on the screen. "Unless you people live a lot longer than you've told us, this can't be your father. This is over eleven thousand years old."

Puzzled, Shucorion grimaced with emotional stress clashing against common sense. "Your equipment is faulty," he declared. "It is my father."

Planting his hand on Shucorion's shoulder, Keller leaned down to look him right in the eyes and, determined to get his point solidly across, spoke very clearly. "It looks like your father. It can't possibly be him. Do you have another explanation?"

"What can be another?"

"I don't know. Is there anything about this man different from your father?"

"His... clothing... his hair is not... the right hair."

"The right style?"

"Ennengand's was long, like mine. My mother taught me to wear mine this way because of..." He closed his eyes and seemed to weaken. "Oh, the crime of sentiment..."

Keller pushed aside the urge to give him more time. "Was he the first to see the Gateway?"

"Yes. He gave it that name. It was an accurate name, so no one changed it. His last messages warned of it, and described his escape through it, with the Kauld battlebarge in pursuit I have replayed the message many times and heard his voice describe the portal... he was angry, bitter at being forced to take so rash an action without time to see where he was going."

"Space commanders have to do that sort of thing,"* Keller told him. "He must've expected-"

"Ennengand hated the need to go to space," Shucorion explained sadly. "He found space inhospitable and unfortunate, a cursed necessity. Kauld would come to destroy us if we did not meet them in space. We were forced to become spacefarers. We did not choose this life."

"Could we be looking at the original civilization that seeded the Blood and Kauld worlds?" Keller asked "Maybe the Gateway is how they got around, and how you and the Kauld ended up way out here in the middle of this star cluster by yourselves, on a couple of pretty well matched planets circling binary stars-" He pressed a finger to one of his aching eyes. "Starting to sound like Zane..."

Savannah took over. "Starfleet's found evidence linking humanoid cultures all over the place, people who have no business being related at all, yet they seem to be. There are plenty of hypotheses about species-seeding. Add this to the pile."

The air actually got heavier. Shucorion stared and stared at the picture on the screen, trying to absorb what they had discovered and digest all the mysteries stirred up.

"This is my father," he stated.

Keller did the math again. "It can't be."

"Why did you keep this from me?"

"I didn't know what it meant. I didn't want to shake you up till we could find out what was happening. Just got squeezed by events."

"My thanks."

Amazed, Keller huffed and shook his head. "Why don't you get mad at me? Take something personally for a change. Take it as an insult I underestimated you. I lied. I hid the truth. I interfered in your personal busi-ness-cripe sake, hit me or something!"*

Shucorion's shaded eyes were sorrowful, but accept-ing. "You tried to shield me. I thank you for it"

"Great snakes... you're welcome."

"My thanks."

"You're-stop that." Keller leaned into the other man's periphery again. "Somewhere here, there's a clue we're missing and I mean to-

"Bridge to Commander Keller. Quinones, sir."

Usually a call back to duty at a time like this would've been a relief. He punched the button. "Keller."

"Sir, I've been watching the optics and I think some-thing's going on outside. Riutta's bundle of spinners is in contact with the grave ship"

"Give me an optical down here. Can you get it through?"

"We 'll try. Check monitor four"

"Stand by." Shifting his hand, he engaged number four. Two screens down from the recording of Ennegand, a picture-rather a bad grainy picture-scratched into miserable focus. The optical cameras on the outer hull suffered to bring in a direct visual view, but since he knew what he was looking for, Keller managed to make out the spiky shape of Riutta's spinners, still welded into a cluster. He and Savannah and Shucorion watched as the cluster rolled like a big snowball toward the clawed bow of the grave ship and nestled between the claws. From the ends of the claws, both of them, razor spindles launched and pierced the cluster of spinners. The spinners* hulls changed from bronze metal-lies into a gelatin, like oil mixed with mercury.

"Look at this," Savannah uttered "They're rafting up!"

Keller couldn't get a comment past the knot in his throat. The grave ship and the spinners were now joined into a single unit, a shaggy green barge with a morningstar on its bow. Impressive enough, considering the gross tonnage under Riutta's control had just tripled.

What kind of power did the two entities bring to each other? What could the grave ship do that it couldn't be-fore? What could those little pickers do once bonded together, and now rafted with the grave ship?

"At least we know what the razor quills are for," he mumbled, mostly to himself.

"And, sir, the report on the shields... sensor analy-sis confirms we didn't read anything at all when Ri-utta's portal opened. No readings, changes, no flux of any kind. We pick up Riutta's physical presence, but the window itself might as well be a mirage* We can't beam through our own deflectors, but it seems she can come and go as she wants.*"

"Then it's not beam energy. Starfleet deflectors are constantly adjusting themselves to repel new forms of energy or assault What she's doing must be a form of energy our shield science doesn't recognize as energy."

"Does that help, to know that?"

"Not a flippin' bit Lucy, maintain surveillance and hold the distance between us and them if they start moving."

"Why would they move in the middle of Gamma Night?"

"Don't know. If they do anything at all, call me. Keller out." He shifted his shoulders and turned.
"Shucorion, b'sten... I need you to be clinical about this.

Do you have anything enlightening to tell me about this or these people?*

The Blood blinked at him. "These people axe strangers to me.*"

"What about this man?" Unwilling to take second, Keller pointed at the other screen. "Is this your father or not?"

"If I didn't trust you about the years... I would say yes.*"

"But the years say no."

The Blood looked up at him, dazed by the spiral of new data. "It must be no. How can it be yes?" He con-templated his own query and added, "Did the people from the Gateway... the ones you saw... did they look like Blood? Like me?"

Keller flexed his aching back. "Y*got me there. They really don't Their skin and eyes are different, and their hands are different. They also have technology the Blood don't possess, or Kauld either, and I don't think anybody in a harsh environment could come up with what we saw in just twenty years. No matter how many facts we collect, they lock antlers with each other 'stead of helping. Savannah, have you got the red-alert record-ings of the bridge during Riutta's little visit?"

"Oh-sure."

"Let's see it"

The new idea took her by surprise. She had no com-ment A moment, and a recorded view of the

damaged bridge came up. Keller watched himself standing with Bonifay at the helm, looking at the alien woman just as her micro-gate sipped back into whatever pocket she stored it in.

"This woman is Riutta. She calls her people *the Liv-ing.' They use a transporter mat doesn't even register on our instruments. We got no readings of its existing at all, and she came in right through our shields. We can't beam through our shields, but her transporter win-dow didn't even notice our technology. Look familiar? Anything?"

Valiantly attentive, Shucorion scoured the visual record and his memory, his knowledge of the Sagittarius Cluster, and any legends he might have heard. Nothing rose on his face that gave Keller any hopes. Complete certainty overplayed the unhappiness that he was forced to deliver an unhelpful declaration.

"They are strangers here," he declared.

With a glance at Savannah, Keller silently ordered the recordings both clicked off. No more Riutta, no more ghosts. He paced away a few steps, turned, and leaned heavily on the lab doorframe. He folded his arms, and studied Shucorion passively.

"Now I know what happens when you see them,"* he said. "What happens when they see you?"

"Bridge to Mr. Keller!"

He flinched at the volume and urgency in Ensign Creighton's voice. "Yes, Dean?"

"Sir, five Blood Savages just moved into our opticals! "

"What? In the middle of Gamma Night? Are you sure you're not getting a reflection off the Pompeii?"

"Course not sir! We're getting visual code flashes from Avedon Delytharen. He wants to use his own transporters to beam directly to the bridge!"

Keller's eyes squeezed shut "Ten hours early..."

"Sin" Creighton lowered his voice. "Bonifay's up here, y'know."

Damned if gossip didn't spread on this ship faster than a lizard with its tail on fire.

"All right... lower the shields as a sign of good faith, but stall him on permission to come aboard until I get up there. What's the status of the turbolift?"

"Still under repair"

"Stall, for God's sake. We're on our way." He straightened and thumped a sore knuckle on Shucorion's shoulder. "I expect you to back me up."

He hesitated a moment, fishing for reply.

But Shucorion had nothing to say.

Chapter Sixteen they spoke not a word to each other during the climb through the ship's veins to the

bridge. Savannah was right behind them, but Keller was aware only of Shucorion. When they reached the bridge and climbed out of the hatch, Keller shot a glance around to make sure there were no visitors here yet. For a moment he floundered at the sight of a handful of Blood crewmen working on the hull damage and the turbolift. He started breathing again when he realized he knew them all, that the new Blood hadn't beamed over.

From the sci-deck, Creighton reported without being asked. "They really want to come over, sir. This guy is hard to stall."

"I'll bet," Keller huffed, and turned to the helm. "Zane, I don't know if you should be here!"

Nervous and angry, Bonifay snorted, "I'm impressed by your self-confidence. By the way, you look like hell."

Keller looked down at the scorched front of his sweater, now a plaque of melted black fibers overlaid with gory stains of Hytek's blood.

"Aw!"

And these were Blood dignitaries coming aboard! He had Blood blood all over him.

"Where are the sweaters?"

Bonifay pointed at the starboard cargo trunks. Kelly scrambled like a crab into the knee-high locker. The tiny utility light popped on, casting a feeble glow on a stack of sweaters piled Bonifay-neat in a corner.

From outside, Creighton called, "Mr. Keller, we've got transporter activation!"

"All right, but let me do the talking. I mean it. Every-body else, same order. I guess I'm ready-"

Creighton called down from the sci-deck, "Mr. Keller, we've got transporter activation!"

From halfway inside the trunk, Keller called, "Oh, hell-shields down! All I need is a half-dozen chumps bumpin' around space on a deflected transporter beam!"

With a sweater tangled in his fingers, he tried to back out of the hatch, only to bang the crown of his skull on a crosspiece. He burst out "Ow-ch!" and fell on his elbows. The inside of his head rang for a good five seconds.

"Commander Keller?"

His stomach crumpled. He didn't recognize the voice.

Everything was happening so fast lately....

He got stuck for a terrible second on the locker hinge. By the time he rolled out onto the deck, there were four freshly materialized Blood dutifuls on the port side, looking up at Dean Creighton on the sci-deck. Indeed Creighton seemed commandatorial up there, four feet in the air on a balcony, his sweater intact, his hair tidy enough-

Speak up, idiot, before he takes a bow.

"No, I'm... I'm over here." From the deck, the announcement didn't exactly suggest stature. Dragging a fresh sweater, this one navy blue, Keller came out on his knees and made a point of not accepting Shucorion's tentative offer of help. His black T-shirt had some scorch marks on the front, which he self-consciously pawed. "I'm Nick Keller. Nice to meet ya."

Howdy. Ha y* all down?

The effect rammed home when Delytharen turned to him, then kept looking down, down, down, to the burned burgundy sweater now hitched to Keller's left boot heel. Some pets just didn't want to go gracefully. While everybody watched, Savannah stepped on the offender and gave Keller a chance to shake his boot free. After that, nobody moved.

"Scuse me a minute." He swam into the sweater, but got lost inside. When he finally came out, his hair was in six directions and the sleeves of the sweater were down around his knuckles. The neatly woven hem batted at his thighs. Extra large.

Whatever Keller was missing in grandeur, Delytharen more than equalized. The Blood Avedon was missing an arm, but carried the absence with style. His clothing was Blood-plain, mostly brown, pleat-perfect, and spotless. Even the fabric belt was tucked so the end didn't flap out. The sleeve on his missing arm wasn't just pinned out of the way, but had been perfectly tailored to fit the stump. This didn't look like a man who had just picked his relentless way through the harrows of Gamma Night. Such an exercise would've left Keller pasted in three layers of sweat.

"Commander Keller," the dignified Blood began again, "I am Avedon Delytharen. I have joy to finally meet you... are you in distress?"

Toying with a long explanation, Keller instead said, "We're stable now."

We received two flashes of distress.

"Yen... they were somewhat premature. I think, as the Blue Net ventures farther away from our planets, you'll find how big space is. Usually, if we don't handle emergencies ourselves, there's not enough time for anyone to get to us. We went ahead and handled ours. I'm sorry for the inconvenience."

**We joy in your success."

"Thanks very much."

"We see a foreign ship," Delytharen mentioned. "Shall we attack it?"

"No-" Keller stuck out a hand. "No, they could be friends. We aren't sure yet" Sounded almost twaddly enough. He changed hands and tried again. "We... haven't yet formulated a plan of action regarding... uh, them."

Delytharen accepted that completely. He managed to have no expression at all, and despite the curiosity of his men—their eyes kept shifting around the bridge, even though their heads didn't turn—he fixed his gaze studiously on Keller. "I see you succeeded in rescuing Avedon Shucorion. Was his companion also retrieved?"

"I'm right here." Wincing in the nav chair, Bonifay proclaimed his presence without even glancing at Keller.

for permission.

Whether or not Bonifay's instincts would serve this time, Keller couldn't tell yet. The bosun might have simply been unwilling to hide when he believed he was completely in the right. He didn't want any illusions of guilt by silence. He might have even been proud of what he had done. After all, he had wrested both him-self and Shucorion from the jaws of warp detonation.

Whatever the residual emotions were, Keller lost his momentum and the chance to navigate this problem slowly.

Delytharen wasn't inclined to linger in amenities. The Avedon studied Bonifay, said nothing to him, and seemed both unimpressed and savvy about what was going on. He gave Keller a few seconds, then spoke up in plain talk.

****We are prepared to receive the condemned.*'**

"The condemned?" Zane Bonifay came halfway out of his chair.

Careful not to appear too familiar, Keller pressed him back down.

"You're using that word wrong, Avedon," he quickly said to Delytharen. "You mean *'the accused.'*"

"He doesn't," Shucorion interrupted. "We're quite strict about language."

Keller's ears got heavy, his eyes hot. A death penalty? Without a trial? He stared at his first officer, who had just cut him off at the knees and seemed to insist upon not helping.

He stole a bitter moment to ask, "You knew this?"

Clearly Shucorion was torn between what he expected and what he preferred.

As he skewered Shucorion with imaginary voodoo needles, Bonifay's black eyes took on a sheen of contempt. "He knew it. Would've been a lot easier for you if I'd been sweet and died of my wounds, wouldn't it?"

"You disobeyed a full Avedon on a Blood Plume," Shucorion explained, his voice low. "Execution is mandated. The higher a man defies, the greater number of people are affected by the defiance."

"I'm not dying for that box of bolts, then or now! You hypocrite, I saved your life!"

"I know you did."

The mere sound of Shucorion's mellow voice drove Keller's mind to a rage. "There's nothing in your code between 'wrong' and 'dead'?"

Shucorion looked at him. "People will not keep to the rules or put themselves in the path of harm without fear of punishment. This is the nature of all life."

Bonifay stiffly snapped to Keller. "You aren't gonna let them do this! Are you?"

Carrying the weight of his crew's dependence upon him and of the untempered laws and tricky

relationships being hammered out in the Sagittarius Cluster, Keller made up his mind for the second time to stand his ground. He motioned to Bonifay, but faced Delytharen.

"I'm sorry, Avedon," he said. "I'm retaining custody over him. He'll be held here pending a hearing. He's entitled to legal representation and a process of justice. We'll consult with the governor's office soon as the sensor darkness lifts. Until then, he'll have to cool his heels in house arrest."

The Blood visitors made no further attempt to hide their amazement or control their expressions. Not only them, but the Blood crewmen who had served on Challenger all these weeks-Keller clearly saw their shock, disbelief, disappointment, and one of them gulped back a gasp.

And the silence nearly broke Keller's legs.

"House arrest," Delytharen chopped out, "is not part of the agreement!"

Inside the enormous sweater, Keller actually shrugged. "I didn't fully understand the details of the agreement until today. We'll have to renegotiate a few things. I'm sure we can work it out*"

He might as well have invited them to pull up a chair and help him kill a relative and eat it

Bonifay completed his venture to stand straight and when he got there he stuck a finger out to Shucorion. If his magical powers, were worth their salt, there were in-visible lightning bolts coming out of his fingernail.

"I warn you," he vowed, "I won't die for nothing."

Not-so-subtle body language and meaningful drum-ming of Keller's eyebrows seemed to do nothing to get Bonifay to quit digging a hole.

"Mr. Bonifay is a member of my crew," Keller said. *T11 retain custody for now. But you can be sure he'll be confined under guard until we can look at the details of the incident and get advice from Governor Pardon-net about due process of law. Lieutenant Quinones, take Mr. Bonifay to the brig-or since we don't have one, take him to the tool alley."

As Delytharen and the other stunned Blood watched, Bonifay shuffled to the steps, climbed them on his own, and managed laudable posture as he stepped up to the quarterdeck. Challenger's Blood crewmen, Bonifay's shipmates, moved out of his way. He and Quinones boarded the repaired lift. When the doors closed, every-one else was left in a cloud of silence, staring at the blue panels.

With the hot potato safely gone, Keller turned back to the Blood visitors.

Delytharen's face had flushed indigo with a mix of grief and shock. His mouth was open, but nothing came out Was he breathing?

All at once the avedon gawked at Shucorion. "What have you done to him!** he demanded. "Is this your idea?"

Shucorion ticked his lips and a light went on in his eyes. He seized the blame for this disaster with a quick "Yes!**

"No, no!*" Keller protested. "He didn't do anything. I'm retaining custody over a member of my own

crew, for disobeying my first officer's order. Bonifay is covered by Federation jurisdiction.*'

Delytharen rasped, "He disobeyed a Blood avedon aboard a Plume!"*

"The Plume was under my flag. Procedures have to be devised that'll satisfy Starfleet Command and the Department of Justice on Belle Terre.*'

Complete bilge. Starfleet Command was way yonder off and Belle Terre didn't have any Department of Jus-tice. Might as well throw in a couple more. They tike rules? Give' em rules.

"And on top of that, we have to establish violation of the Starfleet ordinance of officer conduct in deep space, and the Emergency Action Powers Act-it's pretty com-plex. Mr. Bonifay will have to stay here awhile...."

Any takers? Anybody at all? Speak right up. j

Immediately he realized he had just made a splendid! error. Their expressions told the story. They had picked up the disrespect and flippance of his tone, if not the flimsiness of his facts. Perhaps they could read embar-rassment or something else in Shucorion's expression. Or perhaps they'd done their homework while he bet they hadn't.

Still, Delytharen wasn't angry or insulted He was amazed. Not at Keller's gall, but at his freelance rewrit-ing of the agreement.

"Now," the avedon began, "we must take him from you."

Hairs rose on Keller's arms. He had to say some-thing-anything to continue the discussion.

"Don't try" he said.

Not exactly butter cream.

Delytharen, though, was done talking. He turned and nodded at one of his officers. The officer touched the signal pad on his wrist. Two seconds later the bridge brightened and the Whole team beamed out, riding the Federation transporter technology Nick Keller himself had given them.

So much for diplomacy.

"Dang, I haven't heard that many steel doors clang shut since Titanic hit the berg."

Nobody laughed, because there was nothing funny.

