

Glorious Destiny

Allen M. Steele

Asimov's (2002-12)

"Glorious Destiny" is the final story in a series that will soon be published by Ace. The novel-length version will be entitled Coyote. Two tales in that series, "Stealing Alabama" (January 2001) and "The Days Between" (March 2001), have been nominated for Hugo Awards. The author is now working on a second set of Coyote stories, the first of which—"The Mad Woman of Shuttlefield"—is already in our inventory.

Liberty: Zamael, Gabriel 16, c.y.3 / 1906

The comet had appeared a couple of weeks earlier, in the last few days of Hanael before the winter solstice that marked the end of the Coyote year. At first it was little more than a hazy white splotch that hovered just above the southeastern horizon after sundown, and no one in Liberty paid much attention to it until its nimbus grew brighter and a distinct tail began to form. Eighteen nights later, its luminescence was rivaled only by Bear, until the superjovian rose high enough to eclipse the comet so that it couldn't be seen again until it made a brief reappearance in the northwestern sky a couple of hours before dawn.

Like everyone else in Liberty, Robert Lee notices the comet; lately, though, he's given it little more than a passing glance. As chairman of the Town Council, other matters rank higher on his list of priorities. The last of the autumn crops are in, and although the colony won't have to worry about food shortages this winter, swampers discovered the corn stored in one of the silos shortly before they went into hibernation; the tunnels they dug beneath the refurbished *Alabama* cargo module threaten to undermine its foundation and eventually topple it. Two more colonists have come down with ring disease; it isn't contagious and is easily treated with antibiotics, but Kuniko Okada has privately warned him that the drug supply is running dangerously low. One of the aerostats was toppled two weeks ago by a severe windstorm; if it's not rebuilt soon, the council will have to start rationing electrical power.

And then there's the storm that's been forming a few hundred miles east of the Meridian Sea, slowly gathering force as it creeps eastward along the Great Equatorial River. It's still on the other side of the planet, so it's possible that it might die off, but if it doesn't it'll soon rip across the southern plains of Great Dakota and slam straight into New Florida.

Tonight, though, the sky is clear: no clouds, no wind, the stars serene in their crystalline beauty. As Lee marches across the light snow covering the frozen mud of Main Street, he spots a small group of people gathered outside the grange. They've built a small fire within a garbage barrel and clustered around it to keep warm, yet their eyes are turned upward. It's not hard to figure out what they're watching.

"Evening, folks," he says. "Comet keeping you busy?"

Everyone looks around. Smiles, murmured greetings: "Evening, Mr. Mayor," "Hi, Captain," "Hello, Robert," and so forth. Now he can make out individual faces,

shadowed by the parka hoods and downturned cap bills: Jack Dreyfus, Henry Johnson, Kim Newell, and Tom Shapiro. Tom, Jack, and Kim are former *Alabama* crew members, of course, Henry was once a civilian scientist, yet people seldom make such distinctions any more. Lee's the only person anyone still addresses by his former rank, and then only out of habit.

There's a child among them: Marie Montero, almost nine. No doubt there's other kids inside, but she's always been shy, preferring the company of Tom and Kim, her adoptive parents. It seems as if ages have passed since Tom was *Alabama's* First Officer and Kim was a Liberty Party loyalist who had to be held at gunpoint while the ship was being stolen from Highgate; now they're married, and the bulge beneath Kim's parka shows that it won't be much longer before they add another member to their family.

"Looked at it lately, Mr. Mayor?" This from Jack Dreyfus, standing on the other side of the barrel. "We're trying to figure it out."

"Looks like a horn!" Marie proclaims. "A big friggin' horn!"

"Marie! Language!" Kim gives the child an admonishing glare, then looks at Tom. "She's spending too much time with grownups. Look what she's picking up."

"Yup," Tom mutters, "helluva shame." Chuckles from all around, but Lee barely hears this as he gazes up at the sky. The comet's tail is very long now, stretching almost halfway to the edge of Bear's rings as the giant planet slowly rises above the horizon. Yet it doesn't taper down to a point, the way a comet's tail normally would, but fans outward instead, forming an elongated cone as seen from profile. Beautiful, yet discomfoting in its strangeness.

"Y'know, she's right," Jack says. "Kind of looks like a trumpet." He grins. "Gabriel's Trumpet. Good name, kid."

Marie blushes, hides behind Tom. "Beats hell out of me." Henry murmurs. "Sorry, guys, but I can't figure this one out."

"What do you mean?" Lee asks. Before he turned to farming, Henry Johnson was an astrophysicist. If anyone here should be an expert on comets, it would be him.

"Well, for one thing, the tail's going in the wrong direction." He points to the comet. "Shouldn't be doing that. Solar wind from Uma would be blowing dust off the nucleus, sure, but away from the sun, not toward it. And spreading it out like that...?" He shakes his head. "Might happen if the dust is being deflected by Bear's magnetosphere...but if that's the case, then it's a lot closer than we think."

"It's not going to hit us, is it?" Kim's voice is low, concerned.

"Oh, I doubt that. Bear's gravity will probably pull it in long before it comes close enough to be any sort of threat. One of the benefits of having a gas giant for a neighbor...sort of a huge vacuum sweeper for comets and rogue asteroids." Henry gives the others a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. We're just going to have a light show for another week or so."

The group laughs, albeit nervously, and shuffles their feet in the snow. "Well, have fun," Lee says, and ruffles Marie's hair as he walks past. "Don't stay out too long, or you'll catch cold." The little girl favors him with the salute that she's seen her guardians and other former crewmen give him on occasion. Lee dutifully responds in kind; even after nearly four Earth years on Coyote, he's still regarded as captain by most people. He supposes he should be honored, although he prefers to think of himself as an elected public official rather than a commanding officer.

He opens the heavy front door, steps into the foyer, takes a minute to remove his parka and hang it next to the other coats and jackets. Warm air rushes across his face as he opens the inside door; someone has stoked a fire in the wood stove, and the meeting hall is nice and toasty. The grange has become the center of Liberty's social life, particularly during the long months of winter. There's probably a dozen or so people hanging out at Lew's Cantina; every so often Lee will spend an evening there himself, but generally he prefers the more placid ambiance of the grange. Chairs have been pushed aside to make room for card tables; there's a couple of bridge games going on, but a few people are also playing chess or backgammon, and some of the younger children are huddled around a Parcheesi board. Dogs lounge on the blackwood floor, showing only slight interest in the mama cat nursing her kittens in a nearby box. A platter of home-fried potato chips and onion dip has been laid out on the side table beneath a watercolor painting of the *Alabama*; a pot of coffee stays warm on the stove in the center of the room, itself fashioned from an old oxygen cell salvaged from one of the habitat modules.

And there's music. A three-man jug band—the Crab Suckers, a private joke no one else understands—is on the raised platform at the front of the room, where the council usually sits when the monthly town meeting is in session. With the exception of Ted LeMare's antique Hammond harmonica, brought with him from Earth, their instruments were hand-made by Paul Dwyer, the bassist, and their repertoire mainly consists of twentieth century blues and country standards. But they've been working out some original material lately; as Lee walks in, Barry Dreyfus, Jack's boy, is singing:

*"Catwhale, stay away from me.
Catwhale, stay away from me.
Just lost in your river, can't you see?
Catwhale, stay away from me..."*

Not quite up the standards of Barry's idol Robert Johnson, but for homespun music it isn't bad. Lee helps himself to a mug of black coffee, and reflects upon the circumstances that inspired this song. Barry was one of the members of the ill-fated Montero Expedition, the group of teenagers that attempted to sail down the Great Equatorial last summer. Considering the fact that one of his friends was killed when a catwhale attacked their canoes, the lyrics are strangely light-hearted; perhaps black humor is Barry's way of dealing with David Levin's death.

*"Catwhale, don't eat me.
Catwhale, don't eat me.
There's a lot of other fish you can have for free.
Mr. Catwhale, don't eat me...puh-lease!"*

Morbid, yes, yet then Lee notices Wendy Gunther sitting nearby. Her legs crossed, her left toe tapping the floor beneath her long catskin skirt, as she bounces baby Susan on her knee. Wendy's another member of the expedition; the last line of Barry's song refers to her near-death experience, but if she thinks it's in bad taste, there's no indication. Susan smiles in delight, babbles something that may be a compliment.

We've raised a tough generation, Lee thinks. Almost four Earth years, and the

kids are hard as nails.

He can't decide whether he likes that notion or not. Wendy's just turned eighteen, yet not only is she now a mother, but in the last election she managed to get herself voted onto the Town Council, replacing Sissy Levin when she unexpectedly resigned. Wendy ran for office on the platform that Liberty's younger generation needed a voice in the colony government, and since then she's carried out her responsibilities well. Lee can't complain about her performance, yet whenever he sees her, he feels a twinge of long-suppressed guilt. Her father...

Enough. There's another reason he's ventured out into the cold Gabriel night. Taking his coffee mug with him, he crosses the hall, briefly nodding or waving to everyone whose eye he meets, until he reaches a door off to one side of the room.

A narrow corridor takes him past the council meeting room, the armory, and the records room. His office door's shut, but there's light under the crack; he hears Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" from within. He quietly opens the door, steps inside. Dana Monroe is seated at his blackwood desk, studying the screen of his comp; she doesn't look up as he comes up behind her, but smiles as he leans over to give her a kiss on the cheek. "Wondering when you'd get here," she murmurs. "What took you so long?"

"My turn to wash up after dinner, remember?" Lee finds the spare chair, pulls it over next to the desk. "That stew you made was pretty good. What'd you put in it?"

"My secret ingredient." She notices the annoyed expression on his face. "Okay, it's what I didn't put in. You told me you don't like garlic, so I left it out this time. Better?"

"Much. Thank you." Dana had been a better Chief Engineer than she was a cook; when she moved in with him last summer, one of the things she had to learn was that her new mate was surprisingly temperamental about what he ate. Otherwise, they have an easy relationship; although Lee has officiated at nearly a dozen civil ceremonies and Dana's helped Dr. Okada deliver four babies, neither of them was in any rush to get married and start a family. Let someone else be fruitful and multiply; their job is managing the colony. "So what's the forecast?"

"Hmm...not good." There's a close-up image of the storm on the screen; the time-stamp shows that it was captured by *Alabama's* cameras as it passed over Coyote's eastern hemisphere an hour and a half ago. She taps the keypad, and now there's a more distant view: a dense swirl of white clouds, shrouding the Equatorial River about five hundred miles east of the Meridian Sea. "Looks like it's picking up moisture off the river," she murmurs. "Still a long way off, but it's growing. Unless something changes in the next day or two it's coming our way."

Lee nods. For the most part, the *Alabama* colonists made the right decision by establishing a settlement close to the equator. Winter on New Florida isn't as brutal as it is in the northern and southernmost latitudes, and they have the advantage of longer growing seasons, from early spring through late autumn. Nonetheless, Coyote's global climate is cooler than Earth's, and Bear's tidal pull frequently plays havoc with wind patterns. Their first winter was relatively mild; it only figures that the colony would eventually have to deal with a major snowstorm.

"There's still a couple of large mountains in the way," Dana says. She points to the major range that straddles Great Dakota, the continent west of New Florida. "Probably won't stop it, but they may blunt the worst of it."

"So we can hope," Lee says. "At least we've got some advance warning. If we

can..."

The comp chimes just then, as a small window opens in the center of the screen:

03.12.2304/1512 GMT
SAT TRANSMISSION / ALABAMA / PRIORITY 1A
CODE 1893: PROTOCOL ETW-1B
CLASSIFIED / COMMANDING OFFICER'S EYES ONLY
AUTHENTICATION: PASSWORD_____

"What the...?" Dana's eyes narrow. "That's from the ship." She looks over her shoulder at Lee. "And what's this protocol? I don't remember anything like that."

A chill sensation runs down Lee's back. It's been so long since he programmed the subroutine into the *Alabama* AI, he's nearly forgotten it existed. Now it's suddenly become active. But why...?

Then he remembers the comet. Gabriel's Trumpet, as Jack Dreyfus called it just a few minutes ago.

"Robert? What's going on?" Dana searches his face. "Do you want me to leave?" she adds, her voice low as she starts to rise.

"No...no, stay with me, Chief," he says quietly. "You ought to know about this...but let's keep it between us. At least right now, okay?"

"Sure. Okay." Dana settles back into her seat. She knows this is serious, not only from the tone of his voice, but also because this is first the time he's addressed her as chief in a long time. They may be partners now, but once again he's the captain of the *Alabama* and she's one of his senior officers. Old habits die hard.

Lee turns the comp toward him, picks up the keyboard, types in the password: *helix*. A few moments pass while the uplink is established, then the window disappears and a new image appears on the screen. Now they're peering into the heart of the comet, as seen by *Alabama's* onboard navigational telescope. The shape is hazy and ill-defined, yet it's obviously not a natural object: a long, cylindrical form, with a white-hot flare erupting from its aft end.

"That's a starship." Dana's voice is nearly a whisper.

"Uh-huh. I know." Lee hesitates. "Go find the council members. Don't tell them what you saw, just get 'em here. We've got a situation."

Zamael / 2021

Carlos Montero expected to find a crowd at Lew's Cantina, and he was right; it's Zamday night, the middle of the three-day weekend, and Lew Geary's place is the best (and only) watering hole in Liberty. He hasn't come here to drink, though, as much as he's tempted to do so; he's had a long day at the boat house, finishing the longboats he and his crew have been building for the last few months. There's one quick errand that needs to be done before he goes home to Wendy and Susan, but the moment he spots Chris Levin, he knows it's not going to work out that way.

