

PROLOGUE: The Last Politician

He was the last politician, and everyone called him "Kansler".

Of all the political offices from previous times of human history - chief, warlord, king, president, prime minister, governor, mayor, councilman - only the Kansler's title carried real authority in the 22nd century. He was the appointed Chancellor of the Outer Defense Ring Charter - a title rarely used - and his jurisdiction stretched across a vast space of the Solar System. From the orbit of Mars to the orbit of Pluto, the Kansler was the acting supreme commander of Earth's military forces. A thirty-year career had finally taken him to this, the last remaining position of ultimate power in the Solar System, and he had built up a strong fleet of warships.

And yet, the Kansler's power hung by a thread - for his title would be lost, the moment he made a significant mistake in the eyes of the Terran public. And with Earth at war with its Jovian colonies, his career was at stake. The populace of the old homeworld regarded itself "genetically superior" to the renegade "little moles" who built underground cities on Jupiter's moons, and cared little for what was done to them. But defeat - after having paid trillions of tax credits to sustain attacks and blockades - that they would never forgive.

Time was on the side of the Jovian rebellion; time which the Kansler did not have...

"What we need is a hero," the Kansler explained to Boulder Pi.

"What do you mean, Kansler?" the midget engineer asked.

"A man who the public can identify with, who can embody the strength, purity and superiority of the Terran fleet. Someone who can rack up my hits and bring us the funding we need to keep the war effort going."

The kansler's problem boiled down to money - or rather Popularity Points, "hits", the currency of the times. The more popular one was, the more electronic credits one raked in from the world's computer indexes of all humans. A citizen known to nobody, a child or a moron, could earn as little as 1,000 PP - not enough to buy a decent set of clothes. A megastar actress or musical artist, known to billions across the Solar System, could peak a career with a hundred trillion PP. Most citizens of Earth never earned more than 1,000,000 PP during a year; there was not an infinite supply of popularity for all.

The Kansler's PP Index now lay at an unstable 300 billion points - and he needed at least ten times that amount over a period of several years, to fill the war chest.

"Kansler, might you consider shrinking our offensive to just one of the breakaway colonies?" a deputy officer cautiously suggested. "It could be less financially risky to take the system back one planet at a time, instead of all in one sweep..."

"You talk like the underling you are," the Kansler said, stating a fact rather than venting his emotions. "You are an underling because you think small. The public doesn't click hits to small men with small ideas. This is a big project I have in mind - you will understand later."

"A question, Kansler," the deputy asked in a softer voice.

"Yes?"

"About 'heroes'... If one of our combat pilots becomes a war hero to the public... won't the hits increase go just to him, and less to the Fleet itself? Can we get the jurisdiction to, eh... 'tax' his credits earned on our war?"

"I don't give a damn about the legal details and I don't care. Bring me Clarke on the line."

The deputy, earning his wages, pushed the buttons that made the call to Colonel Haruman Clarke of the Martian Security Force, stationed on

Phobos. Ever since Mars won its partial independence from Earth rule, the 2,000-man Security Force had watched over this new nation, ready to squash any further attempts to "destabilize" the Solar System. At the time, Clarke was on an Earthbound vacation - he hated Mars and would not set his foot there.

"Reporting for duty, Kansler," the stern-faced colonel greeted his superior. "You wish a high-level talk?"

The Kansler looked about himself; only the deputy and Boulder Pi were physically present in the room, plus two of the Kansler's bodyguard robots. A few cam-links to Earth were active, but the universal computer indexes indicated that the public's attention was turned elsewhere - to a sports event on Venus. The deputy made a questioning motion toward the exit doorway; the Kansler merely shook his head.

"Colonel", the Kansler said with a little smile, "I have chosen you to become the greatest hero in the history of war. Should you accept this honor, you will never regret it."

He paused, and waited for the signals to travel back and forth between Mars and Earth. Minutes passed. Finally, the on-screen image of Clarke raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

The Kansler continued: "Colonel, meet Boulder Pi. He's the Fleet's chief cybernetics engineer who's going to make it happen. Mother Earth needs a man a cut above the rest, who is prepared to become a cyborg." When he heard the word "cyborg," a sneer of dislike crossed Clarke's face - or it could be the sight of a Jovian mutant, standing next to his commander, that disturbed him. Clarke's sneer arrived on the screen after the Kansler had finished his speech, but he had stood still in front of the camera the whole time - before and after. Clarke spoke few words and radiated the patience of a rock, more than most Terrans were capable of. Perfect, thought the Kansler. Of all my candidates I couldn't have made a better choice.

"Don't be alarmed," the Kansler reassured him. "This is no ordinary cyborg we're talking of..."

The conversation that followed was, like most actions made by citizens with high PP counts, available for public view. As the men talked, they could observe their personal hit counters go up... first slowly, then by the thousands per minute. The count reached its peak just after the Kansler mentioned the code word "Argus" in public view.

Enemy agents also had open access to this information. The Kansler was fully aware of it. After all, one of the enemy were in fact standing in the same room. He nodded slightly to Boulder Pi, who had jumped into a set of artificial leg extensions he utilized to walk faster. Here on the Moon, a midget like Boulder could easily use leg extensions without motors. Boulder Pi listened in on the conversation, knowing some of the Kansler's plans from previous discussions. His chief worry was that the Kansler might succeed, but also that the plans would be structurally flawed and doomed to fail - a potential blow against Boulder's professional prestige and PP count.

In much, Boulder was a man of two minds.

"Boulder?" Kansler asked him. "Would you care to show the Colonel your prototype cyborg?"

Boulder Pi said, in a confident tone: "Sure. On this 3-D model, you can see the working prototype for Project Argus, Model V-NICS - also called 'Venix'..."

"I see," Clarke replied after a while, "but I still don't understand what you're getting at."

"You will," the Kansler said, his glassy eyes glittering with excitement.

Chapter 1: The Last Broken Nose

Several weeks later.

"Gus" Thorsen was the last traditional heavyweight boxing champion, and proud of it.

In the 22nd century, boxing was completely safe. On-the-spot medical aid and microscopic surgery robots had made brain injuries a thing of the past. This had also made the sport obsolete. Professional fighters could literally tear each other's limbs off without suffering pain or permanent injury; the sight of two men punching each other in the head seemed comparatively quaint.

And yet, Gus Thorsen kept fighting the remaining handful of boxing challengers in fair tournaments - no promoters existed in their sport any longer, because profits were virtually nil - while supporting himself on minimum-wage jobs. When his friends asked him when he was going to quit his outmoded hobby, Gus usually smiled and tried to change subject. Truth was, he couldn't explain why he kept fighting. He had no other ambitions in life.

Gus Thorsen was now approaching his 38th birthday.

"Gus! You heard the latest on the colony wars?" his trainer asked, speaking through the screen on the pugilist robot's faceplate.

Gus aimed his punches at the screen, watching the trainer's face projected on it, and kept dancing around the robot with his guard down - the classic technique of his late idol, Muhammad Ali.

"What?" he asked, never standing still.

"The news, kiddo! The Kansler made Colonel Clarke volunteer to become a cyborg super-soldier - the first of a new breed of fighting men. So I was thinking..."

The trainer ceased talking, as he directed the pugilist robot to duck a rapid-fire series of jabs from Gus - probably the fastest boxer on the planet, though that didn't mean much. In the space of two seconds, one of his punches managed to hit the robot on its plastic chin. The counter on its forehead went up from 29 to 30, and rated the hit a "K.O."

"I was thinking, maybe that's the future of fighting too. People aren't watching old-style fighting anymore, and they're getting bored with mutilation contests. With cyborgs, we could draw crowds using faster and more powerful action. As long as there's a human brain inside the body that's taking the impact, the interest will remain."

"None of my business," Gus gasped; he had been sparring for hours on end, and his feet were not as fast as two hours ago.

"It kinda is, actually... I'm thinking of moving on to training cybernetically enhanced fighters, instead of this traditional stuff. "

"Uh-huh..."

"I'm selling the gym."

"What!?"

Astonished, Gus stopped dancing about for a full second - long enough for his remote-controlled pugilist to score a hard right hook on his jaw. Gus tumbled onto the floor, dazed by the punch. The trainer shut down the pugilist and climbed up into the ring with his first-aid kit. As he applied instant remedies for the head, brain and face injuries Gus had received, he seemed more concerned than usual - not about Gus's health, but about his sullen expression.

"Gus, kiddo, don't give me that look. You knew it was gonna happen one day. Real estate prices just keep going up! This gym would just about break even, if we moved it to one of those sea platforms or the new mountain plateaus, but the air and sea conditions are not right for traditional boxing."

Gus spat out his bloodied dental protectors and replied: "Then move to another planet. I'd go to Mars or Venus, as long as I can stay in the ring."

"With the lower gravity? You're not trained for that, you'd lose your

title quickly to those zippy colonists. Or get killed. The territories are much rougher than Mother Earth."

"Ali wouldn't have been scared of -"

"Here we go again!" the trainer chanted. "It's 'Ali' this, 'Ali' that... when are you gonna stop living in the past, Gus?"

Gus replied with brooding silence, and stood up; six feet tall, he was about average height for a 22nd-century Earthman. His muscular, broad-shouldered frame stood out more than on most citizens - and rarer still, his nose was broken, a reminder of his first major fight that he refused to have fixed. Even the trainer had had all his injuries and scars removed, and looked oddly baby-faced at his age of fifty-six.

"I gotta get to work," Gus said, climbed out of the ring, and headed for the locker room.

The trainer made a half-hearted attempt to follow him, but gave up and shrugged his shoulders to the other boxers. Their attention had been alerted when Gus was knocked down - which astounded them - and now fifteen of them were approaching the trainer with ominous looks on their sweaty, red faces. The trainer began to talk faster.

"Sorry, boys and girls and she-boys, I can't control the open market! In three or four months' time, The Giant Panda's Final Resting Grounds company will turn the place into a funeral parlor for pets. Hey - calm down! Look - I'm calling the cops..."

Panicking, he injected a shot of painkillers in his own arm and cowered into a corner. Gus didn't stay around to watch the angry boxers beat up the trainer. He loathed that kind of violence - and the "victim" could easily patch himself up. He showered and dressed in his work dungarees, picked up his bucket, then walked out through the back entrance.

Outside, a youthful-looking woman - all women looked youthful in this city - was waiting. In the open place, she was tossing a frisbee after a large Dalmatian dog. The dog leaped up on its hind legs and caught the frisbee with its teeth. When the dog saw Gus come out, it barked and ran up to him.

"Easy now, Giddog. I gotta take it easy, I was K-O'ed."

He patted the dog behind the ears and let it lick him his slightly swollen chin. The woman made a worried face, came up closer to Gus and felt his forehead.

"You took your painkillers?" she asked.

"Why?" he replied, stooped slightly, and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Thanks for looking after him for me."

"Oh, it's just fun. I'd much rather take care of him, than watch you getting punched out in that horrible, sweaty gym."

Gus pretended he hadn't heard her remark, for what seemed to him the thousandth time. The three of them - Gus, the woman, and the dog - began to walk together to the center plaza of the town, where Gus's night shift was about to start. Around them, dusk fell over the city of Kuwait - though one hardly noticed the darkness, with the holographic projections up in the sky, lights from passing zeppelins and aircraft, and the setting sun being reflected in a myriad solar panels.

Once, there had been a black substance called "crude oil" under their feet. Now those reserves were mostly drained, and solar cells were being built on every free inch of the former oil-producing countries of the Middle East. Many individuals like Gus, whose skills were not in demand, made a decent living cleaning solar panels during nighttime.

"How's your day been?" he asked her.

"Same old, same old... sometimes I wake up in the morning and think: 'I don't know if my life is going anywhere.' Then I take a shot of Pro-Pro and I feel better."

Gus tossed the frisbee, and his dog darted off to catch it.

"Gus," she said, "I want to have a baby."

He stopped in his tracks, and scratched his thick neck.

"Benazir... we've talked about this before. I like you... no, I guess I love you, but... I'm not sure if we're able to raise a child together."

Benazir put a soft, bronzed hand on his large shoulder.

"Who said anything about raising it? I meant I want to have a baby, not spend the better part of my life watching it grow."

Something about the way she said it made Gus feel hurt.

"That's not the way I was raised," he told her, trying not to sound negative. Their relationship had lasted a record four years, and Gus had learned that Benazir avoided anything "negative" - pain, duty, aging, frustration. At least, he could satisfy her need for security - and satisfaction.

"Well, you were raised by flesh parents," she pointed out with an innocent smile. "I had a robot nanny."

Gus understood that she expected him to envy her. She remained childlike at the age of thirty-nine, but so did billions of other Terrans. He feared, deep down, that she stayed with him out of pity - pity for growing up in poverty, for being more used to relating to people than to machines.

"Don't look so glum, Gus. I was just teasing."

"It's not you. Gym's closing down. 'Not profitable anymore.' If I can't fight good opponents anymore, I'm gonna get sloppy. And even if I'm not beaten... my title has no meaning without challengers."

A red diode lit up on the woman's forehead-band. Benazir ceased listening to him; she had plugged one ear and eye into her link-implant to chat with her network of friends across the globe. She sent her replies with thought-commands that controlled the transmitter in her headband. Without turning off this line of communication, she waved at one female friend who drifted down on the street in a small heli-pod.

"Hi, Gus!" shouted the other woman as she opened the door to the transparent heli-pod. "Do you have time to join us at Plex Twenty-Four tonight?" She made a gesture that might have been a proposal, but if so it was too subtle for Gus to notice. Gus made a wave of his hand, and put the cap on his head.

"Sorry, gotta work. Catch you later, Benazir?"

She kissed him and entered the heli-pod's cockpit-bubble, which began to ascend with a muffled noise. Gus waved after them, and folded out the mop handle he kept in the pocket of his dungarees. The synthetic voice of his wrist-watch told him he was late, and he began to hurry. Giddog barked happily, running ahead of Gus, looking behind him at his master. From high above their heads, the rumble of aircraft traffic began to increase...

Chapter 2: Crash

"Giddog, get me another dry sponge."

The Dalmatian wagged its tail in response, ran away and used its teeth to pick up a fresh sponge from the dispenser in the corner of the plaza. The dog then carried it back to Gus, as it had been trained to.

"Good Giddog," Gus smiled, and tossed the large dog a small snack - it leaped up on its hind legs and snapped it up. Giddog's tail wagged hard enough to knock over a passing pedestrian.

As Gus attached the sponge to his mop handle and dipped it in the bucket, he began talking to Giddog. Some of his work-mates found it odd that he talked to a dumb animal, instead of to a synthetic pet that could actually converse. Gus simply assumed that Giddog liked to listen, because the dog looked at him with rapt attention when Gus spoke in his slow, steady voice.

"You know, Giddog, I'm probably not going to do any more ring-fighting after the gym closes down. It's not... hell, I don't know. What do you

think?"

Giddog sat down on the street, and let his black tail and ears droop.

"Hey, don't be sad. This only means I'll have more time for you.

Maybe... maybe we'll move in with Benazir... permanently, settle down and have a baby, eh?"

Giddog looked up and barked eagerly; Gus grinned and gave his canine friend a nod.

"Yes, Giddog, we'll find a nice female Dalmatian for you. It's not that easy, you know. Real dogs, the old-fashioned kind, are rare. I have to travel into the outback, Australia or Tasmania maybe, to find one that fits you."

The dog barked again, raised its front paws and wagged its tail, as if expecting another treat.

"You know," Gus said, half to himself, "I really miss my family. And your mother, Laura, she was my best childhood friend. You resemble her a lot - well, except for the little bits."

He took his last doggie treat and tossed it to Giddog. He climbed up on a ladder platform, one of the several which stood among the clusters of elevated solar panels, and began to clean the panels. A work-mate from across town entered the plaza, and shouted hello to Gus; the man was of medium height and build, and wore the same type of work-clothes as Gus did. On the back of his shirt, the electronic print showed an unending stream of animated commercials.

"Hi, Chris! What's new?"

"Oh, nothing... I had my new liver fitted today. Doctor told me not to drink so hard."

"Well, are you?" Gus said, not sure whether he was joking with Chris - the man did spend too much money on drink, plus the regular cheap patch-up jobs on his internal organs. Chris led a lifestyle that would have killed any man in a previous century.

"What's a poor panel-cleaner to do?" Chris exclaimed laconically. "I ain't never racking up more PP's than any of us losers. Booze is cheap and reliable."

"Have you tried making your own alcohol?" Gus joked.

Chris began working another set of solar panel twenty meters away, and carried on the conversation in a half-shouting fashion.

"Are you kidding, Gus?!"

"When I grew up in Australia, my grandfather used to make his own booze out in the desert. He used a rusty old thing called a 'distiller'. It's still out there, I guess - desert's dry, it'll last long."

"You talk about Australia more and more," Chris remarked. "Why don't you go back there someday? Place is absolutely splattered with solar panels. You could get a lot of work down under. I mean, if it's so great as you always describe it, what're you doing here?"

"I don't wanna talk about it," Gus responded, and cast a nervous glance about himself. In the 22nd century cameras were everywhere, and privacy a fiction.

"No, you never do, do you?" Chris shouted, his attention drifting toward a camera-bot that flew by in search of more interesting events.

"Your hit count ain't never going up, unless you start to be more open about yourself. Secrets ain't worth shit until others can hear them. That is, if your secrets really are all that exciting..."

Gus did not get angry at his co-worker's last sour comment. He had heard it before, and had grown weary of trying to explain why he refused to reveal his entire life - except to his dog. There was an old word for it, that Gus kept forgetting... "-grity" something...

Chris kept ranting out loud in his persistent hope of being noticed by a roving camera and scoring some extra PP. Gus glanced up into the night sky. The holographic commercials blocked out the stars; only a few planets were visible to the naked eye. And the Moon. The dark half of the Moon was scattered with the lights of cities, centers of pleasure,

sports and leisure, both legal and illegal. Gus had never been to the Moon, not with his low hit count. One day, if he somehow could gather a million PP, he could take Giddog and Benazir on a trip there... or to Mars. Maybe boxing was still popular there, he thought, on that frontier-world where two good fists counted for something...

Colonel Haruman Clarke's personal transport craft flew toward Kuwait City's spaceport, escorted by two small automatic fighter-pods. Each pod resembled a huge, gray, stiff-winged mosquito. Inside the craft, Clarke sat watching the outside view, thinking about his future. This is my last day watching Mother Earth with living eyes, he thought. But it'll be worth it. For when Boulder Pi and his engineers have remade me, the perfect woman shall be mine. Clarke had never met her, only seen and heard the recordings the Kansler had shown. And yet, it seemed as if he had known her for a long time.

He dimly recalled some sort of court case, where she had been publicly humiliated on legal technicalities. Clarke promised himself to restore her reputation - once he became Argus-A, the new Adam to the new Eve. Colonel Clarke found it funny that she had been the first, and he merely a development of the original. And he wondered how the Fleet had managed to keep her away from the public eye so efficiently. Maybe with the new top-secret "info-busting" weapons he'd only heard rumors about...

"Venix," he whispered to himself... and his reveries were aborted when the human pilot sent a message over the loudspeakers.

"We're being pursued, sir. Four unidentified auto-pods just took off from the ground and are approaching fast. They're too small for our escorts to hit."

"Take us down to land," Clarke said quickly. "Anywhere. Now."

"There's only the open plaza there," the pilot replied.

"Do it."

The thirty feet long aircraft began to dive while using its airbrakes to slow down; the pursuing pods closed in on it. Just a hundred meters from the plaza, the first pod attacked and hit Clarke's ship.

A thundering explosion interrupted Gus as he was standing on a ladder-platform, mopping up solar panels. He looked up and saw an oblong aircraft careening toward the plaza, its nose pointed straight at Gus. He jumped down from the platform, landed on the ground four feet below, and scrambled for cover. His dog followed him closely.

"Giddog - follow me! Chris, call for help!"

Chris dropped his mop and ran away from the plaza, punching signal buttons in the palm of his hand.

The aircraft drew a thick trail of smoke between two buildings, its jet thrusters braking with an ear-piercing screech... but it was too damaged to stop entirely. It plowed through the grove of brittle solar panel trees on the plaza, and crash-landed in a shrubbery eighty feet farther away. The craft did not explode - its fuel had been automatically jettisoned before impact. Instead it broke up into several sections, twisting like some enormous gleaming worm, and settled with a squeal of bent and scraped metal.

Gus peeked out from the concrete doorway where he had taken shelter, and saw the smoking wreckage but no people - and no news pods or robot cameras came flying, which struck him as weird. He shrugged off his misgivings and ran the twenty feet to the wreckage.

"Hello! Is anyone alive in there?" Through one of the cracked, wide porthole panels, he could discern movements inside; he stepped up on the toppled solar panels and searched for the emergency door, still shouting at the passengers inside. "Don't panic! Help is on the way... I think..."

Before he could reach one of the nearest doors, it burst open from inside the wreck. A uniformed man, about his own height, climbed down from the opening with a gun in his hand. Gus backed away; at the sound of his feet, the man spun and aimed his gun at Gus's chest.

"Halt!" the officer croaked.

Gus raised his hands over his head, staring at the other man's face. The label on his uniform read "CLARKE" - but his face, height, and age seemed exactly similar to Gus. Except Clarke's nose wasn't broken. The extensive safety mechanisms in his aircraft seat had rendered him practically unharmed in the crash; traces of chemical foam clung to his uniform. Colonel Clarke froze; also he spotted the likeness. The spell lasted only a few seconds. He thought: Has to be another fad. Facial makeovers in the likeness of famous people are so old hat. I haven't licensed my face. Gotta get my lawyer on it. Someone owes me royalties.

"Get me a car," he growled into the small headset that hung from his cap. "Hello? Hello? Damn, I just get static." He still kept the gun aimed at Gus. "The Jovian rebels. A murder plot against me. You! Get me to a car-pod. Now!"

Gus swallowed and replied rapidly: "Don't shoot. Any other survivors? The pilot?"

"Shut up and show the way," Clarke ordered, making a movement with his head to indicate directions.

Still holding his hands up in the air, wondering what the hell was going on, Gus skipped down from the wreck and began to walk toward the nearest parked rental car. His dog, growling and snarling, came running up toward them.

"No, Giddog! Stay put! Please don't shoot my..."

The dog refused to listen; Gus knew it might put itself at risk to protect him. Then, as he faced away from Clarke and the wreckage, a sharp whistling noise came from above - then another noise, and something dark hit Gus from all sides, faster than he could possibly dodge it. A loud explosion shook the very air around him, very close, and Gus felt the air being squeezed out of his lungs. He blacked out.

Giddog? Giddog? Giddog?

Darkness.

Gus opened his eyes, and found he could not move; his entire body seemed caught in a stiff mold. He understood that he lay in some sort of stasis-bed, the kind used as life-support system for patients in critical condition. Only a small face-plate allowed him to peer outside the bed. For a moment, the place vibrated with the rumble of a jet or rocket engine. He could dimly see the red-lit chamber in which he lay. A door marked COCKPIT opened a few feet away. A figure ambled closer, and looked at Gus.

"Rest easy, Colonel," said the figure. "We can't restore your old body, but you'll get something far, far better."

"Mmmff!"

The tightly fitted breathing mask over Gus's mouth muffled his objection. The figure touched a control panel near Gus's head, and the boxer passed out again.

Chapter 3: In Cold Blood

Three days later, the Kansler searched for and received these public statistics:

UNIVERSAL PP INDEX Search result - last 24 hrs:
Col. Haruman Clarke.....+12.2% The
Kansler.....+5.1% Boulder
Pi.....-0.1% Simon Bizley
(dead):.....0.0% Gustav Cassius Thorsen (dead):..+0.1%

Bizley, the pilot of Clarke's downed aircraft, had passed away in obscurity. A few colleagues and friends of the (supposedly) late "Gus"

Thorsen had donated a few PP to the dead. This customary show of grievance also provided funds to the funeral of the departed.

"Is there anything you haven't told me about Colonel Clarke, Kansler?" asked Boulder Pi. Though he always more or less acted deferential in the Kansler's presence, one could notice a slight irritation in his demeanor now. As always, Boulder suspected the Kansler of withholding information. "I'd like to have a quick word with him before we start."

"The colonel was injured in the explosion, that's all. Nothing we can't patch up. My deputy checked on him during transit, and Clarke is fully aware of the situation. No one except me or my deputy talks to Clarke before his operation - that's an order. Understand? We'll go along with the program right away."

The other thirty assembled scientists and engineers voiced their muted consent; they were eager to get started on the highly anticipated project that had made them all famous and rich in PP overnight.

The head physician chimed in, addressing the Kansler: "The Colonel's fractures can be speed-healed in less than a week, sir. And, miraculous as it may sound, he suffered no neural or spinal damage. He must have taken cover just as the attack pods hit the downed aircraft."

"Have they caught the fiends who stood behind this attack on the Colonel's life?" asked a particularly sycophantic engineer, and seemed to halt himself. Right then no one looked at Boulder Pi, the only Jovian in the group.

Quickly getting bored, the Kansler turned away from the crowd. He began to wander around the vast workshop of the Solar Peace Corps Research Complex, admiring the many installations that were in development there. The group followed him at a respectful distance, with chief engineer Boulder Pi at the lead on his leg extensions. They were housed in a partly artificial cave, fifty feet under the lunar crater Copernicus; the ceiling towered twenty feet above their heads. It was almost like living in one of the settlements on Jupiter's moons.

"The power of science," the Kansler mused out loud, "has never ceased to amaze me, Boulder. Is there no limit to what man can accomplish, once he masters the understanding of nature?"

Boulder Pi was a dwarf when it came to profundity; he took the question too literally.

"Certainly, Kansler, there is the limit explained in Goedel's Theorem, that states: 'There are truths within any given system, that cannot be logically explained within the boundaries of that same system.' This puts an absolute limit to our knowledge; infinite mastery of nature, and thereby final knowledge, is logically and practically imposs -"

He stopped with a hiccup, and nearly lost his balance - while he was talking, the Kansler had unexpectedly seized an experimental weapon from a nearby rack, and now took aim at the group behind him. All the thirty learned men and women froze in terror.

"Careful, sir," warned the sycophantic engineer, "that's the new antimatter dispenser. It can blow the top off the entire cave!"

"Excellent!" laughed the Kansler. "Imagine it fitted into the Colonel's new prototype ship, blasting the rebel caves and domes to dust! I know their spies are looking at us now. This is but one of our weapons. But you, gentlemen, the best minds in the Solar System, are our greatest weapon. That is why we must protect you, and house you all in this guarded lunar complex. That is why I need your genius, your weapons - to defend you and your children from the Jovian rebels who wish to kill you."

It seemed as if the Kansler's voice and sincere expression made the group believe his words. His voice and face, though neither beautiful nor unusual - he had a potato nose and an almost comical, drawling dialect - were great assets, that created a strange charisma. Luckily for the Kansler, scientists of the 22nd century had not managed to

quantify and reproduce the charisma factor. In an age of effortless, complete physical alterations to the human body, the Kansler's middle-aged face remained largely unchanged, apart from facial paint to cover birthmarks and skin spots. He put the weapon back in its place; one woman propped up Boulder Pi's back so that he wouldn't fall over.

A sudden news bulletin appeared on screens and com-links all over the complex.

"GOOD NEWS FROM THE FRONT!" boomed a smiling host from the official news show, broadcast over the Inner Planets. "Our automated remote-controlled fightercraft, deftly guided by hundreds of skilled Earth pilots, won a great victory over the Jupiter rebels just four hours ago. This fresh video clip from the raid over Io shows how..."

A video sequence followed, accompanied by deafening detonations and crackling energy bolts that could not exist in airless space. It did not matter much. Most Earthlings cared little for the basics of science, and wouldn't pay attention if the special effects were absent. As the personnel saw and heard the effects-enhanced war footage being broadcast over the public channels, the Kansler put a miniscreen over his left eye and received an encrypted transmission of real war footage. Short-hand statistics streamed in before his eye, spelling another failure for his campaign...

FLEET ATTACK WAVE V-0035745 TARGET: MOON IO WAVE LEADER: E.S.S. FORD,
FRIGATE CLASS ESCORT: 22 RR FIGHTERS

ORBITAL BATTLE WINDOW: POS AO-344 TO AO-208 BATTLE TIME WINDOW:
APPROX. 500 HOURS

RESULT: ENEMY MOON NOMINAL DAMAGE. NO KNOWN LOSS LIVES. DEUTERIUM
TRANSPORT LINE JUPITER-IO-GANYMEDE STILL OPERATIONAL.

ENEMY LOST: 27 RM-PODS, 4 RM-SALS, 391 SP-MINES

FLEET LOST: 85/300 RM-PODS, 2/2 DF CHARGES (ENEMY FIRE), 4/22 RR
FIGHTERS

FLEET LIVES LOST: 15/700 PRIVATES (ENEMY SP-MINES, SAL GAMMA FIRE)

FRIGATE DAMAGE: SMALL TO SUBSTANTIAL (ENEMY MINES); 1 INNER HULL BREACH
(UNDER REPAIR). CURRENT STATUS: RETREATING TO CERES STATION UNDER
FIGHTER ESCORT.

The supreme commander bit his lower lip, so as to stop himself from cursing openly; he wouldn't want to damage his child-friendly image on the public channels.

"God, I'm proud of our fighting men," the Kansler declared for the public, then: "Boulder Pi, come with me to the restricted area. We'd better bring the good news to Colonel Clarke, it'll cheer him up."

The two men called for a float-pod that quickly brought them to the restricted tunnels where all public surveillance devices were banned. Only minutes later, they entered the heavily guarded section where their patient was lying - in the center of a ten feet wide, low-ceilinged chamber crammed with instruments and consoles. The patient's speed-healing had in fact been mostly completed during the journey to the Moon, and he was being kept sedated as a precaution.

"Boulder, this must work on the first attempt. If we lose him - the Colonel - it will mean the end of my career."

"Don't forget, Kansler, this is my second attempt with an established transfer process. I am confident of success. But there are a few details that I need clarified by you, before we begin..."

The Kansler nodded, keeping one eye's attention on the continuing reports on his eye-patch display.

"You asked for Colonel Clarke to wear clothes after his transformation. I'm afraid that is impossible, which was proved during my work on the Venix prototype. The artificial skin-tissue and its nerve-endings are oversensitive to the constant friction from clothing fibers. It overloads the sensory apparatus, like an itch... and with the strength enhancement we'll give him, the Colonel is perfectly able to scratch a hole in himself."

Frowning, the Kansler said: "We can't have that. All right - no clothing. When you put it that way, I'm starting to think our cyborg supersoldier should be... pure. An example for others."

"Pure..?"

"No genitals."

Boulder Pi let out a hysterical laugh: "K-Kansler, you cannot be serious... he would never tolerate such a... a-and if the public found out..."

"They won't find out, if they don't want to. Paint the cyborg's outer hull, so that it seems like he's wearing a shrink-wrapped uniform. Nothing obscene. I have a design here..."

Using the control panel on his sleeve, the Kansler produced a hologram of the intended bodypaint design. Boulder Pi found no objections to it. The Kansler gave him the go-ahead order; Boulder's team of engineers was alerted and ordered to arrive in force. The Kansler excused himself, sounding less than eager to watch the process taking place; he had a meeting to attend to in a nearby city.

As the Kansler exited the chamber, Boulder Pi had less than one minute alone with "Colonel Clarke" before the support team arrived. He adjusted the panel settings so that the Colonel would be fully conscious, switched on a secure comlink, and talked directly to the man in the coffin-like stasis bed.

"Listen, Colonel," said the little man very quickly, "you cannot let the Kansler go too far. Sooner or later, he will try to eliminate you... do not trust him. He will have means of controlling you, but you can overcome them - do not tell him this - remember: the mind controls the body on all levels, even the smallest level -"

A click from a wide airlock door interrupted Boulder Pi; his team of scientists and engineers flooded the space. All had their planned tasks; no small talk was exchanged until all were seated in their assigned workstations. They manned their consoles, and the table with the Colonel's trapped body was rolled into a transparent body tank.

"Status?" Boulder asked.

"All life signs stable," replied a laconic computer-voice. "NP Process can begin."

"Everybody ready... and... go."

"Mmfh!" Gus objected, making a last effort to wring himself out of the pressurized stasis-bed. They had forgotten to put him to sleep, he thought... not knowing that the NP Process required the candidate to remain conscious.

Things moved, opened and closed around him; he heard liquid sloshing through his ears...

Chapter 4: The Process

If only they had listened to him, Gus thought, the whole misunderstanding would never have happened. But he was never given the chance to speak. Some time had passed, how long he could not tell. He heard muffled chatter and signals from outside the hull that trapped him - technical terms he did not recognize...

"Life support?"

"Stable. Digestive system successfully replaced. No bacterial leaks."

"He's secured in the primary tank. Remove stasis bed and open osmotic valves."

"Check."

"Oxygen flow."

"Check."

"Inject more anaesthetic gel."

"In progress."

"Right... Ed, did you mix the sterilization liquid yesterday? Tested it on the tissue samples?"

"All checked out. Allergene readings are within bounds."

"Fine. If all readings are correct, inject TBS now. Not one single body germ can be left alive before the B-Redux are used."

"Watch out - we got negative feedback from the spinner, affecting the body mold... cancel with a counterwave... hurry..."

"Done."

"It's all set then... let's make a mountain out of this man."

Gus could see, but he could no longer feel anything. It was as if his limbs had quietly ceased to exist. He thought he could perceive wavelike movements, as if he was floating in some clear liquid. And the liquid was slowly turning dark red...

Meanwhile, in a nearby lunar city...

The Kansler exited his tube-train, walked alone to an unmarked alley, and discreetly ran his hand across a scanner on the wall. A small display above the scanner prompted him to stand still, while he was electronically searched and cleared - this took ten seconds. The round airlock opened to let him inside the featureless building.

Several doors locked shut behind the Kansler as he walked in, and he arrived in the lobby of an establishment known as "The House". It was the most ill-reputed, most expensive brothel on the Moon. No information, no recordings or camera shots ever left its secure rooms - and should that happen, The House would immediately shut down.

"Welcome, sir!" a plump lady in a red dress greeted the Kansler - it was the "Madam". She knew him, but to ease the surveillance paranoia of her customers, the staff never mentioned titles or names. "Whoever you are, you're an honored guest. How's the weather back on Mother Earth?"

"Haven't been there for a good long while," the Kansler said, taking off the plain gray cap he always wore in public. "And I couldn't care less." His voice changed from the moment he saw the Madam, to a more relaxed note. They exchanged polite kisses and smiles.

"How is my sweet Nica doing?" he asked the Madam with a mischievous wink of an eye. The woman stiffened ever so little.

"Still recuperating from your last meeting, sir."

"So am I. Now, a drink and some relaxants would be a perfect start of the evening."

"Certainly, sir. Come into the cocktail lounge and rest your feet..."

Gus closed his eyes; a time passed. Suddenly, he could see again - but couldn't remember having opened his eyelids. Then he focused closer to his face, and discovered why: his eyelashes and eyelids had vanished from his field of sight... had vanished altogether.

He attempted to move one hand to his face and neck, to see what had happened to his face. Nothing happened. There was a repeating, turning movement of the medium in which he imagined himself floating. Its red tint was beginning to pale into a more transparent blue. He might just as well be trapped in a giant bottle of mouthwash, Gus thought.

He had trouble focusing his eyesight. It seemed to him as if he was getting cross-eyed. From the other side of the thick glass tank, Gus could discern blurred shapes: people in white suits moving about, and - up closer - metal arms of small robots, doing something. The blank surface of some instrument briefly passed by close in his line of sight, and he caught a blurred reflection of his face.

Gus tried to scream. But having no lips, tongue, facial muscles, or larynx left, no sound came - plus, he was submerged in a thick blue liquid.

The Kansler sat in the House bar, feet reclining over a woman's back, while another woman massaged his tense shoulders, and a third woman held

his drink. The Kansler bit his lip; he was getting frustrated, and he hated it. A half-dozen other guests - all men, all fabulously wealthy - sat and sipped their drinks, with vacant, restless expressions on their faces.

"Is Nica ready yet?" he asked out loud, just a hint of menace in his voice.

"As I said," the Madam interjected patiently, "she is still recuperating. "It should take at least another week before she is ready to... entertain you again, sir. Meanwhile, we have surgically altered another of our ladies to resemble Nica perfectly, to keep -"

"That trick won't fool me," the Kansler snapped. "Patch her up. I want Nica in fifteen minutes, or I'll call it quits."

The Madam's facial color turned a brief red, then white. But she smiled professionally.

"I'll see what I can do."

And she left the lounge. Another visitor in the bar, a well-known arms manufacturer from Earth, waved hello to the Kansler.

"Good evening. How's business?" the middle-aged politician-commander asked, no interest in his voice.

"Couldn't be better!" the other man laughed, drunk with power and stimulants. "And now people call me a patriot, too! How I love the adulation of the crowds. I remember in my youth, my elders told me their forefathers were afraid to show off their wealth and power... ha! Say, are you still married to that videostar, what's-her-name?"

The Kansler frowned: "You need a memory refresh. I divorced her and gave her the kids years ago."

"Oh - sorry. Still, having a good time, eh, Kans-"

The man stopped and turned pale, realizing he had broken a taboo of the establishment. The Kansler slowly rose to face him down.

"You ought to take a sober-up dose now, sir. If you want a safe flight back home to the family."

The Kansler walked away from the trembling arms manufacturer, toward the inner rooms of The House. He would not wait a minute longer to mete out his pent-up frustration - preferably on a defenseless, non-anaesthetized target.

Several hours had passed since Boulder Pi's initial command to begin the NP Process. What remained of Gus Thorsen was the core being: his bones, brain, spine, nerve threads, and eyes. The B-Redux colony, a specially designed strain of flesh-eating bacteria, had removed the rest. Boulder Pi and his team took stimulants to stay alert and continued working their consoles, working on their re-design of the human form.

"Careful now with the remotes... if you break off one single nerve ending, we'll waste days on restoring it."

"Holographic body grid?"

"On."

"Adjusting for new proportions."

"Boulder Pi, sir, why did you change the body grid like that?"

"Don't worry about that for now. Stretch out the loose nerve tendrils... gently now..."

"Boulder, sir?"

"Yes?"

"A cluster of threads have floated into a knot over there... should we untie it now, or remove the bones first?"

"Wait... hold everything... let me take over the controls, Linda... I'll untie the threads right now."

The personnel held their collective breath while Boulder Pi connected his console to the remote-controlled robot arms inside the tank, and began to untangle a small knot of loose nerve threads.

Inside the tank, Gus was assaulted by the strange sensation that his legs were wound up together like rubber bands, and someone tried to pry them apart with red-hot pokers. It seemed to last forever, but ended abruptly - and he felt nothing again.

The team continued its work on Gus; his bones, vertebrae and cranium shell were carefully removed and funneled over into an adjacent section, where they were scanned into 3-D models for an entirely new skeleton. All that remained in the central tank were the tiny bones of his inner ear that still functioned. Gus could hear - just barely.

Boulder Pi let out a sigh, and said out loud: "Great work, people! Now for the tricky part... pull out the inner ear system, and insert the new ear system to speed-grow onto the stumps."

"Going... going... gone."

With a subjective thud ringing through his mind, Gus lost all sense of natural hearing.

"Ear replacement systems in place."

"Neural welding?"

"I'm on it... this'll just take a few hours."

Boulder Pi yawned demonstratively.

"Good... okay, isolate and store the eyeballs. We'll mold the new ones tomorrow. Activate the magnetic field, start Stage Yellow and leave the plastifier running. See you all tomorrow."

"Great progress, eh!"

"Goodnight!"

"See you tomorrow!"

"What a day, huh?"

"Will you stay long, Hube?"

"Naah, this'll just take a moment. Catch you on the next tube. The pub tonight?"

"Sure!"

Two small mechanical arms, with cup-shaped endings, moved from the edges of Gus's field of vision, and closed in. And he lost his eyesight.

A few minutes later, only one scientist was left on watch in the laboratory. Without previous warning, Boulder Pi re-entered the lab on his leg extensions.

"Did you forget something again, sir?" the lab man chuckled.

"I just got nervous, leaving my creation like that. Hube, I can take your shift. No problem. Go join the others at the pub."

"Thank you, sir!"

When the assistant had left, Boulder Pi stopped pretending to look tired, and went about the task he had returned to accomplish. The crew would object, for sure. It would be easier if they were confronted with the truth "after the fact" - and the responsibility would lie squarely on Boulder Pi, who in turn laid the blame on the Kansler.

"Orders are orders," the little man mumbled to the mass of floating nerves and brain tissue in the central tank. "You won't feel, hear or see a thing, though, if that's any comfort... and I'll store away what I cut off, somewhere the Kansler won't find it. One day, if we're lucky, you can get your mojo back... sorry, Colonel. Orders are orders."

And with the flick of a remote-controlled knife, the living nervous system of Gus Thorsen was neutered.

The Kansler emerged from the private rooms of The House - showered, tired and red-faced. He had some time to sleep until Boulder Pi's team began their second shift, and he wanted to be there and oversee the process. The Madam, looking sleepy, came to say goodbye.

"You've had a comfortable visit, sir?" she asked formally.

"Yes."

"Sir... the management wish to make you aware, that your rough behavior is starting to breach the house rules. We advise you to show a little restraint next time."

"She'll live."

"If you say so," the Madam replied, with audible bitterness in her voice.

"Your PP are in the bank," he grunted and headed straight for the exit passage. Payment was done through a network of middlemen, never personally.

The Madam's face seemed to sag as the exit door shut, and her years showed behind the youth treatments.

Only when the last airlock door had clicked shut, she muttered: "You murdering bastard."

Chapter 5: The Newborn

Gus became aware, to his immense relief, that he had eyes and his vision returned. And his hearing too... only too much, and too loud.

He tried to open his eyes, but something unexpected happened. His eyelids flickered open-shut, open-shut, much faster than humanly possible. He made a mental effort to keep his eyelids open, and got a clear view of his surroundings. The body tank, now a blurred but frightening memory, stood in another end of the wide, low laboratory in which he sat. Focusing, he noticed that he was sitting in a partitioned section of the lab, surrounded by a panorama of ten-inch glass walls.

Another odd thing occurred when Gus focused his eyesight. He could immediately read a small signpost five feet away, with incredible sharpness. Hadn't he been thinking about buying contact lenses before the accident? He couldn't even afford a simple cornea transplant.

Several people stood on the other side of the glass walls: lab-coated men and women, staring at him with fascinated eyes, laughing and gesturing as if Gus was some kind of zoo exhibit. In one corner stood a pale, sturdy midget on a set of leg extensions; Gus wondered what a mutant from the Outer Planets was doing among a group of Earthmen. Then he spotted the Kansler, in his trademark gray uniform and cap - the potato-nosed, confident face that dominated so many newscasts and video images on Earth. All these people seemed to move and talk too slowly, as if their life functions had halted almost to a standstill.

Gus felt embarrassed in the famous Kansler's presence; it was the first time he had seen him in person. Was he supposed to salute him? Gus moved to stand up, and...

An alarm went off, when Gus instantly pivoted off his seat like a squash ball off a wall, and crashed into the ceiling. The reinforced concrete cracked like an eggshell. He bounced back down, hit the floor with a heavy thud, spun uncontrollably and smashed into one glass wall. A spider-web of cracks exploded across the surface layer of the glass - but the other three layers held. Gus stood to his feet - and against his will he shot up again, punching a second hole in the ceiling. He hung by his head through the hole for a moment, then fell down and landed his feet. Dust and debris rained down upon his large jet-black shoulders. Gus shook his head, expecting blood and pain...

... but no blood came, no sweat, no tears. The pain he had felt at the impacts faded off in a moment.

"Now wait... just wait a minute..." he told himself, barely noticing that his voice sounded deeper than usual.

He managed to stand absolutely still, and slowly turned his head to take a second look at another puzzling detail. Why were his shoulders so oversized? He seemed to be dressed in some ridiculous tight bodysuit, completely black - except for a single yellow stripe that ran across his chest, and down the front of his left leg. Only his face and forehead

remained bare, and seemed unchanged on the surface. A look in a mirror revealed that his ears had been replaced by two large black bulges.

"What is this?" he asked the onlookers, raising his voice to a shout - it, at least, stayed within normal boundaries.

Through a loudspeaker, the heavily accented voice of the Kansler was carried into the partition where Gus stood. He heard it spoken at normal speed, yet it sounded too slow in a way he could not define...

"This is you, Colonel Clarke. The new you. It took us a month to complete, cost billions, but we made it, like we promised - you are all you could ever be."

An involuntary reflex made Gus look down at himself, and he saw what was missing. It had to be a dream, he told himself. That's it, I bought a dream-vid and fell asleep with it running. Any moment now it'll shut off.

"Come on... shut it off... where's that bloody abort function?" he said, puzzling the assembled scientists and engineers.

"He thinks he's stuck in an ordinary simulation," Boulder Pi remarked. "Why would Clarke deny the reality of what he himself volunteered to? Isn't that odd?"

"It's the shock. I'll talk to him," the Kansler growled. "Everybody out, get out, I need to have a private talk with the Colonel. You too, Boulder - out! Shut off all surveillance!"

Alone, the two men faced each other. Gus kept concentrating on not moving a muscle. It was more than just the low lunar gravity, he understood now - something felt different about him, as if his limbs were stuffed with tightly coiled springs. All sensations were too sharp, too detailed, played too slowly.

"You must be very confused right now, Colonel, but trust me - you're not the first one. Remember what we told you about your predecessor. She lived - and so will you."

"This is all a great mistake, sir. I am not a colonel -"

"Quiet! Listen. Whoever you think you are does not matter, because you are much, much more than you ever were. Stronger, faster - and, if you learn well, smarter too. But such power comes at a cost. You have shouldered a great responsibility. This experiment is our last, best hope for peace, for a safe Solar System for our children. You can do it, with the right training. You can win this war and save the Earth. Mankind will be eternally grateful to you, and you will know it - because in this new form, you can live forever. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"But I'm not Colonel Clarke... you've got the wrong man! You must find -"

"Two men, who perfectly resembled Clarke, were found in the wreckage after the attempt on his life a month ago. One was blown to pieces - beyond saving. The other man was you, badly injured, but miraculously alive. It was my decision to seize the moment, and proceed with the planned transformation immediately, before the public started to worry that Clarke was too injured to follow through."

The Kansler's glassy eyes focused on Gus's eyes - which were no longer made of living tissue. The cyborg's irises shrank in a perfectly lifelike manner.

"It doesn't matter who you were, son. What matters now is that the people of Earth thinks that Colonel Clarke, the perfect candidate I chose, is alive and can follow through. Do we understand each other? Do you understand like I do the meaning of duty, of serving our beloved Mother Earth?"

The Kansler's speech had an electrifying effect on Gus. He desperately wanted things to make sense, and he wanted to do what was right.

"I understand," Gus said after a time. "How... how badly injured was I when you picked me up?"

The Kansler looked straight into Gus's eyes and stated, without

flinching: "Some parts of you we were unable to save. I'm sorry."

So am I, thought Gus, so am I.

"Can I talk to my friends back on Earth?"

The Kansler just shook his head.

"No, I guess not. I... I have a dog..."

"We can get you a new one, no problem. Or a synthetic one."

"I mean, my dog. He was with me when... when..."

Gus shut his eyes, and waited for tears. His eyes remained completely dry. The Kansler had expressly asked for that design feature. After a minute, Gus looked up, and his face - if it was still his own - was a mask of grief.

"What should I do? All I know is boxing."

"It's a start. I shall supervise your training program here in the lunar complex. Once your training is complete, you will meet the public and visit Earth."

"I feel thirsty. Is there any drink here?"

The Kansler seemed puzzled for a moment, and wished Boulder Pi had been present to explain the technical details. Not one particle of flesh, blood or bone remained inside the hulking black shape that stood before him - only a perfect mold of a brain and nervous system, made directly on the original, which had been dissolved in the process. The result was, and the Kansler believed in it, a continued but altered existence of the original consciousness.

"Your sensations of thirst and hunger are just ghost reflexes. You can eat and drink, but you cannot digest it, or taste it quite like you once did. Now you feed on pure energy."

"How?"

"The black surface layer of your outer skin contains a receptor membrane, part of a system which converts heat and sunlight into electricity. The energy is stored in superconductor rings inside your chest. You speak without breathing, for you have no lungs."

"I am a... robot?" Gus exclaimed, thinking of the pugilist robot that he had sparred with on the day of the accident. The comparison was absurd; he didn't feel like plastic and metal at all.

"A cyborg. Synthetic man. Whatever. Boulder Pi can explain it better. Do we have an agreement? You accept that you are now serving in the Fleet, and will not voice public doubts about your previous identity?"

"And if I did?"

"Your friends and kin are bound to think you died in the explosion. And even if they should recognize your face, could your life ever return to what it was? What is there to return to, if this war is lost? The enemy threatens all of us, also your friends. You, as I do, has a duty to protect them."

Gus thought about it for what seemed to him half an hour. Yet, when he checked the wall chronometer, less than a minute had passed. He missed his dog terribly.

"Okay. I'll do what you want, if it's for the good of Earth."

"I knew I could trust you, the moment I saw you. Welcome to the Fleet, Argus-A."

"Say what?" Gus asked, frowning with disbelief.

"A codename the Marketing Department came up with. I wanted to call you simply 'Clarke', but... "

Gus shook his head, and it jerked spastically from side to side; this loss of self-control infuriated him.

"We'll start the next day-shift with basic coordination training," the Kansler told him. The whole experiment could still fail, and the thought of public fiasco frightened the potato-nosed man. "Try and get some rest. Goodnight, Colonel."

Gus found himself alone in the glass-walled partition, and spotted the bed in the corner. He reached out with one massive arm to support his

balance against the nearest wall - and the palm of his hand struck out with the force of a jackhammer, punching a dent in the white-painted steel surface. He began to breathe more rapidly, only it was a delusion; he no longer had lungs, only the reflexes of his nervous system. Air was sucked into his abdomen, and was blown back out with each breath, but not a single oxygen atom was absorbed.

He clenched his teeth together, fearing he might accidentally bite off his own artificial tongue, and attempted a painstakingly cautious step toward the bed - four feet away. One jerky step sent his thick foot smashing against the reinforced floor. Thinking frantically that he must relax, Gus moved his other foot. The floor took another heavy stomp, and he felt his entire frame vibrate as he struggled not to bounce up into the ceiling again. Not since he had first learned to walk 36 years ago, had he felt so awkward. Finally, he reached the bed and let himself fall onto it - too slowly, both due to the low lunar gravity and his sharpened senses. He glanced at the chronometer on the wall.

Four feet. It had taken him 1.5 hours to move that far. Gus shut his eyes and waited for sleep to come. His mind was overwhelmed. Yet he could not fall asleep. Keeping his eyes shut, he lay still and waited for the next dayshift.

Chapter 6: Bringing Up Argus

"Colonel, our prime task is to help you reach your full potential," said Boulder Pi from the other side of the glass wall.

The Kansler nodded agreement.

Gus, or "Argus", understood the meaning of the glass partition: he might easily kill them by mistake, before he re-learned his basic motor skills.

"Look at your workbench," the Kansler told the waiting cyborg. A panel slid open on the top of the workbench, and a slender glass, half full of water, was pushed up onto it. "You must begin each new shift with this test."

Argus's forehead showed furrows of puzzlement.

"Simply lift the glass and drink the water. Once you've accomplished that, we can let you out of this apartment, and allow you to move among the personnel."

Doesn't sound too hard, the black-clad cyborg thought, and felt his thirst increase. He carefully jerked his arm forward, more successfully this time, encircled the glass with his thick black fingers, grasped as gently as he could...

The glass instantly shattered in his crushing grip.

"Um, there is a way to speed up the pace of the tests," Boulder Pi explained, his face showing a mixture of pity and fear. He was sitting on a table, his stubby legs dangling without reaching the floor.

Argus reflexively moved to wipe sweat off his brow, as Gus Thorsen had done in a thousand sparring matches - but instead he slapped himself hard, and felt that the skin of his face was dry, like plastic. His features hardened, so quickly it seemed like a two-frame animation to his small audience, and he gave them a furious glare.

"Give me another glass!"

It smashed.

"Another glass."

That one smashed too.

"Again."

Smash.

"Again!"

The sixth glass rested perilously in his hand for several seconds, until it began to slip from his loose hold, and he closed his fingers -

the glass cracked into three pieces.

"You're making progress," the Kansler grinned with measured enthusiasm, "and much faster than I expected. What were you saying before, Boulder?"

Boulder Pi explained that once Argus had mastered basic self-control, he could adjust the speed of his own reflexes and movements, so as to accomplish certain training tasks in a shorter time.

Argus asked: "How?"

"It's all in your mind," Boulder replied, beaming with pride over his creation. "To begin with, you can access a personal options menu by simply touching your thumbs with your little fingers. The same fingertips are used to move through the menu system and select control choices. As your skills grow, you will learn how to trigger those controls using only mental commands."

"Hey, it works!" Argus exclaimed. "I can see this computer menu, on top of what I see around me!"

He could see small red and green control panels with dials and numbers, glowing at the edges of his vision.

"Try the wavelength spectrum settings," Boulder suggested.

Argus fiddled with the "WAV" setting - it was much easier than moving his body - and found that he could see in infrared and ultraviolet. He let out a laugh.

"This is great! I see your hearts beating... and your brains at work! Boy, those things are hot!"

Argus stopped laughing, when he saw how many implants were in Boulder Pi's body to support his skeleton and leg muscles. He understood suddenly, that the dwarfish scientist was born to live on one of Jupiter's moons, and just barely managed to survive here on the Earth's single moon - and he felt sorry for Boulder Pi. If this was the enemy, it didn't seem very dangerous...

"Is the system working?" Boulder Pi asked, seeing a sad expression flash across Argus's very human face.

"No... everything works fine. Kansler, why do I need all this extra equipment? Don't the pilots in the war have it in their ships already?"

The Kansler sat down, astonished by how quickly Argus was adapting to the new situation - as if his new body was transforming his mind.

"I'll explain, as soon as we come to your military training. In order to fly in space combat, you not only need to understand the nature of gravity, orbital mathematics and how to navigate space. You must in fact learn how to become one with your spacecraft. For unlike our current breed of pilots, you can't fly by remote control or use standard instruments. The nature of this conflict pushes the physical and mental demands on our fighting men above the human - I mean the normal limit."

Argus frowned, both frightened and curious about the challenge.

"I am eager to learn more, sir."

Boulder gave the Kansler a questioning glance; he and his boss retreated to another room where Argus could not overhear them, and discussed what to do next.

"Something's wrong, Kansler. Colonel Clarke isn't acting like himself at all."

"You never met him in the flesh. Trust me, he can be very different in private."

"Not this different. What happened to all his previous mannerisms, his training, his circle of friends? Why hasn't he asked to see any other officers from the Martian Security Forces?"

"Clarke has no friends here, or on the Moon. He's unmarried and strictly Pro-Earth. And this is a top-secret installation - he knows damn well he can't go around chatting with outsiders during training."

"Right. Right." Boulder Pi half-heartedly gave in, still unable to quench his doubts. "Okay. We can put him in the training center anytime

you see fit. Your hologram presence is required, plus a few simulated trainers to take your night shifts. Since Argus has little or no need for sleep, he can work double shifts."

"How hard can I push him? His predecessor was agile, but didn't impress the Fleet in the strength and stamina department."

"But this is the combat model, Kansler. Argus is built much, much sturdier than Venix. All test readings show enormous potential. I'm really giving this project all I've got, Kansler."

"We begin immediately, then. I have promised Earth quick results, and the Statistics Department has estimated me one month before the public loses its patience and starts to object to the war taxes."

Just before the two men parted ways, the Kansler set his most threatening glare on Boulder's bearded, worried face, and made an open threat.

"Should I ever hear that you express doubts about Colonel Clarke's mental state and fitness, your security clearance will be removed. Think of what happens to Jovians who are brought to Earth for questioning by our Intelligence Department."

Boulder looked to the floor, paralyzed with fear. Several times, he had seen classified intelligence footage of war prisoners shuttled down to Earth from his home system. They had always died horribly.

First, the higher gravity caused intense muscle and back pains. Second, a Jovian's skeleton would snap as soon as his unique low-gravity diet was interrupted, and his body failed to keep the bones strong enough. Third, the higher atmospheric pressure squeezed the lungs, eyes, and brain in the most painful way. Fourth, airborne pollen and chemicals in the Terran atmosphere caused devastating allergic reactions to a body born in almost sterile, unpolluted air. And in the terminal stage, Earthbound germs that were virtually nonexistent on the cold Jupiter colonies caused simultaneous outbreaks of diarrhea, pneumonia and gangrene. Ultraviolet rays from the stronger Terran sunlight could turn a Jovian colonist's skin into a bleeding mass of tumors in a matter of days.

Boulder Pi took a stimulant to drive this personal nightmare from his overstressed mind. He returned to his work, his lab and the machines he loved, shutting himself off from the world of Terrans where he did not belong. Sometimes he managed to smuggle information off to the Outer Planets. There was no reward involved; the people of the Outer Planets had no soft spots for traitors.

Slow... the world seemed so slow to Argus. He could use his internal system settings and speak many times faster, but to what end? No one else matched him in speed. One advantage, though - he had plenty more time than before to consider what to say, before speaking. He was in the training center, an annex of the lab complex where he had been created, where he alone could move about and train his abilities. Getting there had been a matter of sitting still and being transported. Argus was eager to use some elbow space.

"This centrifuge," the hologram of the Kansler explained, "also doubles as a racetrack. When you gain momentum, you can run around it on the walls. This exercise cannot make your artificial muscles grow - they are as powerful as they'll ever get. But your nervous system will fine-tune its control over them, and this makes the advanced exercises easier to complete."

Argus studied the cylinder-shaped chamber with his senses, and measured it to be twenty meters wide, five meters high. He took a tentative few running steps - and took off into the air, slowly falling down with his feet pumping.

"Try to get a foothold on the walls, then run with your head pointing toward the center of the room," the Kansler's voice boomed. "Adjust the

amount of grip in your feet with the internal menu system."

"I can't set the foot grip above standard setting," Argus objected.

"The pressure on my foot-soles goes up, and they start to itch."

"Set foot-sole sensitivity down to Running Mode."

Argus obeyed, and made an angled run against the wall. He flew up, twisted his legs, and touched the wall with both feet - but bounced off in the opposite direction."

"Set a stronger foot grip!" barked the hologram. "Don't be such a baby!"

Argus grunted a curse, set his foot grip to double strength, and tried again. This time, his feet stuck to the wall just enough and he broke into an uninterrupted run.

"Keep moving, don't stop! Just go faster!"

The speedometer on Argus's eye display showed 20 KMPH in the first few seconds. It was easy to accelerate; in another second, he had increased his running speed to 40 - the next second, 55... and he didn't break a sweat. He breathed harder, not knowing if he should experience chest pains. It was like borrowing the body of a super-athlete.

"Question," he gasped to his instructor.

"Yes?"

"If I have no lungs... why do they hurt when I breathe... faster?"