Shoulders knotted and his neck tight, he broiled a deep breath and let it out before turning to Shucorion with a leer so bitter, a glower so raw that others backed away and left the two men standing alone in the space forward of the navigation pulpit.

"Do you," Keller began through gritted teeth, "have anything to say?"

Shucorion's eyes were wide with warning, his hands very still, his lips pressed flat. He said only three words.

"Raise... the shields."

Chapter Seventeen

"HOLY cripe-shields up! Red alert!"

He got the words out, but too late. The frigate endured a drumming point-blank hit. This was friendly fire cannibalized from wrecked Starfleet ships and privateers.

Starfleet phasers... and they hurt, in more ways than one. How could he fire back?

The first hard slam drove everyone to staggers. Zoa was the first back on her feet, clawing for the tactical boards so she could fire back. As his head cleared, he re-alized the Blood had toned down their phaser power. He had to do the same. They weren't shooting to kill-yet

"Zoa, half power on the phasers!" Keller called. He dragged himself along the rail, only now realizing that the bridge was tilted; the whole ship had lost its axis and was screaming to recover. "Drive him off but don't kill him! Savannah, take MEL! Shucorion, take the helm and get me some distance! Creighton, get the damn shields up, kid, or the next shot'll peel us like an onion!*"

He cranked around and swept a hand across the gag-gle of Blood workers who had come to repair the bridge and were now stuck here during action.

"You men, each of you take a station! One of you, engineering on the sci-deck! You-ah-Lumellen- come down to the nav! You've done this before!**

He snapped his fingers a couple of times, mostly to himself. How could he fire on Blood Savages and do enough damage to drive them off, but not enough to inflict deadly damage? He hadn't spent much time on Blood ships-what were their weaknesses?

On the sci-deck over Keller's shoulder, Creighton clawed at the rail to get back on his feet at the science boards. He could raise the shields from up here, but it would take seconds longer than direct-feed from the nav/sensory. Of course, there was nobody manning the nav/sensory-Challenger's chronic annoyance, today a critical weakness. He should've done it himself.

"Shields are up!" Creighton called, relieved. **We've got damage on decks four, five, and nine, outer perimeter hull breaches. Spectroscopy array is compromised-*

"Evacuate the damaged areas,** Keller ordered. "Seal off. Zoa, target their weapons arrays and fire!"

The forward screen and all the other outside visuals were clouded over with Gamma Night's sensor sickness.

"Engage the opticals!"

He'd never given that order before, except in tests. Creighton's shoulders moved and Keller knew the right buttons were being pushed. Had Delytharen's un-shielded strike ruined any of the camera mounts?

On certain monitors around the bridge, at four points each representing a quarter of the field of view around the ship, telescopic cameras folded out of concealed slots in the saucer section's black hat. They'd learned that Gamma Night mostly affected high-tech devices using subspace or fields. Light-gathering

cameras with magnifiers, essentially a cluster of collectors on the hull, could still see at a limited distance. Passive sensors and telescopes, combining their efforts by way of a computer, could offer a tentative picture. They could use radio to communicate, with a slight delay.

Not as good as sensors, the cameras were better than the naked eye and didn't care about Gamma Night. They couldn't read any data other than visual, but that was better than the static-laden distortions of sensor blindness. There were over three dozen camera units, and they could be used independently or combine on a field of vision to bring a large single picture to the main screen.

That's what they did now. On the main screen, the grainy film of Gamma Night suddenly cleared to a far-off view of Delytharen's Blood Hand, five Savages in circle formation with Delytharen's primary Savage on the bottom-firing again!

Another hit rolled across the hull, this one muffled by the deflectors. When he felt the blunted blow, a flush of relief dizzied him. He crossed the deck behind the command chair to the crescent and took the Blood crewman Lumellen by the arm. Poor guy was stunned. "Get down to the nav, right now, pal."

The view of the Savages was very distant. Normal sensors would've made them look as if they were a hundred feet away, but the cameras only saw real distance, so the ships look small. Challenger's phasers responded, spitting through space to a pinpoint target on Delytharen's flank.

Keller squinted at the main screen as he propelled Lumellen down to the main deck and pushed him toward the nav station. Then he climbed to the quarter-deck and rushed to Zoa's side. "I said target the weapons, not the engines!"

Zoa's golden face pivoted to him. "I cripple while we run and run."

"No, I don't want them crippled out here in the twigs. What are the other Savages doing? How many are firing on us? Lumellen, are you tracking them? And why'n hell aren't we moving?"

Lumellen didn't answer. He was sitting at the nav station, but only gripping the wrist roll. He wasn't doing anything but gawking at Shucorion, who was still standing on the foredeck. He hadn't moved a step!

Keller snapped, "Shucorion! Don't freeze on me sow-take the helm!"

What was happening?

But now Shucorion turned to face Keller. Gray eyes crimped with misery, he stood his ground. His voice, though quiet, declared itself clearly over the noise of another hit

"I can't."

The deck swam under Keller's boots. He stormed to the rail and seized it as if to drive the barrier down under his hands. A hundred questions blew into his mind and almost instantly out again.

Suddenly, words weren't necessary. All around the bridge, the other Blood lowered their hands and backed to the perimeters. Horror and torment showed on their faces—they wanted to obey his orders, take their posts, defend what they had so diligently built and served. But they were all watching each other, and, to them, a full avedon was giving them the cues. They were all at once no longer Nick Keller's crew, but once again Shucorion's.

They were on strike.

Keller dug his fingernails into the rail's hard resin. His eyes fixed on Shucorion's as the ship endured another bolt of Starfleet technology from Blood hands. "Damn you for this."

"I'm deeply grieved,"* Shucorion said, "but I can't work here now. None of us can."

"Don't give me 'can't.' You 'won't!'"

Despite the hammering being given by Blood Sav-ages in half-blind strikes, so worked up that this had to be resolved now, in spite of Gamma Night, Shucorion spoke as if nothing were here to distract them.

"If you steal from me, this is punishable by heavy restitution and limits on your freedom. But if we have an agreement that we will not steal from each other, and you steal, the least you can expect is banishment. The most is death." He tipped his head, indicating the area where Delytharen had stood only moments ago. "In his eyes, you are a criminal now too."

"You and your men signed on this ship" Keller snarled. "Don't you know what that means? Don't you understand at all?"

"We understand, but you must also, or there is no common land." Shucorion's lips were dry, his expression one of torment and resolve. They weren't going to work, and he wasn't going to make them. He put his own hand on the rail, close to Keller's in a kind of fee-ble gesture. "Do you want us confined to quarters? Or shall we leave the ship?"

"Quarters?" Keller roared. "Even if you don't lift a finger, every one of you is going to stand a post I may not be able to make you work, but I can sure as hell make you watch."

Chapter Eighteen

"savannah, get some hands to the bridge! Quinones, take the helm and give me aft thrust! I want some maneuvering room. Zoa, you got weapons power?"

"I got."

"All right, crew, let's slap the Savage Hand. Lay down a restraining pattern, target engines!" Keller heard himself yelling and deliberately lowered his voice. They could hear him fine. "Keep 'em at a distance. Don't let any of them close in on us."

As Zoa bent to her tactical pulpit to design a firing pattern, Keller threw a glance at Shucorion. The Blood's expression was unreadable. He was the leader of a rebellion, a sit-in, but his heart wasn't in it.

Around the bridge, the eight other Blood stood back against the perimeter, every Blue body refusing to work.

But they weren't Vulcans. They twitched and flinched, clenched their hands and sought each other for whatever tentative support they could find. They

/ didn't like this. They were torn. They wanted to take posts.

Keller was gratified in a nasty way to see the guilt, the doubt, the touch of loyalty to the ship they had

built. He hoped it ate them alive.

"Full opticals. Turn on all the cameras. We can't fight if we can't see."

*The lower range is only partially mounted, Nick," Creighton reported.

"Better than nothing."

"Aye, sir. Full lateral opticals."

On the forward screen, far-off pinpricks spread their circle outward and two more ships opened fire.

"I don't know what they think they're doing," Keller complained, eying the formation. "Unless they mean to kill us, they can't turn loose full phasers and I'm not about to give in under this kind of behavior."

Shucorion watched him, and listened carefully.

"Here they come!" Quinones squeaked from the helm.

Two more hits rolled across the primary hull's shields, drummed in their ears, and threw some of the unseated Blood to the deck. On the forward deck, Lumellen stumbled into Shucorion and they both went down.

"Pretty tentative shots," Keller analyzed. "Keep our forward shields to Delytharen's ship."

**What about the other four?" Creighton asked. "They can surround us! Hit our flanks-"

"I'm betting Delytharen will do most of the damage himself. I don't think he's any more sure of what he's doing than I am."

"This is an error," Shucorion warned as he pulled himself to his feet.

Keller shot him a glower. "If you want to help, take a post. If not, shut up "

Were the Blood really that single-minded? Or did they just think of themselves that way? He made a bet otherwise. He'd seen Delytharen's disappointment and shock, and also regret in his eyes. The Blood didn't want the treaty with Belle Terre to fall apart any more than Keller did.

But Keller recognized the tactics of a defensive war. The Blood ships were firing one at a time and moving independently, instead of organizing their efforts. They didn't know how to stress the frigate's deflector shields with sustained fire or coordinated assault. The Blood had always been at a disadvantage against the stronger Kauld. Unless they had a lucky event, they never had the chance to develop attack methods that could stand down a ship like Challenger. And Keller hadn't gotten around to teaching them yet. Also lucky.

Another strike rolled over the primary hull, pounding the ship downward on her lateral axis. A shift in the graviton integrity threw Keller and the Blood men forward and down. Keller caught himself on the pilot station, but managed not to crush Quinones as she fought to bring the screaming frigate back up.

He swept a finger around at the staggering cluster of Blood men. "All of you sit down," he ordered. "Sit down!"

Some of them did. Others looked to Shucorion for guidance. Their former avedon wisely nodded for them to obey that simple order for safety's sake.

The turbolift opened and two Starfleet crewmen, Tyce and Ryan, both formerly of Peleliu, plunged through the gaggle of Blood men and instantly split up, one down to the nav/sensory and one up to the sci-deck, where Creighton could certainly use the help. At the helm, Quinones struggled to swing the ship around to keep Delytharen's ship on the frigate's forward screens, while still protecting the dorsal's sensitive sides and the nacelle flanks from the other Savages.

"Keep turning us, Lucy" Keller ordered. "Keep their relative bearing on the parallel axis. They'll have a harder time getting broad targets on us."

"I'm not good at this," she admitted.

"You're doing fine."

His reassurance was swallowed by another hit and a bad shudder through the spaceframe.

"What was it?" he demanded, turning to the sci-deck.

"Saucer separator system, I think," Creighton called over the alarms. "**Two of the grab plates shook loose."

"Reinforce with the umbilicals. Never mind the hardware."

"Umbilicals, aye. Bridge to deck eleven-meinforce using umbilicals!"

"Zoa," Keller called, "**figure out who targeted the cou-plings and get 'em off us. I'll reduce the impulse flux!"

He jumped to the quarterdeck, but only made it one step along the crescent toward the IM pulse/mule pulpit before he was blinded by sparks and a plume of heat that scorched the side of his face. A dozen processors on the bridge suddenly blew into funnels of smoke and sparks. Electrical stink rolled into his lungs and he choked

Dean Creighton gulped, "Power surge! Power surge!"

Keller coughed his lungs free and gasped, "Damm it! Cut thrust! Shut down your stations! Shut down!" Shielding his face, he doubled back aft through the clutter of Blood crew. He passed Savannah and stum-bled up the sci-deck steps. "Keep the shields up! Dang it all, why now?"

The ship's electrical innards buckled against each other, competing for power and priority.

He only got halfway up the sci-deck steps before re-azing his place wasn't up there. Two men were al-ready working the science and engineering boards.

"Keep the status displays operational, Dean, what-ever you do! We need those external readings!*"

Creighton's face was red and dotted with spark bums. "Bonifay's the only one who knows the codes to synchro-nize velocity with the celestial buoys we've deployed."

"Damage to the main armory, Commander," Tyce croaked at Creighton's side.

"Evacuate and seal off." Keeping his feet under him, Keller turned and dropped to the crescent deck in front of MEL, then dropped again to the command deck. "Power your stations up slowly, everybody--don't strain the systems. Coordinate for priority. I want weapons and impulse drive first!"

"Life-support in main engineering's got a flutter" Savannah reported. "They've got an overload hi the crystal coupling "

"Radiation spillage?"

"None yet Permission to suit them up?"

"They'll suit up if they need to."

"They won't take the time if I don't order them."

"Granted."

"Engineering, bridge. Suit up! Insulate, insulate--"

The ship was new, but she was a hot rod. Her used parts were incompatible, some completely alien, and at times of stress they showed their bullish lack of cooperation. Always something different, always some new weak point, or competing systems coming together that were too strong and wanted a fight for supremacy. That was the hard part--weaknesses could be targeted and patched. The strong parts and connections and processors were the stallions that didn't get along. Could each system be neutered until they worked together? Then the whole ship would be weaker.

If they only had a competent helmsman--but the Blood crew knew best how to navigate during Gamma Night and had done most of the piloting since Challenger's launch. Now they wouldn't put their hands on a panel.

"We're venting electrofluid residue into open space!" Brad Ryan reported at the nav. "They'll see it!"

"And they'll know we're overloaded," Quinones mourned.

"No, they won't," Keller said. "All they'll know is we've got some damage. They can't know how bad. They don't know the extent of our circuitry problems. Unless somebody told them."

He couldn't resist a glance at Shucorion, who received the bald accusation with a grimace. Might be anger, or something else.

Creighton shot him a troubled look. "We can't maintain against five ships if they decide to go to full assault.**"

"Don't tell me what we can't do." Keller punched the keys on the side of his command chair* communicating alert status and permission for independent action to the various department heads who might need it right now.

"Nick, radiation burns on deck three!" Savannah called. "Permission to go there! They're right below

us!**

"Granted Get right back up here."

"Thanks!"

She bolted for the turbolift.

Challenger bristled with weaponry, just about the only system that always worked. Zoa devised a spider-web firing pattern and was executing it, broad short-range cluster shots that struck two or more ships at a time with divided streams. She didn't know how to re-pair the weaponry, but she sure could use it Her lined lips, which almost never came apart except for the odd word or two every other day, now were parted very slightly in concentration. Her intense eyes fixed with underlying passion on the dynoscanners that gave her a panoramic view at the tactical pulpit She wasn't even sitting in her chair. Her legs were braced, knees bent, arms out slightly, her hands poking at the controls a finger at a time.

A shot from an rocked the frigate again, but Chal-lenger swallowed it better than the previous hit, and on the main screen they saw the flush of raw energy sheet off and blow uselessly into space. Something automatic was working, compensating, fighting back, flushing strength to places where it was most needed. Some-where in the bowels of complication, Challenger was deciding how and where to defend herself.

"Atta girl," Keller muttered. He turned to Shucorion. *I guess you're right Delytharen's really out to hurt us."

"Or impress you," Shucorion suggested. He held on to the nav station to keep on his feet as another hit rolled under them.

"I'd hoped he was bluffing or baiting."

**We don't do those things. We fight, or run, then re-turn to fight more. These tactics you use-Blood are not so clever."

"He must know he won't break our shields unless he uses full phasers. Even then, they'd have to hit us with all five Savages at once."

"I'm certain he hopes you will decide to honor the agreement before he takes such actions."

"I won't honor anything under these circumstances. Not under fire from people who are supposed to be al-lies."

Shucorion only pressed his lips flat and held on to the rail as another hit thundered through the ship's bones. He shook his head at Keller's stubbornness, but made no argument. The hit rocked Ryan out of the nav chair, and for all the talk about not lifting a finger, Shu-corion bothered to pick the crewman up and hurry him back to his post.

Suddenly the sound of Challenger's phasers changed slightly, from a hum to a whine. The five Blood Sav-ages broke formation, but confused each other in the move. Delytharen's flagship and its wingman ended up crossing each other's paths. This accident gave Zoa a target too succulent to ignore. Phasers were now on full power, and she got two ducks with one arrow.

Delytharen's Savage spun off with severe damage to her underbelly. Three unmanned Plumes fell right out of their launch bays and splintered right in front of Challenger, washing the frigate's black hat with debris that rattled like rain on a tin roof. The second ship turned bow over tail and ended up gravity-compro-mised and spinning on an off-center axis.

"No! Zoa, no!" Keller shouted. "Not full power!"

Too late. A fresh salvo speared through space, light-ing up the hull of Savage 2, which took the hit just as it stopped spinning wildly. What a target!

The Savage was slammed up on a wing and now spun in the other direction, spewing hot fluids.

"No, no, Zoa! Too much!" Keller plunged for the quarterdeck and raced around the rail toward the tacti-cal pulpit. Zoa's reaction to such an incursion into her personal space usually resulted in an elbow in the ribs, but this time Keller was ready. He blocked the elbow, grabbed her wrist, and pulled her arm over her head to provide himself a doorway. He stuck his other hand into the gap and struck the phaser power level controls just as Zoa's most recent shot broke from the array and gut-punched Delytharen's damaged flagship.

The whine dropped back to a hum halfway through the shot-a weird buckling compromise made by the targeting computers. It meant the flagship got half a bullet, then a slap.

The Blood crewmen on the bridge grimaced and suf-fered the horror of ships they had trusted for years being so easily dismembered. They'd never come up against anything like Starfleet phasers, and even Keller's modifications to the Blue Net didn't come up to full starship standards. They'd never seen a full-out battle with Federation technology.

Keller jumped back down to the command deck "Put the transporter room on notice!"

"We'll have to drop the shields to beam the crew on board," Ryan reminded. "We'll be unprotected."

"Better than letting them die. They're our allies, even though they don't know it"

Shucorion was watching him. The other Blood were watching both Keller and Shucorion, in a vain search for signals and a way to behave while not serving a man who was ready to have his own ship heavily dam-aged rather than let other Blood die. The reasons and willpower didn't add up for them, and that too had never happened. Things were simpler back home, but this wasn't home.

"Can you read the damage on the wingman? Is its at-mosphere venting or something else?"

"Not sure," Ryan reported. "I'll try spectrometry"

"See if you can read his life-support! How much trouble are they hi?"

"Hey! Look at this!" Quinones came halfway out of her chair and pointed at the forward screen. "Mr. Keller, look!"

Though small in the lenses of the direct optics, a fa-miliar shape moved toward them at a pretty good clip, green and flowing, with the prickly ball of bonded spinners gleaming on its bow. The grave ship!

It grew large very quickly and came to a position a few thousand kilometers off Challenger's bow.

"I flay them 'live!" Zoa declared. Her braids bounced and her tattooed shoulders flexed as she happily took a firing sequence reading. "Phaser full! Torpedo also!"

"No!" Keller barked. "Not until I say. Are they heav-ing to?"

"They're at all-stop, sir," Quinones confirmed. "I can't understand it. Why would they float over here, then just hover?"

"What do they want?" Creighton asked.