Not that he isn't welcome at the cantina. For the first few weeks after he returned from his solo journey down the Great Equatorial, he was shunned by quite a few

people in town. Although most realized that David's death was accidental, nonetheless they blamed him for persuading David and the others to steal a couple of canoes and run away from Liberty. Before they left, they'd pilfered supplies from all over the colony, including irreplaceable items like riffles and a satphone. Almost everything they had stolen was eventually returned, yet Carlos soon discovered restoring someone's flashlight was much easier than restoring their trust. Yet over the course of the last four months—a solid year, by Gregorian reckoning—he had gone out of his way to make amends with all the people that he'd offended or wronged, until by the end of c.y. 2 he was back in good graces with everyone.

Nearly everyone...

Chris is seated on a stool at the far end of the blackwood bar, a mug of sourgrass ale parked in front of him. Carlos ignores his sullen gaze as he moves through the packed room, greeting friends he encounters along the way. Bernie and Vonda Cayle are sitting by the fireplace; they're old friends of his late mother and father, and never gave up on him even in his darkest hour, yet although Bernie tries to wave him over for a drink, Chris shakes his head. He made a promise to Wendy before he left home this morning, and he doesn't want beer on his breath when she comes back from the grange.

There's an amused expression on Lew's face as Carlos approaches the bar. "Ah, so. Mr. Montero, the famous explorer," he says, looking up from the ceramic mug he's washing. "What brings you here this evening? Your usual?"

"If you've got it, please." Carlos hasn't taken off his parka; he props his elbows on the bar and nods politely to Jean Swenson and Ellery Balis standing nearby. Jean gives him a smile, but Ellery scowls and looks away. Little wonder; as the colony's quartermaster, Ellery is responsible for the safekeeping of all the firearms, and he's still irritated at Carlos for having stolen the key to the armory. Carlos tried to make up for the theft by stocking the armory with the bows he learned to make while fending for himself on the river; they've helped the blue-shirts fend off the creek cats and swampers without wasting any more rifle bullets, but Carlos knows Mr. Balis is one of those who will never completely forgive nor forget.

Lew walks to the door behind the bar, pushes aside the curtain. "Carrie! A jug of your best for Carlos!" He glances back at him. "One'll do it, or you want more?" Carlos shakes his head and Lew holds up a finger to his wife before returning to the bar. "Sure you don't want anything else? It's a cold night, son..."

"I'm sure. Thanks anyway." Carlos digs into the pocket of his parka, pulls out a dollar. He drops the wooden coin on the bar, but Lew shakes his head and quietly slides it back across the counter to him. No words are spoken between them; Carlos nods gratefully as he picks up the dollar, but the gesture hasn't gone unnoticed.

"Yeah, hey...heroes drink for free, don't they?"

Chris's voice is loud enough to carry across the room. From the corner of his eye, Carlos sees people glancing up from their conversations. Everyone knows there's bad blood between them. Not only that, but ever since the Town Council formally introduced the currency system a couple of months ago, no one has managed to cadge a drink from Lew...or at least not without scrubbing the kitchen, repairing the roof, or cleaning out the goat pen out back.

"It's not what you think," Lew says quietly. "Let it go."

"Okay, sure. None of my business." Chris raises his hands in mock apology. He picks up his mug, looks at Carlos. "Hey, c'mon over and have a drink."

"No thanks." Carlos gives him a wary smile. "Just dropping by for a minute."

"A minute? Just for a minute?" Chris's face expresses bafflement. "You can't do better than that? Come on, we're ol' fishing buddies..."

The last thing Carlos wants to do is to have a drink with Chris, no matter how many times they used to pull redfish out of Sand Creek. Not that he hasn't already tried to patch things up with him. Twice before, they've sat together at this same bar, two young men barely eighteen, putting away one mug of sourgrass ale after another. Each time, it was a disaster; the first occasion, Chris got pissed off and tried to throw a punch at Carlos before Lew grabbed him and threw him out the door; the second time, Chris became a maudlin drunk, inconsolably sobbing about his lost brother before attacking Carlos again, managing to put a mouse under his eye before a blue-shirt hauled him away to the stockade for the night. Lew barred Chris from the cantina after that, and let him back in only after he promised never again to pick a fight in his establishment.

Perhaps this isn't a prelude to another incident, yet there's no warmth in Chris's invitation. His hostility toward Carlos goes beyond his brother's death. His mother suffered a severe breakdown a few weeks after Chris returned to the colony; first she'd lost her husband, then her younger son; she eventually recovered, but she's battled depression ever since, often staying in their house for weeks at a time. Then Chris proposed to Wendy shortly before Susan was born, and she turned him down. Carlos moved in with her not long after he returned, and although she hasn't agreed to marry him either, if only because she's still uncertain of their relationship—indeed, their home is just a two-room addition their friends built onto Kuniko Okada's house—Chris has never gotten over that either.

Once again, Carlos observes how much Chris has changed. His face has become swollen from drinking; his blond hair hangs lank around his face, and there's a suggestion of a beer gut at his midriff. He knows that Chris has fallen to holding down odd jobs around Liberty, keeping them only until he screws up again and gets shunted off to a new duty generously supplied by another foreman. At age eighteen, Chris is well on his way to becoming the town drunk.

"Sorry, man." Carlos tries to keep things as cordial as possible. "Got something else going on. Maybe another time." He turns away, hoping Chris will take the hint, yet he can still hear him muttering about how his oldest friend doesn't want to be seen with him anymore. Which isn't far from the truth...

Hearing the front door open, Carlos looks around, sees Dana Monroe come in. Pulling back the hood of her catskin cape, she glances around the room as if searching for someone. Spotting Bernie and Vonda Cayle, she begins to ease through the crowd. Odd to see her here; she almost never visits the cantina.

Carrie Geary picks that moment to emerge from the back room. "Here you go," she says, holding up a large brown jug. "From our private stock. Want me to put it on the tab?"

"Already got it covered." Her husband takes the jug from her, starts to pass it to Carlos. "Tell Wendy..."

"Oh, yeah, hey! Check this out!" Chris points to the jug. "Son-of-a-bitch won't drink with an ol' buddy, but he can always carry home some of their private stock!" A few more people pay attention now; colony law clearly states that all liquor produced at Lew's Cantina must be consumed on the premises. "Guess there's a double...double-standard for famous explorers, right?"

Carlos closes his eyes, embarrassed not so much for himself as for Chris. Yet if Lew's angered by the accusation, he hides it well. "Uh-huh, you're right. Caught us in the act, that you did." He steps closer to Chris. "Tell you what," he murmurs, his tone conspiratorial. "If you promise to drop it, I'll let you try some. On the house."

Chris stares greedily at the jug, not noticing that some of the patrons are chuckling behind his back. "Umm...all right, sure. Bring it on."

Lew picks up Chris's half-empty mug. He uncorks the jug, but briefly turns his back to him as he pours. "Here y'go," he says, handing the mug back to Chris. "Our best stuff."

"Thanks, Lew. You're a gentleman." Chris gives Carlos a smug wink as he raises his drink. "To your wife," he adds. "A real fine lady."

Silence falls across the room. There's no mistaking what he means by that remark. Carlos says nothing as he watches Chris take a deep slug. A moment passes, then Chris's face screws up in disgust. For a second, it seems as if he's going to spit it out.

"Oh, no you don't!" Carrie snaps. "Puke in my place and you're mopping the floor!"

"She's right!" Lew yells. "You drink it, you swallow it! Rules of the house!"

Everyone's cracking up, but Carlos doesn't laugh. He catches a glimpse of the anger and humiliation in Chris's eyes as he lurches from his stool and quickly staggers across the room, his hand clasped over his mouth. He nearly collides with Dana as he stumbles through the front door; she stares after him, then reaches over to escort Vonda through the uproar.

"Here you go," Lew says, slapping the cork back in the jug before he hands it across the bar to Carlos. "Two quarts of fresh goat's milk. Tell Wendy there's plenty more where that came from...unless Chris wants another round, of course."

You didn't have to do that, Carlos thinks, yet he doesn't say this aloud. Ever since Wendy stopped breast-feeding, the Gearys have provided Susan with pasteurized milk from their goats. It's clear that Lew doesn't care much for Chris, though, and there's no worse contempt than that of a bartender for a drunkard.

"Thanks, I'll do that." Carlos tucks the jug beneath his arm, turns toward the door. With any luck, Chris will be so sick that he won't be able to start any trouble outside.

He's halfway across the room, though, when Dana stops him. "Are you going home?" she asks softly, and shakes her head when he nods. "No. Follow me back to the grange and pick up Sue. Wendy needs you to babysit for awhile."

After this, taking care of their daughter would be a pleasure. Nonetheless, Carlos is surprised by the request. "Why, what's going on?"

Dana glances over her shoulder, making sure they're not being overheard. "Emergency council meeting. Everyone's being called in." Before he can ask, she shakes her head again. "Can't tell you more than that. Just come with me."

Outside the cantina, the wind has picked up again. Thin clouds scud across the sky, shrouding the comet. Carlos joins the two older women for the short walk back to the center of town, their boots crunching softly against the packed snow. They've barely gone a few steps, though, when he hears someone behind them.

He turns to see Chris slumped against the cantina. He'd left his parka behind; shivering in the cold, he holds his arms together as he leans unsteadily against the log

wall. There's a small puddle of vomit at his feet, already freezing solid.

"Chris..." Carlos hesitates; behind him, Dana and Vonda have stopped. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for that to..."

"Get lost," Chris mutters, not looking up at him.

"Do you want me to get your coat? I can go back in, get it..."

"Just go away." Chris's voice is as chill as the wind; masked by shadows, his face is unreadable. "Lemme alone."

Carlos turns back to Dana and Vonda. Nothing more is said as they continue walking toward town, but after a while Vonda slips her hand through his elbow. There's little comfort she can give him, though, for now he knows the truth.

He's lost his oldest friend. Chris is now his enemy.

Zamael / 2052

"No question about it...that's the plume of a fusion engine." Henry Johnson examines the image on the council room's wall screen. "Given the size of the ship, I'd say it's firing at about one gee, sufficient to decelerate from relativistic velocity."

"And how...?" Sharon Ullman involuntarily yawns. "'Cuse me...how far away do you say it is?"

Lee consults his pad. "According to *Alabama*, its current position is just within the orbit of Snake, about three hundred thousand miles from us." Before Sharon can ask, he answers the obvious next question. "And, yes, it's on an intercept trajectory with Coyote. It should arrive within the next twenty-seven hours. I think we can safely assume that it'll make orbit at that time."

Seated around the blackwood table, the members of the Town Council glance at one another. Fortunately, it hadn't taken long to gather them for an emergency session; Tom, Paul, Wendy, and Henry were already at the grange, and Dana found Vonda at the cantina. Only Sharon had to be woken out of bed; she still looks half-asleep, but Dana brought in a pot of coffee before she left the room, shutting the door behind her. She's not a council member, so she's not privy to their discussions.

"It doesn't give us much time," Lee continues, "but at least we've got some advance warning. If we work quickly, we can figure out an appropriate course of..."

"Pardon me." Like a shy student interrupting her teacher, Wendy raises her hand; Lee nods in her direction. "I'm sorry, but there's just one thing I don't...what I mean is...how did the AI figure out this was a ship and know to contact us?"

"Good question." Tom Shapiro looks from her to Lee. "I don't remember anything like an early warning system being written into the AI." Across the table, Sharon nods in agreement. As the *Alabama's* former senior navigator, she's familiar with the AI's major subroutines, particularly those controlling the navigation telescope. Nothing like this was programmed into the AI before the *Alabama* left Earth.

Lee drums his fingers on the table. He knew this question would eventually be raised: better now than later. "I've got something to show you," he says at last. "Nobody here has seen it before now, so I'm going to have to ask that it not leave this room...or at least not until we're ready to divulge it to the rest of the colony. Understood?"

Reluctant murmurs of assent. Lee picks up an *Alabama* operations manual he's brought over from his office, opens it. From the back pocket of the three-ring binder, he produces two sheets of paper: brittle and yellow with age, with ragged tears down one side. Carefully unfolding them to reveal faded handwriting, he hands them across the table to Tom.

"You know what happened to Les Gillis, of course," Lee says. "Awakened from biostasis three months after we left Earth, spent the next thirty-two years alone aboard the ship. Wrote fantasy stories to pass the time..."

"*The Chronicles of Prince Rupurt.*" Wendy nods. "I've read it twice."

"Yes, well..." He takes a deep breath. "Before Les did that, he wrote something else...sort of an unofficial log entry, in the first ledger book he used for his stories. The time he spent aboard the *Alabama* wasn't completely uneventful. Not too long after he woke up..."

"Oh, my God." Tom stares at the pages he's been reading. "He spotted another ship."

"He saw a light...a moving star, as he describes it...from the wardroom window. He interpreted it as another starship passing the *Alabama*, heading in the opposite direction. He attempted to make contact but failed, and then the ship vanished. Never saw it again." Lee looks at Wendy. "I've read the Prince Rupurt stories, too. I think that's what gave him the idea. Whether it really was another ship, though, I have my doubts. At any rate, he noted the sighting in his ledger, just before he began work on his book."

"But that's not in..." Wendy says, then Tom hands her the pages and she notices their tattered edges. "You tore these out of the ledger?"

"Robert...why?" Tom looks bewildered. "Didn't you trust us?"

"Trust wasn't the issue, believe me." Lee clasps his hands together, gazes down at them. "Look, we'd come out of being in biostasis for two hundred and thirty years, with a hundred and three people aboard, half of whom weren't trained for the mission, not to mention five URS soldiers who were on the verge of inciting mutiny. Our food and water reserves were low, and we didn't know for certain whether Coyote was habitable. The last thing people needed to worry about was whether someone else was out there. I wanted everyone to stay focused upon survival, not watching the skies to see if aliens were about to land.