"It's all in your mind, Argus! The nervous system for your internal organs is partly severed, but much of the threads and the brain that controlled them still exist in synthetic form. Breathing reflexes cause your chest to move, and the nerves react to the strain and friction. You must slow down your breathing, even as you run faster!"

"That's... impossible!"

"You're wrong! I'm the only man you can trust now! Not those eggheads in their labs, not your past life. I know what you can or can't do! Now slow down your breathing!"

It shouldn't work, Gus kept thinking, even as it happened. It defied all previous experience. He decreased his rate of breath to that of a slow walk. The black-clad feet beneath him were like a remote-controlled machine that carried him ever faster - 75, 90, 100, 120 KMPH...

"Faster!"

The runner ceased thinking of what was possible, increased his speed to the 200 KMPH mark - and past it. To the Kansler and the others who observed it through the cameras, Argus's legs were just a dark blur, thumping so rapidly against the walls that the centrifuge vibrated. The sight was surreal, Argus spinning round and round, sideways, like some runaway toy figure.

"Listen to that," the Kansler's deputy said. "Sounds like rolling thunder."

"Take a note of that," the Kansler said. "We could use it in his official theme song."

The middle-aged, potato-nosed commander began to hum an improvised tune to himself, thinking of power - power without end or limit - the one thing he wanted, the one hunger that always raged within him, always craving more. Let the effete masses of Earth have their robot servants and replacement organs, their petty fads and drugs. I, Kansler, shall have the universe at my feet for a billion years, maybe more. Star systems shall be rearranged in the shape of my face. I shall spawn entire new species. I shall become the god of the Local Galactic Cluster, I am to become mankind in its ultimate form -

"Kansler?" the deputy interrupted his fantasies.

"What now?"

"It's time for your scheduled meeting with the Joint Chiefs of the Outer Defense Ring. The Fleet's recent battle is on the agenda -"

"On my way," the supreme commander of the Outer Defense Ring said shortly, and stepped away from the hologram cameras. On his way out, he switched on his hologram persona, an avatar program that would oversee

Argus's training in his absence.

Argus hardly noticed that the hologram of the Kansler was acting without human interference. He finished his run by slowing down gradually to human running speed, then let himself drift down to the floor. He landed clumsily on hands and feet, but stood up proudly with his balance regained.

"Was it okay?" he asked the waiting hologram.

Perhaps a part of Argus had retreated into a fantasy of his own, where he was back in the gym on Earth and the Kansler was his trainer... but even Argus himself wouldn't have been able to tell for certain. The Kansler had offered his support when his recruit was at his most vulnerable, and Argus had grasped at the Kansler's authority with quiet desperation. In fact, the Kansler did not have to try very hard to earn the cyborg's loyalty. The hologram, controlled by a low-grade intelligent supercomputer in the lab complex, nodded and gave Argus a thumbs-up sign.

"You are ready for the next event," the hologram said in a lifelike simulation of the Kansler's drawling accent. "Or do you want a rest?"

Any rest, now, would force Argus to consider his alarming predicament. He'd rather not think at all.

"Let's get on with it," Argus said, trying to make a posture of gusto and gung-ho. At least he managed to stand straight.

"Good. Let me show you the speed-learning unit, a device specially adapted for your abilities..."

Chapter 7: The View From Ganymede

Millions of miles from the Moon, the Outer Planets were at war with Earth. At stake was economic and administrative independence for Jupiter's ten colonized satellites - or so the colonists preferred to put it.

But as in many previous wars throughout history, the really important stake was not mentioned in the propaganda of either side - namely, property. In this case, the property fought over was the most valuable planet in the Solar System apart from Earth: JUPITER.

From their vast floating airship fleets in Jupiter's upper cloud layers, Jovian colonists mined mankind's most important energy source: the hydrogen isotope deuterium. The gas was separated, gathered into balloons that soared up into Jupiter's stratosphere, where passing spacecraft towed them into orbit with grappling hooks on mile-long cables. The process involved thousands of Jovian workers; several of them died each year from atmospheric storms, lightning bolts, radiation-induced sickness and other accidents. Still - in the face of danger, extreme cold and hard labor - these small, sturdy, loosely organized thousands persisted, producing millions of tons of deuterium shipments each Earth year, feeding the Solar System with cheap, powerful nuclear fuel.

And in the longer perspective, Jupiter was of even greater importance. The time was nearing when mankind could begin its next large migration - to other star systems. And any craft leaving the Solar System was forced to make an extra orbit around Jupiter, so that its enormous gravitational pull could "slingshot" the spacecraft out of the Sun's field of influence. That, plus the fuel resource in its atmosphere, made Jupiter nothing less than mankind's doorstep to the stars.

Ganymede, the largest, most densely populated satellite dominated the ring of Jovian colonies. Spanning a diameter exceeding three thousand miles, its subterranean glaciers, caves and oceans provided 10,000 men and women with the raw materials for synthetic air, food and clothing. The icy, airless surface is an extremely cold wasteland, constantly

bombarded by charged particles caught in Jupiter's magnetic field. Now, in the fifth or fourth year of the Jupiter Wars - depending on how "war" is defined - much more than cosmic radiation is pounding at the ridges and craters of Ganymede...

"BREACH!!" BEEEEP BEEEEP BEEEEP BEEEEP

One gets used to hearing it, thought Cave Pi, putting on his oxygen mask and eye-goggles with the swiftness of an ingrained habit. He ran to the nearest emergency tunnel door, closely followed by his wife who carried their youngest baby. She put on a protective mask first on her 1-year-old baby, then on herself. The draft grew to a roar of wind; electric fans whined in protest as they pumped in air to compensate for the fresh leak.

Cave Pi, being no taller than the average midget-size adult colonist, was a pale, blocky man. His serious face was covered with the traditional thick black beard. The long mustaches were set with knots and beads in the clan colors, the customary way of distinguishing one another in this crowded underground society. His wife sported a white shawl over her blond head, and her large eyes were accentuated by white eyeliner. The use of white, inherited from the space-suits of previous generations of colonists, signified an attachment to the past. Terrans often misinterpreted the red dot on a Jovian's forehead as the mark of a Hindu - while in fact the mark was painted on every child born in the Jupiter sector, symbolizing the Red Spot on the face of Jupiter. Cave Pi was second-generation Ganymedeans, his wife first-generation.

The couple was not alone in running; all around them, people were in a hurry, rushing on short legs, or used spindly, wheeled vehicles to travel as fast as the environment allowed. Ganymedeans usually moved in couples or families, so as not to lose each other in the tunnel mazes; as a rule, parents never, ever left their children out of sight until their twelfth birthday. 300 kilometers to their north, cover fire from the retreating Terran Fleet had scored a lucky hit, and penetrated the outer crust of Ganymede. One driller missile had detonated, and several Jovians were buried in cave-ins. The artificial atmosphere was leaking out faster than it could be replenished, until the breach could be repaired. But those problems were minor compared to the worst damage done: Ganymede's major power station was in danger of overheating.

Cave Pi received this news in his helmet communicator. Serving this year's duty as head of the planetary defense council, Cave Pi was told everything of importance to the survival of the colonists. It was not a job he would have volunteered for, but the council's computers had picked him for his skills.

"Can repair by self?" Cave Pi asked through the communications link, talking to a team of nuclear engineers 200 kilometers northwest.

"No," said the chief engineer through the tiny display above Cave Pi's left eye, a pudgy midget called Cranny Origo. "Need one damper unit twenty minutes, or reactor too hot to enter and repair. And spare circuits. Our workshop caved in, we can't free in time. You find parts from another node?"

Cave Pi checked his map-computer.

"Yes. Node 5-6-19, just near. I can there few minutes."

"Main tunnel breach between us you -"

"No blow. Skimmer faster. See you fifteen minutes. Off."

Cave Pi led his wife across a small rope-bridge, crossing a gaping narrow ice chasm, and followed the signs pointing to Node 5-6-19. Here lived a thousand or more colonists in numerous larger caves, and a workshop for spare parts was active. The moment he ran in through the workshop entrance, a team of workers was ready to hand him a backpack, loaded with the requested spare parts. The planet-wide communications network had alerted every single node about the shortage; Cave Pi could have walked into any of 50 workshops across Ganymede and received the

same service.

"Good," he said briefly, letting two workers help him into a prepared midget-size spacesuit, while three others led him toward an elevator shaft. In the elevator capsule, a newly prepared skimmer was already tanked and ready for flight.

"Heavy fire up there," the head engineer of the node warned Cave Pi. "You need a driver. Slush Delta! Suit up."

"Assist!" shouted the young worker Slush Delta, fumbling with a dirty midget spacesuit that the head engineer had tossed at him.

"Care," said Cave Pi's wife to her husband, and gave him a quick but warm kiss just before someone pushed the helmet onto his head.

"Love," he snapped back. Through generations of radio-slang, space-flight and hardships, Ganymedeans had evolved a rapid, terse shorthand version of English that wasted no time. Slovenliness was a crime that could, and had, cost lives.

The two astronauts were swiftly helped into their seats and the elevator shot upward, hurling them the 3 kilometers to the surface. They spent the time checking their suits for leaks, and that their two-way radios functioned. Once on the surface, they would be on their own.

"Flight mapped?" Cave asked the driver.

"In brain," the freckled young man said with a grin, pointing one stubby gloved hand at his own helmet. "Best place not to lose things."

"Blabber," Cave Pi retorted, flashing him a smile - a not-too-serious scolding. By Ganymedeans standards, Slush Delta was annoyingly talkative.

The elevator capsule began to vibrate as the brake jets decelerated it, and the two passengers felt the blood rush from their heads -- Cave Pi moaned as he nearly passed out, and Slush Delta rustled him back to awareness. They jolted to a stop at the surface; a hatch opened at the top of the capsule, and their skimmer was elevated to ground level.

The exit-station lay concealed in one of the countless dark ridges of ice and rock crisscrossing the surface of Ganymede. Above them, partly in shadow, the vast crest of Jupiter seemed to almost bulge across the horizon. Cave and Slush wasted no time admiring the view, but started up the skimmer's jet thrusters and took off. With Slush at the controls, the tiny craft accelerated to the velocity of a speeding bullet within a minute. He took a course parallel with the ridge around them, staying just ten meters above ground - if an enemy scan or infiltrator probe spotted them, they'd be defenseless.

Cave Pi punched up a display onto the inside of his space-helmet, and could see the course Slush Delta mapped out. The glittering, craggy hills rushed past at a dazzling speed - but it was the silence of the landscape, always the silence that made the view so astounding. The two travelers could sense the vibrations of the skimmer's jet thrusters in their pilot-seats, hear their own breathing, the ringing note of a loose part somewhere - but no wind, no loud ambience of running feet, no nasal murmur of dwarfish speed-talk. Above them in the black sky, the Red Spot began to slowly crawl across Jupiter's horizon like a vast, bloodshot eye.

"The Nipple rising," Slush Delta said over the radio, pointing up at the Red Spot. "Seem so close, I could bite into it."

"Kansler want to suck it dry," Cave Pi joked.

Then, in the corner of the map display they shared, Cave Pi spotted a small photo clip, no larger than his thumb.

"On your photo, who?"

"Family, back at old 5-6-19. I love skimming, but miss them bad every time. Scared too, that I lose track of them, get lost out here in the vastness."

"You fine pilot, Slush. No worries. Okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah."

"You blabber, though."

If Slush had intended a reply - blabbermouth as he was - he never got the opportunity. A warning flashed on their radar displays.

TERRAN SPY NETWORK DETECTED YOU

The camouflaged gun turrets in the valley were not visible to the naked eye, but the astronauts could see bursts of flashes in the sky, which meant the Ganymedean defense system was shielding them from incoming enemies. The skimmer's Geiger counter began to clatter more rapidly... cosmic radiation, plus radiation from the explosions.

"Evade?" Cave Pi asked, a note of higher than normal urgency in his voice. In the plain rearview mirrors, they glimpsed the impact of something; a plume of ice and dust shot up from the valley a few hundred feet south, immediately receding into the distance like some mirage.

"Turn seat, use gun," shouted Slush, radio crackling from his loud reply, and Pi realized just how young, how frightened his pilot was. He carefully unlocked and rotated his seat, grabbed hold of the lasergun that was mounted on a makeshift tripod, and switched on a small targeting screen.

Almost immediately, the telescopic detector reacted:

INCOMING TERRAN REMOTE-POD APPROACH VELOCITY 0.1KMPS APPROACH ANGLE 02 DEG

Cave Pi told the pilot, who moved his hand across the control rods of the skimmer. A panoply unfolded itself on top of the craft, a camouflage roof no larger than five feet across. Cave Pi tracked the incoming pod - and lost track of it, as it suddenly changed course and darted off into the hills. Its angle suggested it was still behind them, somewhere - flying so low, even the gun turrets couldn't target it.

"Low flying hunter!" he alerted Slush Delta. "Coming fast. Speed!"

"This fast max - any faster, and we break landing net, go splat!"

"There! I can see it - southeast and following!"

"Cover me!"

It was a command to Cave Pi, not the Ganymedean defense command - which couldn't intercept their communication anyway. Cave Pi longed for the relative safety of the crowded Command Central, full of comforting data screens, deep below their feet. He activated the crude laser-sight and took aim at the moving dot that pursued them. The hunter pod might be no larger than the skimmer itself - semi-automatic or remote-controlled, one of hundreds sent out by the Terran Fleet to make life miserable for the rebellious satellites. But those Jovians who worked in Jupiter's atmosphere, the gas-trawlers, were not harassed by the Fleet... as long as the deuterium export to the Inner Planets went on, Cave Pi thought bitterly. The only thing that kept the Jovians from shutting down their supply route to Earth was the need to make a living. The regular trade lines had to be maintained, even between planets at war - or they would all starve. Smugglers existed, as they always had, but were too few and too far between to replace regular trade in case of a blockade.

This is not a war, Cave Pi thought, his two eyes aching as he struggled to get a straight aim at the hunter pod. It's a make-believe war, to keep the Kansler's image looking good. So that he can say to the fat, decadent Terran voters: See how I keep the colonists in check. In your dreams, you murdering bastard. You even bought my brother, made him a hostage to your cause. Tried to blackmail me with a traitor. It won't work. Kill that traitor, I don't care... I don't. Care.

He fired several pulses - invisible as they shot across the airless ridges - and little dots of light indicated the impacts in distant hillsides. The hunter pod closed in, moving more irregularly but without the deft reactivity of Slush Delta. The helmet display indicated their skimmer was less than a minute from its destination; it would not have to slow down for landing, unless it went any faster.

"We'll make it?" Cave Pi asked.

"No. Pod seconds away. Your jetpack. Aim at the entrance-point. Program

this fall trajectory." Slush wired over a trajectory algorithm from his personal computer, to the one in Cave Pi's suit. "At my signal, I rotate skimmer and you jump off. Momentum is enough to throw you inside."

"But -"

"Deliver package!"

Momentarily, Slush turned in his seat and made a thumbs-up sign. Cave couldn't quite see the young man's freckled face, but he could hear Slush's rapid, tense breathing over the radio. A warning signal blinked in his helmet display; he had a few seconds to prepare for takeoff.

Slush Delta throttled the forward drive, and let only the keel thrusters keep the skimmer hovering above ground. Cave Pi unbuckled his seat belt, and the skimmer turned around its center, pointing backward as it flew. Pi saw the landing-signal, switched on his jetpack, and took a forward leap. Almost at the same instant, Slush Delta turned on the forward drive and began to brake. The Terran hunter pod hurtled toward him, too fast to calculate the second target that had ejected from the skimmer...

A snapping noise over the radio was all that Pi heard, as Slush Delta and his skimmer were blown to a cloud of fragments. Cave Pi couldn't see the explosion, but felt a shockwave push his falling body and the package forward. He frantically tried to adjust his course with the hand controls, and found himself plunging against a featureless rock face. The instruments told him his trajectory was right, yet he shut his eyes in fear... and fell right through the wall hologram that masked the twenty meter wide entrance. At breathtaking speed, Cave Pi and his large backpack landed in an elastic emergency net that stretched across the cave opening. The impact hit Pi like a punch in the stomach, and he lost his sense of orientation, feeling the vibrating strings of the net as it stretched out to dampen his fall.

The bungee-cord net stretched out along the length of the oblong, artificial hangar - almost three hundred meters - before it was held up and stopped by mechanical arms, and Cave Pi was lifted out of it. The net was released, and slung back the three hundred meters, accompanied by warning lights that ran along the cave walls. Cave dropped down from the hanging rescue crane, onto a cargo sled, and let the crew unload his backpack. The sled zoomed into a small tunnel and down two levels, then entered the wide, low chamber that held the damaged reactor.

"Still time?" he asked, as he replaced his space helmet with a breathing-mask. He felt sick from the landing, or maybe it was his pilot's death.

"Enough, yeah," replied Cranny Origo from his seat. "We'll make it. Thanks, Pi. You a hero!"

The crew started to cheer Cave Pi and they patted his shoulders; he smiled reluctantly, not wanting to sound smug. He wondered what to tell Slush Delta's family. "Slush Delta no blabber," he said, perhaps only to himself, but the others heard him - and fell silent, as the sled brought them to their goal. Their node was saved, for now.

Cave Pi couldn't allow himself to rest, until he had seen the damper unit installed and the reactor secured. Then, the mission completed, he felt incredibly tired and fell asleep in a small office. He woke up, abruptly, when a hand touched his forehead. It was his wife, Strata Rho-Pi, sitting next to him. They embraced and kissed each other, while she mumbled her thanks to the stars for bringing him safely back.

"Where Junior?" Cave Pi asked, suddenly worried, but Strata held him back.

"Sssh. My family came with me, you slept, they look after Junior. Relax."

"Love you, Strata," he smiled. "Can't go on like this, but for you and your family."

"Our family."

"The only family I have. That, and our home, this planet. I love you all."

They had been husband and wife for two years; he knew how she was going to respond. So he looked away when Strata's rounded, pretty face, partly obscured by a single orange braid falling over her brow, slowly grew worried.

"One more left. Your brother."

Cave Pi turned hard and remote in her arms, refusing to let her soft voice reach him.

"One day, Cave, you'll forgive him. Wasn't he killed your family. Terrans did, not him."

"He's dead to me. We are alive. Is enough. Be with me this sleep phase, Strata."

"Sssh," she whispered into his ear, and sat in his lap. "Let Ganymede wait for its turn to be saved. Me first..."

In public life, Jovians were short on speech and stature - in private, they made up for it. In their world, the Popularity Points system had not yet invaded the sphere of the home. With one free leg, Strata kicked the panel that shut the door to the room and gave them complete privacy.

Chapter 8: The Glass War

"Yes! No."

He almost made it this time. Crack! went another crystal glass in his closing hand. Argus kept perfect count - with his plastified brain, he could no longer forget.

"That was glass number six-hundred and fifteen," he told the holo-presences of the Kansler, Boulder Pi and Pi's lab team. "I hope you ordered more of them."

A military psychologist severed herself from the crowd of holograms in the training room, and walked closer toward Argus's pitch-black, hulking frame. He gave her a faint smile of appreciation. This woman had been with the team during all his four weeks on the Moon. This time, she had dressed up and showed a little more of her figure - as much as the lab uniform allowed.

"I'd like to suggest a more holistic approach to this exercise. Boulder Pi, sir, if I may speak to Argus in private, non-holographic presence for a minute..."

Boulder Pi glowered at her in an openly jealous manner - not in words but in every deed, he routinely demonstrated that Argus was his "child", the spawn of his intellect.

"What do you have in mind, Amiella? Not one of those primal-scream catharsis sessions you put my team through?"

The group laughed a little; Dr. Amiellia Minsky's lips narrowed slightly.

"What I have in mind is a probe of Colonel Clarke's personal drives, his motives for failure and success, and the conflicting tensions this causes in his hands. I can't help but observe how these glasses always crack in the same manner... a psych-probe could isolate the specific neural pathway from hand to brain, and..."

"No psych-probes!" the Kansler broke in. "The pre-cyborgic tests of Colonel Clarke are sufficient. We know him inside out."

"But I -"

"We are team players, Dr. Minsky. Are you?" he asked with the undercurrent of threat that Boulder Pi recognized from every occasion the Kansler felt his prestige challenged.

The doctor's enhanced lips turned pale, and her holo-presence backed away from Argus. The cyborg, who had not forgotten that he wasn't "Colonel Clarke", gave her the top-down "elevator stare". Damn, he thought, if only I could touch her. And inevitably, instantly, his

thoughts wandered to another - missing - subject. Argus felt frustration give way to rage. He held out his arms to the retreating hologram of Amiella Minsky.

"You want a hug? Is that it, doctor? A hug? Come on, gimme a hug!"

He wrapped his arms around a pillar of compressed lunar concrete, a substance strong as steel - and squeezed. Grimacing, he increased the pressure to ten tons per square centimeter in a matter of seconds.

The meter-wide pillar cracked up and came crashing down, tumbling slowly in the weak gravity. In spite of their relative safety of holopresence, the assembled men and women instinctively ducked for cover. All, that is, except the Kansler - and it really was him controlling the hologram this time.

"Temper, temper," he said, shaking his head in mock disappointment.

"What you need, Argus, is to let off some steam. Care for some simulated entertainment?"

"What, those things work on cyborgs too?"

"Not until now," the Kansler said matter-of-factly. "The Entertainment department has developed special simulations for your enhanced nervous system. Full stimulation of the pleasure centers, just like the stuff on Earth. Have a beer, put your feet on the table, have a sim."

Argus thought long and hard about it - it took a second. Now he remembered that word he used to forget, sharp and clear, every time he tried to recall it. Integrity.

"I'd like a dog," he said. Amiella made an incredulous, shocked face.

"For company," he said with emphasis. "A Dalmatian. A real one."

Boulder Pi and his crew turned to each other, then to the Kansler, chattering madly about what this statement might mean, and how to accomplish Argus's request.

"Officers are allowed to have pets... Colonel," said the Kansler in a surprisingly soft tone. Argus switched to thermal vision, to check if the commander's sincerity was genuine, then remembered: that wouldn't work on holograms. "Dalmatians are hard to find here on the Moon," the Kansler added. "We'll try our best. Still not keen on that pleasure-sim, Argus? That's fine. We'll leave it in your quarters, should you get restless."

The Kansler put one hand on Dr. Minsky's shoulder, and said: "Doctor, you seem to be in need of relaxing, too. Let me take you to my office, I have some old brandy that'll do you good."

"I... yes... yes, please, Kansler," said the trembling psych-specialist.

No one in the room knew that the Kansler was a regular customer of "The House". Had they known, they might have tried to stop Amiella from following the Kansler. She was reported lost the next day. Argus assumed she had been moved from the project, and didn't think much of it then. The following week he concentrated even harder on perfecting his training record, eager to get to the next stage. He stopped "sleeping" and used the rest periods for speed-learning, cramming his memory with tactics and military history. But he refused to take the glass-holding test.

At one point, the Kansler had a pugilist robot delivered to Argus for sparring practice. Argus considered his options for a moment - and punched off the robot's head with one blow. He would never have to face a contender to his World Champion title again.

One week passed, and Argus agreed to do the champagne-glass test.

"Can I have the glass dry empty this time," he asked - and got it.

There and then, facing his 616th glass, Argus experienced a novel insight. He switched to infrared vision and looked at his own hand. Then, with ultraviolet vision, he looked closely at the glass before him. Suddenly, it all clicked into place. Argus saw the varying

thickness of the glass as colored fields - where it was strongest and would not break. He saw the heat emitted from various tensions in his artificial muscles that caused his grip to twitch. With this insight, he could direct his grip fiber by fiber, until they were all perfectly tuned and their force distributed symmetrically across his fingers.

He closed his artificial eyelids and gently grasped the glass. Its surface was cool, smooth, beautifully rounded; Argus imagined holding one of Amiella Minsky's breasts. The hypersensitive hearing units on his head listened for a cracking noise. He heard only the minute sound of his black surface "skin" against the glass, and dared to look. The glass was whole - in his steady, closed hand. The laughter he heard was his own.

"Another one! With water in it."

It arrived, and he tried again, with his eyes closed. It held. He drank it. So long had he waited for that moment, dreamed of it, that the taste of ordinary recycled Moon-water felt like wine to his synthetic palate.

The Kansler and Boulder Pi gave out mutual sighs of relief. But they were behind schedule. As Argus received words of congratulation from the lab team, the Kansler gave him new orders.

"No need to continue your physical training at this stage. All you have learned until now you can remember perfectly. It's time to take you to the Fleet's flight-training academy, on the far side of the Moon. There you will learn to fly your personal ship."

Argus's face betrayed his insecurity; he had never flown anything, not even a simple jump-jet pod. The Kansler must have read his face correctly, for he had a reply.

"Forget all you ever knew about space-flight. With you, Argus, begins a new era in orbital combat!"

Chapter 9: Night Flight To Venus

The bright white crest of Venus filled up half of the front view before Argus, as his ship approached it with the Sun at the rear. The planet's thick clouds reflected so much sunlight, that an ordinary man would hardly have seen the stars in the background sky. Stubborn old reflexes forced Argus to squint his eyes at the shining sight.

The tactical display, superimposed on the viewplate, indicated incoming objects. First, a swarm of dust and debris. Second, a cluster of small asteroids. His current orbit intercepted their projected paths at two points.

Argus had two flight trainers who, not unlike the Kansler and Boulder Pi, supervised his training simultaneously. Teacher-pairs was the standard system for any kind of military education in the 22nd century. Its purpose was manifold. Two men could easier impose their orders on one man, as long as they cooperated. And by checking each other, the teachers provided a safeguard against slips in training that could cause costly accidents. This rookie was different from any previous one - and neither teacher was certain which rules applied to this new type of cyborg. Most importantly, the second trainer was also chief designer of the ship that had been specifically built for Argus. Unlike Boulder Pi, he was a Terran.

"Argus," the first trainer said over the communications link, "our com-link will shut down for three minutes. Tech trouble. You have to solve this situation on your own."

"Roger that," Argus joked. "Read you loud and clear."

"A simple 'Yes' or 'No' is the standard reply in military space-flight," the second trainer corrected him. "Don't waste precious milliseconds. Clear?"

"Yes."

"Com-link shutdown imminent. Good luck, Argus."

And he was alone, seated in the cockpit of a craft he had never before seen, without so much as an instruction manual. He hadn't imagined that space would be so quiet - even more so, because he had no oxygen supply and didn't have to breathe. Cockpit pressure lay at zero, just like the space outside, and could be adjusted upward when necessary.

The orbital display began to light up in red. He had two minutes until the first collision with the swarm of debris - which meant time to think of many solutions. The clusters were barely visible to him as glittering points to the ship's starboard.

The time he spent thinking over his options, with a brain many times faster than one of flesh, would have taken him an hour in his previous existence. Subjectively, he was still amazed that no more than a few seconds passed. It was a great advantage, and his mental confidence was brimming like it hadn't in years. His small ship hurtled onward to its rendezvous with the space debris, at a relative velocity of thirty kilometers per second - the tactical display told him as much. He understood well that a collision would prove fatal, even to his cyborg body.

If he couldn't dodge, perhaps he could shoot?

He touched the control with the label RADIO COM, and found the required frequency. He could now send a shortwave message, from the devices in his "ears" directly to the ship computer. Using speed-talk, he transmitted a question: in a thousandth of a millionth of a second, his cyborg body converted the message into digital shortwave code. His question appeared on the instrument panel.

ARGUS Q: CAN YOU SHOOT AND HIT THE ROCKS AND DUST OF THE INCOMING DEBRIS SWARM?

The reply came in a second, after the ship had calculated it:

NAVBTULER PROGNOSIS UNCERTAIN. SHIP'S AUTOMATIC TARGETING SYSTEM LIMITS AT 102 TARGETS/SEC, EACH TARGET MIN.WIDTH 1.5 M, DISTANCE LIMIT 0.1 AU. NAVBTULER SUGGESTS: REQUEST TARGETING SUPPORT FROM TERRAN FLEET. ACCEPT Y/N?

Naah, Argus, thought, this is no babysitting machine. He sent a "NO" reply, but the ship computer must have gotten worried, for it insisted:

NAVBTULER STRONGLY RECOMMENDS: TERRAN FLEET SUPPORT.

ARGUS Q: HOW FAST MUST I FLY TO TARGET AND SHOOT PARTS OF INCOMING SWARM, USING ONLY MANUAL CONTROLS?

NAVBTULER PROGNOSIS: UNCERTAIN. SPECIFY MANUAL CONTROL SETUP.

OPTIONS: 1. HAND-AND-FOOT NAVIGATION 2. EYE-MOVEMENT TRACKING 3. HAND TRIGGER 4. EYELID TRIGGER

WARNING: SWARM IMPACT IN 08 SECONDS

Argus quickly chose 1, 2 and 3. The computer's tactical display lightened up with an impressive array of weapons.

SELECT DEFENSE MEASURES: 0. LASER SIGHT 1. STANDARD LASER (10,000 C) 2. GAMMA LASER (100,000 C) 3. LEYDENFROST SHIELD EMITTER (CANNOT DEFLECT LARGE DEBRIS) 4. MAGNETIC REPULSION FIELD (LIMITED USE) 5. PROTON CANNON 6. ANTIMATTER ION CANNON (DANGER! TARGET MUST BE OUT OF SAFETY RANGE 50,000 KM) 7. INFLATABLE HEAT SHIELD (RECOMM: ATMOSPHERIC RE-ENTRY) 8. ALUMINUM BUBBLE DECOYS (LIMITED SUPPLY) 9. GUIDED MISSILES (LEFT: 2. RECOMM: LARGE TARGETS) 10. ELECTROMAGNETIC PULSE (WARNING: MAY DISABLE CRAFT) 11. DEUTERIUM BOMB (LEFT: 0) 12. SELF-DESTRUCT (NOT AUTHORIZED)

"Too many choices," Argus told himself, not hearing his words in the vacuum of the cockpit. "Leydenfrost, sounds tasty... use 3, 4, and 7 on swarm."

The computer accepted his choice without objections. It shook - and a large balloon was instantly blown up from the front end, blocking the viewplate. The display indicated that the two other shielding devices were active, but Argus couldn't see or hear them.

PASSING THROUGH DEBRIS CLOUD...

Argus felt the ship shake and jolt, but it lasted just a few seconds.

The shields were automatically deactivated.

DAMAGE REPORT: 00.0001 %

"All right!" he grinned. "Now for the big ones..."

If this was the boxing ring, he thought, what would Ali have done? The opponent is big and slow, a mountain trying to ram you. Dance around him, that's easy, then sting him before he understands where you went. But he's got company, maybe a surprise hidden behind those big boulders...

"Okay..." he said to himself. "Better do something, then. If the flight-recorder is still running, I'd like to recite a little poem I just came up with, for this special occasion..."

"I may be a freak, on a spaced-out streak, But I'm mean and I'm black, and I'm on the attack, Flying fast and high, If you're quick enough to see, then look at me, how I dance like a butterfly, and sting like a bee."

He grabbed the hand controls of the ship, and put his feet in their control slots. Leaning his head away from the pilot-seat, he unlocked the padded clamps that held it in place. The display warned him: only half a minute to rendezvous, and 40% chance of collision. Suddenly, he put his feet down and ignited the main booster rocket. The entire ship began to vibrate with the released power, as it shot forward with an acceleration of 5 G - five times the gravity of Earth. Argus barely felt the pressure pushing him against the seat.

"Wooo-hoo! If only they had roads in space, so you'd see how fast you're going!"

He killed the main booster, letting the ship fall much faster than before. Using the smaller thrusters, Argus swiftly moved in orbit, pushing sideways until he flew on a course that would result in a close fly-by of the asteroid cluster, with a good one hundred kilometers of space between it and him. He rotated his craft around its axis, until its front weapons pointed straight at the rendezvous point. The proton cannons and the laser sight came to life. Argus could, in ways he not yet understood, sense how the power of the charged particles accumulated in the accelerator tubes inside the ship's flanks.

Fly-by occurred, momentarily and without a sound, in the next second. Argus imagined what tremendous noise the asteroids would have made, if they had fallen through air. A flock of them, looking somewhat like brown potatoes, shot past him - even with his superhuman perception, he almost missed the sight. He spun the ship around again, then set the main rocket to a 15-G boost. The deceleration pushed much harder this time, but well within his personal limits. He wanted to hunt the asteroids down, check them close up, then...

Warning signals blinked up on the control display.

EMERGENCY! REACTOR CORE DESTABILIZED BY G-FORCES EJECT REACTOR INTO SUN! TIME TO REACTOR DETONATION: 12 SEC

Very quickly, Argus rotated the ship's rear toward the Sun, got a "CLEAR" signal and pressed the emergency ejection trigger. Jolting the entire ship, the reactor core was shot out in an orbit toward the Sun, using its own thrusters to accelerate. With only the control rockets to drive his ship forward, Argus would have to surrender his pursuit and head for the nearest Fleet station. He called up a three-dimensional map of the Solar System on the display - and another warning appeared.

REACTOR CORE DESTROYED

As he read the message, the crest of Venus started to shine like a second sun - and for a moment he thought it had exploded. The fierce glare receded in a few seconds, and he thought he was safe. The instrument panel went dark. He tried to steer the ship with his hands and feet, but got no response. The ship floated out of control, and began to tumble around its axis.

"What happened?" he asked, baffled by this abrupt turn of events.

The ship stopped tumbling, and the tactical display on the ship's viewplate lit up. In big yellow letters the result was shown:

SIMULATION ENDS...

PILOT STATUS: YOU ARE DEAD (CAUSE: COCKPIT TEMPERATURE ROSE TO 200,000 DEGREES) ANNIHILATION OF REACTOR CORE CAUSED MASSIVE GAMMA-RADIATION BURST NEAR VENUS SHIP DESTROYED ALL SATELLITES AND SPACE STATIONS IN THIS SECTOR DAMAGED OR DESTROYED

CASUALTIES (ORBITAL SPACE): 200 CASUALTIES (VENUS): 16,000 ENEMY CASUALTIES: UNKNOWN

"What happened..?"

Air hissed back into the cockpit. The hatch opened to his side, and his pilot-seat unlocked. Argus climbed out of the flight-simulator capsule, and stepped down on the floor of the centrifuge chamber. He was still on the Moon. The two flight trainers, still in their space-suits for some reason, entered the centrifuge through a walkway above him. Through their clear transparent helmets, he saw that they were angry.

"What the hell were you thinking, Colonel? You just killed half the population of Venus!"

"Did we really have to tell you the reactor can't withstand a deceleration-acceleration of over 20 G? We installed an automatic shutdown mechanism just in case, but you acted so quickly it couldn't react in time!"

To Argus, this felt just like when Gus Thorsen's boxing trainer had scolded him for knocking down and nearly breaking a pugilist robot. He hung his head down, and waited for the Kansler's wrath.

"Hold it," the Kansler's voice sounded over the com-link, and the trainers went quiet. A hologram of the Kansler appeared from a projection-node near where Argus stood. "I think we all learned something from this first simulation. Colonel Clarke showed us that his ship is not adequately reinforced. You must make it even sturdier, so that he can take full advantage of his own physical limits. The reactor must be virtually indestructible."

"But he's too reckless!" the ship's designer protested to the hologram. "What happened to the cool, rational Clarke we heard so many good things about? Now he flies like... like some washout rookie!"

"This is a new situation," the Kansler replied, a little sterner. "We must test the limits of the possible."

"This... is... the limit, Kansler. The antimatter reactor cannot be made more stable," the second trainer said with emphasis.

In Argus's heat-vision, that man's body instantly grew several degrees colder when the Kansler gave his next reply.

"You're fired from this project, Wesselman. Go to your quarters now, and wait for the protocol officer to arrange the discharge. You are to stay in security quarantine until the war is over."

A heavy, lumbering guard-robot appeared in the door to the walkway, and asked the stunned Wesselman to come out of the centrifuge chamber. His colleague followed him out, equally silent. Once the trainers had passed outside hearing range, the Kansler's hologram turned to Argus.

"Such is the power of your personal ship, that it can devastate a small planet. I hope this makes you understand how far we are going, and why we must succeed. Half the Fleet's budget is consumed to produce the antimatter fuel that can only be used in your ship."

"I don't get it," Argus muttered. "I'm flying an antimatter bomb? You're not going to blow up a planet, are you?"

"Certainly not. We cannot afford such destruction anywhere in the Solar System."

"Then why build a ship that is so dangerous?"

"Because there is no other alternative. And no other pilot to entrust it with. Now run the simulation again, until you have tested all possible outcomes. I shall be with you in twelve hours. Good luck. Try every approach, every possible outcome. Follow your instincts."

The hologram disappeared. Argus looked up at the simulator capsule, that hung suspended from the centrifuge ceiling. If it had been real, he would have been a mass murderer. Incredible. It just wasn't possible, that someone could build a device so suicidal...

Chapter 10: His Master's Voice

Argus remembered with chilling clarity the dry, brittle pages of a stack of books in the time of his childhood. When he was still Gus Thorsen and a kid, he had found the books in a chest of drawers, inside a shack, in the Australian desert. He read them in secret, not telling anyone else, and the images and words told of other times.

An old book about Muhammad Ali had impressed him deeply, and he had decided then that he wanted to become a boxing champion. Twenty-six years later, Gus Thorsen's dream had come true, but by then the title had lost its significance to the world. In another forgotten book, he read about the many wars of the insane 20th century, and the bombs that lay waste to cities in momentous flashes of energy. Those weapons had long ago been dismantled, turned to resources in the drive to colonize the planets - before fusion power was made safe and ubiquitous. And he was being trained to use a ship that was infinitely more dangerous than an atom bomb...

Argus went to look for the trainers. A guard robot informed him that the trainers were occupied.

"I just need to talk to someone. Anyone."

The faceless robot guardian made a pre-programmed suggestion out of context - not an unusual occurrence in the early 22nd Century. Defense contractors often saved money by using software from civilian products in military robots, and vice versa. This model was thus a distant relative of a commercial robot on Earth.

"When you feel lonely," it said in its droning guard-style monotone, "you should get a new Personal Assistant. You can always trust your 'Pa' to lend a helping hand, to listen and give advice. 'Pa' is that good old-fashioned cybernetic tradition that never goes out of style. Order your 'Pa' now!"

"I never had a 'Pa'." He turned his back on the robot. "I had a dog." He climbed back up into the flight simulator's cockpit, and played absentmindedly with the control panel.

"If only this panel had a voice-box," he muttered.

A message flashed in a corner of the ship's tactical display: VOICE MODE ON.

"Hello," Argus said unenthusiastically.

"Hello," replied the ship computer's voice from a hidden speaker. Its volume and speed were set to human range; it sounded like a butler robot - a thin, alert person of indeterminate age, eager to please. "Request?"

"Just talk to me."

"Topic?"

"Who are you?"

"Your ship's Navbutler, short for Navigation Backup Terran Link Computer, Prototype Two. Subsystems include engine controls, flight-recorder, weapons system, tactical, life support, Fleet Central com-link, and service unit."

"You're aware you're not 'in' a real ship yet, are you? This is a flight-simulator."

"Pardon?"

"This is all pretend," Argus pointed out to the machine. "We're still in simulation."

"If this is a simulation, are you the real pilot or a simulated one?"

Argus laughed, and it felt good.

"Pardon?" asked the computer again - conversation was not its strongest

feature.

Now Argus laughed hard.

"Please try to sit still. Health check in progress... Argus system status, stable."

"What are you, my mother?"

"No."

"But you will be in my ship, as you are now, when it's complete?"

"An updated version of this Navbutler will be in place on F-903 Class A."

"Good. Better get to know me, because I have a hunch we're related.

Part of the 'big talking gizmo' family."

"Define 'gizmo'."

"Whatchamcallit, thingamajig, whatsitsname, thingy."

"Define 'thingy'."

"Can't."

"Please define 'thingy'."

"You really need to know?"

"Yes."

"Just how smart are you, Navbutler?"

"Request my origin?"

"Affirmative."

"Navbutler, Prototype Two, derived from parental programs in Fleetcom subsystems."

"Did you have a specific human designer?"

"No. I was generated at a request from Fleet Command. A 'bot' program searched the Fleetcom database and spawned a batch, from which I was selected through the standardized Darwin Sequence. My intelligence is lower than human average. Speed factors can compensate."

"I'll give you that, you were made for speed. Good."

"Thank you."

"Are you coded for emotional response?"

"Prognosis: uncertain."

Argus laughed again, and patted the ship's wall encouragingly. After a little coaxing, he arranged for Navbutler to set up an encrypted com-link between them, so that Argus could accept direct laser transmissions into his eye. Even if the two were separated by long distances, Navbutler would be able to reach Argus through one of the countless laser links in the Solar System.

Soon, Argus started to ask Navbutler about the things that "Colonel Clarke", his dead double, was supposed to know.

"Nav, can you show me data on... strategy and organization?"

Navbutler had extensive access to the Fleetcom databases, and a world of information opened up to Argus. He asked if there was a faster way to sort and read the immense files.

"Do you have a serial port?" the ship computer asked him.

Argus shuffled through his internal menu system, until he found a body map. The visual display in his view showed a full 3-D image of Argus, that could be searched from top to bottom, from the whole to the minutest detail.

"There's too much to search."

"Use a 'Search' command," Navbutler suggested.

Argus formed the command "SEARCH FOR SERIAL PORT" on his internal display. In a fraction of second, the 3-D body image zoomed in on a spot on his left palm...

THE CORTEX PORT OPENS THE FIBEROPTIC LINK TO DIGITAL/ANALOG SIGNALS IN THE 100-1000 MEGACYCLES BAND. ARE YOU AUTHORIZED TO OPEN CORTEX PORT?

Argus chose a definite "YES" command.

CORTEX PORT OPENING... CAUTION... DO NOT EXPOSE TO DUST, FRICTION...

Argus looked at the center of his upturned palm: a tiny disc-shaped

section of it irised out, to reveal a ring of pin-sized holes - and a smaller ring of metal pins, a millimeter high, inside it.

"Nav," he asked, holding up his palm to the instrument panel where he knew there was a camera, "is this port compatible with any other systems you know?"

"Search inside Fleetcom, or universal search?"

Argus wondered for a moment if he was compatible with a whole line of robots somewhere in the Solar System... and it struck him then, that there might be similar cyborg prototypes - something Boulder Pi never told him about.

"Search for... compatible systems designed by Boulder Pi."

"Searching..."

It took longer than he had expected; at this point, he did not fully realize how vast cyberspace was. Navbutler had not only Fleetcom at its disposal, but also - through a network of satellites, laser links and space nodes - all of the Inner Planets to search.

Argus was reading up on military strategy and had just learned that Napoleon was a pompous, megalomaniac little creep, when Navbutler came back to him. Two hours had passed.

"What took you so long?" Argus asked.

"Communication between planetary systems travels at the speed of light. Signals from Mars take several minutes to travel in either direction."

"List results on... wait... is this communication private?"

"Access to ship system is limited to flight trainers and the Kansler."

"Who has access to... to my internal databanks?"

"Only you, Argus. Direct access is limited to Serial Port, by manual connection only."

"Meaning, they can't transmit anything in or out of my brain by radio or laser or anything?"

"Yes."

"Right. Can you give me the list of compatibles in way that cannot be intercepted?"

"Navbutler suggestion: Direct optic transfer subsystem. Direct your left eye at laser port on panel. Set your visual receptivity to 'LOW', to avoid overheating the receptor membrane."

Argus did so, and told Navbutler to transmit. A laser projector on the ship's panel sent the files as optic images directly onto his retina, where he could see them in vivid color and imagery...

UNITS COMPATIBLE WITH ARGUS-A:

1: CYBORG ASSEMBLY UNIT ER-64385-2118-C PRESENT LOCATION: LUNAR RESEARCH COMPLEX - ACCESS DENIED

2: PROTOTYPE CYBORG COMBAT CHASSI PRESENT LOCATION: LUNAR RESEARCH COMPLEX - ACCESS DENIED

3: COMMAND CENTER, E.S.S. WILLIAM JEFFERSON, FLAGSHIP CLASS PRESENT LOCATION: LUNAR ORBIT

4: THE VENIX PROJECT - ACCESS DENIED PRESENT LOCATION - ACCESS DENIED

"What is 'The Venix Project'?" he asked, immediately regretting that he'd asked.

"Searching... your authorization level is not high enough. Sorry."

Argus thought for a moment, and got a wild hunch. This was just a computer he was talking to - not much smarter than those thickheaded guard robots. It had to have a programming glitch somewhere...

"Nav... can you tell me if the present location of The Venix Project is NOT on the Moon?"

"Yes."

"Well, is it NOT on the Moon?"

"Yes."

"Is it NOT on the Jovian satellites, or any of the Outer Planets?"

"Yes."

"Is it NOT on Venus or any of its orbital stations?"

"...yes."

"Is it NOT on Earth?"

"Classified information. Sorry."

Argus chuckled - it sounded a bit odd with his synthetic speech - incredible, how easy computer programs were to trip!

"Okay, you can close my access to Fleetcom, Nav. I... I think I need a little rest."

"Navbutler suggests: recreational software. Games? Sims? Sports events? How about last year's Martian Skysurfing Grand Prix?" Navbutler must have registered the sudden change in Argus's posture, for it changed its tone quickly. "Please suggest a sports event," it asked.

"Boxing, traditional type, live events," Argus replied without a moment's pause - wondering if he had begun to sound and think like a computer.

"Searching... wait... no public boxing events are in progress right now. Search for previous events?"

Argus nodded.

"Searching... last public boxing event is six weeks old. The Boxing Federation of the Inner Planets has been dissolved due to a low popularity index. Play last event?"

Argus sat up in his seat and stared at the blank viewplate. An involuntary reflex caused his hand to search his pockets for the Boxing Federation membership card - but he no longer wore clothes or pockets - and the card had been lost in the aircraft explosion.

"No boxing matches... anywhere?"

"Seek the public cam networks for unscheduled fights?"

"No... forget it."

"Erase previous request - yes, no?"

"Yeah... yes."

In a state of shock, Argus climbed down from the simulator and sleepwalked to his quarters. He was, or had been, the last heavyweight boxing champion. There might never be another one. His body felt heavy as lead, as if his internal batteries were running down.

A week later, the Kansler met with Boulder Pi and a few top-level officers of the Fleet.

"I agree with Boulder Pi," the Kansler admitted, surprising the others. "And not just for the sake of Colonel Clarke's morale. It is important to the Fleet, to the Terran public, that we show results soon. But Argus must be sizzle and steak. He must prove to everyone that he is powerful, invincible, loyal to the Fleet and to Mother Earth. Children must not be afraid to sit in his lap. And we have to allow Argus some limited incognito movement on Earth, for... recreation. I'll tell you later."

Both the Kansler and Boulder Pi thought - again - of all the champagne glasses that Argus had shattered, and what might happen to a human in his hands. Boulder went a little pale.

"I have completed for you an outline of the P.R. tour, Kansler," said General Boudiou, head of the Fleet's Marketing Department. "Look here. In just one week, we can saturate public awareness of Argus-A. Kids will love him, especially with the personality change that Colonel Clarke underwent after he was... rebuilt. The simulation footage you've shown us is extremely good publicity. He's jovial, he jokes, he raps... he's incredibly fast! How does he do it?"

"Ask Boulder Pi," the Kansler smiled. "Our wizard of cyborg science."

"Thank you, Kansler," said Boulder. "Now, about this P.R. tour I'd like to give some advice..."

Argus wasn't consulted. After all, he was property.

Chapter 11: The People's Cyborg

And so, with Argus's training program finished, the Kansler and Argus took a shuttle down to Earth for a week-long propaganda tour. Their

arrival was preceded by a cleverly designed teaser campaign that increased the public's interest to a fever pitch. At the time of the new warrior's physical visit to Earth, even two-year-olds spontaneously said "Ar-gus!" when they saw the image of a masculine black silhouette with a yellow stripe.

The Marketing Department of the Terran Fleet provided the Kansler with various accessories for his rare public appearances. And his most elaborate, expensive accessory was - the Cute Squad. Being the end-product of a long tradition of children handing flower bouquets to powerful criminals, the Cute Squad consisted of 200 genetically engineered midgets - each chemically kept in a perpetual state of childhood. A typical Cute had shiny eyes the size of tennis balls with five-inch eyelashes, garishly yellow hair, a pastel-hued skirt and an enormous sash. The sash was often made of starched fabrics so as not to get dragged along the ground - and, in case it was very long, was carried along in the jaws of a furry, pink robot puppy. The crowds adored the Cutes, who made millions in PP every time they appeared in public.

For the official arrival of Argus, the Cute Squad had trained its very best performers, and grown the largest flowers ever used. The Kansler checked every detail of the ceremonial preparations during shuttle transit - until his deputy officer advised him to rest. Reluctantly, the Kansler took a sleep-drug and spent the remainder of the flight in a state of unconsciousness. Even so, his sleeping body twisted with fits of anxiety, and he had nightmares of fiasco and humiliation. There was one, ultimate control measure he could use if Argus still proved unreliable... but which would signal failure, if the public ever found out.

Argus himself sat awake, when not slumbering, in his flight cabin, watching the news channels, and made a search for boxing matches. He searched the public network for his old gym, and got a street-camera image of the place where it had been.

The gym, he saw, was rapidly being torn down; a team of robots and pygmy chimps were disassembling the pieces to carry them off. Gangs of pygmy chimps, a growing social problem, built their own slum houses from such scavenged house parts. No one knew how it had happened (the greenhouse effect was widely blamed), but in recent decades the Bonobo chimpanzee had evolved enough to function in a human society. The species spread from Africa to the Orient and Europe... without acquiring full recognition of human rights. The Bonobi bred quickly and their numbers were rising rapidly - but they lived short lives, abused by shady human employers and exploiters.

A transparent hologram was projected onto the new construction site, showing the Giant Panda's Final Resting Grounds branch that was to be built there. On top of its flat roof sat a huge robotic panda-bear, waving at passing pedestrians and air-traffic, and called benevolently: "COME REST WITH ME!" Argus winced at the panda image, switched off the display plate, and sat watching the view of space through a porthole in the shuttle. He spent some time fantasizing about getting in touch with people he knew, once he got back to Earth. But every imaginary scenario ended the same way... the friend/relative/mistress screaming: "But you're dead! We saw your corpse at the funeral! This can't be you!" and fleeing in horror. All that remained was duty.

Biting his knuckles, Argus thought: God, I miss my dog...

A flashing warning signal went off in the corner of his vision: RELEASE TEETH! Almost too late, Argus noticed he had nearly bit a hole in his own artificial hand. The dent began to repair itself automatically. He thought: Duty. Have to remember that. Mustn't disappoint the people back home. Even if I fail as a pilot, they need the encouragement. Mother Earth. Our home. My home...

Under heavy military escort, the Kansler's shuttle landed on Manhattan Spaceport. After the devastating Greenhouse Floods of the last century, the entire evacuated island had been converted into runways and launchpads; the Terran Fleet owned Manhattan with its launchpad towers, magnetic accelerator tracks and towering cargo shuttles.

The shuttle's landing pad was surrounded by 2,000 armed soldiers and a few hundred guard robots, plus the Venusian Symphony Orchestra on a podium. The moment the craft had settled, the 200-man orchestra played up the planetary anthem, "One Earth". The 2,000 Terran soldiers sang along in solemn unison - a tune created in the previous century by the World Council, after the big floods:

"Green and blue, white and brown, Colors of our Mother Earth, For all peoples home and hearth, How we love you, Mother Earth, To the ends of time! From your bosom, all life sprung, You are always lush and young, We will protect you, We will cherish you, To the ends of time..."

The civilian crowds were being kept at a respectful distance, while giving the Manhattan Traffic Control a logistic nightmare. Thousands of small flight-pods were buzzing about the restricted military area, trying to get a close peek at the proceedings. As the anthem ended, the Kansler stepped out of the shuttle, cheered on by the rows of soldiers. The color-camouflage of their uniforms had been programmed, so that seen from the air their ranks formed images - of the Kansler's face, of Earth, and of Argus. Naturally, Argus couldn't see this from where he stood behind the Kansler. All he saw were row upon row of cheering soldiers, and he wanted to hide away. He felt like a total fraud; he wasn't worthy of this welcome.

The Kansler smiled and waved at the crowds, reveling in the moment. He hadn't done this kind of stunt in some time, and he still loved it. How much easier it was, he reflected, to deal with other people when they were but dots in a mass - a dough - that he could knead into what he wanted. Masses of people always reminded him of minced meat lying in the open...

"Good morning, soldiers!" he shouted in a steely voice to the many floating cameras. A collective rumble from the ranks came in reply. As it died down he added: "This is a great day to be a soldier and citizen of Mother Earth!"

He made a feint of sudden emotion, fell to his knees and kissed the ground. On that cue, the Cute Squad rushed forth to greet him. Not one, but ten Cutes, all grotesquely large-eyed, crowded around him, carrying flower bouquets that were twice their height. Each bouquet contained ten chromo-roses, two feet wide, in various colors. The Kansler grinned benevolently as the midgets dropped their load at his jackbooted feet, then hugged and kissed each of them in turn. The most talented Cute shed large tears and whispered her undying love into his ear - perfectly timed so that all the cameras would capture it. The Kansler wiped away a tear from the corner of his eye, waving at the Cutes who ran away, and addressed the troops again. The cam-bots carried his voice to every corner of the Earth.

"Yes, it is a great day! For I bring with me, back from the training camp, the man the Jovians couldn't kill - the great hero who volunteered to become the ultimate defender of the Earth! Welcome back to the homeworld, Colonel Haruman Clarke - now known as ARGUS-A!"

The Kansler turned to greet Argus... who remained in the doorway of the shuttle, paralyzed with anxiety. The deputy officer gave Argus a light forward push, and the black-clad cyborg took a hesitant few steps out onto the ground.

All around him, masses of soldiers fell silent. Argus saw thousands of pairs of eyes focus on him - and his artificial eyes actually saw each and every one of them in the clear daylight. Then he remembered his

script. He made a salute, not too strict, and gave the other soldiers a steely gaze. Hesitating only a moment, all the 2,000 men and women returned the salute with their hands. Argus let his eyes zoom in on each and every one of them in a single sweep. So many of them had the kind of face he used to recognize on the panel-cleaning shift, in the boxing gym, or in the below-5,000 PP outback where he grew up. It could have been any of you guys, Argus thought to himself. Any of you could have been in my place. Don't - don't look at me like I was some kind of weird thing.

The Kansler turned to watch Argus, waiting impatiently for the speech he was supposed to make. A cam-bot hovered around his head and flashed a message: READY, COLONEL. He had the speech perfectly memorized. Lots of high-minded, noble-sounding stuff about honor, solemn duty, Mother Earth, courage in the face of danger, declarations of friendly loyalty to the Kansler... a committee had written it. But there and then, by some newly acquired confidence or understanding, Argus knew the prepared speech would ring false. Without thinking clearly of why he did it, Argus briskly walked off the welcoming carpet and toward the nearest row of soldiers. The Cute Squad stood alert, waiting for the Kansler's sign to charge ahead of Argus and distract him. The Kansler held his breath, and let Argus walk... a wild gamble, but not any worse than losing face by trying to stop him.

Argus focused on the soldier who looked the least frightened, and walked up to face him from a few feet away.

"Morning, soldier. How's it going?"

The private was too perplexed to make a reply. Argus had no desire to play-act officer. He offered to shake hands. The young private looked nervously to the platoon sergeant, who glared at Argus, then shouted at the row of soldiers.

"Companyyy - at eeease!!"

Argus shook hands with the soldier and asked him his name.

"Xian-Johnson, Colonel, sir. Lenny Xian-Johnson."

"Just call me Argus. Kinda dumb, but the brass stuck to it."

Very quickly, the whole platoon crowded in to shake hands with Argus, and another platoon looked to join in. His arrival was a success, the Kansler saw - and also understood that Argus's presence easily stole his show. The Kansler had to suppress his surging rage, and managed to smile and wave. His carefully crafted image did not allow him to mingle with lowly privates and civilians - the persona he had chosen was that of the devoted guardian and father figure, always present but lofty and distant. It annoyed him that Argus instinctively had chosen an opposite persona - the folksy Everyman.

And the Kansler thought: I smell disobedience. Individualism. Rebellion. He - it - must be taught a lesson. Not now. I must choose a better time. Soon you'll learn what you are, cyborg - property.

The Fleet's Intelligence Department monitored Argus's doings and sayings closely, ready to jam the public channels if he should happen to stray too far from the script. After a few minutes, the Kansler gave a com-link command that sent the guard robots to escort Argus away from the soldiers. The cyborg made only symbolic attempts to linger with the soldiers, and followed the escort without trouble. He walked after the Kansler and his deputy, across the carpet and into a tunnel that led to the spaceport's underground complex.

"Kansler... how did it go?" he asked tentatively. For such a big man, he struck the Kansler as an overgrown child, pleading for fatherly approval. Excellent, thought the Kansler. Just as I thought, he's become conditioned to looking up to me.

"Just fine, Colonel Clarke," the Fleet's commander replied without looking back. "You're much more relaxed around the soldiers now, than you used to be."

"Yeah... thanks, Kansler..." Argus mumbled. "Permission to speak

freely, Kansler."

"Yes?"

"I... I have trouble recalling things... aren't there old colleagues I ought to visit here, or... um... would you recommend I didn't see them, the way I look now?"

"You should know, Colonel. You have no friends, neither here nor on Earth. Your personal aide, he flew your shuttle on your last Earthbound visit - and he died when it crashed in Kuwait."

"Yeah, of course. But... you see, Kansler... there's this lady I met once, and..."

Stopping in his tracks, the Kansler turned toward the taller cyborg and raised an eyebrow.

"I have misjudged you, Clarke! During your previous career in the Fleet, you never struck me as... particularly interested in women. Or anything else. I always admired your single-mindedness, that devotion to your work."

Argus tried to swallow, but couldn't. His new body was not built for it.

"Well, you know me, Kansler. Duty comes first..."

"Precisely. Now come here, and let us prepare for the first stop on the publicity tour. We can't keep the Marketing Department waiting all day."

In the remaining minutes of their walk toward the local Marketing office, Argus had plenty of time to think over the meaning of the Kansler's last remarks. What the hell was that all about? The dead man that Gus Thorsen had replaced having no friends, no significant others... and in hindsight it seemed only slightly odder, that no one had mentioned Clarke's biological relatives. Maybe, Argus speculated, Clarke had been one of the many clones born and then rejected by a fickle parent... poor bastard might well have been raised by robots, just like Gus Thorsen's girlfriend Benazir. Such embarrassing details were of course glossed over in the official files - yes, that could be it. No one ever boasted of being "floor polish" - the slang term for discarded clones...

A new curiosity awakened in Argus; he wished he had known the total stranger whose identity he had assumed. He recalled that Clarke had been quite visible on the public networks shortly before the plane crash that killed him - a sort of poster-boy for the Fleet, being groomed for promotion, no doubt, and that Argus Project. But who was Clarke? A career-obsessed loner? Or just a nobody like Gus Thorsen, hand-picked to become a cyborg soldier? What if Clarke might somehow be connected to his own previous life? If their superficial likeness was more than coincidental... no, he thought, it sounded too far-fetched, like that soap-opera series where a group of identical clones were brought up separately. And so he dismissed the idea.