Another Blood hit caused scattered overloads on the sci-deck, blowing sparks over the heads of everyone midships. Everybody was watching the grave ship, and there was no response from the frigate.

"Nobody told you to break off!" Keller glanced to Zoa. "Keep returning half-phaser fire on the undam-aged Blood ships, is that clear?*"

She bent over her board, and the frigate continued its pattern of fencing fire. The Blood ships kept up the as-sault, but didn't dare move in for better targets.

"Keller!" Shucorion seized his arm to turn him for-ward again. He simply pointed at the main screen.

Keller resisted at first, then realized what was hap-pening and quickly turned.

In space before them, the grave ship and its attach-ment of individual beetle-like ships with spikes had started doing something completely new. Keller had to squint to isolate what was happening. The spiked ships-spinners, Riutta had called them-began to, well, spin. Tiny threads worked out from their moving mandibles. Like baby spiders held by the mother's two great claws, the bundle of spinners turned loose a stream of shining silver filaments that spewed info space, traveling kilometers in an instant

"Is this a weapon?" Shucorion wondered.

Keller murmured, "You don't recognize it?"

"No..."

The distance between the grave ship and Challenger and all the five Blood savages meant nothing to the sil-ver threads. One each went to a ship, the filaments shot through space. As each thread approached its target, the filament began to swell into a bulb, then flatten out and grow larger, larger...

"Back us off!" Keller shouted. "Aft thrust!"

"It's on us!" Shucorion gasped in an instant, and he was right

The silver bulb filled the visuals-all of them-then thinned out to a shimmery film they could see through.

Phasers were still firing! The beams struck the silver veil, but did not cut it. Instead, the energy blew wildly around and around the ship, circling, crackling, with nowhere to go and no way to dissipate.

They were trapped inside a silver ball with their own destructive energy racing madly around them.

"Zoa, cease fire! Holy-"

Nick Keller held his arm up to shade his eyes from the blinding orange crackle of phaser near-detonation. The howl of constant phaser fire stopped, but the wild crackling around the inside of the silver ball continued in screen after screen all around the bridge.

"How long before those bolts lose integrity?"

"Forty years " Creighton called over the sizzle.

"Oh, fine..."

They didn't have to wait. Something else happened. The silver veil entertained the phaser bolts for several more long seconds, then began to absorb the energy. The red glow faded to pink, the sizzle dissipated, and the silver shimmer returned.

"Hold position, Lucy," Keller countermanded. "Cut engines. Don't move us. Dean, what is this stuff?"

Creighton was hunched over his readouts, with an expression on his face that scared everybody who looked up there. "I... don't know..."

"Metal?"

"Maybe... doesn't read."

"Doesn't read as metal?"

"Doesn't read at all. Could be Gamma blindness keeping us from a good fix, I guess, but I'm not scooping up much more than a cloud. It's forming a globe around us... and it's around the Blood ships too."

"Uh-oh," Keller groaned. "Ryan, open a channel for me." He stepped back to his command chair and his link.

"Delytharen, this is Keller. Don't move until we figure out what this thing is."

He waited for a response, but there was nothing.

"Did he hear us?"

Ryan shrugged. "Probably."

"He stopped moving," Quinones reported. "I think all the Blood are holding position."

Keller turned to the secondary screens on the port bulkhead, three screens larger than the auxiliary processor screens over each station. They offered a view of near-space targets as recorded by the ship's sensors, or in this case the optical cameras. They were selective, and now showed angles outside the range of the forward screen. Those angles included all the Blood Savages, each held in a silver bulb, seen behind a shimmering veil from inside Challenger's own bulb.

Keller moved forward again between the nav and the pilot station. "What... the devil's... this?"

Nobody jumped forward with a colorful explanation. The Blood crew seemed even more perplexed than the humans, and more afraid. Keller empathized with them. They were no more used to foreigners, aliens, than he was himself. Probably even less so, for he came from a culture that at least knew how many other kinds of people might be out there. For Blood, this was a new concept and still scary. (Ryan, you know how to work the optical zooms?"

At his right elbow, Brad Ryan shook his head in doubt. "Mr. Bonifay's the designer of that system, sir... I'd only be guessing."

"Okay, guess me a superzoom."

"Superzoom, sir. Any particular point?"

"Doesn't matter. Pick a section."

"Aye, sir."

It took damnably long seconds for Ryan to pick his way through the systems and call up computer assistance, and even then he couldn't find the *Forward opticals... focusing... damn, lost it... oh, there it is."

The screen blurred, then focused again. The zoom was so strong that the screen probably showed only a square yard of the silver veil, and still the fabric's construction was tiny, barely enough above microscopic to be seen as individual circular links, four links through a fifth, compounded indefinitely.

Shucorion studied the tiny circular links that made up the structure so effectively holding them. "I don't recognize this construction/*

Beside him, Keller endured a cold shudder of recognition as he peered back in time to all his favorite periods of history and suddenly realized what they were up against

"I do," he said. "It's chainmail."

"Can we cut it? Anybody got a reading?"

"I got nothing."

"Just haze."

"Some magnetic jumps, but that's all."

"See it, can't smell it."

Nick Keller stared and stared, but the chainmail balloon around Challenger and around each of the Blood Savages wouldn't speak. The ship's sensors, Gamma-bounded, were no help. The phasers had run around inside the balloon like ants. He hadn't missed the significance.

"Don't shoot," he threw over his shoulder, in case Zoa got too happy again.

With the optical cameras feeding a combined photographic view through the main screen, he could see

three of the five Blood ships and the grave ship with its picker ball. The two remaining Blood Savages showed on Ryan's navigational board, on small screens. Five tidy bubbles. Six, counting the frigate. He could see the other ships, despite his own ship's being surrounded by this silvery stuff. That's how thin the chainmail was.

"How's the wingman doing? Can anybody tell?"

"I think he's got secondary thruster rupture," Creighton guessed. "The venting's got a green tint to it"

He was right. One of the bubbles, even through two layers of chainmail, appeared celery green.

"Hope they're all right... Zoa, next time I tell you half phasers, don't change without my direct order."

"I make an field promote."

"That's not what a field promotion is. Wait for my order, clear?"

"Is clear."

He prowled the bridge, going between the helm and nav like an obstacle course, always keeping his eyes on the forward screen. "What's she going to do? Leave us out here in these envelopes?"

"Maybe she's waiting for us to make the next move," Creighton suggested. "Like a test."

"Test? Okay... all right, I'll bite. If we can't phaser our way out, let's ram through this stuff. Power up the impulse drive, zero thrust."

"Yes, sir!" Quinones responded "Towering pulse drive. Should I-uh, should I-should somebody else-**

"No, you're at the post" Keller patted her shoulder. "Just stay there."

She pushed her ashy blond hair behind her ears and hunkered to the helm. "Aye, sir...."

"All you have to do is go forward. Nice and straight And don't stop till I tell you "

He stood on the command riser, but didn't sit in his chair. Instead he came around behind the chair and gripped the backrest with both hands. A few steps away, Shucorion held the rail in the same manner and watched the forward shimmer.

"Shields stable?" Keller asked.

"Stable, sir," Creighton said.

"Everybody ready?"

Shucorion stepped up to Keller. "Are you going to rip through?"

"We'll see if we can. It might be able to deflect energy, but solid mass is another story, and we got a lot of mass "

Touching the arm of the command chair, Shucorion glanced at the Blood men, then the main screen.

"Keller..."

Keller brushed him off the chair's arm. "If you want to participate, you know what to do. Otherwise, the sidelines are right down there.*"

Shucorion's cheeks flushed to cobalt "Of course. My apologies."

He stepped down, looking quite dejected.

The sight was satisfying. Keller worked to conceal a rising gloat, not that it helped much. He needed other kinds of help and the Blood all knew he did. Shucorion was forced to maintain their strike, though the toll on him was high-anyone could see the strain in his eyes.

Keller couldn't afford to break, not with a shipmate's life hanging in the balance. And what would they think of him if he caved just to make things easier for a few hours?

Forget it.

"Keep powering, Lucy," he ordered "Get us up to point seven five, zero thrust. Tell me when.*"

"Aye, sir... point five... point five five... point six.. r

Around them the ship howled angrily, strained at her harness, and did everything but whinny. She was ready to rip.

"Point six five... point seven.."

"Sir, look!" Brad Ryan almost broke his ribs as he bolted forward against his console and pointed at the main screen. "One of the Blood ships is doing the same thing!"

On the glittering screen, the nearest of the bubbles had a purplish-red glow-Blood engine exhaust!

"All stop!" Keller snapped.

As Challenger wheezed out her power-up, the Blood

Savage blew out a sudden exhaust wash and jumped forward. Instantly it pressed the barrier of chainmail. The gauzy mail bowed out slightly at the push of the Savage's bow, but only for an instant.

A monstrous white explosion slapped Keller in the face. Everyone else ducked as if stricken. Moments later, the wash struck the chainmail bubble and the frigate, pushing it away as if a giant arm swept them back.

The deck ran out from under Keller's feet. He was catapulted forward over the command chair, rolled on his shoulder over the seat, and landed in a heap at Quinones' left side inches from the port hatch. He looked up, but Quinones wasn't there. She was between the helm and nav. Beyond her, Ryan and Shucorion were struggling to their feet from under a pile of Blood and Zoa.

"What happened!" Keller called. "What was it- what hit them? Did the grave ship hit them?"

*1 didn't see anything!" Quinones gasped.

"Catastrophic, whatever it was," Ryan said. He palled himself back to the nav.

Keller clasped his throbbing left arm, stumbled to the mid-deck, and fought to focus his half-blinded eyes. Through the flashes he managed to perceive the globe of chainmail nearest them. The globe wallowed and swam, but retained its own structural integrity. But in-side... there was nothing. No Savage. No wreckage. Instead, space to the right side of the screen sparkled and tumbled with tiny bits of debris.

**My God, where are they?" he choked. "Where's the Savage?"

Shucorion appeared beside him, also gaping at the screen. "It's-not... where have they gone?"

"Replay it! Dean, put it up, on slow!"

"Yes, sir." Creighton's voice was tenuous. The clicks and beeps of his science boards provided an eerie soundtrack.

In seconds, the main screen changed, reversed itself, blurred through the huge explosion, this time with flash-mute, and paused when the Savage appeared back inside the chainmail bubble.

Another click, and the screen rolled forward again, this time very slowly.

The Savage fired its sublight engines to high inten-sity, then puffed a plume of exhaust and surged for-ward. The chainmail bowed outward like pliant rubber, resisting slightly the force of the Savage's prow.

With the colors of struggle painting their faces, Keller and his crew were riveted to the scene before them. As they watched in disbelief, the chainmail seemed to peel back along the body of the Savage-but what came out the other side was not a ship. Thin splin-ters of matter pressed through the chain mail like meat going through a grinder. Into space came a blizzard of shredded material, pulverized and pebbled-metal, fab-ric, crew, and all.

The chainmail penetrated through the body of the Savage, disarticulated its way through until it reached the area of the dynadrive engines and the warp core. Now the enormous matter-antimatter explosion ruined what otherwise was a simple deadly dance.

In slow motion, atomization bloomed across the screen, but couldn't cleanse the ghastliness of what they had just witnessed.

An entire Blood Savage and forty men aboard... diced.

Chapter Nineteen was this what Shakespeare meant by "sea of troubles"?

This was supposed to be officer paradise. A ship of his own, unquestioned authority, out too far to be chal-lenged, with his own guns to stick up for him and a fair number of honest folks who had him to use them.

He had that, or some aberration of it, like an itch he couldn't reach. He had a ship-an untamed one. His crew was honest, but acted too much on their own. He was out too far to be challenged, but also too far to be helped. Just born lucky.

This was why the nonfraternization clause had stuck for century after century. Let go of the ties if you want command. Leave your Mends behind. Otherwise you'll never be able to send them to their deaths.

Sure, he'd heard it a thousand times. Everybody had. The dirty seduction of rules, the magnetism of a duty done, and a stable historic precedent making easier the hard thing.

Doing it was something else. Captains needed years to get used to the idea. That was why it took years to become a captain, and why everything changed on that day.

Shucorion had ordered Bonifay to stay on the Plume, and in a way he'd been correct about impending disaster. Bonifay had ended up in a worse situation. But was it better than dead? Probably. Bonifay did the wrong thing, but he had no particular loyalty to Shucorion. He didn't think his actions were the same as abandoning a ship and crew. Disrespectful, maybe. Treason?

Gale-force trouble. Because of Shucorion's distress call, a Savage Hand had come here in good faith. Because of a botched treaty, one ship and crew had been butchered.

And Keller was still alone. There was no help to be summoned. He had to deal with all this by himself.

With Starfleet around, there would be procedures and support systems, a scaffold of replacement, legal representation, a whole barnyard of people with years of experience to help the decision get done. Instead Keller had a dislocated life holding the reins of a wild frigate that screamed and bucked every time he spurred her. He was a tenant sheriff, a badge-in-residence-

Or was he a vigilante? Was he self-appointed, or stationed with Star-fleet's blessing? No matter how hard he worked or how many orders he gave, he couldn't shake the sensation of transience. He was a sojourner, a concierge, with only a brittle grip on the situation. The anal-retentive Blood were uncertain and picky, the parochial Kauld fickle, and now these new people had jumped on the Keller whirligig. He could pat himself on the back for his resilience, but had he done any of these people any favors? Could he protect all the planets he had promised to protect?

He hadn't been able to protect his hostile colleagues on the Savage. Now he knew, also, that the chainmail of the Living was not to be taken lightly.

Not a word was spoken for the first long minutes after the dicing of the Savage. No one had seen anything like this. No one knew what to say about it. The fear, though, thickened on the deck like putty.

With a twig of compliance on his shoulder, Keller moved to Shucorion.

"Obviously we can't bust out," he said.

"A nightmare," Shucorion murmured, and shuddered a little.

"You won't work. Will you give advice?*"

"I don't know what to advise. Their science is strong. They are in charge."

Keller kept his voice very low. 'Has this changed your mind any? You and your men?***

Grieved and frustrated, Shucorion closed his eyes for a moment "You must try harder to comprehend No

one person's life is more important than what is being accomplished in these days. The new structure will all fall over if Keller is seen to break his word. I must help you keep your promises." Engulfed in sadness he didn't bother to hide, he turned slightly away as if to escape, and gazed up at Zoa at the tactical board, not really paying attention to her. "All because of Bonifay and me... better for both of us if we had died on the Plume, I think, man this...."

Zoa looked down at the two of them. She didn't care that she was overhearing a private conversation. Was there contempt in her eyes? Resentment?

Keller couldn't tell, but she made him more uneasy.

All this trouble, because of a treaty that hadn't even been completely hammered out

Could he make a choice between Shucorion and Bonifay?

He was finally absorbing the idea that he had to be very careful when speaking to the Blood people. If he told them to hold at all costs, they would die doing it. He'd better never engage in bravado. They would take such words literally.

But how could he speak to Riutta?

Now, with the frigate and the remaining Blood Sav-ages held immobile inside globes of chain mail, was the time to try.

"Let's have radio communication," he requested. The radio network was still flimsy, though better at short-range during Gamma Night than subspace, which was commonly distorted by the neutron star and pulsar orbiting each other that caused the sensor blindness.

"Go ahead," Ryan said, doing it by remote, through the nav station.

Entertaining a momentary thought about getting this ship properly staffed, Keller tightened his shoulders and looked at the forward screen. There, through a shimmering veil of chainmail, he saw the Pompeii and its new additions, still linked to Challenger and each of the Blood ships with a thin single thread each, as if it were holding kite strings. He glanced at Shucorion, who offered as supportive an expression as he dared.

"Challenger to Riutta. You're interfering in a private conflict. We have the right to operate our own interactions. Retract your barriers immediately."

Or what? He hoped nobody asked. Or we'll bounce our phasers around inside here till we fry ourselves.

"Did she hear us?" He glanced around. "Anybody picking up anything?"

Up on the sci-deck, Tyce complained, "I'm not even reading this thing we're in."

"Not at all?"

"Sir, I'm not a science specialist, but I don't get any-thing."

Keller peered up there. "Dean, can you do any better?"

Creighton frowned. "I'm not a science officer, Nick."

"Don't take this wrong, but you're better man noth-ing."

Quinones looked up at him from the helm. "You got anybody better than me? I'm no Gamma Night helms-man."

Keller gazed down at her with sympathy. She was a security specialist, a law-enforcement officer, a cop. He was asking her to do microsurgery.

Truth be told, they didn't have anybody who could do any of these jobs well enough. Only the Blood had any skill with Gamma Night, and that skill involved tender finesse with such things as stellar radiation on the hull, static filtration, light shifts, and subtle spectral informa-tion. Such work was tedious, and not for doing in a hurry by people who hadn't been doing it all their lives.

Not far from where Keller stood beside the com-mand riser, Lumellen hovered near Shucorion, hungrily eyeing the helm as Quinones struggled to get some-thing to use. More guilt. Good.

He endured a twinge of empathy. They really thought they had to abstain from work. What must that be for Blood, to whom work was everything?

How far would they carry their principle? Would they stand there and die when working would help?

He didn't want to push things that far, but-

"Sir!" Quinones flinched and leaned toward the mid-dle of the bridge. To her credit she didn't leave her seat at the helm, despite the abrupt and silent appearance of the Living micro-gate.

The Blood men on the port side had to scramble out of the way, but somehow Riutta's magic door managed not to hit anybody. All of a sudden there was a hole in the air over the tube hatch, framed by the brushed-pewter links not so different from those of the Gateway in space.

"Nobody move," Keller warned.

Through the micro-gate they could see the grottoes of the grave ship, and the rows of dark metal bodies like sculptures of daily life in some town of clay. Now what? Should he go up and knock?

He motioned the Blood men on that side to move farther forward. "Lucy, move out," he uttered, and mo-tioned her away from the helm.

When he moved toward the micro-gate, he noted in his periphery Shucorion take a step toward him, maneu-ving between the pilot station and the navigation post

Keller ignored him. Instead he glanced up at Creighton, who simply shrugged and mouthed, No readings.

He nodded.

"Riutta!" he called. "We'd like to conduct our own business without interference. Are you in there?"

"Why is this fight? Why?" Her voice echoed slightly.

He still couldn't see her.

"Show yourself," he invited. Knowing he was up against people with far more power on some level than he possessed, he made a bet and played the only card in his hand right now. "I have new information for you. Meet with me, and I'll explain."

His stomach quivered. He was over his head. How could he keep from drowning? Riutta seemed secure in her purposes, though his remained undefined. He was guessing his way through this situation. Even though Riutta was a stranger here, she was setting all the boundaries. He had to change that

She appeared suddenly, at the bottom of a slope he hadn't even known was there. At her sides were several other Living, each in some version of the light mail shift and molded padding, though there was no unity of style. The colors were all grays, whites, and muted blues, as if color didn't matter. Maybe to the Living they all looked the same.