"I was the first person to read Gillis's ledgers. When I saw this, I ripped out the pages and hid them. But just to be on the safe side, shortly before I left *Alabama* I programmed the AI to track any incoming objects through the telescope and alert me if it spotted anything that might resemble an approaching ship." Lee opens his hands, shrugs. "And that's what it did...and so now you know. It wasn't my intent to deceive anyone here. I just didn't believe it was critical information."

All through this, he carefully avoids looking at Wendy. There's more to the matter than this. Gillis left behind yet another note, one he destroyed long ago, lest she learn the truth about her father.

"Not critical information?" Vonda regards him with disbelief. "Captain, I can't believe you'd..."

"Never mind that now," Paul says, cutting her off. "What's done is done. What matters is where this leaves us. Assuming that it's an alien ship..."

"I wouldn't assume that," Henry says. "In fact, I'd call it unlikely."

Paul gives him a curious look. "Sorry, I'm not following you."

"What I mean is, we're jumping to the most far-fetched conclusion without considering the facts." Henry points to the wallscreen. "Look, we already know this thing is coming straight here. That can't be a coincidence. Why would aliens pick this one particular world...a moon of an ordinary gas giant orbiting an ordinary star...for a visit?"

"Because they know we're here." Paul raises an eyebrow as if this is obvious fact.

Henry shakes his head. "There's no reason to believe that Coyote is inhabited. We haven't transmitted any radio signals since we first got here, and then only briefly...a message that, even if intercepted, could be coming from anywhere in space. *Alabama* can't be detected from interstellar distances, and even if you were in low orbit above Coyote, you couldn't tell there was someone down here. You've seen the orbital photos...Liberty is virtually invisible."

"Maybe they're searching for a place to establish a colony themselves," Sharon says.

"Perhaps...but what are the odds of two different races wanting to settle the same planet at the same time? The galaxy is vast..."

"And habitable planets are rare," Tom says. "That was established a long time ago."

"Established by whom? Us? We'd barely searched one small corner of space for only a couple of dozen years before we found 47 Uma. That doesn't mean..."

"Gentlemen," Lee interjects, "this is an interesting debate, but it's getting us nowhere. However, Henry's got a point. The idea that this ship may be extraterrestrial is an unlikely explanation. If we accept that, then it leaves us with only one other possibility...it's coming from Earth."

Everyone shuffles in their seats. No one speaks, but Lee notices that their eyes reflexively shift to the flag that hangs against one wall. Red and white stripes, with a single white star against a blue field: the symbol of the United Republic of America. Presented to him by the mission launch supervisor at Merritt Island just before he left Earth, Lee has never permitted it to be raised above town; he put it in the council room instead, as a silent reminder of the tyranny they left behind.

"If that's the case," Vonda says quietly, "perhaps we should attempt to contact it. Let them know we're here, where we are."

"And if it was launched by the Republic?" Tom asks. "Do you really want URS soldiers coming down on us?"

"Oh, come on. We left Earth...what, almost two hundred and thirty-four years ago? I have a hard time believing the Republic lasted that long."

"Doesn't matter whether it's still around or not," Tom says. "If it survived long enough to build another ship...a twin to the *Alabama*...then it could have been launched only three years after we took off. Which means it'd be arriving just about now."

"Then why use a fusion engine to decelerate?" Henry asks. "*Alabama* conserved fuel by using its magsail to brake itself. Why wouldn't a sister ship do the same?" He holds up a hand before Tom can go on. "Besides, remember how long it took to build the *Alabama*? And how much? Ten years and a hundred billion, and the government wrecked the economy to do that. So how could they construct another ship just like it in such a short period of time?"

"I don't know the answers." Tom's beginning to look annoyed. "All I know is, I'd rather play possum until we know more."

Vonda opens her mouth to object, but Lee waves her off. "I tend to agree with Tom. We shouldn't expose ourselves until we..."

A soft knock against the door interrupts him. Lee looks around. "Come in."

The door opens; Dana steps in. "Sorry to intrude, but..." She hesitates. "*Alabama's* just received a radio transmission...and it's in English."

Everyone is on their feet in an instant. Lee barely manages to beat everyone else out of the meeting room. He leads them into his adjacent office, where they crowd into every available corner. Taking his seat at his desk, he waits until Dana sits down in front of the comp, then motions for Paul to close the door behind them.

"Okay," he says, "show us what you've got."

"Well, first, there's this." Dana leans across him to pick up the keyboard. "About five minutes ago, *Alabama* detected a change in the comet's...I mean, the ship's...condition."

The screen changes. Now the exhaust plume has vanished, leaving behind only a bright orange spot against the black background of space. "They shut down the main engine," Sharon says; she's standing behind Lee, peering over his shoulder. "Probably don't need it anymore, and they'd have to do so in order to transmit a radio signal."

"Makes sense," Lee says. In the back of his mind, he realizes that anyone outside the grange will have noticed that the comet has suddenly disappeared. "Go on, Dana."

"I was still trying to figure out what happened when we received this..."

She taps a command into the keypad. A tinny sound comes from the speaker; static courses through it until Dana cuts in digital filters and raises the volume. Now, in sharp and sudden clarity, a voice:

"...if you are able...repeat, to URSS *Alabama*, this is WHSS *Glorious Destiny*. Please respond if you are able...repeat, to URSS *Alabama*, this is WHSS *Glorious Destiny*. Please respond if you are able...repeat, to URSS *Alabama*..."

Over and over again, like a Toot reiterating the same prerecorded alert. Indeed, the voice has a certain artificial quality. "That's all I've received so far," Dana says, looking over her shoulder at the others. "For what it's worth, they're signaling *Alabama*, not us."

"Guess that settles the argument," Henry says quietly. "It's from home." Then he looks at the others. "Okay, so now what do we do?"

"We play possum." Lee glances at Tom; his former first officer gives him a slight nod. "We've found them before they found us. For the time being, we're going to keep it that way. Total radio silence until we learn more about them."

"And how do you propose to do that?" Sharon asks.

"What you always do when new neighbors move in." Lee smiles. "Haul out the welcome wagon."

Liberty: Orifiel, Gabriel 17 / 0834

Cold oxygen fumes drift upward from the *Plymouth's* vents, made ghostly by the wan morning sun. For nearly four Earth years, one of *Alabama's* two shuttles has always

been kept in flightworthy condition, a task made difficult by the fact that several Coyote months often went by before either of them flew. Despite Dana's efforts to protect the craft from the weather, some of the spaceplanes' more delicate components are wearing out, and lately it's become necessary for them to share parts. The engineering team borrowed hardware from the *Mayflower* and worked overtime to install them aboard her sister ship, while the indigenous-fuel converters groaned constantly, sucking in air and filling the wing tanks with supercooled hydrogen for the nuclear engines.

Seated in *Plymouth's* narrow cockpit, running down the preflight checklist, Lee once again reflects upon just how ill-prepared *Alabama* was for colonizing another world. The United Republic of America had splurged a hundred billion dollars to build a monument to itself, while giving little thought to the fact that the men, women, and children it sent out into interstellar space would have to build a self-sustaining colony. Two state-of-the-art SSTO shuttles with few spare parts to keep them operational for more than a few years. A large supply of pharmaceuticals, but no way to manufacture more once they ran low. All the tools needed to build shelters, and a ridiculously inadequate means of generating electrical power. There were Federal Space Agency scientists working on the Starflight Project who'd considered such things, of course, but most of them were branded as dissident intellectuals and shipped off to re-education camps, while Liberty Party politicians harrumphed about the "American frontier spirit." He would have loved to have seen some of them here, chopping wood and planting crops; most of them probably wouldn't have survived the first winter.

No. Enough of that. Gazing through the cockpit window, Lee sees a small crowd gathered at the landing pad, watching the shuttle as it's prepped for liftoff. No official announcement had yet been made, but rumors are doubtless spreading through town. Sooner or later, the council will have to tell the townspeople what they should know. It should have been done earlier, but there simply hasn't been enough time.

"Skipper?" Jud Tinsley enters the cockpit. "We've got five suits aboard, and Ellery says there's five more aboard *Mayflower*. If you want more, he can haul 'em out of storage, but he can't guarantee what shape they'll be in."

"Five will do," Lee says. "Three for you, me, and Dana, and two for our passengers." Jud gives him a curious look as he rests his arms against the back of the pilot's seat. "I know we can take more, but I want to keep the team as small as possible. Less chance of...well, the fewer people directly involved, the better. Understood?"

"Yeah, okay...I mean, yes sir." Like his other former officers, Jud has subconsciously slipped back into his old mindset: no longer treating Lee like a mayor, but as his commanding officer. "So who else do you want aboard?"

Lee's been thinking about this. He himself will be mission commander; Jud's the pilot, and Dana's the flight engineer. But they'll need two specialists. "Henry Johnson's got a good handle on this. I've already spoken with him, and he's willing to go. And we should take someone else from the council, too...another civilian, just to even things out. I was thinking about Vonda..."

"I've already asked her, and she refused." Jud grins as Lee stares at him in surprise. "She says she throws up every time she rides in one of these things."

"Oh, yeah, that's right." The first time Vonda Cayle got spacesick, it was aboard the *Mayflower*—then christened the URSS *George Wallace*—when it lifted off from Merritt Island on its way up to the *Alabama*; the second time was when she was

aboard this same craft, formerly the *Jesse Helms*, when it brought the colonists down to New Florida. These two incidents may have been separated by a quarter of a millennium and forty-six light years, yet the last thing Lee wants now is to have an ill passenger aboard. "So who else do we have? We're leaving Tom behind to..."

"We've got a volunteer." There's a wry expression on Jud's face. "But you may not want her."

"Oh, no...she's not here, is she?"

"Out back, waiting to see you." Jud can barely conceal his grin. "I tried to talk her out of it, but she's..."

"Right." Annoyed, Lee taps an instruction into the keypad, stopping the diagnostic test he's been running, before he rises from the right-hand seat. "And, of course, you let her come aboard, even though I told you not to let anyone..."

"What could I say?" Jud steps aside as Lee brushes past him. "She's a council member. If she wants to come aboard..."

"Carry on," Lee mutters as he ducks his head to leave the cockpit.

Wendy's in the passenger compartment, sitting on the arm of one of the acceleration couches, pad in her left hand. She nervously rises, but before she can speak, Lee raises a hand. "You've already asked once, and I've given you my answer. Give me one good reason why I should change my mind. And don't say it's because you're on the council...there are six other members who have more seniority than you do."

"I know. That's the very reason why I should go."

Lee crosses his arms. "All right. I'm listening."

"This is a historic event, right? The second ship to arrive from Earth, possibly carrying colonists of its own..."

"Or a squad of armed soldiers."

She looks at him askance. "C'mon, you can't seriously believe that. It didn't identify itself as belonging to the Republic, only as the WHSS *Glorious Destiny*...whatever WHSS means." She shakes her head. "In any case, this is something that will take its place in the colony's official history."

"What official history?"

"The one I've been writing." She holds up her pad. "Ever since First Landing Day, I've been keeping a journal. Kuniko got me started on it, and I've been at it ever since. Everything's here..."

"Tom Shapiro's the town secretary. He's in charge of maintaining the colony log."

"But since you're leaving him behind to take charge of the council in your absence, he won't be able to witness this mission, will he? Besides, have you actually read Tom's log? It's pretty dry...nothing but statistics. My journal is much better than that. And do I need to remind you that you yourself encouraged me to do this?"

"I did indeed, but not as an official record." Lee lets out his breath. "Let me get this straight. You're saying that the reason why you should go is that you'd serve as the...well, maybe not as secretary, but as a historian. You'd deliver an unbiased account of whatever happens up there..."

"Not necessarily unbiased, but at least truthful."

"Don't play semantics with me. When I say unbiased, I mean it." She turns red, looks down at the deck. "And you'd enter your account in the log, signing your name

to it as a member of the Town Council." She nods. "That's a good reason, I'll grant you that...but it still sounds like an excuse you've worked up. Now be honest...why should I take along a young mother on a potentially hazardous mission?"

"Because I want to go!" When she looks up at him again, Lee's surprised to see tears at the corners of her eyes. "Mr. Mayor...Captain...I can't explain why, but...but this is something I've just got to do. My father rescued me from a youth hostel when he got me signed aboard the *Alabama* as a colonist. If he hadn't, I probably would have spent the rest of my life as a ward of the Republic. Probably washing clothes in a D.I. internment camp, if I was lucky. And then, after all that, almost as soon as we got here, he..."

Wendy stops, rubs her eyes. *He died*, she meant to say, but she doesn't know the half of it. Lee looks away, not wanting to meet her gaze. As she just said, there's the unbiased account of what happened, and then there's the truth...

"Look," she continues, "this is the first contact we've had with Earth since we left. I've got to know for myself what happened back there. I didn't have many friends in the hostel, but I did leave a few behind. I just want to find out..."

"Okay, okay." Lee holds up a hand. "Carlos can take care of Susan while you're away, right?" She snuffles back tears, gives him a weak nod. "And you'll pay attention to everything that occurs, and write reports for the council and...um, your official history?" She nods again, and he sighs. "All right. Against my better judgment, you're on the team. Go see Ellery about..."

He doesn't get a chance to finish before she throws her arms around him. "Thank you," she whispers. "Thank you so much..."

"All right. Okay." Grateful there's no one here to witness this, Lee gently pries the girl off him, daubs the tears from her face. "Now hurry up...we're lifting off in an hour. You've got just enough time to say goodbye to Susan and Carlos."

