

THE THIRD BOOK IN THE TWIN PLANETS SERIES



Senaria



Lamont Downs

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THE TWIN PLANETS SERIES:

Mikiria

The Three Minds

Senaria

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Time After Time (“We don’t belong here? On the contrary, Herbert...”)
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Sherlock Holmes quote (“When you have eliminated the impossible”)
from *The Sign of the Four*. © 1881 Arthur Conan Doyle.

Winston Churchill quote (“A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma”) from a radio broadcast on October 1, 1939.

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INTRODUCTION



It was few hours before sunset and the temperature seemed permanently stuck at a hundred and eleven, the mountains on either side of the desolate valley shimmering in the heat, when I saw it. It might have been a soap bubble hanging low in the sky, and it was impossible to tell just how far away it was, except that I knew perfectly well there wouldn't be any soap bubbles hovering in midair in a remote part of the Mojave Desert with the temperature in the hundreds, so whatever it was it had to be a long ways away.

I blinked a few times, thinking it might be one of those “floaters” you get in your eye when you're tired and have been out in the blazing sun for too long, but it didn't go away. Instead, it was definitely getting bigger. In fact, I suddenly realized, it was coming right at me—a soap bubble from hell.

For a moment I had visions of my car, my campsite, and myself obliterated by a crashing jetliner. Is this what a jetliner looks like head on? I wondered. But jetliners have wings, and this was still just an expanding round soap bubble. And then it grew *very* fast and seconds later whizzed overhead forty or fifty feet above me, and as I spun my head to watch (picking myself up off my ground pad in the process) I saw it hit the desert floor with a tremendous bang, raising a huge cloud of dust, then bounce into the air and continue skidding and bouncing along in a perfectly straight line for a good half mile before finally sliding to a stop on the rocky ground. For a long time the distant mountains echoed back the near-deafening impacts, like a series of high explosive detonations.

For one brief instant I'd glimpsed something transparent and cylindrical. I wasn't sure of its size, but I was certain it wasn't anywhere near the dimensions of a jetliner. I'd also seen something inside that wasn't glass, and suddenly realized that I was going to be the first person at a crash site. Fighting a freshly growing knot in my

stomach I frantically pawed through my stuff for a first aid kit and set off in a run towards the thing, now settled to a stop amid a slowly dissipating cloud of dust.

Amazingly, it hadn't hit anything except for a few boulders along the way. They'd been literally pulverized into dust, with only a few larger fragments remaining. Before long I'd reached a nicely smoothed furrow in the ground, with plenty of rocky debris around but nothing I could identify as pieces of whatever it was that had made such a remarkable landing.

(So what was I doing camping out in the Mojave Desert in June? I just happen to like it there, thank you. I won't tell you where I was; after all, the reason it was one of my favorite camping spots was because of its almost total isolation. I suppose girls in high school aren't supposed to go camping out in the desert by themselves, but I'd been doing it for almost a year now and no one had ever bothered me. So there.)

By the time I reached the thing the dust had pretty much settled, revealing what looked for all the world like a huge glass bullet about the size of a large recreational vehicle. Dust was still drifting down from the top, but the sides were so smooth that it just slid off, revealing to my horrified gaze what was clearly the figure of a man slumped forward in a seat near the pointed end, behind what looked like a control console. Smoke was starting to fill the interior, boiling out from under a horizontal panel that ran the length of the cylinder and made up its floor. Frantically I looked for a doorway, but couldn't find so much as an outline of one anywhere on the perfectly smooth surface. The flat rear of the thing was apparently made of metal, but there I also saw no sign of a hatch.

Now desperate, I ran back to the front of the craft and shouted as loudly as I could, but got no response. Seeing a large heavy rock at hand that had escaped demolition, I lifted it with difficulty and heaved it with all my strength at the glass. To my dismay, the rock shattered loudly like so much plaster, leaving not so much as a scratch on the polished surface.

The occupant, however, suddenly jerked upright, broke into a coughing fit, and then seemed to shout something, although I couldn't hear anything through the thick glass. A circular portal appeared in the smooth wall between us, as if the glass were simply melting away from the opening, and a moment later he emerged amid a boiling cloud of evil-looking smoke, coughing violently. He staggered out of the craft down a ramp of some kind that had also appeared out of nowhere, and

collapsed onto his knees on the ground.

I ran over to him, first aid kit in hand. "Are you all right?" I croaked, my heart pounding furiously. "Is anyone else in there?"

He looked up at me, and I saw to my amazement that he was only a boy, about my own age, maybe sixteen or a little older. He said something in a language I didn't recognize, interspersed with more hacking coughs.

"Sorry," I said as reassuringly as I could. "I don't know your language. Do you speak English? Sprechen sie Deutsch? Parlez vous français?"

"I'm okay," he wheezed, still coughing the smoke out of his lungs. Suddenly he looked at me in evident horror. "Oh, no. You saw me land, didn't you?"

"Uh-huh," I confirmed. "At least if you call that a landing. Is this thing secret or something?" In response he shakily tried to stand, then sat back down on the barren ground and stared disconsolately at the strange craft. Smoke was still drifting out of the open doorway.

"Oh, jeez," he moaned. "Kiri's gonna kill me for this. Nobody's supposed to see me land here." He had an odd accent that I couldn't quite pin down.

"Just where are you from, anyway?" I asked. "I've never even heard of a plane like this, much less with doorways that melt open." For the first time I looked him up and down. He seemed reasonably human, and the dark blue sleeveless shirt was ordinary enough, but the cutoff jeans didn't look quite right. And his boots were nothing like cowboy boots; they came up about two thirds of the way to his knees and appeared to be made of some kind of soft leather, except that they were dark blue.

I crossed my arms across my chest and assumed what I hoped was an intimidating expression (not easy to do when you're only five feet three). "Come on, talk. I can keep a secret, if that's what you're worried about. Where is this thing from?" Wordlessly he pointed a finger straight up. "What, from outer space?" I protested. "Give me a break!"

A look of relief suffused his face. "You mean you don't believe me? That's great!" I decided that either this kid was more than a little crazy or I was having a very strange dream. He was cute, though, with one of those rare builds that manages to look strong and graceful at the same time. In addition to a pair of warm almond-brown eyes, he sported a shaggy shock of straight black hair, especially long in the back, where it was tied into a bushy ponytail that reminded me of nothing quite so much as a real horse's tail.

“Aren’t you kind of young to be piloting a space ship around the solar system?” I said skeptically. His face fell; I guess he thought I believed him after all.

“Actually, it’s a starship,” he corrected me.

Right. “Yours?”

“No, it’s Kiri’s. She’s Empress of Deshtiris,” he added helpfully. “Boy am I ever gonna get it,” he mumbled again to himself.

I was almost starting to believe him, against my better judgment. “Listen,” I said. “Are you sure you’re all right? That was quite a landing. You didn’t break anything, did you? Or hit your head?” I added hopefully. He shook his head.

“I’m fine,” he said sadly. “At least until I get home.”

By now curiosity had hopelessly gotten the better of me. “It does seem like you’re in a bit of trouble,” I agreed. “Tell you what. Are you hungry? My campsite’s about a half-mile back. Maybe you’d like something to eat?”

His expression brightened visibly at that. “I was just getting ready to have breakfast when I found I had a problem. I could use a bite if you’ve got something.” Breakfast? I wondered. At six in the evening?

He stood up shakily and turned back to the thing behind him. Smoke was no longer coming out. “Come on,” he said. “You might as well get a look.” I followed him up the ramp and into the strange craft and peered around curiously as he poked at some of the now darkened controls. The interior was almost barren of furnishings except for four well-padded chairs near the front, two on either side of the central walkway I’d seen earlier. At the back of the craft was what looked like a solid steel wall, with a door in the center of it.

But there hadn’t been any door visible from outside. Even as I puzzled over the contradiction the boy politely pushed past me and tried the door’s handle without success. He pressed a few buttons on a small panel to the right of the door and tried the handle again, with no more luck than before.

“Well, everything’s dead,” he sighed, turning back to me. “Looks like I’m stuck here all right.” He motioned towards the opening we’d entered through, and reluctantly I headed back to the front of the ship. Along the way I took one more look at the control console. It was remarkably featureless, with only three or four brightly colored buttons and a five-by-five keypad, the keycaps labeled with unfamiliar symbols. There was also a considerable expanse of blank panel that I guessed was a computer readout when things were functioning.

I could feel the greenhouse heat building even during the brief

minutes we'd spent in the craft, and in spite of being unusually well-acclimated to the desert I was starting to feel sweat trickling down my back. I was truly grateful to find a mild evening breeze springing up when we stepped back out of the craft onto the ramp.

"I'll have to look at the power compartment when it's cooler," he said despondently. "*Futaba*: close portal." The ramp retracted and the opening in the side shrank to nothing again, leaving the smooth surface as featureless as before. It suddenly hit me that there didn't seem to be a scratch anywhere on it, in spite of its having bounced along several thousand feet of rocky desert landscape.

"If there's no power, how can you open and close that door-thingy?" I asked suspiciously.

"It's a fail-safe precaution. It uses a separate power source independent from the rest of the ship. Otherwise the *Futaba* could turn into a high-tech coffin in a hurry if the air regeneration failed." I nodded, not entirely pacified. "Now how about that bite to eat?" he added, somewhat more cheerfully this time. He has a nice smile, I decided as we trudged back to my car.

"So what's your name?" I asked. "Mine's Haley. Like the comet, but with only one 'L'. My friends call me Hal, though." I wasn't about to tell him that my full name was Brianna Haley Larkin, the first name courtesy of my father, who'd thought it sounded "upscale" at the time. My mother wanted to name me Halley in anticipation of the comet's much anticipated visit the following year, and he finally agreed to compromise, provided she changed Halley to Haley (which is a perfectly respectable Irish name). Much to his disgust, I've been known as Haley ever since elementary school.

"I'm Rann," my unexpected dinner guest reciprocated. "Nice to meet you. I really appreciate your waking me up. I don't know how much of that smoke I'd have inhaled before the fire extinguished itself."

"Are you sure you're okay?" I asked again. "All that stuff you breathed looked pretty nasty." I'd heard of people appearing to be fine after a fire and then dying the next day of smoke inhalation.

"It's harmless, really," he reassured me. "At least once I coughed it all out." He looked around. There was nothing to see in any direction except the desert and the surrounding mountains. "So are you prospecting or surveying?" he asked.

I giggled. "You've got to be kidding. I'm still in high school. I just like it out here."

"High school? Aren't you kind of old to still be in high school?"

"Hey," I said indignantly. "I'm only sixteen. Just how old did you think I was?"

"Oh," he said, reddening. "I forgot. I thought you were about my age."

"Forgot what?" I demanded. "And how old are you, anyway?"

For a moment he seemed to be debating just how much he should spill. "Oh, well," he finally sighed. "You've already seen me land, and the ship, and everything. I guess it doesn't really matter how much I tell you. You're either going to keep a secret, like you said, or you're not."

"Well I am," I insisted. "Provided you don't turn out to be a pervert or something." I'd noticed that the sun was getting a lot lower, and he didn't seem to have anywhere to go, so I was starting to wonder just a little if I was going to be spending the night with some kind of psycho sharing my campsite.

The horrified look on his face was at least partially reassuring. Besides, I reflected, I had a hatchet hidden next to my sleeping bag. "You were going to tell me what you forgot," I reminded him. "About my age."

"Oh," he said apologetically. "Well, we age more slowly than you do. I assumed you'd be about twenty."

"Is that how old you are?"

"Twenty-one, actually."

"Yeah, right," I grumbled skeptically as we reached my campsite. We were finally in the shade, the sun having slipped behind the mountains to the west. By now I realized I was hooked; I was going to hear the whole story whatever it took. It's a good thing I'm not a cat, people tell me, or I'd be dead by now. Several times over.

"You've got a choice of fried Spam™, corned beef hash, or a deviled ham sandwich," I offered as I lit my cooking stove. He looked embarrassed. "Er, those are all meat, aren't they?"

"Are you a vegetarian or something like that? I've got some trail mix and fruit if you'd rather."

"That would be great," he agreed with obvious relief.

"So is this a religious or a dietary thing?" I asked as I sliced up an apple. I'd turned off the stove, not wanting to make him uncomfortable.

He thought about it, then said, "Do you have any pets?"

"I used to have a cat," I said. "Why?"

"Well, I guess it would be sort of like my offering you a catburger. We consider all animal life to be sentient." I stared at him.

"It's okay, really," he said in embarrassment. "I know your culture is different and everything. I just couldn't eat it myself, that's all." By

now I was expecting to hear a speech about the “prime directive” at any moment. This guy is really living in a fantasy world, I thought, then I remembered the ship.

“All right,” I sighed, “suppose you start at the beginning. Like where are you from, and who is Kiri, and why did you land that giant glass salt shaker in the middle of my desert?”

So for the next two hours, as the sun sank below the mountains, he told me. And my life has never been the same since.

PART 1:

Add 1, 1



Allow me to summarize. His full name was Parkor Rann, and he came from a planet called Deshtiris, about thirty-five light-years from Earth, which up until a year ago had been ruled by totalitarian baddies calling themselves “Brizali.” Then the legendary Princess Mikiria had come down from the sky, overthrown the Evil Empire, and was now Empress, along with her husband, Emperor Wilorian.

(Okay, I thought to myself, so he reads science fiction. Really bad science fiction.)

Anyway, he ended up serving the new Emperor and Empress as part of their bodyguard, living in the royal palace in the capital city of Deshti. He’d been given an errand to perform on Earth (which he casually glossed over, presumably thinking I wouldn’t notice), and the Empress had invited him to take her own ship so he wouldn’t have to spend several days’ travel time in each direction. (Apparently the ungainly thing I’d seen bouncing to a stop was the fastest ship in the galaxy.)

Unfortunately, he’d been preparing to land when something blew out. He’d had just enough power left to spiral down through the atmosphere, losing speed in the process, but with no idea where he was going to set down. As luck had it, he’d barely missed the mountains to the north and wound up skidding to a halt right in front of me on the relatively flat valley floor.