Riutta and one of the men climbed the slope and stood just on the other side of the micro-gate, inches from Keller.

"You are having conflict?" Riutta asked.

"Some," Keller admitted. What was the point of say-ing no? "We have some matters of dispute with the Blood ships out there. It's a private dispute. We don't appreciate being stopped. You've destroyed an entire ship and crew. More than forty people were cut to pieces by your chainmail." Bitterly he added, "Do you know that?"

"Chainmail?"

"Your barrier. The metal fabric!"

"Chainmail," she repeated, tasting the word. She decided it was accurate and attempted no other identification of what she had done. "You saw the destruction. No one else will go through. You must tell all your people to stay inside. What is your new information?"

So much for sitting down to discuss this over coffee.

"Right here," Keller said bluntly. He reached out to his side, took Shucorion's arm and pulled him up close. "I'd like you to meet my faithful Indian companion, Shucorion."

Riutta squinted and strained, fought to make her eyes work. If they couldn't see red where they came from, what else looked different?

The man beside her suddenly gasped. "Ennengand!"

Instantly, as if stepping between rooms, Riutta raised her foot and came over the bottom of the micro-gate onto the bridge to get a better look at Shucorion.

Her eyes narrowed and she focused with effort. "En-nengand?"

Shucorion licked his lips to speak, then made a brief visual contact with Keller. The two of them made an unspoken connection, and Shucorion held his breath.

Riutta was more controlled than her companion. "Why are you here? How and why?"

Keller realized he had put Shucorion in a bad spot. Should they lie or make up a story, or what?

"Tell her," he encouraged.

Keeping one eye on Keller, and deliberately being vague with the truth about himself, Shucorion wisely attempted, "I am Blood, like those in the ships firing at us. Here, we are all different kinds of people, different races. There are many races here now."

"Where is 'here'?"

"We live in a common cluster of stars and planetary systems." Shucorion looked at Keller and made a motion with one hand. "All of us, together."

Could Riutta see the difference in skin color? That Shucorion and the Blood were markedly different from the humans? From Zoa?

"They are the children of Ennengand," Keller added. At least there was a connection he could capitalize on. "We've come to join them here."

She looked at him with her strange star like eyes. "You have relations with the others who fight? Then why are you in conflict?"

The man with her blurted. "You are the same!"

**We all live together," Keller said, "and we have some things to work out We want to work them out without interference from people who don't understand us yet"

Riutta continued to watch Shucorion. In her eyes, a legend had just come to life. "You have no relation? Why are you doing these things?" She looked at Keller for her answer. "Why?"

Irritated, he said; "It's a private matter between me and the other commander. We're trying to work out a misunderstanding in a deal we made."

"Deal? You had a bond?"

She might be strange and foreign, but she had the concept of relationships down flat

"One broke the bond?" she persisted.

Although there might be a thousand ways to justify certain actions, Keller had to admit to himself that she had the basic idea right Every disagreement, betrayal, turmoil and war since time immemorial had started with a difference of opinion at some level or other. What could he say?-they were shooting at each other for fun?

"In the other commander's opinion," he admitted, "I broke the bond. But I didn't understand what had been negotiated."

But Riutta was finished with him. She turned her long thin form away, the knotted muscles of her shoulders and back showing through the thin metallic sheath in a body language anybody from anywhere

could translate.

She faced Shucorion. "Gateway has made its decision. The Anointed will show us the path lines of space. We will do as Ennengand provided us to do."

"What do you mean," Keller asked, "provided you to do"? Did Ennengand leave instructions?"

But for Riutta, he no longer existed. She spoke only to Shucorion.

*The time of order has come," she said. "Everything in the records was true. All the plans are undistorted. Disorder was held in place here until we could return. You are the confirmation."

She stepped back from Shucorion and turned, this time to look back at the Living man who was still in-side the micro-gate. With just that look, and no other sign of communication, she made some connection with him. The man turned and looked down the slope at the others, who went into action below and disappeared back to whatever control center they had in the grave ship.

Three seconds later, the chainmail globe around Challenger was retrieved away from the ship, formed itself into a milky sheet, twirled into a strand, and was slurped back into the mandibles of the pickery ball on Pompeii's bow.

She was setting the frigate free!

Why? Because of Ennengand? Because she thought she was talking to a living legend?

Did Keller dare ask?

He clamped his lips and determined not to press his luck.

Still addressing only Shucorion, Riutta said, "We will protect the children of Ennengand from the curse of space. We know who we are. We will take care of all these things."

In move of supreme clarity, she stepped back inside the micro-gate without looking at them again. She'd made a decision.

"Wait!" Keller stepped toward the gate, but Shucorion reached out and dragged him back.

Inches away, the micro-gate shriveled, turned into a ball, rolled three times, and winked away.

The Grave Ship Pompeii

"Time has rushed forward on our side. Time stood still here while we marched forward. These are not the descendants of Ennengand's travelers... these are the actual people. They have been made to wait for us."

"We are interfering." Under the tentative gazes of the other Living farers, Luntee pressed his knuckles to his tormented eyes and digested Riutta's vaulted statements. Her words were terrifying. "This place is foreign to us now," he said. "Better we go home, where all is familiar. Through the Gateway, we can see and function as we are now meant to."

She led him among the rows of Anointed, working to use her senses in this new environment that had

once been familiar. Even the ship of the Anointed was strange once they were through the Gateway. There were many, many new textures. There was red and other colors. Smells were overwhelming, a constant wash of unfading sensations spinning in her skull.

"You wanted to come here," she reminded.

"I want to go back. I don't like it here, Riutta. Living are not meant for this alien place anymore. To be here and be blinded? To find that color is not a gift, but a curse? To have this terrible scent and feel these ill-nesses?"

"We stay, Luntee. We have been summoned to work here."

"We have been in exile!" Luntee raised his hands, but in a different manner. "Exile has become our home. This place is foreign!"

"Exile," Riutta echoed. She stopped and gazed at the hundreds of Anointed in their imitation of life. "Or have we been in the forge? While we tempered ourselves upon a metal ball for lifetime after lifetime, disorder was not allowed to continue here. We have been made to be ahead of them. We possess the greater power now. Every bit of extra energy has been saved for a thousand of generations. Ennengand's effigy is here, alive, as a sign, a direction-bringer for us. Random order has planted him here, in plain sight. You saw him.**"

"But he doesn't know us, Riutta. He was surprised."

Riutta made her way again along the soft fabric dunes between the grottoes, moving between the sweeping curtains. Would she ever be able to visit the planet imitated here? Over the generations, Living had woven this tribute from hair and skin and sinew, bits of live tissue, as much as could be spared, and unusable material from the free dancers. This vessel was a giant picture of the ancient world from which the first Living travelers had come, fit-tinged together from remnants of stories long faded in time.

Never before had she let herself contemplate so much of the future at one time. For her, before she was an Elder, the future came only in days. The hunt. Her family. Rest. Storing energy. Reading the old records. Studying. Looking much more back than forward.

As an Elder, she must entertain new plans, long plans.

"This is where we have been stationed by random order. Whatever random order has in mind for us, it must be on this side. Our entire purpose on that side was to get here!*"

"You have condemned our civilization to a thousand generations of new suffering in space."

"I interpret the message of the Gateway," she told him. Why did he argue so much about things so clear?

"These people have abundant food, warm planets, and color. They eat, they have shelter, they have order and rules, and a simple way to know what the rules want, yet they travel. They must go into space because others will. If they don't go, someone will come and conflict will happen."

**Let them have then* conflict," Luntee said. "I was wrong, and the Elders were wrong."

"You and I are the Elders now." Riutta pushed aside the veils protecting the spinner mechanisms. "The wonder of being marooned on a planet with food and color, Luntee-this is not ours to have. We have

another pur-*pose*, a good purpose. We have the Anointed. There is a purpose to random order. All those lifetimes of suffer-*ing* were just to prepare all Living for this purpose. This is a new beginning. We will start here. We will give Ennengand's people what they need."

The chamber was warm now. Such luxury for those who had ceased to enjoy it The Anointed deserved everything, even pleasures they could never realize.

Luntee rubbed his eyes, disoriented in the warmth. "How many will you try?*"

**We will try five. They're very dense."

"Your project is foolhardy."

"Embrace it"

He nodded, troubled. "I must Riutta-the Anointed!"

Around them, in a great mysterious concert, forms of the Anointed began to flex and move their arms, sag-*ging** from their poised positions along the steppes. They moved their heads and necks, though their faces had no curiosity, their eyes no light.

The Anointed would decide which among them would step down. This process was ancient and no one understood it. They would make their own choices and sacrifice, for this was their primary purpose once life was finished They were the source of strength.

Two women, one very old and venerated, and three men selected themselves from among the dark shifting throng. The small group climbed down from their pedestals, left behind the places they had been standing for generations, and moved toward the polished glass funnel in the chamber's core.

The old woman went first, plunging into the funnel as gracefully as a free dancer descending.

Deep inside the funnel, a flash swallowed the dark-ened body. The processing, had begun. One of the men went next.

Luntee shaded his eyes in respect as the Anointed gave themselves to the forge, into the mysterious process carrying them to the next level. The knowledge was long gone, but the process would take care of itself. Once the process had been established, all those generations ago, the people who developed it had been chosen, their knowledge taken away. New skills were learned, and the Living did not strive to rediscover what had been taken.

Riutta blinked at him, determined to learn better how this new vision should be used. She could spot red now, and was working on green. There was much green here, if she was right in her study.

As the remaining three Anointed who had selected themselves now one by one plunged into the forge, she raised her hands well above her head. "This is the pur-*pose*, Luntee. This is the beginning, our new starting place, our reason for these generations of work. We will secure this place, then bring the rest of our people through the Gateway, out of the blast furnace that made us strong, that stopped time and gave us the tools to do what is necessary. None of these people can stand against what we have. We are chosen to stay in space. We will help Ennengand's people be happy. We will re-*store* random order."

"They're warping out! And they're dragging the Blood ships with them!"

"Through Gamma Night?" Keller rushed to the nav station. "Ryan, what's their heading?"

"Direct for the binary. The Blood and Kauld home-worlds! They found 'em somehow."

"Figures. All right, crew, saddle up! Let's have warp power, Lucy. Match their speed. Don't let them lose us!"

Quinones' face was a matte of panic. "What if they plow into something!"

"Reckon we will too."

Poor Quinones was perfectly terrified. It was a hell of a bet they were making. Shield technology didn't have any effect on Riutta's science. But to take the chance that Gamma Night also had no effect? That they could navigate cleanly through it? Keller was betting against the very real possibility that Riutta just didn't know about Gamma Night and was misreading every-thing she saw. She could easily lead them on a death run into a gas giant or a gravitational anomaly. At warp speed, even with the opticals, they would never even see disaster coming.

"Commander, I'm not up to this!" Quinones pleaded with amiable honesty. Sweat drained down her face. **Sir, I don't want to get us killed!"

"I know. Go to warp speed." Keller bent over the helm and helped with the fine-tuning so critical during sensor darkness. Sometimes they couldn't even be sure of what they were seeing with their own eyes. "Track Pompeii. Just stay with them. We'll talk about getting killed later."

Around them the frigate spat and shuddered, turned to its new course as plotted tentatively by Ryan, who also gave Keller terrible glances of fear and uncertainty. Ultimately the ship breached the great gap to hyperlight speed. On the blurry screens, space funneled and stars stretched out. They were off, following the unknown.

"Warp one," Quinones gulped. "They're still outpac-ing us."

"Lights just went out on deck nine," Creighton said, irritated.

"Understood. Go to warp two."

Quinones hunched her shoulders. "Warp two, sir...."

Whack

Their speed multiplied on a maddening scale.

"Still outpacing us."

But Keller was committed. "Match their speed. Do whatever it takes."

Tension mounted as Quinones shivered her way to warp two point five, two point seven five, warp three... three point two...

"They're-they're settling down-" she choked out "Warp three point... four."

"Sci-deck, how long till we reach the binary?"

"Thirteen hours," Dean Creighton reported. "If we reach it"

Back and legs knotted, Keller straightened and stepped to face Shucorion.

"How about taking the helm?" he asked

A simple question, but braided with trouble. There were Blood men here on the bridge, watching their avedon. Word would get around even if they weren't here, even if no one wanted to spread it.

Shucorion's hand touched the front of the helm, but he never looked away from Keller. There was terrible anguish in his eyes, guide-railed by willpower gleaned from a lifetime of strife. He desperately wanted to take the helm.

"I'm sorry," he said.

With a frustrated frown, Keller stiffened. "Then take your men and get off the bridge."

"Where would you like us to go?"

*I don't care where you go. Go take a nap if you want. Don't be surprised if while you're sleeping I paint you all toucan orange."

Chapter Twenty

"WHY do we fly? Why? Why do we walk?"

Six hours gone. Seven to go.

Seemed long, but with a bomb ticking relentlessly away it was only minutes.

On the sci-deck, Dean Creighton grinned nervously down at his commander.

Nick Keller doggedly paced the lower deck. The bridge was a lot emptier than when the Blood men had been here. Somehow they were still here, like ghosts.

Quinones hunched over his pilot station. A few steps to her right, Ryan slumped back in his chair with his hands folded over his chest, watching his navigation and sensor readouts the way a man watches a pregnant wife in the last ten minutes.

The crew had made a laudable effort to pretend they were in control. They weren't. The frigate was traveling at more than warp three. During Gamma Night, this was perfectly insane. Out in front of them, Riutta's composite grave ship and spinners made a beeline toward the Blood and Kauld worlds, and once there they would be, cosmically speaking, not very far at all from Belle Terre, a completely defenseless planet

Riutta wouldn't answer his hails. If she could even pick up the calls through the sensor distortion. He couldn't be sure, but something inside told him she could hear him and refused to answer. She wouldn't talk to him. He had broken a bond.

Sounded damn familiar.

Angrier by the minute, Keller wandered to the star-board side, where Quinones, hi a pair of safety goggles, used a soldering tool on the damaged plates. "Why do we breathe? Why do we need a ship without holes in it? Why do we have lips? Why? To keep our cheeks from fraying."

With his cold hand on the rail, he moved forward to-ward tactical, where Zoa picked at her phasers and tor-pedoes and solutions and diagrams of firing patterns. She liked the firing patterns.

Keller paused, bent his lanky frame against the rail, and studied the Rassua's gold-threaded braids in their helmet shape, and the landscape of tattooed adventures running across her shoulders and down her arms, pic-tures that told of her many conquests and successes, wounds and challenges. Her **witnesses."

They were enticing pictures, exaggerated zoomorphs and story glyphs with a vicious edge, like the heads of Viking ships, meant to scare the enemy, or Celtic illu-minations meant to confuse the eye of evil.

"Why do we have officers hi tactical command? Why?" he mumbled. "To land us in hot water with long tall slickers from over yonder. Why else?"

Zoa looked at him. It was like being stared at by a sarcophagus.

"You 'mind me of husband five," she said.

"Pardon?" Then he realized, and asked, "You've had five husbands?"

"More."

"How many?"

"Four and three."

"Really... still have one of them?*"

"Yes. But five husband were an butch like you."

"If you mean he let situations get out of hand, reckon you're dead-on right." He leaned an elbow on the rail and punished himself with immediate memory. "What do you suppose I did to turn this into such a mess?"

Zoa stood up, came down the access steps forward of the crescent, stepped around in front of him and squared off between him and the main screen.

"I will hit ye now," she declared.

" 'Scuse me?"

Booof

What was he doing on his butt, way back on the riser, with his shoulders against the command chair? His lungs seized up under bruised ribs. A cough of shock choked him.

"Hey!" Brad Ryan jumped up from the nav and got between Keller and Zoa.

Quinones shot out of her own chair and came to Keller's side, but neither knew what to do against this one not-so-big woman.

"Hold off." Keller grasped Quinones' wrist. His words were little gasps as he looked at the Rassua woman. "Wha-why*d-you-hit me?"

With one arm Zoa poked Ryan with one finger in the throat. He gagged, looked shocked, and dropped out of her way as if he were a potted plant. Her thick-soled sandals clunked twice on the carpet, bringing her to tower over Keller like an ancient colossus.

**Why you let me?*" Her golden face remained impassive, lined golden lips in perfect order, solid-blue eyes unblinking. "I warn ye. Why you din move? I always do what I say. Next time, move thee."

How many words was that? More than she'd strung together at once in all these weeks-months, really, counting the voyage from Federation space to Belle Terre. Maybe this was the first time she had anything to say.

Something made him listen, more than to someone who talked all the time.

*I varnish now, for drama. Be in paser room, you want me." She let her minimal lecture flap around the bridge a couple of times, then turned without any hint of helping him up, and thumped to the turbolift

The doors opened before she got there. Savannah Ring came out, instantly sidestepped the other woman, and got out of the way as Zoa disappeared into the lift and the doors closed again.

"I'd say that's dramatic," Keller grumbled. He rubbed his ribs, distracted.

Quinones knelt at Keller's side, the soft dome lights reflecting faintly pink on her blond hair. "Want me to help you up, Mr. Keller?"

Keller waved a hand. "Nah, I think I'll just sit here and pout. Take your posts, keep us on track, stay alert. You've got your hands full."

She and Ryan hesitated, but did as they were told.

Savannah stepped down to the command deck and crouched beside him. "What happened, Nick?"

Dimly aware of the attention, Keller spoke mostly to himself. "Zoa socked me in the breadbasket"

"Deserve it?"

"Uh..."

"She sneak up on you?*"

"Not exactly." As his gut started seriously hurting, he coughed again and rubbed his watering eyes. "She's not supposed to hit me...."

"I think she's flirting with you."

"They don't flirt on her planet They do that club-and-drag thing." He flexed a fist and curled his lip. "I shoulda biffed her one."

"She wouldn't notice. She's brain-dead. That sparkle in' her eyes is the light coming through her ears. Any-thing broken?"

Keller shook his head, bewildered. "I honestly don't know. Have you noticed I'm surrounded by scary women? No offense."

"None taken."

He brought his knees up and leaned on them. "She warned me," he mumbled, "then she hit me. What am I missing?"

"Get Bonifay up here for a s,ance," Savannah com-mented. 'The spirit world should be able to read the mind of a sphinx."

"I don't think Zane would do me any favors right now."

"Mmm... with Zane, the glass is half empty and quickly evaporating."

He glanced around to make sure no one was listen-ing too closely, and murmured, "Did you see what hap-pened to the Savage?"

She widened her eyes and nodded.

Reliving the horror, he pressed down a flutter of nau-sea. "I don't think we have a word for what happened to those people."

"Nick, my medical computer signaled me with some news. But it's peculiar." When he looked at her, she low-ered her voice. Her brown eyes crinkled with wicked delight "The man over on the grave ship doesn't just look like Shucorion's father. He is Shucorion's father."

He was glad they were sitting on the rise, out of everyone else's direct view. Wouldn't do for anybody to see his expression right now.