"Yes, sir." She's already heading for the ramp. "Be back soon as I can." She pauses at the open hatch, looks back at him. "And Captain...? Thanks for believing in me."

Lee forces a smile, gives her a short wave that she accepts with a beautiful smile before she rushes down the gangway. The moment she's gone, though, he closes his eyes, leans heavily against the hatchway, and prays that he hasn't made a mistake.

Orifiel / 0940

The muted rumble of engines being revved up, then a crackling roar that ripples across the frozen marsh as *Plymouth* slowly ascends upon its VTOL jets. Carlos quickly reaches down to cup his hands over Susan's ears; the little girl quails back against him, yet she doesn't seem frightened so much as astonished. Her eyes are huge as she watches the spacecraft rise; a blast of hot air rushes across them, an instant of summer on a cold winter morning.

"Wave bye-bye to Mama." Carlos picks up Sue's arm, raises it above her head. "Go on, Sue...wave bye-bye." Susan gazes up at him solemnly, not quite comprehending what he's just said even though she watched Mama walk up *Plymouth's* gangway just a few minutes ago, then she silently waves her tiny hand just as she's been taught. Then she loses her balance and falls down on her rump.

Carlos scoops her up, straddles her across his shoulders. Susan squeals in delight

and immediately loses interest in the *Plymouth*. By now the shuttle has reached cruise altitude; its blunt nose tilts upward, then its scramjets kick in, and the gull-winged spacecraft soars upward into the slate-grey sky. Within a few seconds, it disappears through the low clouds, leaving behind only a pair of smoky contrails. A minute later, there's a loud boom from far above as the craft goes supersonic.

The crowd watching the launch begins to dissipate, townspeople tucking their gloved hands in the pockets of their parkas as they turn away, talking quietly to one another. Even though no official announcement has been made by the council, everyone already knows about the Earth ship. Until they hear back from *Plymouth*, there's little to be done; Carlos supposes he could put Susan in Kuniko's care and go down to the boat house to get some work done. The thirty-four-foot faux-birch longboats he and several others have been building for the past several months are practically finished; they only need to have their masts fitted with rigging.

Besides, it'll help take his mind off Wendy. He tried to talk her out of going, insisting that this was nothing that Captain Lee and the others couldn't handle on their own, but she was adamant about going with them. When the captain turned her down the first time, Carlos was secretly relieved, but she went back again, and that time...well, he should have figured that she'd eventually win. When it comes to arguments, he's already learned that Wendy seldom loses.

"C'mon, little creek-cat," he says. "Piggy-back ride to Aunt Kuni's house!" Susan babbles happily in baby-speak as she grasps the hood of his parka, and he's just turned to walk back toward town when he hears a voice behind him.

"Surprised you didn't go up yourself," Chris says. "Thought a hero like you wouldn't pass up the chance for more glory."

Carlos looks around, sees Chris heading toward him. He looks better than he did last night, but not much; there are dark circles beneath his eyes, and Carlos has little doubt he's suffering from a wicked hangover. Just behind him, his mother trudges through the snow; her parka hood is turned up. Once again Ms. Levin throws him an icy glare before she looks away. Sissy Levin has barely spoken to him since he returned from his journey down the Great Equatorial River, but what little she's said has always been brutal.

"No one asked me to go." Carlos keeps walking, his hands wrapped around Susan's ankles. "Besides, this is Wendy's business. She doesn't need me."

"Hey, how 'bout that...something you and I can finally agree on." Chris's smile is bitter, without humor. "How long did it take you to figure that out?"

This is just as pointless now as it was last night; Carlos knows he should just let it go. It's been nearly a year and a half, by Gregorian reckoning, since they went down the river together, yet Coyote's long seasons collapse time, making everything seem shorter. They've come a long way since they left Earth, and not just in terms of distance; they boarded the *Alabama* as kids, and now they're both young men who've suffered the loss of parents and, in Chris's case, a brother. Chris loathes him, yet Carlos still maintains hope that he can reach through his anger to find the boy he once considered his best friend.

"What happened to you, man?" Carlos stops, looks straight at him. "You've changed. There's something...I dunno, but it's ugly, and I wish you'd get rid of it."

Shock appears on Chris's face. He stares at Carlos in surprise, and Carlos suddenly realizes that this is the first time in many weeks, perhaps a month, that he's spoken to him like this. All through autumn and into winter, Chris has chided him,

baited him, tried to pick fights, finally leading Carlos to avoid contact with him altogether. Maybe it was because Wendy was always nearby, often out of sight but never out of mind. But now she's gone, at least temporarily, and it feels as if a shackle has been loosened.

"I...I haven't changed," Chris protests. "You're the one who's..."

"Yes, I have," Carlos says. "I'll admit it...I'm not the same guy I was last summer. A lot's happened since then, and none of it's been easy. There's things I did back then that keep me awake at night, and believe me, there's no way I think of myself as a hero. But I keep going, because I've got my kid to take care of..."

"His kid, you mean." Ms. Levin has also stopped; from the corner of his eye, Carlos can see her glaring at him. "That's my granddaughter you're holding. I hope you're treating her right."

Carlos suppresses a sigh; they've been through this many times before. When Wendy was still in the early stages of her pregnancy, there was some doubt over who was the father. Although it seemed certain that Carlos was responsible, there was also the fact that Wendy had had a brief affair with Chris. Dr. Okada settled the question through blood tests, but even after she'd certified that Susan was Carlos's child and Chris reluctantly accepted her findings, Sissy Levin remained adamant in her belief that Susan was Chris's offspring. She'd even gone so far as to accuse Kuniko of tampering with the test results and lying to everyone involved, including the Town Council. This occurred during the depths of her breakdown, yet even through her depression has stabilized—at least she's no longer threatening suicide—Sissy continues to quietly insist that Susan is a grandchild who has been unjustly taken away from her.

"Mom, please let me handle this, okay?" Chris gives her a sharp look, and Ms. Levin seems to fold into herself. "Go on home. I'll make lunch for us, all right?"

His mother nods numbly, then turns and starts walking toward town, her head bowed. Watching her leave, Carlos feels pity for the once-strong woman who used to make grilled cheese sandwiches for them. "I hope she's doing okay," he says quietly.

"Some days are better than others. This isn't..." Then Chris seems to remember that he's supposed to be angry. "What do you expect? If it wasn't for you..."

"How many times do you want me to say I'm sorry?" Carlos feels Susan impatiently squirm against the back of his neck. "Okay...I'm sorry. I'm really sorry about what happened to David, and I'm sorry about your father..."

"And last night? After you set me up at the cantina?" Chris's eyes are cold. "Maybe you'll be happy to know that Lew's barred me from his place again. Only beer joint in town, and I can't go there any more."

Maybe it'll do you some good, Carlos thinks, but he doesn't say this. "I didn't set you up, but if you want to think that..."

"Yeah, right, you're sorry. Heard it before, means just as much as it did the last time."

"Chris..."

"Forget it. What's the point?" Then he glances up at the sky, watching the contrails as they're whisked away by the breeze. "But, y'know...I kind of hope that's a Republic ship. It'd sure be sweet to see someone come down here and..."

He stops, shakes his head. "Never mind. Go back to...whatever." He turns his back to Carlos, begins following his mother. "Take it easy, hero. Don't lose any more

sleep."

Carlos waits a few moments to let Chris get ahead of him, then he falls in with the last of the townspeople leaving the landing pad. Susan restlessly kicks at the side of his face; he'll have to change her diaper once they're home. Wendy's been gone for only ten or fifteen minutes, and he misses her already. He scarcely notices that the wind has begun to rise.

Plymouth: Orifiel, Gabriel 17 / 2612

"Wendy? Time to wake up."

Captain Lee's voice in her headset nudges her from a dreamless sleep. Wendy opens her eyes, glances across the aisle of the passenger compartment. Henry yawns and stretches; Dana's seat is empty, though.

"I'm here," she mumbles. Her mouth tastes like cotton; she reaches beneath her couch for the plastic squeeze bottle of water she'd stashed down there. No response; Henry motions to the wand of his headset, and now she remembers that she has to tap it to activate the comlink. "I'm up, Captain," she says. "Where are we?"

"Last place we were when you sacked out." Dana's voice. She must have gone forward to the cockpit. "But we're no longer alone, just in case you're interested."

Wendy and Henry trade a look, then both of them scramble to unbuckle their seat harnesses. Wendy's first out of her couch; floating upward from her seat, she grabs the ceiling rail, then begins pulling herself hand over hand toward the cockpit. The bulky spacesuit she's wearing hinders her movements, but she manages to squeeze through the narrow hatch ahead of Henry.

The view from the cockpit is spectacular. Three hundred sixty miles below, Coyote stretches out before them as a vast, curving plain, the green and tan landscapes of its continents and major islands crisscrossed by the aquamarine veins of river channels and tributaries, the Great Equatorial River cutting through them as a broad blue swath. They're passing over the eastern hemisphere; it's early morning down there, which means it must be close to midnight back in Liberty. Bear would be somewhere behind them.

"Not down there," Lee says quietly. "Look up."

Wendy raises her eyes, and her breath catches in her throat. Through the center window, she sees an elongated shape, off-white and reflecting the sunlight, the apparent size of her forefinger yet steadily growing larger: cylindrical in form, wasp-waisted at its center, slightly wider at one end.

"Twenty nautical miles and closing." In the left seat, Jud Tinsley keeps an eye on the instrument panel. "On course for orbital rendezvous."

"Very good." Lee glances back at Wendy and Henry. "I know it's tight up here, but try to find a place where you're out of the way." Wendy looks around, finds Dana jammed into the narrow space behind the right seat; she moves over a little more to make room for her. Henry tucks himself behind Jud's seat, murmuring an apology when he jostles the pilot. *Plymouth's* cockpit wasn't designed to hold so many people, but it can't be helped; there are no windows in the back of the shuttle.

Lee waits until everyone is settled, then reaches the com panel and flips a couple of switches. Wendy hears the soft purr of carrier static in her headset. "WHSS *Glorious Destiny*, this is Coyote spacecraft *Plymouth*, do you copy? Over." He waits a

moment. "WHSS *Glorious Destiny*, this is *Alabama* shuttle *Plymouth*, formerly URSS *Jessie Helms*. Do you copy? Please acknowledge, over."

Silence. Lee looks back at Dana. "I'm transmitting on the KU frequency band," he says, cupping a hand around his mike, "but I don't think they're picking this up."

"Maybe they're using..." she begins.

"URSS *Jessie Helms*, this is WHSS *Glorious Destiny*." The voice they hear is clear, but not the same one they heard before. "We receive you. Do you receive us? Over."

Smiles and relieved laughter, until Captain Lee raises a hand to quiet the others. He unclips his headset wand. "Affirmative, *Glorious Destiny*, we...um, receive you. We are presently in low orbit, at coordinates..." He pauses to check a comp screen. "X-ray one-eight-point-nine, Yankee four-seven-point-five, Zulu three-three-zero, distance eighteen nautical miles and closing. Do you copy? Over."

"Understood, *Helms*," the voice says after a moment. "We have acquired you. Please stand by."

"Understood. Standing by." Again, Lee muffles his headset. "Not good," he says quietly. "That's the second time they've called us the *Helms*, even though I first identified ourselves as the *Plymouth*."

"*Alabama* didn't have a shuttle called the *Plymouth*," Dana says. "Maybe they..."

Plymouth, do you receive?" A new voice: feminine, with an accent that sounds vaguely Hispanic. "Es...this is Matriarch Luisa Hernandez, commander of *Glorious Destiny*. With whom am I speaking, *por favor*? Over."

"Got it right this time," Lee says, then he takes his hand from the mike. "This is Captain Robert E. Lee, commanding officer of the URSS *Alabama*. Good to hear you, Captain...I mean, Matriarch Hernandez. Welcome to Coyote. Over."

Another pause, only this time they can hear other voices in the background. Wendy listens hard, but she can't make out what they're saying; it sounds like a polyglot of English, Spanish, and French. The others seem just as perplexed; Lee looks over at Tinsley, shakes his head.

"Thank you, Captain Lee," Matriarch Hernandez says haltingly after a few moments. "We're certainly...ah, pleased to learn that you're still alive." Now Wendy knows it's not her imagination; *Glorious Destiny's* commander speaks English only as a second language. "We have...um, attempted to contact you previous, but...ah, until now, there has been no response."

Lee's prepared for this. "My apologies, Matriarch Hernandez. Our communications system is rather deficient." A blatant lie, but one that hides the fact that the colony is unwilling to expose its location through high-gain radio transmissions. "When we saw you coming, we launched a shuttle to intercept your ship. May we have permission to rendezvous and dock with you, please? Over."

This time, the delay is even longer. Almost a minute passes before Hernandez comes back on line once more. "You have permission, Captain Lee. Our external docking hatch is located on the forward section of our vessel. It will be marked by a blinking red beacon. One of my crew will meet you at the airlock."

"Understood, Matriarch Hernandez. We'll be docking in about a half-hour. I'm looking forward to meeting you. *Plymouth* over and out." He clicks off the comlink, looks at the others. "What do you make of that?"

"So far, so good," Tinsley says quietly. "But why do I have a bad feeling about

this?"

"Same here," Lee replies. "But they're opening the front door."

The ship is huge, much larger than anyone suspected. Over twelve hundred feet long, it's more than twice the length of the *Alabama*, and at least three times more massive: two enormous cylinders, each about five hundred feet in length, joined at the center by a slightly smaller midsection. The forward section is encircled by rows of perpendicular windows, indicating the presence of at least five passenger decks, yet there are also portholes within the hemispherical bulge that protrudes from its blunt bow.