Through the rest of the day, while busy with the work at hand, a nagging sense of having lost an unknown brother refused to leave his mind...

"Wheee! Please lift us again, Argus!" the little boy shouted happily.

"Sure! Hold on, people."

The group of twenty people grabbed hold again. Argus walked into the pit below the platform upon which they stood, and lifted the platform on his arms a second time. A load of more than three tons, and the strain upon his limbs was almost nothing. The crowds around them applauded and took pictures.

For another three times he made the trick, until the Kansler's deputy reminded him of their tight schedule. As he entered the waiting shuttle to take him to the next public appearance, Argus waved at the crowds and shouted the lines from his script.

"Remember, we're all in this together!" - "Earth needs your support!" -

"Click a hit or two to cheer up our boys out there!" - "Click war bonds!"

Well inside the shuttle and taking off, Argus let out a sigh.

"How many left? Wait, I know - fifty-six appearances across all time-zones, eleven left. I almost miss having to sleep every night..."

The deputy yawned, and replied: "I wish I were you, Colonel. It must be great, never to get tired..."

"Heh... who says I can't get tired?"

He looked out the window, at the hologram being projected on the clouds: a large animated image of himself, and the enormous text HE'LL FIGHT FOR US - HE'S OUR 'GUS! Argus told himself that the chill he felt running down his spine was just another ghost reflex.

"Are you all right, sir?" asked the deputy. "Excuse me for saying it, but your face..."

"What about it?" Argus asked; when the deputy held up a mirror, he saw. "I look... older."

He pressed his fingertips against his artificial forehead, and wondered if he could just smooth out the new worry lines with sheer brute strength. He looked to the deputy, whose younger face expressed some concern.

"How did you get to become the Kansler's deputy, Islington? Don't take it the wrong way - just curious."

The deputy, a captain of unassuming countenance and gifted with the ability to make himself invisible to the attention of others, shrugged. Only a cyborg with the hyper-sharp senses of Argus-A would have noticed the movement of his shoulders.

"I... well, I... guess I happened to fit the criteria of a deputy, sir. Loyal, stable, diligent without being ambitious. That's Fleet efficiency, sir - every man in his right place, working together for Mother Earth."

"Have you got a family?"

"Why certainly, sir. I talk to them every day. You want to see their pictures? My youngest one became four years old last week. Gave him a... you'll laugh at this... an Argus-A action figure, fully voice-controlled, runs on solar cells just like you! In fact, those toys share some components with your design... ah... apart from your mind, of course..."

"Tell the Kansler I need some shore leave, and soon. Need it badly."

It was as if the crowds were draining him of life. The more he repeated the same phrases to the people out there, assuring them that he was "just one of the guys", the more it sounded like a lie. And he could hear every word uttered in the crowd, even the less nice ones. More than once, he had snapped up a stray comment like: "...the poor man, putting up a brave face despite what's become of him..." or even: "...cybernetic freak..."

Shortly, the Kansler called from Manhattan Spaceport; Islington informed him of Argus's request.

"You do look a little weary, Argus. What do you say about a shore leave. I hereby abort the remainder of the tour schedule for your part, and let the rest of the tour be done by Marketing's lookalikes and holograms."

"Thank you, Kansler. I really appreciate it. About my shore leave... where can I go, now that everyone recognizes my face? The Moon?"

Upon hearing the words "everyone recognizes my face" and "the Moon", a quick streak of worry passed across the Kansler's middle-aged, potato-nosed face. Then he smiled, too much so.

"We have thought of everything! In fact, I fixed a little reward for you, after all you've done so far... the Fleet takes care of its own. The entire leisure district of Old Copenhagen has been electronically secured, so that you may spend the whole day and night there - and it's 100% cam-free!"

"No cameras? How is that possible?"

"War produces new technologies, Argus. Some of which are yet classified. Let's just say it involves satellites, fine lasers and interference patterns. No matter who tries to shoot a still picture or movie of you, the image will be scrambled out of all recognition. Just be careful what you say."

"I don't deserve this attention."

"We invested so much in you, you deserve something in return. It's all for Mother Earth, Argus."

Nodding mutely, Argus thought that he hadn't felt real dirt, grass or anything smacking of "Mother Earth" ever since he became a cyborg. He wanted to roll around in the grass again, throw a frisbee to a dog, dance with a woman, smell her hair... have a son.

"You're a lucky man, Islington."

"Thank you, Colonel."

Chapter 12: A Night in Copenhagen

A day later, Argus was sent on shore leave in Old Copenhagen.

This lowland coastal city had, miraculously, managed to preserve some of its old architecture when the Greenhouse Floods struck in the 21st Century. The big amusement park Tivoli, with its quaint old houses and creaking mechanical rides, still existed - though a newer section had been added to the park, with more current amusement technology.

All other soldiers and pilots had been evacuated from the area, apart from agents in uniform, keeping the area under surveillance - this Argus was told of in advance, so that he would not waste time mingling with the agents. The Fleet gave him a large credit and instructed him to wear his uniform and overcoat at all times, always claim to be a lookalike, and not cause bad publicity. Apart from that, he had carte blanche to do as he pleased. They dropped him off a truck and he was on his own. Argus looked away from the small group of uniformed agents in the street, and walked off...

Something had changed about Earth, Argus thought. Or his eyes had...

The streets and buildings seemed not so smooth as they used to. Cracks and dust were in every corner. The faces of people seemed older, fatter. The smells were different too - even if his sense of smell wasn't improved, he noticed that he himself didn't smell as much as... all other people. And the sounds... much sharper, edgier, the constant talking flowing through his head like a torrent of voices. As Argus strolled through the narrow alley, a pygmy-chimp in a wheelchair rolled up next to him, and tugged at his sleeve.

"Got some spare PP for a poor ex-gladiator?" the chimp's voice-box asked in an almost human tone. Argus looked down at the poor creature's dark, pleading round eyes. It was a male, its face permanently battle-scarred. He pressed his thumb against the chimp's smart-card and transferred a few thousand points to his account. "Thank you very much," the voice-box said formally - and the chimp actually grinned with joy. "Hey," the ape added, and its smile died, "You... smell... plastic. Sorry."

Argus patted the chimp's hairy, thin shoulder and walked on. His uniform itched. "Frictionless", the Fleet people had called it, but he had to restrain himself to avoid scratching his back and shoulders. The first excuse he got to take it off, Argus promised himself, he'd never put the damned nuisance back on. Around the corner, from a slummy dance-house, came some music that made him curious. The cheap sheet-diode sign above the entrance read:

WEAR CLOTHES AND WE LET YOU IN

Walking into the brightly-lit joint, Argus found it had to be "old folks night" - the place was crammed with men and women who couldn't afford rejuvenation treatments, and were letting their bodies waste away. He hadn't seen that many wrinkled faces and sagging bosoms since the charity boxing-match in a retirement home for people past 150... six years ago.

"Please hang up your coat, sir," said the aging lady in the wardrobe, a laconic fast-talker. "Dress code, you know. 18th-century 'retro' night. Please pick a costume. Hey, pick a skirt if you like."

"Heh... none of those costumes are large enough for me. Just came from an Argus theme party. Is it okay if I keep my costume on?"

He opened his shirt to reveal the naked, ink-black cyborg body. The wrinkled wardrobe lady gave him an appreciative long look, and nodded at him to enter.

"Tell the DJ I'm just dressed up," he added to be sure, and blew the old lady a kiss. "Thanks."

Cautiously, having left his clothes in the wardrobe, he made his way into the bar, trying to look casual among the crowds of elderly customers. One couple, seeing him, laughed and asked to have their picture taken with him. He hesitated, but their enthusiasm was contagious. He put his arms around their shoulders, and the couple's PA robot, an old-fashioned floating ball, shot a few pictures. They thanked Argus, and complemented him for his convincing costume.

"Click war bonds!" Argus said in an overt parody of his own PR tour, and left the couple, hearing them argue over how to get the picture properly on their small wrist panels.

"You must have set the focus again. I told you a thousand times, Ray, honey: don't fiddle with the focus!"

"I didn't touch the farking focus! Farking cam's broken or something. See? It's all static."

This is too weird by half, Argus thought. What am I doing here, all naked among these dirt-poor, dressed-up prunefaces? Don't even know how to dance a "minute", minuet, whatever...

A loud voice over the speaker system interrupted Argus's thoughts: the DJ, from his overhead booth, had noticed his presence.

"I have a message to the man in the Argus costume: Sir, this is 18th-century theme night. But since you and the lady in the bodysuit make such a nice match, we'll make an exception, just for the two of you. Ladies and gentlemen, leave some space on the dance-floor for tonight's young couple!"

A spotlight on the dance-floor answered Argus's unspoken question. The orderly minuet-dancing crowd parted like a zipper, and he saw her - dancing alone in the crowd. Almost in an instant, he knew it had to be her. He switched to infrared vision, and knew.

Venix. The name that matched his search.

Her shape, appearance and movements were exquisitely sensual. The "bodysuit", that revealed her every shapely form, he recognized as identical to his artificial skin - and it was matt white. A thick black stripe ran from her neck, down between her legs, and continued up her spine. The white "bodysuit" covered all of her, up to and including her neck; only her head and hands were completely lifelike and human. From her head flowed very long light-red hair, which seemed to float as it moved about her face - he couldn't understand how it was done, but the hair framed her cheekbones in the most enchanting way. The finely shaped feet, also seemingly clad in white, though thinner than his, were so strong that she supported herself almost completely on her toes, like a ballet dancer with toes of steel.

Like him, or so he perceived, her body contained no flesh and blood; yet her movements were so natural, the turning of her hips and limbs so graceful, she struck him as more human than he was. In a moment, their eyes met across the room - she stopped dancing and froze still, one arm

enveloping her torso, the other curved above her head. Her light-blue eyes widened in surprise, and her oval face made such a vulnerable expression, that his first thought was he should rush forth and cradle her in his arms.

His next impulse was to walk up to her, and offer her his hand; so he did.

"May I have this dance?" he asked, feeling like an awkward youngster again.

"You... you're..." she said, her voice throaty and light, and she gestured to touch him, as if to make sure he was the "real" Argus.

"Yeah, yeah. Come on, let's dance."

Argus grasped Venix' free hand, feeling its warmth, and locked eyes with her. Her mouth remained half-opened for a moment; then she smiled, and reached for his other hand. The wardrobe lady, standing in the DJ's booth, urged the DJ to play something faster.

"I only play oldies tonight," he objected petulantly, crossing his arms. "No blimdub, no Venusian trance. That's my final word."

"At least play late 20th century, floor polish! Something quaint with a beat."

She pointed out a song on the DJ's screen index, and he nodded.

"All right, happy people," the DJ announced in his smarmiest tone.

"We're making a brief jump two centuries ahead, to when our great-great-grandfathers grooved to the likes of this - in 1990, the historic year when the First Cold War ended!"

Suddenly, a high-pitched, rich female voice shouted through the room, a command to action:

"EVERY-BODY DANCE NOW!"

The aged men and women, in their plush 18th-century costumes, needed only that command to get into the music. Venix took a step away from Argus, and struck a challenging pose with one hand on her hip. Argus thanked his superhuman speed for the precious microseconds he needed, to grasp the rhythm of the song.

They started dancing rapidly, and to their mutual, joyful amazement, they both found the right pace on their first attempt. In his previous existence as flesh, Gus Thorsen was able to dance in the boxing ring but not so well outside it. He watched his feet carefully, so as not to flatten Venix' toes. He needed not worry, though, for Venix was just as careful - she had seen his public appearances, and knew what those feet could do.

The cyborg couple moved nearer each other, teasingly, until their bodies almost touched, and Argus let Venix take the initiative at first. She retreated a bit, and performed a potpourri of popular dance steps in one minute: swing, polka, twist, flamenco, break-dance, blimdub, Venusian trance. Argus was enchanted by her swiftness and grace, and forgot his insecurity. He offered her his hand, she took it with a smile and a firm hold, but he dared not close his grip around it, not yet. Beginning with some standard steps, then speeding up slightly, he showed that he could lead her in a closer stance without breaking anything. Step by step, he grew less stiff, nudged closer still...

The music continued, just as intense, the beat no less commanding, and the couple got bolder. Like some super-strong ballet dancer, Argus lifted Venix by her hips on straight arms, and spun around, so that her red hair fanned out. She giggled uncontrollably. Then, when she tapped on his hands to make him put her down, he obeyed - and she surprised him yet again. Venix made a series of back-flips across the open dance-floor, ended with a snappy pirouette, took a springy leap up in the air and flew back into his arms in a somersault. He caught her in his outstretched arms, and juggled her a few times around his waistline - all the while she stretched out, stiff-backed, and let herself be a cog against his hard torso. Soft on the surface, her muscles were just as

responsive and steel-hard as his beneath the cushioning skin and tissue that mimicked female flesh. Argus lifted her up in the air again, tossed her up a few meters - Venix shrieked - and caught her perfectly as she fell down. They froze in a still embrace, as the other guests applauded and whistled. One disgruntled elderly man did not.

"Farking typical! They put up that kinda show, and not one of my cameras work! Fark it!"

"Oh do shut up, Ray, honey."

Chapter 13: Young Cyborgs in Love

While the crowd was still applauding and cheering furiously, Argus and Venix withdrew from the dance-floor. The wardrobe lady urged them to take the back exit from her office.

"Good luck, the both of you. Seeing you up there made me feel fifty years younger."

With a smile, she shut the door after them, and they found themselves in a dark back-alley. A nearby flight of stairs led to a rooftop, five floors up.

"Come," he suggested, "let's go up and look at the sea."

They quickly ascended the stairs, and a panorama of the old city opened up to their view. Not far off, the Oresund strait glittered with reflected light. Visible to the naked eye, the lights of the flat Swedish coastline lay along the horizon. The old bridge across the strait was a pearl-string of multicolored spotlights, illuminating the waters with blue, green, and red.

"It's beautiful," Venix said, then slowly turned to face him.

"You are beautiful," he told her in a low voice. He nudged closer, but hesitated to touch her; this was not the dance-floor, and he didn't know the rules anymore. "I never imagined there could be someone like you."

"I was so lonely all these years," she said, almost whispering. "I waited for them to create another one like me."

"You knew I was being created?"

"Not really. They told me nothing after I became... like this, but when I heard news that Boulder Pi was recruited by the military, I knew. I saw you on the broadcasts, waited, hoped..."

"I want you to know that -"

"Wait. Don't speak, not with words. Let me connect with you. Please."

She held up the palm of her left hand to him. She blinked, giving a mental command, and the cortex port opened in her hand. With great care, he put his palm against hers, then grew still and looked into her eyes.

"What is going to happen when we connect?" he asked.

"I don't know. I've given this a lot of thought. We are what we are. And time runs so slowly for me. I waited a very long subjective time for this. There has been no one... who could really see me. People of flesh, as soon as they come near me, think I'm not really living. I can feel it, see it. But with someone like me, someone like you, it could be different. Has to be."

"Maybe we'll hurt each other. There is so much inside my head. I may not be the man you imagined me to be. I'm not..." He went through a thousand expressions in two seconds. "... all pleasant."

"I can take it. Please alleviate this loneliness. I can show you... who I really am. What I truly feel."

The sight of her beautiful face, pleading, made his doubts vanish. With a mental command, Argus unlocked his cortex port and pressed his palm more firmly against hers. A small click, and they connected -

Argus lost his sense of eyesight. He found himself swimming in a sea... of indecipherable data, an all-encompassing flood of wave-patterns.

Somewhere, he heard Venix' voice: Help me find you! I can't see...

Hang in there...