" 'Sense me, but isn't that impossible, given the years involved?" 4

"Everything checks out biologically. If you ignore the years, it's his father. The facts make me ignore the years"

"You're about to give me gory details, aren't you?"

"If you want them."

"Naw, I'll take your word"

"And something else," she went on, giving him a few seconds to absorb what she was about to say. "All the Anointed have names. The grave ship really is a ceme-tery. Shucorion's dad is catalogued as

Ennengand, and logged to his specific pedestal. All those thousands of dead people are each named and listed to the position-the post-the thing they're standing on. It's meticulous. Zane would like it"

Keller shook his head at this new thing. He rubbed his face with one hand and let the other flop over his knee. He stared at the deck lockers under the quarter-deck. His eyes lost focus.

"I've got to add this all up. Let's just start with the differences, the things that support the eleven-thousand-year theory. Their clothing is very lightweight metal loops-virtually air. You can't put a knife through it, it takes a phaser hit, they're really good at energy, and that chainmail keeps the energy going round and round, until it finds a ground. Then it arcs.

Now we find out they can spin this chainmail big enough to surround a ship, and it acts the same way."

"According to their diaries," she supplied, "they stumbled around for five hundred of our years just trying to understand the physics of the place on the other side of the Gateway."

"In those years and the other ten or so thousand, they've learned how to work metal on a microscopic level. They're experts at dissipating energy. They also control some kind of energy that can't be read but sure is there." He paused to clear his head, and thought back on Riutta. "She doesn't carry weapons, but she commands a power source which we also can't read. What do their records say about the Anointed? Does Riutta control them? Does she make them move?"

Savannah shook her head. "No. It's just a computer system of action and reaction. The mummies moved themselves when they wanned up to pliability. They're programmed to embalm whatever's put in the embalming machine. Live people aren't supposed to be in there at all. The grave ship is just a shrine to the dead who still have bodies when they die. The Living put the dead in there, and the mummies fill the body up with a metallic compound."

"Then they're-what, androids?"

"That's for you to figure out, sheriff, not me. Not in the conventional sense. They're solid metal. No circuitry or chips. Magnetics, maybe. Some kind of selective reaction? I don't know... they're run by the computer pilot program on the grave ship. Same thing that runs the ship. Basic signal and response, like navigational programs on scout probes. Go there, use this route, do this when you get there. The grave ship's computer system is very basic, way simpler than ours.

Communications too. I guess the Living didn't have anybody to talk to."

Keller stretched his legs out and flexed his back. "But they did have reasons to become experts at metallurgy. They have conducting and nonconducting metals. They make their chainmail out of the nonconducting stuff, like a mirror doesn't conduct light Energy just flows off."

She sighed. "Maybe in their universe, the electromagnetic reaction and the absorption of it act differently from ours. There's an awful lot of information to-

"What did you just say?"

Startled, she paused. "I don't know... what'd I say? Electromagnetic reaction is absorbed-

"Not that,"

"I didn't say anything else."

"Yes, you did." He sat straight and gripped her hand. "You did! You said... 'their universe.' "

She shrugged. "Just a figure of speech."

"Keep your mind open."

"Everything'll fall out"

But he was already onto his new line of thought 'They've got an aberration of Shucorion's attitude, an extreme of Blood and Kauld practicality and sense of rules, agreements..., and they've learned to work metal so it sheds energy the way a mirror sheds light The power source is invisible... can't be traced, scanned-energy that can't be found-"

"Maybe we're just misreading or making some other mistake."

"What if we're not?" he said sharply. "What if... what if that Gateway changes everything? What if the Living really are a huge exaggeration of Blood and Kauld... as if they'd had thousands of years of practice on one principle... eleven thousand years there... twenty here-"

She stared at him, no longer part of the conversation he was having with himself.

"Of course! Savannah-" He clapped his hands once and shot to his feet so fast he had to catch himself on the quarterdeck rail. "Another dimension!"

She got to her feet behind him. "Isn't that kind of a leap?"

Everyone else was watching him too.

He slapped the rail. "The

"That's too easy."

"Got something against easy? The ability to directly convert matter to energy is being beamed from inside the Gateway!"

She followed him across the bridge while Ryan, Creighton, Quinones, and Tyce watched the odd dance.

"What do we do? Attack the Gateway?"

"It might defend itself," Creighton suggested.

Keller nodded and held up a staying hand. "Not yet. If our guess is right, the energy coming through the Gateway could be years' worth. Her people are still over there, catching electric fliers and sending the power over here. And she uses it, too. Those micro-gates-she can go anywhere she wants. She can drop a grenade anywhere on this ship, right through the shields and the hull, and we wouldn't even know it. We can't read the power. She just steps back and forth like you and I go between rooms. We can't beat her technology, and I'm betting death's not what she's afraid of anyway. If they're eleven thousand years ahead of

Blood and Kauld, how far ahead of the Federation does that put them? How far ahead of us?"

"No idea," she accepted, "but I'll bet we can't whup 'em in a fair fight."

The carpet seemed unyielding under his boots. The rail fell behind as he moved to the main screen and communed with its fuzzy view of the grave ship in the forward distance, a green blur with silver dots trailing behind it. The Blood ships, helpless inside globes of chainmail.

He combed over the choppy, fruitless conversation between Riutta and Shucorion, plucking and sifting for anything he could use. What were her inflections? Had the translator gotten the words right but maybe the sentiment off?

"She talks about the Gateway as if it has a mind," he recalled. "Wisdom, from a metal object. She's got spiritual ideas about the Anointed, talks about them as if they're still alive and running their own ship... same way Zane talks about trees and cards and candles. With some kind of... respect. But how do I fight somebody," he contemplated, "who doesn't have to fight back?"

Savannah came to his side and raised her brows. "How are you at unfair fights?"

As he reviewed those critical moments of contact with people from so far away in time and space, Keller found the experience a mirror. He was really looking at himself, seeing again himself sprawled on the deck, flattened by Zoa after a fair warning.

Warning... yes, fair warning. She did always do what she said she would, didn't she?

Why hadn't he moved? Why hadn't he anticipated?

Looking ahead wasn't enough. He had to learn to look beyond ahead, beyond what might be coming, to what he could force to come.

"I want that respect," he declared, more into the mirror in his mind than to Savannah. "I want it from Riutta, I want it from the Blood and from Shucorion, from Zane and the crew... I want it."

Apparently Savannah Ring knew an epiphany when she saw it. She said nothing as Keller stared with sudden resolve at the colored blurs on the forward screen, a crisp view of his own purpose and a sense of control that had eluded him until now.

"I've got seven hours," he blurted. "Savannah, get me every bit of cultural information on these people. Find out everything about her ship. If it's old Kauld, then we can fiddle the mechanics. I want to see their logs, their drawings, what they say about themselves, about that ship, the Anointed, their history-everything. I can't beat their science... maybe I can beat their attitude. If I can't have physical power, then I want mental power. Shucorion and the Blood crew won't work for me, Riutta won't fight me, Delytharen won't talk to me-I mean to get all these people to pay attention to me again." He turned away from the main screen and squared his shoulders. "Unfair fights? You watch."

Chapter Twenty-one

The Bosun's Tool Alley, Deck 14

"reroute your feed to the local quadritronic sub-processors in auxiliary, then boost to the main bridge through the secondary software."*

" Won't hold up for long like that"

"Doesn't have to. Just make sure he's got the sub-light guidance he needs."

"What about the optical link?"

"Am I a computer specialist?"

"No."

*Then do it the stupid way."

"This is really making me nervous. I'll electrocute myself-maybe we better wait and tell Mr. Keller."

"Don't tell Keller. He's got his hands full."

"I think I should tell him."

"I don't care what you think. You already told your watch leader, and he told me. If Keller needs to know,

I'll tell him. Keep your insulated gloves on, do one thing at a time, and don't hurry."

"Okay, okay..."

The starboard tool alley was a paradise of clutter in half-baked order. Every manner of wrench, socket, machining tool, utility aid, coil, and leftover hardware lay about the deck and on dozens of shelves from deck to crossbeam, most of it time-tested junkyard rescues. Almost everything here had been recycled, retooled, or yardsaled. All of it was here because it hadn't broken yet.

Zane Bonifay paced like a hyperactive hamster. His communicator had been in constant use since he banished himself here. The ship was in trouble, racing toward more trouble, and he was here, under guard.

The guard was even more unhappy about the arrangement than Bonifay himself.

"Zane, I'm leaving," the big young man said from inside his extra-extra-large moss-green crew sweater. His wide shoulders cast a shadow over half the tool alley. "We've got damage to the armory and I oughta-

"Stay put, you oughta." Bonifay looked up, up, up, into Gyler's ruddy face. "I outrank you, marblehead."

"We're both ensigns!" Gyler complained. "I don't like loafing around so it looks like you're under guard.**

"We've got to keep up appearances for the nosy neighbors," Bonifay implored. He talked fast. No chance for witnesses to take notes. "Nobody'll give Keller any crap if everybody knows I'm guarded by a walking power tool like Teddy Gyler. Here-keep your hands busy. Stack these cutters and everything in those boxes on the coded shelves in the right numerical order. Don't put the green ones next to the brown ones. Stop arguing!**

"I didn't say nothin'!"*

"You're arguing in your soul. Stack." Leaving Gyler with a job, he paced into the back of the tool alley and brought his communicator up again and adjusted the channel. "Ellis, Bonifay. How's that cascade amplifier coming? Tell me something wonderful."

"Ellis here. We're kidding ourselves. It keeps trying to focus on green phosphorous on the narrow aperture. It's got no periphery, no depth perception-it's pushing high-noon illumination on everything and I can't break through the radiation codes to stop the acutators"

**Why would it &o that?" He grumbled his way to-ward Gyler, then back again, deeper into the alley. "There's got to be a reason... let me think... let me get the diagnostics into my skull."

This process took thirty seconds or so before he could think his way back through the guts of the ship. It worked. It always worked. Stop, Think. Wander back in the mind... revisit, rediscover, walk it through-

He slapped his forehead, clawed his hands into his meticulously rakish black hair, and sold his revelation with a grimace. "I know what that is! You're getting flickers of leftover programming in the unclean chips all over the parts! Language impulses from whatever programs were embedded before this sea serpent was even a light in Keller's eye!"

"You want to conduct an exorcism?"

"Try a passive injector on low speed. And use the antigrav pontoons, no matter how crowded they are. Remember-in triple gravity, a six-foot fall is like a twenty-four-foot fall. So don't fall."

"Copy that."

"Zane," Gyler attempted again, "this is crazy. We're still under red alert. I'm gonna report back to the ar-mory."

Lowering his communicator, Bonifay leveled a finger at the big crewman's nose. "Stay put or I*11 beat your fist in with my face." When Gyler batted the hand away, Bonifay ducked and chimed, "And never touch my earring!*"

"You're not wearing one!"

*It*s ephemeral. You can't see it because you don't believe."

"Bonifay, Manteo. Where are you?"

"Bonifay. I'm just stepping into the hot tub."

"/ can't find the flight-stress punch for the grab plate. Isn't it supposed to be right on the site?"

"What shipyard did you grow up in? Can't you fake it?*"

"I'm a microbiologist!"

"Look behind the next bracket. Reach for it"

"Oh-got it!"

"Now, listen carefully. Watch my hand in your mind. Concentrate." He closed his eyes, put his hand out in front of his own face, and drew the procedure on the air between himself and Gyler, a process which freaked poor Gyler to the bone. "The main fluid reservoir for smooth actualization of the pistons runs right through the assembly on the right side of your spreader. Two inches down and four left is a manual latching option. There's a magnetic valve above the redundant sensor assembly. Is your forefinger where mine is?"

"Think so..."

"I want you to manually latch the reservoir before you unhook the umbilicals. Clear?"

"We really need some engineers...."

"We need more girls too. Keep burning your bay leaves."

"The Blood crew was refitting this system, weren't they?"

"And they did a damn fine job. Now it's your job. Just be methodical.*"

"Emmanuel to Bonifay."

"Bonifay."

"We're getting brittle metal in the driver coil assembly. Should I use the vent patch compound again?"

"We don't have any more. Use the fusion patch."

"But it shows a constant flash of load imbalance. I'm betting on a short"

"And a woman who picks St. John's wort while naked in the summer will be fertile. But it doesn't have any effect on us right now." He paused, rubbed his eyes, and with contempt huffed, "Gyler! I said don't put the green ones next to the brown ones!"

"Why not? What difference is the color?"

"It's just not a good idea."

"It'll wake the dead, right?"

"This is not a stance, goober. There are no ghosts. There are spirits. Fine line. Take these out, move those over, wedge this in, and put these between those and mat"

"What about this?"

"Doesn't go there."

"Just tell me one thing. Who'm I guarding you against?"

"Against myself. My own temptation to walk out that door, beat Tyce off the helm, and do it myself. Make sure I don't leave."

"You serious?"

"It's important."

Gyler frowned, but bought in.

As long as he was stuck here, Bonifay determined to make a tidy alley. The ship could be in trouble, about to fly into the middle of a maelstrom between hostile civilizations, but there was no reason not to be tidy. That was what he liked best about the Blood crewmen. They were-

A third presence startled him, at first only a floating shadow on the other side of Gyler, at the opening of the tool alley. Nobody ever came here without his permission, so he wasn't expecting anyone.

He dropped off the thing he was standing on and leaned-way, way over-to see past Gyler.

"Ah, she of the slashing tongue," he greeted.

Zoa stood at the entrance to the alley. She didn't move. She just stood there, her right arm slightly poised at her side, her left tucked behind her back as if at parade rest. She looked Gyler up and down, and up again, which was work.

Gyler paused, stopped stacking, and looked at her. Great-two strong silent types. Pure vaudeville.

Bonifay snapped his fingers. "I know! You need a new needle key for the tactical pulpit I didn't forget I've got one back in here. I put it aside... it's back here. Swear t'God... well, it was here. Gyler, did you move a huge green utility box about the size of your head with a bundle of long skinny things with hooks on the ends? If you put it hi the wrong place, I'm gonna murder you."

Gyler didn't answer.

When Bonifay stopped craning into the top shelf and turned to see why, Zoa was almost nose to nose with Gyler, peering into his eyes as if searching for a rogue eyelash.

"What's this?" Bonifay asked.

Zoa ignored him. She stared more intensely at Gyler. She never blinked, not once. Her eyes were very wide, like the eyes of a cougar hunting.

Now Gyler wasn't blinking either. The big ensign sighed heavily, sucked in a yawn, and his head lolled

Suddenly his knees bent and he spiraled to the deck. She never even touched him and he went down like a darted ox!

Bonifay fell off the shelf and stumbled in the hard-ware, found footing with a clatter and gaped at the sack of meat on the deck. "What'd you do to him! Gyler, snap out of it!"

But Zoa's posture had changed. Her thick sandals mumped on the deck as she stepped over Gyler's bulk and revealed her hidden hand.

"You make an trouble Commander Keller," she said, and drew her left hand from behind her back.

Bonifay's skin grew cold at the sight of the armed phaser she pointed directly at him. If she fired it, the ship's sensors would set off the alarms. Of course, that wouldn't do him any good

"How'd you get a hand phaser?" he demanded "No-body issued sidearms... hey... hey! No, no, mis won't work-what're you doing? What do you think you're doing! Hey!"

She moved toward him, her spot-eyes fixed

He backed away, but there was nowhere to go.

The Blood Planet

UFP Designation: Star System "Whistler"

Sublight speed, thank God.

At the helm, Lucy Quinones was a rag. Beside her, Brad Ryan had his head down on his arms, exhausted His reddened eyes were open, though, and fixed on me instruments. Gamma Dawn had come, and they could at least drive again. They now had a clear picture of the

Pompeii, soaring ingraciously through the solar system, dragging four Blood Savages in cocoons. Thirteen hours through deep space without a word from Delytharen or Riutta. Hail after hail. No response.

Keller felt supremely lonely. Shucorion and the Blood crew remained below decks, unable to participate without bringing the wrath of three solar systems down around them all. The big picture twisted in on itself.

Zane wasn't here, an absence more critical by the hour. Keller had never realized the benefit before, but somehow Bonifay's acidic mysticism lowered his blood pressure, not to mention the fact that only the bosun knew where the bolts and pins were kept.

Zoa wasn't at tactical. Where was she all this time? Probably in the armory. There had been heavy damage in that section. He thought about summoning her back after her exit for effect, but couldn't muster the will. What could phasers or photons do against Riutta's en-ergy from another universe? She had to be beaten some other way than sheer force.

After treating burns and minor injuries, Savannah was now up at the medical/environmental/life-support pulpit, quietly sifting through information from the grave ship.

Now that the grave ship approached the Blood planet, not bothering to orbit, Keller ordered a cautious distance and tried to hail Riutta again.

No answer.

"Brad," he said, nudging Ryan out of his torpor. "You and Quinones arrange safe distance where I can watch whatever Riutta does. I don't want to get close. Not yet, at least."

"Aye, sir."

"Saddle up, everybody. They're approaching the planet."

The bridge came to life as if he had lit off a firecracker

Creighton moved to the forward end of the set-deck. "What do you think she'll do?"

Ignoring the question, Keller said, "Stand by to assist Delytharen's fleet if they're still in distress."

"Pompeii's at the planet, sir," Quinones reported, confirming what they could all see on the screens. "Hey... why are they separating?!"

Keller turned to the main screen. Savannah came down to his side, and together they watched, mystified, as the spinners broke from the grave ship and dispersed in a random formation.

Or was it random? In fact, they were spreading out through the atmosphere of the planet.

"Look!" Quinones blurted. "They're turning the Blood ships loose!"

Hovering between the grave ship and Challenger, the silver cocoons around the four Savages suddenly split down the middle and were retrieved into the bow claws of the grave ship. Just like that, as if someone had reeled in a fishing net Keller could almost hear the slurp.

"Get this picture down to Shucorion," he said on an impulse. "Make sure he sees and hears everything."

"Understood," Ryan complied. "Switching."

"Nick," Savannah began, "they're surrounding the planet. What do a dozen or so little ships think they can do with a planet that size?"

Try hailing her again.

They never got the chance. The tenor of the bridge changed suddenly when the micro-gate opened in its spot over the port hatch. This time Riutta was already standing on the other side, only steps away, waiting to speak.

Quinones flinched, but stayed in her seat, though Riutta blinked at her with catlike curiosity. She was on a different part of the grave ship than before. This area had all the earmarks of a lower-deck workshop. There was none of the beauty of the other chambers, none of the reverence or artistry. The walls and supports were undecorated, much more mechanical than the grottoes and forests of the other decks.

**We will remove the barriers from your ships," she said without any other greeting. "You may go home. No one will come out."

**What does that mean?" Keller immediately demanded. "You're going to blockade an entire planet? Our civilizations are interdependent. These planets depend upon shipments and helping each other. Why are you threatening to blockade us?"

"There is no trust and cooperation," Riutta continued. "You have trouble in space. No good comes of it. No food, no work, no good."