The aft section is more mysterious. Elevated above the otherwise featureless cylinder are four long convex vanes, running parallel to the hull; wedge-shaped flanges rise from the rear of the vanes, just past which is the giant bell of the fusion engine. At first Lee thinks they may be heat radiators, yet as the *Plymouth* moves closer he hears a low whistle from behind his seat.

"Got an idea what those things are?" he asks, peering over his shoulder at Henry.

"I'll be damned." The astrophysicist is clearly awestruck. "I think these people have a diametric drive." He points to the vanes. "If I'm right, those are field generators." Then he gestures to another set of flanges at the front of the ship; these are folded down against the hull. "Positive and negative polarities would be generated from either end of the ship, so that it creates an asymmetric field around itself. In that way, it warps spacetime around itself and..."

"You mean, like a wormhole or something?" Wendy asks.

Henry shakes his head. "No, no...nothing so exotic. This is something else. The concept goes all the way back to the mid-twentieth century. My team at Marshall played with it for a while, but no one could figure out how to make it work, so we stuck to developing a Bussard engine. But it looks like someone came along behind us and licked the energy-conservation problem. Probably using zero-point energy as a power source."

"Then why include a fusion engine?" Dana asks. "That's like putting a mule harness on a race car."

"Probably to boost the ship to sufficient velocity so that the field would take effect, and to slow it down again once it reaches..."

"That's all very interesting," Lee interrupts, impatient with the discussion, "but you haven't told me one thing...how fast would it go?"

"I don't know. How fast do you want it to go?" Henry shrugs. "I don't mean to sound facetious, but in theory a diametric drive could accelerate a ship to within a few percentiles of light-speed."

"If that's the case..." Jud doesn't finish the thought, nor does he have to. If *Glorious Destiny* traveled to 47 Ursae Majoris at velocities approaching the speed of light, then it would have been launched from Earth within the last fifty years.

By now the starship fills the cockpit windows. Jud has matched velocity with the giant vessel; now he's carefully moving in. "There's our docking port," he murmurs, not taking his hands off the yoke as he gently maneuvers the shuttle upside-down toward a rectangular superstructure rising between a couple of flanges; a red beacon strobes next to a docking collar. "Looks easy enough."

"Sure." For the moment, Lee's distracted by something else: halfway down the

cylindrical hull, just below the rows of portholes, he's noticed what appears to be a closed pair of double-doors, large enough for a shuttle to fly through. A quarter of the way around the hull, he spots an identical hatch.

Shuttle hangars? More than likely...and if there are more than just these two, then *Glorious Destiny* must be carrying at least four landing craft, each possibly the size of the *Plymouth*.

How many people are aboard this thing? He snatches his mind away from these thoughts, focuses on the task of helping Jud guide the shuttle in for docking. Shifting his eyes between the radar screen and the windows, he calls out numbers while Jud moves the yoke a few fractions of an inch at a time, easing the shuttle toward the docking collar. At last there's a hard thump as the *Plymouth's* dorsal hatch mates with the ship.

"We're here." Jud's hands move across the instrument panel, putting the engines on stand-by. He checks a screen, gives Lee a nod. "Docking probe shows equal pressure on both sides. You should be able to go right in."

Lee unlatches his shoulder harness while Jud remains in his seat; the pilot is staying behind to prevent anyone from coming aboard during their absence. Lee turns to the others. "We can get out of our flight gear now. Ellery put some old *Alabama* jumpsuits aboard before we left...they're stowed in the lockers in the back of the passenger compartment. We'll take a few minutes to change before we pop the hatch."

Henry and Wendy sigh with relief; they're not used to wearing spacesuits, and leaving them behind would be a blessing. Before they turn to leave the cockpit, though, Lee holds up a hand. "Just a second...let's get one thing clear before we go in. We don't know who we're dealing with, so let me do the talking. Is that all right with you?"

Henry nods reluctantly, but Wendy is less sanguine. "How are we supposed to learn anything if we can't ask questions?"

"Ask all the questions you want," Lee replies. "I hope you do, in fact. But these people are going to have some questions of their own, and for the time being I'd prefer to be the only one who gives them answers. Understood?"

She slowly nods, and Lee gives her a reassuring smile. "All right, then. Let's go meet the new neighbors."

Liberty: Raphael, Gabriel 18 / 0052

The night is colder than it has any right to be. Heavy clouds hide Bear from sight; a brutal wind moans through town, blowing new-fallen snow off rooftops, causing shutters to clatter softly against window-frames. The town is dark; everyone has gone to bed.

Almost everyone. Hood pulled up around his head, scarf tied across his nose and mouth, Tony Lucchesi stamps through the snow, gloved hand gripping the shoulder-strap of his rifle. Tough luck to have drawn the graveyard shift; it was originally Boone's turn, but since he came down with a bad cold earlier today, Chief Schmidt picked Tony to take his place on the night watch.

Not that it's necessary to have anyone on patrol after midnight this time of year. The boids migrated south months ago, the swampers have gone into hibernation within the ball-plants, and even the creek cats know better than to come out on a night

like this. But the Town Council, in its infinite wisdom, has ordained that the blue-shirts keep someone on duty twenty-seven hours a day, nine days a week. Like it's really necessary.

Tony's tempted to return to the Prefect barracks, curl up in a chair beside the stove, and steal a few hours of shut-eye before the sun comes up. A former URS soldier, though, he's one of Gill Reese's men; the colonel may be long dead, but his ghost still haunts the grunts who once served under him, and Gill would have kicked the ass of anyone caught sleeping on guard duty. So Tony staggers down Main Street, and hopes the barracks coffee is still warm by the time he completes his hourly swing through town.

Tony reaches the grange and is about to turn and head back the other way when he notices something odd: a faint blue light, glowing between the cracks of the shutters of one of the rear windows. That would be the comp in the mayor's office; he's seen this before, when either Lee or Monroe are working late. Both of them are gone, though, so no one should be in there, least of all at this ungodly hour.

Damn. One of them must have left the comp switched on. A minor thing, really, but since the aerostat went down last month everyone's been urged to conserve electricity. So Tony mutters an obscenity into his scarf as he tramps up the front steps of the grange...

And finds something else unusual: the front door, normally shut by this time, is slightly ajar, as if the wind has blown it open. With the exception of the armory and the mess hall kitchen, there are no locks on any of the doors of Liberty's public places, simply because there's no need for them. Theft is almost non-existent within the colony—why steal anything when you can have it merely by asking?—and locks themselves are a valuable commodity. And the last person to leave the grange at night always shuts the door behind them...

Tony's training takes over; he's no longer a blue-shirt performing a thankless task, but a URS soldier making a sweep. Pulling his rifle from his shoulder, he flicks off the safety and switches on the infrared range finder then lowers the monocle from his head strap. Carefully pushing open the door, he steps into the foyer, quietly closing the door behind him. Noting the empty coat hooks, he unlatches the inside door and tiptoes into the meeting hall.

He raises the rifle to eye-level, uses its infrared beam to guide him through the dark hall. The door leading to the offices in the back of the building is open; he peers around the corner, sees the blue glow coming from beneath the door of Captain Lee's office. The door is shut, but he can make out a soft clatter of someone typing at a keyboard.

One step at a time, Tony inches down the corridor, back pressed against the wall, rifle at waist level. As he reaches the door, a floorboard creaks beneath his boot. He stops, holds his breath. Unseen hands pause at the keyboard; for a few seconds all Tony can hear is the hollow groan of the wind. Then once again the typing resumes.

Tony lays his left hand on the doorknob. He counts to three, then throws open the door. "Freeze!" he yells, bringing the rifle up into firing position. "Don't move!"

Startled, the figure silhouetted against the comp screen whips around. "I said don't move!" Tony snaps. "Stay right there!"

"Okay, okay! Don't shoot!" The voice is young, male, badly frightened; he raises his hands slightly, and now Tony sees he's still wearing a parka. "I give up, all right?"

"Good. Keep it that way." Switching his grip on the rifle, Tony fumbles along the

wall next to the door until he locates the light switch. The ceiling panel flashes on, and Tony tries not to wince in the sudden glare. Chris Levin is seated at the mayor's desk, his eyes wide with fear. Tony dislikes Levin; a couple of months ago he hauled the kid down to the stockade after he took a poke at Carlos Montero, and he's been on the perp list for one thing or another ever since, usually drunk and disorderly. Breaking and entering is a new low, though.

"What are you doing here?" Tony doesn't lower the rifle even though it's clear that Chris is unarmed.

"Tony, man, take it easy. I just wanted to use the comp, that's all. My pad fried out, and I just..."

Chris starts to rise, and as he does so his right hand drifts to the keyboard. "I told you to freeze," Tony says, "and I meant it. Now put your hands on your head." Chris obediently folds them atop his skull. "Now step away from the desk...easy does it."

"C'mon." Chris essays a smile that trembles at the corners of his mouth. "I'm sorry if I...I mean, y'know, it's a mistake. Nothing to get worked up about."

For a moment, Tony's inclined to agree. The kid sneaks into the mayor's office after midnight to steal some comp time. No reason to put him under arrest; just send him home and enter the incident in the logbook once he returns to the barracks. Tony's almost ready to lower his rifle when he happens to glance at the comp.

On the upper half of the screen is a schematic image of Coyote, with spots depicting the positions of the three spacecraft orbiting around it: *Alabama* on one side of the planet, *Plymouth* and *Glorious Destiny* on the other. A real-time display of the positions of all three ships. *Glorious Destiny* and *Plymouth* are nearly on top of one another, and both are almost directly above New Florida.

A dotted line leads from Liberty to *Glorious Destiny*. As Tony watches, it moves to track the Earth ship across the sky. And now he sees the highlighted bar separating the upper and lower halves of the screen—GROUND TELEMETRY LINK—and below it, several lines of script. From this distance, he can't make out the print, yet he can discern what looks like latitude and longitude numbers.

Tony feels a cold pulse at his temples. He's heard the standing order: no further radio contact with the Earth ship until *Plymouth* returns. *Oh, Christ! He couldn't have...!*

"On the floor, Levin! Now!"

"I'm telling you, it's...!"

"Shut up and do what I say! On the deck!"

Chris throws himself to the floor, his hands still locked together on his head. Tony kicks aside the chair, keeps the gun barrel centered on his back. He reaches into his parka, pulls out the com unit, presses the pound key and the digit two, raises it to his ear.

"Chief, it's night watch. Tony. I'm at the grange, in the mayor's office. Get down here, we've got a problem." Tony looks again at the screen. "Better wake up Tom Shapiro, too. It's serious."

WHSS Glorious Destiny: Raphael, Gabriel 18 / 0102

The inner airlock hatch cycles open, revealing a compartment not much different

from the ready-room of the *Alabama*. Someone's waiting for them: six feet tall, wearing a long black cloak with a raised cowl, standing on what first appears to be the room's far wall until Lee reorients himself and sees that it's actually the floor.

"Welcome aboard." The voice has a slight electronic burr to it, but it's not until the figure raises a skeletal metal hand from beneath its cloak that Lee realizes it belongs to a robot. Glass eyes the color of rubies peer at him from a skull-like face; it motions toward elastic foot restraints arranged along the floor. "We'll soon be rephasing the ship's local field," it continues. "The transition will be gradual, of course, but we don't wish you to be harmed in the meantime."

Now Lee recognizes the voice as the same they heard during the original radio transmission. "Thank you," he says, pushing himself over to the nearest stirrups; behind him, Dana, Henry, and Wendy have floated into the compartment. "I take it your ship has...ah, artificial gravity of some sort."

"Artificial gravity?" Unexpectedly, dry laughter emerges from its mouth grill. "I suppose you could call it that. We refer to it as a Millis-Clement Field, but artificial gravity will do. We dephased it to facilitate docking procedures." The figure's other hand appears, holding a plastic bag. "Put these on, please. You'll be subjected to a brief period of ultraviolet radiation, for purposes of decontamination."

Lee takes the bag, opens it, pulls out a pair of wraparound sunglasses. Obviously meant to protect their eyes. "I assure you, we're not carrying any dangerous microorganisms."

"You're probably not. I apologize if you're offended. Merely a precaution." Again, the eerie laugh. "Besides, it'll give us a chance to talk before you meet Matriarch Hernandez."

"No offense taken. We understand." Lee puts on the glasses, passes the bag to Dana. She and the others have already fitted their feet into the stirrups; now it looks as if everyone is standing on the wall. "I'm Robert E. Lee, commanding officer of the..."

"Of course I recognize you, Captain Lee. I've thoroughly studied the *Alabama* incident...something of an interest of mine. It's quite an honor to meet you, sir." Its right hand comes up, palm open. "I'm Savant Manuel Castro...please, call me Manny."

Lee clasps the steel hand, finds its grasp remarkably gentle. "Pleased to meet you."

"Doesn't sound much like a 'bot," Wendy murmurs.

Manny's head makes an audible click as it turns in her direction. "What makes you think I'm a robot?"

Her eyes widen, but before she can say anything a loud gong reverberates through the compartment. "That's the thirty-second warning," Manny says. "Everyone, please put on your glasses and make sure your feet are secure. There are handrails behind you if you need them. This won't last long, I promise."

The ceiling panels grow brighter, emitting a bright-blue hue. Lee feels the soles of his shoes gradually settle against the floor. "You said..." Henry begins, then stops to grab the railing behind him. "You mean you're not a 'bot?"

"Strictly speaking, no. Old English terms for my condition would be 'android' or perhaps 'cyborg,' but even those are inadequate. Technically speaking, I'm a post human...a human intelligence transferred into a mechanistic form. A savant. Until seventy-eight years ago, my body was flesh and blood, but then..." A pause. "Let's

just say that I opted for a longer lifespan."