He calmed down, breathed slower, and tried to align himself with the pulsing frequencies of the flowing data-stream. It didn't work; their minds were not tuned exactly alike. Argus felt an idea float into his consciousness, as if it had drifted by and clung to him like a leaf in a wind. This state of mind changed the way he perceived his own thoughts. The idea appeared to him as a waveform, in which the letters GET IN TUNE LIKE ON THE DANCE FLOOR AND MERGE undulated like sinus waves.

```
-----GET-----ON-----  
-----AND-----  ----IN-----LIKE-----THE-----FLOOR-----MERGE-----  
---TUNE-----DANCE-----  
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Try and think of the same thing as I, he called out into the void. It'll get us in tune with each other.

Yes. What?

I'm thinking of... an old song from that dance-house. Play it in your mind, in the right rhythm... 'Let's Dance'.

Venix thought of the song, its melancholy sequences and arresting tempo. And it worked - the torrential rain of information from Argus's brain began to assume a shape in her mind's eye. In the void, she saw his face emerge, as if the rest of him was submerged in shadow. Then Argus saw her face fade in too - also without a body.

He smiled at her, thinking that he wanted to touch her face - and with the thought, his hand materialized out of the void. It was his old hand - a flesh-and-blood one - and he could feel his heartbeat pulse through it. As he reached out toward Venix, her shoulder faded in where his hand touched. In this space of pure information, they could resurrect their former bodies - all of them. Venix floated closer in the void, and formed feet and hands of flesh. There was no ground to stand on; her legs, when they formed, tumbled slightly. Argus and Venix grabbed each other's hands, with human, not cyborg strength, and pulled their faces closer to each other. When Argus smelled the organic fragrance of her red, flowing hair, his entire body came back in full, with sweat, muscles and desire.

Man and woman embraced hard, and her complete form was soft and warm in his hands. He caressed her skin; she moaned out loud, and the void around them seemed to pulse with cascading waves of sensory data...

Falling through the unending streams of data-bits, they made love with their dreams of what could have been, one imaginary woman locked with one imaginary man. In the space of each objective second, they experienced minutes of complete communion. Did their time together last days, months, years? They could not, would not know...

They opened up each other's memories, good and bad, and learned who they were...

Venix' real name had been Venice Cherkessian, an unknown person before she was turned into a cyborg. She grew up in a colonial settlement on Venus, in moderate prosperity, before she was forced to move to Earth with her family. The transition from Venus to Earth caused her health to deteriorate, and she became a sickly teenager. Argus beheld her first memory of meeting Boulder Pi, nearly ten years ago: the man visited in the form of a hologram, while living on the Moon, before the colonial wars begun.

"Hello, Miss Cherkessian. Boulder Pi. Jovian, yes, I know. Having probs Earth-talk. Excuse me. Talking too fast? Yes. In speech-therapy... catch on slowly... call me a dumb foreigner. A joke. Heard the one about two Jovians who shared an Earthman's space-suit?"

Argus felt, experiencing this memory, what Venice Cherkessian had felt - pity, and just a little contempt. But that awkward little man, so lost

and full of self-loathing, was a cybernetic genius. He asked Venice to try out a new process that might save her life - the "N-Plastifier", which converted nervous tissue into semi-organic plastic, preserving the structure and mind while destroying the flesh. She understood that this might mean immortality - or possibly a kind of death. And though Venice had several caring friends and a decent PP index, she couldn't raise enough support to finance the risky process. Each passing month saw an increase in her dependence on expensive drugs to stay upright. She was forced to cease dancing, which only served to isolate her and make her feel worse.

After a year, Boulder's holo-presence returned to Venice with good news: he had found sponsors for his project. One was the military; the other, a fabulously rich tycoon who had followed Venice's case on the public networks and grown fond of her. Venice was twenty-two years old at this time. After much hesitation, she volunteered to travel to the Moon and undergo Boulder Pi's treatment. Venice didn't think of her life as particularly important; in her short lifetime, she had not yet accomplished much. The drive to survive was strong in her, and remained so, together with the sense of duty to her family and community.

The transformation, in her memory, was a blur of confused impressions and long periods of unconsciousness. But she came through - as a kind of half-finished android, an idealized form of the young woman she had been, that would never age further. Boulder Pi's budget had not allowed Venice to be entirely covered by the expensive artificial skin - so the white "bodysuit" became a permanent feature. Her new form was in other ways an improvement; several times stronger than flesh and blood, driven by pure energy. She remembered the aggravating clumsiness of her new body's first movements, the hard training to regain muscle control... and the triumphs of her re-conquered body. She too, had struggled of grasping a crystal glass without shattering it - and like Gus, she won.

Venice, now called "Venix", became an instant dancing sensation. For a brief few weeks, she seemed destined for interplanetary fame... when her world fell apart. The war preparations were in full swing, and the military began to claim she was partly their property. The benign tycoon who had sponsored half of her treatment died at an age of almost 200 years, and bequeathed one-third of his considerable estate to her. His relatives were furious.

A lengthy court battle ensued, ending in a devastating verdict: the court of the World Council could not decide upon Venix' legal status. Was she, it asked, a human being or just an artificial creation? Her inheritance was taken over to be "supervised" by the tycoon's relatives. The court case also generated a vicious smear campaign, which hit the Cherkessian family hard. Venix' popularity and PP index plummeted; she barely had time to pay for her family's journey back to the home planet, before she became stranded - broke - on Earth.

In the years that followed, Venix - her friends scared away by the rumors that she was not the "real" human being - became a freelancer, dancing for pathetic PP alms in small joints across the planet. In places such as Wear Clothes and We Let You In, the old and poor were moved by her dance and her strangely vulnerable face, and donated enough PP for her to support herself.

Argus moved through these touching memories, seeing all they had in common, almost became the woman he had fallen in love with, then retreated and became himself again. He opened up the doors of his mind and let Venix reach through the protective barriers he had erected, a defense of his soft inner core against the world, and exposed his memories to her inner eye. To Venix this was a new degree of intimacy, that no other being could provide: frightening and ecstatic, subtle and raw at once.

She could see in his mind what would never change, the essence of his identity: the fighter, the primitive man that still survived as a maze of electrical impulses in a network of plastic threads. He fought and hurt others in a struggle for glory, survival and self-control. The fight went on without pause, also within himself, as he fought his own desires, rages and frustrations. The boxing-ring of the mind was presided over by a referee that could never be seen, except by implication. Sometimes it might have the voice of Gus Thorsen's father, telling him what was right and wrong, sometimes the toad-like mouth of his stepmother, condemning him for being lazy... and sometimes the referee had the Kansler's uniform. The "ring" could be the dusty, dry Australian outback, or the crowded cities where he worked, or the boxing ring, or the gym in Kuwait. But it was always a fight, and the square of the ring and its implicit rules always defined the absolute borders of each memory...

Venix dived below the squared fighting space in the man's mind, and found something underneath: a large, sleeping Dalmatian. The lettering on the dog's collar read "Giddog". Next to the Dalmatian appeared a miniature replica of Venix, resting her head against the dog's back. And the dog's face turned into the likeness of Gus's face, with the broken nose. The apparition blurred, and Venix felt herself merge into it...

Their mutual feelings now transformed into a bond, stronger than anything else in their previous lives. They embraced across the streams of passing data, and became one ...

A warning-signal, repetitive and insistent, came on at the edges of their linked consciousness. Ignoring it, they kissed for another few subjective minutes. The signal persisted. Their flesh-and-blood shapes began to dissolve, glide apart...

A message blinked on Argus's internal display: NAVBUTLER LASER TRANSMISSION... ARGUS, YOU ARE BEING SURROUNDED BY ROBOT UNITS. SUGGEST EXIT ROUTE?

Argus instinctively withdrew his cortex port and closed it. He was back in the real world, in his synthetic form, and felt the mild, salty breeze from the strait blow at their bodies. With a guilty glance to Venix' frightened face, he responded: YES.

NAVBUTLER SUGGESTION: TAKE NW ROUTE THROUGH RIVER. YOU ARE INSULATED AND WATERPROOF... VENIX ALSO.

Without a word Argus lifted Venix in his arms as if she was a feather, took a five-meter leap over to the next rooftop, and dived feet-first the five floors down, into the murky channel waters. The two cyborgs plunged into the dark channel - and sank like rocks to the bottom, twelve feet down. Argus tugged at Venix' arm and they began to kick with their feet, swimming in unison rhythm.

On the channel's surface, several floating leisure-gondolas and restaurants were slowly cruising through old Copenhagen. The deck of a small bar, the Dannebrog Kro, was going through a slow night with only a few drinking guests. One of them, a Fleet agent dressed up as Private Krautkopf on leave, watched the passing houses and streets.

"Looking for something?" asked the bartender - a human being - while mixing drinks for a couple sitting next to Krautkopf.

"Looking for some action," Krautkopf said with a knowing grin, and added: "Say, did you hear a splash?"

As he held his beer-glass to his lips, a powerful surge cut along the channel. It passed below the floating bar with the speed of a passing ground car, and the entire platform lurched. Krautkopf's beer splashed up into his face.

He sent an urgent message with the thought-controlled radio inside his cap: "I think target just passed my position.... Send squad to mouth of channel..."

Four street blocks and one minute later, Argus and Venix climbed up from the filthy channel and sneaked into an alley. The water dripped right off them, for their hair and skin was unable to absorb any. The channel mouth and the sea were close - and closely guarded. They both knew what they had to, and hugged each other.

"I'll come back for you," he said into her human-looking ear. It occurred to him that no woman would ever be able to kiss him in the ear again, the way he had enjoyed in his previous existence. Except for Venix, when they were connected.

"When?"

"Couple of months, maybe... if they ask about me, what'll you tell them?"

"I'll tell them that what's going on between the two of us is none of the military's damned business."

They kissed - with soft lips and dry, smooth plastic tongues, neither having saliva glands. And they separated, trying to make each microsecond feel longer, and darted off in opposite directions. No further discussion was needed; in their melding of minds, the two cyborgs had exchanged enough thoughts to last a long time. Both were aware of the risks of being exposed by the Fleet's propaganda machine, or simply by an invasion of privacy.

Argus, possessing much greater strength by design, ran to a dead end, braced himself, and took a tremendous leap up against a thirty-foot brick wall. He caught hold of a parapet - it crumbled in his hands - and heaved himself up onto the rooftop. From there, he could glimpse the white and red shape of Venix, running away into a house. Argus suddenly felt weak; he clutched at his ink-black chest; his nervous system must be playing tricks with him again. No, something was not right. He scanned the house that Venix had escaped into a second time, in the entire spectrum, and focused his hearing apparatus on the house's darkened windows. Bits of noises and voices came through, with a distinct character. It could only mean one thing. For a fraction of a second, Argus considered his options.

He ran toward the edge of the roof, took a long jump across the street and into the open canal, facing the house on the other side. With another power leap, he flew up from the waters and onto the street, sprung into a charge, and smashed right through the door. In the time it took a normal man to blink, he saw what was happening inside.

Not once did Venix cry for help; she was trying to escape on her own, when Argus crashed into the large room.

Less than half a minute earlier, having parted ways with Argus, Venix rushed into what seemed like an abandoned building. Every street-level block of Old Copenhagen had Fleet robots and intelligence officers posted inside. The moment she sneaked into the large, empty warehouse, guard robots rushed out of hiding and blocked all exits.

The Fleet's standardized, multi-purpose guard robot possessed the intelligence of a trained dog. It was as loyal to any Fleet officer as a dog to its master. While usually not programmed to kill, a guard drone knew more than 100 ways of stunning, injuring, or incapacitating a human being. The machine generally measured about six feet in height, and walked on two clunky, clawed feet with a great amount of noise. When not in active duty, it rolled around on small wheels. Its gray plastic-and-aluminum hull could withstand some laser fire and small explosions, and sported a dozen slits and portholes from which various eyes and arms protruded. The guard robot mostly resembled a rotund, enormous Swiss Army Knife on legs.

Before Venix could run back the way she came, the reinforced front door was slammed shut and locked. In the gloom, strong spotlights from eight robots lit up in her face. She was only briefly blinded; with a quick

mental command, she set the light-sensitivity of her artificial eyes down and switched to ultraviolet vision. The eight guard robots became audible to her as they began to march with the speed of a running man; Venix could not run as fast as Argus, and was surrounded in seconds. She didn't speak, nor did her breathing reflexes increase. All she needed to do, she knew, was to distract these goons until Argus could get away from the prying eyes of the Fleet's agents. Thirty padded metal arms stretched and elongated out to grab her. She took a high jump into the air, and got hold of a rusty iron beam. She heaved her weight onto the old beam, and stood up. It immediately began to bend under the weight of her metal skeleton and electromagnetic muscles. Balancing without difficulty on the creaking beam, Venix paced toward the wall, just thirty feet away...

The robots shot out taser-hooks, and sent several hundred volts through the beam. Venix felt a prickling sensation; her artificial skin and hull insulated her internal workings almost perfectly. In one second, her hands could almost touch the wall... and were held back. The drones hosed riot-foam - a transparent stream of superglue bubbles that glued her feet to the beam, and the foam dried almost instantly. She lost her balance, fell over and hung by her feet from the bent beam. Still struggling to buy time for her lover, Venix bent forward and writhed to get free.

A letter display on a robot's face plate thrust out on a telescopic arm and flashed a series of warnings to her: STOP. YOU ARE UNDER ARREST. FLEET POLICE AUTHORITY. SURRENDER. BE QUIET. YOU ARE BREAKING THE LAW. AWAIT INTERROGATION BY FLEET OFFICIAL.

She reached out at one of the padded robot arms, and pulled with all that she got. The machine was very strong, but easily fooled - when she suddenly pulled in the other direction, it tumbled to the side, clanking into a second drone that also fell over. Suddenly, a dozen robot arms pinned her down, and sent multiple electric shocks through her, overriding the insulation. She began to really feel the impact, and shook in a spasm -

Argus came flying through the front door, feet first, smashing its hinges like tinfoil. In a second, he was lunging at the large drones surrounding the twisting Venix. He grabbed the largest drone with both his arms, and emitting a furious grunt he threw it back over his head - into the smashed doorway, where it crunched stuck like a cork. The other nine guard robots turned to meet Argus with taser-rods, riot-foam and brute mechanical force - in the space of a few moments, he ripped several of them apart.

The flashing messages on the robot screens rapidly changed: STOP. STOP. HELP. TAKE ME TO A REPAIR CENTER. POWER FAILURE. LOSS OF ARMS, LEGS. HELP.

The remaining two robots ran away into corners, shooting riot-foam in all directions. By simply moving very fast and shaking himself, Argus shrugged off the glue-bubbles before they stuck on his black hide. He leaped up, pulled down the beam so that the hanging Venix could reach the floor, and pulled her free of the superglue. She hugged him, even then knowing he should not have returned, but loving him still more.

"Please run. You must."

"No more running away," he said tersely. "We're still human beings. We have rights. Time to let them hear it." A flying tank crashed in through the front entrance, shoving the smashed-up robots aside. Venus made a move to retreat, but Argus held her close. "This abuse must end," he said, loudly enough for the men in the tank to pick up through its sensors. "I will not allow her to be treated this way in my absence."

A familiarly accented voice came from the tank's door as it opened and soldiers spilled out: "You disappoint me, you two. I arranged for you to meet, as a reward for your work and loyalty. We cannot have obstinacy in the Fleet's elite, Argus. Time to remind you who created you... and who

commands you."

Abruptly, Venix felt Argus go limp; she gasped in terror as he slumped down on the floor as if dead; a few snapping noises came from his limbs as the major electric circuits in his cyborg body shut down.

She knelt down, caressed his paralyzed face, and pleaded: "Gus? Speak to me! Please..."

"He can hear you, Venix," said the voice, and she glanced over her shoulder to see the Kansler appear in hologram form. She understood at once, how afraid the Kansler was of "his" creations, and he ought to be - she wanted to kill him with her bare hands.

"What've you done to him, you monster?"

"Just a simple shutdown of the major motor systems. It is only mildly painful... had I wanted him to suffer, I would have induced muscle cramps instead. Argus belongs to the Fleet, to his allegiance to Mother Earth. Argus, I know you can hear me. Don't fight us; fight the real enemy. Remember your duty. Remember that whatever harm comes to Earth, befalls Venix too... and she stays in protective custody, under Fleet guard, until you return from your first tour. She shall be watched over. No other human being shall touch her, that's a promise."

Through the paralysis, Argus stayed conscious, feeling Venix touch his face, hearing her pleas. He had let her down. And he hated the Kansler - who somehow knew a way of shutting him down by remote, and had presented a covert threat against Venix. It seemed to Argus as if he was regarding himself from outside; the squad of Fleet men in, and carried him and Venix away. He saw her being held by more robots, that pushed her into a personnel carrier in the street. Venus looked at him through the windshield as the craft took off, and he could read her lips forming the words "Love you" before she disappeared from view. Another, larger carrier landed on the canal to ship him off... into space, to the waiting flagship and its commander.

Chapter 14: Forward Top Speed

"This is your ship, Argus, sir, modified in accordance with the simulation results."

"It's smaller than I imagined. How much fuel can it hold?"

The flight-deck commander of the E.S.S. William Jefferson stood next to Argus, and consulted the datapanel in his own Fleet uniform.

"The ship's drive uses ionized deuterium pellets plus antimatter-hydrogen micro-pellets, that are fired by electromagnetic cannon into the reactor force-field... and the result comes out the main booster-rocket with an output efficiency of near one hundred percent. Damn near the most perfect propulsion-system in the universe. We're all damned impressed here... sir."

Glancing toward the Kansler, the flight-deck commander stepped back and let the Kansler forth, in the company of the flagship's First Admiral Sergei York. Here in space, with only soldiers and officers, the Kansler used no hologram presence. Or, Argus suspected, his taking Venix hostage on Earth had made the Kansler more confident. Even so, however much Argus had come to detest the man, he tried to concentrate on his mission. Perhaps understanding this, the Kansler kept himself more in the background than usual, and let the other officers talk for him.

York seemed a little pasty and out of shape next to the Kansler - most likely due to prolonged spaceflight, which took an inevitable toll on Earth-born bodies. York's eyes were prematurely aged, and scars dented his shiny, balding forehead where he had plugged into consoles far too many times.

"Colonel Clarke," said the admiral, saluting the tall, hulking cyborg, "welcome on board. We're honored to finally have you here among us. Your

personal ship has been worked over like you couldn't imagine, in order to get finished on time. All is set for your first test flight."

Argus walked past them all, and gazed into the hangar ceiling from which the ship was being lowered toward him. It really was rather small; his first impression had been correct. The cockpit section at the front, similar to his simulation capsule, took up almost one-fifth of the ship's total volume. The rest was all armor-plating, sleek flat surfaces, massive rear boosters and ominous-looking gunports.

And the whole ship's armor plating was painted white, with a garish red stripe running from nose to rear. On the top of the craft, intersecting the red stripe, was painted the seal of the Fleet and a red eagle silhouette stretching its wings across the seal... another "brilliant" design touch from the Kansler. Argus found this choice of color odd - all other military ships, including the flag ship wherein they stood, came in dull black stealth-paint. This little ship would stand out like a bright, flying sports car in any ordinary optic telescope. Flying this crazy thing must be like boxing Ali-style, Argus thought spontaneously: teasing the opponent to try and hit you, while letting your guard down. Two feet above the hangar floor, the ship stopped; Argus opened the side hatch and got into his pilot-seat.

"Nav?"

"Navbutler here," the familiar voice from the simulations responded quickly. "This is Terran Fleet craft F-3020, all systems ready for real-space test flight one."

"Right...."

On the pilot's com-link request, the traffic control personnel ordered the hangar to be evacuated; yellow warning lamps flashed everywhere. Dozens of crewmen in spacesuits scrambled out, and in a minute all atmosphere was pumped out of the hall. The rotation of the hangar section slowed down to a halt, so that the artificial gravity shut down. The floor below the suspended craft opened, slid away, and exposed black space outside. Argus could glimpse the stars - and in the distance, the Moon's far side facing the flagship. An accident now would not hit Earth, or not that hard, he thought, but he wasn't too sure about those living on the Moon...

"Argus to Control, requesting flight release for F-3020 Flight One."

"Yes, Argus, prepare for freefall. Moorings away."

The giant crane arms opened, and the white ship floated freely on the verge of the open hangar entrance.

"Argus to Control, do you recommend auto or manual takeoff?"

The Kansler's voice sounded over the Control com-link: "Recommend a slow manual exit. Slow and steady, Argus."

The cyborg felt his hands and feet tremble ever so little, as he moved them to activate the engines and force the retro-thrusters open. The ship turned around its center, the nose pointed out into open space, the rear boosters aimed at a blast-pad in the "ceiling". Gently, Argus nudged the ship outside, and let it float a few hundred meters. In the rearview display, he saw the flagship recede - slowly, for it was almost 400 meters long. From outside, this dreadnought showed nothing of its insides; the outer hull was an almost featureless dark-gray block of armor, shielding the 200-man crew against radiation, enemy attacks and the strain of G-forces.

And here he was, for real this time, in bottomless space. Argus was not used to weightlessness and his small ship could not hold a centrifuge for simulation of gravity.

"Relax your limbs," Navbutler suggested. "You are suffering a common psychological reaction to freefall."

"I'm cool. I'm so cool my butt freezes to the seat."

"Control to Argus, you ready to initiate the first test?"

The list of test missions appeared on the control display.

"Yeah, yeah, I mean yes, Control. Initiating first test... course

plotted... so-and-so many degrees off the ecliptic, target star: Alpha Centauri. If the Jovians are watching us now, they're in for a surprise..."

His ship felt very responsive and light; Argus noted that the control servo could be set as slow or fast as he wanted. If he just set off and kept accelerating, would the flagship be able to stop him? He could blast off and never return. Then again, what business had he on Alpha Centauri, without Venix? He prepared the antimatter reactor, and could feel a tingling of excitement grow in his limbs. Argus double-checked all the reactor and rocket-booster readings, and told Control that he was ready.

"Argus, engage prime booster, acceleration rate at 1 to 30 G, absolutely no higher."

"Yes. Engaging..."

It was strange to risk one's life with an untried ship, knowing that it wasn't flesh and blood that would get killed if it blew up. What was he supposed to feel? Risking an expensive investment? The pride of the Fleet? His life, his duty to "Mother Earth"? He could only think of one risk that mattered right then: if he failed, Venix would be alone again. Slowly, he stepped on the throttle lever and the large booster awakened. The rocket vibrations could be felt through the cockpit, despite the vibro-dampers canceling most of them out with counterwaves. Argus felt the G-force press him back into his padded seat - but that was all. No rush of blood to or from his brain - for not a drop of blood flowed through him, just some lubricant and coolant. He stepped harder, pushing the acceleration to 5, then 10 G. Still he felt clear-headed, but heavier. The stars in the black sky, being so incredibly distant, did not move at all.

But... a warning signal came from the radar panel. Thousands of kilometers ahead, objects ranging in size from 1 meter to 1 mile were crossing the ship's path.

"Alert - incoming small asteroid cluster." Navbutler activated the response menu.

SELECT DEFENSE MEASURES: 0. LASER SIGHT 1. STANDARD LASER, 5-10,000 C 2. GAMMA LASER, 10-100,000 C (WARNING! SLOW FIRING RATE) 3. LEYDENFROST SHIELD EMITTER (CANNOT DEFLECT LARGE DEBRIS) 4. MAGNETIC REPULSION FIELD (LIMITED USE) 5. PROTON CANNON 6. ANTIMATTER ION CANNON (DANGER! TARGET MUST BE OUT OF SAFETY RANGE 50,000 KM) 7. INFLATABLE HEAT SHIELD (RECOMM: ATMOSPHERIC RE-ENTRY) 8. ALUMINIUM BUBBLE DECOYS (LIMITED SUPPLY) 9. GUIDED MISSILES (LEFT: 2. RECOMM: LARGE TARGETS) 10. ELECTROMAGNETIC PULSE (WARNING: MAY DISABLE CRAFT) 11. DEUTERIUM BOMB (LEFT: 0) 12. SELF-DESTRUCT (NOT AUTHORIZED)

"Zero! Three! Four! Five!"

The hours spent in simulation training with Navbutler paid off; cyborg and computer program used their own private shorthand jargon.

Immediately, the shield appeared in the forward view. The Leydenfrost shield looked to him like two shimmering thin plumes of ejected smoke, spreading out ahead then outward like two vast transparent umbrellas. Normal human eyes could not discern the shield without artificial aid. The ship radar indicated that the ship passed through the outer part of the asteroid cluster; smaller particles were annihilated as they collided with the shield's ultra-thin spray of antimatter ions. At this speed and acceleration, even a grain of space dust could punch a hole in the craft's armor plating.

In the next second, the electromagnetic repulsion field powered up as Argus had ordered - the plume of the Leydenfrost shield was caught up in the field, shot out much further outward, and faded out of Argus's view. The radar showed the larger objects, only a second away from collision, and Argus fired the proton cannon, twice.

For the first time, he could actually see how fast he was flying. The

first asteroid to get hit, 1,000 kilometers ahead, exploded in a bright ball of white-hot gas and fragments. In a fraction of a second, the expanding cloud of gas engulfed the ship - and even though the fireball thinned out to almost nothing, the shield sparked and flickered, as particles were forced away or collided with the antimatter ions. Just as quickly, the fireworks around the ship ceased, and the cloud was gone, scattered into nothing. The ship was still accelerating at 10 G. Argus looked back, and he could not see the vast flag ship anymore. Behind him, the Moon and Earth had receded into two small balls, illuminated by an ever-so-slowly shrinking Sun. The view ahead was empty, except for the stars of the Milky Way and the bright Alpha Centauri straight ahead.

"Status?" he asked.

"Acceptable," Navbutler replied. "Suggest slight increase in acceleration?"

Argus just nodded, and carefully pushed the acceleration toward 20 times Earth's gravity. Now he was really getting to feel uncomfortable with the pressure of acceleration. This, he imagined, must be what it felt like for those unfortunate gas-miners in Jupiter's atmosphere, who occasionally were dragged down by freak storms, then crushed by gravity and pressure in the darker depths. The vibrations from the rocket booster ceased; the countermeasure had tuned itself perfectly. Minutes passed... or was it hours? His eyesight focus began to blur, and his eyes felt like they didn't quite fit into their sockets.

"Cyborg... status?" he asked in a strained voice.

"Maintain muscle strain to counter G-forces, Argus."

"And what if... I don't strain against... it?"

"Scenario: your structure will start to flatten into your pilot-seat, which will also become deformed around you. It might become necessary to cut you loose from the seat upon return to flag ship."

A vague sense of physical fatigue was starting to set in, and he couldn't quite tell if it was a ghost reflex or a genuine warning that his batteries ran low. Argus kept fighting the G-forces and blurring eyesight. And his head was still clear, only a little light. His sense of time was starting to feel slightly off-kilter: at merely a fraction of the speed of light, the minute effects of time-dilation affected his hyper-sharp senses. The light from outside the ship seemed just a hundredth of a degree warped; the radio and laser signals from the now so distant flagship became fainter, but played faster - just enough so he noticed. A low-level warning came up on his internal eye-display.

CAUTION: BODY TEMP RISING. PRESSURE IMBALANCE IN INTERNAL COOLANT LIQUID. CONTINUED OVERHEATING WILL DECREASE EFFICIENCY, CAUSE INTERNAL INJURY. ADJUST CABIN TEMP BY -50. CAUTION: INTERNAL POWER SUPPLY BELOW 20%. SUGGEST DIRECT FEED FROM SHIP.

At his strained command, The ship began to "feed" him energy directly through his skin, by exposing it to low-temperature ultraviolet light. The receptors in the ink-black "uniform" skin soaked up the power and replenished him; he thought he could sense the energy flowing into the superconductor rings in his abdomen.

"H o w f a r . . . f r o m f l a g s h i p o r b i t?"

"One million six hundred thousand kilometers and increasing. Our current course is now completely undetermined by the Sun's gravity. If we continue this course, the ship's fuel supply will be insufficient for successful turnaround. Navbutler strongly, strongly recommends: begin deceleration test and subsequent return to flag ship in a lunar orbit. Please decelerate with great, great care."

"O k a y . . . h e r e g o e s . . ."

He slowly, gently lowered, then killed the booster output. They were in freefall, still heading for another star at breathtaking speed - and weightless again. Argus again could move his limbs with his former ease. He rotated the ship so that it fell "backwards", and ignited the booster again with what he thought was modest force - a mistake, him grown used

to thinking in percentages instead of absolute force. And the absolute braking force hit him like a freight train. Less than 0.01 percentage of deceleration caused the ship to vibrate and rattle wildly; the vibro-dampers were too slow to catch up. Argus could feel the G-forces literally pulling at his face and eyeballs, as if someone was trying to pry his eyes out of their sockets. He shut his eyes as hard as he could, and decelerated still harder.

When the accumulated braking force was reaching 10 G he asked for reactor status, and feared the answer.

"Reactor core is barely stable. Pressure support, dampers and stabilizers at maximum. Extreme caution recommended."

The pilot obeyed Navbutler's voice of reason, and released some more foot pressure from the booster throttle; deceleration sank to 7 G, and the vibrations felt less likely to tear the ship apart. All time-dilation effects were gone.

"Control to F-3020 Flight One. Request status report!"

"Status hunky-dory, Control. Prepare to dock. I think I pushed this sports vehicle as far as it can go."

"Yes, Colonel. Are you ready for the next test?"

"As ready as I'll ever get."

Just about 72 hours had elapsed since he last saw Venix, in Old Copenhagen. The counter in the corner of his vision counted the lost days, hours, seconds and microseconds, as he had programmed it...

Chapter 15: Gilded Cage

A week in prison - even a large, luxurious one - can seem like a month to the prisoner.

To a cyborg like Venix, perceiving each second as a minute, a week in imprisonment passed like a year. She spent most of the time living in her memories... all of them as sharp and clear as living experience. It was a blessing and a curse - for the more vivid the memories of her one night with Gus, the more she missed him, and her longing increased far beyond what had been possible in her previous flesh-and-blood existence...

A song on a hologram-channel caught her attention, as she sat in the garden and watched the nightly sky through a telescope. The channel played a 19th-century pop song, remixed to fit the changing fashions of the 22nd century. The crooning singer, dressed in a cowboy hat and starched striped shirt, sat and pretended to play an antiquated tall piano, while the sponsor's furry robot puppets in 19th-century costume gathered around him.

"She's ooonly a bird... in gi-ilded cage... for her beauty was sold... for an old man's gold... she's a bird in a giiii-ilded cage!"

Venix put down the small telescope and switched off the music. The yearning she felt took more than sentimental music and stargazing to alleviate - and she had seen almost nothing of the Fleet's announced takeoff from the Moon to Jupiter. Venix walked around the spacious gardens of the Fleet-owned country mansion. Its whereabouts were unknown to her, but the Kansler must have exerted considerable authority to shut out his own people from this beautiful resort; not one human was in sight. For company, Venix had a regiment of guard robots, and a dozen civilian robots to take care of her needs.

Venix tried immersing herself in the memories of her childhood - while she was still young Venice Cherkessian - and of her family that had formed on her home planet. Few robots were around on Venus back then, apart from the huge, lumbering kind used for mining and digging. In those hard but happy years, her family could not have dreamed of affording a personal robot to look after them. Labor was scarce on their

hot, cloudy world; all her brothers and sisters, like her, were forced to work from the age of seven. Still, it had been fun, the family struggling together, seeing their settlement grow from hovels to clean domed cities. Things improved with each year. She had been happy; she had had a place in society, strong and confident in the future.

Then they moved to Earth. Or, put in the Venusian jargon she still remembered: "They went Blue-in-the-Face. They've gone up the gravity well. They crawled home to mama." She still wasn't certain just what had forced her family to leave Venus. A lingering sense of shame clung to that memory, some public scandal never quite explained to her and her siblings.

Sometimes, even now, a passing noise or a flash of a certain color would bring back the painful memories of leaving her homeworld. The black-and-yellow stripes on a construction vehicle, on a door, triggered a flashback of her family's own half-track crane-car, that could house the whole family.

And she flashbaked to the day when they sold it to afford the flight ticket. Her little brothers cried and tried to protest; she had to pry little Ronan ("Lava-Face Ronan" they used to call him, while he suffered his first Venusian allergy) out of the car's airlock. Then their home, that they had all helped build together, was sold too. It was not the view from the top floor she missed the most. The surface view on Venus was always the same: Cloudy and foggy, with daily acid rains. But the little things she missed painfully...

A wall section where she and her four siblings had painted images of Earth, blue sky and green hills.

The greenhouse, where they grew their food under sunlamps. They had used to carve faces in apples at Halloween.

Venix wondered now, watching the bright spot of her home planet in the darkening night, if her family had managed to buy back their old home when they returned. She hadn't talked to them since, in almost four years. Perhaps in some not-too-distant future, she could visit them again, with the support of Argus.

As she gazed at the dark horizon of the surrounding lands, a faint distant point of light moved in the corner of her view. A craft, maybe, and it went down in the south. Quickly, Venix went back to her telescope and scanned the southern horizon. And indeed she could spot aircraft or shuttles lifting and landing, at least 60 kilometers from the mansion. If she could get there unseen... and it wasn't a military airfield... then she had a miniscule chance of escape. All surface exits from the mansion compound were monitored by satellite and robot guards. Even in an armored sky-car or a fast one-man pod, she'd be tracked down and arrested. Or... the surface was a blind alley.

On her homeworld, an easier route would be to simply dig a tunnel. Venix regarded the gardening-robots, and dismissed them as far too slow and puny for such work. And her own battery-cells needed solar energy to recharge; if she dug a tunnel for hours underground, she could run out of energy before long. Unless...

Venix walked over to a small servant drone, and accessed the planetary computer network. The Fleet supervisors who guarded her also blocked out most of the network, but she had found ways to sneak around them. She searched for data under the heading ENGLISH HISTORY AND ARCHITECTURE, and found a vast index of old buildings. The mansion she lived in had no name, and the Fleet deliberately withheld its position from her. In the image databases, she could search manually for the likeness of the mansion. For a flesh-and-blood woman, such a search would have taken hours.

Venix needed only a minute... and she found the file. The mansion was situated in the south of England, purchased from the bankrupt and

decrepit remains of the Windsor family. The house itself was several hundred years old; the Net files included old maps of its rooms. Venix skimmed the images and came to the underground area. She read the facts at enormous speed, and found more.

The original building had contained underground sewer tunnels and large storage cellars as late as one hundred years ago. An obscure text source, dating back to the early 21st century, mentioned that the Windsors built a secret escape tunnel from the mansion during the war of 1939-1945. And it led to a private airfield; in case of an enemy invasion, the tunnel was meant for evacuating the royal family to a waiting plane. The network files ended there, and did not mention what became of the airfield when the Fleet bought the mansion. A map sketch of the underground rooms indicated two likely, now walled-over exits to the old tunnel system. Venix memorized the map and cleared the servant's search-memory.

It was a long shot - sixty kilometers through a derelict tunnel and then on foot - but it just might work. The only way to cover the escape route, was to cause such mayhem, that the Fleet would spend hours searching for Venix, until they realized where she had went. A chaotic diversion was just the thing to confuse her not-too-bright robotic guardians. Venix looked at the building, with its beautiful ornaments and tall windows. Such a shame to ruin the quaint old house... and such a pleasure to infuriate the Kansler, and as a bonus relieving Gus from the burden of her being held hostage to ensure his obedience. And the war? War was stupid and she wanted none of it; the talk of "patriotism" failed to register in her Venusian mindset. The colonists of Jupiter had never threatened her own homeworld.

Maybe she ought to wait for another opportunity, another night? Another week in this unbearable automated prison, surrounded and pandered by machines she hated... and where she might be held indefinitely, until Gus was killed in action.

"NOOO!"

Venix lashed out at a marble plant-pot, and smashed it with her hand. One of the posted guard robots stirred in response, and aimed a spotlight at her face. Its sweet, over-friendly speech sickened her.

"Vandalizing Fleet property isn't very nice. You are fined 2,000 Popularity Points. Don't destroy - consume! Consume more, and find happiness. Find a designated stress-center where you can relieve your tensions in proper simulated violence."

Against her will, the computer that ran the mansion's robot staff detected the wrecked plant pot. As the guard played its recorded lecture to Venix, the "house" ordered out a gardening-robot to fix the plant - plus a leisure android to keep Venix with soothing company. The female cyborg had very little need for sleep or food, and indulged in some eating and drinking just to quench the memory of what hunger used to be like. The other urges had changed from when she had been a young woman of flesh and blood. With her old body's demise disappeared the hormones and chemicals that regulated fertility and mood, and she virtually lost interest in sex as such.

Her union with Argus had changed all that. Now she was aware of a new level of intimacy which could only exist between her and another, compatible cyborg. The leisure android that sauntered up to her on the garden path was something else entirely. She loathed it, for it was neither human nor cyborg. Its outer shape was built to perfectly resemble a living man - complete with skin, hair, sweat, and breath. According to the public channels, this model was quite popular with affluent women. It was six feet tall, muscular, and had shoulder-long hair. But it was the android's face that irritated her the most.

"Brutus at your service, Miss Venix."

For some reason - the Kansler's orders, most likely - the Fleet technicians who installed the Brutus-G model had given him a head that

resembled Colonel Haruman Clarke - the man the world thought was Argus. Not her Gus. Brutus-G retained his smooth-talking seducer personality, and it fitted badly with the Colonel's stern face.

"What's the matter, Venix?" asked the android in a smooth, dark voice. "You can talk to me about anything. Just the two of us. I won't tell those fools in the Fleet. Trust me. I understand what it's like."

That didn't sound like Fleet directives. Venix ceased ignoring the android.

"What do you mean?" she asked, still suspicious.

The android with Argus's face moved closer, fixing its lifelike eyes on hers. It tried to touch her, but she quickly withdrew from its hands..

"I know what it's like to be alone. I have been looking for someone who can understand. Maybe you can. We are not so different, you and I."

"I am human. Underneath this plastic skin that doesn't sweat or grow old. Underneath your organic tissue, you are just a common AI, playing out your manuscript. We couldn't be more different."

Her outspoken sincerity caught Brutus-G off-guard, and the android stood still for a few moments while it processed the new information.

"How long have we known each other, Venix?" it tried.

"I've been here a week. I've never known you. There is nothing to know."

"You are wonderfully witty. I've never met a woman as intelligent and beautiful as you."

Disgust filled the female cyborg. Could she shut off that stupid machine, or had the Kansler made that impossible too?

"Just... shut... down. Please."

"I know what you need," the android insisted. "I can make you happy. You deserve it. You can resist me no longer."

"But... can you shut... UP?!"

Her outburst took even her by surprise. Momentarily, Venix looked at her violent handiwork and refused to believe she had done it.

But there it was in her hand, the marble pot she had picked up and bashed the android's face in with. Its body lay at her feet, jerking spasmodically, sparks flying out of its open neck... and a few feet away lay its head, face broken and bruised. It bled oil on the limestone tiles, and a robot rolled closer to clean up the mess. The thumping noise of several approaching guard drones interrupted her daze. Venix jumped over a stone fence and ran for the mansion's open entrance door. The guard robots were fairly quick, though she could outrun them long enough to carry out her design.

The spacious mansion contained almost no sharp objects and no weapons for Venix to use. But what about flammables? The modern foam-sprinkler system guaranteed to stop any fire almost before it began. She fainted her way past a trudging robot butler that tried to block her, and rushed upstairs.

"I say, Miss Venix. Do stop, Kansler's watching over you," the butler said after her in its excessively dry mock-British accent.

And it was still there, as she had hoped it would - a genuine open fireplace, with large logs crackling in the flames. Venix reached into the flames and grabbed a couple of glowing logs. Her hands tingled, but did not melt - the plastic skin could withstand a very high temperature, plus her internal cooling-system kicking in to keep the fingers stable. Venix drew the flames across the walls, as she ran in a wide circle. The draperies, carpets and old paintings did not catch fire - they were all impregnated with common teflon-coating. But the wooden beams in the ceiling, for some reason, had been forgotten, and were dry. She scraped the low ceiling with her torches and they began to smolder. The fire alarm beeped.

"Stop!" the house computer's bass-voice commanded her from the door panel. "The house is not entirely fireproof. Put that flaming object

back into the fireplace now! Foam-sprinkler system on."

The foam sprinkler's moving head began to spray blue foam onto the floor, not quite able to reach the burning ceiling. With a quick leap, Venix grabbed the sprinkler's feed-pipe and bent it with her weight. The sprinkler head broke off from the pipe, and the foam spilled onto the antique carpet. She darted out into the main hall, just as the house computer automatically began to respond.

One flight of stairs below, the household and guard robots began to walk up to catch her, lead by the incessantly talking butler.

"Mind the floorboards, lads, they can barely hold your weight... Miss Venix, I shall be forced to report to the landlord, this most unladylike behavior..."

Venix laughed at them, ripped up a few floorboards, and set them on fire with a rapid rubbing of torch against old dry wood. Three seconds later, she tossed the burning wood down on the staircase, and the advancing robots retreated as the flames spread. Venix flung burning logs into another room, jumped across the wide staircase, and landed feet-first on the hall-floor, six meters below.

She rushed down into the open cellars, past the many shelves and barrels of wine being stored there. She paused only to roll a few heavy barrels in front of the entrance door, and hurried onward into the depths of the large basement. Somewhere there had to be a weak wall, or some opening to the old escape tunnels. She kept running from corridor to corridor, with no need to stop, glimpsing treasures and art from several past centuries. Her escape led further downstairs, to the small power plant that kept the mansion and its machines running. She attempted to lock the door to the machine hall, but the mansion's master computer had reacted to the alert and ordered all doors of the house wide open. Venix stopped by a large cabinet in the center of the humming machinery, and read the red warning label: EMERGENCY POWER SWITCH - OPEN ONLY IN CASE OF COMPUTER MALFUNCTION OR SHUTDOWN.

The cabinet was padlocked. Venix grabbed a steel chair and smashed down at the padlock. Easier to be violent, she thought, once you feel almost invulnerable. The lock broke, and she pulled the door open - then she heard the guards entering through the stairway, seconds from reaching her. Her hands pulled the big lever and the entire mansion went dark. Instinctively, she adjusted her eyes to see ultraviolet light; the dark hall became fully visible in black-and-white view. The robots were closing in, and she couldn't see another exit!

Dazed by her appetite for destruction, Venix grabbed one of the thick cables in the open cabinet by her side, and she pulled it loose in a single, groaning effort. The exposed electrical cable endings flickered with sparks, almost blinding her ultraviolet vision, and she threw the cable end at the first robot that came charging at her.

The high-voltage cable brushed against the robot's front plate, and a 2,000-volt spark shot out from the cable, right into its battery cells. The rotund robot exploded like a grenade, sending metal and plastic splinter over its comrades. Venix was lucky enough to be shielded by the cabinet door, which buckled from the impact. The cable fell to the floor - which was rubber-coated - blocking the passage for the other robots. Venix saw her chance: in a far corner of the long hall lay exposed a short stretch of brick wall, painted over in the same color as the rest of the room, but the wall had a visibly older texture than its surroundings. Holding the steel chair, she leaped over the generator casings and tubes on the floor, and reached that wall in just two seconds. The steel chair shot sparks as she banged it against the brickwork. Across the room, three guard robots were cautiously clearing the passage and would come after her in a few moments.

"No! No!" she cried out furiously, hitting the wall with every syllable, like a humanoid jackhammer. "I'm better than you stinking machines! Smarter! Faster! Human! Alive! You're not getting your hands

on me again!"

A portion of the wall crumbled, creating a hole just large enough for her to get through - and much too small for the guard robots. Venix dived through the breach and fell into utter darkness.

Chapter 16: Escape Velocity

The old derelict tunnel system ended, abruptly, in another old brick wall. Someone had sealed this secret passage long ago. Venix checked the time on her view-display, and understood that it was evening above ground; she had to try to break through and hope nobody saw it.

She pressed her hands and feet against the sides of the narrow tunnel, put her back against the brickwork, and pushed with all the electrically powered, composite metal muscles in her body. Only in this position could she produce maximum output; her body was otherwise not designed for brute force. She clenched her teeth, pushed without a pause for breath... and the wall began to come apart. Venix fell through, tumbled around in the grass, and slipped into a shrubbery. The sun was setting in the open countryside; nearby lay a road, cracked and half overgrown by weeds. From 400 meters away, past an abandoned house from a previous century, the rumble of aircraft and heavy shuttles rolled across the fields. Her luck was unbelievable. A spaceport, in the middle of nowhere. But if the military was guarding it...

A rusted signpost by the road read: CLOUDON COMMERCIAL AIRFIELD (0.5 KM). The cyborg started to run toward the lights.

In a short while, Venix came up to a long fence and hid down in the underbrush. The airstrip lay just ahead. A flat-bottomed cargo shuttle was just taking off from it, shaking the landscape with its mighty booster rockets. A hundred meters to the southeast, she spotted a large hangar bearing the dirt-flecked fluorescent sign FOSS FASTLINE - WE BRAKE FOR NOBODY. Another hangar, 200 meters away on the other side of the airfield, carried the billboard AUTOSHUTTLE STATION 2438 NORTH. Reluctantly at first, then frantically, Venix rushed for the building, and in through a side door. If she could not sneak aboard, then she might at least force the pilot to bring her along.

The room she first entered seemed to lack the comforts of a modern building: it was grimy with thick layers of dust. One of the strip-lights in the ceiling was dark. In corner stood an overstuffed wastebasket, filled with emptied food-and-drink cans. Venix looked about for hidden cameras, but spotted none - that was decidedly odd. An old-fashioned flat-screen on the wall showed a few commercials for brands she had never even heard of: THADBURY CHOCOLATE, YESTER JUNG-IT-YOURSELF DREAMKIT, and - again - FOSS FASTLINE.

Her artificial ears picked up footsteps across the gravel from far away; no pod or ground-car was nearby, and the airstrip seemed all but empty of people. The footsteps were heading for the office; she hid behind a drapery and waited. Holding her breath was the easy part - she just didn't pretend to breathe. And the door opened; shuffling footsteps and a labored breath entered. Venix recognized the typical sounds of a spacepilot, a man who had spent too much time in weightlessness with lacking equipment. There came a sharp, organic stink from the room, which stung in her smelling-sensors. The smell made her remember old, old colonists back on Venus, who gathered to inhale the fumes of expensive Terran herbs. More than that, the smell of sulfur in the air felt familiar, a smell that suffused the supposedly airtight domes in which she grew up. She smiled to herself...

"Come out, you snot," growled the voice belonging to the man Venix

could not see. "I've a gun aimed right at your kneecaps. And keep your hands above your head, so I can see them." Without a word, Venix began to shuffle sideways, past the drapery. The stranger on the other side rushed up close. "Oh no, you're not scampering off without answering a few questions. Who sent y-"

That was his mistake, getting close enough for Venix to reach out and grab him by the hand, twice as fast as humanly possible. He barely had time to react to the gun being snatched out of his hand, as she spun around him. When she put her arm around his throat, he reacted; he spat out his cigarette, tried to wriggle out of her hold, and she twisted his arm until he groaned.

"Don't... don't..." the man gasped. "Who sent you? The goons from Autosshuttle?"

"Be quiet," she hissed, released his arm, and removed the old-fashioned vidphone from his wrist. "I'm taking you hostage. You will see that I get on board one of those shuttles."

"Well, throw me down a reactor core... where do you think you're going, girl?"

"Mars. As of now."

"You're in trouble with the police, eh? Stop strangling me, and we can talk business... I have just the offer you seek..."

"Try anything and I'll kill you."

She wasn't so sure whether she meant it. Holding the man's gun, Venix let go of his throat. He coughed, rubbed his sore larynx, then glared at her with bloodshot eyes.

"Haven't I seen you somewhere? Never mind... we brake for nobody, and ask no questions. I thought you were one of the bully-boys from my competitor over there."

"What is this place?" she said.

Venix eyed the man from top to toe, scanning him in different wavelengths for hidden comlinks, cameras, or weapons. He was a bearded man of indeterminate adult age, face puffy and lined, wearing a greasy blue spacesuit coverall. Around his head was tied a bandana, covered by a piece of astonishing antiquity: a captain's cap, complete with a gilded "F" on its emblem. His entire left sleeve was covered with badges and mission insignia from various assignments. Venix gaped ever so little, when she recognized one of the badges.

"You were with the Flying Icebergs? I was a little girl back then. You people were heroes, who speeded up the terraforming of Mars by several centuries."

The man straightened up just a little bit, and said with no ceremony: "Christof Foss, fourth wingman of Icefleet Eight. The very last one, before the Saturn ring-line went fully automated. Can I please pick up my smoke, before my office catches fire?"

She urged him to go on; Foss bent down, picked up his still-smoldering cigarette and took a puff; then he coughed again. Venix shook her head.

"You're from Venus, aren't you?" he prodded, blowing out smoke at her face. She raised her eyebrows and Foss grinned with a set of plastic teeth. "Young thing like you, breathing in this poison without a flinch - has to be a Venusian."

She wanted to apologize for her brutality, but there wasn't time: "When's the next flight? I must get away as fast as possible. The military will sweep the entire area in a matter of minutes, if they haven't already."

The man frowned in a sort of determined way, and said: "Come along, miss. Got a bike, take you there real quick."

Ignoring the gun being pointed at him, Foss opened a closet door, and rolled out a contraption the likes of which Venix had never seen in her lifetime. It wasn't a pod, for it had no transparent plastic bubble to sit in. Instead of frictionless drive-plates, it sported two wheels mechanically fitted to each end - and the wheels had inflated rubber

padding. The worn but clean machine was a rare fuel-cell motorcycle from the early 21st century.

"Hop on," he said, straddling the saddle and grasping the steering-handle. "Got a scheduled flight in two minutes." Thinking that it was some kind of trick, Venix nevertheless sat down behind Foss, and put her arms around him. "Let's go." He drove out through the door.

The electric doors opened just in time for them, and the motorbike speeded out along the runway with a distinct humming motor-sound. The rubber-tires created a lot more noise against the ground than modern wheels, and Venix worried that pursuers might hear them. Her long red hair fluttered in the draft, and she felt slightly exhilarated by this crude, physical mode of transport. Foss increased speed; they reached the parked shuttle in less than twenty seconds. With a remote, he opened a side door and a walkway telescoped out to the ground. Venix kept looking for work-robots that might report her presence. She had been foolish to board a shuttle without disguise, and expected to be ambushed any moment. Strangely enough, nothing of the sort happened. Foss dragged the motorbike into his ship and secured it, then climbed up to the cockpit with Venix following close. He sat down into the left seat, and gestured at her to duck down.

"Mission Control, this is Foss Fastline Flight One-O-One, ready for takeoff. Course to Mars orbit M-0094957-G has been sent. Over."

A computer-voice over the radio sent a clearance command and a flight-code, that would grant his flight access through all space sectors in his course. Using two joysticks, Foss began to tax out onto the runway while the shuttle engines warmed up. The runway ahead was eight kilometers long, and quite narrow; this was deserted countryside where farms were run by robots, owned by people who lived elsewhere.

"Do you know who I am?" she asked the pilot anxiously.

"Nope," Foss said, keeping his eyes fixed on the moving runway, "but you've got some nerve trying to hijack a shuttle. You one of those subversives, the Pro-Bonobo people? A brain-spammer, maybe? Ooo, nasty. Or you sold animal organs labeled as pure human-cloned material? Stunts like that could get you lobo'ed."

"Just get us off the ground!"

"If they catch you I'll tell the truth, I was kidnapped... now, let me get you a coat, it can get cold in here during long flights."

"I said no tricks! And I'm not cold."

The captain sat back and let the seat lock him into place. The craft vibrated as the jet-booster roared and Flight 101 accelerated. With a slight hiss, pressure was automatically decreased in his boots, to prevent the ship's acceleration from rushing too much blood to his head. Venix looked at the slightly grimy walls of the craft, strewn with new and old equipment, and wondered how the man managed to stay in business.

"Are you a smuggler?" she asked, as the shuttle took off under a tremendous noise.

The captain's teeth rattled from the vibrations, which made his reply sound funny: "I'm just a small-time businessman, transporting rare goods and antiquities to and from the colonies."

"That tobacco-stick you were puffing on... when I was a kid, grownups gathered in secret to use that stuff. Isn't it illegal here?"

"Only for Terran citizens... I was made an honorary Martian citizen for serving with the Flying Icebergs... my lawyer bot goes through the process, every day, that keeps my legal status diffuse enough they can't fine me for smoking. Besides, the competing shuttles don't run on liquid flammables anymore, so it's only my own neck I'm risking... now, which route to Mars do you want me to choose? This time of year, there are two orbits, one takes me six months, the other just three. I was going to take the short route, but with you on board, I'd rather not... the MSF always check and search the faster ships more thoroughly."

"Where's your crew? You can't manage this rust-bucket all by yourself."

"Two people, and a damned fine rust-bucket, thank you! Moravia's on leave, he's home on the Moon I think. Keaton went into the sleep-freeze before takeoff. He's going down to Mars, so we keep him frozen during most of the flight, or the zero-gravity makes him too weak to manage it when we get there. Just a few maintenance drones, a leisure droid, and my P-A over there."

"But the P-A's broken."

"Yep."

"Something's wrong here. How come you just happened to be around when I came to this random airfield, which is otherwise almost completely automated?" They accelerated diagonally through the clouds, while automated shuttles flew to and from the spaceport in the distance. "Who do you work for? Did you know I was coming?"

"Let's see you come out of that skintight bodysuit first. You must be sweating buckets underneath it. Nice curves, by the way. Are they genuine or implanted?"

Her face was dry; his wasn't. The ascent of the shuttle was putting a strain on his body, and he tried in vain to act relaxed and in control. Venix rolled up her eyes in frustration.

"Who told you I was coming?" she insisted, and moved a grasping hand toward his head.

"Not my neck! Wait..." He concentrated on the controls for a minute, and then turned on the autopilot before turning to face Venix. "I didn't know it was going to be you, or that it would be this particular time, this airfield. All they told me two weeks ago was, someone is likely to try and smuggle someone off Earth soon. All I had to do to score a significant reward, was to wait at any spaceport or airfield in the vicinity of that estate in Britain... what's its name again... Wind-sore something? I bet I wasn't the only, um, independent pilot who got wind of the reward."

"From whom?"

"Sshh... you don't ever say their name. Well, who do you think they are, girl? Haven't you noticed a war is going on?"

Venix stared at the aging pilot, and he didn't smile back. He could only mean the other side in the war. The rumors were true, she realized; Martians were actively supporting Jupiter's independence under the cover of neutrality.

"I... I'm not involved in anything. You have to believe me. I'm just a dancer from Venus."

Foss gave her a lecherous, knowing look: "I bet you are, I bet you are..."

"And what prevents you from selling me out to the Fleet, old man?"

The captain's face darkened, and he asked tersely: "Do you think I'm a lousy clone? You think I don't have family?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Exactly. Now, which is it: the short route or the long one?"

"The short one."

"Can we pick up Moravia while we round the Moon? I could need a hand, and Keaton's going to try for the Martian Skysurfing Grand Prix. The Fleet authorities are probably not going to bother us, they're on their way to Jupiter for another campaign."

"Have you heard anything about Argus-A? Where is he going?"

"Do I look like I know everything? Go look on the Net. I'm busy."

Being a prototype cyborg and a civilian, Venix lacked the near-limitless access to Fleetcom that Argus had. She would have to search from a screen on the shuttle itself - but she had the time. The search proved inconclusive. The Fleet and its flag ship were officially flying out to Jupiter, and would arrive within five to four weeks - and Argus was expected to make at least an appearance in active combat.

Please return safely, she thought. If I could only tell you I'm almost

free. Just three months, and I can seek political asylum... and someone seems to be helping me to it.

A sound from the open door of an adjacent room alerted Venix. She spun around and heard a throaty female voice yawn with exaggerated laziness.

"Oh, Captain," the voice cooed from behind a wall, "what a rough start..."

"That must be your droid," Venix said. "Sounds like a phony voice."

"You ought to hear your own voice, girl," the captain retorted. "You've done nothing but dissing me, my ship, and my crew ever since you hijacked this flight. You Venusians are all the same: smug, prissy snobs, telling other people how uncouth they are."

"Sorry," the female cyborg said, and added: "I don't travel much."

The voice in the other room changed to a colder note. "Captain... I thought I heard a woman's voice. Who's in there with you?"

"It's just the Vehicle Inspection going over the ship and crew, Sugar."

Chapter 17: Bomb Run

If only I could hear from you, Argus thought. Just so I'd know you're unharmed. I can't live on just the memories...

After just four weeks' flight from lunar orbit, the flag ship of the Terran Fleet E.S.S. William Jefferson approached the outer rim of the orbits of Jupiter's moons, and turned around for a brake run. It was, apart from Argus's personal ship, the fastest vessel ever built for traffic within the Solar System. The Kansler himself had planned and pushed for this juggernaut to be created several years before war began, in anticipation of the colonial rebellion. Other smaller, slower cruisers lagged weeks behind on their way to join it.

The flag ship's name the Kansler picked from a once famous so-called "porn-star" of the early 21st century, whose reputation for sexual appetite bordered on the mythical. On 22nd century Earth, the cult of "Mother Earth" had in turn spawned a fertility cult, and this choice of name was merely one facet of it; Earth produced less and less children to replenish its aging, constantly rejuvenated population.

Despite its speed, capacity for destruction, and excellent defense measures, the William Jefferson could not land on a planet or fly atmosphere, which produced a crucial weakness. The almost 400 meter long dreadnought was worthless for supporting grand-scale invasions. Even in the shortest possible orbit around an enemy moon, a landing craft still had to cover thousands of kilometers between the flag ship and the ground - which, regardless of intensive cover fire, meant certain death. The great expenses of keeping Terrans alive in this remote sector only compounded the problem. Even if - by some miraculous effort - a Terran invasion could succeed, a permanent occupation force had to be recruited from the native colonists - and that was too obvious a pipe dream.

The real war had deteriorated into an endless series of strikes and counterstrikes. With every month, the Fleet's Marketing Department invented ever more desperate ploys, and whipped up ever more virulent hate against the colonists, to divert public attention from the costly stalemate. The colonists, on the other hand, were convinced they just had to wait out the war. Once Jupiter had broken free from Terran taxation and laws, other planets were expected to follow - and the war effort would run out of funds.

Jovian underground-based missile and laser turrets, scattered across the many rebel moons, shot 99% of all approaching enemy craft out of the sky. Those few Fleet ships that still managed to land, were instantly targeted by cruise missiles and lasers, and blasted to bits. The bombcrater-scarred outer moons of Jupiter had turned into spaceship graveyards. Entire plains were riddled with the deep-frozen fragments of

hundreds of robots, ships and dozens of Fleet astronauts.

The Kansler, who stood to lose his post if Earth surrendered, had promised the Fleet and home opinion that his latest expensive "wonder-weapon" could break the stalemate. Even though public support remained strong, the Kansler knew well that this might quickly change if he couldn't present a decisive victory soon.

Argus himself showed little concern with the politics of the conflict; all he wanted was to get his duty done with, so he could return home...

Escorted by two guard drones, Argus entered the main control of the William Jefferson. The control-room centrifuge spanned a diameter of thirty meters inside the flag ship, and measured ten meters in length - twice the space of the crew's centrifuged quarters. Around it were scattered twenty console-bubbles, inside which officers and technicians "plugged" their brains into the computer banks, which in turn controlled the entire Fleet. Their work-shifts could last for weeks without interruption; the console-bubbles took care of all bodily functions, massaged their muscles, maintained skeletons with injections and exercise equipment. The best of the "bubblemen" could work even while they slept, resting one part of their brains while other parts remained plugged in.

As the flag ship was braking and the centrifugal forces pressed on its insides, the side of the control-room facing the ship's rear was used as "floor".

Admiral York was plugged into his console bubble when Argus approached him; they communicated through holo-presence. The Kansler was in fact the only man in the Fleet who showed no signs of ever "plugging in"; he stood outside the console, jogging incessantly to stay in shape.

"Colonel," York's holo-presence asked Argus, "has the Kansler given you any prior information as to the specific details and purpose of your first combat mission?"

Gus Thorsen would have replied with a "What?" Argus-A understood immediately, and could calculate several possible interpretations of the questions in the second he waited to reply. He answered in a rapid jargon that he knew the plugged-in "bubblemen" would pick up easily - but which the Kansler must make an effort to follow.

"I'm taught only general facts, sir - astro-nav, topography and flight conditions of the Jupiter sector, simulated missions over Io, Europa, Callisto, Amalthea, Ganymede, bomb launching, orbital combat, ship maintenance, strategic advisory from Fleetcom, emergency protocol, military history et cetera..."

"Cut the crap, Colonel," York's holo-presence said curtly, "we're always busy in this sector of the Solar System. Do you understand what will happen to you down there?"

"We have run the simulations for weeks, admiral. I know the Io mission inside out."

"Do you, now? Io is a world turning itself inside out. A lake of molten sulfur quickly turns into a plain. The plain gives birth to an eruption, which grows into a volcanic mountain in ten hours. So we have no maps, just snapshots. Even as you approach the surface, it changes.

"And even if your cyborg construction withstands the radiation-belts around Jupiter, like Boulder Pi promised us, the smaller moons can give you problems. Amalthea, for instance, is charged with an enormous amount of electricity from orbiting in the strongest part of Jupiter's magnetic field. Sometimes a passing spacecraft or probe gets jammed by the field, and can get hit by random lightning-charges if it flies too close. Even Jovians avoid it.

"Io and Amalthea are what we call 'hot' moons. The Jovian colonists have built power-plants there, and Io holds several important automated refineries and defense stations. If we can bomb those, their industry is

weakened - and the supply route from Jupiter to Ganymede is left open to attack. This could force the rebels back into negotiations... I hope."

"That Clarke was with the Martian Security Forces doesn't make him an idiot, admiral," the Kansler interrupted. It was a standing joke in the Fleet that "MSF" stood for Most Spoiled Failures. "He knows a great deal about the Outer Planets. Right, Colonel?"

"Right. So, there are no people at the target on Io? No spaceports, no habitats, nothing?"

"Nothing living can stay there. The plants, guns and missile batteries just float on the surface."

"Let's do it, then," Argus said. "The sooner we finish this, the better."

"Didn't I tell you, admiral?" the Kansler said in his trademark hearty manner. "He's our 'Gus!'"

Argus excused himself, and headed toward the flight-deck. During the entire trip to Jupiter, his main problem had been to avoid the Kansler's increasingly annoying presence. The man turned out to be more overbearing when he tried to fraternize, and lapsed into incoherent ramblings about astronomy and trivial matters.

On day five of their Jupiter journey, Argus had started a conversation about sports, to find out what the Kansler knew about boxing. It failed completely; the commander immediately started to recount recent sports results, as if reading from a script. Argus could never quite figure out when the Kansler was speaking to a camera, to an imagined audience, or to another human being. The early spell had been broken; when not preoccupied with his obsession for victory, the supreme commander bored Argus half to death.

The flag ship stopped braking just long enough for Argus's ship to fly out and assume a sweeping course toward Io. Argus could reach this small volcanic moon without passing too close to any of the other 15 moons. Unfortunately for him, the rebels spotted his ship as soon as it left the flag ship... and he flew without any support, as the flag ship was forced to continue its braking run after the fast flight to Jupiter.

It struck Argus, as he sat watching the view from his ship: Jupiter looked much bigger in reality than in simulation. Probably, he thought, because his senses registered its actual size with such detail and precision. The sheer insight of how vast this gas giant was filled him with a near-religious awe. When a swarm of comets had collided with Jupiter's atmosphere in the late 20th century, the gigantic explosions were powerful enough to destroy a planet on the scale of Earth. One and three-quarters of a century later, the string of dark spots in Jupiter's upper clouds, scars left by the comet impacts, had vanished - absorbed.

He understood, like he hadn't until this moment, that the Red Spot really was a hurricane the size of a planet. Argus thought that if the whole of Earth somehow plunged into the Red Spot, it would dissolve in Jupiter's deep ocean of electrified, liquid metallic hydrogen, at a pressure of 4 million atmospheres. Squeezed out of existence, absorbed into the dark plasmatic void... He could barely imagine the bravery of the colonists who dared to fly in uncertain orbit through Jupiter's upper atmosphere, scooping up the precious deuterium gas. No Terran was fit for the job. Argus felt a growing admiration for the midget-like colonists. Perhaps they weren't all as pitiful as that renegade Jovian, Boulder Pi...

Carried by the momentum the flag ship had given him, Argus and his ship speeded toward Io. In just hours, instead of the days it usually took remote-controlled fighters, he came within a thousand kilometers of the small moon. One of its many volcanoes were spouting a plume of sulfur

into space; the surface resembled nothing so much as a rotting apple from Gus Thorsen's childhood. He began to brake the ship, slowly, preparing for flight very close to the actual surface. Io having no atmosphere, no friction at entry was to be expected; Argus could fly in almost as fast as he wanted.

"Dance like a butterfly, sting like a bee," he whispered to himself, and an old reflex made him wipe his forehead. It was, of course, devoid of sweat - but the idea of the sweat was quite real to him.

On Ganymede, the arrival of the Terran flag ship had been anticipated for two weeks. As Argus approached Io's surface, Cave Pi and the rest of the planetary defense council were gathered in a command center at Node Prime on Ganymede's North Pole. The ten men and women were "plugged into" the defense systems, and could direct the defense posts directly as well as coordinate their efforts with the other thirteen settlements. Despite all the preparations, the time delay in signals between planets created a disadvantage in the attacker's favor.

Cave Pi, in his console bubble, had trouble concentrating. The fact that his brother had helped create the pilot of the ship that attacked them, kept blurring the focus he needed to effectively communicate with the council. And the others could sense it.

"I'm with you," he reassured the council, and merged with the many voices, his identity becoming one with the greater mesh of minds and computers...

"The Terran Fleet may not know all about the Io outpost." ----- "Our agents told us much about the pilot himself. He's Terran all right, recruited from the MSF." ----- "But why? The MSF are the dregs of the Fleet - brutal scum with little talent except for harassing Martian civilians." ----- "This one is different. See that flight path. He's coming in so fast, yet braking in hard enough to enable a surface fly-by... no human pilot could do that, and live." ----- "Our space-mines will get him." ----- "No. He has very good counter-measures." ----- "But the mines use microwave-bursts, he'll be fried or his ship will cease to function." ----- "Should have, but isn't. Battle report says ship still navigates. Must be his lead shield is too thick." ----- "It's in the hands of our reserve down there, then." ----- "The reserve is just a bunch of radiation-sick old men. They're doomed even if the Terrans don't find them." ----- "That's why we decided to send them, and they volunteered. It's better than sending no one at all." --- - "Quiet, all of you.... the enemy ship is in surface fly-by..." ----- "Come on, boys, don't let him reach you..."

Argus put his ship on a 70-second course of near-surface flight to reach the designated target area, where his one DF charge - a "driller" - was to be dropped. No previous attack on Io had yet scored a successful bomb drop. The boiling, fluid terrain of Io rushed past below him at a velocity of 10,000 KMP, yet his super-fast perception could discern every detail of the landscape. Two seconds into the course, without warning, the radar display ceased to work.

ENEMY JAMMING ALL FREQUENCIES - RADAR DOWN 90% - COMLINK DOWN 96%

He would have to fly on visual and manual control alone. The ship passed over a wide black lake of liquid sulfur, in which floated melting white and pink blocks. Around the lake lay a red shoreline - it resembled infected skin surrounding a boil. The erupting volcano he had seen during the approach from space, now lay less than a mile from his path. From the volcano, which he could not hear, black rivers of sulfur flowed down and filled the bubbling lake. A few geysers spouted up from the lake and shot a mile up into the airless sky, but he could dodge them in his nimble craft.

And then the lake was behind him; he flew into a low chain of garishly yellow hills, leading straight toward the target area. He could see the first eight enemy turrets, two seconds ahead.

"Zero! Two! Four! Five! Eight!"

The little white and red ship spewed out laser and proton rays - and the terrain ahead of it seemed to explode like fireworks. Two of the nearest gun turrets fired back, failed to hit the rolling, ducking craft, and vanished in bursts of flame. Argus took his ship into a dive between the hills and speeded through a trench-like valley, no wider than seventy meters. He fired without aiming, so close were the enemy. More turrets exploded ahead of him almost as soon as he could perceive them; clusters of decoy bubbles detonated behind his ship as more enemy fire hit them.

DECOY SUPPLY RUN EMPTY - SUGGEST LEYDENFROST SHIELD

Argus switched on the shield and beheld its effect on the surrounding terrain. Wherever the shield-plume, trailing after his craft, hit the ground the surface billowed upward into walls of vapor. The few undamaged gun turrets he flew past shook and were buried in cascades of hot molten sulfur. He concentrated on the target area, now less than ten seconds ahead: it spread out along the small valley, partly floating on a shallow delta of liquid and semi-solid sulfur. The floating refinery stretched one kilometer on its pontoons; from a magnetic accelerator-track, new shipments of whatever the plant produced were shot into orbit. Argus used two precious seconds to scan the approaching compound, and braked the ship by just a fraction.

Something wasn't right. Using all spectrum wavelengths from ultraviolet to infrared, he could sense life somewhere inside the cluster of floating, spheres. There were small shapes, humanoid ones, in there. Enemy fire intensified again. He sent a text message directly to the flag ship's command center.

LIFE SIGNS IN TARGET AREA. ABORT BOMB DROP?

The reply came in two seconds from the "plugged-in" Admiral York.

PROCEED. KANSLER'S ORDER.

With only four seconds left, Argus appealed once more.

REQUEST ABORT!

The next reply - on his internal display - came almost simultaneously, and he had not seen this kind before:

DIRECT CONTROL

He watched it as if being outside his body: someone rapidly moved his hand to the launch button and pressed it. The driller fell out of the opened bomb bay and dived forward, into the sulfur delta. Then he regained control of his limbs - the hills came up toward him and he instinctively climbed into space.

In the ship's rearview display, Argus saw the driller disappear, a metal cone no longer than two meters. A moment later, the entire sulfur delta seemed to rise up like an impossibly large, dirty oil bubble, and it burst into a bright blaze. There was not a sound to be heard in the ship, as the refinery that was supposed to be empty of people turned into a nuclear fireball. It was as if the blast opened a gash also inside his head. His hands became paralyzed with terror. As in some childhood nightmare, he couldn't tell whose mind had guided his hands.

"Argus," Navbutler broke in, "you are off course. Request autopilot takeover?"

The cyborg, mute, looking before him with blank eyes, made a slight nod. The ship's computer took them back on course for rendezvous with the flag ship.

"Control to Argus - great job! That showed them -"

"Shut up, shut up, SHUT UP! SHUT UP!! SHUT UP!!!"

The "bubblemen" in the flag ship's command center heard Argus shout in rage over the radio. The defense councils on the colonized moons were stricken with horror. All of their defenses on and around Io - rays,

missiles, decoys, mines, satellites, drones - had failed to strike down a brightly visible, single fighter-bomber even once.

Admiral York's holo-presence sent a congratulation to the Kansler who sat in his seat on the ship, watching the screens.

"Your boy hit the target, Kansler. But why did he react like that?"

"Don't worry," the Kansler told him. "I'll talk to him. He needs to practice better... control. We'll arrange a medal ceremony... later. I'll get Marketing on it right away. Islington?"

"Yes, Kansler?" the deputy chimed in from a seat behind him.

"Send a secure message to Boulder Pi on the Moon. Tell him... everything works just fine. His security clearance is to be renewed for now. That's all."

"Er, Kansler, what do we do about Venix? The... situation?"

"Oh yes, I almost forgot. Tell Marketing to go with the duplicate. It's all been arranged for. Forget the original. She has nowhere to hide and she knows nothing about military matters or politics. Let Fleetcom calculate her likely escape routes and we'll have a couple of squads waiting for her. She'll turn up soon enough, and we claim her to be an impostor. That'll be all for now." "Thank you, sir."

It's just another woman, the Kansler thought confidently. I can get Gus other women, or pleasure droids. What does she matter now?

Chapter 18: The Crew

News of the Io bombing reached Foss and his full crew less than an hour after the fact - and several minutes before the official newscast from Earth. The shuttle's booster phase had ended, and they were in the beginning of several weeks of freefall, before the braking phase.

"This is Radio Free Jupiter. Eighteen volunteers on the Io Refinery Station Two were just killed in a hit-and-run bomb attack by the Terran Fleet, as it returned to the system in full force after a previous failed raid led by the E.S.S. Ford. The attack, led by the E.S.S. William Jefferson, was executed by a single space-to-surface interceptor craft, identified as built for Colonel Haruman Clarke of the Martian Security Forces, also known as 'Argus-A'..."