“That’s a pretty neat story,” I said skeptically. “Now how about the real one?”

“No,” he insisted, “it’s the truth. I swear it. Besides, who here has a ship anything like that?” I found it pretty amusing that he was now earnestly defending his story. Not bad, Haley, I congratulated myself, you’d have made a great interrogator. Then I realized that I was starting to believe *his* story, and that I wasn’t sure any more just who was outfoxing who.

“All right,” I continued a little less confidently. “Let’s say I believe you. Now what?”

He stared up for a little while at the stars beginning to dust the

fading sky. "Well," he finally said, "I need to try once more to get things started. If that doesn't work, then I'll have to call home."

"Why don't you wait until morning?" I blurted out before I knew what I was saying. Logically, I suppose I should have done anything I could to send him on his way. California has to be the weirdo capital of the world, and you learn early on never to trust strangers. And here I was in the middle of the Mojave Desert, looking at spending the night with someone who claimed to be from another planet and an employee of the Empress of the Universe. But for some reason I trusted him. "Besides," I added, "you got knocked around quite a bit, not to mention inhaling god knows what."

"You're probably right," he agreed reluctantly. "A good night's sleep wouldn't hurt."

"All I have are these sleeping bags and ground cushions," I apologized. He grinned.

"I was in the Deshtiran military for a year. You get used to sleeping on the floor, or wherever you have to. I'll be fine."

One nice thing about the Mojave Desert in June is that you don't need to worry about staying warm at night. I unzipped my sleeping bags and spread them over the ground pads as cushions, and we both finally just sprawled out and went to sleep, using rolled up jackets as pillows. I really didn't know why, but I felt very safe with him stretched out next to me. The hatchet remained undisturbed in its hiding place.

I woke up the next morning, just as it was growing light, to find him gone. I had a vague memory of waking up some time after midnight and staring at his profile, shining almost silver in the light of the waning moon. For a few minutes I wondered if the whole thing had just been a bizarre dream as I shook the sleep from my eyes. There was still a rolled-up jacket where his head had been, however, so after splashing some cold water from the cooler over my face I decided to find out once and for all.

Pulling on my hiking boots, I set out towards the spot where I remembered the strange craft landing. It was still too dim to see it a half-mile away, but before long I'd reached the first patch of demolished boulders and was following the smooth furrow towards the glint of glass ahead. By the time I was a few hundred feet from it I could see a figure poking around inside the remarkable object, which now looked for all the world like a giant discarded soft-drink bottle lying on its side.

The gods really are crazy, I decided.

I stuck my head inside the open portal. One of the floor panels had been raised, and Rann was down on his knees, his chin nearly touching some strange-looking electronic equipment. "Hello," I said hesitantly, and was rewarded with a quick jerk of his thick thatch of black hair as he looked around for the source of the noise.

"Hi, Hal," he said, seeing me. He didn't look very happy, I thought.

"So how is it?" I asked. "Can you get it started?"

He shook his head. "I don't have any power at all, not even for communications. This is really bad. I can't even get into the living quarters for a change of clothes," he added ruefully.

"What living quarters?" I looked around, puzzled. The interior of the thing was as barren as I remembered it from the day before. Rann jerked his thumb at the other end of the ship, where the metal wall with its non-functional door made up the back of the ship.

"But there's nothing back there," I protested. "That's where the ship ends." He grinned sadly.

"I'll explain it someday. Anyway, looks like I'm stuck here for the time being." He put back the floor panel and stood up, stretching cramped muscles. "I'm going to have to let them know I'm okay and get some instructions. Right now, without power almost nothing on the *Futaba* is usable. At least the hull transformations are still working."

"Hull transformations?" I said blankly.

"The portal you saw. The whole ship can reshape itself any way I want by reconfiguring hadron fields on a subatomic level."

I digested that for a minute. "That's the strong interaction, right?" I like physics. I know it's not cool for girls to know too much, but that's why I spend a lot of time on my own. To hell with idiots, I say.

"Yeah," he confirmed. "The hull is made of amorphous diamond, and with hadron fields configuring its shape, you can form it into anything you like. It's also nearly indestructible." By now the sun had again begun to warm the interior quite noticeably, and we emerged through the doorway with considerable relief.

"You mean this thing can change into something else?" I said dubiously. "Like, it can morph, or something?" In response, he turned to the ship and shouted "*Futaba* transform: truck!"

I think it was what I saw next that finally convinced me once and for all that I wasn't just seeing the results of some secret military experiment. The whole ship turned liquid before my eyes and repoured itself into an odd-looking hybrid somewhere between a jeep and a pickup truck, colors and all. Even the rubber tires looked authentic. I suddenly realized my heart was pounding wildly.

"This is real, isn't it?" I breathed.

"Go kick one of the tires," he said with a grin. "But not too hard, for your sake." Dazed, I did as he suggested. The extremely realistic-looking tire (it even had a flat spot on the bottom where it rested on the ground) might have been made of solid granite as far as my foot could tell. "Ouch," I said, impressed.

After asking me to back away again from the vehicle, he shouted another command; this time, "*Futaba* transform: starship!" A moment later the truck was gone, replaced by the now familiar crystal bullet.

"It's true, then," I conceded reluctantly. "About you being from Deshtiris, or whatever."

"I wouldn't lie to you."

I took a deep breath. "Well, in that case," I said, now adopting my most businesslike manner, "let's see if we can't start working all this out. You said you needed to call home. What exactly do you need to do that?" I had a mental picture of the Rube Goldberg contraption used in *ET*. I hoped we wouldn't have to steal any classified electronic equipment from a military base or something.

"Do you have an Internet connection at home?" he asked. I did a double take.

"Huh? Sure. I mean, I can surf the Web and send email. How would that help?" He then explained that there was some kind of gadget on the moon that relayed all of our satellite signals on to Deshtiris, including most of Earth's Internet traffic.

"And you can just send email from here to there?" I said in disbelief. "But you said it was thirty-five light-years away. Isn't that kind of a long time to wait for an answer?"

"What, you think I spent thirty-five years getting here? It all goes through hyperspace,* the same way I came. Trust me, it works. But they're not going to be very happy about this," he added, looking anxious again.

"Look," I said, and feeling more than a little anxious myself, "I'm going to have to tell my mother some kind of story about who you are. She's antsy enough about my camping out all alone in the desert; if she thinks I've been spending the time out here with some boy she's going

* There is of course no such thing. When speaking English Deshtirans usually use the science fiction term "hyperspace" as a convenient form of verbal shorthand to describe the complex interactions of space, time and mass involved in faster-than-light travel. The actual Deshtiran word is much different and utterly untranslatable.—*Ed.*

to hit the roof.” Actually I suspected she’d be thrilled, but I didn’t want to encourage him too much.

“What would happen if you told her the truth?” he asked, and I suppressed a giggle. If there was anyone I could safely tell about this whole bizarre incident, it was my mother. No one would ever believe her if she repeated it.

“That’s a good question,” I suggested. “Let’s find out.”

“So where do you live, anyway?” he asked. “Certainly not around here.”

“Las Vegas.” I didn’t bother suppressing the usual involuntary shudder, either. “That’s in Nevada,” I added.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of it,” he acknowledged. “Kiri once said it was a good place to be from.” He suddenly looked worried. “No offense intended.”

“It’s an understatement, if anything,” I said disdainfully. “A bloated, vulgar playpen for the aesthetically challenged. Sort of like living in a sixties TV commercial. So you’ve never been there?”

“I’ve only been to the Los Angeles area,” he said absently, looking over the *Futaba* once more. “I better hide this,” he decided. “Not that anyone could damage it, but they could haul it away, and I’d rather tell Kiri I broke her ship than that I lost it somewhere.”

“How are you going to hide something like this?” I protested. “I hope you don’t think we’re going to bury it; that would take days. And if you turn it back into that truck someone’s bound to try tow it away sooner or later.” He didn’t seem to hear me, being lost in thought.

“Kiri once told me she’d programmed something in just for emergencies like this. What was it? Something about making copies, I think. Oh!” His expression brightening, he looked around wildly, then suddenly darted over to the pile of rubble wedged against the front of the ship. There he selected a large, irregularly shaped fragment of rock and carefully set it down directly opposite the spot where the ship’s portal usually appeared.

“Stand back,” he warned me, doing likewise himself. “*Futaba*: simulate with parameter scale times sixty.”

Even after what I’d already seen during the past twelve hours the results astonished me. In place of the now-familiar *Futaba* there stood a huge replica of the rock Rann had set next to it, identical right down to the texture of the grain and the fracture planes.

Actually, it was more than realistic. A rock blown up to sixty times normal size will no longer look like a rock. The individual crystals making it up don’t look natural at that size. But somehow this rock

retained the detailed texture even when I walked up to it and ran my fingers over it.

“Recursive fractal texture generation,” Rann said with a grin. “It replicates the texture at ever smaller scales when reforming, so that even up close it still looks authentic. Kiri doesn’t miss a thing, does she?”

“I hope I get to meet her someday,” I said in awe. “She’s good. Really good.”

“She’s the best,” he said simply.

“I know this is kind of unlikely,” I asked, “but what if some prospector decides to chip a piece out for analysis? Or, worse yet, tries to blow it up with dynamite?”

He laughed, for the first time since I’d met him. It was a nice laugh, good natured. “The *Futaba* could run head-on into a meteor at a thousand miles per hour and it wouldn’t scratch it. The hadron field that holds the hull in shape is more powerful than any explosive. They’d have to drop a nuke on it to hurt it.”

“Let’s hope they don’t,” I said with a shudder, as we headed back to the car. I looked back once, from a few hundred feet away. It truly looked like a large rock, a little out of place on the valley floor, but with nothing else to distinguish it.

“Unfortunately we can’t do anything about the furrow,” he observed regretfully, “and it will show up from the air. We’ll just have to hope nobody flies too low over this part of the desert for a while.” A few minutes later we were bumping our way along the dirt track I’d driven in on. After another forty-five minutes we were on Interstate 15, pointed towards Las Vegas.

Along the way we discussed his future. “You’re going to need a change of clothes,” I decided.



“Mom, I’m home,” I shouted. “I’ve brought a visitor. It’s a boy.” From somewhere upstairs I heard a welcoming yell. “Can I get you some juice or something?” I asked Rann, who was looking around with great interest.

“Sure. Thanks.” He was obviously fascinated to see what an Earth home looked like.

“Is it very different from yours?” I asked curiously.

“Actually, no,” he said to my surprise. “That’s what’s so interesting.”

Just then there was a clatter on the steps. I’d had a feeling my mother couldn’t resist seeing who I might have brought home. Although I’d had a few girlfriends over the years, one of them very close, I hadn’t brought any boys to the house.

I could tell Rann was intrigued by the apparition that materialized a moment later on the stairwell. I love my mother more than anyone, but she is a little—well, eccentric. To be quite honest, I think she inhaled too much of the seventies while she was there. Draped in a large, loose flowing dress made up of most of the colors of the rainbow, she practically billowed her way to the bottom, the various stones and gems draped around her neck glinting in all directions. Sandals and two copper wrist bands completed the picture.

I knew the meanings of every one of the stones, too; after all, I’d hunted up a number of them for her out in the desert or in Utah rock shops. There was selenite, which was supposed to provide energy; beryl, to prevent psychic tampering (something useful in a state plagued with telephone solicitors, I suppose); and of course the ubiquitous quartz crystals, which are apparently supposed to do just about everything except take out the trash. And the copper bracelets were worn to attract love (copper being a “metal of Venus”), something she hadn’t been very successful at since divorcing my father a year and a half ago.

I’m not sure exactly why not, since my mother is actually a very attractive woman, one who doesn’t come close to looking her age (forty-four). She has very pretty reddish hair, which she lets flow down her back (almost all the way to her butt, in fact) when she’s not doing

housework or yard work, at which times it transforms into a nicely braided pigtail. She also avoids cosmetics entirely, mostly because her very fair, almost pinkish skin is hypersensitive to them (a legacy of her half-Irish background, I think).

"This is Rann, Mother," I said as she looked him up and down appraisingly. "Rann, this is my mother, Jennifer Larkin."

"What a nice-looking boy," she decided, adding, "I love your ponytail," as Rann blushed. "So where are you from?"

"He's from outer space, Mother," I interjected. I didn't want to know what kind of story Rann might have felt obliged to concoct, and in my mother's case the truth was far safer.

"Really?" she said, her eyes widening. "Would that be Saturn, by any chance?" She had a special thing for Saturn; it had something to do with a book she'd read once.

"No, I'm afraid it would be Deshtiris, Ma'am," Rann responded respectfully, to her evident disappointment.

"That's near Saturn, isn't it?" she suggested hopefully.

"Just on the other side," I said hastily. "Mom, Rann is stuck here in town. His spaceship broke down out in the desert and he won't be able to get it fixed for a while. I wondered if he could stay with us in the meantime. We could put him in the spare bedroom." That had been my father's study; as soon as the divorce had been finalized and he'd moved out we'd transformed it as thoroughly as possible. Today you'd never guess that a spiritual descendent of Adolf Hitler had lived there for several years.

"I suppose that would be all right," she said brightly. "Does he have any things with him?"

"It's a long story," I said. "I have the rocks you asked me to look for," I added, unzipping one of the duffels and pulling out a few stones which I handed to her. "I found two pieces of obsidian and a chunk of chalcedony. Will that do?" She swirled happily off to the kitchen with them, returning a few minutes later with the glasses of juice I'd promised.

"We'll need to do some shopping," I explained to Rann. "You know, socks, spare underwear, that kind of stuff. I know—you go take a nice long bath and I'll run your stuff through the washer. And while it's washing I'll hop over to the store and pick up a few things." He looked embarrassed at that.

"I really hate to put you to so much trouble," he said apologetically. I was about to open my mouth when my mother burst in insisting that of course it wasn't and we'd be delighted to have him here. There are

times when I'm awfully glad I have the mother I do; I don't know how many of my schoolmates' parents would have nonchalantly allowed their daughter to bring home a strange boy and put him up in a spare bedroom for an unspecified amount of time.