"Is...uh, everyone aboard ship like you?" An expression of horror on Dana's face.

"Forgive me. This must be a shock to you. No, not everyone aboard is posthuman. In fact, only ten of us are savants. The rest are baseline humans, just like you, although most are still in biostasis. My fellow savants and I remained awake during the voyage."

"Tell us about your ship, please," Lee says. "It's quite impressive."

"Thank you." Manny nods, an oddly human gesture. "We're quite proud of it. The full name is *Seeking Glorious Destiny Among the Stars for the Greater Good of Social Collectivism...Glorious Destiny*, for short. It was constructed in lunar orbit by the Western Hemisphere Union, a federation of twenty-one provinces in North and South America formed in 2096 by the Treaty of Havana, and it was launched from lunar orbit on June 16, 2256."

"That's..." Dana mentally calculates. "Forty-eight years ago."

"Forty-eight years, nine months, two weeks, and three days, including the three weeks it took for the ship to accelerate to cruise velocity and three more weeks for deceleration. Of course, since we traveled here at 95 percent light-speed, according to the ship's internal clock it seems as if only fifteen years, six months, and three days have gone by, which means that by our reckoning it's December 19, 2271...which means we've arrived about twenty-nine years before the *Alabama*. Makes sense, yes?"

Lee manages a wan smile. "We threw out the Gregorian calendar a long time ago. I take it your...ah, field...is what allowed you to achieve sub-light velocity."

"The Millis-Clement Field is a manifestation of our diametric drive, yes," Manny replies, and Lee notes the smug look on Henry's face; his deduction turned out to be correct. "The matriarch will give you a detailed synopsis of our means of propulsion, if you wish."

Lee feels heavier; the sensation of weight, denied while aboard *Plymouth*, is slowly returning to him. "I'm sorry if this is uncomfortable," Manny says. "Sit down if it makes you feel better...you shouldn't need the foot restraints now. Captain Lee, I don't think I've had the pleasure of meeting the rest of your party. Is it too late for introductions?"

"Not at all." Lee turns to the others. "This is Dana Monroe..."

"Ah, yes...*Alabama's* Chief Engineer. History records that you were one of those who instigated the takeover. A pleasure to meet you, ma'am."

If Dana is flattered, she keeps it to herself; she gives Manny a distrustful nod. "And this is Dr. Henry Johnson," Lee continues. "Astrophysicist, a civilian passenger..."

"I believe you were one of the so-called dissident intellectuals involved in the conspiracy. An honor to meet you, too, sir." Clearly pleased by the notoriety, Henry grins, takes a short bow.

"And finally, Wendy Gunther, a member of our colony's Town Council..."

"Wendy Gunther." A slight pause as Manny regards her with his strange eyes. "Oh, but of course...one of the children who was aboard. You're a bit older now."

"You could say that." Wendy has pulled out her pad, set it to voice-record mode; she scarcely glances up at him. "Last time I checked, I was two hundred and forty-nine years old."

Again, the weird laugh. "I must say, you don't look a day over eighteen."

"Nineteen, actually, but who's counting?" Wendy smiles.

"A pleasure to meet you, particularly considering your father's role in the hijacking."

Oh my God, Lee thinks, he knows...

"What do you mean?" Wendy looks up sharply, her brow furrowed in puzzlement. "My father wasn't part of the conspiracy. He was a Party loyalist...A life support engineer."

"You speak of him in past tense. I take it he's no longer alive."

"He was killed in an accident, just after *Alabama* arrived. What do you...?"

The gong sounds again, interrupting her, as the ceiling resumes its normal appearance. "Transition completed," Manny says, slipping his feet from the stirrups. "If you'll follow me, please, I'll take you to the matriarch. She's anxious to meet you."

There's a haunted look in Wendy's eyes; Lee now knows that it was foolish to have brought her along. He could easily order her to return to the *Plymouth*, but that would solve nothing. As she walks past him, following Manny toward a hatch on the other side of the compartment, she briefly meets his gaze, and in that moment he realizes she knows he's lied to her. Indeed, perhaps she's suspected it all along.

Nothing he can do about it now. All he can do is wait for her to discover the truth.

The passageway down which Manny escorts them is wide enough for two people to walk abreast, yet it's strangely vacant, and silent save for the background hum of the ship. They pass closed doors marked with words in a language Lee doesn't recognize. Without explanation, the savant leads them into a lift. He utters a foreign word; the doors iris shut and the cab begins to rise. "Excuse me," Henry asks, "but what language are you using?"

"English." If Manny could smile, Lee could swear that he's doing so now. "*Anglo*, to use the proper term. English has changed quite a bit over the last two centuries. Only the savants and a handful of the crew are fluent in the older form. You'll have to forgive the matriarch when you meet her...she knows enough to get by, but it's still new to her. That's the reason I've been sent to greet you...besides being your guide, I'm also your translator."

"You just mentioned the crew," Lee says. "How many are aboard?"

Manny replies with something in Anglo. "Loosely translated," he adds, "it means, 'all good things in all good time.'"

Lee says nothing. At least the numerals on the control panel are Arabic; they boarded on level 8, and now it looks as if they're heading for 12. If they have to make an escape, this is useful information.

The lift opens, revealing darkness. Lee steps out, looks up...and finds Coyote hovering directly above him.

The effect is startling; it's as if he's standing outside the ship, with nothing separating him from the void. Coyote fills the star-flecked black sky; through patches of clouds he can see the Great Equatorial River meandering past yet-unnamed islands, with Bear rising just beyond the horizon. For an instant it seems as if the walls have disappeared, until he looks down again and sees himself surrounded by tiered rings of

varicolored lights: instrument consoles, arranged on two open decks, with the cowed forms of other savants silhouetted before them.

"Our command center." Manny has quietly come up behind him. "We're in the bow. The view is projected by the ceiling...artificial, of course."

Lee stares up at the dome. The ship is somewhere above the eastern hemisphere; now he can make out a dense, spiral-shaped cloud formation above the equator. The winter storm is still moving eastward, churning its way toward the other side of the planet. The winds are probably already rising back in Liberty; they can't remain aboard *Glorious Destiny* much longer, or it'll soon be too dangerous for *Plymouth* to attempt a landing.

"Very impressive," he says, pretending a nonchalance he doesn't feel, "but our time is rather short. If you could take me to Matriarch Hernandez..."

"Captain Lee, I am here."

A woman emerges from the shadows, her hands folded together. Dressed in a gold-trimmed blue robe, her auburn hair cut close to her scalp, she seems to be middle-aged, her face plain yet her eyes sharp and piercing. She steps into the light, raises a hand palm outward, a formal salutation. "Matriarch Luisa Hernandez, I am," she says haltingly, her accent so thick it's difficult to understand her. "Meeting you...pardon...it is a pleasure to meet you, Captain. No...an honor, instead. I have not...never I have..."

Frustrated, she shakes her head, then turns to Manny and says something in Anglo. "The matriarch is embarrassed by her lack of language skills," Manny says after a moment. "She's honored to meet someone who occupies such a heroic place in history. Indeed, were it not for the actions of you and your brave crew, the United Republic of America might have never fallen, and so this conversation would not be taking place."

"I don't understand." Lee looks back at the matriarch. "What do you mean by that?"

She speaks to Manny once more before she looks back at Lee. "Savant Castro explains better than can I," she says.

"The matriarch has asked me to provide a brief historical summary," Manny says. "It's important that you know these things. When you stole the *Alabama*, it was the first of a chain of events that eventually led to the URA being toppled by domestic insurrection. A few months after you left, government news agencies officially reported that the ship had been destroyed...an act of sabotage perpetrated by a member of its crew. The fact that Eric Gunther's daughter is among us only further confirms that this was an untruth, that he was an operative placed aboard by the Internal Security Agency..."

"My father?" Wendy's voice is strangled, disbelieving. "I don't...are you saying my father was a saboteur?"

Manny says something in Anglo to the matriarch. Her eyes grow wide; no longer stoical, she regards Wendy with astonishment. "This thing...you do not know?"

Lee turns, sees Wendy's confusion. "I couldn't tell you," he says quietly, taking a step toward her. "I'm sorry, but..."

"You knew?" She backs away. "You knew my...?"

"Wendy, please listen to me. The government placed your father aboard the ship to blow it up in case it was hijacked. He never intended to carry out those orders...he

brought you aboard, didn't he? I didn't know any of this until after we arrived, when he tried to kill me, because he was still loyal to the Party..."

"So it wasn't an accident." Now there's cold fury in her eyes. "You killed him...or had him killed."

"Wendy, no. That's not the way it was." Lee steps closer toward her; she starts to back away, but he grasps her arms. There's more to this than they know," he says, his voice low, "but this isn't the time to..."

"So when were you going to tell me?" She stares back at him. "Or were you ever going to...?"

"I'll tell you everything, but not now." Lee lets go of her. "Right now, I need you to stay calm, and record everything that's being said. You told me you could do this...Now I'm depending on you. Can you do that? Please?"

Wendy doesn't respond, only looks down at the floor. After a moment, she nods her head. Dana moves closer, puts her arm around her shoulders, offering comfort to her. Without a word, Wendy raises her pad; her hand shakes as she makes notes with her stylus.

There's an uncomfortable silence within the command center. The savants have turned to watch, their ruby eyes glittering in the darkness. Lee lets out his breath, turns back toward the matriarch. "My apologies," he says. "This is...something she didn't know."

The matriarch gives a sympathetic nod, says something in Anglo. Manny listens, looks at Lee. "Our fault for having brought up a matter that shouldn't have been discussed."

"Thank you." Lee straightens his shoulders. He still has a mission to perform. "You were saying...? About the insurrection..."

"Yes, of course. The government attempted to claim that *Alabama* was destroyed by sabotage three months after launch, but then the underground net provided evidence that it was hijacked from Highgate, with you yourself as the conspiracy's leader. When the government couldn't deny this any longer, it produced one of the main conspirators, the former director of the Internal Security Agency..."

"Roland Shaw. Yes, he helped us get away." Lee remembers the last time he saw Shaw: he shook his hand at the launch just before he boarded the shuttle. *I hope you find what you're looking for*, he said. "What happened to him?"

"The government put him on trial for high treason. He was found guilty and publicly executed." Lee winces, and Manny hesitates before continuing. "It wasn't an empty death. The organization he helped build gained more converts, and the fact that the *Alabama* had been stolen demonstrated that the government was not as indomitable as it once seemed. Small groups of insurgents began making contact with one another, forming networks. Within months, there were acts of sabotage all across the Republic..."

"Remember the *Alabama*." There's a hint of a smile on the matriarch's face as she raises her hands to form the thumbs, forefingers, and index fingers in an A shape.

That was the sign of revolution," Manny explains. "It took nearly twenty-six years for it to gain sufficient strength to topple the government, yet in the end a mob stormed the capitol and placed President Rochelle under arrest..."

"Joseph Rochelle?" Lee raises an eyebrow. "My father-in-law became president?"

"No...Elise Rochelle, his daughter. Your former wife...she stopped using your name after you left. Elected by Congress to life-term following..."

"Never mind why. What happened to her?"

"She was supposed to stand trial in Havana for crimes against humanity, but she took her own life before it got that far. She..."

"Crimes against humanity?" Lee stares at him in shock. "What sort of crimes?"

"The underground movement didn't act alone. It managed to gain assistance from outside the Republic. New England, Canada, and Pacifica were the strongholds...arms were smuggled across the borders, government coms were cracked, fugitives taken into hiding. When President Rochelle became aware of this, she ordered bioweapons strikes against Boston, Seattle, and Montreal. Over eight hundred thousand people were killed by superflu in New England and Canada, and nearly three hundred thousand died in Pacifica."

Lee closes his eyes, lowers his head. He'd fallen out of love with Elise long before he decided to steal the *Alabama*, and just before he'd left Earth she had attempted to betray him to the ISA, only to be thwarted at the last minute by Roland Shaw, an act for which he eventually paid with his life. She had always been cold, yet he would never have believed her to be capable of such evil. Somehow, in the intervening years, the Liberty Party must have twisted her soul, transforming her into a monster...

He feels a hand touch his arm. Looking up, he finds Henry Johnson next to him. "You okay?" he whispers. Feeling numb, Lee nods. Henry turns to the matriarch. "Why are you telling us this? What does it have to do with why you're...?"

She holds up a hand. "Patience. All to be explained." To Manny: "Continue."

"After the Liberty Party was overthrown," the savant says, "the government collapsed virtually overnight. What used to be known as the United Republic of America had become an anarchy. Thousands more perished over the course of the following months, either from plague, starvation, or random violence. During the crisis, the countries bordering the Republic and elsewhere in the Americas formed the Western Hemisphere Union, with its capitol in Havana, in the neutral nation of Cuba."

"You said something about that," Lee murmurs. "The Treaty of Havana, signed in...What was the date?"

"April 26, 2096. Liberation Day, as it's now known. The first major act of the WHU was to dispatch military troops to North America to restore civil order and provide humanitarian relief. Once this was accomplished, the Union set forth to rebuild *El Norte*...not as an independent nation, but as a province under the stewardship of the WHU."

Lee stares in disbelief at the matriarch "You're saying my country no longer exists?" Manny interprets, and she nods gravely. "And what sort of government did you install?"

"Social collectivism." Her chin lifts with pride.

"Under social collectivism," Manny says, "all individuals are treated as treated as equals. The barriers that once divided people—capitalism, class status, racial inequality, so on—have been eradicated, replaced by a system that rewards the individual on the basis of his or her contributions to the greater good. No one is rich. No one is poor. There is no hunger, no civil strife, no political turmoil..."