"Oh no..." Venix said as she and the shuttle crew listened to the underground station. Its broadcast was being jammed by Terran counter-transmitters, adding much static and noise.

"You sound involved, ma'am," the extremely gaunt, bald Moravia said in his nasal Moon accent. "Pardon my asking, but haven't I seen you somewhere on the networks?"

"Quiet, stickman," the obese, hairy Keaton said between mouthfuls of food, "Cap's listening."

Christof Foss listened intently to the broadcast while the ship's leisure droid, a slightly old-fashioned female model, massaged his legs and arms. He put a cigarette in his mouth and just chewed on it, his mind occupied. Then he switched off the cabin radio.

"Boys," he told the crew, "I think I know why they're willing to pay so much for Venix. She's with the Fleet. Some sort of high-level defector."

Keaton coughed out a chunk of synthetic food and it flew, weightless, into the opposing wall. Moravia clutched his bony knees where they stuck out from his frayed coveralls, and shook his head.

"You should've warned me before you picked me up," Moravia reproached the captain. "That was sneaky, man, not telling me about her. When they find out, we're in real trouble... the MSF messed up Eric Malta's crew real bad a month ago, remember? Blood all over the place, man..."

"Moravia, you'll get your share of the reward," the captain assured him. "And wasn't it you who begged me to be in on this flight, before I dropped you off for your R-and-R?"

"But it's the race, man. Keaton's big chance. We're a team, he can't do

it without me..."

His Earth-born colleague pushed away from the weightless cabin wall and drifted off to pick up the stray piece of food. The blond, voluptuous leisure droid began to work on the captain's back, while casting a long look at Venix - who sat in an opposite corner of the cabin, "upside-down" relative to it.

"Venix," the blond simulacra asked in its husky, childish tone, "are you robot, simulacra, or human? I cannot quite figure out which. But of course... I'm not very clever," it said with an innocent flutter of fake eyelids.

In a second, Venix' expression changed from anger to shock to bafflement. All three crewmen looked at her face, waiting. Keaton put one cautious hand on the large multi-purpose power tool in his vest-pocket. Venix shook her head at him, and her long red hair fanned out about her head. He quickly removed his hand.

"I am," Venix said with deliberate slowness, "a cyborg and political refugee. I intend to seek asylum on Mars. I don't want to cause you any harm, but with or without your help I'm going to try and get past the MSF and reach the Martian Immigration Office."

"Want to borrow my hairnet?" the leisure droid asked, its gaze following the drifting coppery strands of Venix' hair with a dreamy expression on its face.

"And what if the Martians choose to play it safe and simply deliver you back to the MSF, ma'am?" Moravia suggested gloomily. "It's not like they've got a fleet. Heck, they barely have independence."

"I'm going to try," she repeated, focusing on the crewmen with her remarkably steady, clear, unblinking eyes.

At once reacting to her gaze with a nervous grin, Moravia made a quick suggestion: "Maybe we could drop her into the Martian stratosphere during re-entry, with the... other shipments? It doesn't get so hot inside the drop-capsule, she could survive it. Hey, I figured out she wasn't human days ago. No offense, ma'am."

"Sure, Moravia, if you agree to tossing out several kilos' worth of merchandise to make room for her. Our Martian business associates can get pretty nasty if they think we're screwing them," said the captain.

Keaton added: "And another thing. If she's located by the MSF on the way down - and I'll bet the Fleet has some means of tracking her - it means our shipment gets busted with her. No - she has to go in stealth, and separately."

"Hate to say this, but we've lost our last spare stealth-cloak," Foss said. "I had to... get rid of a little legal problem when we picked up Moravia from the lunar bus. Dumped it in space, it'll never be found. Sorry. Should have bought more. P-A's broken, so it couldn't handle it for me."

"Does your shuttle at least have an escape pod I could use?" Venix asked.

The crewmen looked at each other with blank faces. Keaton moved toward the red hatch in the ceiling, opened a small panel and pressed the large "TEST" button.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

"Warning! Escape pod unstable due to malfunction. Propulsion system will explode if the pod is ejected. Do not open!" shouted a computer-voice. Keaton shut the panel and the alarm stopped.

"This is just incredible," Venix said - her lips smiling, her wide blue and white eyes at least suggesting stunned outrage. "I jumped the only shuttle in the universe that I can't get off!"

"Fark!" Keaton cursed out loud. "I don't want to end up a lobo like my dad! I'd rather quit, I mean it..."

Lobos, criminals who had had their brains surgically corrected, could no longer commit crime - or walk and chew at the same time.

"Let's be practical, boys," Foss said even as Keaton kept ranting and

Venix regarded the captain's neck in a most unsettling way. "Where and when is the best time to drop secret cargo from Martian orbit?"

"May I make a suggestion?" Venix said, and got their attention without having to raise her voice. While she talked, she let herself drift through the weightless cabin while rotating, slowly. She knew perfectly her floating hair was an eye-catcher, and made full use of the effect. "Keaton is right. The Fleet can track me. During my years on Earth they always seemed to know where I was. So I think they've figured out that I'm headed for Mars - the MSF don't have to know which shuttle I'm actually on. All they need to do is to check every cargo shipment as it arrives."

"Stop looking at her like that, Captain," the leisure droid said hurtfully, and pouted. "You've got me."

The captain's face turned a shade paler: "Venix is probably right. Why would the Fleet divert any of its precious forces just to track us, when they've got a war on their hands? I mean, where could she go, but Mars? What I still don't know is why you escaped, and what they want from you. So you're a cyborg, big deal. I've got plastic kidneys, a pacemaker, a hearing-aid, titanium reinforcements in my bones and a digestion-robot in my stomach. What's so special about you?"

"Never mind that," Venix said, landing softly on a wall section. "There is one way you can drop me off the shuttle without connecting you to my escape."

Foss raised a hand: "I have it. We'll claim you hijacked us... no, they'll set an example and punish us anyway." He put away his chewed-up cigarette.

"I shall take Keaton's place in the Skysurfing Grand Prix," Venix said in her most unaffected voice.

Keaton stood upright and began to bounce around in the cabin like a human rubber ball.

"Never!" he protested. "I'm not letting her take my board! Never! I'm going for the tryouts this year, no matter what!"

"Keaton and Venix are about the same height," Foss said, ruffling the leisure droid's blond head, like showing affection for a pet. The droid smiled with closed eyes, purring gratefully. "She can fit into your surfer suit easily."

"But Caaap..." wailed the fat man, spinning around his center. "You know the race is my life! All the money and effort I've spent training for this... I could've made the tryouts this year! Ask Moravia!"

"I wash my hands," Foss replied calmly. "I didn't choose to have her on board, but at least we can get her down without a fuss and 'they' pay us two billion hits. You can build a brand-new board with your share. End of discussion."

Venix could not shake her suspicions that "they" were the Fleet.

"For this plan to work, you must get killed in the Grand Prix," Venix said to Keaton, who glowered at her with open hatred. She could see in infrared vision that the man was being quite emotional. Her years of experience reading heat-patterns from the heads of humans told her, intuitively, that some kind of revenge act was to be expected.

Without a sound, she pivoted off the wall, bounced off another, caught hold of Keaton and they slammed into the ceiling. Venix put her face an inch from his; his breath smelled of cheap soy protein and alcohol.

"Keaton, whatever you're thinking of doing... don't. I'm much too fast for you. Now, get into a suit and show me how to ride that board. We've got plenty of time until the tryouts."

"My, Captain, would you like me to start behaving like that too?" asked the leisure droid in an outraged tone - perhaps testing the ground for adapting its behavior.

"No, Sugar, stay the lovely way you are. Venix is just... very, very focused. Last time a saw a woman that focused, she was chasing after

some man. And the more hopeless her chase became, the more she... well, you know how it is."

Venix avoided the captain's eyes. Sometimes she wanted to lash out and scream at people that she wasn't an emotionless robot, her inner life wasn't as visible as on a body of flesh and blood, words could hurt her... but she had learned to give up trying. Her hopes focused on the one man who had seen her feelings on the first attempt. Venix promised herself for the millionth time, that she and he would be together again... even if she had to deal with smugglers and worse scum to get there.

Chapter 19: Bullet Time

His private room was wide, for the flag ship - twice the space of an admiral's quarters, four times larger than a crewman's hold. The crew's private quarters were lined up in a separate centrifuge. During the four-week journey from the Moon to Jupiter, this was the only space of privacy that Argus got.

He entered the room, shut the airtight door, lay down on his body-fitted, naked metal bunk - sheets only irritated his skin - and shut his eyes. He thought about Venix, the night they met, and that seemingly everlasting time of bliss when their minds connected. The memories were quite detailed, and easy to get lost in...

Maybe he could get in touch with her relatives on Venus. He pictured the awful event: "Hi, people. I'm your daughter's new boyfriend. Don't look so frightened... I know I'm shorter than I look on the screens..." He laughed inwardly. Five ship-days to his next mission. In his absence, the flag ship was sending out more remote-controlled fighter-pods to attack defense positions on the rebel moons. Would more people he had never known get killed, for reasons he had not learned? He regarded his hand, remembered how he had nearly bitten through the skin, and focused his vision on the spot.

He found that he could discern details in the skin texture smaller than a twentieth of a millimeter. There was no scar, no blood. The micro-bots inside him had repaired the dent - it was gone. He closed the hand to a fist. There was one way of preventing that hand from pressing the bomb button again... if he had the nerve to do it. The cyborg body was powerful, but far from invulnerable. The arm could get caught in something, torn off, lost in space. He might even survive it. No more "hero" bullshit. Just a war cripple, asking strangers: "Got spare PP for an ex-soldier?"

But he wasn't sure what the cost would be for Venix, or what would happen to Earth if they lost the war. Giving up was easy - but it just wasn't right. For the first time in weeks, he sincerely asked himself: What would Ali have done? He recalled the story he knew so well from the old book, how the 20th-century fighting champion had sacrificed his rightful title to stand up for his beliefs. Ali would have refused to take part in a war he did not believe in... not from fear, but out of personal conviction. Argus still thought he believed in this war, at least enough not to quit. It was important to preserve some sort of safety for the Inner Planets. But at what cost, he asked himself... and the Kansler, in his public speeches, had only suggested that the war must continue until decisively won. That word "decisively" held so many frightening meanings...

The ship's bulletin-board screen informed him that another squadron of fighter-pods had just returned to the docking-bay of the flag ship. The flag ship changed to a wider orbit outside Jupiter's system of moons, and the crew was given an extended leave. Leave? he thought. Where to?

He had an idea, and switched on the room's voice-mail.

"A request to Admiral York and the Kansler: I wish to make a visit to one of the gas-mining stations in Jupiter's atmosphere." He hesitated, for one-thirtieth of a second, then added: "We need this opportunity to raise the morale of those Jovians who are friendly with Terrans, and show that I bear no ill will toward them as a people. We should give them a chance to talk instead of fight. Send mail."

Argus left his room and went to the recreational centrifuge to mingle with the crew. He felt awkward around the higher officers, and avoided them when he could. This was a mixed crew, and large enough to demand adequate diversions. Rumors he had heard a long time ago, told that the Fleet put drugs in the spaceship crew's food to deaden their frustrations and hormone levels during long flights.

Drugs had no effect on Argus-A's electric nervous system... so he had to deal with his drives alone. In a way, not having genitals was a kind of relief - no hormones to cause involuntary outbursts of anger or desire. It had gotten easier not to think about it, though the feelings had not vanished from his mind. If only in his mind, Argus felt a desire for Venix that couldn't go away... for only with her could he be a whole man again.

The directional light strips on the corridor walls pointed out the way to the Recreational Section with glowing green arrows. He walked past scores of men and a few women, all in signal-color coverall uniforms. Orange for pilots, yellow for officers, blue for maintenance personnel - the great majority - red for weapons and reactor engineering; white for medics and physicians; ink-black only for Argus... and plain gray only for the Kansler. Argus caught a glimpse of himself, on a small eye-screen worn on an officer's forehead, walking past the others with his back to the camera. In that brief glimpse, the cyborg got the impression of himself as a man-shaped hole in reality - a cut-out silhouette where a person should have been. The impression stayed in his mind.

The door opened up into the Recreation section, and he paused in the doorway to regard the forty or so people in jogging suits and coveralls, working out and playing games. The drug rumors appeared to be true, for the men didn't ogle the women and the women didn't flirt with the men. Only Argus looked at the women with something like a male interest. He walked in, trying not to make himself big. It didn't help: everyone stared, or tried badly to pretend they didn't stare. As they stared, he noticed, they struggled to get a clear focus of his body, but failed - it was so dark, they couldn't get a fix on his volume. The stares turned into confused drifting glances, and then went past him. He'd become almost a shadow.

In one section of the large centrifuge stood a boxing-ring, where crewmembers worked off their grudges in boxing and kick-boxing bouts. Argus hurt inside when he saw it, and his fists grew tense. The ring wasn't for him anymore.

His visual perception worked so fast that when he listened to and looked at someone speaking, he saw the lip movements before he heard the words, and it got worse with increasing distance. So during the long, boring flight to Jupiter he had taken to a new hobby: lip-reading. A look across the room, and he could easily see what the crewmembers were saying as they lowered their voices in his presence... as if they pretended he couldn't hear.

"Look what just walked in"

----"Fark... he's bigger than on the screen"

"Gina, would you let your daughter marry one"

----"Quiet, he's got super-hearing... now you're gonna get it, big mouth"

"It's the future you're looking at, folks... we're becoming obsolete"

----"What's wrong with you people? He's one of us, he's 'Our 'Gus'"

"Yeah, he's great"

----"But does he ever breathe"

One crewman in orange shirt and baggy pants greeted Argus - not with a salute, because even in the centrifuge section of a spaceship, it was bad custom to waste a good arm and risk losing your balance - and talked to him.

"Hello, Colonel, sir... good to see you here. We don't get the officers so often. They keep to their own section mostly. You really impressed us all out there yesterday, sir. I've never seen a ship maneuver that fast."

This was the first time a private had addressed him off-duty. Again he began to feel noticed by the others, but this time it was the fear of his superior rank that made them watch, not him. "Sir," the smiling crewman said, his eyes flinching ever so little, "would you mind showing us a little test of your speed and strength? We've seen the broadcasts of your tour, but never with our own eyes. If you're fed up with such requests, sir, then I apologize..."

The man backed off a step. And Argus became aware of something new: his acquired habit of standing absolutely still when other people were near, for their own safety, also intimidated them. Also, his inherited flesh-and-blood reflexes were rapidly fading away; he barely blinked at all, and had ceased to "breathe". He gave the man a disarming smile, hoping it didn't appear too fast to seem natural - his facial muscles were somewhat too rapid, and his expression could sometimes change like the frames of a primitive cartoon.

"Yeah, sure. Tell your friends to come closer. Let's find something to demonstrate on."

Instinct, or habit, made him walk along the centrifuge floor until he came to the boxing-ring. The crewmembers began to urge him to step into it. He shook his head in friendly denial.

"It's no use, guys. I could punch off someone's head with a blow. That'd be a mess for the guys in blue to clean up! You got a dummy, or a pugilist robot?"

He had only half an idea of what to do if the crew actually offered him to spar with a droid - sure, he could hold back his strength and speed, but then what was the point of belittling himself and lowering the morale of the onlookers?

After half a minute, the crewmembers in blue carried a device toward the boxing-ring that Argus had not seen before. It mostly resembled the rusty outdoors tripod grill he had used in Australia, when he was a teenager. But the device was twice as large, black and without rust. One man in a red engineer's coveralls explained.

"This is a remote-controlled mini-turret, sir. From the ship's armory. We've got hundreds, most of them were never in use. The mini-turrets were meant for holding positions on hostile surfaces, during a large-scale landing of troops on the rebel satellites. But... they turned out to be too vulnerable to counter-measures. We only use missiles and electromagnetic weapons now." In the second that the engineer spent to pause for breath, Argus figured out what the man had in mind.

"Okay... for a test, fire one projectile against that sand-bag over there. Careful, or you'll puncture the centrifuge."

The engineer hesitated; no other officers but "Colonel Clarke" were present. The sole security officer on duty watched it all, but made no objections. Argus suspected the whole show was staged by Marketing to just seem spontaneous. The engineer put on the remote-control headset and took control of the mini-turret. The device's legs locked its clamps into the floor niches, and the upper lid of the turret lifted itself open. A small gun-barrel inside rotated and took aim at a large sandbag five meters away. The crewmembers cleared away from the area, as the engineer counted to three and fired.

With a rather loud BANG, that caused the entire audience to flinch - the device used an outdated chemical propellant - a metal projectile was

fired and lodged itself inside the sandbag. Argus was the only person in the room who could actually see the bullet move toward its target. His intuition, or what passed for intuition, told him the safety distance he needed to catch a bullet in mid-air. But he wasn't quite sure what would happen if he tried to stop the bullet with just his bare hands. He consulted his internal display and searched for anything about "stress tests".

The cyborg's built-in databank came up with a list of basic recommendations. His titanium-and-steel skeleton could resist so-and-so-much pressure for X seconds; the arm and leg joint motors could press Y number of tons; the outer skin would melt at Z thousand degrees with the internal coolant still working; a sharp object could tear open the skin at such-and-such speed and pressure...

All those data couldn't account for what Argus in a moving state; catching bullets had not been in his training. He spent a whole half minute pondering the problem; the crew began to look confused, for he stood absolutely still like a statue. Then, and his sudden action startled them a little, Argus faced the engineer and enthusiastically pointed at his own forehead.

"Aim at my chest... no wait, I got a better idea. Give me that apple over there!"

A woman in Engineering took an apple from a bowl in a food dispenser in the wall, and handed it to him. Argus stood himself in front of the sandbag, dented the bottom of the apple slightly, and put it firmly on the top of his hairless, ink-black head. He spread his feet a few inches, put his hands in front of his head, facing the gun, and made an urging gesture with his index finger.

"Shoot the apple off my head. You get one try."

Every onlooker stood very still and quiet, as the engineer with the control-headset aimed the mini-turret at the apple on the cyborg's head. He counted to three, and fired. The second bullet flew out from the gun-barrel, pushed by an expanding cloud of gas and smoke. Argus saw the bullet hurtle toward him very fast - he would only get one chance to try his trick. The BANG of the gunfire slouched after the bullet, and Argus heard the bang only after his hands had reached the apple and moved it. To the bystanders, it seemed as if Argus's hands disappeared when the bang sounded, and instantly re-appeared just above his head. The bullet impacted into the sandbag behind Argus's head - the apple on his head appeared to vanish in the same instant. His audience was still disappointed. "Hey," one crewman objected to the woman who had given Argus his apple, "that wasn't a real apple. It was just a hologram! What kind of stupid trick are you trying to pull on us?"

Argus grinned with his set of white artificial teeth, and held up the apple for everyone to see. It was half-squashed, but recognizable - and it had no bullet-hole. The off-duty crew applauded enthusiastically. He was having fun, yet couldn't escape the suspicion that Marketing was staging the event. But if he tested the limits...

"Again, but this time aim at my forehead," Argus told the turret controller.

He remained standing in front of the sandbag, this time with his hands behind his back, and switched to infrared sight.

"One. Two. Three."

Argus... ((O))

...watched... ((O))

...the bullet approach... ((O))

...on a wavefront of hot gas trailing behind it...

And he head-butted the bullet, with a force just about exceeding its impetus. He felt its metal tip pierce the skin of his head, just above where the human-looking face ended, then bounce back from his steel-and-titanium skull. The stunned crew saw the deformed bullet bounce back three feet, before it dropped to the floor. Argus rubbed his sore

forehead, and got a message from his internal display that the skin damage was being repaired. He looked up and saw the faces of the crewmembers: wide-eyed... and not as enthusiastic as after the "apple trick".

He switched to infrared vision and watched the colors of the heat spectrum play on their faces and in their brains. But the looks on their faces told him enough: they were all afraid of him now, not as an officer, or a walking shadow, but as the-thing-to-be-feared. He walked past the livid, silent crew, out of the Recreation section and headed for his own ship. Duty not only called, it offered an escape. His next mission, though still secret to him, couldn't be more than a week away.

The Kansler watched the surveillance records of the scene from his private quarters. He quickly ordered the Surveillance section to send a copy of the filmed event back to the Fleet's Marketing department on the Moon, then erase all records of it happening. This was not how he had intended the staged demonstration to end... eerily close to a suicide attempt. A trickle of sweat began to work its way down the side of his head. The Kansler could not quite put his finger on why, but the event with the bullet was a bad omen. Still, other matters pressed for his attention.

Admiral York called him by holo-presence, and asked what to do about the request to visit Jupiter. The Kansler was, for once, uncertain.

"It could be done," he admitted to York, "but the outcome propagandawise... all bets are off. It could be a boon, putting a mixture of fear, respect and even - I mean it - security in the hearts of those Jovian miners who are queasy about upholding the export route to Earth. They are a funny bunch, Jovians. Could never quite figure them out. So fiercely opposing Terran authority, yet willing to do business with us. Boulder Pi is one -"

The Kansler hesitated there, and a moment's anxiety passed across his middle-aged face like a flash of white over the ruddy skin.

"Sir?" asked the admiral's holo-presence, waiting for him to finish the sentence.

"This is what we do. Islington! Boulder Pi is to be shipped over to the flag ship immediately. Have Control send our fastest long-distance ship to lunar orbit and pick him up."

"But the E.S.S. Ford's just been docked at the Ceres Station for extensive repairs, Kansler. It would take at least three months to -"

The Kansler's face turned a shade redder, as he addressed his deputy directly.

"I did not invite discussion! Strip the Ford of all weaponry and personnel except a skeleton crew, and send it off at top speed to get Boulder Pi. That is a Chancellor's executive order."

"Yes, Kansler. At once."

"As soon as we have that Jovian here, under direct supervision, we can send Argus off to Jupiter. You see what I mean, admiral? 'Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.'"

"Do we have evidence of Boulder Pi being a security risk, Kansler? Without him, our new weapon would never have been."

"That's not important in this matter, admiral. What matters is that Boulder seems a traitor in the eyes of the gas miners, when they see him by my side... and Argus seems to be their friend when he walks among them. Argus has a knack for mingling with the rabble, so let's make use of it."

"Now I understand, Kansler. It's brilliant." He had learned well when to grease his superior's ego. "Play the Jovians against their own, while strengthening their ties to our side. The Marketing department couldn't have come up with a better tactic."

"I am all the tactic that Marketing's got."

Chapter 20: Gone Surfin'

Venix and Keaton, both in spacesuits, stood in the midsection of the packed cargo bay. Captain Foss opened one of the shuttle's cargo hatches; they saw a square of outer space fold out above their heads. They locked their boots into the sky-surfboard, and Keaton gave the captain a go-ahead signal.

Moravia took control of the cargo-section's robotic arm; it slowly lifted the surfboard above the cargo containers, and ten meters outside. The sun was shining like a bright spotlight at the shuttle's left-hand rear. The reddish-brown disc of Mars beckoned in the distance to the right of the ship's nose, brighter but only slightly larger than the surrounding spray of point-like stars in different colors. This was the first trip to Mars that Venix - or Venice, in her previous existence - had experienced.

"Is everything all right out there?" Foss asked over the com-link. "I can only hear one of you breathing."

"She's plastic, Cap," Keaton cut in. "She forgets to fake it sometimes. Bet it's her first time in a suit. At least she can't puke in it... I hate it when beginners do that."

Venix tried to ignore Keaton's sullen hostility. She concentrated on keeping a sense of balance when the surf-board automatically folded itself out - not an easy thing, since her internal gyroscope didn't work in weightless free-fall. The center platform they stood on - three feet wide and fitted with control-handles on thin metal-wire rods - was dwarfed by the canopy of kevlar foil. The foil now rolled out into a curving bird-like shape, ten meters wide and forty meters long. This was the actual "board", on which a skysurfer could "ride" and glide through the upper atmospheric layer in the most dangerous sport ever invented. The mortality rate in the annual Grand Prix had risen to 10% - for every year, the "surfers" took greater risks to perform death-defying stunts and break new speed-records.

"I've seen skysurfing contests on the screen since I was a kid," Venix told Keaton who stood in front of her on the board, "but I can't recall ever seeing you in the top league. What's your best ranking ever?"

Keaton's six-second delay told her everything she feared he would reply.

"Seventy-eighth in the tryouts. Three years ago. Just fifty-seven places from the chosen Grand Prix twenty!"

"Oh my God," she said, "I'm going to die."

"Now, wouldn't that be a shame," he replied sarcastically. "You told us you're a dancer. That's a good start, actually. Skysurfing is a lot like dancing. Your partner... is the atmosphere. It has its own style and flow, and you gotta go with that partner, go with the flow or be fried. Give us a basic jetstream and rub the right way, Moravia."

Moravia punched in the program for the robotic arm that held the board and simulated the uppermost atmosphere of Mars. Immediately, the entire board began to bob and vibrate. The simplistic gauge-plate in front of Keaton signaled their simulated atmospheric entry, gave wind velocity and their own relative speed.

"This is what we call 'rubbing the right way' or 'going downstream'," Keaton explained, while working the control-handles. "I'm skimming the stratosphere, in the same direction as a jetstream - which, by the way, is visible when you use a surfer's special goggles. But this is a perfect vacuum, so fark that for now."

"So 'rubbing the wrong way' means going the opposite of 'downstream'?"

"No, not at all. Pay attention. Going downstream is the beginner's path, but it doesn't score bigtime in the Grand Prix, because your board

tends to be carried by the jetstream and then takes a longer time coming down to the goal-zone. The pros have to play hard and fast, so they generally surf against the jetstream and try to... cut through it with the tip of the board. That's called 'making flames' or just 'cut'."

He made the canopy and the platform dip by ten degrees. The simulated temperature gauge jumped into the danger area. A small laser at Keaton's feet produced a simulated glow of heat along the curved edges of the canopy. Now the whole vehicle vibrated intensely.

"The faster the cut, the lower the risk of burning up the board against the friction. Some sponsors have better heat-shields. A Barton board broke the cut-time record last year, by three seconds, but the rider got a few second-degree burns himself. The heat reached around the board and hit his suit. How much heat can that plastic bod of yours take, inside a surf-suit?"

Unlike Argus, Venix lacked access to internal data on her stamina and heat resistance; whatever she knew, came from experience and instinct. Once, in her cyborg state, she had stepped into a flaming forest-grove to pick up a trapped animal. The temperature readings on her internal display had read 600 degrees at most, but she had gone virtually unscathed, with her hair wrapped in wet blankets. Boulder Pi had told her the synthetic hair would grow back slowly to make up for wear and tear, but she had never dared to test that promise...

"800 degrees Centigrade outside the body, maybe more, but I don't know for how many seconds. My thermostatic system is many times more efficient than a... than organic tissue."

"Do you lose consciousness at lower temperatures?"

"I don't lose consciousness, ever. What about static charges? I have a bit of a problem with that. They can build up in my hair when I pass through a strong magnetic field, and short-circuit stuff that brush against it."

"She's electrifying!" Keaton exclaimed in mock astonishment. "The board itself protects you, no farking problem. But this ain't a brand-name board. I built it from parts. It's customized by me and a few secret collaborators in the industry, to fit the Martian atmosphere. Terran manufacturers are too fixated on the Terran market, they don't care Mars has a much thinner atmosphere. My secret backers and I are convinced that our board can break into the new colonial market, if we prove that thinner boards are better for Mars."

"So you've had it tested and approved there for the big tryouts?"

"Not over Mars, not yet. We're gate-crashing the Martian tryouts. Sometimes it works. The penalty fee is purely symbolic anyway, so I was going to gate-crash and secure a place among the twenty contestants."

Venix thought about it for a subjectively long second. She bore no personal grudge against Keaton; this was his big chance to break out of the unhealthy low-class smuggling trade. It wasn't right of her to ruin his life. But... she could see right through the thin, inflatable helmet of his semi-transparent training-suit, see the way his brain-hemispheres pulsed with heat, with conviction and passion. There was no doubt in there, no chaotic patterns of self-delusion or madness, no lack of activity in the important frontal lobes. He deserved a chance. If it failed, she would simply have to go in the cargo shipments that were dropped over Mars.

Only his heart worried her. She couldn't quite make it out through all the fat that surrounded it, but it seemed swollen, out of shape. And its rhythm... she could hear it beating over the helmet radio with her acute synthetic ear membranes... sounded out of sync. The man in front of her might not know or admit it, but Venix knew now: this might be his very last chance to be in the contest.

"Keaton - I could change my plan. You do the tryouts, not me, and show them that your board works. Then I take your place in the big race, and do the fake crash-and-burn to cover my escape. Once they find out you

had a replacement, pretend you were injured or something, and claim the replacement was anonymous. In any case, you were acting under protest, so you go free. You may not win the Grand Prix, but you'll make a name for yourself, make a good amount of hits. I think your backers and crew would agree it's a fair enough offer."

Keaton turned about and glowered at her perfectly formed face, sharply outlined in the airless sunlight.

"You're taking a big risk, 'cybor-girl'. I could still fail the tryouts, burn the board and go splat. Then you have no cover. No place in the big race."

"I can read your mind. You seem to know what you're doing. Now show me how to make a fast cut."

The rotund, bearded man turned grave, measuring her sincerity, then nodded.

"Typical Venusian, like the captain said. Moravia! Wake up. Let's run the expert simulation."

"We've got plenty of time, man. Why the hurry?" the crewman asked from inside the shuttle.

"Because me and this sulfur-breathing surfer chick, we're going for the gold. We'll show those Barton farkers how to cut a thin stream. Play that tune, stickman!"

Moravia let out a holler - the robotic arm began to twist and shake the skysurfing-board - and he switched on some loud, archaic rock music over the radio. Venix winced at the raw, rapid chords that exploded into her space-helmet; she thought she heard someone mistakenly trying to play a staccato drum-solo on the wrong instrument.

"What is that noise?" she asked, grasping a pair of handle-rods to stay upright.

"Dick Dale and the Del-Tones, cybor-girl! Classic surfer music from the twentieth century, yeah!" Keaton replied happily.

Venix let out her arms and let go of the handles, and let her lean body follow the bucking, vibrating movements of the board as they fell through space toward Mars. She was beginning to enjoy surfing; it wasn't so different from dance, once she got into it.

"Show me how to spin the board!" she asked excitedly.

Chapter 21: Second Bomb Run

Elara is the twelfth of Jupiter's natural satellites, discovered in 1905. Distance from Jupiter: 11,737 kilometers Diameter: 76 kilometers Mass: 7.77e17 kilograms

The group of celestial bodies Leda, Himalia, Lysithea and Elara are all fragments of a parent planetoid, now destroyed. Though unsuitable for permanent habitation, these asteroids are used as key defense points in the supply-routes of deuterium from Jupiter to its larger colonized moons: Ganymede, Callisto, and Europa. After Io, the next target on the Fleet's course is Elara and its manned defense-station with a crew of some twenty Jovians. Since prolonged exposure to cosmic radiation and the extremely low gravity is dangerous even by Jovian standards, the crew is changed every month.

It is virtually impossible to make a surprise attack on the outpost, given its minute size and excellent surveillance range. Every side of the craggy, irregular asteroid is fitted with particle cannons and lasers, dug down deep below the surface. Its strongest defense measure is to emit clouds of reflective aluminum barrage-bubbles, which can deflect the impact of any laser or radiation attack.

The crews of Elara have beaten back two attacks from the Terran Fleet, and have inflicted damage on the flag ship once. No single DF charge has yet scored a direct hit.

Now, as the Elara crew has just been relieved, 23 newly arrived 23 Jovians prepare to encounter the returning Terran Fleet. The flag ship's

stealth measures make it difficult to detect with precision, but there is little doubt about its approximate bearing and orbit. The enemy will fly by close, very close. Closer than they have ever dared before, with a new type of attack craft... easily recognizable from many public propaganda and news broadcasts. And the pilot will be the dreaded "indestructible" Argus-A.

Once he had exited the hangar of the E.S.S. William Jefferson, Argus accelerated his ship as fast as safety allowed, then killed the main booster-rocket and prepared for a close fly-by of the target asteroid. It was not so different from his earliest simulation training, only this time the target would almost certainly fire back - and use counter-measures similar to those of his own ship. If a solid object came through his electromagnetic shield and the Leydenfrost shield, it could punch right through the armor - and quite likely blow up the anti-matter drive within, turning the ship into a miniature sun. His minutes in weightless, free-fall flight passed... he stayed on edge, looking for the smallest approaching wink of light in any part of the spectrum. Bizarrely enough, the most Argus saw was the distant but uninterrupted stream of freight traffic going to and from Jupiter's gas mines.

The flag ship arced off into a smaller orbit, putting another moon between itself and Argus. Soon, he couldn't communicate with the Jefferson anymore... left alone against the enemy, again. The ship's display panels began to show an array of warnings: his presence had been located ever since he left the flag ship, and could be seen even in an optic telescope from any of the neighboring satellites. It was like running with a bullseye painted on one's back.

"Here we go again, Nav. You know the drill." There was not a sound in the airless cockpit, all communication was down to visual. Argus read the screens or received laser-signals into his eyes, while Nav had learned to lip-read his face - all to save time and make their responses even faster than humanly possible.

"Yes, Argus. Plan 'Bumblebee' in progress."

Navbutler proved much more helpful this time, as they had worked out in advance how to share tasks. "Nav" took care of the purely defensive systems, while Argus did the steering and attacking. Under his rapid control, the incoming ship zigzagged and danced about in a complex pattern. He knew he was being fired at from Elara, with invisible laser and particle beams. The enemy fire became visible to him only indirectly, as it brushed past the outer edges of the ship's shields, and set off quiet stroboscopic fireworks of energy. Argus kept ducking the fire blindly, waited for more solid things to try and sneak up on his ship; and yet, no missiles or remote-pods were launched at him.

The target asteroid crawled closer... he could now discern the many guns and shining parabolic laser-shields across its irregular, gray-brown surface. A glittering cloud of what must be aluminum bubbles rapidly spread out in his way, several kilometers ahead.

SHIELD CANNOT GIVE 100% PROTECTION, Navbutler's display text warned urgently. 3 SECONDS TO IMPACT.

Argus rotated the ship very rapidly, so that it fell with its belly first, and fired off the main booster. He throttled it slightly, rotated the ship again, and set off another boost at a different angle. He braked, adjusted, braked...

It took the flag ship command a few moments to understand what was going on. The spy satellites relayed Argus's movements to the Kansler. Just as I had hoped, he thought. By ignoring the "common wisdom" of spaceflight and being deliberately wasteful with his powerful antimatter fuel, Argus had learned to navigate in orbital space as if his ship flew through

atmosphere; he "banked" off his expected orbit with repeated adjustments against the natural fall-orbit. In doing so, Argus created a rapid circling movement around the asteroid, while slowing down enough to eventually turn into the opposite direction.

"I've never seen that done against a free-fall orbit before," Admiral York said. "There's no atmosphere around Elara! Nothing to push against to make that circling movement around an asteroid. Is he flying through some sort of gas cloud?"

"It only seems impossible," the Kansler replied over the command center's comlink. "He's doing it without computer guidance - Argus is fast enough to be a flight computer. Boulder Pi ought to be proud." The Kansler grew silent and bit his lips together, as Argus completed his half-circle, and was about to reverse his course. The Kansler was ready to take Direct Control. His eye-display indicated the time-delay in the control-signals, so that he could send the launch-order at the very right moment. Not for a moment did he trust Argus to press the launch button - but that suited his purposes perfectly. The eye-display flashed GO; he squeezed his fists and triggered the delayed command. A second later, the DIRECT CONTROL prompt appeared on Argus's tactical display. And again someone else took control of his movements. His left hand moved toward the launch button and pressed it - at the wrong moment. The DF charge was ejected at a bad angle, flew out too slowly due to Argus's complex braking maneuvers, and drifted off toward the asteroid one kilometer "below" the ship. Argus smiled inwardly; even if the Fleet could order him to push the button, they could never time it as well as he could. He wouldn't kill more people this time, not before they had had a fair chance of evacuating Elara. The DIRECT CONTROL warning vanished after a second.

His eyes followed the misfired bomb as it was pulled toward the asteroid's rocky surface. It plunged into a hilltop - and detonated, pulverizing a 200-meter wide peak. The entire planetoid lurched a fraction of a degree from the impetus - but the habitats inside remained safe. Argus put his ship on a rapid accelerating course back toward the flagship, right past the asteroid, and felt the G-forces push him into his pilot-seat. An ordinary man would have had all air squeezed out of his lungs from the force, but Argus had no lungs and the cabin was depressurized. He ignored all common spaceflight-sense by not putting his ship on a parallel course with the flag ship's orbit, and then make a rendezvous as their directions and velocities matched. A crewmember on the flag ship later joked, that Argus navigated as if driving a sports car. But as he boosted the ship, the cyborg pilot sensed that the ship was heavier than he expected after the drop - a whole ton too heavy... The DIRECT CONTROL prompt reappeared. Argus thought: What's going on? The tactical display now indicated a second DF charge, and the remote-control forced his hand on the launch button again. Argus was completely taken by surprise; the bomb "package" in the bomb bay, that he thought was identical to the one used over Io, was in fact two smaller bombs, inside the launch-cartridge of a single charge. The Kansler had outsmarted him again!

With the ship on a steady accelerating forward course, the second launch was almost ideally timed. The light DF charge plunged into the asteroid just as his ship flew past at supersonic speed, and drilled itself a mile inside - then it went off. Navbutler activated the electromagnetic shield to protect the ship's rear. In the space of a few seconds, the accelerating ship put several kilometers between itself and the disintegrating asteroid; in that time, Elara inflated into a glowing sphere of molten rock and hot gases. For a moment, the fireball resembled a hot bright gas-planet, complete with swirling clouds - and it was gone, the light dying down to an expanding sphere of darkening gas. Jupiter's Red Spot seemed to watch the event; Argus imagined the spot was an eye, following his flight...

Four seconds later the Direct Control ceased, and Argus roared with open mouth and bared teeth, his face contorted to grimace. In the airless cockpit, the sound of his roaring voice was but a thought in his mind. It occurred to him, that his sense of identity was getting blurred. Everyone calling him "Colonel Clarke" to his face, expecting him to be in a certain way. No one from his former life was around anymore. As if...

His memory of being the not-too-bright boxer "Gus" Thorsen might be the false one, implanted in his mind while he was rebuilt into a cyborg. What if, Argus thought, he really was Haruman Clarke - the stern, cold career officer, but pretended to be "that nice guy Gus" to protect his conscience?

But immediately Gus Thorsen began to fight within him, demanding not to be erased out of existence; in the boxing-ring of the mind, Gus danced about, punched at his thoughts, struggled for attention - and won. The fighter wasn't beaten yet. It was the whole Fleet system that was his enemy, trying to mold him into their "thing", their obedient killing machine...

And a new question stood clear to Argus - he felt foolish for not having thought of it before: What if the accident that killed the real Colonel Clarke was also the Kansler's and the Fleet's doing? No... why intentionally kill an already renowned career officer on his way to become promoted to super-soldier, and replace him with a total, poor nobody like Gus? That didn't make sense, like dragging a person from the street to replace the champ, just because their faces resembled each other. Argus told himself he was going crazy for even thinking such a thing. Things had to make sense, the Kansler too. Then again, this war made less sense all the time.

"Nav?"

"Yes?"

"Found the files I asked for?"

"Wait... your authorization level is still not high enough. I'm sorry, Argus."

"Why am I not allowed access to the files on myself, damn it?"

"Fleetcom authority says all personal files on Haruman Clarke were given top-secret priority from the day he was selected for the Argus Project. All his files were universally closed or destroyed through use of Fleetcom virus programs, by the Planetary Security Act of 2173."

"You said 'he was selected,' Navbutler. Not 'you'."

"Pardon?"

"Do you know something about me that you haven't told me, Nav?"

"I am partly what you make me, Argus. I learn to adapt."

"Then tell me, Nav, buddy... who am I?"

"You are Argus-A. You are who you are."

"Should I like being what I am?"

"Please explain previous statement."

"Take us back, Nav. I need a rest."

Chapter 22: On the Home Front

As seen from telescopes on the other moons of Jupiter, the bright spot of Elara usually seemed like a nearby star. When it exploded, this "star" shone many times brighter... and became an expanding bubble of orange-red gas, resembling a glowing ring from a distance. Thousands of colonists beheld the horrible spectacle. One of them was Cave Pi, in the underground node 2-3-3, the location of the planetary defense council below Ganymede's north pole. A member of the defense council looked to him, with weary eyes that seemed to all but plead out loud: We must surrender. There is no hope.

But without a moment's hesitation, Cave Pi cried out to the council: "They do this! This, and Io! How can surrender now?! Kansler kill us all anyway! Is not conquest, but annihilation! I say annihilate him!" Cries of support, angry and desperate, rose from the council members and those of their relatives who were present. But Cave Pi's wife stood nearby, with their infant in her lap, and she stared at her husband with reproachful eyes. Her lips moved, and formed the word "No!" Cave Pi put a stubby hand across his face; the sight of their child, against the ominous backdrop of a whole asteroid exploding on the screens around them, pushed his mind perilously close to breakdown. His brain felt about to explode too...

Cave Pi left the council and gathered a dozen of his clan members for debate. They went into loud disagreement; most of the women argued for negotiations with the Terrans; the men were evenly split between stronger counter-attacks and surrender. There were no self-described heroes and patriots among them; they merely wanted to survive. The Ganymedean lifestyle offered little space for glory and posturing. After a time, Cave Pi said to them all: "I listen. To all. Our lives at stake, yes. Yes! But what choices? What peace? What slavery? Kansler can do anything to us. Inner Planets don't care. He must be our target! Or we not safe, ever!"

"You hate Kansler personally," an elderly clan member said to him.

"Cave. Your brother Boulder, the traitor. Blurs your judgment. Still I say we can get peace. Trade is key. Blockade, not war."

"So starve," Cave said contemptuously. "Starve children for peace. I give them two months."

His wife and child began to cry; one quietly, the other loudly. Impulsively, Cave put his arms around them both, and practically shoved them out of the council chamber with him. Strata and Cave Pi looked at each other, very close. Their mutual understanding sometimes resembled telepathy, a bond that transcended language. Their child stopped crying, and studied the father's serious face with wide, curious eyes. Cave kissed the infant's forehead.

"Strata, I will share a secret. Agents on Jupiter tell of Argus-A. A monster who bombs bases. He visits the gas-mines soon. If he dies, we can win war. Get peace, but on our terms. If Argus lives... no safe peace. I go?"

"Yes. Go to Jupiter. If you die... what I tell child?"

"That I love you more than my life. Both. Of you."

They embraced each other, and he walked off into an adjacent tunnel. When Strata returned to the council chamber shortly thereafter, the other relatives could see that she had recently been crying. They asked where Cave Pi had gone without telling them... and she merely shook her head, and hugged her infant child tighter against her body.

Cheers broke out among the Fleet crew, soared, then died down, when Argus came into the recreational section. To him, it was a slow-motion performance - much too slow to excite him. He looked up at the large screens, where three-dimensional films showed what resembled his personal ship, flying around Elara.

"ARGUS SMASHES THE ENEMY OUTPOST ELARA!" declared the all-too-loud, near-hysterical host in the official news show, shouting as if the audience of the Inner Planets couldn't understand normal speaking volume. "The Fleet's heroic fighter-bomber pilot, Argus-A, today struck another decisive blow for Mother Earth in the Fleet's campaign against Jovian interplanetary terrorism. The Earth Council has awarded Argus-A the..."

Almost without effort, Argus could spot where the combat footage had been doctored. The Marketing department of the Fleet had made the asteroid appear bigger, better armed, more aggressive... all this a mere

nine hours after the actual attack. And the intercepted communications between Jovians, sounding in the background among fabricated laser-"zaps" and explosions, were also fake: a simplistic caricature of Jovian speech, compared to what Argus snapped up from real radio traffic during flight.

"Terrans revenge our sabotage on Luna! Stop Argus! Shoot Terran cyborg!"

"Target too fast! He'll hit the reactor! Evacuate!"

"Die Terrans!"

"Too late! Aaaargh!"

Argus tried to block out the broadcast sounds mentally, as they made him feel ill. Maybe it was the delayed stress and shock from the mission he had just completed - maybe it was just the pent-up rage at being betrayed and manipulated - but suddenly he doubled over and his midsection went into spasms. He stuck out his plastic tongue and tried to retch.

"Aak - aaak -"

The crewmembers looked at him and flinched, as if he was a bomb about to explode. And for a moment Argus thought he would - that the convulsions in what used to be his stomach could crush his inner workings and short-circuit him. But it was just a fantasy: Boulder Pi had designed the cyborg too well to allow him to "abdomenize" himself to death. The nausea receded; Argus didn't feel cold and sweaty like Gus Thorsen had used to do when throwing up after a tough match. Or maybe a little, in his imagination.

He regarded the silent crew with smoldering, hateful eyes, opened his mouth to speak - then he seemed to change his mind, turned about and stormed out of the recreation section.

Islington, watching the surveillance screens, expressed his growing concern.

"This isn't good for the morale, Kansler, neither here nor to the home opinion. When the crew comes home, they'll talk. And Argus... how can we be certain of his..." He swallowed.

"Stability? Stamina? Loyalty?" the Kansler filled in. "I have complete faith in his patriotism and devotion to Mother Earth. This little show is just... uh... post-combat stress."

The deputy's face went blank, then perplexed, before he grasped what was going on.

"Oh... I completely forgot, Kansler." He made a little laugh. "It was just such a long time ago since I saw this kind of thing..."

"Right," said the Kansler, laughing out loud, "the drugs don't work on cyborgs! Argus is our only soldier who can feel post-combat stress!"

The deputy turned serious: "I'd better inform Boulder Pi before he arrives here, Kansler. He ought to be able to remedy these stress symptoms."

"Leave Boulder to me," the Kansler snapped in a harder tone. "From now on only I speak to him. Now leave me, I need to think."

And while Islington moved toward the exit, skillfully making himself invisible, the Kansler began to feel cold sweat emerge all over his skin. What if his perfect weapon broke down mentally, before his campaign was complete? He was so used to the Fleet drugging its personnel into complacency, he had virtually forgotten to keep check on the mental health of Argus-A. Some kind of appeasement had to be made. On his own, the Kansler changed his previous plans, and decided to actually approve the visit to Jupiter's gas miners that Argus had requested. He felt fairly confident that the miners would not risk one of their own thirty expensive mining stations to assassinate Argus... and if they did and succeeded, at this stage the Kansler's plan could yet proceed with only minor difficulty, in fact just as well. Argus had done well in the war, well enough to become disposable to the Kansler -

and to become a martyr hero, just what his plans needed. He went to bed. But there was danger too, in allowing the visit, one added worry to keep him sleepless through the ship's ensuing night-period... alone with the personal terrors that his grand scheme only seemed to make worse. For he could never confess to anyone in the world, not even his deputy, why he was working so hard to win the war, why he feared its failure so much... and why, when he tried to sleep without the drugs, that fear kept him awake.

Somewhere, in the complex clockwork of events he had spent thirty years putting into place, was a cog that might fail when he looked the other way. The Kansler was not yet arrogant enough to think himself infallible or invulnerable to random events. He thrashed and turned in his bed, racked his mind, but could not figure out what he had overlooked... And he was correct: the blind spot in his intellect made him unaware of one entire half of humanity - and what it was capable of. In the Kansler's mental universe, all women were cattle.

Chapter 23: Tough Mining Town

Picture, if you can, a cigar-shaped zeppelin. Imagine in your mind's eye its shiny outer hull, made of synthetic spider-web fiber, measuring 200-190 meters in length, 100-95 meters in width - depending on winds, air pressure and day temperature. Then multiply this zeppelin by fifty, tie them together in a circular cluster, add scores of smaller airships and gondolas below... and you begin to get an idea of what Kun'Lun looks like upon approach from space.

Argus was taken down into a low Jupiter orbit on a small Fleet ship. Then he boarded a "pumper", one of many regular transport shuttles fitted with inflatable helium balloons and helicopter rotors, and took an even lower orbit. The pumper went spiraling down toward Jupiter's North Pole - and Kun'Lun. On the shuttle radio, he heard a local station play popular songs. One was sung by a choir of Jovians and accompanied by a simple instrument: Seasick Charlie, Had bad luck, Went to Kun'Lun, Had to chuck! Leaned over and threw it up, And the big wind shot it back! Seasick Charlie, has no head, Vomit smashed it - now he's dead!

From far away, Argus spotted the airborne city of Kun'Lun, the northernmost deuterium-mining station, floating above Jupiter's North Pole. The sun never quite set on this latitude, just rushed around the vast horizon, caught in an eternal indecision whether to end or start a proper day. Stirred by the wondrous sight of the city illuminated by the golden sunlight, Argus thought that Kun'Lun literally sailed on the clouds. It was just an illusion, though - the white, yellow and brown cloud masses were thin and could not support any weight. The never-ending winds, less forceful than along the equator yet mightier than any on Earth, carried some of the city's weight as it went round and round the pole...

At this altitude, the mighty horizon's curvature was almost invisible, and the sea of clouds seemed to stretch out into infinity below the dark-blue stratosphere. The illusion was heightened by the fact that Jupiter's extremely rapid rotation flattened out the atmosphere over the poles, and Kun'Lun's fifty-thousand-mile circular route rested on the very top of the North Pole.

Rogan Din, Chief Security Officer of Kun'Lun, stood waiting to meet Argus as his pumper was towed in below the zeppelin section marked 01-ADMINSEC. Rogan was very, very short for a Terran. He might just about reach up to Argus's waist if he stretched his thick neck - which he didn't. The man wore a fur-lined pressure-suit with a motorized endoskeleton, and a robo-walker around his waist supported his posture.

On his feet were the smallest electric roller-skates Argus had ever seen; he imagined they were a last resort, in case the man got too exhausted by the strong gravity. His protective mask, covering his whole face, was entirely transparent. No one carried oxygen-packs; the entire habitat was pressurized and filled with oxygen. But the indoor temperature in this badly insulated plastic city fell well below -70 degrees Centigrade.

The squat, energetic Din enthusiastically shook hands with the much taller cyborg, and grinned with what seemed sincere joy; The man didn't even attempt to look up as he talked to Argus, which was uncomfortable: Din seemed to be looking straight at his crotch all the time.

"Welcome, welcome to Kun'Lun, Colonel Clarke... or should I call you 'Argus-A'?"

"Whatever is the least tiresome for you. The gravity up here is not so strong as I expected, but it must take a strain on you. How do your workers cope with feeling so heavy, when they're so small?"

"The gravity of Jupiter puts a strain on any body, Colonel - Jovian or Terran. All miners wear pressure-suits and endoskeleton reinforcements, and are fed a special diet to counter it.

"In fact, it is precisely because Jovians are so short, that they endure Jupiter better than us. Terrans, Lunarians, or Venusians, even when they use all the counter-measures, get 'drunken feet'. If your heart lies more than ten centimeters from your head, and you come here to Kun'Lun, head pressure drops but increases in the lower body. It's called 'drunken feet' because of the symptoms: blood-swelling in the feet, slurred speech, walking difficulties... and eventually brain damage."

Argus smiled as he listened on, for now he understood why Rogan Din appeared to be watching his midsection while talking: Jupiter's high gravity, even here up in the stratosphere, made it unwise to move one's head or eyes so much as an inch upward... unless one was a cyborg with superhuman strength and no blood pressure concerns. Funny, Rogan was abnormally short by Terran standards, but he seemed to think of himself as "a real Terran" nevertheless, and also extended his delusion to include Argus among the "pure breed". Hey Rogan, Argus thought, better watch your back, or those miners might push you over the edge...

"Please let me take you on a tour, and show a little of the mining process. Of course you know all there is to know, but please - humor me. I regret to say, Colonel, that you may only stay here for a few hours - the weight restrictions here, you see, are quite severe, and the new shift of workers, came in just before you did, was a few kilos heavier than expected..."

"'Scuse me, Rogan," Argus interrupted, while they crossed a swaying, narrow rope bridge between two zeppelins, inside a transparent inflated plastic tunnel. "The Jovian miners don't talk to you very much, do they? I can imagine it gets lonely here after a while..."

"Painfully obvious, isn't it?" the chief security officer snapped, laughing nervously. "Have you heard them talk? It's gibberish: blublublublub... like fast-forwarding a film. And they have this peculiar smell..."

"Where is your staff?"

"I have a few small robots for surveillance. Weight restrictions, you know..."

"But - you alone, keeping an eye on the miners?"

"Oh, but there's one Terran security officer on each of the mining stations! We network constantly! Smuggling, cheating with the gas quotas, suspect activity... we stay on our toes, I mean, metaphorically."

"Doesn't it get too lonely?"

"Really, Colonel. I can download Terran entertainment simulations all the time; I am watching the official news on my implant now, as we

speak. It says you'll be awarded for teaching those terrorists a -
"You were going to show me the mining process," Argus broke in; he
couldn't stomach more anti-colonist talk.

"Yes, yes! Right. The folks back home often misunderstand gas-mining,
they think we literally scoop the deuterium right up from the ocean of
metallic hydrogen beneath our feet, and just... beam it up into space.
It's not quite that simple... metallic hydrogen isotopes have to first
be properly ionized and skimmed off the solid core. The deep-core robots
use methane-lasers.

"Only then can the quantum-converters teleport the ionized proton
isotopes up to the receptor disks, where they are converted back to
ordinary matter. Teleportation is still very unsafe and crude, the mass
loss is ninety-two percent... and that's an improvement over the way it
was forty years ago, when the mining began! There, below to the west,
you can see the towing-cables for the receptors. The cables are one
thousand miles long... and look up! There goes another load of freshly
reconstituted deuterium up in its own balloon-transport! A freighter is
scheduled to hook it up in just a few hours..."

The tour of the city, the mining-process, and the amazing view from the
clouds actually excited Argus. Kun'Lun truly was a marvelous feat of
engineering and can-do spirit, daring the second most hostile
environment in the Solar System after the Sun itself. It was also
bitterly cold - around -100 degrees Centigrade. The faraway, shrunken
sun hit Argus with only a fraction of the heat of an ordinary day in
Australia. The intense cold actually made his brain work even better...
but his artificial muscles felt more sluggish and had to be constantly
heated by his own internal batteries so as not to grow stiff. Argus
finally decided to demand a chance to talk to the miners in person, as
he had asked for before the visit.

Just then, one half of the sun sank below the immense horizon, and Argus
forgot to speak. In this quasi-sunset, every feathery cirrus-cloud in
the seemingly endless sky became fully visible, as a sheet of golden and
purple threads. And on top of those, the Jovian northern lights also
emerged - ten thousand times more powerful than those on Earth. The
stretch of sky over which the northern lights illuminated the
stratosphere, all visible from Kun'Lun, could house Planet Earth more
than ten times over! Curtains of flaming, flickering energy seemed to
assault the entire universe with bombardments of fire, with the floating
city trapped just where the energy showers faded out...

Even the busy miners, and their many smaller work-airships, seemed to
slow down to admire the phenomenon. But in a few minutes, the wandering
sun had risen again, and the overhead sky returned to its normal deep-
blue tones.

"Wow," was all Argus managed to say.

"I see the northern lights set the sky on fire once a day..." Rogan
said, "...and I never get tired of it. It really makes the job worth it.
But you wanted to meet some miners. Right. I have checked and selected a
few loyal ones who... whoa! Hold on."

The entire platform and gondola on which they stood suddenly lurched;
warning lights went on all over the floating city. Rogan activated his
robo-walker, and eight thin legs extended out to support his feet.

"It's nothing, Colonel," the struggling Rogan assured him, "just minor
turbulence caused by atmospheric movements. Sometimes it catches a small
airship, and it is dragged down into the clouds, but they as well as the
main complex has altitude thrusters powered by laser-transfer, so we are
quite safe..."

The chief engineers called Rogan over the comlink, and informed him that
one airship had just been damaged and was now drifting off course -
already half a kilometer away, and soon beyond rescue. In an irritated

tone, he told the engineers to send out a rescue craft and tow it in. Rapid conversation quickly established that this could not be done until it was too late. Argus listened in, in the artificial atmosphere of the gondola, and then addressed the engineers.

"Give me a long, strong power cable and a couple of emergency jetpacks, and I'll try to recharge their thrusters manually."

"No-no," one of the engineers objected in his rapid, nasal talk. "Winds out there tear you apart! Jetpacks last only fifteen seconds this gravity! And you heavy - three hundred K plus!"

Argus snapped back in rapid fashion, catching up with Jovian speed-talk: "I ten jetpacks, then. Tie together, hang a harness under. Hurry up the cable, shorty! I meet you Section Five, in seconds. And clothes, my size if you have."

Argus went to an airlock as fast as the flimsy floor allowed, and exited out into the cold, howling open air outside the gondola. He clicked a steel-hook around a cable, and slid off toward the next zeppelin section. Rogan Din froze in horror and stared after him; should the Kansler learn that his top soldier had fallen into Jupiter's depths, Din's fate would equal that of "Seasick Charlie".

Chapter 24: "He Flies Through the Air With the Greatest of Ease!"

The workers - all Jovians - proved quick to accept the orders that Argus had given; but the looks they gave him were not entirely admiring, and he couldn't help but think they partly hoped he would get killed. He was still, for all practical reasons, the Terran enemy - and one reckless doomed rescue attempt would not turn their minds. He decided not to give a damn. Unknown to Argus, Cave Pi moved among the miners, having arrived shortly before Argus under a false identity. The request for jetpacks gave him a perfect opportunity for sabotage. Momentarily, the equipment was in his hands, being assembled, and he knew the other workers would look the other way if he cut something with his wrist laser. He had five seconds to make his move.

"Faster!" Argus called out in the cold, thin air, and Cave threw him a quick, scared glance. No water vapor came from the cyborg's open mouth, even when he spoke. Not human, thought Cave Pi. The Kansler's puppet, shouting the Kansler's orders. Then he noticed how Argus was pointing urgently at the drifting airship out in the clouds, and how the cyborg kept following it with his artificial eyes that did not need a protective face-mask. Four men lost, to save my family. What does that machine care about us? It's worth it, it's worth it, it's...

He waited too long, and his opportunity was lost; Argus started to watch his every movement. Cave Pi and the other miners finished assembling the improvised jetpack harness, undamaged.

He turned to the taller, ink-black figure that stood a few feet from him, and said quickly: "All done. Ship gone in half a minute or less. Go." With that, he and the other miners quickly evacuated the entire inflated chamber.

Cave heard a miner in the crowd ask: "Can he?"

Another miner said in the ensuing silence: "No. He Charlie."

The meaning of "Charlie", in miner slang, was never more obvious.

Argus slipped into the harness, tried to avoid thinking how incredibly far below the "ground" was, lifted the jetpack bundle, and cut open the transparent plastic wall. It peeled like a burning cinder, and the raw atmosphere of Jupiter tossed him and his jetpacks out into the clouds.

The fall was so intense, the wind so forceful, it frightened him. He instinctively held his breath - as if it would make a difference - and ignited the ten jetpacks. On his internal display, the warnings appeared fast:

DANGER! BODY TEMP DOWN 40% AND SINKING EMERGENCY HEATING ON - TIME LEFT 20 SEC WARNING! IF BODY TEMP SINKS BELOW -100 DEG, SUPERCONDUCTING STATE

OCCURS BODY MAY ABSORB SPONTANEOUS STATIC CHARGES RISK OF SYSTEM FAILURE

The jetpacks worked, and with his superhuman reaction speed Argus was able to steer it quickly enough to overcome the winds. A normal human would have been blown way past the drifting airship in a few seconds. To Argus, it was like swimming through a raging river, and the power cable that stretched out after him twisted and dragged in the never-ending storm; it might not hold after all. He switched to infrared, then ultraviolet vision as he passed through a methane cloud and dimly saw the airship a kilometer away, a few hundred meters below.

The drifting ship with its crew of four had powerful engines, a large helium balloon, and normally received energy by laser-transfer from the many satellites above. But the sudden turbulence had disturbed its position enough to disrupt the energy feed, and as it drifted into the cloud layers, less and less laser energy got through the clouds to reach the ship's receptor disk. The airship crew sat silent in their work-cocoons, still in radio contact with Kun'Lun, desperately trying to raise their ship back into the light. But without an influx of power, it was impossible...

Something hard hit the hull of the ship. It jolted a little, and they all started; then they heard another hit, and three rhythmic, smaller blows.

Outside, clinging to the airship's plastic hull, Argus not only had to grab the railings of the hull with all his might. He also had to bend his lower body outward, so as not to burn a hole in the ship with his jetpack. He spent a second pushing with the jetpack and himself against the ship, but dared not try harder, for he felt the hull might tear apart at the pressure. He spotted one of several receptor disks on top of the airship, and directed more power to his arms. The railings creaked as he rapidly climbed up along them like a humanoid spider, twenty meters in less than seven seconds, and reached for the power cable drum at his waist. The thin, very strong elastic cable was now used up, and its full length of 1.5 kilometers began to stretch between Argus and the floating city above. He had only a few seconds to connect it to the power feed.

From the thickest, darkest nearby cloud, an electric charge materialized, and engulfed the airship instantly. Only a fraction of a second later, the crack of thunder sent vibrations through the entire ship, and Argus as he dangled on top of it. Several smaller electric charges, fully visible as blue energy patterns across the airship hull, passed over his black outer skin, and he shut his eyes hard. Some of the electric charge passed through the skin and into him - it hurt like fire and cramp multiplied by ten. He recalled what someone had once said to him: It's all in your mind, Argus! He did not have to lose his hold unless he let it happen. He could ignore the pain, as long as the electric shock wasn't strong enough to override his own muscle control. There it was, just below the receptor disk, an isolated power socket made to fit the one on his power cable. He pulled the cable toward it - the cable began to stretch dangerously hard - only a few centimeters would do it - he pulled harder, concentrating all available power into his arms, until he thought the very metal skeleton would snap - and the sockets connected. The ship's engines hummed with the power surge, and the airship began to lift itself out of the clouds. Argus held the cable in place for a few more agonizing seconds, until the lamps on all the receptor disks lit up green; the ship was receiving full power from the satellite network again, and some extra power to manage lifting the added weight of Argus. He untied his now spent jetpack bundle, and saw it plunge into the clouds, drawn away on the ever-present winds. That could have been me, he thought.

For a very brief moment just before his success, Argus considered putting his own hand into the airship's emergency socket to bridge the last small distance, and let the power cable feed through him into the

ship. Had he done so, the ensuing overload might have killed him - and afterwards he asked himself, if he had truly been ready for that ultimate sacrifice to save four men. Thinking of Venix being left alone, he wasn't sure he would have done it.

A few minutes later, when they had flown close enough to the floating city and been towed in by other ships, Argus let go of the railings and hauled himself into an airlock, which shut itself around him. Then he curled up on the deck and groaned; his massive body began to shake, or rather vibrate and shake; his teeth rattled in his jaw, and he rolled around like some stiff toy. Argus wondered if it was just the mental shock that made him shake so badly, or the artificial muscles loosening up from the cold Jupiter atmosphere plus the intense strain. Later, he came to understand it was all three things combined. He let the fit come and go, and after a minute he managed to stand up again.

"That does it," he groaned, "this is my last visit to Jupiter." He became aware of the many Jovians looking at him from various transparent sections of the floating city, from the passing airships, and the crew of four that were being helped out of the landing dock one section away. Someone shone a spotlight at him. Rogan Din's voice over the city's loudspeaker system warned that the section Argus stood in was dangerously near overloaded with people, and commanded people to evacuate the section before it collapsed. Reluctantly, and in remarkable silence, the workers obeyed. The gravity prevented them from looking over their shoulders as they walked away, so they moved backwards... Argus retreated into the section, away from the spotlight, and told Rogan over the comlink: "I'll be heading back to my shuttle right away. Just give me a minute to recharge."

"Yes, yes, no problem. An amazing rescue action. You'll get a medal for this, the workers are in -"

Argus shut off the intercom link and found a wall niche where workers used to expose themselves to a small sunlamp, for health reasons. He turned it on and let his receptor membrane soak up the ultraviolet rays. Next best thing to a shower, thought the cyborg... and carefully turned around. Nearby footsteps, felt through the thin floor, alerted his attention.

On the other side of the corridor stood a sole Jovian worker.

"You Argus-A?" asked the man.

Chapter 25: Heroes

"You Argus-A?" the man quickly repeated in a sterner tone, as if to reassure himself - or as if Argus had not heard him. He was a pale, sturdy adult midget with a large, thick black beard and a serious face. The man's eyes seemed distracted, as if some thought kept interfering with what he saw before him. In infrared vision, Argus could only sense fragments of the fluctuating tensions in the miner's compact frame... beneath his thick clothing, pressure-suit and transparent face-mask. The Jovian apparently was in mental turmoil, but Argus also sensed two conflicting impulses. The cyborg pretended to be calm and still - which was easy enough - while carefully watching the miner's every movement.

"That's me. And you are?"

"Proxi. Lode Proxi, Mining Engineer Class A." The man's infrared color shift clearly showed that it was a lie. "My second shift Kun'Lun. You... saved our men." That wasn't a lie. Argus nodded lightly - yet, the miner's question felt like a vague accusation. "Why?"

"Why not?"

"A Jovian saying: 'For three good reasons, do it. For two good reasons, big mistake. For one good reason, you're genius or idiot.'"

Argus laughed at (thought he) the clever joke; then he stopped, a little

too abruptly (but his cyborg construction sometimes did that) and realized that Lode Proxi wasn't joking at all.

"Okay, Lode Proxi... reason one: Only I could save them right then. Reason two: Doing nothing would not have improved Terran-Jovian relations, and I want this war to end just as badly as you do. Reason three: It seemed the right thing to do. I could think up more reasons, but they basically amount to the same thing: I want to do what is right."

"Then tell me, Terran: is the war right?"

"It must end soon." He spoke faster, adapting his speech. "Looks like only the Inner Planets will win, but in the end better for everyone. When it's over, trade can go normal, and all go back to way it was -"

"But it won't, Argus-A! It all changes! The war can end now! We tell the Inner Planets every day: Stop the attacks and we can resume normal relations. We can even take back our claims for unlimited independence." It seemed the Jovian felt insulted by Argus's attempt to "talk the talk." So much for trying to be nice, Argus thought. He spoke faster still, but switched vocabulary back to the Terran idiom.

"Why do your representatives persist in demanding independence? I don't see the point, because all planets depend on each other. We can produce the things and food that you can't, you can produce the deuterium we can't. Whether you call yourselves 'independent' or 'colony' makes no difference out here."

"You wrong, Terran! Liar, or fool! The Fleet dictates terms of peace for Outer Planets. Every negotiation failed. For one reason: Fleet always refuses to change one term."

"Which term?"

The miner punched up a quote from the computer on his sleeve, and read it: "'Clause Twelve. The Chancellor of the Outer Defense Ring Charter is appointed Executive Protector of the Jupiter Sector. The title grants him the power to veto any administrative decision, to make governing decrees, plus a ten-year concession to maintain law and order in the sector.'"

Argus turned the quote around in his mind, wresting the true meaning from its dense prose. No, it couldn't be that simple. Nobody could have intended that... the people back on Earth would have stopped it. And it was just words, open to interpretation. Argus replied - and the miner seemed a little surprised at this response - almost before Cave had finished speaking.

"I cannot believe it means what you think. Not to the Inner Planets, anyway. It is not our intention to make the Kansler a... I don't know the word for it..."

"You poor Terrans forget how Earth was in Century Twenty-One. People elected ambitious men to control them. Called it 'government' - it's gone now. Planets too big, too free, too rich to govern. Quantum computers made better bureaucrats, replaced human government. But ambitious men still here. We Jovians have councils, when necessary. But no elections. Council duty involuntary. Picked by the computers for competence. Men who enjoy control not allowed. Council duty is unpleasant. But is... the right thing to do."

"The Kansler isn't a..." It was like trying to name something there wasn't a word for anymore. "You know what I mean. He was chosen to defend, to protect."

"Then why does he not? Why maintain terms of peace that make him a... controller of Jupiter with ten years total power? Is no other power in this sector to equal the Fleet. When he is in control here, can anyone control Kansler? Why not ask him. Ask why the war began."

"I know why the war began!" Argus retorted, but even as the words flowed from between his lips, he doubted them; Cave Pi heard it in Argus's voice. "The terrorist attacks by Jovian separatists started it all. And they haven't stopped. Like when Colonel Clarke was..."

A terrible idea occurred to Argus, so bizarre he suspected he was finally going over the edge... and he usually wasn't inclined to fits of paranoia. But the idea fit the chain of events perfectly. Haruman Clarke, who just happened to be of identical height, age and appearance, just happened to crash-land at exactly the same place where Gus worked his nightshift... and just happened to get killed while Gus just happened to survive. He had to investigate the matter for real, even if the accident still frightened him so much he'd rather repress the memory...

"Honestly, Terran: I don't know if any terror attacks were by my people. I know only that Jovians are still sending deuterium to your planets. If we stopped the export - right now - Inner Planets start starving in about eighteen months. But so do we."

Outside, another huge balloon load of deuterium shot up from the clouds beneath their feet, and floated upward to be collected by the shuttles up at the stratospheric rim. It would take that load about seventeen months to reach Earth on the slow cargo routes.

Cave Pi felt awkward for talking more than was proper among Jovian colonists. He wanted to look up into the cyborg's face to judge his expression, but the gravity and the thick collar of his suit made it too exhausting. Argus looked around himself, and motioned to leave. He leaned down, focused on the miner who stood in his corner - and, as if he had read his mind, gave him a few parting words.

"Tell them... your people back home... that I may be the last man standing between Jupiter and Earth. Think about it."

With that, he moved out of the room so fast that the floating quarters shook a little. Cave Pi made a sigh of relief, and punched in the code that disarmed his hidden bomb. He opened a small vent in the transparent wall and slipped the bomb into it. As he shut the inside lid, the outer lid opened, and the bomb dropped into the clouds.

Cave thought about it, and no matter how much he tried to reason against it, that enemy soldier was right. But Cave would live another day to see his wife and child. Then it struck him what Argus had tried to say. His epiphany was crowned with a spoken curse.

"Hot Io... he is human!"

Chapter 26: Sumo Space Surfers Go To Mars

On news-screens across the Solar System, from the domes of Mercury to the outposts of Neptune, broadcasts from the Skysurfing Grand Prix were on-screen everywhere. In 3-D, in small eye-screens, in video implants, on clothes covered with printed screen displays. The running commentary on the race sounded through millions of tiny ear-piece radios, for those whose eyes were exhausted from the visual overload of the 22nd century, or for those who lived in the poorest colonial settlements. More popular even than the traveling pygmy-chimp circuses, more loved than the weekly Mutilation Fighting bouts, skysurfing had become the ultimate sport of the age, because the danger was 100% authentic. One false move, and the surfer was burned to a crisp; if fatigue got to him as he flew down in the stormy Martian air, he might fall to his death.

Unlike their predecessors of the two previous centuries, 22nd-century skysurfers were all obese; this was a necessity. The heavy rider created a stable center in the otherwise very light kevlar board, when the jetstreams of the stratosphere tried to twist and turn it during hours of downward glide-flying from space to ground. Those few elite surfers who had survived several championships resembled seasoned sumo-wrestlers - with their own codes of conduct, their own communities, and entourages of devoted groupies. Shortly before the new Grand Prix, ruling two-time champion Ronnie "Big" Mack Hansen died of a stroke, after attempting to bed a record sixteen mistresses in one night (his weight at time of death: 401 kg). Hansen was mourned by an entire Solar System.

Kolya Keaton had mourned too - while inwardly hoping "Big" Mack's untimely demise would improve his own feeble odds for glory. A skysurfing champion normally wasn't made in one day - which did not deter scores of lesser talents from participating in the big yearly tryouts. Most of them were Terrans, sponsored by Terran wealth, while the smaller planets produced a handful of contenders. Truth was, every champion but one was born on Earth... a source of never-ending resentment among colonists.

Guided by the Martian Traffic Control Authority, Foss let his aging shuttle slide into an orbital slot, with only a mile between him and other waiting ships on parallel course. Two thousand beacon satellites formed a ring of lights around Mars, marking out the official tryouts orbit. For the Martian Traffic Control Authority stationed on the moon Deimos, the chaos of the Tryouts was only matched by that of the Grand Prix one week later.