As we headed up the stairs to his room, he whispered to me, "Before we get too involved in settling in, is there any chance I could send that email we talked about?" So we changed course and headed for my room instead.

"This is my computer," I announced proudly. It was actually a pretty classy setup (I don't spend my money on clothes and CDs like most of the other kids my age; instead I've been putting it into this for the past few years), with a scanner, two printers, DVD-ROM drive and a 17-inch LCD monitor.

"What do you think?" I said proudly. For several seconds he was silent. "It's so—*big*," he finally blurted out, clearly embarrassed. Feeling rather deflated, I booted up and started an Internet connection.

"It's all ready," I growled. He briefly puzzled over the keyboard, apparently familiarizing himself with the layout of the keys, and when he did start typing, it was pretty much hunt-and-peck.

To: mikiria@rp.gov.dt
From: haley@vegasicomm.net
Date: Thu, 14 Jun 2001 20:33:41
Subject: Help! I'm stranded

Dear Kiri and Will,

Something in the Futaba blew out and I had to make a forced landing in the desert. The ship is completely without power, except for the hull transforms. I'm staying with some people in Las Vegas. You can reach me at the above address.

Rann

PS: Sorry this is in English, but it's an American keyboard and I don't know how to do Deshtiran on it.

"And you really expect to get an answer to that?" I said skeptically. "There's no such domain suffix as 'dt', you know."

He grinned. "That's right. This'll bounce back to you within a few minutes with a 'no DNS entry for host' message."

"So what's the point?" I insisted. This was getting interesting.

He thought intently for a moment. "Let me see if I understand how

this works well enough to explain it. There's some kind of box that the message goes through that translates the 'rp.gov.dt' into a numeric Internet address."

"That's a DNS server," I said helpfully.

"Whatever," he agreed. "Anyway, normally it wouldn't find an entry anywhere for 'rp.gov.dt' so it would bounce your message back. But there's a hidden program that's automatically installed onto every DNS server the first time it connects to the Internet that intercepts any messages with a 'dt' suffix and gives them an address that's not supposed to exist."

A Trojan Horse. Cool. "Go on," I said, by now thoroughly engrossed.

"Well, eventually it reaches an actual machine with that address. That machine rejects the message and returns an error, saying there's no such domain as 'rp.gov.dt'."

"Huh? What's the point of that?"

"Well, in order to reach that machine, the message has to be routed via several communications satellites that handle most of Earth's Internet traffic. There's a gadget on the moon that picks up all your satellite transmissions and relays them on to Deshtiris. Once there, any messages for 'dt' get sent to the proper place." He took a deep breath. "So how was that?"

"Bravo," I said. "That was the silliest thing I ever heard in my life." I heard a beep from my terminal program, indicating that I'd received a message. It was an automatically generated message from my Internet provider, informing me that my last email had bounced. "No DNS entry for host rp.gov.dt," it read. He grinned again. "See?"

"See what?" I sniffed. "Your message bounced with an invalid address, just like I said it would." He sighed patiently.

"Well, we'll see. Meanwhile, do you think I could take that bath?"

It took some doing to figure out how we were going to arrange for him to take a bath and me launder his clothes at the same time. I finally located a nightshirt long enough for him to wear in the meantime.

"Now empty your pockets," I ordered, getting a startled look in return. "So I can wash your clothes," I explained. With a shrug, he deposited some ordinary U.S. coins and an odd object onto the dresser.

"What's that?" I asked curiously. "It looks like a vibrator." It was a cylinder of clear plastic, rounded on both ends, with some miniaturized gadgetry inside.

"What's a vibrator?" he asked, puzzled. I told him, and had the satisfaction of seeing him blush a deep crimson. "No, it's nothing like

that," he stammered, obviously flustered. "It's—"

"Never mind," I said with a contented grin, handing him the nightshirt and leading him to the bathroom. "Now toss your clothes outside the door and I'll wash them while you take your bath." A few minutes later I threw his clothes into the washer as I heard him happily settling into the hot water.

When I got back to my room there was another message in my inbox. With a start I saw that the return address was mikiria@rp.gov.dt and that the subject line read "Re: Help! I'm stranded." I suppose I shouldn't have read it, but after all it was my email account.

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To: haley@vegasicomm.net
From: mikiria@rp.gov.dt
Date: Thu, 14 Jun 2001 20:41:21
Subject: Re: Help! I'm stranded
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Rann--

What have you done to my ship!? You didn't scratch it, did you?!

Just kidding. I take it you're all right? Please send me the location of the Futaba; also some details on what happened so I'll know which parts to bring. The bad news is that it's going to be at least two weeks before I can get away to Earth and make repairs. Can you hold out that long? Let me know ASAP the status of your assignment.

By the way, please don't forget about the stuff I asked you to pick up in Little Tokyo.

Love,
Kiri
EoD

PS: Will says hi.

For a very long time I just stared at the message. Either I was the victim of a remarkably elaborate hoax, or I really did have a very unusual house guest.

I knocked on the bathroom door. "Rann," I said as nonchalantly as I could, "you have mail."



A few hours later we were all sitting down to an early dinner, Rann and I having both gotten our much-needed baths. I was relieved to see that Rann's hair (and ponytail) didn't get any less shaggy after being washed. It didn't escape his notice, either, that my mother's cooking was strictly vegetarian, and he soon had her beaming with his praise. Great, I grumbled to myself, now he thinks it's just me that's a carnivorous barbarian.

I'd explained to Rann that my mother had a reputation for being more than a little flaky, what with all her New Age mysticism and everything, and that he could pretty much tell her whatever he wanted without worrying about the consequences. (I know that sounds condescending, but how many people take seriously someone who's convinced that the Earth was originally settled by convicts from Saturn?) So the dinner table conversation was fascinating, to say the least, as Rann told us about daily life on Deshtiris and its sister planet Qozernon, sometimes known together as the "Twin Planets."

Among other things, he explained that his ancestors were actually from Earth, having been brought there by something called the Virrin, who'd set up the two planets as giant ecological laboratories, stocked with most of the existing species of Earth life. I think even my mother was growing skeptical after a while, although this had to be a dream come true for her: an alien from outer space that actually admitted it.

The bad news is that it's going to be at least two weeks before I can get away to Earth and make repairs.

Just two weeks, I thought. Already it seemed a terribly short time. Maybe his stories were a little far-fetched, but I was starting to really like him just the same. He seemed to be everything that the boys I went to school with weren't. He was even polite, a trait I thought had vanished forever from the planet. Not to mention that although he might only look sixteen, there was something in his face that betrayed the twenty-one years he claimed. At first I wasn't quite sure what it was, and then it suddenly hit me as I watched him: pain.

For just a moment it was there, and then it was gone. There's

something about a person who's actually gone through a really bad experience that never quite goes away. I remembered my best friend Melanie, whose older brother had been brutally murdered during the Lucie revolt two years ago, or the Millennium Eve Uprising* as it had come to be known. She was the liveliest of people, both before and after the tragedy, but afterwards I saw it there too. I wondered what had happened to Rann.

Speaking of pain, that evening in his room after supper I asked him if he'd had any aftereffects from his crash landing, as I'd seen him wince several times during dinner when passing a dish. "I'm fine," he said blandly. "I was pretty well strapped in." I remembered his ship bouncing along the desert, demolishing boulders as it went.

"Take off your shirt," I demanded. He looked at me in astonishment. "Come on," I said. "I saw you at dinner. I'm not blind, you know." Reluctantly he pulled his shirt over his head, to reveal an ugly X-shaped pattern of purple bruises across his chest and shoulders where the harness straps had crossed. "Omigod," I blurted out. "Rann, that's got to hurt. Why didn't you say something?"

"I really don't want to be any trouble," he insisted, but it was too late. By then I'd dug a jar of "horse liniment" (my name for it) out of the cupboard and ordered him to sit down on the bed while I scooped out a gob of the smelly gunk.

I wasn't really prepared for what followed. I'd spread this stuff on my mother's back and shoulders more than once, when she'd accidentally gotten sunburned or worked herself sore in the garden. But when I put my hands on his shoulders, felt his smooth skin and solid muscles under my fingers, I unexpectedly found my heart starting to pound and my breathing strangely ragged. Is this some kind of allergic reaction because he's an alien? I conjectured hazily, now feeling my face growing hot and an odd tingling in my fingers, along with some other physiological effects I won't go into here.

Fortunately the few rational brain cells I still retained managed to blast a message through the fog, just as I was about to start spreading the stuff over his chest as well. *It's called runaway teenage hormones*, they informed me snidely. *Do you know what you're doing?* I wrenched myself back to reality to find Rann staring at me rather nervously.

* Technically the uprising (which occurred in 1999) would have been *two* years before the millennium (2001), but an errant newscaster applied the nickname during a broadcast and it stuck, to the lingering distress of purists everywhere.—*Ed.*

“Bad Haley! Bad Haley!” I silently castigated myself, thoroughly appalled, and with extreme difficulty pulled myself away. “Here,” I stammered, shoving the jar at him, “you can do the rest yourself. I’m going to bed. Let me know if you need anything,” and fled from the room, probably leaving a very puzzled Rann wondering just which one of us was really from another planet.

Sitting on my own bed, I remembered that it was my friend Melanie who’d once warned me that I was rumored to be a lesbian because I hadn’t dated any boys since moving to Las Vegas. “Me?” I’d said in amazement. “Not that I have any prejudices about that, but I happen to like boys.” I’d felt my face reddening. “In fact, I like boys a lot.” She’d looked skeptical, to put it mildly. “Just not any of these boys,” I’d explained. “Their idea of fun is driving pickup trucks over desert tortoises.”

There are a few high class public schools in Las Vegas, including some reasonably good magnet schools, but Lon Ashcroft High School wasn’t one of them, being mostly noted for an especially vicious football team and a higher than usual frequency of weapons violations. If I’d been a boy, my father would probably have sent me to a high-tech private school, but I wasn’t, and he’d never made any effort to hide his disappointment. Instead, he’d been adamant that I go to a “traditional” school, considering the magnet schools to be breeding grounds for “liberals” and “deviants.” By the time my parents split up, it was too late in the school year for me to transfer.

It wasn’t that I didn’t find any of the boys physically attractive; it was just that once they opened their mouths I found myself in the presence of something akin to the Hitler Youth. Several even regularly came to school wearing John Lucie T-shirts while the administration timidly looked the other way.

“You ought to go out with someone,” Melanie had suggested, “if only to keep people from talking so much.”

“You want me to date some jerk just so people won’t spread rumors about me?” I’d exploded. “What do I care what other people think?” The last phrase was one of my favorites, ever since I’d read Richard Feynman’s autobiographies. She’d shrugged, but I could tell she’d been amused. Dammit, Melanie, why did you have to move? It’s been such a long year since you left, I realized sadly.

Yeah, I do like boys a lot, I thought, trying to get my pulse rate back down where it belonged. What on earth was I thinking, anyway? He’s from outer space, and besides he’s leaving in two weeks. But the memory of his strong shoulders under my fingers left them tingly for

quite a while afterwards.

Before I went to bed I opened my email client to check for messages one more time. I noticed a message in the Sent Mail folder addressed to mikiria@rp.gov.dt. I debated opening and reading it, and then clicked the “close” button. It’s bad enough that I practically attacked him, I thought, but eavesdropping on his mail too? With a sigh I crawled into bed. I had some very interesting dreams that night.

My mother was out running errands the next morning so I prepared breakfast for the two of us, wondering all the while why sitting on the windowsill were several quartz crystals at the bottom of a jar filled with murky greenish water. We sat down to a meal of sugared oatmeal, which was about as close as I could get to a safely vegetarian breakfast on my own, and discussed the immediate future.

“We still need to get you some clothes,” I informed him. “You can’t very well wear the same shirt and pants for the next two weeks.” So we went clothes shopping.

“Clothes shopping” inevitably meant The Mall. And that meant driving through congested streets (every third one under construction) while dodging Las Vegas drivers.

Forget the horror stories you’ve heard about California drivers. Every time I drive to California, I’m amazed to discover that when I put on my turn signal people in the next lane actually slow down to let me in. Here they’re more likely to speed up and tail the car ahead, as do the vehicles behind them, just daring you to try change lanes. Nobody’s gonna pullinfronta *them*, by god. Then there are the ones that speed up to pass you on the left so that *they* can pull in front of *you*, just so they can hit their brakes to turn right into a driveway. Winning is everything here, whether it’s at the craps table or a freeway cloverleaf.

The mall itself was pretty much like every other mall, with the usual boring clothing, music, and food franchises. School being out for the summer, it was also jammed with teenagers on the prowl. I’m always reminded of those overcrowded mazes scientists use to drive rats insane.

“Well, if it isn’t Iceball,” said a female voice behind us. I felt my face reddening; it wasn’t one of my favorite nicknames. I slowly turned to see two familiar faces from school. One of the girls was tall, with long straight blond hair; the other was shorter, with dark hair, carefully foofed. They were both dressed in standard Vegas mall crawl drag: short tube-tops, ultra-tiny ragged shorts, and a garish assortment of lipstick, eye shadow, belly rings and the like.

For a moment I was surprised that they deigned to address me at all,

being two of the most popular girls in my class. At school they would customarily have walked past without so much as a condescending sneer. Then I noticed that they were staring at Rann in considerable surprise, not to mention interest. Rann looked distinctly uncomfortable.

“Going to introduce us to your friend?” the shorter one demanded.

“This is Rann—Randy,” I said reluctantly. “He’s visiting for a few weeks. Rann—ndy, this is Brittany and Kimberly. They’re classmates of mine.” He nodded a polite acknowledgment.

“Please call me Kim,” the dark-haired one exuded.

“So, where are you from?” asked the blond, slowly looking him over from top to bottom. That was Brittany. I knew Rann was her type: he was male.

“He’s from Deshtiris,” I blurted out without thinking, getting a startled look from Rann as a result. I felt an instant of panic, wondering if I’d given away something important.