He realized she wasn't speaking to him, but to every-one. She meant for him to spread the word.

"Look behind her," Savannah whispered. She tipped her head toward Riutta, but meant something else.

Keller squinted. Behind Riutta were five cubicles of some sort, without tops or fronts. In each was part of a humanoid form. Two had heads... but three of them were missing heads and at least one shoulder and arm. One of them had nothing above the waist. Above each of the bodies was a spinning vortex, like a dust devil on new snow, sucking in the matter below.

"It's a factory," Savannah decided. *The Anointed are the source of raw material."

"Raw material," Keller murmured, "for making chain-mail!"

"We have been a thousand generations in the forge," Riutta went on. "We will be ten thousand before we will be allowed to rest. You will be remembered as the beginning. Witness this."

Hiding his words behind his knuckles, Keller grum-bled, "I don't like the sound of that...."

**Uh-uh," Savannah agreed.

Riutta apparently knew they could see what was hap-pening in space. She understood their visual screens and expected them to watch.

The view of the planet suddenly blurred-but it wasn't a blur after all. It was a veil of chainmail! Each of the spinners, those still in view, had begun to work their mandibles in and out, and from them spewed silvery strands of chainmail which bloomed wider and wider.

Were they surrounding the Challenger again?

No. The fabric of chainmail extended itself thinner and thinner, but spread in the atmosphere of the Blood planet

Keller looked up at Creighton. The other man scoured the sci-deck readings, then looked down and quietly informed, "No mass. Barely reads at all-

"Warn your people," Riutta said. "Tell them to stay home, or their fate is written. Go back to your planets. Live your lives. You will have no more reason to be in space because you fear your neighbor will come and you will be disadvantage^!. You will enjoy your beauti-ful planets... with color and flower and smell-

*Riutta!" Bristling, Keller stepped closer to the micro-gate. "What gives you the right to be in space and keep us all out?"

Riutta backed away, but only slightly. "It is our bur-den. We have been given power here. Random order has left me to do this,"

**Why not let us patrol space?" Keller challenged. "We prefer to do it!"

"You would not do it. You'll be here, and others will come, and you'll allow them to come. They'll want what you have, and someone will shoot. You'll shoot back. Our task is large, but finite, like storing energy. We will not finish the task, nor our children nor grand-children, but someday it will be done. We will secure this star cluster. Then we will secure the rest."

"The rest?"

"We have tracked your paths. You have many worlds. We will help them all. We have been given lifetimes more than you have had here. We are now the superior force. We have no need to destroy. Ruin will be at your hands, not ours.*"

Savannah leaned close to him and mumbled, "She's not really speaking to you, Nick."

"Not exactly a canned speech," he said. "She really believes all this. She's got a mystical system all worked out."

"What do you think she's talking about? What's 'the beginning'?"

He didn't bother to answer. They both knew.

As the individual silver veils from each spinner came together and formed seams, the entire planet was now blanketed in a thin upper-atmosphere layer of chain-mail. The entire planet. A more intimidating sight could scarcely be imagined.

Once the job was finished, the spinners broke off and backed away from the planet, leaving a pure platinum ball shimmering in the light of its troubled star.

"You will all go home and stay home," Riutta finished. "Prepare your planets for peace."

Chapter Twenty-two

**are you taking me to be killed? You could just as easily hand me over to the Blood! They want to kill me too. Everybody wants to kill me. Stop pulling!"

Zane Bonifay hauled back on his own arm for the tenth time, but he might as well be in a Jefferies clamp. Zoa had him by the wrist and was drawing him from quarters to quarters through the ship, farther and farther below, deck by deck. At the slightest chance of being seen or heard, she stuffed him into a locker or a room or closet until the chance passed. He tugged, kicked, sat down-she was unaffected. She kept pulling, as if she had a poodle on a leash. A small poodle.

"Look, I know you're devoted to Nick" he coughed out. "He doesn't know it, but I do. Are you intending to kill me to eliminate the problem? At least do me the re-spect of telling me!"

"You escape."

"What?"

"You flee."

He pulled harder, finding sudden strength. "Oh-no, no! I will not! I refuse! Guards! Where are the guards? Why don't we have guards! What kind of traction have you got on those sandals! How could we have believed you were a diplomat!"

"Keller better not decide."

"What's that mean? Speak English!"

"I am English. I dranked it."

"You can't go around making decisions like this! How-what-hey!"

She pitched him inside an airlock and he abruptly re-alized where she'd dragged him-the emergency pod dock on the underbelly of the engineering section, about as far from anything as a person could get on a ship without going outboard.

Locked into place was a two-man utility runner they'd modified from the Blood fleet, for use in servicing the Blue Net.

"What are you doing with the Blood pod? You can't operate this. You don't have the codes."

"Go in. Ry."

"I don't have the codes either."

"Ry. Go 'way now. Clean getaway."

He stepped back. "I will not escape! How would that look? Keller doesn't have enough problems? For-get it."

She got him by the wrist again and with very little effort pulled him inside the pod, then threw him into one of the two seats.

"Fine. I'll just sit here," he said. "Shucorion's the only one with the pilot codes. It's exclusive. You can't even disengage-"

She plugged in a computer cartridge and cranked the access latch.

On the outer hull of the pod, six docking clamps dunked open. The pod was free! Bonifay gripped the seat's arms. ****How'd you do that!**** ****We launch when planet-dawn on Challenger. Go on dark side, till next Gamma Night. Then we get clean away.****

While she spoke, she powered up the pod. Around them both, the pilot theatre came to life and the screens popped on.

Leaning forward in a vain hope to have some effect on her, Bonifay lowered his voice and hissed out his words. "You don't understand. This is no help for Keller! This won't look good. Nobody's going to be better to him because of this. They'll think he set it up." "I leave an letter. Keller is pure white innocent" "Look, I'm an officer and a gentleman, goddamn it! I do not escape custody!"

Still holding her phaser on him, Zoa settled back in the pilot seat and peered at the monitors, which showed various views of the chainmailed planet. Behind the planet, the corona of the sun called Whistler created a supernatural golden-orange aura around the rim of the chainmail globe. Planet-dawn would come... maybe twenty minutes.

Satisfied, she turned her blue dots to him. "You be gone. Keller jump off the hook."

The Fantail

They couldn't stop working. They couldn't sit or sleep. Not with the Humans working so hard only chambers away. The turmoil of conscience drove Challenger's Blood to activity. Neither Blood Many nor All Kauld had ever had time to indulge the kind of zest brought by these Humans who came now to breathe passion into the star cluster. Humans seized their own plans with joy and daring, made mistakes with style, and plunged past those mistakes with sharp surges of determination. Caution served a purpose, but a small one to the larger vision of these vibrant newcomers. They let nothing stand in their way. Their very feet could explode beneath them, and they would hobble on, or learn to fly.

Very hard to ignore, this Human way. Nick Keller, especially, took every defeat as a reason to push on with even more energy. Inexperience pestered him, but did not impede him. He knew what he would not be able to do, then did it anyway.

Shucorion was thinking about Nick Keller when he heard a footfall that had become, though he hadn't realized it, familiar to his ear. He knew Keller was approaching long before he looked up to see the young commander who had not wanted command.

Must be those cowboy boots. They made their own sound upon the deck.

All the Blood crew of Challenger had gathered here, on the fantail, but few spoke. There were no supple words for their condition. None was pleased with himself, or their rules, or their obligations. None could go against those.

In their eyes he had seen the temptation, and he had put them to work here, though they worked angrily and with resentment.

"Can't stop working, after all?"

Shucorion, unlike the other Blood, was not working but instead was pacing before the operational screens, which showed a clear and frightening view of the planet where he was born, now surrounded in a vast glistening shell.

He looked up as Keller approached. "You look fatigued."

"Never mind how I look. I need to talk to you." Self-conscious, Keller pushed his fingers through his hair. With its simple cut, feathered back like a gentle helmet, his brown hair framed his eyes in a manner that showed off the concern ever present there. He sometimes redirected his emotions, but never attempted to hide them. He was honest.

This begged appreciation. Add to it an easy manner and genuine care for the well-being of his shipmates—Nick Keller made everyone want to work for him.

Keller paused to glance at the other Blood men, who were riveting segmented blast shields into place on the fantail launchpad. Even now, in the midst of all this, he offered a generous nod of approval to the other men before turning to Shucorion.

He gestured at the two screens with their picture of the planet "You've seen everything."

"Yes." With a simple nod, he accepted the invitation to turmoil. "It's impressive and terrifying."

"Riutta's given us an ultimatum. She wants Derytharen and the other Savages and the rest of the Blue Net

to go back to the planet Then she'll keep them in-side and keep everybody else out"

"I was listening," Shucorion confessed. "Most com-pelling, this woman."

"Hell, yes, she's compelling. She means to close down space. She talks about our planets as a starting place. If I'm reading her right, she means to track us back to the populated galaxy and make everybody go home. Humans, Romulans, Klingons, Orions, Rigellians... scary part is, she might be able to do it She's got a huge store of raw material-"

He stopped speaking suddenly.

Shucorion caught the pause. "They have raw mate-rial? In what form?"

"Uh..." Keller's green eyes crimped and grew more troubled. He seemed to realize he'd made a poor judgment, though Shucorion couldn't understand why. Why would he not wish to tell? After a moment, he pressed his hand to his mouth, rubbed his jaw, and admitted, "It's the... the Anointed. Those mummies. They're a repository for the metallic compound Riutta spins into chainmail. We've been crunching some numbers. The Anointed are so dense and the chain mail so light and thin, it only takes one or two of them to surround the whole planet" He motioned toward the terrible view of the Blood world. "They could engulf a hell of a lot of planets... just a hell of a lot"

Watching him, Shucorion felt the fear mount in his chest "And she means to make everyone go home..."

Keller nodded. "Good fences make good neighbors, I guess." Once again he paced, unable to shake off the weight of responsibility.

"What if nothing in this universe will beat her?" Shucorion pondered.

"That's the other thing that scares me," Keller said. "This is just one old battlebarge with some pickers. What if she summons more ships and Living to come from the other side, with more of their power source? A power source better than antimatter, better than olivium... with ten or eleven thousand extra years, what could you and I learn to do with antimatter or olivium? She's had the eleven thousand."

The concept was huge, overwhelming. Shucorion's skin tightened as he tried to imagine numbers so enormous, possibilities so wide and encompassing. Until the coming of Federation, his had been a Me of straight lines, of Blood and Kauld, and hardly anyone else.

"On the other hand,** Keller went on, 'there are some things they didn't tamper with. The grave ship is the original battlebarge that chased your father into the Gate-way. We've analyzed the mechanics. It's very simple."

"In so many years, they changed nothing?***

Keller shrugged. "You don't work to change reli-gious icons. Religion stops things from advancing. They got through the first thousand years deifying your father's basic rules for survival, then spent ten thousand trying to make a prophecy come true. You don't change things when you think you have the answers."

Shucorion parted his lips to speak, to voice his desire to help, tell how much he despised these conditions that divorced him from the bridge, from helping Keller in this terrible time. But such a conversation, he suspected, would weaken them both and serve nothing. Was Keller right? Was it unhealthy to stay home?

We did some tests on that effigy over there," Keller began, shifting the subject to the more personal. "I think you know what we found out, don't you?"

"I have my fears," Shucorion confirmed.

**You should be proud of him," Keller bothered to offer. "He went through that Gateway twenty years ago and a Kauld battlebarge followed. The two teams landed on a hellish planet. By all rights they should've died in a week. Instead they got along for what amounts to eleven thousand years on that side. All their surplus goes into storing energy and processing metal, and they're real good at it. Your father got two warring tribes to hunker down and carve a whole civilization out of a metal rock."

"Yes, I suppose he did..."

"So what can you tell me about the Living?"

Startled, Shucorion paused. "What can I tell you-T

Keller stepped closer, intensifying his statements. **Well, Ennengand was your father... Riutta's your greatgrandsister. Knowing him, what do you think she's got in mind?"

Many questions could have come. Somehow Shucorion hadn't expected that one. He hesitated briefly, to contemplate.

"She mentioned 'the curse of space/ At first, I thought mis meant nothing, but now I begin to worry for it. Ennengand hated space. He knew we should not be there, but we had to go because Kauld were mere. Riutta may embrace such ideas... if that indeed is what she meant and we're not misunderstanding." Suddenly over-whelmed, he rubbed his hands on his leggings. "How can we face them if they are so many years advanced of us."

"We can't beat their technology," Keller admitted. Obviously he had already given this much consideration. "We have to do something else. That means you and I have to retool our agreement."

Thus came the sinister truth, the reason for this un-easy visit

Shucorion clasped his hands at his chest to hold himself to the moment "I bear the scars of a thousand falls," he mused, "yet I quake to see you harmed, even in small ways, for you take every wound to the core of you. This coming struggle will chisel you away to nothing, I think."

Keller spread his hands. Insult came out in his voice. "What's that supposed to mean?... Are you disappointed in me? You think I broke my word and nothing else I do is worth believing?"

Tormented, Shucorion battled his own expression.

Quietly he said, "You are bigger than you know in the eyes of Blood Many and All Kauld. Sovereignty has its tolls, lawlessness its furious demands. You are battling brainless chance with ritual and swift response. So far, you have kept above, but it cannot hold."

"If you're saying we been lucky, you're dang tootin.* "

"Lucky?... Lucky... I don't know. Blood Many struggle all our lives against the designless. Vigilance gives

no help, prudence no comfort You have only the legend of Keller and what you have built, which we fly through space... and I am greatly haunted that I agree with Ennengand, with Riutta. All this trouble occurred because we came to space, I sometimes think."

"Quit thinking it. You'll have to start trusting me. It's not healthy to sit home. The whole thought of nothing new, nothing to quest for... it's like the Blood having no work. What if my idea of paradise was sitting around a beach, and I forced you to do it too?"

Without waiting for an answer, Keller shook his head and paced.

"Well, you can talk philosophy all you want," he said, "but we've got a more acute problem on our hands. It goes back to the moment on the Plume when you ordered Bonifay to stay on a ship that was about to blow up." He stopped and faced Shucorion. 'I want you to ask yourself-was there any hope of saving the Plume?"

In deference to a legitimate query, Shucorion took the moment to think back, to feel again the strike made by the grave ship in what was apparently self-defense or mistaken identity, an action against which a Blood Plume was not stressed to survive. Mechanical confusion was an odd disease, sometimes cured, sometimes deadly.

When he met Keller's eyes, he still had no clear answer.

Sensing that, Keller lowered his chin and frowned "Then why did you order him to stay?"

Again the response was only a thoughtful silence. Shucorion believed he knew his own mind, but doubts began to leak in as he fielded Keller's steady eyes.

After a moment of this, Keller folded his arms, "It takes time to learn who to trust. I wasn't even mere and I know what Zane was thinking. 'We're in a box, there's another box over there, this box is blowing up, so we'll go to that box.' "

"The decision was not his."

"No, it wasn't. But contacting Delytharen wasn't yours. Why'd you do it? You did it because you trust them more than you trust me. Same problem on the Plume-you admitted defeat too soon. You didn't give Zane's alternatives a chance."

Shucorion warned him with a tilt of his head. "You listen too much to your friends."

"And you don't listen enough to yours," Keller shot back. "Shipmates have our own kind of agreement, one that says we'll die if our leader asks us to. The other side is that the leader won't ask us to die for no reason."

Having said this, Keller paused and his attitude melted. He came to Shucorion's side, turned and leaned back against the chart desk. He looked down at the blunt toes of his cow boots and at Shucorion's gray knee-highs-Keller called them "moccasins"-and seemed to comb back over his own words before going forward.

"We're shipmates," Keller continued, "you and me, Zane, Savannah, Lumellen... all of us, we have our own agreement that we don't just give up on each other. We don't put a dissolving hunk of metal above a shipmate. You went too far."

'I ordered him to stay and fight for the Plume!'

"Oh, no, your order wasn't 'stay and fight' The order you gave was 'give up/ You gave up and Zane didn't All this is happening because he'll gamble and you won't"

Shucorion straightened, surprised by this cultural line he couldn't quite cross.

"You believe I broke an agreement with Bonifay he asked, amazed. "Do you think he believes this?"

Tightening his folded arms, Keller nodded. 'I believe you didn't expand your mind to the situation. Zane found a way for you both to live. Now he has to pay. As for you, you're still trying to be a Blood avedon more man a first officer of this crew. That's why he doesn't trust you yet You haven't decided where you're going to put your loyalty. You think the crew hasn't picked up on that?"

Shucorion's feet were suddenly cold, his hands tense and sore. He knew this was a turning point, mat Keller was closing in upon a decision he had already made. The set of those shoulders, the sedate expression of re-gret where before there had been only resentment and anger... these were signals Shucorion had learned to see hi Nick Keller's manner. So he remained silent, in realization that this might be the last time they would stand together.

I can tolerate a hell of a lot," Keller said with false passivity. "I can deal with Zane's juju and Savannah's flirting with dead guys and Zoa staring me down and with you never taking a chance. But give up? Quit? Hell, buster, you got no business being disappointed m me. I won't give up on the Blood even though every last one of you gives up on me. I saw these men and women build a fighting ship out of broken sticks and used glue. I'll play every hand and I'll rifle other peo-ple's pockets for more cards if I have to. You want to go sit? There's the door."

"What are you saying?" Shucorion asked. "Are you making an order?"

"I'm saying you're released from your obligation to me and this ship. Take your Blood guys, whoever wants to go, get on the Blood pod and report to Delytharen or anyplace else you want. But if you're not off this ship by Gamma Dawn, I'll expect you to report to your posts and follow orders from then on. My orders. That's your timetable."

His voice sounded different

"I know you need us," Shucorion mentioned, hesi-tantly.

Keller actually laughed, but with irony rather than delight "Hell, yes, you're my trump card! Riutta trusts you. I need you to betray that trust You're the only one who can open a chink in her armor. My only edge is your special status with the Living." He lowered his voice. "We need your help. I need it."

Shucorion looked at him with a depth and signifi-cance that penetrated the officer commonality and went to something far more personal. There was desperation in his voice. "I want to help you."

The other half of the sentence went unspoken, but announced itself anyway. It wasn't a good clause. It de-manded that Keller meet him halfway,

"I know what has to happen," Keller told him. "I'll give you my word. I want yours. You take my orders, all of them, whatever they are, no matter what I say, 1 until you leave this command."

He was afraid, but not for himself. This was a big \ afraid, not very pleasant to see in the eyes of a brave man.

When Keller pushed to his feet, Shucorion caught his wrist and held him in place.

"Please understand/" he implored "I do not prefer to see him killed."

"Well, that's a little late" Keller snapped, "and I don't know if it helps. But you can bank on this promise... I'll ask you and all our shipmates to fight I'll even ask you to die. But give up? You make that decision for yourself"

Behind him, as if in a sort of curious support, the Blood men had ceased their activities and crept forward. They knew something had changed, and had clearly been paying attention to their two leaders through the not-so-guarded conversation. How much had they heard?