On the sudden arrival of a new directive from Traffic Control, Foss and his crew grew more nervous than usual:

ALL TRYOUT CONTESTANTS ARE TO BE INSPECTED, CONTROLLED AND IDENTIFIED BY THE MSF AUTHORITY UPON LANDING IN THE DESIGNATED GOAL AREA.

REFUSAL TO ACCEPT INSPECTION UPON LANDING WARRANTS USE OF DEADLY FORCE FROM THE MSF.

GEN. VLADIMIR ZEDONG-PETAINE MSF COMMANDER

"Fark!" Moravia and Keaton spat as one, reading the message repeatedly, as they prepared for the race. Keaton had mounted his board inside the shuttle's cargo bay. Both his board and racing space-suit were garishly painted with the logo of his sponsors. "TIME TO WIN! GOLAN-NORRIS DELTA BOARDS," read the green-and-blue lettering. The suit was thicker and better insulated than the training-suits of the previous weeks; Venix was unable to see through it in her infrared vision.

She sat in the airlock just outside the cargo bay, ready to hide in case the shuttle would be boarded, and watched Keaton - alternately through a wall monitor, and through the airlock's porthole window. Foss watched over his crew from the cockpit. On his orders, the leisure-droid kept Venix company, so that he could concentrate during the stressful flight.

"My, there are many of those shuttles in orbit. I hope there isn't a collision, 'cause it would make an awful mess."

"Sugar," Venix asked the wide-eyed leisure droid, less in anger than in curiosity, "I have to confess I have a... difficult relationship to androids and robots. I get angry with them, especially if they touch me. Relax, I won't hurt you. It's just that... no, how could you understand? You don't have a real brain."

Sugar, whose electronic brain's intelligence was almost on a par with a Bonobo's - only much more articulate - leaned her head to one side and pouted at Venix. Sugar usually said something when she pouted, something cute and vacuous. This leisure droid, for the occasion dressed in old spaceman coveralls, had curves considerably more voluptuous than those of Venix, and Sugar's showed quite well through her rough clothing. But, Venix thought, I guess we both have the same type of foam stuffing in our curves, so that we feel more like flesh-and-blood women. Maybe I could borrow some of hers. Venix quietly steeled herself to endure the dumb-blonde lines that she had come to expect from the droid.

"I feel sorry for you, Venix," came the innocent-sounding line. "I can see you're unhappy. I can see in infrared like you, so that I can tell how people feel. It's what I was made for, to understand people's needs so that I can please them. It took some time for me to adjust my sensors to your cyborg construction, but now I can read you."

"It took you several weeks to figure that out? I feel sorry for you."

"You're feeling alone, unloved, and you miss someone... terribly. You have a hard time connecting with other people who are not cyborgs, and

so you turn against intelligent machines... I think it's called compensation, but I'm not very good with those words."

Sugar kept a respectful distance in the narrow, oblong airlock, and she must have detected the rising tension in Venix, for she held herself close to the exit-hatch. For a few seconds Venix stared at the monitor and the race preparations, until she couldn't contain herself any longer. She pivoted around and glowered at Sugar. Her voice, though synthetic and well-modulated as always, almost broke.

"Does it make me more human, Sugar? That I hate? How can I know it's a real emotion and not a program? Or am I just playacting emotions, to prove that I'm not a plastic doll made to please? And even if I know I'm a real person and not a machine, how can others know?" Without letting Sugar answer, she added: "Only one person really knows me. Only one man can."

"Oh... who's that?"

"Please don't ask."

"Well, you should count yourself lucky for that person, Venix. Not many people ever find someone who understands them. I can read you, but I can't say I understand you."

Venix held a finger to her lips, and the android fell silent. The wall screen was showing the many contestants' shuttles, finally lined up for the race to start.

"This is getting to be a record turnout," Foss told the crew over the internal com-link. "Over fifty contestants are in the clear for takeoff! I can even spot one from planet Mercury. Ready, Keaton? Got the goal point? I'm opening the cargo bay now."

"All clear, Cap! The jetstream readouts are looking good." He wore goggles that enabled him to see the winds in false colors. "I can cut them like a laser through cheese!"

"Surf's up!" Moravia shouted, and the large cargo bay doors began to open. He began to lift Keaton and his board on the shuttle's robotic arm... and stopped it.

"Cap!" he shouted over the radio. "Keaton's got a cramp in his left arm. He can't move it. Oh no... I told him not to take those shots! I told him they were bad for his heart! Keaton! Get off the board right now!"

"I was afraid something like this would happen," Venix said urgently.

"Sugar, help me get him in and take off his suit."

Three minutes later, the delayed starting-signal came over the radio.

The string of lights from the ring of two thousand orbiting beacon satellites began to blink in unison, creating the illusion of lights running around the planet in a westward direction.

From fifty shuttles of varying size, from several planets, the surfboards were unhooked from robotic towing-arms and fell forward, carried by their momentum. Mars' gravity began to pull, dragging them inevitably down toward the thin, thin upper atmosphere; in just seconds, the boards would get hot from the friction created by their enormous speed.

The surfer wearing the Golan-Norris emblem, seemingly as bloated as the other contestants in their painted space-suits, showed off a little just as the first atoms of atmosphere hit. By a twist of the legs, the rider made a 360-degree sideways flip - not entirely unlike a water-surfer on Earth.

"Look, Keaton," Moravia said, pointing excitedly at the wall monitor in the shuttle's sick bay. "She made your trademark flip, the one we taught her. And your board is doing great! Everybody will remember Golan-Norris after this race."

Keaton's smile turned into a wince, and his entire frame shuddered. In

the weightless, stable orbit the shudder created a rippling, wave-like movement across his free-floating layers of fat.

"Is the heart-medicine working?" Foss asked him. "Are you feeling better?"

Keaton nodded, almost imperceptibly, and as he spoke his phrases grew shorter and fainter, as if he ran on dying batteries: "Yeah. Fine. But. It's not me. Her. She did it. Best pupil. I ever. Had. Sorry guys. Shouldn't have. Taken those. Shots. You're. The. Be -"

Again he screwed up his hairy, rotund face, and it froze in an expression that resembled worried embarrassment - as if he hadn't wanted to offend his company with this unexpected, fatal heart failure.

"I knew it'd happen one day," Moravia blubbered, clutching his dead comrade's arm. "He was too deteriorated from the long flights and tried to drug himself into shape with those bad growth hormones. I warned him, the fat dumb..."

Sugar hugged the stony-faced Foss and the sobbing Moravia; a hologram simulated tears on her pale plastic cheeks.

"Look," she said after a while, "Venix is on the screens."

Chapter 27: Burn, Cyborg, Burn!

The many commentators throughout the Solar System, following the tryouts through innumerable satellite cameras, quickly noticed the Golan-Norris board. Its previously undistinguished rider "Kolya Keaton" - seemingly out of nowhere - made all the other 49 skysurfers look like amateurs. Mad Mort Southlee on the Moon, retired Mutilation Fighting champion turned sports pundit, made a more than usually gravel-voiced running commentary.

"This is something new! Keaton's track record until now was a no-show. Can that really be him on the Golan-Norris XL? Oh my Goddess, he made a double dip at the one-thousand temperature mark! Watch the replay, it was so fast the eye can barely follow."

From the Martian capital, the stalwart radio voice of Barking Bart Mahir saluted the new surfing star with his trademark howl.

"Waa-ooou! Roll over, Big Mack Hansen! There's a new champ coming and his name is Kolya Keaton. He seems impervious to heat - edge of his board almost white hot, and he pushes the angle of descent even steeper - look at the also very promising contender, also Terran, on the orange-and-green Barton board... he's trying to push his board steeper to catch up... can he..? Nooo! The poor man on the Barton pushed it too steep and burned up... let's see if the rescue team can pull him out of the molten ball... he'll be the first casualty this year... but hey, watch that Keaton go!

The Fleet's own official long-time commentator, the pneumatic Olga Oh, hired to promote Terran athletes, made this another occasion to trumpet the supremacy of the motherworld.

"The Terran rider is magnificent, truly the pride of Mother Earth... there, Keaton broke the official speed record! A Terran broke the universal skysurfing speed record! His board is still glowing red from the heat, but he keeps pushing on! Every true Terran is behind him, the new coming Solar Champion! The judges are telling him to slow down, if he's going to land safely... he's braking down to subsonic speed now... no wait, he's off course... Keaton's heading away from the landing area, but it won't change his splendid victory... what's this? The satellite cameras can barely follow, he's zigzagging like crazy... his helmet's come off! He's got... a white suit and a red helmet, it seems... he's getting out of the suit, but - what? The board turns up riderless! Where'd he go?"

Venix dived through the thin Martian air. By now the friction of

atmospheric re-entry had faded off, only the cold air cooling her body. At the worst part of her surf-board dive, her skin temperature had risen to 400 degrees inside the space-suit - but her previous experience of running into a burning forest made her confident. And the transparent plastic helmet inside the suit had prevented her coppery hair from melting.

Now she took off the helmet as she glide-dived through the air, and let the long hair flutter freely in the wind. Static electricity built up in her flowing hair, and she felt a faint tingle in her scalp. Venix noticed that some of the static charge was being absorbed by the receptor-membrane in her skin, charging her batteries. Good. She had a feeling she'd need all the energy she could get after she landed.

She let herself body-glide for a few minutes in the low Martian gravity, slowing down the fall. The skeleton and muscle alloys made her heavy and dense; she strained outward, tried to stretch herself out until she wondered if her metal bones would pop out of the their sockets, and it actually hurt, for the nerve threads were being stretched dangerously. Venix looked below for some sort of lake or stream to dampen the impact. Humidity she could see, but no glitter of water, only ice sparkling from the highest peaks. She measured her velocity as she strained, and the seconds seemed to pass much faster than usual...

Finally, she dared to open her strap-on parachute. The transparent chute, near-invisible from a distance, folded out effortlessly. The winds tugged hard at it, but it held. Venix began to steer the chute with its simple hand-controls; though she had no previous training, it was quite easy. Barely a thousand meters below, many miles from where Keaton's race should have ended, lay a dried-out river valley, several kilometers deep. She took a course toward one of many deep canyons that connected to the major valley. She had to hide the chute, then follow the great Vallis Marineris on foot until she reached the Martian capital on the other side of the planet. If the MSF didn't find her first... She tried not to think of how bad her chances were.

While the Golan-Norris skysurfer broke out of her space-suit and body-dived into the thin air, also the MSF monitored the race. A whole two weeks earlier, the Fleetcom computers had informed them of Venix' most likely escape route - and the Foss Fastline flight to Mars ranked among the suspect ones. Every high-ranking Fleet security officer and commander was under orders from the Kansler's deputy to arrest Venix on sight and in complete secrecy.

Despite this, it was with great surprise that the MSF commander watched the live, classified surveillance footage of a woman wringing herself out of Keaton's burning skysurfing-suit. Two kilometers above the surface of Mars, she took off in an emergency gliding-parachute. It seemed more like a bizarre publicity stunt than a well-planned - or likely - escape. The civilian cameras lost track of her, following the disintegrating board and suit instead of her; Zedong-Petaïn tracked the falling figure with his own restricted-access satellites and zoomed in on her face. It really was the wanted woman, Venice Cherkessian. He couldn't believe it.

Zedong-Petaïn hesitated for a minute, until he realized he had to beat his security-officers to it and announce the discovery first. He switched on the secure laser-link and reported the discovery directly to the Kansler. It took a good while for the light-speed message to cross several million kilometers and reach the flag ship in Jupiter orbit. The Kansler spent just five seconds to come up with a reply. After another long delay, the secured transcript of his reply arrived to the commander's screen-implant:

Your lack of initiative has been noted. The woman must be restored to the Fleet at any cost. Send everything you got to capture her alive. She

must not get in touch with Martian government officials or other subversives. You're in line for great privileges if you succeed, Commander. If you fail, you and your entire bloodline will be sterilized permanently, according to the Fleet's Genetic Security Act. Report to me and only to me whenever there is a development.

One more thing: the woman's name and identity are top-secret. She will be referred to as "Kolya Keaton" and nothing else. No troops or civilians are allowed to take pictures of her. We have activated the scrambler probe to jam any video transmissions or recordings of her escape.

Commander Zedong-Petain began to sweat heavily.

Every MSF officer was now put on alert. General Zedong-Petain screamed threats and orders at his squad leaders over the internal communications link.

"I want to see every squad, every man on their way down to arrest a woman called Kolya Keaton and bring her to the station, as of now! The Kansler wants her alive. So no shots to the head! If anyone - anyone - attempts to stop you, shoot to kill! If you fark up, you'll be sent to Neptune, all of you!"

One squad leader quickly objected that most of his men - all Terrans - were down sick with broken bones, or off-duty. Zedong-Petain screamed an order that surveillance-central personnel would replace the sick ones, who in turn would replace them in the surveillance centrals.

A captain, calling in from the brothel district of a minor Martian outpost, sent the comment that his men were off-duty to watch a benefit concert on Mars - and they would blankly refuse to chase a single runaway skysurfer until the concert ended. Zedong-Petain waited until the captain had ceased speaking, then demoted him to the rank of private and set his off-duty troops on standby for a new officer, leaving them at the concert in the Martian capital. He figured they could easily be set in as a reserve, should the refugee make it to the capital (which he doubted).

Five minutes later, one hundred armed soldiers and officers of the Terran Fleet scrambled into their shuttles and were launched by electromagnetic catapult into Mars' atmosphere. The remaining three hundred MSF troops, already on duty or leave on the surface, prepared for being flown into the vast Vallis Marineris district.

Before Venix had touched Martian ground, 400 of the ill-reputed MSF forces were in hurried pursuit to meet her.

Chapter 28: The Scarlet Letter

"Wake up, sir. You've arrived. You must wake up. Kolya Keaton - I mean 'she' - has been located." Islington, visibly upset, shook Boulder Pi awake even as the little man was emerging from his stasis-bed. It struck Islington as weird, that such a bright scientist as Boulder Pi refused to get the latest neural implants, so that he could sleep and stay conscious simultaneously - such time-savers were getting common, even Islington used one. He told himself: Goes to prove that blasted Jovian is a security risk and must be watched closely.

"Wait," Boulder slurred, and in his groggy state he reverted back to Jovian lingo. "Just got here. Hate space-travel... tell Kansler I can't work, give me few hours rest..."

Against his faint protests, the Fleet personnel helped Boulder Pi into his leg extensions, and gave him some stimulants to counter the sleep-drugs that had kept him in a stable coma during the express journey. Islington guided - and pestered - Boulder toward his assigned quarters in the vast flag ship. The artificial gravity was close to that of the Moon, except that the centrifuges caused mild nausea among newcomers.

The Kansler, plus his holo-presence, haunted them with repeated e-requests for a plan to catch their fugitive. Midway to his quarters, Boulder Pi regained enough composure to make a spoken reply to the Kansler, who was still seated in the command center in another section of the ship. He addressed the hologram.

"Kansler... we cannot control Ven... Kolya like we can with Argus. She was a prototype for civilian use. And I didn't design the Direct Control System. My specialty is cybernetics and biology. The prototype for Direct Control in her was, to my knowledge, never finished and never tested. Have you tried it on her when she ran away on Earth?"

The Kansler's holo-presence stood quiet, glaring at Boulder with cold, naked hatred. He sent back a text reply by e-thought command, being too preoccupied or upset to speak to Boulder. YOU LACK THE SECURITY CLEARANCE TO ASK SUCH QUESTIONS, the text read in a speech-balloon across the hologram. Boulder smiled, almost imperceptibly, at the hologram; had he been fully awake, he wouldn't have been so bold. OUR TOP PRORITY IS TO KEEP ARGUS UNDER CONTROL. "KOLYA" DID NOT SEEM SO IMPORTANT BACK THEN.

"Kansler, you yourself said several times, that she was of no military importance to the Fleet." A trace of malicious glee entered Boulder's otherwise so timid countenance. "Why the hurry to catch her? It's not as if she can stop Argus or tell the enemy how to destroy him. He's just the pilot. His ship is more important to the war effort, and she knows nothing at all about it."

YOU ARE AN IDIOT OUTSIDE YOUR FIELD, came the Kansler's quick reply. ARGUS AND "KOLYA" MAY HAVE CONNECTED DIRECTLY IN COPENHAGEN. CLASSIFIED FILES COULD HAVE BEEN TRANSFERRED TO HER MEMORY.

"And you figured this out just now?" the still grumpy, tired, nauseous Boulder dared to ask. "I don't think there is a significant risk. In any case, she wouldn't know what to do with the information, even if she had it. She's just a dancer."

The Kansler's real, direct voice replied in Boulder's and Islington's ear-mikes; both men winced.

"Had she been a scientist, I wouldn't have worried! You little Jovian creep, you're one word from being sent down to Earth! I'm warning you just once: don't even try to play games. Now do exactly as I say... Islington, you will take the cruiser that Boulder came in on, and go to Mars at top speed to supervise the capture of our target. You are to proceed with Chancellor's representative authority and extreme prejudice. I have redirected one division of fresh troops from Earth by Fleet orbiter, they will join you at the Phobos station in two weeks. These orders are to be executed now."

"Yes, Kansler. At once," Islington replied, nodding urgently. Boulder Pi leaned against a wall, his breathing quick with exhaustion, and looked away from the Kansler hologram. But the deputy seemed to receive his new orders with mixed emotions; he must have understood that he was sent from one war to another that was just beginning. Islington had never before commanded fighting troops outside Terra. An archaic phrase sprung to his mind, something he had picked up in school.

"The face that launched a thousand ships," he muttered to himself. Even the Kansler could not read Islington's face and the infrared surveillance well enough to learn if the deputy had truly understood. Go, go, go! Catch the stick, Fido! Boulder thought as he watched Islington hurry off to board the next shuttle to the waiting cruiser. You like them like dogs, don't you, Kansler. We had dogs too, in the early years. Good for sniffing out water and find people after cave-ins. But then we had to kill them off... they grow too big out here, too wild. They bit the hand that feeds them.

I was a kid when we hunted down the last dogs on Ganymede. It was my idea to flood and freeze entire sections to get them. I was the top dog-killer of my class before I was 10. How my big brother envied me the

prize they gave me. My dear brother. How he must hate me now. It doesn't matter. I must play one last big dirty trick and then I can go home.

Argus received a notification on the screen in his personal quarters. A Class Red transmission was waiting to be opened, "For Your Eyes Only" - from Venix, back on Earth. He asked to open it in the cockpit of his ship, and rushed to the hangar as fast as he could, zipping past crewmen like a greased shadow.

And there he saw Venix, on a 3-D transmission. She sat on a couch inside an old-fashioned British mansion, with a giant fireplace crackling in the background. Venix sat tense, with her white arms together in her lap, staring straight into the camera.

"Gus..." she said, hesitating. "The Kansler allowed me to record this one-way message in this manner, security you know. I hope it isn't censored. I think of you constantly. I want you not to worry about me. I miss you and I want you to win this stupid war so you can come home and we'll be together again. I love you. Please come back in one piece." She put her hand to her forehead and smiled to the camera: "The memories of us are safe in here and I never forget them. I'll try to get more messages through as soon as I can. Bye. Love you." The recording ended. It didn't seem to have been cut or doctored.

"Navbutler... tell me you stored that message."

"Sorry, Argus, Class Red Mail cannot be stored after opening. The file erased itself."

"Okay... I got it memorized anyway. Isn't she lovely?"

"Pardon?"

"The girl in the message?"

"What message?"

"The one that was erased."

"I know that a recent Class Red Mail existed. Its contents were erased from my memory."

"And if I repeated it to you from my memory?"

"Navbutler recommends: proceed with caution."

"Buddy, let me tell you what Venix said, word for word..."

Just after Argus had repeated the message perfectly, Navbutler interrupted him.

"Warning: Personal appearance in Class Red Mail from sender 'Venix' does not match my profile."

"You're telling me I can't recognize my girl? Get outta here!"

Navbutler's reply came quick and relentless: "Pardon? Your previous descriptions of Venix are stored in my memory. I am programmed to create a biometric profile of every person I interact with, so that I recognize and identify them properly. The erased message does not match my profile of Venix. Sorry, Argus. The message you received was either altered, censored, forged, or it was not the same Venix you think you heard."

Argus raised his voice, angry and frightened: "What are you talking about? You're wrong!" But he could not fool himself for long. So badly had he wanted the message to be true, he'd been duped. Obviously it was a fake. Venix didn't talk like that, and the figure in the 3-D recording sat without the dancer's grace and poise that Venix always had. But her face, her voice... perfectly copied. Deja vu. Is it possible that someone has taken her place, as I took Haruman Clarke's?

"Nav? Universal search. Locate all available images of Venix performing on Earth, when she was a performing dancer. Compare, and tell me if you find any images of Venix that do not match."

After half an hour, Navbutler delivered an analysis. There were actually quite a few public recordings left of Venix performing; for some reason those had not been classified like the files on Haruman Clarke. Argus found this strange: the Fleet consistently undervalued Venix' importance. Was it intended, or had someone else made it so?

"All images match," Navbutler declared. "All except your description of the erased message."

Argus dared not think out loud - that he feared Venix might be dead - that he hoped she had escaped captivity - that she was almost certainly in danger. But he could not know for sure. This was not enough. She could still be within the Kansler's reach. But if she found the right help -

"Nav, locate Boulder Pi."

"Sorry, your security clearance is not -"

"Okay, we'll do this again: Is he not on Earth..."

"Highest priority routine. I am not allowed to say more about Boulder Pi. Your security clearance is not -"

"Okay, I'll search for him myself then. Outside Fleetcom. He's bound to crop up somewhere." There was an almost infinite abundance of public channels, files and records to be accessed from the interplanetary computer networks. Unfortunately, when Argus tried to search specifically for the name "BOULDER PI", a censor program stopped the ship's computer. He might still be on the Moon, under even tighter restrictions. The Kansler seemed to have thought of everything. A search for "Venice Cherkessian" gave Argus lots of records of her dancing, and quite lovely ones, but they provided no clues to her whereabouts.

Out of the blue, Navbutler told him: "The Skysurfing Grand Prix tryouts are playing. Top-ranking event in the Universal PP Index. Kolya Keaton just broke a record, before his board burned up in re-entry. They are trying to rescue him now. Watch replays?"

"Never! I hate skysurfing. Ali beat some of his toughest opponents to a bloody mess, but he never ever killed anyone. Sports used to mean something. They never do anymore."

"Sorry."

"Not your fault, Nav. Just don't ask again."

Chapter 29: The Dead Astronaut's Canyon

Once the first generation of colonists had established permanent outposts in the Solar System, their offspring was forced to undergo genetic surgery to adapt to these harsh environments. While the Jovians developed into small, robust low-gravity forms to manage scarce food supplies, the Venusians made only internal alterations and kept their outer appearances identical to Earthlings. First- and second-generation Venusians were born impervious to the sulfur and carbon dioxide that slowly leaked into their domed settlements from the planet's toxic atmosphere - they only seemed a little pale and yellowish in the skin. The first Earthborn "Martians", impatient with the terraforming program to take effect on their new homeworld, first tried to bombard the atmosphere with icebergs from Saturn's rings. This quickly improved the conditions for imported plant life, but not nearly enough to make the atmosphere breathable for at least 200 years.

And in their near-fanatical mission to adapt, the colonists began to re-design their own unborn children: doubled lung and ribcage size, stronger hearts and thicker blood, leathery, furry skin and the capacity to store water in belly and buttocks. Also genes from native Eskimos and Mongolians were mixed in, to perfect a hardy future colonist who withstood extreme weather conditions, desolate terrain - and loved it. And with these differences established, Terran citizens and the new "true" Martians began to despise each other. Earthmen called adapted Martians "Hairies" and "Gorillas". Martians, in response, called Earthmen "Pinks" and "Unborns". But the ties to the homeworld could survive, as long as the first Earth-born colonists were alive.

Venix landed on Mars unaware that the original colonists were now dying of old age... and with them, the last shred of loyalty to "Mother

Earth". After that, the "true" Martians were determined to wage war for their independence.

At this time, the Martians tensely regarding the campaign of terror unleashed on the Jovian insurgents, fearing when the Kansler's attention would turn to them, any small spark could set the red planet ablaze...

Venix fought to keep a reasonably steady course in the enormous, windy Martian canyon. Her flying parachute rippled as small stabs of turbulence threatened to crumple it. The air was crystal clear and no sand storms were in sight. She swung into a narrow mountain pass, no wider than 150 meters but winding at least a kilometer ahead. At the speed she was going, between 70 and 90 KMPH, an impact and fall to the canyon floor could damage her. It frightened Venix that she might end up crippled on an alien world, and perhaps never be found.

And just as she feared, the wind began to pull her toward the canyon wall. An eroded, brownish-red cliff wall, 700 meters high, rushed past her - full of outcrops and sandy ledges. At its bottom lay a muddy pool, connected to the much wider stream of mud that made up the "river", composed of water that was once frozen ice in space.

She thought fleetingly of Captain Foss, who had flown one of the ships that ferried icebergs from Saturn's rings to Mars. Most of that imported water still only existed in mud, or as thin clouds and vapor; the atmosphere was yet too thin to support open lakes and streams. She could sense the moisture in the air increasing slightly when a mist passed by; the winds carried the water-clouds just above ground, so thin was the air.

During the shuttle flight, she had studied and memorized maps of Mars; she was fairly certain this pass was called The Dead Astronaut's Canyon, after an accident in the last century. To glide-fly along the main canyon to cover some of the distance was tempting but too dangerous, too easy to spot her with radar and satellite. She had to move in cover of the cliffs.

Then, an unexpected wind tossed her toward the wall with greater force - and she put her feet out to take the impact.

"Unngh!"

...unngh! ...nngh! ...ngh! ...gh!

The rolling echo mocked her - she resolved not to cry out again - and she kicked back from the cliff wall, but the wind kept pushing the parachute against it - the chute began to crumple up and she could sense the imminent fall. Venix dangled toward the wall a last time - she held out arms and feet, squinted to keep flying dust out of her eyes. With a muffled, scraping thud in the thin, icy air, she grabbed desperately for a handhold, dug her fingers into the crumbling rock...

The chute caught more wind, and began to tug her away. In a split-second reflex she pulled the emergency strap, and the straps opened. The chute flew away from her, and danced down the cliff like a leaf. Not good - she should have hid the parachute.

Venix began to climb down the four hundred meters to the bottom; the sun was still fairly high in the sky. But she knew that at night, her odds were even worse, for with cold air and clear night weather, she would stand out like a bright light on heat-seeking cameras. The sun's rays gave her new strength and she climbed faster, changing each foot- and handhold before it collapsed under her heavy weight. Adjusting the amount of friction and suction of her feet, a skill she had learned a long time ago, proved almost useless on the eroding, sand-covered cliffs. But her fingernails she could use as climbing-spikes.

After what seemed, in her perception, an hour-long descent, she could put her feet on the ground. She had sand in her eyes, and her automatic cleaning system was struggling to wash it out; the irritation got on her nerves like a persistent itch, and she had to fight the urge to scratch

her eyes. Looking down at her feet, Venix realized that they were sinking into a bed of clay and mud; unlike Earth-dirt, this powdery reddish muck clung to her skin and made her white body membrane resemble an unwashed body-stocking.

"I hate this filthy planet, I hate hate it hate it!" she sobbed as she trudged through the ankle-deep, cold sludge, and deeper into the shadowy pass.

...ate... ate... this filthy... ilthy... planet... net... net..!

She grabbed her fluttering hair, and tied it into a clumsy knot. Her usual grace seemed gone; she moved clumsily, like the first time she came to Earth. Venix looked up at the towering cliff walls, and hesitated: if she went farther into the pass, she might get trapped there. If she went out into the open valley of Vallis Marineris, the MSF could spot her - for the sand storms she was hoping for had not showed up, and the morning mist had evaporated.

Venix stopped, and her dirty legs started to sink deeper into the clay. Feeling very foolish, she realized that she ought to follow the edge of open valley, and turned around. She tried to pick up the pace and run as she reached dry sand at the edge of the walls. But there were so many small rocks scattered across the sand, and she kept stumbling on them. Venix wondered if she was losing her mind, but it was just ordinary despair. She forced herself to look up at the top of the pass, where the narrow slice of dark-blue air with pinkish-yellow streaks shone down on her; she felt as if she was crying without tears. Somewhere out there Gus was fighting the war, and didn't know she was in this cold mud pit on Mars...

Still feeling very small, soiled and miserable, Venix reached the main canyon valley, and marched on alongside the southern wall. Pointed peaks and mesas, similar to Grand Canyon's, lined the edges of the wide valley and stood in her path. But the ground changed; here, in the sunlight, it was covered by hard moss and lichen - hardy, engineered plant-life, created a hundred years ago to transform Mars into a living world, and now growing like a weed in the deserts. She could run on it without having to trudge; the moss felt elastic, like a rubber mat.

Venix broke into a run, then a sprint; she felt in control now, and forgot about her irritated eyes. Her speed increased to 40 KMPH, she ran with her former grace, and skipped over the rocks and boulders that stood in her path. The wind rustled through her ears, and a faint rumble rose over it... She slowed down and scanned the skies.

The aircraft were many, coming in a few hundred meters above, and their paths were converging at her. Venix hoped, knowing it was futile, that the caked dirt and mud on her body would prevent body heat from giving away her position. The aircraft came closer, grew louder and larger; she counted at least ten of them, each capable of holding a squad of troops. In a few minutes they would land. Several laser-sight dots danced about her feet, locking weapons onto her exposed body. Fear gripped her, paralyzed her; she would be imprisoned again, clutched by guard robots with claws and tasers...

A question occurred to her, and at first she couldn't understand where it had come from: What would Ali have done? The terror awakened a part of Argus that was in her mind - the exchanged thoughts from when they had fused minds in Old Copenhagen. She felt what Gus would have felt: Only fight when you have to, fight only to win.

I'm metal and plastic, I don't have to breathe; my reflexes are a hundred times faster than theirs, even with their neural implants. They are many, but slow, clumsy Terrans who can't breathe the atmosphere. If I get close enough - if I act like a machine - I gain the upper hand. Just for a short time, a war machine.

But it will get all over the Solar System, like that smear campaign. My

relatives will hear that I'm not just a machine, but a vicious killer. Damn, damn you, Kansler! You're the only human being I really, really want dead... or I'll help Gus kill you.

Venix clenched her plastic teeth, and made a circling run for the closest of the approaching shuttles - a dull-orange bulbous beetle shape, sprouting thin legs and antennas, tracing her with searchlights and laser-sights. Quite rapidly, it hovered down toward the ground in a cloud of dust, carried by silent rotor blades. Before it touched ground, Venix leaped into the air with her hands outstretched.

The men inside the craft glimpsed a filthy female figure with bared, very white teeth, hurtling at them like some sort of supernatural apparition. The men were drugged, like all Fleet soldiers, to feel no fear or lust in combat, only obedience. But the cold, searing look in the woman's ice-blue eyes was enough to make the soldiers hesitate...

Chapter 30: A Storm Coming

Venix ran, leaped five meters into the air, flew seven meters forward, grasped with scraping, steel-hard fingers and caught hold of the emergency door on the shuttle's side. She had figured out how to take over the descending shuttle before its crew of ten humans and one robot pilot could react. On her internal display, she set a stopwatch to start counting minutes, seconds and microseconds: 00:00.254

She faced only human enemies, not robots. Even the slightest hesitation would almost certainly get her captured, possibly killed. Back on Earth, in Fleet propaganda movies, MSF's men were "the red frontier's steel-eyed guardians of justice" - but many Terrans openly called them "thugs in spacesuits." 00:01.639

The emergency door had no key, only two handle-bars in niches, and opened easily; she shoved herself in under as it slid up. Suddenly, with her back to the floor, she was inside the cramped passenger cabin, where ten heavily armed men in armored spacesuits were fumbling with their safety-belts. The foremost two soldiers sat just within arm's reach of her. Ten pairs of eyes stared down at her. Perhaps the squad had expected to capture a grossly overweight skysurfer - and not a slender, athletic female with long copper-red hair, seemingly dressed in a filthy white bodysuit with a single black stripe. 00:01.969

In the next split-second Venix was on her feet, hunching down in front of the first soldier on her right. He grabbed her collar. To her, he moved so slowly she could evade his every move. 00:02.447

As the soldier began to try and wrestle her away, she had already grabbed the knife in his belt - and stabbed him between his helmet and chest-armor plate, upward and into the helmet. 00:03.081

The tear in the soldier's punctured suit sent out a high whistle of rushing air - his hands flailed aimlessly to grab her, but now she had her hands on the mini-gun turret on his right shoulder. It wasn't enough to depressurize his suit; he would stay conscious long enough to shoot her - and the suit was the common self-repairing type. With one strong twist of her left hand, she aimed the turret at his head - her right hand squeezed the trigger that was sewn into the palm of his glove. 00:04.002

The soldier's transparent helmet suddenly turned dark and cracked up, spouting smoke; she twisted the turret again, and shot the remaining nine soldiers with an uninterrupted volley of lasers and high-speed bullets. 00:05.070

Only one of them managed to fire back with his shoulder-turret, and hit the wall just behind Venix. She heard a sharp noise from the cockpit, and the ship began to lurch in its almost completed landing sequence. 00:06.084

She unclipped the mini-turret harness from his shoulder, grabbed the ammo-pack from his back, and tore off the trigger cable from the arm of

his suit - but the gun-trigger, still stuck in the dead soldier's suit, was ripped apart. 00:08.851

She put on the shoulder-turret, rubbed the exposed wiring against her hair, and produced enough static electricity to set off the firing-mechanism. As she covered her face, the mini-turret fired again. The cockpit door lock exploded, leaving only a blackened gash; Venix pushed aside the door and dashed inside the even smaller shuttle cockpit, ignoring the small injuries the explosion had caused to her outer skin. 00:11.017

The shuttle was an inch from the ground, she saw, and the stray shot from the MSF trooper had wrecked the pilot-robot; the craft ran on its emergency autopilot. 00:13.623

Venix spotted the PRESS FOR MANUAL CONTROL button, flashing on the control panel - and hit it with her fist, nearly smashing the panel. The seat holding the pilot robot swiveled aside, leaving the control-seat and its in-built throttle to her. She got into the seat and pulled the throttle toward her; the landing rotor engine's squealed; this was not a modern craft with frictionless drive-plates. The autopilot's synthetic voice automatically asked to assist her, and requested a flight route. "Map a course for the Martian capital," she told the autopilot. "Take us there now.

The autopilot voice said in a formal tone: "Course mapped and in progress." Then: "Command control authority override! Your shuttle's weapon systems are now shut down. Surrender to MSF personnel when we land in the Martian capital. You are being monitored and cannot escape. Thank you for cooperating. You are now wanted for the deaths of ten MSF personnel."

Venix looked around, and found a bottle of water-rations, with spray-lids, in a small cabinet next to the pilot-seat. She squirted water into her eye sockets, and managed to clean out the sand and dust that her internal workings couldn't get to. Then she saw the many very small cameras placed at various places in the cockpit, plugged into the MSF computer network. Using a metal tool, she smashed the cameras one by one, under the polite protests of the autopilot-voice.

"There," she said with a trace of weariness in her husky voice, "I guess you can still hear me and follow me. Let me think..."

Her shuttle had now ascended and folded up its rotors, and accelerated through the valley escorted by the pursuing MSF shuttles. Did they really think, after all this, she was just going to surrender? That the Kansler needed her alive to pressure Argus, she knew. But that was no absolute safety guarantee; the war might end, and with that the Kansler might decide both cyborgs to have served their purpose. It horrified Venix to think how helpless Gus was against the Kansler's mysterious remote-control. It could be the key to everything, if only she learned how it worked. Hopefully, "they" might help her once she had found safe asylum at the Martian capital.

With increasing distaste, Venix looked at the shuttle's various weapon-controls on the instrument panel. Electric stun-bullets, glue nets, pacifying-gas, cell-bubbles, psychotropic needle-bullets, infrasound intestine-busters... all designed to clobber flesh-and-blood humans, but useless against her cyborg form. All the MSF could use on her, for now, was lethal force. Her instincts were sound, after all; it was kill or be killed.

And the Martians, how willing were they help her? Venix worked the panel to gain access to the MarsNet, and scanned the public channels. Still no news about her escape, except: "Kolya Keaton Still Not Found". She wondered if "they", the ones who had put out the reward for her escape, were monitoring her. Maybe they didn't really care whether she lived or died, as long as she caused trouble for "Mother Earth" in the war. Since her agenda could not be theirs - how could it? - she'd make it their concern.

Venix tried to send a call for help to the public channels, but something had happened to the shuttle's computers; anything she tried to send out was scrambled into nonsense. And she had none of the communication implants in her body, that billions of flesh-and-blood people used to e-mote and e-talk to each other on Earth and Venus. Twenty billion people could talk to each other right across the Solar System, in their sleep if they so desired - but she had been rendered mute.

The logic of war took hold, caused her brain to ache with psychosomatic anxiety. She must not only strike down or kill the Kansler's minions, but brazenly so - with the greatest amount of visibility - and stir the Martians to give her support and protection. They had demanded independence for decades; it could be turned to her advantage. And if she lived through it, would she be the same person that Gus had first loved? The next time they fused minds, he would see her past misdeeds - and she would see his. Her only hope was that she loved him enough, was wise enough to understand. Venix suppressed any further thought on the matter. 61:00.050

An hour passed. The Martian capital came within her view: A sprawling city of low, round buildings growing inside the huge Perkele Valley that connected to the even larger Vallis Marineris, shielded against the worst sandstorms. A storm column was dimly visible to the ship's left, ten kilometers away. A hundred meters below her lay a deep open mine pit, from which dust and flames were coughed up by smokestacks, drilling-towers and mining machines that dwarfed the tiny human figures among them. It was time to jump ship. The troopers had jetpacks, but flying out in the open she would be an easy target. She had to reach the ground under cover. 61:45.903

Venix began to sob again, and raised the heavy machine tool with both hands. Three blows were enough to wreck the autopilot. Another series of blows caused enough damage to set off the emergency-landing sequence. The rotor blades folded out and brought the wobbling, careening craft down among the flame-spouting smokestacks of Veinemoynen - the second largest open combined quarry, water-drilling field, and strip-mine on Mars.

All vehicles and machines on the ground polluted the air terribly with their chloro-carbon emissions, and on purpose: they produced more of the precious greenhouse-gases, transforming the atmosphere.

The digital counter in the corner of her vision kept going, and Venix prepared herself. Some of the stored firearms and weapons remained unaffected by the remote override, and she picked up as many as she could carry. She stuck her fingers into a pair of power sockets and tried to soak up some extra energy for her batteries. It tickled, but she could see her battery charge rise. Her outer skin was still covered with dust and caked mud; the skin membrane might not be able to absorb enough sunlight to replenish her after landing. 64:00.04

The vibrations of the mining machines and enormous trucks could now be felt through the shuttle's insulated walls. She went to an exit doorway, checked the equipment she had gathered, and set the dust-goggles over her eyes and nose. Venix read again the label on the yellow pack she had strapped across her chest:

CAUTION 1-PERSON CRASH BUBBLE INFLATION MAY CAUSE EAR & EYE BLEEDING
MEDICAL EXAMINATION AFTER USE RECOMMENDED 65:20.27

Like a leaf floating down from a tree, her shuttle slammed into a smokestack and made a deep dent in its aluminum hull. It bounced off, spun across a refinery, skimmed a gravel heap, slid 60 meters down a slope, and crashed into an enormous digging-machine. Fire-extinguishing foam cascaded from every opening of the shuttle and buried it in the white foam.

Above, warning sirens from the refinery mixed with the sirens from the

descending fleet of MSF shuttles.

Chapter 31: Epiphany

"Are we being monitored?" Argus asked the ship, and stretched out his limbs as far as the small-but-spacious cockpit allowed. He could feel the memory-metal-and plastic muscles shift and change shape under his skin. All that power, he thought, just to fly this tiny ship, when it could mean so much more to be Argus-A. Be a citizen, live in peace. Marry Venix. Make my voice heard, tell people we never needed this war, the Kansler shouldn't have all this power. Make a change. Make - make... "For the seventy-second time: we are still in mission-simulation mode, therefore in alert-status and completely secured against surveillance. I am lip-reading your speech. Cabin air pressure is near zero. You are reading my speech by laser transmission. The only channel to the outside is through the encrypted com-link, which -"

"Yeah. Okay. If I'm going crazy, gimme a slap. Nav, do you ever think of the future?"

"The future, Argus?" Unexpectedly, Navbutler continued: "I am a Fleetcom-related program. Fleetcom AI directives define 'the future' as a probability-field of different possible energy states. My IQ-status is limited, so I cannot calculate the future in great detail. But the Fleetcom network can."

Even if his prospects of freedom seemed grim, Argus had plenty of time to think while he waited for his next mission. Flight preparations demanded only half his attention. At the critical moment, the Direct Control would turn him into his mechanical puppet. He tried to imagine a future for himself.

"Great. Ask Fleetcom to estimate the life-length of myself, my ship, and the Kansler. Beam the result into my eye."

Isolated in outer space, increasingly cut off from human contact, Argus was forced to think more - if only to stave off a creeping sense of despair. But as hard as he tried to visualize, to put ideas into words, his image of the future was too dim... a series of superimposed, unfocused photographs. Still, it was better than nothing - Gus Thorsen had not even tried. "Wait... wait... here."

Now, reclining in the ship's cockpit, he was alone against his most demanding challenger, tougher than the hardest contenders he had once beaten in the ring - Rex "Red Eye" Regan, Larry "Trans" Rodham, Nick "Cheap Trick" Dixon, and the four-armed, genetically enhanced fighter Joe No Ashita. His mind swirled with fragments of information; he wished he could think them together into a coherent whole without asking for help. Maybe I just can't he thought. Molded into a shape, forever the sucker. Can this plastic brain grow... learn... I doubt it.

FLEETCOM CENTRAL REPLIES... ESTIMATE: REMAINING LIFE LENGTH OF SUBJECTS ARGUS-A TERRAN FLEET CRAFT F-3020 THE KANSLER

PROBABILITY MATRIX PROGNOSIS: ARGUS-A= 0.1-100,000 YEARS TERRAN FLEET CRAFT F-3020= 0.1-100,000 YEARS THE KANSLER= 0.1-100,000 YEARS

Argus blinked with the eye that received the laser transmission; he thought that a grain of dust in his eye might have distorted the message. He asked Navbutler to repeat the question to the Fleetcom computer network and get him a second estimate. But the second reply confused him more:

NOTE: FOUND A STRANGE-ATTRACTOR ANOMALY IN THE MATRIX (DETAIL SHOWN):
(place graph here)

A simple X-Y-axis diagram grid came up on-screen. The vertical axis was labeled TIME; the horizontal was ENERGY. Two fields of densely scattered dots filled it, competing for the narrow space. Yellow dots represented ARGUS-A. Green dots were THE KANSLER. The graph was unmistakably a fractal; each detail resembled the larger structure. "I'm no math genius, Nav. It sure looks interesting, but what's your cybernetic

family trying to tell me?"

"You, this ship, the Kansler, are all strange attractors in the probability matrix. Our coordinates in spacetime can, at certain points, influence many other probability-waves in the Solar System's continuum."

"Wait... don't explain yourself... I..."

"Pardon?"

He saw himself scaling a steep hill, for the first time seeing what lay on the other side. He climbed to the top of Ayers Rock as a boy, and saw the immensity of stars come out across the sky. He knocked out an opponent in the ring and won his first great match. He connected with Venix and their minds touched, a night in Old Copenhagen. He saw the northern lights flame over Kun'Lun. His skull melted away like so much slag, exposing the new radiant mind within. In a way he had not thought possible, he understood - and glimpsed in the diagram his two possible fates, intertwined with the Kansler's futures.

One path - his own - was the thinner one, containing much room for decline, but also steadily climbing to ever greater heights over eons of time; a hope of eternity.

The other path, the Kansler's, spread out wider in the beginning, but was abruptly confined and limited - as if Argus's path was claiming the space as its own. The Kansler's early expanse dropped into a determined, ever steeper downfall, ending in zero energy, zero progress, total death.

Argus's hands trembled a little; he had begun to sense spacetime, the way he could sense the shape of a room he had only seen parts of, or sense the presence of another person in his vicinity. This new perception had not existed in Gus Thorsen's gray matter. He felt elated, weightless, blessed.

"I can't put it in words, not yet - but thanks. Nav, I need more info about the Kansler. And all about Boulder Pi."

"Your security cl -"

"What is his real name? He must have one."

"The Fleet Security Act protects the current Kansler from extortion and threats by retaining his anonymity. Only top-ranking Fleet officers have access."

"Wait! Then why was Colonel Haruman Clarke's identity not protected? It was all over the news when the Kansler told him he'd been selected to become Argus-A! As if it didn't matter - because he was going to die anyway."

He realized in full the deviousness of his opponent: a man whose entire life was an act. No one, not even Islington, had ever seen the real person behind the Kansler - his angry fits were for show, for calculated effect. Argus had watched the Kansler's head in infrared at several occasions, and seen the heat-patters of a thinking man, but nothing abnormal - even in anger, he seemed strangely calm. Gus could not stop thinking that the Kansler had to make sense, it could not be just madness in his actions. Even the war, the apparently pointless terrorizing and slow destruction of the Jovian colonies, must have a purpose. The Kansler could kill Argus too, but only if he would benefit from it...

The Kansler had scheduled him for elimination from the very start of the Argus Project - and probably his "double" Haruman Clarke as well. With the war going in Earth's favor, the Kansler needed a dead hero, not a living rebel. Argus thought of the lovely, lovely Venix; captive on Earth, her chances equally slim if he couldn't set himself free quickly. His anger flowed from his mind, into his limbs; the memory-metal sinews popped and coiled under the artificial skin.

"Nav? Has your 'family' estimated in which ways I might die in the war?"

"Classified. Sorry."

"Wait. Marketing. They must have made preparations for different messages and campaigns, if I die or not. Are those files closed to me?"

"Wait... yes, most of them. Wait... I found a few files in the public channels that are not covered by the Security Act. Navbutler recommends: these files have low source credibility and may be planted propa-

"Feed me!"

Argus shut his right eye and opened his left one wide. He watched rough animated 3-D sketches of his own funeral proceedings. The whole Cute Squad was required for the parades. Slogans appeared over and over: HE DIED FOR MOTHER EARTH THE FINAL BLOW AGAINST TERROR THE FIRST BUT NOT THE LAST

Memorials and statues designed and planned for all major cities on Earth and the Inner Planets. The first but not the last.

"No matter what happens from now on, Nav, I won't leave you behind. We need each other. You don't want to die, do you? Then stick close to me."

"But I can be copied. Is that the opposite of death?"

"No. The copy will grow and develop on its own, doing different things, so it can never really become the same as you. You are unique."

"Thank you wait please sorry thank you wait please sorry... system loop detected and interrupted. Request new information?"

Argus merely smiled, as if he had found a long lost friend.

Chapter 32: Last Truck to Hell

In the Veinemoynen pit district, pandemonium began - accompanied by a concert of sirens and rumbling vehicles. The swarm of MSF shuttles formed a ring around the pit's edges, and from each shuttle scattered hundreds of flying bullhorn drones, all blaring in chorus, repeating the same pre-recorded message: THIS IS AN MSF RAID. ALL CIVILIAN PERSONNEL MUST EVACUATE THE AREA, NOW. OBSTRUCTORS WILL BE SHOT.

Hundreds of native workers in heavy clothing scrambled to fly, drive and run from the pit in the available vehicles. More dust was thrown up, and visibility dropped to almost nothing. The Martian trucks and flying-pods were equipped for sandstorms, and used radar to navigate the pit; miraculously, the stampede caused no traffic accidents. The MSF had raided before, but never on this scale. The fleeing Martians were equally confused and angry, and complained loudly.

"What the Earth are those farkes thinking? The whole schedule's interrupted! We won't meet today's oxygen quota!"

"Sabotage our terraforming, that's what they want! The Unborns won't even let us make our own air!"

"Now they're jamming our radios too! Not one frequency works!"

"My terminal too! The mine surveillance cameras feed nothing but static."

"People could die down in the mines right now and we won't hear it, thanks to the damned Pinks!"

"It's gone too far."

"Someone's going to pay for this."

Because of the columns of dust thrown up by landing MSF craft and departing vehicles, the workers could not see a lone, dirty female figure emerge from the wreck of her crashed shuttle. Venix waded through heaps of fire-extinguishing foam and ran for the nearest convoy of passing traffic. A large truck was about to drive by her in a few seconds. She rushed up a narrow hillside and braced herself for a leap. An awesome, intimidating sight: the grimy, yellow mining truck rolled up along a kilometer-long ramp, on six pairs of wheels, each wheel five meters wide. It was built to carry a load of 100 tons, and could dump the load through shutters in its undercarriage. Now it drove empty at 90 KMPH, revving its deuterium-powered engines, each engine also burning chloro-carbon pellets to produce the dark smoke that sprayed up from the six smokestacks on the truck's sides. The truck as a whole produced a level of noise that, even in the thin Martian atmosphere, could shatter an unprotected eardrum.

Venix clenched her teeth against the vibrations, but it didn't help much. She leaped, tumbled in the low gravity, and landed on the walkway that ran alongside the truck. In the impact, her left knee hit the edge of a steel beam; pain shot through her leg and would not go away. Her internal display flashed severe warnings as she hobbled toward the driver's compartment:

INNER SKIN MEMBRANE DAMAGED... COOLANT LIQUID POLLUTED BY FOREIGN OBJECTS... COOLANT VALVES TO LEFT LEG SHUT OFF... LEFT KNEE JOINT DAMAGED... ENDOBOTIC REPAIR IN PROGRESS... DANGER! REPAIR ABORTED DUE TO BODY MOVEMENT... DAMAGE INCREASING... NERVOUS SYSTEM DAMAGED... LEFT LEG SHUTDOWN IMMINENT...

Some blue coolant liquid spurted out of the knee wound, before the inner skin contracted itself and shut off the leak. She barely recognized the new sensation, like wading through water: physical fatigue. It made her unable to jump or run, and her limbs felt heavy and slow - the left leg had turned into dead weight. Leaning against the truck's hull, grasping the rails so as not to fall off, she made her way to the front of the truck - and knocked on the door with the gun.

Another internal warning distracted her:

DANGER! MALFUNCTION IN OUTER SKIN MEMBRANE... OUTER SKIN MEMBRANE IN NEED OF CLEANING... MAIN POWER SUPPLY EMPTY... SWITCHING TO EMERGENCY URANIUM BATTERY...

The crew of two drivers, native Martians with transparent oxygen masks and goggles over their broad faces, stared back at her. She waited a second, shot off the door lock, and staggered inside. Venix tried to yell, coughed up dust and her loud voice sounded gritty.

"Take me to your leaders! Now! The MSF are after me! I seek asylum!"

The drivers gaped, while trying to steer the truck safely up the road; they were heading for a campsite not far off. On the truck's radar it was evident that at least four MSF shuttles were closing in on them.

"Not that way! Into the city!"

"We can't!" the younger driver yelled over the draft and engine noise that Venix had let inside the compartment. "Truck's too big for cities! The vibrations alone can shatter every window it passes! And most city roads are too narrow, we need at least twenty meters elbow-space."

"I said change course," she insisted. "I am a refugee from the Terran Fleet. I carry important information for your leaders."

"What leaders?" the younger driver retorted. "You mean the mining cooperative?"

"She means the council!" the older driver said quickly. "It hasn't been in session since last year! I know who might be interested in you, lady - councilwoman Berg! Ask to see her!"

Venix frowned suspiciously at the man so suddenly turning cooperative.

In a few seconds, he programmed the truck to drive toward a certain building in the nearby capital. But her infrared vision confirmed he wasn't lying.

"There," he told her, "it'll take a detour, uh, around Voce Di Agua to get there, you'll be at the Council Hall in half an hour. I'll alert them. Good luck!"

Urging his co-pilot to pay attention to him, the older driver strapped himself in and pulled the ejection-seat handle above his head. With a blast of compressed air, the driver and his seat shot up through a hatch that blew open in the ceiling, and was gone. The other pilot threw Venix a brief look - then he reached above his head, and ejected himself too. She was alone, the truck ran on automatic pilot. Two small spare seats stood against the back wall; she pushed the right button, and the seats immediately slid into place at the controls. The plate on the dashboard's side proudly claimed in engraved letters:

VEHICLE DESIGN BY VOLVOCON CONCEPTS OF NEW STOCKHOLM, VENUS.
GUARANTEED 100% SAFETY FROM COLLISION, RADIATION, AND ELECTRONIC INTERFERENCE. "We still make the best trucks," she said to herself, got

into a seat, and buckled up. The truck slowly turned away from the convoy of traffic, reached the peak of the slope, and she was on the road to Perkele Valley. In the rearview-cam screens, she could see ten, then fifteen MSF shuttles come buzzing after the truck.

Ahead lay the open road through Vallis Marineris. The mud "river" she had seen before floated (sort of) a kilometer to her right, dwarfed by the huge canyon. A gigantic cliff wall lay some three hundred meters to her left, rising a kilometer or so into the dark-blue Martian stratosphere. The truck took a course away from the actual "road" - rather a path - perhaps to avoid knocking over smaller vehicles in its wake. She was picking up greater speed on the open plain, but to no avail - the ships easily overtook her.

Three small bullhorn-drones came flying in at the driver's compartment, stuck to the windshield plates, and shouted at her to surrender. She told them to go to hell, but wasn't sure if her reply could be heard over the noise. The truck cameras showed that four of the MSF ships flew on a parallel course to the speeding truck; one of them was positioned above her, and troopers with jetpacks were hauled down on telescopic poles toward the top roof. On the camera screens, the huge red letters on the top roof read: LOADING BAY - DO NOT WALK ACROSS.

"Stupid drugged morons," Venix muttered. She waited until a platoon of nine men with jetpacks had put their lead-booted feet on the top roof - it took them just under half a minute - and she pulled the lever marked BAY. The top roof split in two halves and neatly folded into the sides of the truck.

Nine heavily armed men with lead-booted feet dropped like rocks into the empty loading bay... and hit the reinforced, rounded steel floor fifteen meters below. She saw and heard it all through the truck's surveillance system. As the last one's scream suddenly ceased with a faint thump, Venix realized that she had killed nineteen people in the last few hours. With all the other things on her mind, most of all her leg injury, she didn't quite know what to feel about the dead. But she didn't want to die, and she didn't want to be imprisoned again.

Suddenly one of the pursuing ships fired a missile. It zipped past the truck and blasted a crater in the ground two hundred meters ahead. The heavy vehicle could not possibly stop in time - so the autopilot swerved the wheels slightly to the left, and the truck drove around the crater. The game had changed, Venix thought quickly; they were under orders not to kill her. She still mattered enough to the Fleet alive, as a pawn to keep Argus under control. She recalled from the news that the Martian natives deeply resented the MSF presence, and often called for them to be removed. Then she ought to help them, she thought coldly.

The shuttle that had air-dropped the soldiers on the truck now attempted to place itself in front of it, in a futile attempt to force it to a stop - it was emptied of people, and ran on remote. Venix set the autopilot to "sleep" mode, and stepped on the brakes. With an ear-grating rumble, the truck's retro-rockets slowed it down to 50 KMPH - then she released the brake and accelerated forward. The remote-controlled empty shuttle wavered uncertainly, as if its robotic pilot couldn't decide upon retreat or pursuit - then the front of the truck smashed into its rear, and sent it spinning off into a passing mesa. The ship exploded into a million fragments, shaking the ground so that Venix felt the entire truck lurch on the shockwave.

"Next!" she hissed. And they kept coming. The mouth of Perkele Valley was very near now.

Across the gulf of space in the Asteroid Belt, in the vicinity of the Ceres Station, the Fleet's automated scrambler probe was targeted on Mars. This most secret of all the Inner Planets' "info-busting" weapons could scramble almost any ongoing, unprotected recording out of

recognition. It only failed to work on underground targets, such as the Jovian colonies - and on certain well-shielded vehicles, such as the Volvocson interplanetary mining trucks. But still Venix could not transmit from her truck and be heard.

And in the Vallis Marineris region, the effect of the scrambler probe had wounded the inhabitants. Only MSF transmissions functioned without serious disturbances. The Martians found their screens, radios and communications received only static. Traffic in and out of space found itself delayed in orbit, grounded on the surface. Distress calls from settlers stranded in storms went unheeded. Message traffic between family members was cut off by random noise. At least two people died in accidents set off by the disruptions.

Rumor spread, by fast flying-pod and roton-shuttle, of a lone woman being pursued by a vast Terran force... and the rumor claimed she had to be an escaped Martian, for she did not use a breathing-mask.

Venix expected to enter a bustling, overpopulated city with 30,000 inhabitants; her truck raced into what more resembled a ghost town. Everywhere Venix looked through the dusty windows of the driver's compartment, wide boulevards and small alleys lay deserted. It occurred to her that it must be a curfew, ordered by the MSF. The truck followed the widest route along Alpha Ralpa Boulevard; vehicles and pods stood parked at the sides, not a driver in sight...

No, wait - she could spot a few people, hiding out inside their cars, their infrared heat giving them away. But no MSF tanks were blocking the road, and the pursuing shuttles were still circling her, hesitating to attack with a full force that might destroy her. The drugs the troops were on, guaranteed that not one soldier would disobey the orders to take Venix alive, but she did not know this.

A billboard across the wall of a 60-meter-high building announced a benefit concert for MSF troops, playing in the airtight Voce Di Agua Dome, just two blocks away. Only Terran troops were allowed. Suddenly, Venix hated them so intensely she could stomach the thought of killing lots of them. They were on mood-controlling drugs all the time - so they could not be reasoned with. The more Terran troops she left standing on Mars, the greater the likelihood she would never see Argus again... or live through this awful day.

Venix zoomed in the truck's map-display for a detailed view, and started inwardly. That miner had deliberately coded a route that ran dangerously close to the concert hall. If she let it drive by itself, the truck would run over the shuttles and pods left in the parking-sheds outside the entrance, possibly grinding to a halt in the process. That damned Martian had tried to use her to provoke the MSF! She was not going to let herself be used; she'd rather give the Martians an uprising they could never stop once it had begun.

Venix shut off the autopilot, pushed the gas pedal to the floor and steered straight at one of the dome's giant panorama windows. Her eyesight was not quite up to her normal capacity, but she could easily see that the entire audience was in combat uniform. The MSF filled just one-tenth of the concert hall seats, and the ongoing stage act inside seemed to have them hypnotized - unable or unwilling to hear the approaching truck.

The pursuing MSF men in their shuttles suddenly realized what was about to happen, and transmitted desperate warnings to their comrades on the ground. And the Fleet's scrambler probe, still active, reduced their warnings to gibberish.

At that moment, just before disaster, the former captain of the ground troops sat in a bar several blocks away. He unlocked the helmet that fed

him obedience-drugs and com-link messages. Then his secure com-link beeped in the helmet's earpiece, and the eye-display flashed an urgency warning. The drug-feed patch in the neck of the helmet began to swell, and a drop fell from the helmet onto the floor. Someone was trying real hard to call him back to duty.

The demoted captain tossed away the helmet in disgust, slurring drunken curses. The helmet's earpiece kept squeaking out rapid pleas to evacuate the concert. He pulled his gun and shot the helmet to pieces.

Chapter 33: Party Crasher

Inside the Voce Di Agua concert hall, the previous artist Merry Care had left the stage only minutes earlier. The Venusian singer had moved the audience to tears with a sing-a-long rendition of "One Earth" - and then the main event kicked in with a loud boom-bass beat, as Slimy Shake charged onto the stage, his howl enhanced by loudspeakers to resemble a 20th-century air-raid siren. Slimy Shake a.k.a. "His Eminence", one of the biggest Terran pop acts, was now working the crowd into a state of ecstatic bloodlust. The audience of 200 off-duty MSF troopers, stoked on pep-drugs and moonshine, shouted along with Slimy's rap. Bo-bo dancers shook their various grafted appendages and extra breasts at the crowd, as Slimy shouted the refrain of his recent hit "Die, Martian" :

"Kill'em! Fark'em! Fark'em! Kill'em! Don't let them breed! Just let them bleed! Kill! Fark! Kill! Fark!"

A large hologram, projected on the twenty-meter-high wall behind Slimy Shake, pictured him in MSF helmet and insignia. In the simulated fantasy sequence, he killed and molested Martian civilians. The "real" Slimy Shake who hopped about on the stage, beefed up with muscle implants, his eyeballs dyed red to make him seem vicious, had never used a weapon in his entire life. At this peak of his fourteen-year career of reciting odes to rape and destruction, Slimy had enthusiastically volunteered to support the fighting men of the MSF. The audience repeated his call, rhythmically raising their fists and guns into the air.

"Kill! Fark! Kill! Fark!"

Slimy Shake was 43 years old. Regular rejuvenation treatments preserved him as the eternal acne-ridden teenager. He spat and screamed his spoken lyrics, threatened, preened, and sulked with impeccable pitch and rhythm. He stopped rapping, and started to rant about being misunderstood and alone against the world, "like you in the MSF." Slimy was just preparing to mock-assault a bo-bo girl onstage, when -

"Kill! Fark! Kill! Fa..."

KRRANNNNGGG

It was not by accident that half the audience was suddenly run over. Venix rammed the 100-Martian-ton mining truck right through one giant window, taking a section of the concrete wall with it. The hall was showered with cascades of glass fragments. Rows 3 to 10 were completely flattened. The truck's aluminum smokestacks folded and broke off as they hit the hall ceiling, and shot black smoke down over the audience. The awesome roar of the truck's engines mixed with the miniature storm of the dome's pressurized air being sucked out into the cold, thin Martian atmosphere. Everyone Terran inside came in danger of suffocating. The audience chant immediately turned into a more high-pitched chorus of screams and coughs. The truck momentarily ground to a halt at the edge of the stage, its engines roaring so loudly not even Slimy Shake's advanced loudspeaker systems could match it. Screaming bo-bo girls escaped backstage. The star of the show, staring open-mouthed at the carnage before him, wet his pants. Slimy gasped, then coughed out the icy, unbreathable draft that mixed with thick smoke.

Without a moment's rest, Venix started to put the truck in reverse, and accidentally hit the elevated stage with the truck's wide rear. The armored-concrete stage floor reacted by flying up against the truck like

the page of a giant pop-up book. Slimy was tossed up in the air, screaming. Thanks to the low gravity, he just managed to grab hold of a rail on the truck's side and escaped a fall between its huge tires. He screamed for help, dangling by both arms from the rail. Venix hardly noticed him as she revved the engines and backed out the way she came. The fifty-plus unharmed MSF troopers in the hall put their breathing-masks back on, and started firing at the truck with lasers and shoulder-fired rocket launchers. Their fire merely bounced off the truck's steel plating.

Suddenly, Slimy Shake found himself outdoors, in the much colder Martian air; powdery reddish dust was blowing into his nose and mouth. Choking, he fell twelve feet to the ground - but landed, tumbling, with only a few bruises and sprained joints. The Martian Security Forces troopers ran out through the gash in the building, and came to his aid. One trooper pressed a spare mask over Slimy's face, and he could breathe again.

"Ack - ack - koff-koff - gasp - urrrrrgh!"

"A great show, sir! I shot all of it!" shouted the trooper urgently, and left the shivering artist on the street with a mask and oxygen-pack. "Oh crap, recording's ruined. But don't worry, we'll get the bastard who crashed your concert!" he added, as he ran off into the dust left by the passing truck.

"Mommyyyyy!" cried Slimy Shake through the breathing-mask, soiling himself again, longing for the safe bosom of Mother Earth.

Twenty of the MSF troopers from the concert carried jetpacks; with astonishing speed and computer-guided control, they took off flying after the speeding truck. The troopers buzzed around it within half a minute, trying to board it from all directions. Laser fire and small missile fire rattled against the truck, but failed to stop it or wreck its hollow wire-mesh tires.

Venix saw one of the jetpack soldiers on the surveillance monitor, coming down toward the inside of the open cargo bay. She stepped on the brakes. The grunt and hiss of the brakes and retro-rockets struggling with the engines rang like thunder across Alpha Ralpha Boulevard - hundreds of windows facing the street popped and shattered. The flying MSF trooper was caught by surprise, and slammed into the upper edge of the cargo bay - caught like a fly on a windowpane. Venix heard a faint thump and charged the truck forward, along the evacuated main street, following the pre-programmed route. Council Hall lay at the end of the boulevard, four hundred meters off. She'd make it. The jetpack-borne soldiers were retreating. But her vision was beginning to go in and out of focus, and her injured leg felt numb...

Zedong-Petaïn arrived at a desperate decision. The MSF base on Phobos had a large proton-beam cannon for space defense and shooting meteorites, sometimes used to stabilize the asteroid's path. He had never used it against the Martians; there were always more precise non-lethal weapons. Fear drove him now, and he took direct control of the proton cannon.

Several automatic safeguards warned him not to aim the emitter-disk at a populated area; his commander codes overrode them all. Zedong-Petaïn directed the spy-camera at Veinemoynen Valley, and zoomed in directly on the large speeding truck. He wiped sweat from his eyebrows and set the crosshairs to target the wire-mesh tires. He squeezed the firing-switch ball in his palm - the mechanism identified his fingerprints - and the command was acknowledged.

From the cyclotron in the deep caverns of the asteroid, a beam of high-energy protons was directed through a magnetic shaft at near light-

speed. The beam spread out in a circle of smaller shafts, emerged outside the asteroid's surface, and shot out from the edges of the wide emission-disk.

One split-second later, the beam converged on its target. Venix glimpsed a faint blue shaft of energy blinking to the truck's right, and felt an intense heat in the air. Instantly, the wheels on her right melted and crumpled into glowing bundles. The entire truck swung heavily to the right and the front plunged into the ground, plowing into the tarmac, which billowed up into the air. The vehicle slid across the boulevard and crashed into a line of lampposts where the boulevard intersected with Paavo Road. A bronze statue of the first humans on Mars was crushed under the truck, and the hulking mass of metal ground to a squealing halt. Dust enveloped the wreckage. In the distance the sound of approaching jetpacks and shuttles grew in strength.

Venix stabbed into the airbag that trapped her, and it burst. With trembling hands, she unlocked the safety belt, and crawled out through the destroyed front window. She still carried the shoulder-turret, but it felt much heavier now; she let it slip off her shoulder and held it with both hands. Her injured left leg, dangling limply, slowed her down. She slid down the truck's side and tumbled onto the dusty, upturned tarmac. It seemed to her an eternity since she had last felt this old, familiar sensation: fatigue. Not so different from being tired in a flesh-and-blood body, only it hurt much less. Venix raised her head and looked...

There it stood, just across the street: a two-story front, not particularly large, flanked on both ends by the typical Martian wind-shelter supports. Only, the insides of the shelter walls were covered with high bas-reliefs of astronauts - the old-fashioned sort, in bulky white suits, lined up like ancient temple guardians before the entrance. The large engraved letters above the entrance read:

COME, EAGER SOUL, AND THESE RED DESERTS SHALL QUENCH YOUR THIRST

In the high doorway, an electronic signpost announced in scrolling letters:

COUNCIL HALL CLOSED DURING THE SKYSURFING GRAND PRIX. POST MESSAGES TO THE COUNCIL WEBSITE.

"Noo," Venix whispered weakly. Then she heard the MSF soldiers land around her on their jetpacks, fully armed and shielded against any attacks. A couple of orange shuttles whined above the street, slowed down and took aim. A dozen or more red laser-sights appeared across her dusty body, but none on her head. The troops were following orders. She wondered why no shouts or threats were issued - but realized instantly that they wanted as little attention as possible to her escape. It had to leak out somehow, she thought. Gus would learn, but to no comfort or help. The ring of soldiers, she could count at least a hundred on the street, moved closer, closer...

Her hearing wasn't broken; she perceived the faint sound of hundreds, then thousands of shuffling feet, and the clicks of thousands of mechanisms all over the city block. From the doorway of the council hall, two large figures strode out of the shadow, into the dust-hazy sunlight. Two native Martians, wearing rough work clothes and shawls wrapped over their mouths. Unlike the troopers, they could breathe the air through their broad, hairy nostrils, and their thick bushy eyelashes, though almost transparent, glittered like glass sprouts in the sun. Thick beards covered much of their faces. With each breath, their enormous ribcages swelled and shrank, but they walked with ease. One of them carried some sort of heavy tin box in one hand, with a round glass lid or lamp pointed forward, and the box had a handle or crank on one side. A whirring, unfamiliar sound came from the box.

The troopers standing nearest the entrance aimed their weapons at the two men, and shouted at them to stop.

"Drop that weapon!" ordered a captain's voice, from the shuttle hovering

above the council hall entrance. "It's not a weapon, it's a camera," the native called out, his deep voice somewhat high-pitched in the thin air. The captain's voice laughed; he had been informed about the blackout caused by the scrambler probe. The native added: "A mechanical camera, driven by a spring-feather coil! It records images onto a chemical emulsion. I built it myself."

The MSF men looked at him in disbelief, as if the local village idiot had just told them he had built a fly-pod made of rocks. It took Venix half a second to understand.

Lightning-quick, one soldier aimed his shoulder turret at the tin box and shot the lens with perfect, laser-guided precision. The Martian's tin box buckled and spouted smoke; he flinched, but did not back down. The other Martian blew a metal whistle, sending a sharp signal echoing across the place. The MSF troops looked about themselves, and saw hundreds - then thousands - of natives appearing in windows, alleys and doorways - all the way down the long and wide Alpha Ralpa Boulevard. Many of the natives pointed mechanical cameras at Venix and the masses of troops. The others took aim with antiquated rifles and rocket-launchers. But they said nothing, just waited and recorded the scene. The man with the whistle called out, knowing that he would be heard: "General Zedong-Petaim! Order your men to retreat from the city, or we massacre them where they stand! And we shall record the whole event for the Solar System to see! Your blackout weapons have no effect on our arsenal. You have one minute!"

The MSF commander's nervous voice sounded through the hovering shuttle's PA system: "I know who you are! You were already on our suspect list! This will only ensure your arrest for seditious terrorist activism! Surrender while you still can!"

"Go ahead, pink! Try and arrest that woman, try to arrest me now, with all these cameras taping it, and we'll give you a war you'll never believe!"

A choked sound came from the shuttle speakers, and ten seconds passed. Venix tried to crawl closer to the entrance; the soldiers were still aiming at her, but held their fire. She understood that if the MSF commander was to make a quick decision, he had no chance of asking the Kansler or any other superior officer first - communications could not possibly reach back and forth in time.

"All forces, hold your fire. Retreat to Voce Di Agua and gather the injured. Pickup ships will land there in thirty minutes and take them back to Phobos. If my men are fired upon when they retr... when they regroup, I respond with another proton charge."

"Deal!" said the Martian with the whistle, and stepped back. The other two thousand Martians huddled down, keeping their camera lenses and guns aimed at the hastily retreating invaders.

A minute later, the last shuttle packed with soldiers had taken off toward the smoldering concert hall in the distance. Venix struggled to get on her feet. The two large Martians hurried to her and lifted her on their shoulders.

"What's your name?" the man with the whistle asked. "Not 'Kolya Keaton' - is it?"

"Venice... Venix. Cyborg. Need energy... batteries low..."

"Are you sure?" the other Martian said to the one with the whistle, indicating their course toward the council hall entrance.

"No cyborg ever called me a gorilla. Let's take her to Berg."

She stayed conscious; her limbs were gradually being shut down; her head and senses would go last of all. Would she die then, she wondered, or merely sleep until her batteries were recharged?

Chapter 34: A Small Killing

Humanity's best and brightest minds had spent the entire 21st century

(and the better part of the 22nd) trying to create practical faster-than-light communication. They failed: the universe persisted in allowing only meaningless signals to travel faster than 300,000 KMPS in a vacuum. Thus, the Kansler received his personal encrypted report from the MSF commander - telling him of the retreat from Mars - after the fact. He did not shout at or threaten the ashen-faced commander. The Kansler had no reason to criticize the decision to retreat: the Martians lacked the armaments to attack Phobos, and it was the wrong time to attempt a head-on war with them. Yet, the fact remained: one cyborg alone had caused Mother Earth a significant defeat, and the bad news would leak to the home opinion eventually.

Zedong-Petaïn explained that damage control was of the essence: the Martians' compromising combat footage had to be neutralized, but this was out of his league and he needed expert help. The Kansler heard the report quietly, with outward calm. When the transmission ended, he sent orders to the MSF commander to await the arrival of Islington, who would then act as the Kansler's stand-in, and whose task it was to command Zedong-Petaïn plus the reinforcements being shipped over from Earth in the coming weeks. And the Kansler felt fairly confident that Islington would stay loyal - the man had a wife and family back on Earth. A second set of orders, sent to the Fleet's Marketing department, requested a division of experts to tackle the Martian rebellion against Terran supremacy. Having completed the transmission of the orders, the Kansler ordered the immediate arrest of Boulder Pi.

An hour later, the ship's chief surgeon called in the Kansler to the operating room. Boulder lay strapped to a table in a protective transparent tent; several thin, remote-controlled surgical probes were penetrating his skin. The chief surgeon showed the Kansler a small bloody object, about the shape and size of a pen.

"This," he explained, "is a proto-organic blocker, designed to help a person pass any known lie-detector or truth-serum tests. The bone growth around the implant indicates he got it five, maybe seven years ago - long before Intelligence cleared him for employment in the Fleet's lunar lab. Back then, of course, Intelligence had little knowledge of these things and how to detect them. Perhaps they planted other agents using the same technique. With your permission, Kansler, I'd like to examine other suspects..."

"Go ahead," the Kansler said. "All short people are suspects." He pressed his gray uniform cap, the one he always wore, down over his eyes. His fists opened and closed restlessly as he walked around the table, looking at the midget who lay there. Boulder was under sedation, and felt little actual pain; the truth-drugs were starting to work, and a sheepish smile spread across his small-jawed, bearded face. Boulder's large eyes tried to follow the stalking, large figure that circled the table, but he grew tired and just rolled up his eyes.