“That’s one of the New England states, isn’t it?” Brittany inquired languidly, adopting her “sophisticated, well-traveled” persona.

“Yeah,” Rann answered, “right next to Rhode Island.”

“Two weeks, huh?” Kim murmured, staring at his chest the whole time. Her eyes looked slightly unfocused, and I wondered what she was on this time. She’d passed out in school on at least two occasions that I knew of, though her parents didn’t seem to mind. “So where’re you staying?”

“With Haley,” he answered innocently, prompting startled looks from the two.

“Well, Randy,” Brittany drawled, striking her best effort at a seductive pose, “if you get too bored over there, give us a call. We’ll treat you to some heavy partying.” She stretched out the word “heavy” as invitingly as she could. Kim still hadn’t taken her eyes off his chest.

“That’s very kind of you,” Rann said gravely.

“I’ll try not to bore him to death first,” I reassured them.

I finally managed to disentangle us and steer Rann to one of the ubiquitous clothing boutiques scattered throughout the mall. He was soon stuffed into a fresh set of jeans and a dark blue T-shirt with a Groucho Marx quote on the back.

“They’re kind of tight, aren’t they?” he said dubiously, examining himself in a full-length mirror.

“They look great on you,” I said, admittedly with lust in my heart. We made several more stops, to pick up things like a bathing suit, socks, and underwear, until I was satisfied that he was suitably stocked for a two-week stay. I couldn’t talk him into a pair of shoes, though, as he

swore no Earth footwear was fit for human consumption.

As we were leaving the mall, I suddenly turned to him. "Rhode Island?"

"Geography's not one of her strong points, is it?" he said with a grin. "Don't worry, I don't think there's any danger of my getting bored while I'm staying with you."

"Thanks," I said gratefully. "I'll try to keep things interesting." It was probably my imagination, but I thought he looked slightly alarmed at that. But only for a moment.

When we returned to the house, out of habit I fired up the computer and checked my email. Scanning the summaries (and skipping over the usual spam for porn sites), I felt my heart skip a beat as I saw that one of the messages had a return address of mikiria@rp.gov.dt.

"Rann, there's something here for you," I called out in excitement.

"Really? Let's see." I brought up the message onscreen. "Do you want me to look away?" I asked half-heartedly. "No, it's all right," he reassured me.

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To: haley@vegasicomm.net
From: mikiria@rp.gov.dt
Date: Fri, 15 Jun 2001 16:03:28
Subject: Re: Help! I'm stranded
Parts/Attachments:
    1   Shown      19 lines text
    2   animetitles.doc (110 KB)
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Rann--

Looks like I'll be there on June 27, Earth calendar, around 6 pm PDT. Can you meet me at the ship?

Sorry to hear about your being locked out of the living quarters. If you can arrange transportation, why don't you stop at my house above Fontana? You'll find clothes, money and ID in the spare bedroom. I've also attached a list of the titles to look for in Little Tokyo.

Love,
Kiri
EoD

PS: Haley sounds nice. Any chance I'll get to meet her when I arrive to fix Futaba?

Attached to the message was a file containing a long list of titles,

all in transliterated Japanese.

I saw Rann turn visibly pink as he reached the postscript. “Rann, just what have you been telling her about me?” I exclaimed in mock indignation, remembering again that unread message in Sent Mail. Hal, you’re just too virtuous for your own good, I chided myself. But I shall reform, I decided. So look out, Rann.

He still hadn’t said anything. “So can I meet her?” I persisted. I wasn’t going to take no for an answer, either.

“If Kiri says she wants to meet you, then of course it’s all right,” he said. Thank you, Rann. Now I won’t have to kill you.



We started off the next morning lounging around my mother's pool. By mid-June the temperature in Las Vegas is usually hitting the hundreds, and even though the air is so dry that it doesn't really seem all that hot, swimming is still a great way to get some exercise without collapsing from heat stroke. For the first half-hour we swam and dove in a respectable manner, but before long things degenerated into a game of mutual tag. It was horseplay, it was fun, and it was also, I realized libidinally, a socially acceptable excuse for considerable physical contact, as Rann grabbed me by the waist and pulled me under the water for the *nth* time and I made plans to do likewise—once I managed to get my breath back.

Although this news may astonish the reader, in spite of the extreme summer heat the majority of homes in Las Vegas don't boast swimming pools. This has nothing whatsoever to do with water conservation, even though the Las Vegas Valley's population growth has far outstripped any increase in available water supplies (not to mention the already overburdened Colorado River, which is just a sad trickle by the time it gets to Mexico). Nor has the local gambling (euphemistically referred to here as "gaming") industry shown much restraint in the ever-increasing number of fountains, lakes, and other decorative waterworks under construction. No—it's just too expensive to chip through the stubborn layer of caliche that lies anywhere from a few inches to a few feet below the surface in most parts of the Valley. That we had a pool was a legacy from my unlamented father, or rather from his highly lucrative medical specialist's practice (a.k.a. License to Steal).

"Tell me about this Empress Mikiria," I said as we settled ourselves into deck chairs during a brief respite. I wondered if speaking her name aloud would render me guilty of *lèse majesté* or worse, but after all Rann had mentioned her quite a few times, so I thought it ought to be safe.

What I wasn't prepared for was the burst of enthusiasm that erupted from him like water from a hydrant. "She's just incredible," he

gushed. "The most brilliant computer genius on three planets, the best swordsman I've ever seen, and amazing agility. She can leap—"

"Tall buildings in a single bound?" I finished skeptically for him. It didn't even slow him down.

"She can jump straight up at least six feet," he resumed, having hardly taken a breath. "She has astonishing strength. It's all part of the genetic tinkering her father did to her before she was born. That and the eyes," he added, his own a bit starry.

"Her eyes," I repeated. "What about her eyes?"

He looked nonplused. "Oh. I never told you about her eyes?" I shook my head. "Well," he continued, "they're at least twice as big as yours or mine. They're also green. I mean really green, like emeralds. For some reason they remind me of a cat's. I think it's because the pupils are a little taller than they are wide. Sometimes I catch myself just staring at her eyes if I'm not thinking about it. Oh, and something else I forgot. She has deep red hair, really red, not what you call red hair."

"She sounds pretty interesting," I said noncommittally. The mental picture I'd formed by now was not a pretty one. "But how is it that you get to hang around an Empress, anyway?" I added suspiciously. "Does everyone on Deshtiris get to stare into the Empress' eyes? Or are you related to her?"

"It's a long story," he said rather abruptly. "Maybe another time." I noticed that he blushed slightly as he said it. I made a mental note to follow up later.

"All right," I summarized. "Green eyes, red hair, super strength, athletic prowess in fencing, and highly marketable computer skills. Not quite your standard qualifications for Ruler of the Universe. So how is she as an Empress? From what you told me earlier, she hasn't exactly spent her life doing this. And didn't you say there was an Emperor, too?"

Rann looked startled at my comment, even shocked. "She's a wonderful Empress," he protested. "Everyone loves her. And Emperor Wilorian, too."

"There's more to leadership than being lovable," I argued. "How are they as rulers? Do they get things done?" I've always been fascinated by power, by how people get it and use it. At one point I used to read a lot about Hitler and the Nazis, wondering how people like that ever managed to take over a civilized, technologically sophisticated nation like Germany. Of course, I had to admit that part of it too was that no matter how much I read, it still all ended up somehow

sounding like wildly improbable science fiction. I sometimes found it hard to grasp that something so outlandish had actually happened. But now I had an envoy of the Empress of Deshtiris in my house, and I was admittedly finding it a little difficult to get a handle on that as well.

Rann had been thinking very hard all this time, and when he did regain the gift of speech he was clearly putting a lot more thought into it. "They are good leaders," he said finally. "They've accomplished an awful lot since freeing the planet. I guess they're what you'd call administrators, getting all the different organizations that actually do things to pull in the same direction. But even more than that, they've persuaded everyone to follow them. I don't really know how, but somehow when you hear them speak, you know that they're doing what they think is right, not just what will benefit one group or another. There's a kind of 'rightness' about them. Not 'righteousness,' " he added hastily. " 'Rightness' is the best word I can think of. I really don't know how to say it better than that," he finished helplessly.

" 'Rightness.' " I repeated the word thoughtfully. "I think you're saying it pretty well, actually." It suddenly occurred to me how aptly the word fit Rann himself.

We were just about to dive back in for another bout of water wrestling when I saw it. "Where did you get that scar?" I said in some surprise. It was about an inch and a half long, located on his left side a few inches below his armpit.

"There're two, actually," he informed me proudly, and turned around. There was a second one on his back, just a few inches from the first. I suddenly realized that something had gone through several inches of flesh, probably grazing a rib or two in the process.

"That had to hurt," I commented with a shudder. "How did you get it?"

"It was when we rescued Senaria," he answered. "Some of the Brizali didn't want to give up without a fight. One of them managed to slip past my guard for a moment with his sword." He winced at the memory.

"A sword?" I said in astonishment. "Your society is advanced enough to build starships and you use swords?"

"We quit using firearms centuries ago," he explained. "With a sword you have to be physically close to someone to hurt them. People are less likely to indulge in mindless violence when they have to see the results of their actions at close range. Not to mention that firearms have a way of mutating all by themselves into ever more deadly strains."

"Besides," he added enthusiastically, "sword training is great

exercise. It's a very popular sport back home." I couldn't argue with that, I thought, again admiring his physique.

"I'm surprised you still have a scar," I said. "I'd think that with all your advanced technology you could have easily healed without one."

He shook his head. "Sure. But it's our choice. People often decide to leave them alone as a kind of souvenir, if it was in a good cause. This was."

"Did you know," he added as something occurred to him, "that Kiri got run clear through the heart in that crazy adventure at Tar Deshta?" It took a second for it to sink in.

"You mean with a *sword*?" I finally choked. "And she's still alive?"

"I told you how her father enhanced her genetically. One of the enhancements was a second heart. Saved her life." He looked perfectly serious, too.

"You are kidding, aren't you?" I said weakly, already knowing he probably wasn't.

"No, really. She was up and around a week later, too. Anyway, she still has the scars from that. Says she wouldn't remove them for anything. They're really almost invisible, though," he added.

"Oh, you've seen them?" I said innocently. "So where are they, exactly?"

"Well, one's on her back, on the left side," not seeing the trap until it was too late, "and the other's on her—her—uh—her left—uh—"

"Yes?" I prodded him sweetly.

"Uh, over her heart, of course," he finished lamely. By then it was all I could do to fend off a nearly uncontrollable case of the giggles. Rann, you really are a guileless soul, I thought to myself.



I wondered how long it would take him to bring up the matter of his “errand.” Sooner or later he’d have to say something, since right now I had the only transportation available. The question was answered a few days later when he casually asked how I’d feel about taking a trip to Los Angeles.

“Something you need to do there?” I inquired innocently.

“Well, yeah,” he acknowledged. “Kiri asked me to pick up some videos for her in Little Tokyo. Since she’s coming all the way here just to fix her ship, I ought to at least have them ready for her.”

“Sure,” I said. “It’s a nice drive. Where’s ‘Little Tokyo,’ anyway?” He pointed it out on a map; it turned out to be just southwest of the Union Depot. And so early the next morning we set out once again on I-15.

Before we left, my mother insisted on placing a small gold chain with an amethyst locket around my neck. “It’s for warding off danger,” she explained.

“Whatever,” I agreed amiably, tucking it under my T-shirt.

It really was a nice drive, too. Along the way we talked about anything and everything. I found out how he’d become a member of the Brizali (the Deshtiran equivalent of the Nazi Party), and later helped overthrow them.

“We’re growing our own crop right here in the States,” I grumbled. “Ever since the MEU collapsed you see street gangs of young thugs wearing black T-shirts wherever you go. If you’re lucky they don’t bother you, but they’re getting noisier and more aggressive. It’s only a matter of time before they start shoving people off the sidewalks.”

“MEU?” Rann interrupted, obviously puzzled.

“The Millennium Eve Uprising,” I explained. “Some weirdo tried to take over the country the year before last. Came pretty close, too. A lot of innocent people died,” I added, remembering Melanie’s brother.

“Oh, you mean the Jack Lucie revolt,” Rann said.

I looked at him in surprise. I’d only heard him called John Lucie, and wondered just how much Rann had heard. “The government never

did explain how they finally put it down,” I continued. “It just collapsed all of a sudden. There’s a whole conspiracy cult developing here that claims the government used nukes to wipe out his headquarters and makes him out to be some kind of hero. Its followers also believe he was secretly murdered by government agents, since his body was never found.”

“Tell me more,” Rann said.

“Well, unfortunately it’s attracting the worst elements in the country, especially young males in their late teens and twenties. You probably know the type: obsessed with violence and looking for an outlet, legitimate or otherwise. Probably the same ones that would have joined Hitler’s storm troopers seventy years ago. Anyway, they dress in black T-shirts and go swaggering around the streets. Fortunately no one’s shown up yet to pull them all together, but it’s only a matter of time. And then I guess it starts all over.”

“And no one does anything about this?” Rann asked, fascinated. I shook my head.

“No one wants to argue with crazies. There’ve already been reports of people badly beaten because they confronted some of these gangs. And the government seems terrified of them. There was so much political flak from the opposition party after the treason trials that they’d rather just look the other way. The lunatics are taking over the asylum. Again.”

Rann was silent for a while, just staring out the window. We were crossing over the railroad tracks in Victorville when I heard him mutter something under his breath. “What?” I said.

“Oh, sorry. I was just talking to myself, I guess.”

“About what?” I asked, nosy as usual. I wouldn’t always have the chance to cross-examine an alien from another planet, and I intended to make the most of it.

“I was wondering if Senaria had done it all for nothing,” he said, still somewhere else.

“Who’s Senaria?” I asked. “You mentioned rescuing her before. Someone back home?”

“She’s a lot of things,” he said. “I guess the one most meaningful to you would be that she’s the person who killed Jack Lucie.” I almost swerved across the freeway at that.

“All right,” I finally said once I’d regained my composure a little. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Lucie wasn’t from Earth, you know,” he said matter-of-factly. “He was a renegade Deshtiran.”