"Sounds familiar." Henry murmurs. "I think that was tried before. Russia, Eastern Europe, and China, during the twentieth century."

The matriarch appears baffled; she doesn't understand what he just said. "You're alluding to Marxist socialism," Manny replies. "An early version of collectivism, quite crude in execution. Our system is different. Believe me when I tell you that collectivism works. It's not only responsible for rebuilding North America, but it's also allowed us to make the technological advances that have made ships like this possible. Were it not for collectivist theory..."

"Just a moment," Lee says. "What you just said...'ships like this.' Are you telling us that there's more than one?"

Matriarch Hernandez apparently understands this, for she smiles. "*Glorious Destiny*, only one...the first. More there are. See."

She raises her left arm from beneath her robe, touches her bracelet, and the dome above them changes.

Lee looks up, sees the Moon as seen from Lagrangian orbit. Scattered in a broad swath across space are three giant vessels identical to *Glorious Destiny*, each in various states of construction—some mere skeletons, others near completion—surrounded by dozens of tiny vehicles, moving back and forth, transporting hull segments from one place to another. In the far distance, he can make out a ring-shaped space station, possibly a construction base. A shipyard, more vast than any ever built before.

"This is Highgate," Manny says, "as we saw it shortly before we left. The vessels you see are three of our five sister ships, each capable of carrying one thousand colonists in biostasis..."

"A thousand...?"

"Yes, Captain. *Glorious Destiny* carries a total complement of one thousand. You haven't seen them because they haven't been revived yet. Unless there were any unforeseen setbacks during the last forty-eight years, the remaining five ships of our fleet should be arriving over the course of the next three Earth years."

The scene above him is already history, an artifact of the past. Even now, distant from one another by only a matter of light-years, a convoy of leviathans race toward them at sub-light velocity, bearing thousands of passengers in deep hibernation...

"We are coming to Coyote," Matriarch Hernandez says slowly, choosing her words with great deliberation. "Seeking glorious destiny among the stars, for the greater good of social collectivism."

Liberty: Raphael, Gabriel 18 / 1917

"Order! Order, please!"

The gavel bangs sharply against the table, yet it's swallowed by the tumult of upraised voices. Throughout the jammed grange hall, men and women have risen to their feet, yelling to be heard above each other. At the front of the room, the members of the Town Council sit nervously behind the head table, a couple of them obviously wishing they could be anywhere but here.

Seated in the audience, Susan cradled in his arms, Carlos watches Wendy from across the room. She sits bolt upright at the council table, her hands clasped together,

her face drawn tight. Little more than an hour has passed since the *Plymouth* returned, and they've barely spoken since he met her at the landing pad, yet it seems as if she's joined the rest of the council only with great reluctance. Something's troubling her, but whatever it is, she's refused to tell him about it.

"Everyone, please sit down!" Once again, Captain Lee pounds his gavel. "We have to get through this, and we're short of time!"

Gradually, the noise begins to subside, as those who were standing reluctantly take their seats again. Now several hands have been raised. Tom Shapiro nudges Lee, whispers something to him; he nods, then looks back at the audience. "Let me finish, then we'll proceed with open discussion. But, please, everyone...we need to keep this on track, so be patient just a little while longer."

Scanning the crowd, Carlos sees expressions of fear, anger, even panic. Captain Lee slowly lets out his breath; like everyone else who made the trip up to *Glorious Destiny*, he appears ready to collapse from exhaustion, yet when he radioed from *Plymouth* shortly after departing the starship, he insisted that an emergency town meeting be held as soon as the shuttle touched down.

"I realize this comes as a shock," Lee continues once the room is quiet again. "Believe me, it was a surprise to the rest of us. I attempted to explain to Matriarch Hernandez that Liberty is barely capable of supporting a hundred people, let alone another thousand, but she doesn't understand our situation or..."

"What doesn't she understand?" This from Lew Geary, standing next to Carrie off to one side of the room. "We've only got enough food to get those of us here through the rest of winter. Except for what we raise in the greenhouse, it'll be at least three more months before we can plant the spring crops."

Murmurs through the audience. "I know that, and you know that," Lee says, "but either she doesn't believe me or she's chosen to ignore the facts. My feeling is that it's the latter. The political system she comes from...this 'social collectivism'...dictates that everyone shares everything in common. What's mine is also yours, simple as that."

"Then they stay in orbit," Lew says. "You just said that most of their crew is still in biostasis. They wait a few more months, then we can talk about feeding a few more mouths..."

"More than a few, sounds like." This from Naomi Fisher, the chief cook. She's seated next to Carlos with her husband Patrick Molloy, one of the Marshall engineers who helped design the *Alabama*. Neither of them look very happy about what they've just heard.

"And where are we supposed to put all these guys?" Patrick demands. "In our homes? I mean, even if they remain in orbit until next spring, who's going to build shelters for them?"

Across the room, the noise level begins to rise once more. Susan stirs uneasily against his shoulder, and Carlos shifts her from one side of his lap to another; she thrusts her thumb into her mouth, and he gently pulls her hand away from her face. Lee bangs the gavel again. "Order, please...Pat, I don't know how the matriarch thinks we're capable of feeding and providing shelter for all her people, only that she expects us to do it. In her mind, the *Alabama* is the property of the former United Republic of America, which in turn came under control of the Western Hemisphere Union. Since we stole the *Alabama* and used it to establish a colony, we're part of the WHU..."

"That's absurd!" Naomi snaps.

"I know...but try explaining that to them." Lee holds up a hand before he can be

interrupted again. "Even if she's willing to keep her crew in biostasis for another few months, that only forestalls the situation. Liberty will have ten times as many people as we do now..."

"So let 'em build their own colony." Ted LeMare calls out. "We've spent three and half Earth years learning how to live here...why can't they?"

Lee's about to answer this, but then Dana stands up from the first row. "For the record, I agree. Apparently they're expecting happy natives throwing out the red carpet. The matriarch doesn't know what we've been through to get to where we are now..."

"Then tell 'em to go somewhere else!" someone shouts from the back of the room.

"You don't understand." Dana shakes her head. "Their ship...I mean, it's nearly three times the size of the *Alabama*. By sheer force of numbers alone, they can overwhelm us. Not only that, but their level of technology is over two hundred years in advance of ours. If...*when*...they start coming down, I don't know how we're going to be able to resist them."

From the first row, Jean Swenson raises her hand. Grateful that someone is abiding by parliamentary procedure, Lee points to her and she stands. "I thought the council decided to keep our location a secret," she says. "When did that change?"

"It was indeed the council's decision to keep secret Liberty's whereabouts for as long as possible." Lee hesitates. "Unfortunately, that's no longer an option. Last night, an unauthorized radio transmission was made to the *Glorious Destiny* by a certain individual, during which he revealed our latitude and longitude..."

Angry whispers. "Who the hell made that...?" Patrick starts.

"I'm sorry, but I don't wish to discuss that." Lee looks pained. "That person has been detained, and once this meeting is adjourned the council will decide what measures should be taken."

Carlos glances toward where Sissy Levin is seated near the back of the room. He'd already heard about Chris. His mother sits alone, her hands folded together in her lap; her face is neutral, expressing no shame or remorse. Perhaps she believes that what Chris did was right...

"At this point," Lee continues, "casting blame serves no real purpose. I don't think we could have kept our location secret for very much longer. Inevitably, they would have found us. The more important issue is what do we do when they arrive."

"When do you think they're coming?" Kim Newell says. Carlos sees that his sister Marie is sitting in her lap. "If we can expect them at any minute..."

"Fortunately, it won't be that soon." Lee forces a grim smile. "For one thing, the matriarch told me that most of her crew is still in biostasis. Only she and the...um, savants, whom I've told you about...are presently awake. I think we can reasonably expect that it'll take some time for them to revive a sufficient number of their passengers to form a landing party. For another the winter storm we've been tracking over the past few days is definitely headed our way. Once it hits...probably two nights from now...it'll be impossible for any of their shuttles to land, until it blows over. So I guess this will give us a lead time of..."

He pauses. "Three, maybe four days. Then I think they'll start arriving."

An uneasy silence falls across the room. No one says anything, and Carlos can tell that it's all beginning to sink in. Lee waits a moment, then goes on. "So far as I

can tell," he says, "we've only got two choices. First, we attempt to negotiate with the matriarch. Try to make her understand that we're unable to feed and shelter a thousand more settlers, or at least until springtime when we're able to plant crops..."

"Okay, so what then?" Paul Dwyer says. "These people probably don't have any more of a clue as to how to support themselves than we did when we first got here. Which means that they're going to be dependent upon us..."

"And so we're supposed to feed and provide shelter for a bunch of unwelcome guests?" someone else asks.

"Hell with that." Lew Geary crosses his arms. "If I wanted to live that way, I would've stayed home. At least with the Liberty Party I knew where I stood." Scattered laughter from around the room, and he nods. "This...what d'ya call it?...social collectivism sounds like the same crap we left behind, just with a different name."

Applause, even from those who were once party members. Gazing around the room, Carlos marvels at how much these people have changed. Less than a year and a half ago by Coyote reckoning, the colony had been divided between those who had once sworn allegiance to the URA and those who'd fled from the Republic. Yet together they'd endured the extremes of climate, suffered through deprivation and loss, and overcome hardships that might have broken lesser men and women. Any differences they once had were now forgotten, or at least rendered trivial; deep down, they'd found something within themselves that many of them probably didn't know was there: a spirit unwilling to surrender to anyone or anything.

Freedom does that to people, he realizes. Once you've tasted it, you never want to let go. But how much would they be willing to sacrifice to remain free?

"All right then," Lee says, "then that leaves us with our second option...we resist. Fight back. Don't let them set foot in Liberty."

Again, the room becomes quiet. Ron Schmidt, the chief of the blue-shirts, clears his throat as he raises his hand. Lee acknowledges him, and the former URS sergeant stands up. "The armory contains two long-range mortars, twenty-five carbines, and twelve sidearms, along with the twelve automatic machine guns that comprise our periphery defense system," he drawls. "During our last inventory, my people counted forty mortar shells, three hundred sixty-two rounds of 38-caliber parabellum ammo, two hundred and two flechettes...and, before I forget, ten longbows and eighty-two arrows."

The last might have been intended as a joke, but no one laughs. Carlos winces a bit; he fashioned those bows and arrows himself, and has trained the blue-shirts in their usage. But never to be used against other people. "Mr. Mayor," Schmidt continues, "in my opinion, we have sufficient materiel to deal with boids and creek-cats, but not a determined and well-armed expeditionary force. If someone seriously wants to take Liberty, they could do so within two or three days, even if we were determined to fight to the last man," He hesitates. "That is, if anyone cares to open fire on another human being. That's a matter you'd have to decide for yourselves."

There's an uncertain rumble through the room as Schmidt sits down. "Thanks, Ron, for your report." Lee says. "I appreciate your assessment." He glances at the rest of the council members, who've become ashen. "The chief has a point. Are we willing to go to war to protect ourselves? Is this a step we're ready to take?"

Voices are already rising—argument, counter-argument—yet Carlos suddenly doesn't hear them, for in that instant, something flashes through his mind.

Not so much an idea as a memory: a mural painted upon the walls of the *Alabama's* ring corridor...Prince Rupert, leading a procession of friends and allies across a mountain valley, taking them away from the forces that threatened to destroy them.

Without fully knowing what he's doing, Carlos turns to Naomi. "Would you hold Susan for a minute?"

Surprised, Naomi nods, gently takes Susan from his arms. Carlos hesitates, then raises a hand. "Pardon me...Mr. Mayor?" he calls out. "Mr. Mayor, may I speak, please?"

For a few moments, it doesn't seem as if Lee has heard him. Then he spots Carlos from across the room and points his way, formally acknowledging him. Wendy stares at Carlos in astonishment as he rises to his feet. Townspeople turn to gaze at him, and suddenly Carlos finds himself the center of attention. For a second, he wants to sit down again, remain silent.

"Mr. Montero," Lee says, "you have something to say?"

"Yes, sir," Carlos says. "I think...I believe there's another alternative."

Raphael, Gabriel 18 / 2310

The town stockade resembles one in name only; it's really a windowless one-room cabin next to the Prefect barracks. Originally intended to be a storehouse, it eventually became necessary to have it function as a jail. Even so, it's seldom used; very rarely does anyone cause enough trouble for the blue-shirts to place them under arrest, and punishment has usually been in the form of community service rather than incarceration.

Tony Lucchesi unlocks the front door, reaches in to turn on the light. "Levin? Wake up. You've got a visitor." A moment passes, then he steps aside to let Wendy pass. "Want me to hang around?"

"No thanks. I'll be okay." Chris is sitting up in bed, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He gives her a reassuring nod; whatever else happens, the last thing he'll do is attack her. Wendy looks back at Tony, and he reluctantly shuts the door behind her. A rattle as the deadbolt is thrown.

"Well, hello," Chris says once they're alone. "This is a surprise." He gazes at the carafe in her hand. "Is that for me?"

"Uh-huh. Thought you might be cold out here." Wendy hands the carafe to him; he nods in gratitude, unscrews its cap. The stockade is sparsely furnished—a narrow cot, a chair, a wood-burning stove, a chamber pot in the corner—but at least it's reasonably warm. She watches as he pours black coffee into the cap. "Also thought you might want to talk."

"What's there to talk about? Caught red-handed. Guilty as charged. End of story." He shrugs, takes a tentative sip. "Thanks for the coffee. Does the condemned man get a last meal, too?"