As Keller stood before him, waiting, Shucorion watched the other Blood for a moment. He saw an entire civilization in this handful of men.

"If you fall back," he warned, "the repercussions will shatter all our planets."

Anger surged up in Nick Keller's eyes and stopped him from offering any sympathy.

"Deal." He stepped back, and with that executed a challenge to them both. "Rise and work."

When Keller and Shucorion arrived on the bridge together, up through the OTC's favorite tube instead of the lifts, no one around them really knew what that meant. They hadn't exactly put out a memo. The curiosity and worry in the crew members' eyes was hard to take. Keller forced himself to ignore the scouring gazes and the noise of unspoken questions. He didn't want to tip his hand.

With them came Lumellen, to take the helm, much to Lucy Quinones' thundering relief, and Milespark for the navigation. The Blood men couldn't make the frigate behave any better than the Humans could, but they could tease information both out of Gamma Night and out of normal space which otherwise would remain in the sensor shadows. Their adjustments were more subtle, careful, their touch more sensitive.

On the main screen, the Blood planet turned passively, surrounded by chainmail. The sight was perfectly astounding.

Keller did something rare—he sat in the command chair. There was a certain image he wanted to impart. A little theatre helped sometimes.

"Hail Delytharen, on visual."

He wasn't even sure who did it. Nobody was manning the communications board, which meant maybe Creighton had rerouted through the sci-deck or Savan-nah had cross-fed from life-support. He didn't know, didn't care. Efficiency dropped by fifty percent this way, that was why they had individual boards each with a crewman to tend it. But beggars couldn't be choosers. The job got done—ten seconds late, but done. The main screen changed from a view of the planet to Delytharen's cylindrical bridge.

And what a mess.

Thirteen hours ago, Delytharen had been elegant and decorous. Now he was a shattered wraith. He had followed rules all his life and this freakish clatter of events left him shaken and obviously wounded. His clothes were torn and burned, as were those of the crew around him. He looked exhausted, fighting for an illusion of control. Behind him, other Blood crewmen were just as wounded and tattered, and even more afraid than their .javedon.

A twinge of guilt ran through Keller—apparently he'd inflicted more damage than he'd hoped. Even trying not to hurt them, he'd still hurt them. Alone in their bubble, they couldn't be helped and had endured the past thirteen hours of suffering and damage alone.

"Delytharen, do you require assistance?" Keller asked

"You are powerless against these new people, Keller" The Blood shuddered. "Even you have no weapons to push Riutta and her people away from us. Assistance? We are under a cloud bigger than Kauld or Federation now."

What a pitiful speech. Keller glanced at Shucorion, who only sighed and folded his arms.

"Oh, I dunno," Keller plunged. "Federation can be a pretty dang big cloud. Don't give up on us yet Riutta has made an announcement," he continued "She wants me to communicate that you can go back to the planet and settle down, but you can never come back out to space. She means to put barriers around the Kauld planet and Belle Terre also. We'll all be cut off."

"We heard," Delytharen said. "When such a force comes, how can we resist? She can block us from our families!"

"Are you saying you'll go?"

"What other way is there?"

"There is one." Pressing his bruised hands to the chair, Keller stood up. Sitting hadn't lasted long. Couldn't think on his butt. "All your ships and men have to take my orders. We can't have a dozen people making command decisions. I'm going to make the decisions. You have to do what I say now. We'll have a new agreement."

"New agreements don't abort old ones."

"Shucorion and I have worked it out I'm not in violation of our previous agreement You will be satisfied.**

"Shucorion," Delytharen called, "do you support him?"

Keller held his breath.

I do, Shucorion said.

Delytharen stared at him, and again at Keller. A dozen doubts crossed his rugged bruised face. Was he being lied to? Tricked? Was Shucorion letting Keller skate? He had no idea. He had seen what had been done to the destroyed Savage, and now to his planet "If we stay in space, we'll never see our homes again! Do you know what you ask of me ? "

When Keller parted his lips to respond, he was cut off by the clang of an internal alarm-security breach!

"What is it?" he called, glancing around the bridge. "Malfunction?"

*The utility pod just launched!" Creighton announced. "The Blood pod!"

"Visual, port."

One of the three larger screens on the port bulkhead flickered and clicked to show them the compact utility pod, blue-gray against the sunlight, chugging away from the frigate's underside.

"They're heading for the dark side of the planet, sir," Ryan reported.

Temper flared in Keller's gut bailing frequency!"

"Open."

"Who's aboard that pod! Respond immediately!"

"200 15 here. No shooting. I snatch Bonifay. No more problem."

"How 'bout that!" Savannah laughed. "She's got Zane!"

"A second betrayal!" Delytharen blurted. "You are letting the criminal go free!"

Keller speared Savannah with a silent threat and called, "Zoa, this won't help! Reverse course and get back aboard!"

His own voice echoed in his head. Why was he yelling? He was in command. They'd listen whether he yelled or not He could whisper, and they'd listen harder.

As if he'd just taken a refreshing shower, everything changed. He stopped shouting and clamped his lips shut for a moment When he spoke again, his voice turned conversational and gave everybody around him an eerie shudder, which he particularly enjoyed.

"Well, I'm sick to hell of this," he muttered. "I'm fed up with other people making command decisions around here and telling me about it later. This camel's back is busted. Dean, throw a tractor beam on that pod."

Creighton was ready, but shook his head. "Tractors have been compromised."

"What's that mean?"

"Probably means Zoa shut them down before she launched."

"Reestablish."

"Trying."

"Ryan, jump up there and take tactical."

"Huh? Oh-" Startled, Ryan glanced at him, then bolted from the nav and jumped up to the fore-quarter-deck.

"Arm phasers, point-seven-five power, and open fire."

"Sir!"

"Nick!" Savannah came out of her seat. "**Zane's on board! You could kill him!"

"Ryan, you will aim and you will shoot," Keller advised. "Debilitate that pod. Target engines. Fire phasers. Don't make me do it myself."

Ryan groaned and turned to follow the terrible order. Phasers spewed from the frigate and with very little trouble sent the tiny pod into a death spin. Within min-utes it would plow into the planet-

No-first it would strike the planetwide chainmail sheath and be minced. Hamburger.

'Transporter room, Keller. Lock on to the pod and beam the personnel directly to the bridge. Hurry it up.'*

He leaned on the chair and hung one hand on his hip as if he were watching a rodeo. On the secondary screen, the pod spun toward the planet, leaking a fine trail of plasma. Just beyond it, the chainmail shim-mered.

"Hurry it up," he repeated. He drummed his fingers on the chair's green leather.

On the main screen, Delytharen was still watching. Keller ignored him. The Blood commander suspected a bluff, if his expression gave any hints, and seemed dumbfounded that the phasers had actually fired.

"Hurry up," Keller said again. The channel was still open to the transporter room. A ghastly thought passed that maybe the transporter room wasn't even manned. Was there anybody there to work the controls? Or had he just condemned his two shipmates to a razor-edged fate?

His heart almost stopped when a whine of trans-porter beams overtook the silence on the bridge. Muf-pling a surge of relief, he turned toward the sound.

In the turbolift vestibule just starboard of Savannah's post, Zoa materialized, holding a phaser. Behind her, Zane Bonifay also appeared. They were both smudged with electrical smoke residue.

"She kidnapped me!" Bonifay blurted. "It wasn't my ide-"

Zoa got him by the throat and slammed him back-ward against the turbolift panel frame. The motion-sensing panels opened dutifully to allow them in.

Damn doors. Who/did they think they were, opening without permission? This kind of shenanigan had to stop.

"Dean, close and lock those doors," Keller tersely or-dered.

Without acknowledgment, Creighton punched a switch. The lift doors closed and stayed closed.

Zoa held Zane at the end of her stiffened arm, plastered against the turbolift frame. She had him by the throat and could crush his esophagus any time. Would she do it? To evaporate Keller's obligation? Holding Bonifay immobile, with her thumbnail dug into his carotid, she turned her hand phaser on Keller.

The deck seemed almost liquid under his feet. He walked straight toward her and climbed the steps to the quarterdeck. The phaser hovered steadily between them.

His jaw took a set. "Don't you shoot me... don't you dare shoot me/!"

Zoa's burnished face was fixed as a statue's. "Pazer set on stun."

"If you shoot me, it better be set on 'kill/!"

The challenge chilled them both. Zoa stared at him and completely believed. In his periphery, Zane and Savannah both held their breath. He ignored them.

Without waiting for more, Keller surprised them and himself—he reached out and took the phaser by the business end. A tingle went through his hand. Had he been shot?

He didn't look down to see if he still had fingers. He handed the phaser over to Bonifay, but continued closing on Zoa.

"I will hit you now," he announced.

And he did—a tremendous blow, carrying all his frustration.

In that instant, he seized control. Zoa careered backward into Zane. They struck the brace first, then the deck.

But she was like a snake and struck instantly out of the coil. Together she and Keller slammed into the quarterdeck rail, Keller first.

He hadn't used his Starfleet hand-to-hand in a while, but he knew where it was. He blocked her next two blows and one kick, then miscalculated a backhand. Her steel-hard knuckles rang off his cheekbone. The bridge wheeled.

Though he lost balance for a moment, he caught the rail and twisted against it, then lashed out with his foot. His heel connected with Zoa's flexed knee just before she would've rounded on him again. Instead, her own momentum betrayed her and she stumbled. Seizing the chance, he drove her supporting leg out from under her. She looped in midair and struck the deck on her side with a whump.

As Savannah dodged in to pull Bonifay out of the way, Zoa's other leg swiped up at Keller in a high arch. The talon toenails provided armor plating better than any shoe. Her foot struck him in the hip. Her only disadvantages were his rage and the fact that she didn't want to kill him, but Keller made good use of both. He sidestepped just enough to lessen the blow, though it slammed him into the communications sub-processors. His elbow scraped across the tripolymer coating, leaving a burn under his lightweight knitted sleeve.

Zoa rolled and surged to her feet. A gentleman would've let his opponent straighten before attacking again, but Keller wasn't in a gentlemanly mood. He deployed the heel of his hand to Zoa's chin before she was up, catapulting her backward. She pivoted on a hip over the bridge rail, went feet over feathers

into the air, spun past Shucorion, and landed gracelessly on the lower deck. The edge of the command chair riser could easily have broken her neck if she'd fallen another two inches over.

Shucorion stepped out of the way.

Dazed, Zoa hiked up on her elbows, but Keller was already there. He kicked her left elbow out from under her and sat on her. With a final backhanded blow, he drove her head to the deck. Bronze welts showed on her jaw and chin now.

Bleeding at the lip, Keller swam through the stars spinning behind his swollen right eye and plunked his full weight on Zoa's stomach, held both her arms flush to the deck, locked his elbows, and glared down at her, nose to nose.

"Don't move," he suggested. "Zane!"

"Right here," Bonifay answered, startled.

Keller didn't look up. "Hand the phaser to Savannah. You will remand yourself to Shucorion's custody. You're confined to the bridge, until otherwise in-structed by Shucorion. Is that clear?"

Almost joyfully, Bonifay answered, "Yes, sir, it is."

"Take your post"

"Aye, aye!" Bonifay stomped down the steps, over Zoa's legs, and went straight to the unmanned nav station. Keller felt the vibration through his knees on the carpet He never looked up.

Satisfied, he sniffed a trickle of blood before it would've destroyed his relationship with Zoa. He Jeered down at her. "You, cobra, are on report. You plant your hide at the tactical station, eyes forward, and that's where you stay until Shucorion or I decide to move you. Other than to visit the head or scratch your ear, you will take no other independent action. Have you... got... that?"

She peered up at him, her blue dots ringed with white. The paint-blue lining around her eyes made her expression acute. "I got scratch."

With the promise in his pocket, Keller stood up and only now discovered the pain he was in. Devoted or not, Zoa hadn't pulled her punches. Straightening up took a grunt and a spasm or two.

The first thing he saw when the sparkles faded was Delytharen still watching from the main screen.

"Oh, yeah... the audience." Keller wiped his lip with an uncharitable sleeve. "Yes, Delytharen, I know what I'm asking. I'm asking you to take the biggest gamble of your life. This is space, not your granny's backyard What did you think would happen? It's not just Kauld bullies you're wrangling anymore. If we don't stand against the Living today, we'll never have another chance. Every-body's going to do what I say, today, or we're finished. Savannah, where's the remote you made up?"

"Right here." She was ready, and handed him a small device over the aft rail.

"What is that?" Shucorion asked, eyeing the palm-sized mechanism.

"It's my second trump card," Keller said, purpose-fully vague. In his hand, the communicator-sized

com-puter tie-in mechanism winked a green light to confirm its power mode. "We made it up out of data from the grave ship. Simple old Kauld design."

"What does it possess? What influence?"

"If you'd wanted to participate, you could've done that thirteen hours ago."

When he stepped toward the afterdeck, Shucorion followed him. "But where are you going?"

"To the transporter room. You've got the conn. Re-member our deal. You'll do anything I say."

Savannah also met him at the steps. "The grave ship?"

"Yeh, that's right."

"Can I go?"

"They're not people anymore, Savannah, they're not even dead people. They're just machines now. Anything that's programmed can have new programming put in. Dean, secure the lift. Savannah, give me that sidearm and a communicator."

As the bleep of the locking mechanism freed up the doors, Savannah proposed, "I don't think this is in the treaty, if you get what I mean."

"Ain't no law for this," he snapped back. "So I'm making one up."

Suddenly anxious, as if just realizing Keller was serious, Shucorion came up the steps, reached out, and caught his forearm, though he didn't go so far as to hold Keller back. "This is reckless, to go there! Riutta is hostile to you!"

"I know she is. Do me a favor. Call and tell her I'm on my way." He glanced briefly at Zane and snickered, "That oughta rattle her chainmail."

Despite everything, Bonifay flashed a spontaneous smile of appreciation.

But this drove Shucorion to a near-panic that was downright sweet. His grip lightened. "Keller!"

The tone of his voice broke through Keller's shell and caused him to pause, to offer a tincture of what the two of them had lately lost, and what three desperate planets were about to lose.

Keller gazed down at him, wishing there were more time. Everyone else watched them.

Quietly he confirmed, "I'm going."

"Please," Shucorion implored. "What can you do there?"

Overcooked and still broiling, Keller connected with him on a personal level while in their periphery the grave ship hovered its silent threat off Challenger's flank.

"I can practice some voodoo."

Chapter Twenty-three

The Grave Ship Pompeii what before had been a brainless maze of junglescapes, metallic moss, and impossible growth now appeared completely different. A certain gauzy order applied itself to Keller's new perception as the grave ship fizzled into being around him. He could see a kind of order and purpose here now, despite the wildness of alien art. He knew why this place was here, and he knew why he was here.

To his right, twisted brass spires reached to an artificial sky. Decorative golden stones and glade-green moss, silver cascades and blue-green veils shimmered like peacock feathers. There was even a tingling sound imitating water.

Riutta and her people had probably never heard water running over stones and through reeds. They knew only rain and storms, and the sound of water sheeting off metal, like plumbing in an old building.

He was alone, right where he wanted to be.

He stepped off the thing he'd materialized upon and sank to the insteps in a mucky puddle. To his left, silent eyes of attendants long passed on watched as he took a few steps. Before him stood Ennengand, memorialized beautifully in this statuesque condition.

Ennengand's pewter eyes, so like Shucorion's, were shaded by thick metallicized lashes. He seemed almost to whisper the dangers to come, describe the jagged paths of his life, the fear of space, and eons of patience.

"Hello, friend," Keller uttered. "You've waited a long time to come home. You started quite a thing. How many of us get to spark a whole civilization?"

Subtle light shone upon the jawline, the brow, the solemn eyes.

"We've got a lot in common, the two of us. Heavy loads to haul, problems we didn't ask for... people depending on us left and right... today we got a little secret squadron going here. You, your son, and I." He raised the Kauld remote. "Time to make good on both our pledges, and take care of your people and mine. Hope you're not brittle. I'll try not to be."

Crouching at the pedestal, he pulled aside the encrusted lichen to reveal the foot of the pedestal. Slots previously hidden now showed themselves. With a bit of force, he installed the remote into a fitted coupling and transferred the information installed there. The grave ship and the Challenger were now plugged into each other, scarcely more than a fibrous link, which he hoped would be enough. He indulged in a Zane-wish that Savannah had everything right. They were about to coax science out of mysticism.

He stood again, and gazed at Ennengand. "You ready? Let's rumble."

The Main Memorial Sanctorum

"Riutta!"

His voice echoed and set chimes in the ceiling to jin-gling. All around him the metallic mummies stood in terraced rows from this center aisle to the roof. He knew now that above and below him were more chambers, each a microcosm of the planet to which the Living believed they were returning. Was it the

Blood world? He'd never been there. Shucorion hadn't recognized these decorations. Perhaps the Kauld world... but more likely a time-distorted echo, the background of a dream long faded into a gauze of legend.

While he waited for a response, Keller brought his communicator to his lips and spoke quietly. "Savannah, you read?"

"I'm ready, sheriff. You're tied in."

"Don't forget," he added, "you'll do anything I say.**"

"I promise."

The others could hear, he was sure. Savannah would make certain they did Shucorion and Delytharen, Zane, Zoa, and everyone. It mattered.

"Keep the channel open and listen carefully. I'm putting you in my pocket."

"Leave an air hole"

With his hands free, he gazed again at the grotto-encrusted forest of people in ferrous stasis. Each one of them represented a story, a life, family, and some accident or sickness that had left a corpse. Perhaps even the odd murder here and there. He let his mind wander. They seemed alike in their current condition, yet the more he looked, the more they seemed like individuals who had hoped and worried just as he himself did.

They had cloaked themselves in a survival suit of order, rules, and ritual, and thus armed had forded the ages on an inorganic ball. With a twinge of empathy, he wanted to help their desperate and resilient children.

But he had to save his own side first

"Riutta!" he called again, louder.

When no one came, he thought about traveling forward to the cluster of spinners and to confront Riutta there, but decided otherwise. He needed to be here. He wanted the company of the Anointed.

No point shouting. He fished around and came up with an imitation of a funnel-shaped plant which dislodged easily enough from its stem. Using it as a club, he began hammering disrespectfully on the nearest Anointed, a male teenager with muscular shoulders and a terrible bone-deep wound across the entire front of his body, which had probably killed him. Using his metal funnel, Keller stood back enough to get a good swing, and rang the instrument off the teenager's shoulder.

The jang echoed high and low. He struck again and again.

Worked. The veils parted and Riutta descended a slope, followed by the man Keller had seen before and two other Living men.

"Stop!** she called as they approached. 'This is dis-respect!**"

"I'm sorry." Keller's arms ached-he'd put more into the effort than he realized.

"Why do you come here? Why?"

"I'm throwing a monkey into your wrench," he bluntly informed. "You won't be allowed to blockade our planets. We want life hi space."