“What is this, a joke?” I exploded. “You don’t seriously expect me to believe that, do you?” I wondered for a moment just how much Rann was putting me on, and how much else of what he’d told me had been a fabrication.

He was staring at me in surprise, and I thought I saw hurt in his eyes. And at the same instant I remembered green lasers, and two unexplained meteorite impacts at opposite ends of the country, and a few days later Lucie’s top henchmen turning up drugged in the desert outside of Roswell, New Mexico, and I found myself shivering uncontrollably. The truly frightening thing was that for the first time it all actually made sense. “I’m sorry, Rann,” I managed through misbehaving vocal cords. “I do believe you,” and was rewarded by a look of relief on his face. “But it just sounded so crazy.”

“It was,” he agreed.

“So Lucie’s really dead,” I observed with considerable satisfaction.

“He died in a Deshtiran hospital about a year ago.”

“I thought you said this Senaria person killed him,” I said uneasily.

“She erased his mind. A human body can only survive for so long without one.” I felt a shudder in his voice.

We were due north of the little town of Fontana, notable mostly for the old Kaiser Steel works and California University’s Fontana branch, when I pulled off I-15 and headed north up into the foothills. Following Rann’s directions, I soon left the paved road and for several miles we wound our way up what amounted to a glorified dirt driveway, until we finally found ourselves in front of a good-sized two story house complete with a well-kept lawn and a spectacular view.

After parking the car, I walked over to the edge of the bluff overlooking the “Inland Empire,” as the area around San Bernardino is sometimes grandiosely called (mostly by its Chamber of Commerce boosters). Climbing up onto a large boulder, I peered down into the valley far below. The air was crystal clear, something very unusual for this area, and between that and the brilliant sunshine it was almost like looking at an incredibly detailed computer graphic: crisp, detailed, and somehow unreal. Calling to me impatiently, Rann directed me across the lawn to the garage. “Looks like the lawn service did a good job cleaning up the crater,” he observed as I caught up with him.

“Crater?” I ventured nervously.

“You don’t want to know,” he replied. I was about to protest when he stepped in front of the garage door and firmly spoke something in an unfamiliar language (Deshtiran, I supposed). Obediently the garage door swung open.

Inside I discovered a small Mishima sport utility vehicle. No ordinary SUV, Mishimas are revered for their superb construction, gas efficiency (unlike most of the monstrosities on the roads) and exceptionally high price. “Wow,” I said in awe. “It’s Kiri’s,” he explained, leading me through a doorway into the house itself.

It didn’t take him long to accomplish what he’d come for. Opening a drawer in a spare bedroom, he sifted through several compartments, assembling a collection of ID cards and a wallet to put them in. “Let me see your driver’s license,” I begged, and he obligingly handed it to me.

It was his picture, all right, on a standard California license. It gave his name as Randy Parker, and his age as nineteen. “You don’t look nineteen,” I said accusingly. “Who’s going to believe this?”

“Lots of people look younger than they are,” he shot back. “Why do you think so many teenagers grow mustaches and beards? Besides, it could be pretty awkward for me to be identified as a minor. I’d have to produce parents and a whole lot of explanations if I got stopped for something.”

He resumed rummaging in the drawers, and eventually produced a credit card and a handful of currency. The card was a standard one, bearing the name Ikiria Rumiko.

“Emperresses have credit cards?” I marveled. “And I thought you said her name was Mikiria?”

“Back when she was still living here, using her real name could have cost her her life,” he commented dryly. “Listen,” he added, holding out a wad of bills, “will you let me pay you back now for all the stuff you’ve bought for me?”

“Absolutely not,” I exploded, suddenly feeling inexplicably angry.

“Why not?” he said, looking bewildered.

“Because—because—” I stammered, desperately trying to think of something that wouldn’t sound too dumb. “Because I’d much rather have you in my debt. This way I have ultimate power over you,” I finished lamely, trying to make a joke out of it. More puzzled than ever, he finally surrendered.

“Let me know if you change your mind,” he offered, slipping the currency into his wallet, which he in turn tucked into his boot.

“Do you need to get any more clothes while you’re here?” I asked, changing the subject.

“No,” he said, “not after all the stuff you bought. Unless—” and he suddenly charged out of the room and up the stairs. I was going to follow him, but a moment later he reappeared at the top of the steps, this time with a pair of dark blue boots much like his own, one in each

hand.

“Try these on,” he said eagerly.

“What?” I said dumbly.

“They’re a spare pair of Kiri’s,” he explained. “I don’t think she’d mind.”

“Are you sure?” I said dubiously. I wondered what the penalty was for kidnapping an Empress’ boots.

Well, I did finally try them on, and they turned out to be the most comfortable footwear I’d ever worn. Somehow the soft leather-like fabric allowed air through while still protecting my feet. I’ve never owned a pair of shoes since.

As we left, again via the garage, I asked something I’d been wondering about, especially after seeing money and credit cards lying around like so much dirty underwear. “Rann, aren’t you worried about someone breaking in? I mean, this place is pretty isolated. Someone could pick the locks at their leisure, or just break in with an axe.”

Closing the garage door with another verbal command, he laughed. “There’s a force field built into the structure of the house itself. You couldn’t break into here with anything short of a green laser cannon, and even that would take a while. No, this place is pretty secure.” I found myself wondering again about that “crater” though as we headed back down the mountainside to I-10.



Before long we'd reached downtown Los Angeles and were off the freeway and looking for parking. The streets were lined with shops with both English and Japanese names, from restaurants to bookstores. This was my first visit to Little Tokyo.

The car safely parked in a nearby multilevel garage, Rann led me to a nondescript little shop with all kinds of interesting stuff in the window. Among other things I saw a white ceramic cat with paw upraised and a large Japanese character on its front.

Inside the shop we took a narrow stairway to the second floor. As we rounded a corner I gasped in surprise, taking in a solid wall of compact discs and multiple racks of laserdiscs (along with a few DVDs) down the center. "Konnichiwa," Rann cheerfully greeted the elderly woman at the counter. "Konnichiwa, Parker-san," she responded politely with a bow and a smile. The two were soon deeply engaged in locating a number of items on the shelves, which were all in Japanese and in no discernable order that I could see. Meanwhile I browsed through the bins of laserdiscs, finding them all to be animation of one sort or another, and all in Japanese.

It was obvious to me that I wasn't going to find anything here to buy, so I waited with some impatience as the two finally finished gathering an immense pile of compact discs and laserdiscs and the woman set about adding up the totals. After paying, Rann slipped the wallet back into his boot.

On the way out, Rann now loaded down with three bags of discs, I bought the cat I'd seen in the window. "That is a *manekineko*, or 'beckoning cat,' " the clerk explained politely. "It brings good luck." I also picked up a jade hair comb for my mother, jade supposedly being another love-attracting stone.

As we loaded our loot into the trunk of the car, Rann casually asked if we could make a small side trip. Aha, I thought. A few minutes later we were navigating the crowded streets towards the skyscraper section of Los Angeles. Once again we located a parking garage, this time considerably less well lit than the one in Little Tokyo. Los

Angeles has definitely gone downhill, I reflected.

As we walked from the garage to our destination, I took in the increasingly patchwork personality of the city. Brand new office buildings were located next to empty, derelict ones with obscenities scrawled in dust on vacant store windows. Although as a general rule I'm not a particularly timid person, I found myself glad to have Rann at my side.

We ended up in the lobby of a busy, modern looking office building. "Would you mind waiting for me here?" Rann asked apologetically.

"But—" I protested.

"Please. It's important that I do this alone," he said earnestly, taking one of my hands in both of his. It was the first time he'd done that, and I have to confess that at that moment he could have asked me to jump into a trash compactor and I would have willingly complied.

"Uh, sure, okay," I mumbled, and by the time I regained my senses he'd vanished into an elevator. I plopped down on one of the luxurious leather couches in disgust. Haley, you sap, I thought to myself. You're a fine one. Just putty in his hands. But I found myself suppressing a snicker.

He was only gone for a few minutes. When he returned I put on my most petulant face and stood there impatiently tapping one foot. "That was a dirty trick," I announced.

"What was?" he responded innocently. He looked so guileless that I finally broke into a grin and took him by the hand as we left the building. Tit for tat, I decided as we walked down the street holding hands.

When we reached the car, which was parked in an awkward corner of the garage, I was almost to the door when I suddenly realized that someone was crouched by the handle jimmying the lock. "Hey!" I exclaimed, and he stood up facing us. He was a thoroughly unpleasant looking character, with greasy hair, unshaven face, and a dirty sweatshirt. More to the point, in his hand was an evil-looking handgun waving back and forth between the two of us.

"All right, brats, put your hands where I can see 'em," he said, waving the gun menacingly. "Do as he says, Rann," I gasped. He did. Of all times for my first mugging, I found myself thinking. Please, oh, please, Rann, don't do anything stupid.

The thug ordered us to empty our pockets onto the car's hood, one pocket at a time, the whole while his gun pressed against Rann's chest. I assumed he was looking for money or a wallet; instead he came up

with the cylindrical gadget I'd seen earlier. "No wallet, huh?" he grumbled ominously to Rann. "Where ya got it hidden, dude? And what's this thing?" he added, curiosity getting the better of him.

"It's a flashlight," Rann explained calmly.

"Yeah? Pretty weird-looking flashlight. Hey, I could use this." He fumbled with it for a few seconds with his free hand.

"The switch is the little red dot," Rann said helpfully. A dull orange glow appeared inside the thing, accompanied by an odd feeling in my ears, like the one a dog whistle produces.

"It needs new batteries, dude," he said, tossing it aside. "Now find that wallet, and fast, got it?" He raised the gun towards Rann's head.

"I'll take that now," replied Rann, reaching out and grabbing the barrel. "Rann, no!" I blurted out. The thug uttered an expletive, and a moment later I heard the click of the hammer on an empty chamber, followed by several more. I felt an overwhelming sense of relief as I realized that the thief had been using an unloaded gun as a bluff. An instant later I heard a loud grunt as Rann landed a fist square in his midriff, followed by a second directly to the jaw, and right on cue the hoodlum crumpled to the pavement, out like a light. Rann still held the gun, having retained his grip the entire time. Calmly he unloaded several bullets into the palm of his hand and pocketed them.

"Rann," I practically screamed. "You mean that thing was loaded?"

"Bad bullets," he remarked with a perfectly straight face as he picked up the discarded plastic cylinder and returned it to his other pocket. "Shall we go?"



“Maybe we ought to call the police,” I gulped nervously, still trying to get the pounding in my chest under control.

“What,” he objected, “and spend the rest of the day in a police station? Besides, my Earth identity isn’t all that solid. A little poking around and I’d be in real trouble, and so would you.” Wordlessly I allowed myself to be dragged along as we left the unconscious thug where he’d fallen. (Not that I felt sorry for him or anything.)

“All right,” I demanded once we were safely on the road again, “suppose you tell me what that was all about. ‘Bad bullets’ my ass. And what did that plastic thingy have to do with it?”

“They are now,” he grinned. “That ‘plastic thingy’ uses a combination of certain frequencies of light and sound to convert any lead styphnate within range into a harmless compound.”

“Let me guess. Lead whatever-you-said is the explosive in bullets.”

“Close,” he agreed. “It’s the detonator for the firing pin. Alan Brinkman invented this thing a few years ago when we were threatened with mass importation of firearms to the Twin Planets.”

I could hardly believe my ears. “Brinkman? *The* Brinkman?” I’d idolized the legendary physicist for years. He’d mysteriously disappeared over a year ago from his teaching position at one of the California University branches and had never been heard from since. Gossip variously had it that he’d been shanghaied by one of the radical Moslem countries for nuclear weapons development, that he’d willingly gone to work for the Russian Mafia, and that he’d been abducted by aliens from outer space.

“That’s him,” Rann said. “He’s been living on Deshtiris for quite a while now. He and the Empress go back a long way, I’ve heard.” So that’s what really happened to Alan Brinkman, I thought.

By now we were out of the downtown area and well into the many communities strung along Interstate 10 all the way to San Bernardino. Traffic was relatively light for a change. “Alan Brinkman, huh?” I marveled. “He’s really on Deshtiris?”

“Yeah. You know him?”

“Sort of. He was part of the reason my parents split up. No, not like that,” I added hastily, seeing the startled look on Rann’s face. “I guess I better tell this story from the beginning.”

A year and a half ago I’d entered a contest for the best physics paper from a high school student. I wound up receiving honorable mention; the winning paper had dealt with optical rotation in crystals. Mine was a speculative paper on the asymmetry of the universe.

A few weeks later I’d received a letter from Alan Brinkman. He’d been impressed by the ideas presented, he said, even as he pointed out several math errors and a major inconsistency that basically invalidated the entire paper. I had great promise, he thought. Would I consider coming to California University/Fontana to study with him? I wrote back explaining that I was only a sophomore in high school. No problem, he’d replied; when you do graduate, consider yourself as having a standing invitation. In the meantime, he did a free-form summer workshop where academic standing wasn’t important; in fact it included people of all ages and backgrounds.

My mother, the believer in healing crystals and psychic forces, had been thrilled. We might have been on opposite sides of what amounted to a religious gulf, but for as long as I could remember she’d supported my enthusiasm for science with wholehearted sincerity. It wasn’t long before we were looking at a calendar and making plans for me to attend.

When my father returned home I’d eagerly broken the news. His first reaction had been typical: science was for men, not girls. Just who did I think I was? Then Alan Brinkman’s name had come up and he’d hit the ceiling.

“Don’t you know anything about his reputation?” he’d raged. “The man’s a notorious pervert. He should have been fired from Fontana years ago. He’ll chase after anything in a skirt.”

“I don’t wear skirts, and I don’t care if he’s a sado-masochistic necrophiliac,” I’d shot back. “He’s the most brilliant physicist on the planet, and this is the opportunity of a lifetime for me.”

It had taken me a moment to comprehend why I was on the floor, my face at first numb, then burning with pain. My father was standing over me yelling something, but I was too stunned to take it in. I felt something trickling down my face and wiped the back of my hand against my nose. It came away bloody.