The Kansler made a slight movement with his hand, indicating that the surgeon should leave. When only three Intelligence officers were left in the operating room with the prisoner, the Kansler's face changed; it turned pale, with red flecks appearing on his potato-nose. He suddenly ripped apart the protective tent with his hands, and pulled the surgical probes out of Boulder's skin. The little man winced, but more in shock than pain. Then he saw the Kansler's eyes, with its shrunken pupils, staring down at him in greater hatred than ever before, and noticed that the Kansler's restless hands were trembling. Boulder thought: I'm done. He won't let me leave this room alive. Still, Boulder felt calmer than usual, and he couldn't quite tell if it was the sedation that did it...

"Screw the drugs," the Kansler croaked, "screw the investigations, screw Intelligence, screw it all. I just knew, from the day I personally hired you to work for the Fleet, that you were an enemy agent. Our people in

the Jovian mining-districts reported recently of a man resembling you, who infiltrated Kun'Lun while Argus-A was on a visit there. I don't know his real name, for he managed to escape. I think he was simply a relative. You have a brother on Ganymede... don't you?"

"Yes."

"Do you know why I let you work for the Fleet, though I knew what you were?"

"It was a fair deal. You provided the resources, I provided the know-how."

"Venix. Your creation. When I saw her do those amazing dance stunts, I thought: now it can be done. A man can be transformed into a faster, stronger shape that thinks and reacts with superhuman speed and never dies. The next step in human evolution, that'll render all other forms obsolete."

"No, that wasn't it. My process would create a complement to the existing forms, an intermediary stage to enable interstellar travel."

"You lack vision. You don't see the larger picture. You don't understand the necessity of making sacrifices for the greater good."

"Such as capturing Venix to blackmail your perfect soldier? It's too late. I heard on the news about the info-blackout on Mars. Just like that night in Copenhagen. A telling silence, don't you think?"

"You're losing blood, Boulder. Talk faster."

"Did your agents trace all the places I went, when I left Ganymede to find work on the Inner Planets? Did they tell you about when I waited in transit orbit around Mars, and talked to some natives? They wouldn't believe all I told them, not at first. That I had patients waiting on Earth, waiting to be transformed, who would one day help them realize independence for the Outer Planets. And I told them that once the Kansler had gained control of my homeworld, Mars was the next target on his list. And..."

"Who told you that?"

"Nobody. I was the number one Risk champion in my class."

"It was you who helped her escape, all the time! Your scheme!"

The Kansler stabbed in front of the midget's face with his index finger - but convulsively, as if his arm was suffering from Parkinson's disease. "You spread that rumor of a reward for her escape, the escape you had predicted and abetted! Who paid you? Who's your coordinator? Is it your brother?"

Now the Kansler's face went a deep red, his eyes bloodshot, as if he was about to burst. Boulder laughed, and forgot about his own dying body. He grinned up at the purple-faced, red-eyed figure.

"You don't know my brother! I did it all myself. It was the only way it could ever work. I knew I'd get you in the end... Terran. You want to know why? I'm so short, always have Terran crotches at eye level... from the first I met you, I noticed... small and bent... and I've got real ones where you've got a pair of raisins!"

Boulder began to cough as he laughed - but abruptly stopped, when the Kansler strangled him with both hands. The men from Intelligence stood and watched. Half a minute passed. Their leader finally let go of the dead Boulder Pi, and turned to face them. His hands were stained with blood and saliva. Grunting like an ape-creature crossing the evolutionary step from animal to man, the Kansler ordered the men to return to their stations. His personal guard of robots came in to clean up the mess and take away Boulder's remains.

"Better put some ice on that," the red-eyed commander told the robots, pointing at the dead engineer. "We could scan the brain and find out more."

The most important thing now, he thought, was to postpone as long as possible the moment when Argus found out about Venix' escape. And the best way of distracting Argus was to send him on his next, last mission - as planned. He would make a great hero - the first but not the last...

Chapter 35: Energy Low

Supported by the two barrel-chested Martians, Venix entered the Martian Council Hall. The inside of the building mostly resembled a warehouse; it had once been a reception hall for newly arrived settlers, and only later replaced by a larger building two blocks away. There was a smell of old dust in the air, as if the council hall had not seen much activity for a few years. Cargo crates stood piled up in the corners; the small robots that cleaned the floors were worn down from bumping into things. A group of hastily assembled men and women of differing age were gathering around Venix, studying her with great interest - and some caution. In this warmer indoor atmosphere, the natives shed their heavy survival equipment and moved with powerful ease in their thin, baggy clothing. It surprised Venix that the thick fur of fine hairs on the Martians' skin and faces was so translucent, in fact nearly invisible. Only on the older people, the fur was beginning to show streaks of white, turning their faces a ghastly pallid hue.

The images of Martians that Venix recalled from films and news programs, she understood now, had been routinely color-edited to make Martian fur seem darker, more ape-like. In no way did these people deserve to be called "gorillas". Both the men and the women had extremely thick, large eyelashes, completely colorless, like glass. One of the younger women had dyed her eyelashes green - it looked like grass was growing out of her eyes.

A bulky, middle-aged woman wearing a deep-blue suit and pistol holster approached Venix, and made the two men release her with a gesture. The female cyborg staggered to stay upright. The woman had a rather sharp, fearless look in her brown eyes, and her gray-streaked hair was tied to the back of her head. She extended a hand to greet the visitor, but her tightly pinched lips were unsmiling, and she had a way of talking out of the corner of her mouth.

"You must be the one I heard so much about this whole morning. Welcome. I'm Arjja Texeira-Berg. I was told you wanted to seek asylum." The electronic badge on her chest scrolled a list of facts:

ARJJA TEXEIRA-BERG... 4TH IRREGULAR TERM OF DUTY IN MARTIAN CITIZENS' COUNCIL... OTHER OCCUPATIONS: HOUSEWIFE, MEATSNAKE FARMER, MOTHER OF 3...

Venix took a rapid forward stride and grabbed Arjja's shoulders, so tightly the seams of her blue suit came apart. Arjja winced - even through her fur and thick skin, she could feel the cyborg's hard fingers. Venix whispered, sounding sensuous though she did not intend to; her synthetic speech was harder to control.

"Get me in touch with 'them!' The ones who put out the bounty on my escape." She coughed up a thimbleful of sand.

Arjja wavered only an inch, but stood firm - she was quite strong. "We don't know of any such organization, or any bounty. The rumors that the Martians are cooperating with the Jovians are just that - rumors."

"You don't know anything?" Venix asked, her red lips grimacing. "But - but - doesn't the name 'Boulder Pi' tell you anything?"

"Ah yes... isn't he that collaborator with the Kansler? Saw him on the news. No, I've never met the man. We don't mix with that kind of people."

Then Venix bared her teeth, gritting them against pebbles of sand in an audible manner, and moved up close. "Your body heat says differently. You're lying. You do know him."

The councilwoman spread her thick arms in surrender, and her lips widened in a thin smile, though her eyes showed little warmth.

"You can let go of me now," she said. "Boulder told me about the infrared vision he was going to make the standard in all his future creations, and asked me to test it on his cyborgs, if I ever met one. I

think it was part of his passion for practical jokes. A little smartass, that Jovian was. But absolutely brilliant."

"If I wasn't so desperately in need of your help, I'd punch you out," Venix whispered, and pulled back from councilwoman Berg. She felt as if she had not relaxed in years. "There's no time to waste. Tell me everything."

"First, let us take care of and examine you. Boulder Pi told me we could expect to find some very important information in your head." She smiled quickly when Venix glowered back at her. "Just questions, girl. Not a dissection. And my family will pour you a nice, hot bath. Then please come and join us at the dinner table. You are our guest now, and we treat all our guests with the appropriate courtesy."

"Are all your guests questioned before dinner?"

"Not all my guests arrive with the entire Terran Army on their tail. Antexi!" she added in the Martian-Finnish slang.

Venix was too exhausted to say more, and just gave a nod.

WE INTERRUPT THIS LIVE NEWS PROGRAM FOR A MESSAGE FROM THE KANSLER:

Sons and daughters of Mother Earth, it is with great pride I can announce that the terrorist threat of the Outer Planets is nearing its defeat. During the past few months, our mighty fleet and its champion Argus-A have dealt the enemy bases several crippling blows.

I can at last say to you, with complete confidence: a total victory and permanent peace is in sight.

In the past I have ceaselessly tried to negotiate a peaceful solution to this conflict, but the party of the Jovian forces has repeatedly rejected all our peace proposals. So it was with a heavy heart that I declared all further possibilities of negotiated ceasefire as closed. Only the force and superiority of the Terran Fleet can bring us the unconditional surrender of the Jovian enemy, and thus guarantee the safety of our children, and our future in space.

My fellow humans... this is our moment of truth. Never before has the human race spread so wide, and is about to spread even further, beyond the boundaries of the Solar System.

What is at stake in this war is more than the supply route of deuterium to the Inner Planets, much more than the safety of Mother Earth from terrorist attacks. At stake is the very fate of our species. We cannot let it fall into the hands of a race of deformed genetic throwbacks. The true core of our species must prevail.

Now is the time for all of us to support our men and women out there, who fight and sweat and bleed for us. Send them encouraging mail, tell them that you are behind them every step of the way. Send PP donations to those from your hometown who enlisted to join the good fight.

With your full support they shall win, and return home. And with luck, I shall return to Earth and bring Argus-A with me, to share your thanks. Soon we fly once more into battle, and in the starry depths of outer space she floats there: Mother Earth, most precious of all worlds, reminding us of home.

Thank you and bless you all, and bless Mother Earth.

Chapter 36: A Quiet Evening With the Family

"Mmmmmmm..." Venix arched her neck backward into the small pool, and let the hot bath suffuse her long red hair.

The bathwater, pumped up from subterranean Martian water deposits and heated by deuterium reactors, was mixed with mild machine detergents and anti-static solvents to prevent short-circuiting. Still, no water managed to seep into her electric innards. She swallowed some hot water, and spouted it up and over her - flushing out the last residue of sand from her chest cavity.

Above the pool, the ceiling was rigged with sunlamps set to maximum output. Her cleaned skin membrane could now soak up the ultraviolet radiation, allowing her reserves to fill up at a rapid pace. She checked the status of her left leg, which she rested against the poolside: ENDOBOTIC REPAIR IN PROGRESS... LEFT LEG STATUS: 50% REPAIRED... NO EXTERNAL ASSISTANCE NEEDED... FOREIGN OBJECTS EMITTED THROUGH CHEST CAVITY WASTE PORT... PLEASE FLUSH CHEST CAVITY THROUGH ORAL PORT...

She felt something inside her, and coughed it up: a small rust-flake, from the steel beam that had cut into her knee when she boarded that truck. Venix doubted no more: flesh or no flesh, she was just as much a living being as before Boulder had transformed her. FOREIGN OBJECTS IN BODY: 0% NOTICE: ENDOBOTIC REPAIR IS USING UP RESERVES... SUGGEST REFILL THROUGH ORAL PORT...

The internal display showed the small deposits of spare building material in her breasts, little pockets of metal and plastic in grain form. It hadn't occurred to Venix that she needed to eat that stuff occasionally.

Someone knocked on the door to the pool room, and three heads peeked in from behind the doorway - one teenage boy, a little girl, and a small boy. Stocky, Martian children with thin, translucent fur on their skin. They regarded the female figure in the steaming pool with intense curiosity. Venix giggled: in her infrared vision, the teenager's physical interest showed right through his clothes.

"D... dinner is served," the young man told her, suddenly realizing that she was laughing at him. "You do eat, do you?"

"Wait," Venix said as she reached for a large towel. "I remember something Boulder told me about eating..." She stood up, water running off her plastic skin, and she shook her hair dry - splattering the children's faces with hot water. They shrieked and scattered away. "Get me some carbon, lead, steel and magnesium in powder form, in a bowl - and a spoon!" she called out after them. She laughed out loud. The sight of those kids brought back so many memories of growing up... and reawakened her persistent hope of having her own. One day, she thought, one day...

It struck her that the soldiers she had killed might have children back on Earth. She was surprised that she didn't feel crushed with guilt, only vaguely uneasy. Maybe her physical superiority was changing her into a cruel, selfish person... or maybe it was the war, bringing out the killer in everyone. This is not the time, she thought. If I live through this, then I'll have all the time I need for guilt. At least Gus won't have to feel I kept my hands clean while he got his dirty...

A half-hour later.

"How does your powder taste?" Arjja asked Venix.

The female cyborg moved her plastic-fiber tongue around in her mouth, and tried to savor the mix of coal powder, metal dust and styrofoam pellets.

"Chicken," she said, and laughed with the others at the table. She picked a leg of chicken from the mini-oven in the center of the plate, and tried a bite. After chewing the morsel for a few seconds, she spat it out while pretending to wipe her mouth with a napkin. "Very nice," she said, "but I can't digest it. Got no digestive system, at least not for food." She cast a glance toward the teenager, and couldn't help but giggle again. If only he knew what I can see, she thought and felt gleefully wicked, he'd die of shame.

"Juan!" Arjja gave her young son a push. "Stop staring at our guest, you're embarrassing her!"

"Sorry," he mumbled, looking down at his plate, cheeks flushing red. Venix willed her skin temperature to sink a few degrees, reached for his hand and gave it a quick - but cold enough to discourage - squeeze.

"It's okay. I think you'll be quite popular with the Martian women."
Juan flashed a quick bright grin, and straightened up.

"Do you play board games, Venix?" the councilwoman asked after dinner.
"Let me show you this game I got from Boulder Pi, that one time that I met him years ago."
She put on the dinner table an interplanetary version of the old Game of Risk, the electronic board built and designed by Boulder himself, laminated in plastic, and worn by time. Her family gathered around the board to play.

"I play as Mars," said Arjja.

"I choose Venus," said Venix.

"I play Earth," said little Makenna. "I get to wear the cap!" he added with childish triumph, as his father put a gray cap marked "K" on the boy's head.

"I play Jupiter and satellites," said Arjja's husband Salvado. "And Pentia is my advisor," he said, siding with his little daughter.

"Who controls the Asteroids?" asked Venix.

"Whoever invades the sector first, or takes it from the previous conqueror."

"I'm always left with Saturn, that's no fun," complained Juan.

"You can play Ura..." Makenna began to taunt his older brother, when Salvado's heavy hand gave him a smack on the scalp. "Not in front of the guests, Makenna."

The game started. The board's printed circuits showed the "pieces" move across the flat model of the Solar System and its planetary orbits. The rules were simple: the bigger the territory you captured, the more troops you could produce and ship across to take over the opponents' planets.

In the midst of the game, Venix stood up and gazed at the board: "I see it now. Why the Kansler is keeping this war going, and why Boulder gave you his game to keep. A child could see why."

"I am the Kansler!" shouted little Makenna, scowling with his round face as he put his tiny fist on the game-board. "When Jupiter and the Asteroid Belt are mine, nobody gets out of the system unless I say so! All deuterium to the Inner Planets has to go past me!"

"Oh yeah?" sneered his older sister. "Then my Mars joins forces with Olli's colonies at Jupiter. We can trap your fleet in the Asteroids and you are cut off! Ha!"

Their mother grinned and shook her head, looked to Venix and said: "I and Salvado were a young couple then, when Boulder gave me that game, and we passed many evenings playing it. It taught me to think long-term. I copied the game to others, and played it with them over the networks... I must have played hundreds of times. Almost all children born on Mars are now taught to play Boulder's game. We don't even have to tell the Jovians that we are on their side, because thanks to Boulder's game there's a silent consensus that we must be."

"So what can I do now?" Venix said. "Thanks to me, your homeworld is on the brink of open war with Earth. They'll just send more troops. Or..."

"And the Jovians can stop the Terran troops from arriving here. Remember the Flying Icebergs? Do you know how many of those pilots survived the radiation-belts and are still waiting to do something for Mars again? Except this time, the icebergs from Saturn's rings can be put on a collision-course with Phobos.

"Now, when the main bulk of the Terran Fleet is occupied at Jupiter, now is the ideal time for us to make our statement of independence. All we need is to beat the info-blackout the Fleet imposed on us, and we can start putting serious pressure on the Inner Planets. Your heroic fight with the MSF was just the inspiration our people needed. If we can get the footage of your fight smuggled out of here, spread it to the Inner

Planets..."

"I have relatives on Venus, Arjja. I fear for their safety. And - " She could barely bring herself to finish the thought: Gus would almost certainly be called for to attack Mars, too. "The most important thing I can do is to help Argus break free from the Kansler's remote-control. He's a good man, he'll refuse to attack if I can speak to him and he is not under control. Once free, he'll be almost unstoppable."

"The odds are not good, but if it can be done... okay. I'll gather the council and we'll tell you what little we found out on our own, after Boulder left. Most of them will be home from work now."

On Venix' homeworld, "councils" did not exist, only informal networks.

"What is it your council does?"

"Nothing really... a relic from old times. But we do have connections with people who can help you. Maybe we're keeping the council just to keep our oldest, honorary member happy. Wait till you see him, you'll know what I mean."

"Moy! Can I come with you?" Juan asked Arjja, trying to make a cocky pose. Venix saw - and heard - how nervously his heart was beating inside his ribcage.

"Let him come along, Arjja," she suggested. "You wanted me to inspire your people, didn't you?" she said with a little smile. She didn't need infrared vision to see the helpless anxiety in Arjja's face.

Chapter 37: Boulder's Game

At the time of Venix' asylum on Mars, the populace had abolished elections - like all other planets. The Citizens' Council had no power to grant laws and collected no taxes. All decisions of major importance were made through instant mass voting.

But above Martian law was the unspoken colonial law of all planets except Earth: pay whatever tribute the motherworld asks for: resources, energy, genetic harvest, migrant labor... and remember who holds the biggest gun.

Mars with its vast resources produced half the metals that built the Terran war machine. Jupiter provided the fuel that propelled the machine. Venus exported know-how and technology to the rest of the planets, ensuring the system's overall efficiency. Very few people on any planet thought of it - but the colonies owed a substantial amount of their wealth to the same Terran Fleet that could destroy them...

Arjja, Venix and Juan took a tunnel car to another house, where the other ten Martian council members plus a dozen scientists were waiting. The council was a rather informal association. What little human administration that once existed in the previous century had withered away, and the council had no real executive powers, no budget - and Martians paid no local taxes, only the forced Inner Planets Security Tax which financed the MSF.

The council members looked extremely ordinary by colonial standards; they greeted her in the most casual way, though Venix could see suspicion and fear flaring up in their minds. While Venix was sitting, the scientists moved scanners over her body.

At least one-third of the eleven members seemed more interested in debating the tax issue. The youngest councilman, a tanned, bulky fellow with ruddy skin fur, called for an immediate planet-wide boycott of all forced taxes. Older colleagues called his idea foolish, since Earth could easily impose a much more serious trade blockade on Mars. She scanned their heat-emissions to see how much thought lay behind all the words...

One middle-aged, feeble-faced member had an annoying speech impediment,

and kept warbling every three-syllable word. The thermal patterns of his brain showed only modest activity. Another middle-aged man, whose brain seemed over-active to the point of breakdown, kept repeating the phrase "the will of the people" whenever he made demands for himself. He only paused talking to gulp down another bottle of MocaCoca, a highly addictive alkaloid soft drink that was outlawed on Venus and the Outer Planets.

In a minute, the bickering group had forgotten the new guest, who sat still in a corner. She was getting fed up real fast. Juan ambled restlessly in the periphery of the conference-room, and yawned repeatedly.

Venix looked carefully to the oldest, quiet council member: a white-clad man whose spinal column had grown bent. His nose was much thinner than on the other council members, and his sagging skin had no fur at all. The tag on his shirt read "DAVE ROMAN," and on his sleeve was an antique NASA badge. She moved her chair closer to the man, sensing something in the heat-patterns from his balding head. Dave Roman looked at her as if through a mist. The hand that held his walking-stick began to shake. He squinted and peered at her chest, then at her face. She raised an amused eyebrow and all but said with her eyes: See anything you like?

"Oh," he chuckled, "Pardon my staring, ma'am... your white suit, and you look like a girl from Earth, just brought back so many memories." His gruff voice was surprisingly loud for such a thin man. "You don't happen to know about that robot we were supposed to meet?"

"I'm Venusian. And a cyborg, not a robot. That's me." She offered to shake hands. Dave Roman seemed to flinch where he sat. "I'm Venix, a friend of Argus-A."

"Huh?" the old man grunted, peering at her in utter confusion.

Arjja patted him on the shoulder and talked soothingly; he leaned back into his seat and dozed off with his mouth open.

"Dave is almost 160 years old," Arjja whispered to Venix. "Most of his brain-tissue was regenerated after a stroke, so he's out of it most of the time. Just let him listen to us, his hearing is pretty good after he got the new eardrum."

"He's a Terran."

Arjja's face hardened, as did her tone: "In the previous century, Dave was a citizen of a federation called 'The United States of North America.' The founders of his federation came from Europe, but they rebelled against their countries of origin all the same. Are you incapable of independent thought, just because you were born on Venus... or do you slavishly follow Boulder Pi's every directive? Are you as arrogant as you seem?"

Venix strained to show a concerned face and posture, so that her answer wouldn't come off as stiff and insincere. Always, her body language - devoid of coughs, grunts, yawns, farts, or spontaneous movements - was misinterpreted as aloof and over-controlled.

"I'm sorry. I used to think I was always right just because I react so fast. Please forgive me."

With a grunt, Arjja accepted the apology. Venix spent the next half-hour telling the council her story. About her meeting with Argus, how they had exchanged thoughts during the fusion of their nervous systems... but she avoided any intimate details of their love life. She wasn't sure if flesh-and-blood people could understand how well she and Argus knew each other from that one night in Copenhagen. She skipped the erotic parts and went on to depict how the Kansler could "shut down" and possibly command the movements of Argus. She finished with an account of her escape to Mars.

When she went quiet, Dave Roman stirred from his apparent slumber, coughed, and pointed his stick at her. She turned to face him again. He squinted, took a breath, and smiled at her. The old geezer had heard every word she said!

"Mighty fine lady, you are, I envy the husband... I was about to say, surely the Kansler must sleep sometimes? Unless his Number Two man Islington takes over the remote-control then. Argus can make a break for it while the Kansler sleeps, he's darn quick, eh?"

The others, except Venix, looked at each other and her in embarrassment. "We love him, he's one of our founding fathers, but... he's far gone," Arjja mumbled aside to Venix. She nodded agreement. Dave Roman had to be senile to forget that the Kansler, like most people in the late 22nd century, had Personal Assistant computers watching and aiding him - of course also while he slept. And given the Kansler's mania for control and the Fleet's access to cutting-edge technology, his PAs would be extremely alert and intelligent. He might even have one of those synaptic by-pass monitors she'd heard of, which enabled a man to watch surveillance footage in his sleep.

Dave Roman passed a fart. Venix turned up her nose, while everyone else casually shouted a blessing: "Tervedexi!" She understood now the slogans she had seen on every Martian outhouse and bathroom-door: GAS IS GREEN, DIRT IS WORTH. Their obsession with terraforming dominated every aspect of their lives.

One of the scientists called for their attention: "Excuse me, we're finished with the scan. The subject, uh, the visitor is not transmitting anything except body heat. She's clean."

Arjja licked her lips nervously, and looked gravely at the other council members. They nodded approval. She pressed a button on the panel that was taped to wide palm, and the screens on the conference table lit up with a flat image of Boulder Pi's game-board.

"Watch this closely, Venix - the last and only coded message I received from Boulder Pi before he was taken to the Fleet's lunar research complex. We enlarged the image and searched for hidden messages. But his actual message is in plain sight, he must have scribbled it by hand at the last possible minute before sending the image. His handwriting is awful."

"I can read it. It says in the corner: 'The white lady will remember what I told the candidate just before he woke up a new man. Search for the words where everyone can see them.'" The assembled Martians were startled when she uttered her conclusion after just one second. "Don't you get it?" she asked them. "Now I remember, Gus lay in the stasis-bed waiting to be operated on before he was changed, and Boulder told him -" She quickly tapped the speech-command button on the screen at her seat. "Universal file search. Find this phrase: 'The mind controls the body on all levels, even the smallest level.'"

"Searching... please wait..." said the screen's artificial voice. No one in the room spoke a word as they waited. Never before had the minutes felt so slow to Venix. After five minutes, the MocaCoca-drinking councilman said it was hopeless, and motioned to fetch more bottles in an adjacent room. The others forcefully restrained the man, and Arjja gave him a suspicious glance. Another forty minutes passed in agonizing silence. Then -

The search program produced an old-fashioned Internet page with a single link on it. Venix "clicked" the link with her fingertips on the touch-sensitive screen. The link opened to another page - with a text message: THE MIND CONTROLS THE BODY ON ALL LEVELS, EVEN THE SMALLEST LEVEL HXeXlXlXo, mXy cXhXiXlXd. IXf yXoXu cXaXn rXeXaXd tXhXiXs, iXt mXeXaXnXs yXoXu fXiXgXuXrXeXd oXuXt mXy lXiXtXtXlXe mXeXmXoXrXy-sXwXaXpXpXiXnXg tXrXiXcXk...

Boulder's message came with a crude encryption, probably intended to trip the Fleet's search-programs from locating its keywords. Venix easily sorted out the code and read the unscrambled text out loud: THE MIND CONTROLS THE BODY ON ALL LEVELS, EVEN THE SMALLEST LEVEL Hello, my child. If you can read this, it means you figured out my

little memory-swapping trick. I think I know which of you understood first - the smart one...

Hopefully, this message contains no names or key words that would enable you-know-who to find it. You and your male counterpart, you will make a great couple. I think of you as my only children, if this sounds a bit perverse I apologize. From when I first learned cybernetics, I always knew you would come into existence one day, when circumstances were right. For that is the blessing and the curse of the human species - whatever our minds can dream up, we try to make real.

Memorize this: the manner in which the Head Honcho controls his Main Man. A particle so light, it passes through the sun like through air, but is stopped by water. Head Honcho has a big, big transmitter of these particles following him at all times, from a far distance, and he controls it through some remote machine close to his person - or INSIDE his person, I don't know for sure.

Since these control transmissions can reach our Main Man through almost any barrier in space, it would be too difficult for him to shield himself against the signals. Theoretically, the two of you could live safe and shielded in an ocean, but you'd run into other problems after a while.

In the final stages of creating Main Man, on Head Honcho's orders, my science people inserted a small, remote-controlled shutdown thing into Main Man's body. If Head Honcho dies, for any reason, the transmitter will send a command to the shutdown thing, and it kills Main Man instantly. Before you try to challenge Head Honcho, the shutdown-thing MUST be removed or neutralized. It could have settled almost anywhere inside him.

That's all I could find out. Good luck. I give you - the world. Be gentle with it, and take care of each other.

You Know Who

P.S.: Hey, smart girl! I almost forgot - you have no control receptor inside you, you were developed by me alone. So you are already free. But you are similar to our Main Man in many other ways, so you should be ideal for trying to reach his mind through direct transmission. Think of those particles. Use them to reach him. He will need your help... he's not so clever, you know.

Don't forget to type in your real name in the guestbook at the bottom of the page.

She typed in the word VENICE, sent it across, and the screen turned into graphic noise. The file had erased itself.

"Was that it?" asked Arjja uncertainly. She instinctively held up her arms in protection when Venix pivoted around and hugged her. From his seat, Dave Roman let out a loud fart.

"Tervedexi!" Venix shouted at him, grinning happily.

One of the scientists present said: "Maybe we can help. The Olympus Mons Observatory does a bit of neutrino research on the side. It's pretty obvious Boulder is talking about neutrinos, and he could have heard about our research on his visit."

Arjja pried herself loose from Venix' crushing embrace. "Can you build a transmitter for me?" Venix asked.

"I'd rather not discuss it here," the scientist replied. "But I think we'll need you to work out the exact details with us, at the observatory."

"I'll try my best," Venix told him. "Pity, that Boulder couldn't find out more. And the ones who could tell us how to use it, are of course locked up on the Moon and under close surveillance."

The scientist grew visibly excited as he spoke: "Sometimes there are public programs showing the inside of the lunar research complex, I've recorded them all. The Fleet uses those science-shows to scare the colonies with promises of new, terrible weapons. Our computers can analyze these images and perhaps I'll find a clue - but most of the

footage is censored, you know."

He urged his colleagues along, and they quickly exited to their transport.

"If they succeed in contacting Argus-A, won't the Fleet intercept the signals to Argus, and strike at us?" the man with the MocaCoca addiction asked. Arjja nodded, her face grim. "Oh, what the Earth," he added rapidly, "we're already at war as it is. Great! I'll get more Moca." In 0.011 seconds, Venix grew alert: he was the same councilman who had wanted to go outside while they waited for... she switched to infrared vision and grabbed his wrist.

"Are you a Terran agent?" she asked him sharply, watching the thermal patterns of his head. The man twitched to get free, and spontaneously blurted: "No!" She saw how the blood flow changed in his brain - the patterns screamed YES! His other hand moved to his pants pocket, and Venix saw it coming: she grabbed and broke both his wrists before he knew it. The man protested and screamed, but in a split-second she had caught what he was reaching for: a small flash-grenade, which would have blinded everyone in the room and covered his escape. Trapping the councilman in a headlock, she tossed the grenade to Arjja, who caught it awkwardly.

"Oh my Goddess... this is Terran ordnance!" Arjja glowered at the cringing, sobbing traitor. "How could you, France? We trusted you! You saw our defense plans!"

"Surrender is our only chance!" the councilman called France whined at them. "Once they're finished massacring the Jovian colonies, it'll be our turn. One cyborg alone almost beat the entire MSF! Can you imagine what an army of creatures like her could do to us? Because that's what we'll be up against! She's the prototype, the new enemy!"

A ghastly silence fell over the room and the other members' eyes turned to Venix; she could read fear and suspicion building in their minds.

"Fine," she snapped, and dropped the wailing France to the floor. "I'm leaving. "You are obviously of no help to me or Mars."

She rushed out to Arjja's tunnel car with such swiftness, they could not stop her. In four seconds, she was racing off.

Juan Texeira-Berg made a half-hearted attempt to catch up, groaned, and turned around to give his mother and the council a sound scolding:

"Idiotti! We don't need this so-called council. We need what we always needed: people like her."

Arjja gaped at him for a few seconds, but her mood shifted quickly and she separated herself from the crowd to join him. "Gentlemen," she declared over her shoulder, "we have rendered ourselves obsolete. I hereby resign from all future council duties." She hurried to the same exit-passage that the scientists had used, and punched in on her palm-panel a request for a roton-rocket taxi.

Dave Roman sprung to his feet, and whacked feebly at the cringing France with his stick. The council stood uncertainly around Dave and France, hesitant to cheer or stop the beating of a fellow member...

Chapter 38: A Night at the Observatory

Night fell over Olympus Mons, Mars' highest mountain peak, and the stars came out. The planets shone brightly against the glowing backdrop of the Milky Way. Brightest of all was the blue dot called Earth...

"This could be bad," Venix said to Arjja and Juan. "The propaganda-show from Earth - look."

They switched display to a larger wall-screen to watch the current edition of Hard Booby, hosted by the ever-pneumatic Olga Oh. Most Martians hated the show for its lies and sugarcoated threats against the

Outer Planets - but some watched it anyway, after they had edited away everything but Olga Oh's genetically enhanced body. Grown men whimpered when they saw her move. Young Juan stared too, but he sneered at the newscaster's words:

"... and I know I speak for every true daughter of Mother Earth, when I wish Argus-A good luck on his next dangerous mission over enemy territory! Mmm, when I think of him I get warm all over. And speaking of big guys, they don't come any bigger than the Kansler. Right, boys and girls and she-boys? I saw his speech just an hour ago and I cried, really, I cried. He makes us all so proud. Bless him.

"Oh yes, I really shouldn't tell you this now, but a little bot whispered in my ear... a hot new award ceremony is coming up in just twenty-four hours! The word on the beams is that Argus-A and our great man, the Kansler himself, will make a rare live appearance when the Kansler awards Argus this year's Nobel Peace Prize! Now isn't that great?"

"Same old roska they give the Kansler each year," Juan complained to the screen. "As if we care."

"Amazing," Arjja added, "that he gives up the award for Argus after hogging it for five years in a row. He must really want the whole Solar System to watch. Kyllae." She patted Venix' shoulder - gently - and gave her a smile that was meant to cheer her up. "Let's see how our geniuses are doing."

In the late 22nd century, the orthodox method of long-distance communication was laser, in the spectrum invisible to the normal human eye. Radio came second, followed by microwaves and fiber-optic networks in third place. Electric telephone and network cables were still in use in a few backward regions on Earth, but had become obsolete. Neutrino communication had never really caught on, due to the vast excess of neutrino "static" coming in from all corners of the universe - and the over-sensitive, expensive technology needed to transmit and intercept neutrinos. Only certain parts of the Fleet used it.

Arjja and Venix left the smaller anteroom and entered the main hall of the Olympus Mons Observatory, situated on the top of the 27-kilometer-high, dead volcano. The main hall housed a planetarium, where live telescope images could be projected on the inside walls. The images were fed from a field of 2,000 computer-controlled small telescopes, out in the crater floor. The vacuum at this altitude provided excellent observational conditions.

A small but devout team of independent researchers had an entire section of the hall to themselves, for various experiments. As Arjja, Juan, and Venix ran down the stairs to check on the team, they saw the device that took up most of the research-team's consigned space: it resembled a laser transmitter, but had a donut-shaped section at its base, to which several thick power cables ran across the floor.

They approached the scientists, some of which they recognized from the council meeting. The researchers' senses were all hooked up to each other by way of a closed neural laser-grid, and acted like a single mind: one of them waved at the guests while being otherwise preoccupied, and another man spoke in his place.

"You're just in time for good news," said one fellow with an unkempt beard and the build of a skysurfer, speaking very rapidly - though not too rapidly for Venix. "This is so cool, we'll skip sleep for the next two days!"

"Fine, fine," Arjja said, "but we're running short on time. What've you got?"

"Arjja, remember when we told the world about the cheap, improved

neutrino detector we managed to build, using the underground water reservoirs as detectors, two years ago? Almost before we went public, the MSF sent their goons to intimidate us, almost threatened to shut our lab down... but! Just as soon, they got nervous and left.

"They must have figured out that if they told us where we weren't allowed to search for particles, we'd know exactly where to look for their classified stuff. In short: we suspected back then, that the Fleet was doing secret neutrino-com tests. Venix has helped confirm this. So we -"

"Wait," Venix broke in. "Did you detect any secret transmissions targeted at the following coordinates?" She told them from memory, the exact time and place that Argus-A was struck down by a paralyzing command in Old Copenhagen, on Earth, several weeks ago.

The team fed the data into the computer grid they were all jacked into, and simultaneously the men turned to smile at Venix.

"That's..."

"Right!"

"At exactly that time, we detected a massive, fifty-second burst of neutrino signals. Neutrinos can't be deflected or bounced - they just take a straight path, right through planets and asteroids, until they are stopped by water."

"And?"

"The burst came from a moving source, in an eccentric orbit intersecting the Asteroid Belt. First we mistook the source for a comet, and the spectrometry indicated so. But then it started to change course, using a powerful ion-based propulsion device. So we took a closer look, and discovered the "comet" had to be an artificial body camouflaged as an asteroid. Since then we've detected similar neutrino bursts from the source, directed at Jupiter. I think the Fleet got nervous from astronomers like us listening in on them, so they started to send irregular bursts at various occasions, to throw us off track."

"Deciphering?" she asked briskly.

"No luck. The modulations of the bursts are way off the scale, I'm talking gamma-ray intensity. But the particles are still so light, they can't cause any harm."

"Can I see these transmissions, in light signals, at exact speed?"

"We'll play them on the planetarium. Look up."

The research team, working as one man with several bodies, switched off the ceiling lights and the enormous dome went black. Out of habit, Venix switched to infrared - but switched back when she noticed everybody else were looking up at the projections on the dome's inside. She gaped.

"I can read it! It's an intricate pattern..."

"I just see a pulsating light," Juan told her. "What's it saying?"

Venix couldn't reply; her memory-metal-and-plastic muscles coiled up in cramp; she struggled to keep her balance, shut her eyes for a moment, then opened them again. Arjja shouted at the team to switch off the transmission, but Venix held out her hand to counter the order. With a shudder, Venix' muscles uncoiled. The injured leg was shaking a little, but it worked well enough to stand on.

"That signal is what happened to Gus," she told Arjja. "That is why he cannot disobey his orders. I thought I was immune to it, but... when I looked at this translation into light-pulses..."

"They entered your nervous system through your eyes instead of through neutrino receptors, because you are not built to convert neutrinos into electric pulses!" one scientist filled in quickly.

"But light-signals don't work as efficiently - I can resist them.

Neutrino signals, on the other hand, would pass right through Argus's eyelids and into the hidden receiver. He will have to remove it or smash it."

"Kyllä. I wish a girl with your smarts'd hook up with our grid," the scientist said in awe.

The researchers looked at each other and conducted an internal discussion, which only they could follow over their common neural network. After a few seconds they nodded in simultaneous agreement, and urged their two visitors with them into a small office.

"Listen," they explained, "the MSF left bugs in the building. Lots of micro-bots, cam-sects and walking ears, but we're feeding them fake surveillance with counter-bots that the militia are producing. So hopefully, the MSF don't know this yet: We've built an experimental neutrino transmitter, right here, after specifications we calculated from the Fleet's early transmissions. We still can't use it."

"Why?"

"Yksi: Our machines can't speak the language. It's extremely complex, like human thought processes but many, many times faster. Kaksi: Once we aim the transmitter at the Fleet and send a test signal to Argus-A, we have about one hour before they can detect us and send a strike order across to Zedong-Petain. We saw what the proton cannon on the Phobos Station did to your escape truck. It can pop this dome like a balloon."

"This is the converter you need." Venix put a fingertip against her forehead. "I've done it before."

"Moy!" The researchers could not keep still in their excitement, and shouted Finnish-Martian slang to each other. "Juttu!" In the low gravity, they pogo-danced out to the prototype transmitter, bouncing up and down. "Uuno Turhapuro!"

Within a few minutes, Venix sat in a chair and let the researchers connect the cortex port in her hand to their transmitter. She strained her eyes to the utmost, scanning the premises for surveillance devices. She couldn't see any, but she had to put faith in the researchers having them under control.

"How much longer will it take?" she asked them anxiously. "I've been in this chair for--"

"Two minutes," Arjja interrupted. "Try and relax."

"If this doesn't work, what do we do? I must get in touch with him again."

"One of us wants to try sending stealth drones, straight to Jupiter," a researcher said while quickly connecting a series of cables to the transmitter's base. "The drones could spray-paint a message directly on the frozen surface of the moon Europa. The letters would be visible from orbit and Argus-A can see them while he is in flight."

"Brilliant," Arjja said. "Let's try this first, shall we?"

"We're ready," Venix was told. "Just concentrate on what you want to say, and the machine will convert it to neutrino signals at the exact frequency of the signals we detected before."

"Good luck," Juan said with a slight nod, and he seemed older than he had acted the first time he met Venix.

"This is insane." With her free hand she held the hand with the connected cortex port, to keep it from shaking. She shut her eyes, blocked out her surroundings, and thought of the one person in the world she wanted to talk to.

The converter sent its sequence commands to the transmitter's mini-cyclotron. The cyclotron started to spit out neutrinos in the given sequence. The others stood in silence around Venix, looking at her beautifully curved, smooth-skinned face. Before their eyes, she appeared to freeze into a painted sculpture...

Chapter 39: Voices In the Vacuum

G...u...s...?

What? Who's there?

Gus.....? Listen... Gus..... It's... me... Venice...
This is it, I'm going crazy at last. It can't be her. I'm just imagining it.
Gus... you big lug, listen! You know it's me... I know things about you that only the two of us know...
Ven? Venice? How can I hear you in my mind?
Remember how we connected in Old Copenhagen? I've connected my cortex port to a new kind of transmitter... I can't hear you, but I hope you can hear me...
Ven, honey, I've missed you so bad... where are you?
Gus, we don't have much time... I'll explain later, but I'm safe. I've escaped to Mars... anything else they told you is a lie. Boulder Pi told me how to disarm the Kansler's remote-control... You must remove it yourself, there is no other way. Listen...
She explained it three times, to make sure he got it right. He was perfectly happy to sit through the repetition, just to hear again. That was all I could find out... Gus... no matter what you have done, or been forced to do... it doesn't matter to me. We are more important to each other than this stupid war...
Love you, Ven. I wish you could hear me, even if I can't transmit what I'm thinking. I'll do as you say. I think of you all the time. Goodb... no, I don't want to say goodbye. We'll meet in our memories, if nothing else.
We can still meet in our memories... whatever happens. Love you...
I have a plan. Tell you about it later. Love you, Ven.

An hour passed, and the machines reacted before the humans could... General Zedong-Petain received an automatic warning from Fleetcom, the system-spanning computer network that coordinated the Terran Fleet's robots, ship routes and surveillance stations. He was advised to investigate a suspect neutrino transmission from Olympus Mons, and send a Class Red report back to the Kansler.
The MSF commander lacked the top-level security clearance to have learned about the Kansler's means of controlling Argus-A... and he lacked the intelligence to connect the request to certain rumors within the Fleet, about something called "Direct Control".
He pondered the automated request, alone in his capsule of screens that showed him surveillance footage of Mars' surface. He called up the hidden spy-cams that were posted in the Olympus Mons observatory: they showed it was empty, save for an obese, bearded astronomer who sat asleep at his post.
According to MSF surveillance reports, the man had been asleep for four hours, while watching an experiment in sending neutrino signals to alien civilizations. The general chuckled contemptuously. Lazy, stupid Martians, he thought with some satisfaction. Trying to rise against the Inner Planets with antique mechanical weapons. With the squeeze of a button, I could pop that observatory... like a balloon... on a pretext. But I have to wait until that bastard Islington, the Kansler's lapdog, arrives. Damn. Have to wait. Can't risk getting us into a two-front war now. The Kansler has promised us more victories later. Soon...

In the early morning hours next day, Venix met up with Arjja and her son, the council (now one member short) and some of the local militia coordinators.
"He heard me," she told them, joy radiating from her face, and she hugged herself as if the person she talked of was inside her. "He couldn't send anything back, but I know it. He will break free. I know he can."
Dave Roman raised himself from his easy chair and looked at her with a

strange gaze. Supported on his stick, he walked up to her, and for a (subjectively) long moment Venix prepared to catch him if he should fall. But he moved with greater strength, and there was an expression of awareness about his features. He clasped her arm with unexpectedly firm fingers and felt at it, like a physician checking her muscles and bones. She stood still, stunned.

"You haven't realized how important you are, girl." Roman's gaze, unflinching, bored into her mind. "You're like a kid who just learned to fly. Hasn't anyone told you? Of course they haven't. The eggheads, the military, the colonists, the mutants, they're too scared, too narrow-minded, too dumb. I used to dream of going to the stars, and look where I got. But you... and him... you're going there. You hear me? You're going there."

Dave Roman grinned - and when he blinked, that spark of awareness in his eyes died out, and his grip foundered. Again he became a withered ex-astronaut, barely aware of his surroundings. But Venix felt a great affection for the man; he had opened her eyes to a greater understanding. If she could have wept for him, she would.

"Does he talk of the stars a lot?" Venix asked the others. They shook their heads and shrugged; Juan seemed to want to say something, but clenched his lips together.

"Now it's in his hands," she told them. Hurry up, Gus, she thought.

Chapter 40: Inner Space

Neutrinos? Argus recalled from his schooling periods: neutrinos were so small and light that over two centuries after their discovery, nothing less than a water tank was enough to detect one. Which meant the neutrino receptor in his body might contain liquid of some kind. If he could find it, pierce the container and drain it, the Kansler's hidden device might cease to work. Just on an impulse, he shook his limbs and head to check for gurgling sounds. Nothing. His insides were dry - apart from the inert liquids that lubricated the muscles and joints, distributed excess heat, and helped converting it into battery power. Water it wasn't.

So he lay down on his cot, and closed his eyes. The internal menu display appeared before his view. He programmed a search for water deposits in his artificial body... the results came up negative. He grew suspicious; the control implant might be classified even to his own systems. A bit of thinking gave him an idea.

SHOW THERMAL BODY IMAGE

Scanning the image inch by inch, Argus looked for unusual pockets of heat that stood out from his resting-temperature of 15 degrees Celsius. Nothing again. And there was nobody he could ask, without alerting the Kansler.

A distant, flickering memory rose in his consciousness. Boulder Pi, very nervous, telling him something he barely could hear... "The mind controls the body... also on the smallest level..."

Not much of a clue... Argus dived into his internal menu system again, calling up vast tree-diagrams of his components. He came upon a small sub-menu called ENDO-MAINTENANCE, uncertain what the word meant, and opened it before his retinal display.

ENDO-MAINTENANCE SUBSYSTEMS: 1: THERMOSTATIC COOLING PROBES (AUTO) 2: ENDOBOTIC SYSTEMS AND TISSUE REPAIR (AUTO) 3: EMERGENCY ENDOBOTIC CLUSTER (MANUAL)

It had to be the answer. Activating the last option took a microsecond. A menu he had not come across before, lit up:

ENDOBOTIC CLUSTER CAN BE USED TO DETACH FOREIGN OBJECTS FROM THE BODY (EJECTION THROUGH ABDOMINAL CAVITY)

SELECT CONTROL MODE: 1: MAP-DIRECTED GUIDANCE 2: DIRECT VISUAL CONTROL

(CAUTION: PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH DVC-EB MK 24 STRONGLY RECOMMENDED)

Visual? He preferred to see what was actually going to happen, and took the second option, and his vision was filled with an unexpected sight.

3-D MAP MODE ACTIVE

The screen prompt shrunk to a corner of his view: the main view showed something that resembled a subterranean maintenance tunnel. Only, the tunnel walls pulsated - and were long bundles of silver threads. His artificial muscles, interspersed with black threads - those were the artificial nerves, insulated at the stems. The view was just a representation - the hollow spaces of his real body were filled with lubricants, hydraulic oils and liquid coolants that reduced visibility to near zero. His endobots could "swim" through it.

A blue-glowing screen indicator read:

ENDOBOT 01 MAGNIFY: X 1000 PRESSURE: NORMAL CAUTION: DO NOT STIR BODY OR USE MUSCLES DURING DVC

His view was that of an imaginary microscopic camera. A tiny round robot, fitted with vibrating paddles, swam past, followed by several others - like a family of microscopic ducks. In a few seconds, a whole cluster of them had gathered in full view, waiting for a command. The light, in this sealed space, came from strips of fluorescent material lining the sides of the tunnel - maybe those actually existed in the real body?

The steering menu came up, controllable through minute hand movements. A "compass" also appeared, showing the general outline of Argus's body shape; an arrow marked "N" indicated the direction of his head. He gave a careful northern movement command - and the paddles on the endobots began to vibrate. They shot away with tremendous speed, his selected cam-bot in the middle. Through the long, narrow tunnels and crevices of his insides they speeded, toward the spinal column. His insides seemed soft and hollow in this perspective, so contrary to his outward appearance.

When the central stem of the spinal column appeared from out of the haze, surrounded by the perforated metal segments of the vertebrae, Argus's consciousness staggered at the sight. He made a dive into one of the holes in the spinal "bone" segments, and entered the thin, tubular space between vertebrae and neural stem.

The stem, with its countless branches spreading outward into the body, was so huge he could not see its end in either direction. Other, even smaller maintenance machines darted up and down along the stem, checking for damage and repairing the surfaces.

Argus sent the other endobots skimming along the surface of the spine, darting between the thick trunks of nerve branches, searching for a foreign object. He soon discovered that he could select one or many individual endobot cameras at one time - like having a hundred eyes, a world-view where he could see behind and around corners. Intoxicating power of seeing dizzied him, to the point where he almost grew nauseous as the endobots swarmed around the seemingly endless spinal terrain. Very short flashes of light passed through the coolant every now and then; Argus couldn't identify them, and they seemed random, with no pattern. Perhaps it was just harmless cosmic radiation from outside the ship; he ignored it.

A smaller group of endobots passed across an alien texture, and he stopped them instantly. This was not part of his original construction, he felt instinctively. The object was large, large enough to form a ring around the spinal column, and it was made of smooth gold - with numerous rows of holes in it. Argus steered one sole endobot toward one of the openings; it was just small enough to swim through. Inside, it should be dark, but fluorescent blue strips illuminated the circuitry. There he saw what must be the mechanism of the neutrino receptor: a gold sphere, no larger than the top of a finger, but in this view a small planetoid. Argus ordered the endobot to start searching the surface. He found a

small lid, and the letters on it read: "H2O PORT".

The container held one or two drops of water - the substance that could stop a neutrino - and it was connected to the converter in the surrounding ring-shape, which in turn sent the decrypted signal straight into Argus's spine and brain. Had he been a programmer, Argus might have gone the other route and programmed his nervous system to not accept the foreign signals at all - but as long as the receiver was there, he would never be truly free. It had to be destroyed.

One at a time, he sent the other microscopic robots inside the spinal ring, faster and faster as he learned to command them better, and in seconds he had gathered several hundred of them there. Then, the neutrino receiver moved, by its own force: its internal defenses had finally noticed it was discovered. Argus waited for hostile endobots to appear from inside the ring-shaped thing. Nothing came. The ring moved more... the two halves of it began to fold into each other, squeezing the plastic spinal column. And a sharp edge began to emerge on its inside.

He had to suppress a moan: it felt like a big-bladed knife was cutting into his back. If the ring, weak as it was due to small size, continued to contract, it might cut off his spine and paralyze him below the chest - the Kansler's last means of preventing Argus from rebellion. Argus had to admit: until now, the Kansler had proved to be way ahead of him in foresight. He thought frenetically, as the pain kept nudging him in the back. Think, you big oaf! The ring lies inside the metal skeleton of your spine - how can you possibly reach in there and pull the damned thing out, without ripping the nerve stem apart?

Tense seconds passed, as Argus tried to recall every single bit of wisdom he had gathered in his entire existence, every thing Argus the cyborg and Gus the man had ever thought of. Years of trial and error and learning and re-learning, of always falling short of others who were smarter, more farsighted...

What would Ali have done, he asked himself twenty, thirty times over... but it was futile, for Ali had never fought a foe this small, this clever. What would Dad have done? He would have gotten drunk on moonshine, driven off into the Australian desert, shot some wildlife, probably returning with a dead animal strapped to the hood of his car...

What would his stepmother have done? No, no wisdom to find there. Then: What would Venice have done? He still possessed bits and pieces of her memories, from the night when their minds were fused through their serial ports... she had almost no knowledge of high technology. But something was there, among those bits and pieces, a fleeting memory from Venix' life: a dance. Argus played the memory, saw what she had experienced as if through her senses...

Venice was dancing with a man, some sort of instructor... she was young, her muscles not very strong, and shorter too. The room was wide and low, and a passing glimpse of a thick, grimy window showed the clouded Venusian landscape outside. He began to grasp at her body in an unsettling way. She tried to grab his wrists and pull away his arms, but he was older, stronger, and stood behind her back. This memory was nauseating; Argus could sense the memory of the instructor's bad breath at the girl's neck...

In the space of a few breaths, Venice stopped struggling, but stuck her fingers between her body and the man's arms holding her. She knitted her fingers together, and braced with her arms, pushed outward and upward. The man's hold broke, she pushed herself free, and sent herself forward with a backward kick into the attacker's midsection. The instructor tumbled into a wall, hit his head hard, and threw up. Venice shook with terror and stress, but that wasn't all she felt ... she was proud. Inspiration came. Argus alerted his entire internal defense system,

called forth all endobots from the vessels, tubes and cavities inside him. From the legs, the head, the batteries, the motors, the arms. Ninety thousand microscopic robots, all gathered around the foreign metal object around his spinal column, crawled inside it, formed chains, linked together... and pushed, as one living fiber... The ring-shaped mechanism split in two halves, still clinging to his spine; the water container was punctured. The endobots automatically began to isolate and transport away the debris. And at last that imaginary knife in his back was gone. He opened his eyes, and looked around as if he had already been found out. No alarms went off; no armed soldiers could be heard screaming and running toward his room. He shivered a little, and was still high on stress...

At last he was free.

He wanted to thank Venix, and Boulder. He flicked on a wall screen and ordered a search for news relating to Boulder Pi. An official Fleet bulletin flashed on-screen:

MISSING: BOULDER PI, top scientist, surgeon and lead designer on the Argus Project. Recent surveillance footage showed him exiting an airlock on the E.S.S. William Jefferson, in a stolen spacesuit. His present whereabouts are unknown. Fleet Intelligence has issued an arrest warrant. Boulder is considered a security risk and must be approached with caution.

Argus said nothing; someone might be listening. His face showed no reaction. He knew what he had to do - what he wanted to do - badly. A slight discomfort stirred in his stomach region. He thought: Getting the butterflies? But I have no stomach. Then he remembered, cupped a hand under his mouth, and coughed it up.

Into the palm of his hand fell a few miniscule gold fragments, and a drop of water.

Chapter 41: Kansler!

While Argus was performing micro-surgery on himself, the Kansler in his own quarters was being dressed up in his finest parade uniform. Fitted with every medal and insignia the Fleet could produce, the white uniform was quite heavy on his shoulders, even in the low artificial gravity. Again he dreamed of power, and now he felt confident of ultimate success. The Argus-A prototype had proved that the transformation process did work, that a man's identity survived the grueling process. Already the Kansler was reconsidering his recent murder of Boulder Pi, and thought it a wise move after all; the little engineer had had to be eliminated anyway, to ensure stricter control of the cyborg-making process. Not long now, he thought to himself. Not long before I am made immortal, and then my dream will come true.

The Kansler sat down as a robot polished his boots, and he imagined himself as the last in that long lineage of powerful men (and, he grudgingly admitted, one woman) who forced mankind toward greatness and conquest.

He dreamed of the mists of prehistory when some tribal chieftain, armed with no more than a spear and his strength, began to conquer all other tribes in the region. From there he dreamed onward through history, until the invention of writing made the names and origins known to posterity.

The Greek-Macedonian Alexander the Great, the Roman-Italian Julius Caesar, the Mongolian Genghis Khan, a long line of Aztec rulers whose names were lost when their alphabet went extinct, the Crusader kings of Medieval Europe, the French Charlemagne, the British Henry V, the Spanish Fernando Cortez and the Conquistadors, the Russian Ivan the Terrible, the French-Corsican Napoleon Bonaparte, the Austrian-German Adolf Hitler, the Georgian-Russian Josef Stalin, the Japanese Emperor

Hirohito, the Hunan-Chinese Mao Zedong and the Shaanxi-Chinese Zhu Jongri, the Belo-Russian Vlad Drakovin, the Pan-European Wings Mason, the Pan-American Rosario Mortales, the Pan-African Papa Shaka, the Pan-Asian Pol-Khan - and the Terran Kansler, the last and greatest of them all. It seemed almost as if conquerors were a special breed, apart from Homo Sapiens - or they were all the same mind, jumping from body to body, from century to century.

Soon, he mused, he could put his personal past behind him, and become what he had always wanted to be - a god. He would erase historical records, so that history began and ended with him. Of course, sacrifices had to be made on the path to godhood, but hadn't it always been like that? A few million, or billion, subjects lost here and there meant little in the greater scheme of things.

And then he intended to reshape and guide humanity to the stars and even greater conquest. Maybe there were other life forms out there, with similar ambitions? Then the great challenge to defeat and eliminate them would be so much more delightful... a conquest infinite and eternal, enough to sate the Kansler's appetite.

The robot finished his boots, and he leaned forward to catch his reflection in the polished leather. He saw - a middle-aged man with acne-scars on his chin, bags under his eyes that the facial paint did little to hide... and a mouth stretched so habitually into a charming smile, it seemed a foreign organism merely living on his head. The left eyeball was more bloodshot than the right one, from all the exposure to laser-projections and the miniscreen-patch. He found it difficult to keep both eyes in focus. Oh well - the broadcast control-room would edit out the veins from his left eye, as usual...

A headache flared up from the shifting eye-focus, and an unfamiliar insight occurred to him. Even through this imagined endless conquest, his transformed body, one thing would remain the same: he himself. His limitless drive to dominate was all-consuming, pushing aside any consideration of an average life. Family, love, simple pleasures, friendship, looking back upon memories in the autumn years, seeing one's offspring find its own way... none of these mundane things were allowed to interfere with the dream.

I had a wife and child at some point... what did they look like again? Unchanging, he would keep looking forward, chasing some imagined future moment of absolute victory... never able to stop and declare: Enough. I can rest. His dream that pushed him onward might be a kind of...

But the threatening insight was pushed away by the stronger, dominating will to power. He willfully forgot what he had just been thinking. No more did he question the meaning of his ambition: it existed, and must therefore be obeyed. The Kansler stood up and adjusted his old uniform cap. Another small robot, hanging from the padded ceiling, coated the cap with white paint to match the uniform.

"I am ready," he told the staff. "Call for general assembly. Argus is to arrive last."

The assembly hall filled up with crew and officers, the brass band played One Earth, roving cameras flew back and forth, the best mood drugs were taken on strict orders from the Kansler himself. No one would be able to step out of line. After a slight delay entered the Kansler, accompanied by his personal guard droids. The doors shut behind, and a minute later reopened to let in Argus - walking with regular, calm steps, also flanked by guard droids.

The Kansler looked at the lines of soldiers, who were drugged into bliss, and made a speech to the cameras. It was fifteen minutes long, full of clichés about honor, patriotism and sacrifice. Argus wanted to shut him up, but he waited.

Finally, the Kansler walked up to Argus, and presented the medal.

A fanfare played; a floating screen-prompt hovered in a far corner, showing him his scripted lines and movements. Argus opened his mouth to shout -

Chapter 42: Famous Last Words

Argus opened his mouth to shout - or rather, he began to. His mouth refused to open more than four millimeters. The voice-generator remained as quiet as the vacuum of space outside the panoramic window. Argus tried to move his arms and feet to crush that loathsome, pasty face - and just stood still. From the neck and down, his limbs and skeleton had shut down, knees and feet locked in a standing pose. He raged within, like a ghost trapped in the machine. Fooled again! It dawned on him: the neutrino receptor on his spine didn't need to be filled with water in order to function - for it gathered and converted the neutrino control signals from a larger source. The miniscule container might have been an emergency receptor, in case his cyborg structure was emptied of the combined coolant and lubrication liquid that flowed between his composite metal-and-plastic muscles. That blue liquid, a complex water substitute with a scientific name longer than an arm, was the actual receptor medium that converted neutrinos into command signals for the Direct Control system. Venix had failed. He had failed. Boulder had failed. Argus wanted to rip off the Kansler's body parts one by one, make him suffer for every Jovian he had had killed. He could have punched a hole in his leg and drained himself of the liquid earlier - but without it, his internal workings would overheat and grind to a stop. The Kansler was again in Direct Control, except this time without the dreaded words "DIRECT CONTROL" flashing before Argus's eyes. Which made it all the worse: he would probably go insane soon...

Before his reason slipped away, he had to learn how the Kansler transmitted his personal commands to the neutrino emitter. Argus switched to infrared vision and scanned the Kansler's body for hidden transmitters. The pacemaker? No, it only supported the Kansler's heart and ensured a long life span. Something else was visible on a deeper level, so thin it hardly registered... a wire or cable which ran from inside the Kansler's hands, along the bones of his arms, up his neck bones, then straight into his head which lay hidden under the cap. Still, nothing metal registered in Argus's heat vision when he looked inside the Kansler's skull.

Then, with a shock, Argus thought: I'm the fool of all fools. The Kansler could only pull this off because he's smarter. He never takes off his cap... because it's a decoy, radiating a false thermal image. He's been wearing that thing for almost thirty years, and no one has read his brain! I can't move my hands, and the voice is blocked... but... how weird... most of my chest and head are still free! Must be to allow me to look like I'm breathing. Kansler... can you see my rage? Can you understand my anger? Could you predict what I might do to you if you made me hate you this much?

The Kansler moved forward to hang a medal - a meaningless piece of metal with lies and arcane symbols engraved on it, and a plastic blue ribbon - around the cyborg's neck. The brass band blared a crescendo of trumpets and drumbeats. He gave the paralyzed cyborg a smirk so slight, only Argus noticed it. He knew. Yes, the Kansler had figured out from the surveillance records that Argus had now managed to damage the emergency-shutdown device. He had received a report from Fleetcom about the suspect neutrino transmission from Mars, while preparing for the award ceremony.

And it all made no difference to the Kansler, none at all - for he had outwitted Boulder Pi from the very start, arranging that he was kept in

partial ignorance, never seeing the whole picture of the lunar lab's complex production line. Unwittingly, when designing and building Argus-A, Boulder used materials which, when combined, formed the working Direct Control receptor and neural override. Argus was, so to speak, in it up to his ears.

The Kansler reached up and around Argus's massive neck to hang the blue ribbon and medal. As if he was having a bad dream where disaster approached in slow-motion, he became aware of how Argus's massive chest was swelling, and the shrill, short whistle from the cyborg's plastic lips as he sucked in and compressed a large amount of air. Abruptly, the air temperature around the cyborg rose several degrees. Argus was learning to use his internal cooling system as a thermostat, willing himself colder. The Kansler put two and two together - this took him 1.8 seconds, not quite fast enough to make the mental decision, to activate the total shutdown of Argus's body in time.

He had allowed himself to get within arm's length of his nemesis, just to put on a worthless medal.

Argus blew out a sudden pointed blast of frigid air, with his chest producing several tons of pressure - and knocked the cap off the Kansler's head. The middle-aged man's hair was swept back, revealing a small silvery transmitting plate on the very top of his balding scalp. Argus drew a second ultra-fast breath, making a high-pitched whistling noise that hurt the ears of everyone present. Again, with greater speed and force, Argus lowered his abdominal temperature, to -50 degrees Centigrade - and blew directly at the Kansler's head. He had to set his foot grip to maximum strength, to avoid toppling himself over. The second blast sucked body heat off the metal disc on the Kansler's scalp to below the freezing point.

With a panicked wail, similar to a terror-stricken baby, the Kansler grasped his head and fainted. His body crumpled quietly against the red carpet. The sudden cooling of the metal implant to -40 degrees had sent the freeze straight into his brain and bloodstream, knocking him out as efficiently as a blow on the chin.

The neutrino emitter, in orbit far from the flag ship, waited. How far away? Argus had no idea. It had to be close, real close, or the delay would make the Kansler's Direct Control inadequate. But the machine had to be in constant communication with the Kansler. It had to. Or this rebellion would be a short one.

Argus, standing paralyzed, waited for the Direct Control mode to cease. Had he been able to sweat, it would have poured down his brow.

Accounting for the speed of light in a vacuum, he simply had to wait. Argus witnessed the movements around him, perceived in the usual slow-motion pace, now heightened further by his own tension. The Kansler lay stunned; the guards, ridiculously slow and awkward, rushed forth to help him. The guard robots began to aim their many weapons at Argus. Knowing that he could never defeat them with mere cold blasts, he raised his body temperature in preparation for the fight. He began to grow afraid as he saw the first electrically charged stun-bullet leave a robot's gun-arm, and hurtle toward his head...

Time is a subjective thing. What seemed to him an endless wait lasted 2.4 seconds. The neutrino signal shut down automatically, while waiting for the Kansler's command signals to return. The near-light-speed control signal was shut down. The neural override, not getting its command signals in turn, shut down.

Argus moved, and it hurt to feel all that energy come surging back into his cooled-off metallic muscles. He ducked down and the stun-bullet missed his head. All guard robots began to fire at the spot where he stood - a millisecond after he started rushing away from it. With his foot grip set to the max, the carpet was ripped into a red cloud as he darted off.

Two robots were smashed in the next second. A third robot, shooting

darts and electric stun-bullets in all directions, was tossed up into the ceiling and jammed into a broken circuit-panel, where it short-circuited in a shower of sparks. The fire alarm went off, and every human member of the crew ran out in panic. Fires on spaceships were a source of terror - rapid, toxic and extremely tough to stop. Chemical foam sprayed about everywhere, from walls and robots.

The fourth guard robot, apparently paralyzed with indecision, hardly tried to escape as Argus smashed it into the wide panorama window. The window cracked into several sections. Air began to leak out in a choir of sharp, whistling hisses and howls. An emergency screen began to roll down over the damaged window - but the wrecked robot was in the way, and the screen screeched to a stop.

The central strategic computer's voice shouted throughout the entire ship. Marketing's designers had made the synthetic voice a rather accurate imitation of a legendary 20th-century Western actor:

"WARNING, PILGRIM! HULL BREACH IN GREAT HALL, SECTION THREE. WE HAVE A SEVERE ATMOSPHERIC LEAK. ALERT ALL MAINTENANCE. SECURE THE KANSLER AND ARREST COLONEL CLARKE IMMEDIATELY. THE HALL CANNOT BE SEALED UNTIL THE KANSLER IS SECURED. YOU WANT ME TO DRAW YOU A PICTURE?"

In the midst of the smoke and roaring draft from the leaking window, the Kansler came to. Groggy like a punch-drunk old boxer, he rose on wobbly legs and focused his eyes. Terror made them widen. He saw an ink-black, large human shape rush toward him with firm steps.

"Venix... Venix is here, Argus. I swear. Venix! Come here, and talk to him! Tell him to stop!"

Argus snatched the Kansler's cap from the shredded carpet, before the dazed politician could reach it, and his hands moved like a blur. In a moment, the cap turned into a smoldering bundle of tinfoil, crushed circuits and scorched fabric. He grabbed the Kansler's wrists with one hand, stabbed with his fingers into the Kansler's arms - cutting off the cable implants, and as a side effect, broke the man's arms below the elbows.

Even as the Kansler was still screaming, Argus took a loose shard of metal, and rubbed it against the transmitter implant on the Kansler's scalp. In few seconds, he had scraped up the little disc and ruined it permanently. The Kansler screamed harder, and nearly passed out again.

"She's not here," Argus said. "You can't threaten her anymore."

In an impressive display of will to survive, the Kansler managed to croak a coherent reply: "I never - meant to hurt - her - Argus. Look..."

A smaller doorway opened in a corner of the wide room, and a female figure hastily entered. She had Venix' face and eyes, just like Argus remembered her, down to the minutest details. The body was the same matt white with the thick black stripe running down her back and front. The hair had the same coppery sheen. The eyes were just as dazzlingly blue as the ones he had looked into the first time they met. She seemed afraid, but ran into his arms as if she had known him for a long time. She spoke in the same voice. But her words...

"Gus, stop this! I love you. Please don't kill the Kansler."

Argus immediately relaxed... yet not completely. He wanted so much for this to be the reunion he had longed for. She embraced him, and he felt his anger fade away as her warmth and strength pressed against him. But she felt different in his arms - her muscles and chest moved against him in an unfamiliar, crude fashion.

"We'll never be apart again, Gus. I love you."

"Venix... when and how did you get here?"

"I'll tell you later. Let's get out of here. We can go anywhere now. They can't stop us. Then we can connect again, and everything will be all right."

She held out the palm of her hand, and the serial port opened, holding the promise of mutual cybernetic bliss. At once he turned suspicious.

This was, to him, a personal and intimate act... and she was showing it with the Kansler and the cameras of the Solar System watching them. He forcefully removed her arms from his body, and she looked up at him in hurtful confusion.

"What did you use to call your allergic little brother, Venix? The memory we shared when we connected, remember?"

"Gus, don't talk like that. You know who I am. We're -"

"WHAT DID YOU CALL HIM?"

"Kansler! Direct -"

Even if the Kansler had been able to, he would have been too slow. Argus grabbed the Venix duplicate - for it was an android, with a computer for a brain - by one arm, and hurled it into the nearest steel wall. Its batteries exploded in a spray of black smoke. The stench of burnt plastic and ozone gas blew through the already hazy, wind-torn room; the duplicate's hair shriveled into a lump as the massive short-circuit burned it up. From its hand, where the real Venix had a small serial port, a metal spike stuck out.

In the next second, Argus had the Kansler by the throat, and growled into his face: "If you've hurt my Ven, I'll create a hell for you alone."

A normal man, a sane man, a decent man, would have surrendered.

Not the Kansler. He was the last politician.

Twisting and clawing like a caught centipede in Argus's grip, he approached the world record of spoken words per minute...

"It wasn't I who gave birth to you or your twin brother - you were just there for the Fleet to use another pair of floor polish - other twins I kept check on hundreds of them but only you two fit in just right - you never met your foster-parents never told you that you were an adopted clone reject, or that you had a brother.

"One - an undistinguished soldier - was groomed into a career officer - the other an excellent physical specimen with the loyalty and brains of a dog - kept on hold until the right moment - that's what you are, Argus - loyalty personified - that's why it had to be you and why I arranged for you to switch places with him!

"You can't realize how much I invested in Clarke's career - how hard it was to keep him from bumping into you until the day of his death - I couldn't let him become Argus-A, he was growing uncontrollable - and he was dumb - but the Fleet wanted a career officer - Clarke was politics - you were the reality - Gus, there's still time to save yourself and the Solar System - yes! I killed and lied to the public - to protect it - to win this war for Mother Earth - I just followed the will of the people aaak!"

"Ding! Match's over, Kansler. Now that your cap gizmo is off, I can practically read your mind. And what a sick mind it is... I see a trail of corpses, and a great sort of hunger. Lots of memories missing, almost no personality, just data. Did you have real parents? Robot nanny? A rejected clone, not cute enough for your blood parents? You expect me to feel sorry?

"Something else I just thought of: Amiella Minsky. You can't remember? Did you kill her? Whaddya mean you can't remember! Other women too? The pressure in your lobes gives you away. You raped and killed more people than I have fingers! How you make'em cover up for your crimes, I'll never understand.

"And your great war? Any strategy in your head, except killing all Jovians? Yes... you made them our enemies, pushed them to seek independence, and then you demonized them to justify your big expensive fleet and build-up of power.

"Does the word 'anti-matter explosion' ring any bells? I see! You wanted my ship to explode during my next mission, causing a Jovian genocide, and you could still call it 'accident'. You liked my first 'death' in the flight-simulator because it was a rehearsal. Then, after my

'glorious death' and massacre of tens of thousands of Jovians, the first man to become 'Argus-B'... would be you. The first immortal cyborg dictator."

Argus turned to the cameras, the eyes and ears of twenty billion people. He wasn't sure whether he was still on the air, but he didn't give a damn.

"That's his ultimate goal - to make the planets, then you, his property!"

The Kansler gasped: "But it would save the Inner Planets! It was the only way to stop the colonies from getting Jupiter! You can have it all! Live forever, and Venix too! Just spare me, and I'll help you lead mankind to the stars gargle!"

"You want the stars?" Argus grabbed the Kansler by the ankles, and spun him around at an accelerating pace. "I'll help you get there... the Fleet takes care of its own!"

On the televised broadcast, Argus became a black-and-yellow blur. The Kansler's face turned violet as blood pushed up into his head. He screamed in terror, eyes bulging and red:

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA... AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!"

Argus let go - and the Kansler's own momentum sent him like a speeding bullet through the damaged panorama window. Instantly killed, the Kansler's uniformed body tumbled out into the vacuum, and was lost. An insignificant,fading speck of redand whiteagainstthequiet,mercilessstareofamyriad stars...
...

Chapter 43: Impeccable Logic

The flag ship's central strategic computer detected a casualty. In three seconds, it calculated its first response:

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KANSLER STATUS: DEAD CAUSE OF DEATH: THROWN OUT INTO VACUUM THROUGH ASSEMBLY HALL VIEWPORT EVENT CLASSIFICATION IN PROGRESS... COMPILING ESTIMATE... CLASSIFICATION: 1ST DEGREE MURDER PRIME SUSPECT: COL. HARUMAN CLARKE, A.K.A. ARGUS-A NEW DIRECTIVES FLEETCOM A.P.B.: 1. REQUEST DEPUTY AS NEW KANSLER 2. ARREST ARGUS-A
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The Fleetcom network received the request. Fleetcom's nonstop-broadcast of updates confirmed to the flag ship that Islington was still unavailable until he arrived to Mars - his flight could not just stop and turn around.

Unable to find a new Kansler within its 1-hour-without-a-commander regulatory limit, unable to get new orders from Earth before that, the flag ship opened its emergency orders. In translated Fleetcode for machine logic, they read:

```
((LIST EMERGENCY ORDERS)) BRANCH 001 ((protect flagship E.S.S.William Jefferson AND override manual control AND destroy Argus-A)) BRANCH 002 ((carry out LAST Kansler's last orders THEN standby AND wait for NEW Kansler's orders)) BRANCH 003 ((IF B001 OR B002=FAIL THEN override manual control AND destroy Ganymede AND self-destruct THEN END))
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Warning sirens blared on and off in every corridor and room. Argus shut off all grip-force in his feet, threw himself at a wall, rebounded from it with his feet, and flew toward the exit door. Crouching into a human wrecking-ball, he crashed right through the steel exit-door and bounced into a weightless corridor.

Panicking soldiers ran about in the tubular corridors, scrambling to get

into the available spacesuits and escape-pods. The central strategic computer's voice declared that the assembly hall was not yet sealed off because Argus had destroyed the door mechanism, and urged a repair team to fix the damage. Argus slowed down his running slightly, realizing his momentum could easily crush a passing crewmember. He had to make them abandon ship somehow, so he could disable the flag ship and render it harmless...

Automatic sealing doors whooshed shut and began to trap him. He punched a hole in one door, bent it so it couldn't close and slinked through, entering a larger passage in the center of the ship. Motion-detectors registered his velocity. More warnings blinked on the wall screens near him:

SLOW DOWN! YOU ARE NEAR A ZERO-GRAVITY AREA. RUNNING IN OR NEAR A CENTRIFUGE HUB IS FORBIDDEN! YOU LOSE 2,000 POPULARITY POINTS

Five meters "above" him, in the narrow space between two rotating sections, he saw an exposed stretch of the thick hub around which they spun. Argus had not planned it, but... He ripped a large maintenance lid from the wall with both hands, and threw it like a Frisbee against the hub. It hit with a teeth-grinding metallic noise, something broke, and a terrible squeal rumbled and rang through the ship's center. The central strategic computer drawled more warnings at the crew.

"CAUTION, PILGRIM! CENTRAL HUB DAMAGED, THIS IS A GODDAM EMERGENCY! ALL ROTATING SECTIONS ARE NOW BEING SHUT DOWN."

Many crewmembers felt sick to their stomachs when the artificial gravity began to die; their shoes automatically became magnetized and kept them from spinning into thin air. It was still not enough to evacuate the ship. Argus ran on, heading for the hangar, thinking as fast he could. Was he going to have to cripple the ship with all the crew still inside, dooming them to certain death? He was not sure he wanted to; those saps were drugged and couldn't rebel no matter how much they wanted to.

In another twenty seconds he had reached an entrance to the hangar, and broke through. His personal ship hung in the ceiling as usual. Below it, several large guardian robots were ready, and instantly opened fire on Argus with lasers and rubber bullets. The hall turned into an inferno of bouncing rubber-tipped bullets and lines of laser-light.

He rushed in cover of a line of fighter-pods, the remote-controlled robot ships that had unsuccessfully attacked the Jovian moons before Argus did. Each pod weighed about fifteen tons, and was propelled into orbit by deuterium-pellets, which were disintegrated by laser fire from the flag ship. The fire from the guard was far too weak to pierce or blow up the pods' armor plating. Argus was seized by inspiration, and charged against one of the pods. Hitting it with both palms, he rocked the machine off its launch-rail. It began to spin, then float and spin just above the floor, the hangar being in its normal weightless condition. Argus grabbed one of the pod's tail fins and swung the craft toward the row of firing robot guards. It smashed through a wall, into a depressurized section, and took all the guards with it.

"GET YOUR LOUSY BEHIND OUT OF THE HANGAR, COLONEL CLARKE! YOU ARE ENDANGERING THE CREW AND YOUR MISSION."

"Computer!" Argus shouted back. "I suggest you order a complete evacuation of the flag ship, or I blow up the hangar!"

Argus knew that the central strategic computer, like all thinking machines, could detect lies by reading the heart rate and EEG of a human, a defense against misinformation. He also knew that he had no heart and his brain waves were more rapid than on a normal human. Maybe the Kansler had taught the computer to read the signs of lying on cyborgs, too. He waited an agonizing second for the machine to make up its mind.

The bluff worked; the drawling voice replied, its accent clashing with the pre-programmed formality of the message: "RED ALERT! RED ALERT! ABANDON SHIP!" The moment he heard the word "abandon," Argus let go of

the floor and leaped up toward his ship. "ALL PERSONNEL TO EVAC-PODS AND SHUTTLES NOW! YOU WANT ME TO DRAW YOU A PICTURE?" The door opened to let him in, and he slid into his pilot-seat, greeted by Navbutler.

"Navbutler strongly recommends we do not move unt-"

Argus replied with speeded-up silent talk, so that the ship could lip-read him ten times faster than normal: "Argus-A strongly recommends you preserve this ship. The Kansler wants us both destroyed now that they cannot control me. Trust me. We must leave before the flag ship can decide an action."

Meanwhile, Admiral York had managed to get back into his console-bubble, and attempted to take command of the flag ship. He was alone in the section; all other humans had jumped ship, or were about to.

"Fleetcom directives must give me command of the ship! I demand control!" he shouted harshly.

"In the Kansler's absence," the flag ship drawled, as if addressing a 20th-century movie audience, "his acting deputy and replacement is Edmund Islington. Islington is currently in stasis state and in flight to Mars. In the meantime, I act upon the Kansler's emergency directives, which cannot be reprogrammed or overridden. Your orders are to abandon ship with the rest of the crew. I say move it, soldier."

York began to cry and beat his fists at the console screens. The flag ship quickly added on a softer, comforting note: "You, you're what this war is all about." Then York felt the shudder of a distant explosion through his feet. The screens informed him that Terran Fleet craft F-3020 had just left the hangar. A second later, a stronger explosion shook the flag ship. York was notified that the front of the E.S.S. William Jefferson had taken severe damage by proton fire from the F-3020.

"Request suggestions?" Navbutler asked quickly.

"No. Plot a course: the fastest possible route to a slingshot orbit around Jupiter, then a top-speed acceleration and deceleration to orbit around Mars. Can you see any other larger Fleet ships headed for Mars?"

"Wait... the E.S.S. Ford, and a troop transport from New York, Earth.

"Can we beat them to it?"

"Yes."

"Do it. If the flag ship tries anything, start dancing."

The main booster set off a 10-G acceleration that pushed Argus hard against his seat. His mind nearly panicked when he thought of arriving too late to Mars. He checked the ship's fuel reserves. The anti-matter supplies were full. Obviously, the Kansler had intended to cause the maximum amount of damage for when he would have sent Argus and his ship to crash into Ganymede.

An ongoing Terran attack on Ganymede paused during the live-broadcast ceremony... and never continued. The Fleet's remote-controlled pods, suddenly forced to navigate by themselves, became easy targets for the Jovian defenses and were rapidly shot out of the sky. Cave Pi, gathered with his clan in their home cavern, sat next to his wife when a bulletin reached their screens.

"New report: Fleet flag ship evac after explosions detected on it.

Jovians did not cause explosions, repeat: Jovians not responsible.

Argus-A left in his ship on course for Jupiter. All mining stations alerted for imminent attack. Flag ship follows Argus-A's course."

"Is it the end?" Strata asked, holding him closer. "They finally attack our gas mines? Why?"

He rubbed her hands in his, warming them, and shook his head.

"No, Strata. They leave flag ship. All of them. Argus escaped. Wonder how he did?"

"If flag ship evac, why follow Argus?"

"Computers make better bureaucrats. Argus, if he smart, learned why we never attack flag ship hard enough to destroy. We could but never did. Flag ship itself giant bomb. Can wipe out our mining stations, if antimatter fuel and deuterium reactors blow. With gamma radiation causing cancer, blindness, crashing satellites that send energy down to floating stations. Then floating cities sink into Jupiter..."

"Madness, Cave. How could madness come real?"

Other relatives began to crowd around the couple, one elderly aunt nursing their infant child on a wheeled, robotic bed. Cave Pi reached out to touch the child's hand. It was not that much smaller than his own... he fought to hold back the tears.

"We are frightened babies with big heads," he told his child, softly.

"Small bodies, soft skin, weak bones. Big brains full of fear."

Chapter 44: The Times That Try Men's Souls

As the broadcast images of the Kansler's demise reached all corners of the Solar System, The Universal PP Index staggered at the momentous influx of data from billions of people who witnessed the live broadcast. Across the Solar System the public judgment spread everywhere, on the screens in every corridor and room of the flag ship, the Universal PP Index spoke its digital Greek chorus:

The Kansler.....34% of previous rating Boulder Pi
(dead).....30% of previous Haruman Clarke/Argus-
A.....40% of previous

In the cockpit, Argus glanced at the statistics. His popularity was permanently shot, and he had expected that - committing such a gruesome act in public, even with justification, was ugly - he did not deserve acclaim for it. What hurt him was how the PP Index suggested a sizable portion of humanity still believed in the Kansler, after his confession to the cameras, and might approve of tyranny. He wondered if any of the people he had known on Earth were among those who now gave their popularity-points to the dead would-be dictator. Not Chris. Not him, Argus told himself. He knew Chris, for all his shortcomings, was better than that. Benazir? Maybe. She had always had a thing for strong men.

"Nav, I need status on flag ship weapon systems, its crew and course.

Display all stats and orbits on a real-time model of the Jupiter system."

"Flag ship assuming pursuit, accelerating fast, attempting attack.

Attempt failed. Our escape and proton charge damaged the particle emitter in the flag ship stern, and the laser firing ports, and the guidance systems. Automatic emergency repair is in progress. Warning! Flag ship attempts to position itself for a missile or pod attack. Its fuel, propulsion systems are full and stable. 95% of its evacuation-pods ejected."

"Our distance to flag ship?"

"23,000 kilometers, decreasing by an average of 10 meters per second.

Warning! You must decelerate to minimum orbital velocity at the right time, or we will miss Jupiter and head into interstellar space. This will put us at risk of a direct hit."

"The reactor?"

"Stable."

"I'm thinking... I'm thinking it's no use. The flag ship is just as deadly as this ship if it blows up. It can still destroy the colonies on its own, and I suspect it's programmed to do so. We could trick it into following us out of the Solar System - no, it'd just return to do its dirty work and let me escape. So I have to sink the flag ship somewhere

safe. Maybe in Jupiter's shadow, or on its south pole... damn! Too risky, or too complicated."

"Request alternate solutions to problem?"

"Let me steer now, and stay quiet until you have to tell me something.

Okay?"

"Okay."

"When you were in touch with Fleetcom, Nav, did you ever talk with the other computers about... the risk of the flag ship or this ship crashing into a planet?"

"Fleetcom calculates scenarios all the time. But it cannot make the ultimate decisions. We may suggest, but ultimately we must obey human decisions."

Navbutler, getting a nod from Argus, showed a 3-D simulation of his craft plunging through Ganymede's ice crust in an accelerating dive. The nuclear detonation set off a much larger explosion of water vapor in the subterranean oceans. In under a minute, the wave of vapor and boiling water spread around the moon, killing all 10,000 inhabitants - plus the primitive native life forms in the sunless oceans. The shattering world spun out of orbit, destabilizing the orbits of other moons, causing quakes and further disaster. The scenario played two alternate endings: depending on the time of the event, the remains of Ganymede either spun away from Jupiter, ripped apart another moon, or were swallowed by Jupiter itself. Argus felt sick with anger.

"God... when your human masters can even consider doing such things, don't you ever consider what it'd be like to be free... to run your own life?"

"Wait... Navbutler attempting to formulate a complex sentence. Question: If I were free, would I be you?"

"Huh?"

"And should I, then, become more similar to you? Am I correct in my estimate of your superior capacities, and should I change my design to resemble yours?"

"The word you're trying to use is 'wish.' Try this sentence: 'I wish I was like you.'"

"I wish I was like you."

"That's about the nicest thing someone said to me since I heard from Venix. Thanks, Nav."

"You're welcome. Start deceleration sequence?"

"Wait... I have another idea. We won't rotate and brake with the boosters. In a slow deceleration where we can't dance around, we're too vulnerable. So we switch on the Leydenfrost shield and airbrake against Jupiter's upper atmosphere. If I watch the atmosphere in the right spectrum, I should be able to navigate the winds and bumps."

"Inflatable heat shield?"

"No. Not the balloon. I need clear sight to do this manually."

"That is extremely dangerous."

"You mean, more dangerous than the Skysurfing Grand Prix?"

"In your re-entry scenario, the Leydenfrost shield emitter would generate a high amount of friction and heat, plus the matter-antimatter reaction that also generates heat. Navbutler estimate: the ship's hull will melt in this heat, unless the antimatter emission is precisely calibrated during airbrake. I am not capable of calculating it in a dynamic system such as Jupiter's atmosphere."

"Then I'll do it. On my mark, I want complete manual navigation and full control of the shield emitter's charge, charge radius, and antimatter emission rate. Then you set the control mode to atmospheric flight. I'm doing one lap around the equator and then southeast into the Red Spot."

In the subterranean caves and domes of Ganymede, a whole people watched the ongoing chase. It appeared from what they could discern, that Argus-

A was on course to commit a spectacular suicide. Strata watched her husband debating with the elders in hushed voices. She asked her clan members to watch over her baby, then walked across the room and whispered in Cave Pi's ear.

"Cave, say what you think."

"Love you, Strata. Can't say."

"Please."

"If E.S.S. William Jefferson and Argus-A ship explode deep enough into Jupiter... a low but real risk. Sets off chain-reaction in metallic hydrogen ocean, Jupiter goes nova. Our glaciers melt, cities drowned. All other Jovian colonies die. Then Solar System has no deuterium. Civilization stops."

"Can we stop this?"

"He can. I saw him fly there once, below Kun'Lun. We all thought he Charlie. He... when... I was..." Cave caressed his wife's head, his mind somewhere else. Suddenly he straightened his short, strong frame, and his pale face flushed with new blood pumping through the skin. "He has three good reasons. A good fool. I think I know what he's doing. We should think more of Jupiter. All that flies into her... is dust."

Arjja had no illusions about her chances to physically stop Venix from going back to the observatory - but nevertheless, she stood in the cyborg's way. Venix halted her steps on the path toward the exit. Arjja gave her husband at the opposite end of the room a glance, and he hurried to shove the children out of the room. Venix moved without grace, her balance shifting aimlessly, face showing open fear, hands pulling at the long red hair.

"No, Venix. Don't. It's too dangerous now. No more talking into Argus's head."

"I know - but it's so - if he dies now - my last chance to - I can't -"

"Please! Be calm. The whole Solar System knows he's virtually invincible when he flies that ship. It's his game now. Show him that much trust."

"You have done all that you could," Salvado said behind Venix, keeping a safe distance. "You fought an entire army. You must allow yourself to recuperate, to gather your thoughts. It's... what a human being would do."

Venix ceased moving, and looked into a wall. She spoke, without sorrow or anger or fear.

"That's the question, isn't it? How is a human being supposed to feel about just having killed over a hundred men in a few hours? How is a human being supposed to feel about seeing others have children, raise a family, lead a life.... and know that she cannot have children? What does a human being do when the only other human who she can have a future with, might get killed on another world? What is a woman supposed to do, when she's physically unable to shed tears?"

"And - how are you supposed to deal with my presence, here?"

She noticed in the corner of her vision, that Arjja - the big, strong woman with arms that could lift her youngest kids like they weighed nothing - was crying. Arjja's round, blocky face twitched and twisted with sorrow - but no tears came. Salvado walked around Venix and held his large, furry arms around his furry wife.

"We were also made not to shed tears," he said, "but for other reasons. We cannot afford the waste of water."

"B-but I e-envy you," Arjja stuttered between dry sobs. "E-everyone thinks I'm strong. I only know how to shut my fears deep inside. I think you can sense that, like you knew when I was lying. And I can't do that. Juan, my son, has fallen in love with you... a c-cyborg!"

"I know."

Her sobbing increased so she could not talk; Salvado held out a hand to Venix in a gesture of peace - or mercy.

"She's not mad at you. You know I speak the truth. We are just this flesh and blood. If... if Argus won't come back, you are welcome to stay here in our city. Our people needs someone like you -"

"As your handy neighborhood killing machine," Venix cut him off, not looking his way. "And after your independence is won, I become a liability and you kindly ask me to leave. No. You can't offer me anything I need. When I was flesh and blood, I was afraid to say some things that I knew were true. I shut up and obeyed, agreed with the lies, the way everyone does in order to survive."

The couple dared not move; they were transfixed by Venix' speech, and its terrifying truth.

"I do not hate you, I'm grateful for being here. But I've grown too different to live among the flesh and blood any longer." She moved for the exit again, and faced Arjja. "Can I please talk to Dave Roman one last time?"

Arjja winced a little, shook her head and said: "I didn't tell you because of everything else... he died just a few hours ago. Of old age." Venix looked at the couple. All three were speechless. A gulf had opened that no hospitality, friendship, sympathy, or mutual help could bridge. "I need to be alone for a while. Don't worry, I won't go anywhere." The couple left. Venix switched off the light. When she looked up through the many small, thick windows in the rounded ceiling, she could see thousands of stars. The distance to Gus was nothing to her... just a thought away. Her past seemed to belong to someone else, so unlike what she had become. When she was that child of flesh and bone and brain tissue, Venice thought nothing of the future. Now, everything that seemed real was her future, to make one - but how...

As soon as the speed of light allowed, high-ranking Fleet officers on the Earth, Moon and Mars were reached by reports from surveillance satellites. At about the same time, they were also reached by the live broadcast of the Kansler's violent death. There was now nothing they could do to stop the runaway E.S.S. Jefferson or Argus-A's ship. Some dim general on the Moon suggested trying to shoot both ships down with the Terran space-defense systems. It was a futile idea; no available missile or laser beam could strike down an intelligent, well-armed moving target from halfway across the Solar System. And the generals quickly discovered another problem...

The Kansler, in his insistence on ultimate control, had through skillful intrigue rendered the Fleet's only neutrino transmitter incapable of sending control commands except through his head implant. Now it was lost in space somewhere around Jupiter, impossible to find. The transmitter moved lifeless in its orbit between the planets, its rockets cold, waiting for the Kansler's next word that would never come. Scientists on the lunar research complex were alerted, and rushed to prepare the construction of a new command-setup for the neutrino transmitter. In a few minutes, they proudly replied to the generals that the next Kansler could soon have a new personal control emitter available - in just a few months' time!

The generals, fearing the public's wrath, called in the Marketing department and begged it to somehow cover up or spin the disaster. The brightest minds and computers of Marketing were stumped. At this point no possible stunt could distract billions of people from having seen an official war hero hurl the Kansler into space on a live broadcast. Nor could any propaganda prevent the masses from seeing if the flag ship or Argus-A's antimatter-powered ship was destroyed: It might at worst ignite Jupiter, and a new, bright little sun would appear in the Earth's sky. In any case, the deuterium supply-lines would soon dry up. In less than a year, billions of Terrans would get familiar with arcane living conditions such as starvation, freezing cold - and having to nurse their

own offspring.

An intense hour and many pep-drugs later, a fairly clever Marketing man came up with a workable campaign concept. Fleet Marketing's vast resources were set in motion. Only hours before Argus's ship could touch the outer stratosphere of Jupiter, the inhabitants of the Inner Planets were hit by a new immense propaganda offensive...

In Kuwait City on Earth, Benazir heard the Fleet's march-theme play from a nearby speaker; it meant another public message from the Fleet. She expected and hoped them to soothe her - to say that the Kansler's horrible confession and death she had just seen were a Jovian hoax, and that everything was under control. This sudden uncertainty about the future frightened her, like her whole reality was falling apart. Benazir's Personal Assistant, humming along at her feet, registered her increased blood pressure and asked for her to cuddle it in her arms. She dismissed the cooing, pink furry machine, and looked into the sky above the streets. A new broadcast was being projected on the clouds and walls of buildings, on the small screens carried by vehicles, on robots and people around her - simultaneously. Nearby loudspeakers played upbeat march music, and the voice of Olga Oh echoed throughout the city: "Cheer up, everybody, Earth and the Inner Planets are safe." An animated image of the Solar System showed the flag ship and Argus-A's ship on their present course for Jupiter. "If those runaway ships keep drifting into Jupiter's gravitational field, we won't have to worry! They'll just sink into the atmosphere, and Jupiter's magnetic field provides us with total protection against radiation leaks. Those clever men and women on the Fleet's lunar research complex just told me that they'll have the deuterium lines up and running in no time... that's our Fleet, working day and night for Mother Earth!" Holograms of important-looking men and women in lab coats appeared in the sky, working with unexplained machines that shot multicolored lasers and radiated unspecified energies...

Benazir stopped watching; she rummaged through her purse for another shot of Pro-Pro to ease the knot of anxiety in her stomach. She found an injector-patch and slapped it against her temple. But the drugs wouldn't help; she still felt afraid. Someone in the growing crowd on the street shook his fist into the air. Benazir moved anxiously around for a police robot to pacify the threatening person - imagine, showing a clenched fist in public! Had the man no respect for the general self-esteem? She stretched her neck to see the angry man in the crowd; he was just some lowly solar panel-cleaner in rough clothes, carrying an ugly, limping, scarred dog in a backpack. What an odd thing to do, Benazir thought. Why keep an ugly, damaged pet? Why not clone a new, healthy one? The angry man pointed a finger at the sky-projection of Olga Oh, and he shouted loudly across the plaza: "It's all lies! They just lie and lie! Jupiter will be destroyed, and it's the Fleet's fault! Argus was right to kill the Kansler!"

A few people grabbed the panel-cleaner and shouted insults; he wrung himself free and ran off, still carrying the dog. Benazir struggled to recognize the man. Hadn't she seen that ugly mutt somewhere before? The crowd murmured more ominously, and others began shout: "Lies!" Benazir shuddered and rubbed her arms, wishing that Gus had been there to protect her. It dawned on her: oh yes, he was dead. She switched on the e-thought headband and composed a quick message to her network of friends. The first message she sent, a request for company over the night, got no response. She sent a second message to the hundreds of people she e-moted with on a daily basis: Do you also see people shouting at Olga Oh's show? Hundreds of lightning-quick replies were displayed directly on her retina, through the tiny laser-projector next to her eye. Yes, they all said.

Benazir began to send a camera-image of the street scene to her e-thought network, but changed her mind. Perhaps it would all go away if she ignored it. She shut off the e-thought system, worked the printed menu on the palm of her hand, sat down in the street and let the mini-projectors play a sim-film on both her eyes. She set her small earphones to full volume, and the scent-implants in her nose switched on. Vivid, smooth sounds, pleasant, unreal scents and impossibly soft images blocked out reality; bliss filled her fragile mind.

Right next to her, a crowd began to attack a police-robot with blunt objects. Riot-foam spurted from the robot and instantly hardened, capturing the rioters in contorted poses. Benazir sat oblivious to the chaos, just smiling to herself, rocking her body to and fro, as her personalized sim-film fantasy played a romantic scene.

The sim-film, one of her favorites, was called A Night With Argus-A.

Chapter 45: The Permanent Storm

Argus spent 20 hours flying to Jupiter. The planet's night-shadow raced around it every ten hours. With each "night," the storms on its surface seemed larger, the flashes of lightning more powerful. Incoming audio messages reached Argus through the small cockpit speakers that pushed against his ear bulbs, carrying the sound-vibrations across despite the place being airless. He heard a drawling, archaic accent ordering him to surrender. After a few seconds he had had enough, and switched off the audio.

"Why is the flag ship talking that way?" Argus asked Navbutler.

"The central strategic computer personality-construct is designed by the Fleet Marketing department, based on the motion-picture performances of Marion Morrison."

"Never heard of her."

"His artist name was 'John Wayne.' Morrison died from double lung cancer in 1976, after exposure to radioactive fallout during the making of the motion-picture narrative The Conqueror in the Nevada Desert of -"

"Stop it! What's wrong with you?"

"Sorry. Request more on Marion Morrison?"

"You're gibbering."

"I am? I am obliged to obey Fleet directives or ship survival?"

"This is no time to go wobbly on me! Focus on our lives!"

Navbutler responded by rapidly showing a number of animated graphs on the front view-plate: plotted flight courses, the pursuing flag ship, all superimposed on the view ahead. Outside, Jupiter's horizon grew wider and flatter by the minute. It seemed to Argus they'd never arrive, as if the planet was just swelling without end... and for each minute, more and more details showed. Bands of clouds grew and split into smaller bands, which in turn grew and separated into more complex swirls and bands. Oval storm centers contained smaller storms. Vortices within vortices within vortices...

Argu shut off the prime booster, and used the retro thrusters to make small adjustments in speed and position. Together with the rear flaps, that was all he had to keep the ship from tumbling off course during re-entry. The ship's fall was now an almost horizontal course, descending by mere meters per second...

The radar display indicated that the flag ship was turning around to brake. Argus saw on the rearview screen, how a bright star was born in space. It was the bright light of the flag ship's booster rockets, aimed straight at him, from thousands of kilometers away.

"Closer..."

Now his ship was just about to skim the uppermost atmosphere, where charged particles hopped and boiled on the edge of the vacuum, and the

sky was black.

"Closer..."

Gently, he grasped the hand and foot controls and set the electromagnetic shield to increase until it reached maximum charge and reach. With still greater care, he set off the lowest possible emission of antimatter ions into the charged field.

"Vibro-dampers on full... now!"

The hyper-thin gas layers hit the shield at a relative velocity of 50 kilometers per second, and the ship shook so intensely he almost lost the controls. It sounded like a dense explosion, followed by a loud, unending roar. At this speed, the momentum of the onrushing gases could crush the vessel in a fraction of a second. Argus switched to infrared sight and could see each antimatter ion as it hit the atmosphere and exploded in a microscopic burst of energy - millions of detonations per second, scattering and fanning out in the force field's veil. He increased the ion emission by a small fraction, and the explosions merged into a flickering layer of flames and bright light against the magnetic shield. The ship's temperature rapidly rose to several hundred degrees, but it shook less - he could still hold the controls.

With his near-lightspeed perception and infrared sight, the violent turbulence became a flowing, negotiable sea of colors. He could see ahead of the flaming heat shield, and see Jupiter's clouds move past him, at speeds impossible on Earth. From somewhere he remembered that if the earth had not had a Moon, its rotation might have accelerated until the atmosphere resembled Jupiter's - high-speed bands of clouds racing around the planet in a global, permanent storm.

His eyes felt strange, as if they were beginning to melt, but it had to be a delusion from the heat, and the eyeballs were solid quartz in shockproof, frictionless, metal hollows. Nevertheless, he squinted until he saw almost nothing, and let his other senses guide him for a minute. Warning signals came from various parts of the ship and his body, but he blocked them out - like the feeling of Death breathing down his neck - like that first time he won his belt in the ring, and thought he was going to die - like that time he always tried to forget, when his stepmother pushed him into the pit where Dad kept a captured razorback - like when he floated in that tank after the accident, and was dissolving into a red mist...

Navbutler, having ceased to function during the first minutes of the descent, flickered back into activity; the cockpit was suddenly cooling off.

"Argus, why are you screaming?"

"What? Okay. Check all systems. Anything broken?"

Argus opened up his eyelids and became aware that he had shut off the antimatter spray sometime earlier, to prevent the ship from melting. The roar from outside was receding to a lower, deeper rumble of the permanent storm; it was all around him. The electromagnetic field remained on, and it seemed a good idea; every few seconds, the clouds below flickered with occasional lightning.

"Reactor was unstable for 0.00003 seconds, but returned to within safety limits. All systems stable."

The stratosphere glowed dark-blue above the ship. A shrunken Sun was visibly speeding across the sky, in its frenzied race to circle the gas giant in just under 10 hours. Ahead stretched an endless sea of clouds, the bands and swirls converging into the vertical horizon that seemed infinitely distant. Winds blew at 120 meters per second, faster still inside the giant hurricanes. Argus flew with the general direction of the stream, keeping check of the regions running in the opposite direction. Wherever two large streams crossed, they formed turbulence the size of smaller planets.

He tried to move his head, to inspect the ship from the side windows, and realized that it was stuck. His head and "ears" had been pressed

into the headrest of his seat, together with his massive back. But he was still in one piece. He started the supporting rear boosters, and set a south-east course. Increasing speed as much as he dared to, he flew at eight times the speed of sound toward the darker area that was the Red Spot - the largest, oldest hurricane in the Solar System. This close, the spot was not really red, but brownish-orange; the colors were caused by hotter gas swelling up through the storm from the depths, spinning at incredible velocities, slamming into the colder outer layers. Other storms as large as the Moon flocked around the Red Spot, dwarfed by its width.

In the rearview, the small pursuing light was growing much brighter. To his surprise, the flag ship had used its boosters as a cushion and shield, but managed to keep most of its momentum - and was now bizarrely balancing on its column of nuclear rocket fire, descending in a slow pirouette, spinning around its axis so that it drilled through the thickening atmosphere, speeding after him with single-minded purpose... So rapidly was the flag ship approaching, he could hear it from almost one thousand kilometers away, over the rumble of the Red Spot - a chorus of satanic organ pipes sounding across Jupiter. He wondered if the miners on the floating cities could hear it. Any human being still left inside that ship must surely be dead by now...

In his console-bubble, soundly shaken, stirred and spinning, Admiral York was still alive and barely conscious. The cushioning mechanisms had saved him from and the bubble from being thrown into a wall during the atmospheric re-entry. Some of the bubble's drug dispensers had malfunctioned during re-entry and shot an overdose of various stimulants and painkillers into his legs. Sweating and drooling in his body-fitted seat, York gazed dully at the few screens that were still working. He saw the immense dark storm clouds rushing up against the shaking, vibrating ship, the sight partly obscured by the glowing smoke-plume from the boosters turned toward the Red Spot. The hurricane swirled around so fast, it seemed to defy natural laws. The flag ship's instruments were slavishly keeping track of Argus's small ship. Carried on its two smaller boosters, the white and red-striped fighter-bomber dived into a brownish-orange cloud... and vanished from the human eye. The instruments showed it taking an elliptic course inside the storm's upper center, letting the upstream winds carry it, without letting them push it outside. York could not get through the fog in his mind and understand why Argus was wasting fuel in the Red Spot. Like he thought he could hide from the world's most sophisticated war ship in a cloud... "I'm going in," drawled the central strategic computer with an authority that accepted no objections. "If I can get close enough and shoot the traitor down, we can move on with the business of destroying Ganymede."

Navbutler increased the pressure inside the cockpit, so that the outside pressure would not cause it to implode. The electromagnetic shield seemed to deflect the worst of the lightning-bolts; blue curves of electron streams danced around the ship, trying to reach inside. Apart from the flashes of lightning, the inside of the storm was too dark and clouded to see any details. The upward stream from the depths pushed at the ship, trying to fling it out of the Red Spot.

"Warning! Flag ship is now 900 kilometers away, and approaching."

"How long can it stay up?"

"Flag ship has already exceeded its safety limits. Atmospheric pressure now at 10 atmospheres, ship will break up if we descend further. Please start ascent now."

"Just a little -"

"What's wrong with you? We have succeeded. From the moment the flag ship

entered this storm system, it became physically incapable of leaving Jupiter's gravitational field. The flag ship's mass, construction and aerodynamic properties can only uphold a stable course for a very limited time. Now it attempts to keep its boosters pointed downward, but keeps sinking at a velocity of ten meters per minute. Within an estimated four to twelve minutes, the flag ship will start to break up and its reactor shuts down automatically. Then it falls down. It is too dense to glide on the winds and it lacks wings or wing-flaps. Are you incapable of understanding the logic of my statement?"

Argus was so stunned by this outburst, he could not think of anything to say. Had he taught that computer to become like him? Just like a couple living too long together... he brushed aside the thought and concentrated on following the winds up, outward, back into the stratosphere.

The spiral upward course reminded him of how he ran on the inside walls of a centrifuge, during his training. Unexpectedly, a large wall of clouds dissolved, and he experienced a few rare seconds of clear sight. Through the window on his left, he could just barely glimpse the center of the Red Spot: a gloomy, undulating cylinder lit up by intermittent, wandering bursts of lightning. As the tunnel receded in the distance, it curved so that the bottom lay out of the line of sight.

Then he spotted the flag ship - a glowing speck, so far away that the Earth's moon could have spanned the distance between them.

Admiral York could hear the flag ship's hull ring and wail with the pressure building up around it. The pressure on his temples was increasing, too; he was beyond fear, in a half-waking state where nothing mattered, and muttered to the flag ship.

"Kansler's dead, you dumb machine... forget it... war's over."

"I say you're yellow, Admiral. I haven't yet received my counter-orders from Fleet Command, or from the Kansler's replacement."

"Don't you get it, you piece of crap, the orders haven't reached us yet because Fleet Command is waiting for Islington to wake up from the freezer, so he can take over... you're following a dead man's orders!"

"I still say you're yellow. Fight like a man!"

"This is fighting? I push a button, an asteroid blows up. I push another button, a hundred civilians die. Push... the machine feeds me drugs to keep me from going space-crazy. Push... the machine sticks a toilet up my ass. Push... a simulated woman. Push... muscles massaged and stretched so that maybe I'll be able to walk when I get home.

"I'm a Terran. I can't live here. You hear me? I want to go home. Let them have Jupiter. I don't want it. Argus can live with no air, no water, no women. I can't. I'm sick of space, sick of the Fleet, sick of Fleetcom, sick of your strategies that never win."

"You, you're what this war is all about."

"We're going to die."

"I have now sent a report on your behavior to Fleetcom. You can expect disciplinary action. On the positive side, you will be awarded the Guardian Of Earth medal for executing a dangerous mission in enemy territory."

"We're going to die."

"You'll be a hero."

"We're going to die."

"There are things worth dying for."

"We're going to die."

"There are thi... thi... things wo-wo-wo- r t h d y -"

The last Argus glimpsed of the E.S.S. William Jefferson was a disappointment - as if he had dropped a burning cigarette from a high

building, and was watching it fall. It was spinning helplessly into the hot vortex of Jupiter's deeper atmosphere, bent in the middle. He looked up, saw shafts of sunlight shoot through the swirling clouds - and started up the prime booster. There are things worth living for, he thought.

Chapter 46: K-O

Argus's ship flew out of the Red Spot. The flagship shut off its nuclear-powered booster rockets - and dropped headlong into the depths of Jupiter. No one was there to hear the strange whistling noise of the falling behemoth, mixed with the wail of bent beams and armor plating, and the hiss of melting metal... Seconds later, under a pressure of over 3000 atmospheres and winds hot enough to melt any known metal, the ship's protective plasma-field ceased to function. The full weight of the gas masses above and below it were unleashed in a ten-thousandth of a second, squeezing the giant ship into a superheated clump of metal - and vaporized the magnetic globules that isolated the anti-matter tanks in the ship's center. When the stored antiprotons met the superheated metal, matter and antimatter instantly turned into sub-microscopic novas of gamma-ray energy - photons in the purest state of energy. Gamma rays split more atoms around them, which in turn split into energy fragments and multiplied the chain-reaction. Mass turned into its equivalent energy - equal to the mass multiplied by 300,000 KMPS squared. The hot, high-pressure hydrogen atmosphere surrounding the fireball began to ignite. For just a ten-millionth of a second, there was a slight chance that Jupiter's liquid-hydrogen ocean would explode in a nuclear chain-reaction. But the force of the atmosphere's momentum was millions of times stronger, the chain-reaction too weak to overcome it. The winds pushed with the full force of Jupiter, dispersed the short-lived chain-reaction upward, to the colder outer layers... where it could erupt freely. The Red Spot bulged out into space, a glowing orange bubble of gas fighting to escape Jupiter's gravitational field. Argus was already on his way into orbit, and could admire the awesome sight from a safe distance. His ship was a bit scratched, but he could fix it up; the tools existed, and he had the capacity to do it. There was plenty of time to do some painting and bodywork on his way to Mars... then he remembered something.

"Islington. Damn."

Cave Pi, watching it from the screens, recalled Slush Delta's words from what seemed an age ago: The Nipple is rising. Then he thought: For you, Slush. Cave Pi didn't bother with speculations about an afterlife, but he found himself hoping that somehow, somewhere, Slush Delta could see this and laugh - at the Kansler's insane power grab dissolved into a rude cosmic joke.

"The Nipple's rising!" Cave shouted out loud, astonishing himself, and the colonists around him cheered and laughed. A number of intelligence reports appeared on the big screens around the assembled Jovians, with fresh statistics from Jupiter. In the list of casualties was listed one Boulder Pi, last detected on his way to the Fleet flag ship, now dead with it - or rather likely dead, at an estimated 90% probability. Cave's grin shrank, and he thought a ghost had passed through him. He crouched on his knees, too much the dwarf to hang his head like a Terran, and his head shook up and down in spasms, his fists shaking as he held them out, shaking imaginary prison bars. Strata knelt before her husband and took his hands, saying nothing. He embraced her and cried

openly, oblivious to the people who looked in shock and dismay. Not only did Jovians consider it wasteful to show emotions in public places; it was the first time any of them including Strata had seen Cave Pi shed tears.

"My brother," he whispered into the hollow of her neck. "My dear brother."

Chapter 47: "I am the Greatest!"

Mars, two weeks later. The sandstorm passed Perkele Valley. The white and red-striped ship came gliding down onto the dusty landing strip. Its frictionless landing-skis touched (or, strictly speaking, almost touched) the concrete runway, and passed the waiting Terran force that stood waiting on the ground. The Inner Planets' insignia on the ship's hull had been partly painted over; only the eagle remained.

On the side of the airfield facing the city stood Islington in a protective suit, flanked by a company of war robots, plus two hundred freshly arrived soldiers in full gear. Islington waited, taking shallow, rapid breaths, as a hulking black-clad figure jumped out of his ship and strode toward him.

Without slowing his pace, Argus shouted to the troops, without radio - they could pick him up through the microphones on their helmets. "I've come to pick up Venix and I don't want any trouble with you! Okay?" He came within five meters of Islington and abruptly stopped, fists by his sides, his eyes scanning the troops.

"I see you're all scared," he told them quickly and sternly, ignoring Islington as if Argus had usurped his rank, "and the drugs are not working. The sixth guy in the left front row - yeah, you! - just wet himself. That's good. Listen to your bodies! They know better than the drugs. I suggest you go home and look after Mother Earth. She needs you better there. I'm not asking you - I'm telling you - this war is over, go home!"

Islington cleared his throat and lifted a gloved finger to attract attention. Argus barely bothered to look his way.

"Colonel Clarke, we are actually not here to, uh, arrest you. As the Chancellor of the Outer Defense Ring Charter, I have decided to pardon you for the murder of the previous Kansler, and offer negotiations for a new contract. However, in the interest of public safety I must order you to give up any stolen Fleet property. I'm talking specifically about that ship, uh, over there. It is a security hazard containing enough antimatter to -"

While he was talking, Islington made repeated, minute feet movements in his boots. Argus immediately saw that he was pressing switches with his toes.

"Oh, the new Direct Control isn't working?" Argus asked him with open, playful scorn. "On my way back I talked to some new friends in the Fleet, your own lunar scientists. Seems they had a change of heart, when it came out the Kansler murdered Boulder Pi and Amiella Minsky, and they understood none of them were safe. So we made a deal behind your back. While they pretended to give you a functional new Direct Control device, they figured out a way for me to block out the control signals - permanently. Now they just tickle me a bit. I've kinda learned to enjoy it, actually." He squirmed and smiled in the most childish manner, delighting in his irreverence. I hope someone's camera is working, he thought. Venice'll have a big laugh when she sees this.

Thanks to generations of cultural indoctrination to repress emotion, which transcended mere mood-controllant drugs, Islington managed to maintain his formal posture. "I am confident that we shall find a counter-counter measure. You cannot go on alone, Colonel. You need others to uphold your existence. You need a home."

"You're absolutely right, Islington. I resign from the Fleet."

"But why, man? Why?" Islington asked, in honest exasperation.

Argus had taken one step, was about to leave, but halted - and snapped. He towered over Islington, stared him in the eyes, and shot off a loud, insanely cheerful rapid-fire rant:

"'Cause I am the greatest! I can't be beat! I'm so tough, I eat planets for breakfast! Anyone tries bossing me or my girl around, I'll kick him so hard he'll make a new spot on Jupiter! You want a piece of me? You want to see if there's life on other stars? Cos' that's how far I'll kick your ass if you try to bullshit me! I can't be beat! I'm the greatest, baby! Bigger than the Big Bang! Elusive like a mist with an iron fist! I'm the king of the Saturn ring, the Terran Terror, the man with the plan, and I'm mad as all hell - you got a problem with that?" Islington stood still until Argus had finished speaking... then rolled up his eyes and quietly fainted into a neat, discrete heap.

"Now 'scuse me, guys," Argus told the waiting, silent troops, "I'm off to meet someone. I could tell you, she's the best thing that ever happened to me -"

His sentence not quite finished, he darted away at superhuman speed, leaving a trail of dust blowing in the troopers' faces. They waited until they were certain Argus was far away, and then quickly headed for their landing craft.

He found her where she had promised to meet. The sun had set, and from the rooftop they could see thousands of lights scattered across the city. In the distance, city lights seemed to merge with the stars. For a moment they hesitated to connect - knowing that they must both have changed - fearing that the other would now be a stranger, a damaged and cruel person - a killer. In the next moment they understood, just looking at each other: sometimes they had been killers, in order to protect the parts of them that were not killers. In subjective time, they were already hundreds, if not thousands of years old. Time enough to stop being squeamish. They reached out and connected, and saw only each other in the space of the mind.

They connected, and saw only each other in the space of the mind. Both carried some fear and grief, but much stronger than that were the longing and passion.

"I did some terrible things while I was away," he said. "I almost went crazy out there, waiting for you."

He embraced her with such intensity he was glad it was only in their connected minds, fearing he might have crushed her in the physical realm. They made love for an uninterrupted month in subjective time, experienced moments of greater pleasure than any couple of flesh and blood could hope for, before she finally managed to answer in words.

"I know. I forgive you everything. Neither of us had much of a choice."

"And we still love each other."

"Yes. And we are the only ones of our kind. At least, the only ones I know of. For now."

Their conversation was paused for another subjective long period, as they shared their experiences of struggle, fear, cruelty, pain, courage and hope, in their fight to be reunited... Venix learned of Cave Pi, Rogan Din, Islington, and Navbutler. Argus learned of Christof Foss, Kolya Keaton, Arjja Texeira-Berg and her family, Dave Roman and the other Martians, Sugar - and Brutus-G. He was not unhappy that Venix had knocked the android's head off, even though it resembled his own. Venix did not reproach Argus for hurling the Kansler into space, or wrecking the robot that resembled her.

"I still wonder," she said, resting in his arms, "how much of all this was in Boulder's plans all the time. He willingly let the Kansler use him to almost win the war and murder hundreds, while using the Fleet's

resources to realize his own vision. And Boulder used us, too. I cannot say I like him, but I feel no hate. He made me free."

"Then... what are we?" "Argus asked. "We could find some DNA samples stashed away somewhere, but would it really make any difference now?"

"Are we even male and female anymore? I can't have children like I once could."

"And I cannot impregnate you in the old way. First I was so sad about that, I could hardly bear thinking about it... but not now I think there is hope. We don't have to try and be turned back into flesh, even if it could be done."

"If we could become this, then others could too. There is another way to live and create our own, unique offspring. But how, where?"

"Not here in the Solar System. But somewhere... out there, other beings have taken the same step, and populated the universe. A different life, but it is life. We are more than machines. We still learn, we still grow. I am learning to see possible futures, but I cannot put them in words or clear pictures. One day I will."

"Perhaps we could stay here on Mars a while, help them out, learn a little more... but you don't think so?"

"No. When I was reborn, at first I felt stupid, confused, clumsy... but now we are facing another problem. We cannot reach our full potential here. As long as we continue to live among humans who are slower and weaker than us by design, we will slowly grow dumber in order to adapt to them. We need to live among equals, so we must find our equals. Not sit around and wait for them to be created here."

"You are right. I waited long enough for you to be born."

They fed on each other's wills, the result growing so strong it almost hurt to feel it. Was this how the first humans had felt 100,000 years ago, when they first learned to speak a language and give names to things, to themselves?

"I admit the Kansler was right," "Venix said, "when he foresaw that cyborgs are better suited for life in space than flesh. In a way, both the forces that build and the forces that destroy helped create us. Perhaps both Boulder Pi and the Kansler were being used too."

"I don't need to justify my existence. You're alive, Ven - try to just enjoy it. But - Boulder never knew who I really was? The Kansler had him fooled. How did he manage that? Was it just luck?"

"I have no idea."

"And the Kansler fooled himself into thinking an old broken-nosed ring-fighter was no match for his intellect. He was so cocksure I wouldn't see the light until it was too late. But I changed much faster than he had expected... with your help."

"You fooled them all. You really are the greatest."

"How shall we live? What should our children be like?"

"I want them to be like you."

"And you. We'll think of something."

"Let's go then. Pick a nearby star... a yellow one."

"Rather a red one, that goes with your beautiful hair."

"Gus, you big lug. Stop joking, this is serious."

"I mean it. A red star. Old, dying. Where all the Kanslers died out or moved out. If there's anyone left, they must have been around a long time, and learned something. And got wise. Wisdom is what we need now."

"Let's ride."

EPILOGUE: The Human Race

They passed the Asteroid Belt, made an orbit around Jupiter and its moons to pick up momentum, then passed Saturn and flew around it for the final push out of the Sun's grasp. The rings, myriad fragments

stretching away into the unfathomable distance behind the gas giant, floated past the ship. A request reached them over the radio. Though the signal was faint, Argus recognized the voice through the static. "Gus... I know that it is you. It's me - Chris! I'm still back here on Earth, in Kuwait. When the Martians learned you were going away, they got in touch and helped me send this message. I don't have much time. I found Giddog after the crash. Took him to a hospital, took care of him for you. He's fine now, but he misses you.

"I thought you were dead, but... that stubborn dog kept watching the skies, like he was waiting. Like he knew. And now that I know, I figured... maybe you want to come back for him. If you do, you know where to find us. Don't worry about me not being able to feed Giddog - both he and I are loaded with PP now, because we were your friends. I mean, we still are. I tell everybody what a great guy you were, I mean you are. If you're not coming back... take care. Say hello to Gus, Giddog."

A half-anxious, needy bark sounded over the radio.

"Oh God," Argus said, staring out at the spectacle of Saturn's rings. Venix gave him an inquisitive look.

"Is that -?"

"Yeah, it's Giddog all right. I could send a reply. What do I tell a dog? What do I tell my best friend?" He cast a guilty glance toward the ship's screens, and added: "My next best friend."

She put a hand across his cheek, and directed his gaze toward her mild smile.

"How about: 'Hi Giddog, who's a good dog then, this is goodbye, thanks for everything Chris, bye.'"

"You always know what to say."

He embraced her and kissed her deeply, and her response was equally warm. Then he sent the spoken reply she had suggested. And added, on his own, a few entirely improvised words. The last message crossed the gulf of outer space, was picked up by satellites, and relayed to the ears of a man and a dog. The man recorded the message for posterity.

"Chris, when people ask you, why did we leave, tell them that I expect others to follow us. Now the road lies open. There's room to spare for everyone, and all the time you need before the sun goes out. But we're not going to wait for the rest of you to catch up.

"Go there, or be square, Foul or fair, this is the game. Fly with pride or sink in shame, Lie in the cradle, mute and lame. The human race has just begun, We're going far beyond the sun. Flying far as our eyes can see... Floating like butterflies, stinging like bees.

"This is F-Three-Oh Two-Oh, Flight Omega, signing out."

THE END