"That's not going to happen...I mean, if you think we're going to execute you." Wendy pulls off her shawl, takes a seat in the chair. "The council just met in executive session. We haven't quite decided what to do with you yet, but...well, that's why I'm here. They want to know why you did what you did."

"They want to know...?"

"I want to know." Wendy shakes her head. "Chris, why? Why do something you knew would put everyone at risk?"

"Oh, c'mon." He shakes his head. "What do you think this is, high treason? If anything, I've saved everyone's lives. We're barely managed to scratch by down here. If that ship hadn't arrived, we'd probably all be dead in another two or three years. You guys want to hide in the swamp, go ahead. Me, I think we could use whatever goodies they've got aboard that ship. That's why I told 'em where we are."

"That sounds like self-justification."

He puts down the coffee, pulls the blanket off the bed and wraps it around his shoulders. "Yeah, maybe so. Maybe I don't know why myself." He hesitates. "You still haven't told me whether you think I'm a traitor."

She doesn't reply. Outside, the wind has picked up once more. On the other side of the door, she can hear muffled voices: men and women moving through town.

Even though it's close to the middle of the night, there's little time to lose. Soon the storm will be upon them, and the colony has to be ready before then.

"I know a little about betrayal," she says after a moment. "I learned something about my father today...something I didn't know before. He tried to play both sides, too...his personal interests against his loyalty to the Republic. In the end, when he had to choose between one or the other, he made the wrong choice, and he paid for his mistake with his life."

Chris peers at her. "I don't understand. What are you...?"

"Never mind. It's a long story." She shakes her head. "What I'm trying to say is, nobody ever thinks of themselves as being a traitor. Deep inside, they always believe they're doing the right thing, even when it hurts someone else. That's what I think my father was doing...and I think that's why you did it, too."

"Sounds about right to me."

"You think so? You really mean it?"

"Uh-huh." Then he smiles. "And given a chance, I'd do it again...just the same way."

Again, Wendy doesn't answer immediately. She gazes at the man—the boy, really—for whom she once felt an attraction, who might have been her partner if things had worked out differently, and feels only a certain cold pity. He sits slumped on the bed, drinking the coffee she brought him; no regret, no guilt, only misplaced contempt.

"That's all I wanted to hear." She stands up. "Goodbye, Chris. I hope...I dunno. Maybe you'll finally work things out."

"Goodbye?" Chris gapes at her as she turns toward the door, raps on it.

"What do you mean, goodbye? Are you going somewhere?"

"Yes, I am," Wendy says. "And where I'm going, you can't follow."

Liberty: Kafziel, Gabriel 22 / 1038

The storm has passed, the sky has cleared. Now the town lies buried beneath fourteen inches of fresh snow that has drifted high against the log walls of cabins and glazed

over their windows. Icicles like slender crystal daggers drape from roof eaves, the bright morning sun causing them to slowly drip into rain barrels below. A low breeze, cold and lonesome, murmurs through the snow-covered street, rattling closed shutters, whistling past chimneys from which no woodsmoke rises.

Wrapped in a thick blue cloak, hood raised over her head, Matriarch Hernandez stands in front of the grange hall and studies the still and silent town. Except for the handful of Union Guard soldiers making a house-to-house search, nothing moves; the snow lies thick and undisturbed save for their footprints.

The matriarch shudders, pulls her cloak tighter around herself. This world is much colder than she'd expected, its thin air difficult to breathe. Hearing a muted rumble from far above, she glances up, watches a shuttle as it races across the cloudless blue sky. Anticipating some form of resistance from the *Alabama* colonists, she'd instructed the second shuttle to land an hour after her own craft touched down on the outskirts of town. There are twenty armed soldiers aboard, ready to quell any rebellion, yet they aren't necessary now.

The town is abandoned, without life. In little more than three days, more than a hundred men, women, and children have vanished.

"Matriarch," a voice says from behind her. She turns, sees Savant Castro marching toward her, a stark black shadow against the whiteness. He can't feel the wind, of course, yet somehow she imagines it biting at him through his monkish cloak.

"What have you found?" she asks, speaking in Anglo. "Is there anyone left?"

"Only two. A young man and his mother." The savant stops before her, his spindly legs almost knee-deep in the snow. "We found them down the street, in what seems to be a jail. They were locked inside, although with sufficient food and water to last a few days."

"Locked in?" The matriarch is puzzled. "Why would they...?"

"He identifies himself as the one who sent us the coordinates. He says the others don't trust him any more and decided to leave him behind. His mother elected to stay behind on her own."

"I see." The matriarch frowns. "So they would know where the others have gone."

"Unfortunately, they do not. They were put in jail two days ago. No one told them anything until then." Savant Castro points in the opposite direction. "I've just visited their landing pad. One of their shuttles is still here...the *Mayflower*, what used to be called the *Wallace*...but it's little more than an empty hull. They've cannibalized it of every usable component..."

"What about the other craft? Any indication of when it lifted off?"

"The snow has covered its blast marks. That leads me to conclude that it probably departed before the storm arrived. That would have been at least two days ago."

Luisa Hernandez looks away, murmurs an obscenity beneath her fogged breath. Once her crew learned the location of the colony from the radio transmission they had received—apparently from the young colonist they've just found—shortly before Lee and his party had visited them, she'd tried to keep *Glorious Destiny* within sight of New Florida. Yet the planet rotated out of synch with her ship's orbit, and so there were many opportunities for a shuttle to lift off without being observed.

"Near the river, we've discovered what appears to be a shed meant for water

craft," Castro continues. Three large boats were once stored there, along with a number of smaller ones." When she looks at him again, he shakes his head. "They're all gone now."

And then the storm hit, and for the next two days several hundred miles of Coyote's western hemisphere had been shrouded by dense clouds. Sufficient time for the colonists to make their escape beneath the cover of the storm...

"And their homes?" She gestures to the primitive log cabins neatly arranged along the colony's major avenue. "Is there anything here that...?"

"No, Matriarch," he says, and she nods. As her scouts have already discovered, the dwellings have been stripped down to bare walls, with only window glass and the heaviest pieces of furniture left behind. Everything that couldn't be replaced, the colonists took with them. Even electrical fixtures are gone, the wiring carefully removed from the walls and ceilings.

"We've found livestock pens," the savant says, "but the animals are missing. The grain silos are bare as well. There's nothing left in them."

Hearing this, Hernandez scowls. She'd been counting on the colony's food supply to get her advance team through the winter, until spring arrived and the colonists could cultivate sufficient crops to support the rest of *Glorious Destiny's* crew. She gazes at the ground, absently running the toe of her left boot through the snow. Her plans have been dealt a severe setback; she wonders what she might have said or done that gave Captain Lee some warning of her ambitions.

"Have you...?" she begins, and at that moment the front door of the grange bangs open. Startled, she turns quickly, her hand reaching beneath her cloak for her sidearm, yet it's only the guardsman she sent into the meeting hall.

He halts on the snow-trampled steps, something beneath his right arm. "Pardon me, Matriarch," he stammers, his eyes wide as he perceives the gun in her hand. "I didn't..."

"Have you found something?" Savant Castro asks. The soldier nods. "Bring it here, please."

The soldier stumbles down the stairs, wades across the snow to where they're standing. "It was in a room in the back, on a table. They'd taken everything else, so I thought it might be important."

"Thank you." Hernandez takes it from the soldier: a swatch of colored fabric, very old, neatly folded. She carefully pulls it open, involuntarily sucks in her breath when she recognizes it for what it is. The flag of the United Republic of America. Back on Earth, they're only seen in museums. This one was probably given to the *Alabama* crew before they left Earth. A priceless historical artifact...

"There was also this." The soldier nervously extends a small slip of paper. "It was attached to the flag. Excuse my ignorance, Matriarch, but I don't know what it means."

Luisa Hernandez takes it from him. There's something written on it, but it's in Old English. Without asking, she hands it to Savant Castro.

He studies it for a moment. "Well done, Guardsman. You're dismissed." The soldier gives him a long look, then salutes and reluctantly walks away. Castro waits until he's out of earshot, then he reads the note aloud.

East Channel: Kafziel, Gabriel 22 / 1101

"This belongs to you. We have no use for it any longer, so you should keep it. Don't follow us, or we'll follow you."

"Excuse me, Captain? You said something?"

Lee looks around. Carlos stands in the longboat's stern, his hands on the tiller. Lee thought he'd been speaking to himself, but the young man apparently overheard him. "Never mind," he says. "Just something I left for the matriarch. I imagine she's found it by now."

Standing up from the grain sack upon which he's been seated, he props a foot upon the gunnel, gazes back the way they've come. The Eastern Divide is still just within sight, but it's falling below the horizon, its limestone bluffs swallowed by the cold waters of the East Channel. In a few minutes, New Florida will be gone. Enough time for one last look...

"I don't think we've seen the last of 'em." Carlos peers over his shoulder. "In fact, I think we can count on it."

"If they're smart, they'll keep their distance." No doubt that the newcomers will try to find them; Lee guesses that *Glorious Destiny* will locate their whereabouts within a few weeks, if not sooner. But the matriarch only wanted Liberty, not the people who once lived there, and the note he left behind was his warning to stay away. Pinning it to the flag was a little more subtle. So far as he was concerned, there was little difference between the Republic and the Union: just another form of oppression justified by political ideology. The matriarch might or might not get the jab; it matters little to him.

A sly grin steals across Carlos's face. "Do I have to keep my distance, too?"

"I hope that doesn't mean what I think it means." When Carlos doesn't reply, Lee shakes his head. "That'll come later. Right now, we've got a lot of work ahead of us."

The broad deck is packed solid with sacks, crates, and equipment containers: all their belongings, or at least everything that could be salvaged from the colony and loaded aboard three thirty-four-foot boats. Their boat is bringing up the rear of the flotilla; ahead of them are the other longboats, escorted on either side by kayaks and canoes, their sails billowed by the cool easterly wind. Just as Carlos predicted, the storm flooded Sand Creek, raising the water level enough for the flat-bottomed boats to slip through the Shapiro Pass without foundering on the shoals.

In another couple of days, they'll reach the Montero Delta. Then they'll turn east and follow the southwestern coast of Midland until they reach the place where Carlos made camp last summer. The rest of the colonists, along with the livestock, have already gone ahead, airlifted to Midland by the *Plymouth* just before the storm swept across New Florida. They should have already made camp in the mountain valley Carlos found not far from where he built his treehouse.

Lee turns away, starts heading toward the bow, picking his way across bags of corn and beans, boxes of tools and spare parts, rolls of electrical wire and plastic tubing. Carlos knows where he's going; just now, there's someone else aboard he needs to see.

Wendy sits cross-legged on a sailboard, her back propped against the main mast. Her pad is open in her lap, yet she's paused to gaze back at New Florida. The breeze whips her hair across her face, the morning sun turning it from ash-blond to silver-

grey; in that moment, she appears far older than her years, more world-weary than any girl her age should be. Lee hesitates—perhaps he should respect her solitude—but then she looks around, finds him standing behind her. Her expression is solemn, her eyes impartial.

"You want to talk about it?" he asks.

"Does it matter?"

"It should. At least it does to me." Lee finds a seat on a crate. Looking around, he catches a last glimpse of the Eastern Divide, now only a ragged dark line above the horizon. "If I didn't get a chance before to say I'm sorry..."

"You've done that already. What you didn't tell me is why."

There's no accusation in her voice. She simply wants to know. There are a dozen different lies he could tell her now, some more comforting than others, yet she'd see through any of them in a moment. In her face, he perceives the child she had once been; in her eyes, the woman she would become. He had to speak to the woman, not the child.

"I didn't kill your father," he begins. "Gill Reese did...he shot him in the back, aboard the *Alabama*, because he thought he was going to shoot me."

"Why did my father want to kill you?" Blunt. To the point.

"He said that I was a traitor, and that it was his duty to kill me." Lee pauses. "Please believe me when I tell you that I didn't want Gill to shoot him. I tried to get your father to give me his gun, and for a second or so I thought he would, but then he changed his mind and...well, Reese thought he was about to shoot me, and so he fired first. He died in my arms."

"What..." Her voice chokes a little; she clears her throat. "What were his last words?"

"Long Live the Republic." Lee remembers the moment with terrible clarity. "But that's not what matters. The last thing he spoke of was you...he didn't want you to ever know why he was aboard. That was his greatest fear, I..."

He shakes his head. "No. That's not right. I don't think that's what frightened him. I think he was afraid of the future. He'd lived so long in the past, he didn't want to let it go. When he stole a gun and tried to kill me, he was trying to turn back the clock. But he couldn't do that, so..."

"I understand." She still doesn't look at him, but through her wind-blown hair he can see wetness on her face. "You want to know what's funny? I hardly knew him. I mean...he put me in a youth hostel so he could join the service, and I barely saw him again until he took me out to put me aboard the *Alabama*. What kind of lousy father would...?"

"I don't know. Maybe a father who cared more for his daughter than he was willing to admit."

Her chin trembles, and now the tears come freely. Lee hesitates, wondering if this is the right thing to do, then he moves to sit next to her. She doesn't resist as he puts an arm around her shoulders; her head falls against his chest, and Lee holds her this way for a long time. The handful of other colonists aboard the boat pointedly ignore them; Carlos minds the tiller, careful not to look their way as he steers them closer toward Midland. New Florida has vanished, and now the boats are alone on the East Channel.

Wendy raises her head, snuffles a little, wipes her eyes with the back of her hand.

"So...what's next, Captain? What do we do now?"

Robert E. Lee, descendent of a Confederate general, turns his eyes toward the south. "There's a whole new world out there," he says quietly. "Let's go find it."