And then my mother was there between us. “That’s it, Matt,” I heard her say in a tone I’d never heard her use before. “Don’t you ever touch her again.” For several seconds there’d been dead silence. “I want you out of this house within an hour,” she’d continued quietly.

"You can send someone for your things."

"You can't order me out of my own home," he'd shouted.

"No, I can't," she'd agreed. "But I can call the police, and I will if I have to." For a moment it looked as though he were going to slap her as well, but she didn't move a muscle. "Go ahead, Matt, hit me," she'd said calmly. "Your patients will read all about it in tomorrow's newspaper. Is that really what you want?" Her voice was perfectly steady. There are times when you find that someone you thought you knew has powers you never dreamed of. At that moment I discovered that my mother was Wonder Woman.

For a few seconds longer he'd stared at her, his face a frightening shade of red. I thought his eyes were going to pop out with fury. (I hoped they did.) Then he'd stormed out.

"Oh, Hal, dear, are you all right?" my mother said soothingly, as she knelt beside me and wiped the blood from my face. "Should I call a doctor?"

"I'll be all right," I said, my voice shaky. "It's just a nosebleed. Oh, Mom, your dress..."

"It's okay," she reassured me. "It's only a dress." After stuffing a few shreds of tissue into my nose she put her arms around me and held me tightly.

"Wow, Mom, you were fantastic," I managed. "I never knew you were so—" and then I was sobbing uncontrollably while she stroked my hair reassuringly.

Meanwhile, for the next half hour we heard my father storming around downstairs, throwing together a few necessities. Then we heard the door slam, and he was gone.

The next day she'd started divorce proceedings.

Oh, yes, about Alan Brinkman. I wrote him back, saying that I would really love to attend his next summer workshop. That was in October.

Then, the following April, he'd disappeared. That's the story of my life...



“Well, you still nearly gave me a heart attack,” I grumbled as we started up Cajon Pass.

“At your age?” he bantered. I glared at him.

“So where did you learn that slick maneuver, anyway?” I asked, letting it pass. “High-tech gizmo or no, you still laid him out pretty neatly. Not that he didn’t deserve it.”

“In the military,” he explained. “Self-defense, what you’d call martial arts, all standard stuff.”

I shook my head. “I really can’t quite see you as twenty-one. You still look sixteen to me. My eyes keep telling me you ought to be in high school, like me.” I stopped, leaving a pause big enough to drop a truck into. Rann looked at me quizzically.

“Rann,” I said, “up until now I’ve believed most of the things you’ve told me, but I have to confess I’ve thought that maybe you were putting me on about some of them. I’m sorry about that. I just want you to know that from now on I’m taking whatever you tell me at face value.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you,” he said. “Everything I’ve told you is the absolute truth.”

“So,” I said, “absolute trust between us. Right?” He nodded solemnly.

“All right, then,” I continued mischievously. “Just what was this mysterious errand you were running that nearly got us mugged?”

At that he looked extremely uncomfortable. “I said I’d never lie to you,” he stuttered. “But that doesn’t mean there aren’t things I can’t tell you. I wish I could. I’m really sorry, Hal. It’s just that I’m sworn to secrecy, and—”

Rather than allow his apologies to continue for the rest of the drive back to Las Vegas, I used the opportunity as an excuse to take his hand again and gave it a squeeze. “It’s all right, Rann,” I said with a satisfied grin. “I just wanted to see how far I could go. You don’t have to tell me anything you’re uncomfortable about. But don’t think I’m going to give up trying to worm it out of you,” I added wickedly. I didn’t let go of his hand, either.

By now we'd descended the eastern slope of Cajon Pass and were about to cross the railroad tracks and the Mojave River (usually a misnomer, by the way; normally there's little or no water in it). Seeing the tracks reminded me of something he'd mentioned on our way into Los Angeles.

"Senaria," I said. There was something in the way he'd referred to her that told me she was more than just an acquaintance. "Tell me about her." I don't know why, but in all this time it hadn't occurred to me that he might have a mate back home.

"Senaria," he said, choosing his words carefully, "was part of the family Kiri lived with. A really good person. She and I were the official Imperial Bodyguard for several months. But after the Lucie thing she decided to go back home to Qozernon. She lives there by herself now." Somehow he sounded as though his mind had drifted far away.

I swallowed. "Are you still in love with her?" I said, trying to sound as casual as I could. If my intention was to startle him, it certainly worked.

"Ehhh!?" he choked. I think it was the first time I'd ever heard someone inhale their own tongue.

"It's a simple question," I said. "No big deal, but I'd like to know. Call me nosy if you want." I unexpectedly felt my heart pounding again.

"I was," he said uncomfortably. "I suppose I still am, but more like good friends love each other. She was hung up on someone else, but he got killed. I don't think she's gotten over it."

"Sorry," I said, forcing myself to pay attention to my driving. "I didn't mean to dig up something painful."

"It's okay," he answered. "That was then," and I wondered just what that meant.

"So what really happened?" I asked. "I mean, with Jack Lucie?" Rann looked hesitant. "He nearly destroyed my country," I insisted. "I'd really like to know. If you're willing, of course."

"It's a long story," he said reluctantly.

"We've still got two hours to home," I said as calmly as I could. It had finally sunk in that I might be the only person on Earth to learn the truth about one of the most shattering events in twentieth-century American history.

Well, after some fumbling around choosing the best place to begin, he told me the basics. About how Lucie had been trapped on Earth when the Brizali took over, and decided to make use of his knowledge and connections to acquire what he craved most: power. About how the scientific genius behind the Brizali, Romikor Tenako, had thought to

make use of him for his own purposes and had ended up being used instead.

“Was he any relation to the Empress Mikiria?” I broke in. I think you said her family name was Romikor, didn’t you?”

“Her father.” After the freeing of Deshtiris a small group of Brizal scientists, including Tenako, had escaped capture and holed up in a secret base well hidden in the Deshtiran southern continent. There they’d awaited Lucie’s takeover of Earth, from where they could eventually recapture Deshtiris. Tenako had provided Lucie with advanced technology, such as the green lasers, that would render his relatively small forces invincible.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “I thought you told me the night we first met that this Tenako was killed when your Empress Mikiria blew up his power station or whatever.”

“He was,” Rann said. “But one of the Virrin devices he’d reconstructed earlier let him download his mind to a file and reload it later into another body. The Tenako I’m talking about was a reloaded copy of the original.”

“Dammit, Rann, my head is starting to ache,” I complained. “This all sounds like science fiction, you know.”

He grinned. “I warned you it was a long story.” I sighed wearily.

“Go on. But first, what’s a ‘Virrin’? You used that word at dinner the other day, too.”

The Virrin, he explained, were the alien race that had kidnapped humans from Earth and settled them on Qozernon and Deshtiris, which had been lifeless balls of rock until the Virrin terraformed them. They’d disappeared thousands of years ago, and it was assumed they’d taken all their technology with them. Tenako had found and identified a data crystal they’d accidentally left behind, and this had provided him with the information he needed to pursue a mad dream of setting an interstellar force field that would have produced inexhaustible energy for mankind. Or so he thought; it turned out the dangers were far worse than the benefits.

“So where does Senaria fit into all this,” I demanded impatiently.

“It was more like she fell into it,” he said. “Literally.” Apparently she’d had some kind of disagreement with Alan Brinkman and left without warning on an unannounced vacation. She’d flown south to explore some of the vast forests in the less well-explored parts of the planet, and had been shot down by several of Lucie’s paramilitary goons stationed at Tenako’s secret base. There she’d been held captive, but at the same time had somehow managed to awaken the previously

buried personality of the cloned body into which Tenako's mind had been loaded, ultimately persuading him to sabotage Lucie's revolt on Earth at the last possible moment.

"Hold it," I said, a chill running up my spine. "Let me guess. He dropped two asteroids on Virginia and Arizona."

"Pretty close," he agreed. "Actually, Kiri dropped the one on Virginia. He just provided the coordinates. The other plant blew up by itself."

"Omigod," I said as it sank in. "Omigod." After the fact estimates had attributed approximately the energy of the original Hiroshima bomb to the impact. A civilization with the power to send objects like that into a collision course with an enemy planet didn't even need advanced weaponry, I realized. And that would have been a tiny boulder in comparison to a typical asteroid.

"Good aim," I finally said, still shaken. "So then what happened?"

The revolt had immediately collapsed, Rann explained, as the advanced weapons of the rebels had relied on energy from the two power stations destroyed. Lucie had managed to evacuate the remainder of his forces on four Deshtiran battleships and headed straight for the secret base on Deshtiris. There he'd killed Tenako and taken control, as well as hostages.

One of the hostages had been Rann's own mother; she'd been kidnapped by the Brizali and forced to work as a camp doctor. But by far the most valuable hostage proved to be Senaria, already identified as a close friend of the Emperor and Empress. Lucie hadn't counted on the depth of Tenako's turnaround, however; before his murder by Lucie he'd managed to send the location of the base to the Emperor and Empress and they'd pulled off a nick-of-time rescue, just as Lucie was preparing to begin killing the hostages.

"And Lucie?" I asked, not quite so impatient now.

"Senaria lured him into the room where the mind-transfer machine was located and downloaded about thirty separate files into his mind. Turned it into pure static. No higher neural organization left at all. After a few months his body finally died." There was an awkward pause, and a distinct chill in the air in spite of the Mojave Desert rolling by on the other side of the car windows.

"Served him right," I finally said, a little more aggressively than I felt. I shivered involuntarily.

"Let's talk about something less grim," Rann suggested brightly. Seeing an opening, I proceeded to make the most of it.

"All right then, tell me all about sex on your planet," I asked

offhandedly, and was rewarded by seeing him turn beet-red. "Oh, please," I protested. "If you're really twenty-one, you can't tell me you don't know anything about sex yet. Or is it some kind of taboo on Deshtiris?"

"Well, no," he stammered. "I just wasn't expecting a question like that from you. After all, you're—"

"An innocent little girl who isn't supposed to talk about such things?" I snorted. "I'm a scientist, remember? I can approach topics like that analytically, without emotional distractions." Yeah, right, I thought, feeling my fingers tingle again at the memory. "So tell me about your customs."

"Well," he said, thoroughly embarrassed, "of course we have sex. But we don't build in a lot of weird distractions like you do, like decorating ourselves or performing strange mating rituals."

"Decorating?" I asked curiously. "You mean, like cosmetics and stuff?" To my surprise he blushed again. It took a bit of prying, but I finally got him to explain that on Deshtiris cosmetics are categorized along with sex toys as something not generally discussed in public. I suddenly remembered his reaction to Kimberly and Brittany, and nearly broke out laughing. "So do you have marriages?" I managed, not without difficulty.

He was obviously relieved at the change of topic. "Sure we do. We don't make a big public production out of it, though. You just go to an official and sign a standard marriage declaration, which is recorded in the computer archives and accessible to anyone. But it's actually pretty special. People don't normally do that unless they're really certain that they intend to stay together for a long time."

"Tell me, Rann," I said, "is everyone on your planet that embarrassed by sex? To hear you talk you'd think it was a shameful secret."

He pondered that for a few minutes. "Well, yes and no," he said finally. "If I were from Qozernon I'd probably have no problem talking about any of this with you, including, er, positions, and—" He stopped again for a moment, his tongue tangling up in the words. "But on Deshtiris we've lived under the Brizali for the past thirty years, and the official government line was always 'love and marriage,' 'love and marriage,' and anything else was immoral and illegal."

"Not that love and marriage are bad, of course," I interjected.

"No, of course not. But I guess it wasn't always that way, and things were a lot freer before. The Brizali went on the principle that people are easier to keep under control if you also keep their hormones

under control as well; that sex is subversive and tends to disrupt the order of a tightly organized society. At least that's Kiri's theory on why they did it."

"So is that how it still is?" I asked. "After all, it's been several years now since the Brizali took a hike."

"Things are loosening up a lot," he said. "But people don't change overnight. We have access to Qozernan television now, for example, which is a lot less, er, restrained than our own. Some people are offended by it, and there are even groups that want to censor it or cut off access. But the Emperor and Empress have insisted that we reestablish free communications between the two worlds like we had before, and those with a problem will just have to get over it."

When we pulled into the driveway I saw my mother waiting in the doorway. I wondered if she'd been watching for us all evening. It gave me a warm feeling, somehow. "Let's not mention the thing at the parking garage, okay?" I said in an undertone to Rann. "No sense worrying her." He nodded agreement.

"So, how was the trip?" she asked, as we lugged our loot up the front walkway.

"It was great," I enthused, showing her my new boots, and giving her the jade comb. Once we'd put our stuff away, I poured us all some glasses of juice and we sat down in the living room to relax as I filled her in on Little Tokyo and all the neat stores we'd seen there.

Remembering the locket, I pulled it off over my head and handed it back to her. "Worked fine," I assured her.



The next morning I decided to call Cedar City and see if there were any tickets left for the Shakespeare festival. Rann, you've seen some of the worst side of our world, I thought; I'd like you to also see some of the best before you go, so that you'll know we're not total savages. To my delight, I found that two adjacent seats were still available for a performance early the next week. I didn't tell Rann about it, resolving that it was about time to spring a surprise of my own for a change.

Speaking of seeing the worst, we spent that afternoon on the Strip. I remembered the comment he'd made on the way in about having never seen Las Vegas, and decided to show him just how rock bottom American taste can go when unleashed.

We passed by imitations of King Arthur's castle, downtown New York (conveniently minus the muggers), the Eiffel Tower (conveniently minus the French), and an Egyptian pyramid. I was after bigger game, though, and we finally pulled into the parking garage for a monolithic structure topped off with onion domes and featuring a huge statue of none other than Josef Stalin out front. "Welcome to The Kremlin Resort Hotel/Casino," I announced.