"You will be comfortable at home," she said. "If your neighbor comes to space, we will put him home also. You will thrive on planets, and be guarded"

"Stifled," Keller corrected. "It's not good for vibrant beings to never change or stop doing new things. We don't want to stop striving. You're welcome to come here and join us, but we won't let you smother our po-tential. We want to paddle our own canoe."

To Riutta's left, her male companion stepped forward and spoke to Keller for the first time. "We have prepa-rations for all Living to come here and do this. My peo-ple are preparing in the Gateway. Tomorrow we will go to the planet Kauld. Next, this name of terribell."

"Belle Terre," Keller corrected. "Ought to at least pronounce it right, since you're so determined to cut us off. Who are you, fella?"

"Luntee," the man said. "I am the second Elder."

"Is this what you want too?" Keller asked. "To inflict your own strictures on people you don't understand?"

He thought he saw a flicker of doubt, but that could easily be the lighting. Nothing here looked normal, just as before. His own skin had changed color, his clothing unfamiliar, but he was no longer amazed or confused by the weirdness.

"You can't understand the scope of our task," Riutta insisted. "All will be better for you and your people, better than space. You'll go to a warm planet with wind and color. You have no experience to understand-"

"I understand," he interrupted. "You see yourselves as some kind of Levites, chosen for a single purpose. You think you're from here, but you're not. After all this time, you're not natives here anymore. You come from a place that only has three products-metal, en-ergy, and thought. You used one to tame the other two. In the process you developed psychological chaining] too. Good fences make good neighbors, and you make mighty good fences. That's fine, but we don't want to be your purpose. It's you or us, and-sorry, but it'll have to be you."

Riutta didn't like the sound of that. In a rare burst of anger and perhaps frustration at his refusal to take her gifts graciously, she said, "I will send you back to your ship now! The Anointed no longer want you here!"

Keller actually shrugged. "Well, I'm not having a conference over it. This is my one chance to get control over my ship, my crew, the Blood, the Anointed, and you. Pardon if I take it while the takin's good." He raised his voice slightly, just enough to make an im-pact. "Shucorion and Delytharen, you'll both follow this order. The frigate and all four ships of the Blood Hand will open fire on the grave ship and maintain full phaser blanketing assault. Don't stop firing, no matter what happens."

Five bad seconds passed without a change. Were they ignoring him? Refusing to do something so

outlandish?

There it was-phaser impact blanketing the hull! The fighting power of five ships, one a fully banked frigate, digging through the grassy sheath around the grave ship and finding the bell of a hull to ring!

What a sound!

Bald energy went into the grave ship's impermeable shag coverings like electricity going into filaments. This ship had the same kind of shielding as chainmail around the planet-Keller knew he couldn't bust it, but this sound screamed otherwise.

"You shouldn't waste," Riutta commented. "Your en-ergy-you'll need it!"

Luntee's face swiveled as he looked up and to the sides. The noise of phaser fire penetrated the chamber and sang through the thickening air. "Why would you do this? Are you ill in the mind? Your weapons can't hurt the Anointed!"

The temperature in the chamber, in the entire grave ship, began abruptly rising. As sweat broke on his brow and neck, Keller said, "No, but energy has to go some-where or be converted. We'll either be cooked or blow up. Either way, the Living will be stopped here and now. Today." (

The air around them became almost too heavy to breathe. Dry heat pressed against his temples, his throat, his chest and arms, his legs, until his body ached and his head swam. Before him, Riutta gasped and suffered along with Luntee and the two other Living crew. Terror limned their faces. Luntee shook his head maniacally and called, "Too much! Too much!"

He grasped Riutta's elbow and coughed fitfully, shaking her toward some unspoken decision.

But Riutta wasn't giving in. Apparently she had more faith in their technology than Luntee did. She pressed her people back, but made no orders that would stop what Keller was doing.

So he didn't stop.

"Keep firing," he ordered. In his mind he could see Shucorion's face, cramped with anguish, doing as he promised.

And Zane-he could see him too.

Zoa probably liked this. As long as weapons were firing, she was happy.

"Riutta! Riutta!"

"He cannot break us," she said "He cannot-"

"The Anointed!"

The other Living crew backed away from Riutta and

Luntee, watching now the highest and farthest of the terraces and grottoes. In the folds of drapery and deco-ration, humanoid limbs were beginning to move, to flex, shoulders to turn and heads to rise. A knee, a hand-one by one the Anointed were coming to life.

Heat. Heat penetrated and filled the grave ship, warming the mummies and the compound that filled them. They were alive again, and on the move.

By the thousands the dead Living came awake, dis-engaged from their footings, dismounted from their pedestals and grottoes, their spire forests and steppes. They swarmed down to the center aisle to surround Keller, Riutta, Luntee, and the two other Living men. Though they closed in around him, Keller didn't move.

Perspiration sheeted his body under his clothing, until the chenille fibers of his crew sweater were soaked and his trousers stuck to his legs. His hair plastered over his forehead and neck, but he loved and needed the heat

It seemed to daze and sicken Riutta and her companions. They weren't used to warmth. Riutta stared at the swarm of zombies shifting pointlessly around with nowhere to go. Beyond them were thousands more metal-filled bodies, the walking history of the Living, who arrived from other chambers, through hidden doorways and passages, summoned for a purpose they couldn't process.

Riutta, Luntee, and the other Living crew stared and trembled, perfectly stupefied. The Anointed were moving more, turning more and more pliant. Their faces, eyes, arms, and legs began to glisten and develop a moist film. If this heat continued its rise, they would ultimately be rendered down to a molten pond.

As his skin crawled and his heart pounded and sweat rolled down his neck, Nick Keller stood stubbornly in the vanguard of the Phalanx of the Dead, ready to lead them all into the caldera.

Keller beamed at Riutta. "How 'bout this," he commented. "Night of the Living."

Didn't have sarcasm on Sheetmetalworld, apparently.

Condensate forming on the ceiling and plates began to form into large droplets and to fall, to strike the hot stones and decor, to sizzle and cause steam. The haunting jungle became a steam bath.

With the heat cloying them and the Anointed shifting and shuffling an eerie threat, and the powerful assault fleet's phasers still ringing on the grave ship's hull, there was little sentimentality about this moment. Yet Keller felt in charge for the first time. Whether this was his last moment, he couldn't predict, but at least he was in control of it

"You'll take away the barrier from around this planet," he told Riutta. "You have power over the chainmail, but I have power over the Anointed. If the Anointed don't want you to do this, then you'd better stop. You'll stand down and do whatever I say from now on."

Even under the pressure of what she saw looming before her, thousands of her revered ancestors and the animated body of Shucorion's father, indeed the father of the Living, a civilization of refugees, Riutta raised her chin and narrowed her star-eyes.

"The Anointed will never do what you say," she resisted. "They are protected."

She hadn't survived all those hunts for nothing. Keller had to respect her power of will and linear determination.

"Okay," he said. The sea of Anointed blurred before his eyes.

No-he couldn't pass out now. He had to endure the heat, keep his legs under him. Must be topping a hundred twenty in here.

He squeezed his eyes shut. Sweat broke from them and streamed down his face. When he opened them again, he fixed them on Riutta.

"Ennengand," he called. "Front and center."

Behind Riutta, one of the Living crew wobbled and collapsed, overcome by the heat. Riutta continued her standoff. Luntee made no more arguments, but he was terrified.

The throng of Anointed shuffled and parted. Beside Keller, Ennengand appeared like a ghost of royalty through his loyal subjects.

There was something stirring to watch him move, so much like Shucorion, yet missing the sense of contemplation and wonder. Instead, poised and lifeless, the zombie moved on freshly pliant limbs until he stood beside Keller, peering through sightless eyes.

There he stood, and waited.

"I'm more powerful than their protection,**" Keller announced. "You'll take away the barrier around the planet... or I'll send these people into space. The Anointed will be forever lost."

"Even you would never waste them," she said. She was calling his bluff.

But it was no bluff.

"Micro-gate," he ordered. "Proximity space."

Several seconds passed. He imagined Savannah sifting through the programming to find the right connections.

She must've found it, for a micro-gate opened just a few steps away, so close that Keller had to step back to avoid falling through, right into the airless vacuum of space. Directly outside they could see the red flashes of phaser fire engulfing the grave ship. Beyond the red lightning, the edge of the Blood planet, with its veil of chainmail, turned beside him.

"Cease fire," he said.

The phaser blasts sheeted away and stopped. The red glow sizzled off.

Metal, energy, and thought The only products of the Living. Add the element of mysticism, and they had found a way to bring out their strengths and find reasons to keep going.

Now he would use all that against them.

He took the zombie of Ennengand by one arm, turned him toward the micro-gate, put a hand on his back, and with a final grip of commonality and regret, he pitched the icon of a civilization into the reaches of open space.

Chapter Twenty-four in perfect mental agony, Luntee dropped to his knees and sobbed.

Even Riutta seemed physically to weaken with shock.

Their national treasure spun off into space, turning slowly until they could see his face and read the lingering sadness of his expression.

"Ennengand," Riutta uttered in her misery. "Wasted..."

Keller watched Ennengand float gracefully away, growing smaller and smaller against the star-studded vista. "I *11 waste them all," he swore. "I agree, it would be a shame. But you're not the only people who have been called to a purpose. This is mine.*"

Though her crew was shattered, her hero thrown away, and the Army of the Anointed doing the bidding of someone else, Riutta-he had to give her credit- still didn't cave in. She motioned Luntee to his feet and to move back from the micro-gate, but she gave no orders or made any motions that changed anything.

"Remove the chainmail," Keller demanded.

Around them the Anointed shifted and flexed, touched each other as if forming new relationships or reliving old ones. Was there some echo of their lives lingering in their programs? Had Ennengand known what was happening to him? Did he feel Keller's hands? Would he orbit his native planet for decades to come, half aware, like some kind of guardian angel?

"Untuxx!" Riutta called. "Move the Anointed away!"

Was she speaking to one of these men, or to some-one on her idea of a bridge?

A light show erupted through the chamber as the grave ship tried to move.

Luntee shook his head. "We have lost control!"

"I have control," Keller told them. "Stop working against me, or we'll all be destroyed here and now."

But Riutta was the custodian of an eleven-thousand-year-old dream and she wasn't about to let it go. Her eyes narrowed, her chin came down, and she moved toward Keller. He was the focus of her troubles, he had made himself the focus, and he sharply realized that she could very easily pitch him out into space with Ennengand

*The Anointed don't want you to hurt me," he said.

As Riutta drew within arm's length and reached for Keller's throat, a dark hand came between them and blocked her. Two of the Anointed stepped in front of Keller, braced against Riutta's strong presence. She was a mighty survivor, but the zombies were unimpressed. Being dead awhile could do that

Startled, Riutta drew back her lips, gritted her teeth, and showed her anguish. The Anointed were protecting her enemy-and that had never happened before. A new page for the history books of the Living was being written before her very eyes.

Two... three... four more Anointed stepped in and pushed her back from Keller. He fixed his eyes on

Riutta and refused to look amazed or show his relief.

Suddenly, beside them, the micro-gate weakened, frizzled, and snapped out of existence, but this time with a terrible crack, markedly different from the other times it had winked out.

Keller wince and stumbled back-he knew a loss of power when he saw it!

Before he could ask what happened, hah7 the lights went off in the chamber, leaving only a faint glow of op-erational worklights-another thing anybody could rec-ognize. Around them the hum of the grave ship's working factory complex died off, replaced by ominous silence.

Beside Riutta, Luntee moaned and covered his face with both hands.

"What happened?" Keller asked. "Why's the power shutting off?*"

"You have destroyed us," Riutta said. **We are all helpless now. I control nothing now. Nor do you."

Driven to anger again, Keller demanded, "Explain that!" He reached out and caught Luntee by the collar of his chainmail tunic. "Explain!"

Luntee's pale face crumpled. "The Anointed have stepped down. Our people will think we've been de-stroyed. Consumed. The Gateway will close. All on this side will remain here. All there will-"

"Be stranded?"

Riutta stepped between them and pushed Keller back. He stumbled into a cluster of Anointed and bruised himself on a random elbow.

"You have what you wanted," she said. "We will soon be without power. Your weapons will rend us at your will. The work of thousands of generations will collapse. Our people on the other side have given all our stored energy to keep the Gateway open-"

"And these pedestals are some kind of counting mechanism? Now they think the Anointed are all gone and you've failed?"

"Yes." Unexpected bitterness flared in Riutta's voice. "They will close the Gateway."

"I didn't mean to do that," Keller told her angrily. "This is what comes from your own silence, refusing to talk to me!"

"You too have tampered with things you misunder-stand," she pointed out. "With so much energy con-sumed, many thousands of our people must hunt now, so a few may survive. This is your random order, Nikelor. Our people have no more purpose, and they must now die off."

"No, they won't," he said. Defiance bolstered his tone. "After eleven thousand years, they deserve to come to living planets and have a future!"

"They will not know to come. They will close the Gateway."

"Hell they will. I'll go get 'em."

She barked at him. "How can you make such boldness in your words?"

"Because I'm in charge now." He stepped to her, right up close, and leered into her eyes. "Are you ready to do what I say? Will you take my orders?"

"No!" Luntee shouted. "You're not an Elder!"

But Keller stared only at Riutta. "Are you ready?"

Chapter Twenty-five

"Tins is Keller. I'm in the control area of the grave ship. Riutta is about to retract the chainmail from the planet. Delytharen, you and your ships will spread out to the Kauld planet and to Belle Terre. Explain what's been going on and have a warning sent at emergency subspace to Starfleet Command in case we fail at this next thing."

"I understand. It will be done"

"Shucorion."

"Yes?"

"The plan was to take the Anointed home, then go get the others in the grave ship. Plans have changed. The grave ship's power stream is being cut off at the source. Activate the Challenger's towing system, primed for highest possible warp. Activate tractor beams and fix them on the grave ship, and harness up the mules. Plot a course to the Gateway. We're going back."

The Gateway

"All right, Riutta, start feeding Anointed into the factory system. Keep that Gateway open."

The grave ship had no engine power now. The Gateway, when they came upon it, had actually begun to fade, to lose its metallic gloss, as if someone were erasing it

In a fresh sweater, thermal boots, and a field parka, Nick Keller felt like an Eskimo preparing for the Iditarod as he took bits of specialized equipment from Zane Bonifay and packed them into his pockets and pouches. A fire-starting kit, microscope, pocketknife and implements, tricorder, battery pack, solar recharger.

"We should at least go through in Challenger," Bonifay suggested, not for the first time. "It's more powerful than those-!"

"I told you," Keller interrupted. "I know for sure the picker ships work over there. We're not sure Challenger will."

"Hardly works over here."

Keller smiled, but not much. He looked up, meeting Bonifay's dark eyes squarely. The smile faded. "I'll talk to you later, gypsy. Understand?"

Visibly steeling himself, Bonifay paused. "Sure, Nick. I get the drill."

He offered a hand. Keller clasped it warmly.

"Here-keep this in your pocket." He held up a small polished disk hanging from a string, mounted in-side a thin titanium frame.

"What is it?" The concave disk was light brown, some kind of rock with circular marks, and concave enough to fit the pad of Keller's thumb perfectly.

"It's the deflector disk we made for the ship model,"

Bonifay said. "I carved it out of a piece of Petoskey stone, from the Great Lakes. It's a survivor. But just to be safe, I tied a knot over it, then dipped it in red pep-per/'

"Thanks... I'll bring it back."

"Nick," Savannah called from MEL, "I crunched the numbers. By feeding all the Anointed into Pompeii's conversion system, Riutta can keep the Gateway opened from this side for about thirty-one hours."

"Ought to be plenty long enough. If you don't hear from me, go on your way. Live your lives. I won't sur-vive thirty-one hours over there.*'

He zipped the front of his field jacket partly up and decided he was ready. On the main screen, not far for-ward of the Challenger, the grave ship hovered and beamed invisible energy into the Gateway, which domi-nated the view of space before them. It shimmered and struggled, clearly losing the battle to stay open. Keller got a frozen lump in the pit of his stomach. He was about to jump into the grizzly's gullet Now as he peered into the guts of the animal, he felt me blood drain from his face. Until now, he hadn't quite grasped what he was about to do.

Shucorion came to his side as Bonifay retreated and spoke very quietly. "I beg you... reconsider this."

"Can't We've started this. It's up to me to finish." He turned away from the main screen and offered Shucorion a sympathetic grin. "Got to take my own orders, y'know."

Though his anguished expression wasn't alleved, Shucorion folded his arms and endured his own fears. "These people will not welcome you, I think."

"I can't leave them in that hellish place without telling them what happened and why their signal stopped. I crushed Riutta's dream-the dream of a whole civilization. I've got to at least tell them why and offer what help I can give "

"A different dimension... different universe... per-haps you cannot even breathe there."

"Then you won't have to wait the whole thirty-one hours."

"Keller..."

"Hush."

With a final pat -on the arm, he left Shucorion on the command deck-a symbolism not lost on either of them. They all watched him as he moved to the turbo-lift He wanted to climb down through the capillary

tubes, but time was critical and he had to go quickly. Before the doors closed, he met Savannah's gaze, an uninterpreted expression that drew a wink from him which even he hadn't meant to offer.

When the doors closed he touched the frame and communed briefly with the ship around him. "Take care of them, calico."

As the lift activated to take him to the transporter room, he drew a last breath of the bridge air and held it as long as he could.

The spinner wasn't hard to handle. A ship was a ship. Forward, reverse, lateral, roll.

However, the Gateway itself was an alien and awe-some thing from close up, by far more frightening than any wild animal on the charge.

The giant bicycle chain and its bright center zapped and flashed before him, its energy sources doing battle with each other, one to shut down, the other struggling to keep it open.

Fully aware that his calculations, plans, hopes, and sense of duty could crumble before his eyes, he aimed the spinner into the dead center, and increased speed to fall.

Making the biggest bet of his life, Nick Keller shielded his eyes from an electrical storm the size of a continent, and soared into the Gateway, alone, not knowing what lay beyond.

Chapter Twenty-six savannah ring picked at her fingernails, which she al-ways did when she was nervous. Usually she could pre-tend not to be nervous, but today she wasn't interested in putting on. She stepped down from the quarterdeck to the command area.

On the edge of the command-chair seat, not relaxed at all, Shucorion gazed at the forward screen, at the grave ship and the Gateway. He didn't look at her when she came to his side. She didn't look at him.

They stood like that, silent, for several minutes be-fore he finally spoke.

His voice was barely a rasp. "Are you frightened for him?"

She buried her fingernails in knotted fists. "Aren't you?"

"Yes."

Around them the bridge made its constant electrical music. Everyone stood their posts, silent and unmoving as the Anointed.

"How long has it been?" Shucorion asked.

Savannah felt her legs tense up and begin to ache. "Five hours."

Sitting at the helm, Zane Bonifay rubbed his sore shoulder and swiveled to look at the two of them. His question haunted the bridge.

"How long on the other side?"

TO BE CONTINUED...

The End

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