Naturally neither of us was allowed into the casino itself (no loss, certainly). However, more and more Vegas hotels are going after the "family" trade as well, with restaurants and high-tech games accessible to minors without having to thread through a maze of green baize tables for roulette, craps, twenty-one and all the other popular ways of separating tourists from their money. This particular establishment was especially well-known for its theme restaurant, the *Lubyanka Room*, featuring such delicacies as Beria Borscht and Gulag Goulash. "Too bad goulash is Hungarian," I sniffed, but it didn't keep me from devouring a bowl. Being minors (or in Rann's case a good imitation of one) we passed on the Molotov Cocktails.

"Your mother's really a pretty remarkable person," he said between spoonfuls of borscht. "I had a long talk with her last night after you went to bed." I looked at him in surprise. Somehow I would have thought he and my mother would have been—well, worlds apart.

“So what did you talk about?” I asked. I’m not sure why, but for some reason the idea made me nervous.

“She loves you, of course. But she also respects you tremendously,” he informed me. “And I don’t think she’s quite as ‘flaky,’ as you put it, as she seems. I’m not sure that she really believes all that ‘healing crystal’ stuff she puts out.”

I wondered at that. It was only during the past few years that I’d actually started to pay attention to the effect my father had had on her as he changed for the worse. Before that I’d been too wrapped up in my own reactions to see what was happening to her.

Not that she’d ever been the most stable person around. Like the moon, she had a tendency to pass through phases, of which the New Age one was only the most recent. Prior to that she’d been (traveling backwards in time) a Scully/Mulder fanatic, a Trekkie, and, according to reliable reports, one of the last certifiable hippies of the late seventies. (On the other hand, she hadn’t cared at all for *Babylon 5*, saying it was “too realistic.”)

Just the same, it hadn’t prevented her from being one of the best all-around moms I knew. She’d always been there when I needed her, and in her own laid-back, lackadaisical way had managed to raise me as one of the few teens of my generation to still believe in doing what she liked to call “the right thing.” Of course there were plenty of my classmates who made a big deal about being moral paragons, but in most cases they proudly announced that it was because they unthinkingly obeyed the prescriptions in this or that sacred textbook, not out of any inner compulsion. Anyone can be virtuous with their brain unplugged.

I’d begun to realize that at sixteen I was already a relic in my own time. Perhaps that was one reason why Rann touched such a chord in me; I found that I just couldn’t imagine him doing anything other than “the right thing.” As long as he didn’t carry it too far, that is.

After lunch we checked out the Kremlin’s high-tech virtual reality ride. This particular one placed you in the warhead of an ICBM traveling from just outside Moscow to Washington, D.C., complete with drop tables, surround video screens, and all the trimmings. As we returned to the car, Rann just kept shaking his head in disbelief. “Welcome to the ‘Entertainment Capital of the World,’ ” I offered.

The days went by faster and faster. I’d known two weeks was a short time when I saw Rann’s first email from Kiri, but now it seemed as though I were on a runaway time machine. Before I knew it I was looking at the day after tomorrow for Rann’s departure, and I was

afraid if I blinked twice it would be past and he'd already be gone.

"Mom," I said casually, "just so you know, I'll be gone for most of the next two days. I'll be taking Rann to the Shakespeare festival tomorrow. He's leaving for home the day after that, after the Empress fixes his ship." I wasn't at all prepared for what came next as she asked me to sit down next to her.

"Look, Hal," she said very seriously, "I'd really like to think that Rann was from Deshtoroon, or whatever it is, but don't you think you're getting a little carried away with all this? I know you're having a good time, but I don't want you to get hurt."

I could hardly believe my ears. "But—" I managed. "You—"

"Maybe I have taken some things too seriously," she admitted. "And it's been a lot of fun, and I've even managed to make myself believe it at times, just for the heck of it. But this thing with your father—we both really need to keep both feet on the ground. You know he's considering refiling for custody, don't you?"

I felt as though I'd been slapped in the face with an ice-cold towel. Somehow, hearing my mother talk about keeping both feet on the ground was profoundly disillusioning. At the time the comment about my father barely registered. "It is real, Mom," I insisted hotly, rising to my feet. "Believe me, it's real."

"All right, Hal," she said, but I thought she looked disappointed. "I've always trusted you, and you've never lied to me. If you say it's true, then it's true. Just remember that it's your interests I have at heart. If there's any way I can help you, don't ever be afraid to ask."

I practically stormed off, not quite in anger but upset nonetheless. As I headed up the stairs to my room it suddenly struck me: she thought I was having delusions and was inviting me to ask her for help if I'd accept it. I wondered if Rann would let me bring her along on Wednesday. I saw how ironic it was that my mother had said to me what I'd finally ended up telling Rann: that he'd never lied to me and that if he said it was true then I believed him. And then I stopped dead in my tracks and stumbled back down the stairs in a panic.

"He's *refiling for custody*!!??" I howled.

My mother, still sitting on the couch, nodded grimly. It was unusual for my mother to do anything grimly, and that only added to my alarm. "Where did you hear that?" I demanded.

She explained that one of the members of her psychic phenomena club worked in the county courthouse. Gossip traveled rather freely there, and apparently my father was quite chummy with the family court judge involved. My mother's friend had discreetly given her a

heads up and warned her to watch her back. "I've seen some pretty slimy things go through that court," she'd said ominously.

"He can't do that, can he?" I argued desperately. "Is it legal?"

"In this state, anything's legal if a judge says it's legal," she said despondently. "We could appeal it, of course, but in the meantime—" She didn't need to finish. Being back under the same roof with him would be the First Circle of Hell, especially with recent rumors connecting him with one of the more fanatic underground Lucieite organizations springing up around the county. "But it's still just gossip, Hal. We can't do anything unless he actually files the papers. In the meantime, we have to sit tight."

Sit tight my ass, I thought. I'll run away. But then what would happen to my mother? A nice trap indeed.

"Are you sure Rann can't stay?" she was saying. With an effort I pulled myself back to reality. "You two like each other an awful lot. I wish there were some way you could stay together. He's such a nice boy."

"Don't think I haven't thought about that," I said dully.

"You two are just so alike," she observed.

"We're from different planets, Mom."



The next day was Tuesday, the day before Rann's departure, and it came all too soon. I was glad I'd made plans for us, to help keep my mind occupied. Practically dragging him out of bed, I herded him through the process of dressing and down to breakfast, his eyes still bleary with

sleep.

"What have you done to this poor boy?" my mother demanded, seeing Rann's half comatose state.

"We're heading up into Utah today, remember?" I said, giving her a wink so she wouldn't give things away prematurely. She nodded knowingly.

"Some of our country's best scenery is on our route," I assured Rann, who was finally starting to wake up. "Zion, Cedar Breaks. Neat stuff." He yawned.

"Just be careful, Hal," my mother said. "You haven't been driving all that long, you know." It was true; I'd only gotten my license when I turned sixteen last September.* I'd put a lot of mileage on my car since then, though, and this wouldn't be my first time through the Utah parks.

I finally managed to get us out of the house and on our way. "So what's this all about?" Rann asked curiously, as we headed northeast out of town. "You're up to something. I know you too well."

"All right," I confessed. "You might as well know. We're going to see a play. A Shakespeare play. Have you heard of Shakespeare on Deshtiris?"

"Well, I know he's one of your playwrights. But we didn't cover a lot of Earth literature in school. The Qozernan schools do, and ours used to before the Brizali trashed them. They're starting to again, but I kind of fell into the crack in between. His plays are written in some kind of ancient English, aren't they?" he added skeptically.

"Elizabethan," I corrected him. "Don't worry, you won't have any trouble with your command of English."

* Up until October 1, 2001, Nevada teenagers could obtain a full (unrestricted) drivers' license at age sixteen.—*Ed.*

He looked dubious. "My everyday English is pretty good, but not that good."

"Trust me on this, okay?" I persisted. He shrugged his shoulders good-naturedly, and we settled down to enjoy the drive. The scenery directly out of Las Vegas is pretty dull, but once you hit the little corner of Arizona between Nevada and Utah things get pretty spectacular for a while.

After St. George we took the exit for Hurricane, and before long were approaching the awesome rock formations of Zion National Park. Our play was at two that afternoon, and I'd wanted to take our time here, which is why I'd dragged him away from his bed so ruthlessly. The summer tourist season was in full swing, and we had to fight our way through roads clogged with long lines of cars and the ever-present motor homes, but we had a wonderful time nonetheless. He was especially impressed with the dramatic climb through the long switchbacks to the summit tunnel, though how much of that was awe and how much was half-suppressed terror at my driving I'd rather not know.

Once through Zion we headed on north through seemingly endless pastures and meadows, garnished by the headwaters of the Virgin River as it meandered its way south. Eventually we turned west, crossing the ridge of land that culminates in Cedar Breaks and reaching Cedar City shortly after one in the afternoon.

We arrived in plenty of time to park and wander around the town a bit. Although he'd been to Earth a number of times, I found that this was his first exposure to small-town America. At one point he commented that it reminded him of the town where he and his parents had lived, before the Brizali had temporarily scattered them to the four winds.

The play itself was Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*. Not one of his more famous ones, but one of my favorites, it dealt with a jealous king and his wronged wife, thought to be dead for most of the play. (It's also notable for one of the characters being eaten by a bear.) In the final climax the king is presented with a statue of his lost wife, for whom he has long grieved, and then—

In spite of my reassurances, it was with a certain amount of trepidation that I watched Rann's reactions as the play began. I had visions of him squirming restlessly, listening to two hours of unintelligible gibberish and desperately trying to maintain a facade of interest.

I should have known better. There's a kind of "white magic" that

happens with Shakespeare that I can't explain. Of course I've suffered through the usual classroom dissections of the major plays, where every fourth word is footnoted and the meanings of each of the Elizabethan expressions carefully analyzed. The result is like trying to watch a movie one frame at a time: something more akin to an autopsy.

But most of the Shakespeare I've seen in the theater has been the lesser-known plays, which I've never studied, or even read in advance. At best I've looked at a brief synopsis of the plot. The actors make their entrances, begin declaiming their lines. Half of the words are unfamiliar, or used in an unexpected context. And somehow after a few minutes you no longer notice, as it all starts to magically come to life. You know what the players are saying, even if you don't literally understand the words. It's as though you've somehow learned a foreign language without realizing it, or someone has switched on a "universal translator" behind the scenes.

At the climactic moment, when the statue of the long-lost wife suddenly comes to life, and the errant husband realizes that she's been alive all these years and that she forgives him, I turned to Rann and saw tears unashamedly rolling down his cheeks. I think that's when I knew once and for all that I loved him.

After the play we had a nice dinner at one of the many modest restaurants that litter the area. Rann raised a few eyebrows with his soup and salad meal; this was after all a region where "real men" ate steak, but then the festival did attract a lot of "city folk," so I suppose they were used to it by now. During the meal he was even quieter than usual. What I did get from him made it evident that he was still overwhelmed by what he'd just experienced. Rather than drive straight home afterwards, I headed back up into the mountains just to the east and finally pulled off at a relatively deserted overlook.

We could see the town far below us, and the valley stretching out into the distance beyond. Off against the horizon was another low mountain range, into which the sun was just beginning to disappear in a gorgeous flaming sunset, with golds and pastel greens indiscriminately mingled with bright oranges and yellows, all set against the light blue dome of the sky. For a while we just sat there, not saying anything, as the light slowly faded.

"So you're really leaving tomorrow?" I said finally, voicing what I knew was on both our minds.

"Yeah," he said reluctantly. "I have to go home."

"Will you ever come back?" I asked, not sure if I really wanted an answer.

"That depends on you, I guess," he said, turning back to face the last vestiges of the sunset. I found myself again admiring his profile. His may have still been a boy's face, but there was a set to the jaw that told of the man already there within. I suddenly found my heart pounding again.

"Rann," I began awkwardly. To my discomfiture the word unexpectedly emerged half-strangled. He turned to me in surprise.

I didn't do it consciously. I don't think I even thought about it. At least I don't remember thinking about it. I just put my arms on his shoulders and put my lips against his. Not that I knew what I was doing, mind you; I'd kissed a boy once or twice before, but apart from Melanie's well-intentioned advice long ago to remember to breathe through my nose, I hadn't a clue as to what to do next.

Fortunately, Rann did. I don't really know how long that kiss lasted, or what exactly either of us did. I only remember his arms around me as I floated off somewhere into la-la land, hoping I'd never have to come back.

When we did finally disentangle ourselves I became aware that we were staring wide-eyed at each other, and felt myself blushing furiously. Even in the reddening sunlight I saw that Rann was too. For several seconds we remained frozen that way, neither of us sure what to do next. For a moment the coward in me contemplated a hasty retreat. ("Oh, my goodness, it's getting late, isn't it? We really ought to be going home now.")

He's leaving tomorrow, Hal. You may never see him again.

The hell with it, I decided, and replastered myself onto his face.

By the time we finally headed south for Las Vegas, I knew for certain that tomorrow was going to be the worst day of my life.



We slept in the next morning. Or, at least Rann did; I woke up somewhere around five-thirty and never did get back to sleep. I didn't knock on his door, as we wouldn't have to reach the landing point until late that afternoon, and it was only a three-hour drive. So it was somewhere around eight that he finally emerged, bleary-eyed as usual, from his room.

"Come on, lazybones," I said lightly, trying not to show the gloom I felt. "The day's half-gone already."

"It is?" he said in some alarm, glancing around for a clock, then saw to his relief that it was still early morning. "I didn't miss breakfast, did I?" he asked plaintively.

Indeed he hadn't, as it turned out that my mother had laid out a massive feast, with just about every species of fruit, vegetable, and greens known to humankind well-represented. "So this is what you were up to while we were away yesterday," I accused her, receiving a huge smile in return.

"No sense in your going away hungry, Rann," she explained. It made sense, too; eating a large meal just before a long drive is not a terribly bright thing to do, and this way we'd have some time to recuperate before heading out. We wasted no further time digging into the lavish spread in front of us.

I could see that my mother had something on her mind during the meal, and I had a suspicion of what it was. In fact, Rann and I had already discussed the issue during our drive back the previous evening.

"Would you like to come along today, Mom?" I finally asked her point blank.

"Hal," she ventured, "are you sure it would be all right? I mean, I won't get Rann into trouble with his Empress, will I?"

"Not any more than he already is," I observed wickedly.

"Of course it would be all right," Rann broke in before I could say anything further. "Besides, you don't want Hal to drive the whole way back by herself, do you?" I had to admit I was grateful. It wasn't the drive home I was worried about, either; I suspected the trip down was going to be pretty gloomy and my mother would be a welcome third

party.

"Thanks, Mom," I said. "We'd love to have you along."

We spent the rest of the morning packing up the car. I made sure we had a cooler full of ice cold drinks, as well as several gallon jugs of water. You don't take chances out in the desert when you're far from well-traveled roads.

I also packed a sun canopy my mother had bought me when I first started camping out, but which I'd never used. It was basically a cloth roof on four metal posts: nothing fancy, but it would at least keep us out of the direct sun, provided the wind didn't blow. Both Rann and I were relatively accustomed to the desert heat, but I knew my mother was going to find it uncomfortable at best.

We had his few things packed up and loaded into the car in plenty of time, and whiled away the rest of the midday loafing around the pool. Finally, at about half-past two we headed out and were soon on our way south via Interstate 15. Rann insisted on sitting in the back so my mother could have a front seat, and I can't say I was really sorry. For most of the way down they exchanged pleasantries about the scenery (which, when you get right down to it, is rather dull compared to Utah). I realized later I'd hardly said a word the entire way.

Eventually we turned north off the freeway and began threading our way along various back roads which gradually degraded from paved to gravel to dirt, the terrain becoming ever more desolate. The car grew quiet as we approached our destination. Finally I saw the giant boulder ahead, still looking as out of place as ever, and pulled the car to a stop.

"Well, there it is," I said sadly. "Looks like your ship is still in one piece." I heard Rann open the back door and climb out, and turned to see my mother crying.

"Mother?" I asked in astonishment.

"I don't understand this," she blubbered. "Why would you go to all this trouble to play a cruel practical joke on me? You could have just told me the truth."

"The truth?" I echoed, stunned. "I did tell you the truth."

"Hal, it's a big rock," she mumbled through her tears. I walked around to her side of the car and gently pulled her out as Rann reached the *Futaba*. I heard his voice faintly as he voiced a command. "It's a very special rock," I said.

"Hal—?" she began, and stopped. There was an expression on her face I'll never forget. I turned to see the ship repouring itself into the well-remembered glass bullet. "It's real, Mom," I said softly.

Rann and I quickly set up the portable canopy, and for the next half-hour we waited in the modest shade it provided, sipping cold soft drinks. I hardly need to tell you that this part of the Mojave Desert, not at all far from Death Valley, is hot. *Really* hot. As I'd expected, my mother was soon showing signs of discomfort, and I wet down a hand towel with ice water and gave it to her to dampen herself with from time to time. Rann and I took turns watching for our visitors, but for the most part the three of us just sat there, lost in our own thoughts, as we waited for the mysterious Empress From the Skies.

"There they are," Rann said at last, pointing skyward, and I saw a tiny gleaming speck almost directly above. No soap bubble this time, it resembled more a shiny metal globe, eventually resolving itself into a much larger version of the *Futaba*, but made of opaque metal with a transparent strip along each side. As it settled down a few dozen feet from us, I saw faces peering out. Then a door opened near the front (unlike the *Futaba*'s liquid motions this one simply slid to one side) and another strip of metal emerged from under the door to form a ramp. I suddenly realized just how unusual the *Futaba* must be, even on its own world.

Several reasonably ordinary-looking men and women stepped out, wincing at the heat, and gave us a friendly salute. They were dressed similarly to Rann on his arrival, wearing dark T-shirts bearing a small decorative emblem, jeans of various lengths, and the standard Deshtiran boots. They glanced around, and then all stepped to one side and looked expectantly at the doorway.

A moment later the most astonishing person I'd ever seen came striding down the ramp, scattering instructions in all directions like a human sparkler. I suppose I was subconsciously expecting an Amazon warrior from Planet E-Cup (you know, the kind with an unrealistically high center of gravity, like the ones the movies always seem to feature), but she actually had a pretty nice build, on the slender side, and she wasn't much taller than me. She was dressed like the others, except for a plain sleeveless shirt.

"Holan, keep an eye on the sensors for anyone approaching," she directed at someone inside the ship. "Hi, Rann. You silly booby, you sounded positively terrified in your messages. Relax, this really isn't your fault. You must be Haley," she added, turning to me. I stared with awe into her huge emerald green eyes. Her hair was an incredible deep crimson, and looked like it could take out any reckless brush that tried to attack it. I must have been tongue-tied for longer than I thought, because she broke into a grin and chuckled. "What's the matter, girl,

never seen an alien from outer space before?"

"No," I gulped, "I mean, yes, of course, there's Rann, but—" I decided to start over again and took a deep breath. "It's just that I didn't expect you to be so beautiful," I finally managed. She laughed, a friendly, warm laugh. I decided that I liked this Empress. I could tell from the look in his eyes that Rann absolutely worshipped her.

By then she'd opened the *Futaba's* doorway and soon we could see her inside the craft, raising some kind of floor panel and poking around the innards along the bottom. A few minutes later she came stumbling out, sweat dripping down her face and into her eyes. "Damn, it's hot in there," she grumbled to Rann. "You weren't kidding about all the interior systems failing. It's a perfect simulation of Hell: a greenhouse in the middle of the Mojave Desert."

To my astonishment she stripped off her shirt without the slightest self-consciousness and, after tying a sweat band around her forehead and grabbing a box of what I supposed were tools, re-entered the ship. I suddenly remembered that I had a battery-powered electric fan in the trunk of my car, and went to fetch it. One of the people that had accompanied her stepped politely into my path when I headed for the *Futaba's* ramp, but when I turned on the fan and aimed it at his face he grinned and motioned for me to go on in.

She was down on her knees, trying to loosen some kind of green thing with yellow spines sticking out of it from its socket, and looked up in surprise as I approached. "Maybe this will help," I said as I pointed the fan at her.

"Oh, that feels wonderful," she sighed as she wiped another rivulet of sweat out of her eyes. "But turn it on yourself now and then too. I don't want to be responsible for you passing out in here."

"Are you really the Empress of a planet?" I ventured, not so much because I didn't believe there could be such a thing but because she seemed way too nice for the role.

"Afraid so," she said as the high tech sea urchin finally came loose and she set it aside. "I was sort of drafted," she added wryly.

"Rann told me how you and your husband overthrew those Nazis or whatever they were," I said, still awestruck.

"Did he now?" she answered, by this time poking around in the board underneath the socket with some kind of electronic fork. "He has a lot to answer for, that Rann," but she looked up and grinned as she said it.

"He's not going to get in trouble for this, is he?" I said in alarm. "It was my fault I was there where he landed."

"No, I'd say he's handled himself pretty well, actually," she replied approvingly. "You like him a lot, don't you?"

I found myself tongue-tied again, and she gave me another grin. "He's a fine young man," she said. "I suppose he managed to conveniently omit the fact that he saved our lives during that whole action/adventure tale he fed you."

"Really?" I managed. "Mmm-hmm," she said. She finished popping the green thing back into place and I suddenly heard a series of soft beeps from the front of the ship, as the various control consoles came to life. She lowered the floor panel back into place, accompanied by the soft click of several invisible latches, and stood up.

"Now it's going to take a few minutes for this thing to cool down. I suggest we get our butts out of here before we both pass out. And thanks for the fan."

For a few minutes we all stood in the shade of her shuttle, as she shot off another series of instructions to the young man she'd called Holan. It was, however, only about five minutes later when she decided that the *Futaba*'s cooling system should have finished its work and suggested everyone relax in something she called its "living quarters." I looked at Rann quizzically, remembering his earlier comment about having left his clothes there.

There were, of course, no "living quarters" anywhere to be seen in the transparent *Futaba*—not even a bathroom. At least those were my thoughts as we filed through the now deliciously cool ship and Kiri turned the handle on the door at the rear. This time it opened, and a moment later I was staring into an incredibly long corridor with doorways branching off to either side for as far as the eye could see. I rubbed my eyes and glanced at my mother, who looked just as mystified as me.

"Make yourselves comfortable," Kiri said airily, gesturing towards one of the doorways off to the left as she continued down the hallway. I found myself in a large luxuriously furnished living room, complete with sofas, easy chairs, and an astonishing collection of antique furniture and fine paintings. "Where the heck are we?" I whispered to Rann, receiving a smug grin in return.

"Welcome to another universe," he said mischievously, and that was all I could get out of him.

A few minutes later Kiri returned, carrying a large tray loaded with cold drinks of all kinds. Once everyone had gotten their share and were gratefully sipping (or guzzling) the icy liquids, I cornered her and asked her the same question I'd asked Rann.

"Well," she said, "it's hard to explain. If you can imagine an artificial bubble in another coexisting universe, you're at least partly on the way." I shook my head. "I don't blame you," she agreed. "Like a lot of physics, the theory of the whole thing is expressed in mathematics, not descriptive language, so it all seems somewhat mysterious. Let's just say the doorway you walked through is actually a gateway into this alternate bubble. There's one on the *Futaba* and one in here, and they're mathematically interlinked through quantum simultaneity. That's why you don't see it from outside the ship, since it's not even in your time-space continuum. All clear?"

I nodded dubiously. "Sort of," I said. "But I have to admit it sounds like technobabble to me. So how is it that this 'bubble' in another universe obeys our laws of physics?"

"Because I told it to when I created it," she said, slightly surprised. "Any other questions?"

"Yes," I said hesitantly. "Where did you get those wonderful eyes?"

She hesitated. "They were a gift." I saw just a flicker of sadness in them for a moment. "An unintentional one."

"I'm really sorry," I stammered, too late remembering what Rann had said about genetic enhancements. "I didn't mean to pry into something painful." The sadness was gone now, replaced by the warmth I'd seen before. "They're really beautiful eyes," I added.

"Glad you like them," she grinned. "Especially since they're the only ones I've got." She excused herself, saying that she was needed up front.

"How is it that everyone here speaks English?" my mother asked in a stage whisper.

"For a long time English was practically a required language on the Twin Planets," one of the Deshtirans, a young woman who appeared to be about twenty, replied. "You were expected to learn at least two Earth languages in addition to Deshtiran. Unfortunately the Brizali put a stop to that on Deshtiris, at least, and as a result an entire generation has grown up knowing only Deshtiran. We're trying to rectify that, but it will take a while."

Just then Kiri reappeared, once again all business. "Holan tells me a military plane with sensing apparatus is heading in this direction, and it'll be in range to detect our shuttle in about eight minutes. I'm afraid we'll have to be going. Rann, you don't have to worry; they won't detect the amorphous diamond the *Futaba*'s made of, so take your time. Just don't hang around if you see anyone approaching. I'd hate to see

you and the *Futaba* show up on the evening news. Haley, Jennifer, it was a pleasure meeting you.” We stood up politely but had barely opened our mouths to respond in kind before she’d disappeared.

Rann headed towards the front of the ship as we followed, and we’d barely stepped outside when the last person disappeared into the Empress’ shuttle and the door began to close. Seconds later the craft was silently lifting off the ground. I saw several people at the windows give us friendly waves, and then they rose straight up and disappeared into the sky.

My mother was standing off to one side staring skyward, tears streaking her face. I suddenly realized how incredible this must seem, how much like a childhood dream come true. I left her to her moment, not wanting to break the spell for her.

“Well,” Rann said with obvious reluctance, “I’ve got to go.”

“I’m going to miss you so much, Rann,” I blurted out. He seemed to be thinking hard, trying to make up his mind about something.

“You could come with me,” he finally said.

“Rann, I’d give almost anything to do that,” I said, feeling my own tears starting up, much to my annoyance. “But isn’t there some kind of law against it?”

“Well,” he said slowly, “we’re not supposed to bring anyone back with us unless we’re willing to take on the responsibility of taking care of them. You know, making sure they learn the language, customs, see that they have a way to live, all that.” He paused meaningfully. “But I’d be willing to do that. For the rest of my life, in fact.” I stared at him, feeling the blood rush to my face. For several seconds I felt as though a door to a much different universe had opened in front of me. I was utterly incapable of speech, and wondered if I’d heard him correctly.

It didn’t matter, though. “Rann, I just can’t,” I managed at last. “My mother needs me too much. You know she’s kind of scatterbrained, and except for me she’s all alone. I just couldn’t do that to her. Besides, I’m only sixteen,” I added unconvincingly.

He gave me a goodbye kiss. “I mean it, Hal,” he said. “If you ever change your mind...”

“I’ll stay in touch,” I said, the tears by now doing their own thing without any prompting.

“Goodbye, Jennifer,” he said, turning to my mother. “Thanks so much for your hospitality. You’ve been wonderful to me.” In response, she gave him an unexpected peck on the cheek.

“Goodbye, Rann,” I whispered as he stepped into the *Futaba*. He gave me a wordless wave as the *Futaba*’s portal closed and vanished,

and then the ship was silently rising into the air. A moment later it had turned its nose skyward and was vanishing like its companion into the cloudless blue sky, once more just a soap bubble, and then it was gone.



I don't know how long I stood there, watching the spot where he'd disappeared. It was as though I hoped that sheer will power could conjure back the bubble, make it grow again, turn into a ship, and disgorge Rann, and the day's events would never have happened.

"You should have gone with him, Hal," came my mother's voice behind me. Startled, I whirled around. She was looking at me sadly. "I heard what he said, Hal. Why didn't you go with him?"

I shook my head. "And make you drive alone all the way back to Las Vegas? You couldn't even find the Interstate from here," I said, trying to make light of the matter. My heart felt like a lump of lead in my chest. Her expression remained unchanged.

"Sooner or later you have to start doing what's best for you," she insisted. "You'd have been happier there. I know you too well, Hal. You don't belong here, any more than he does."

"Is this more of your New Age alternative existence stuff, Mom?" I sighed.

"No, it's not," she said indignantly. "It has nothing to do with that. This world is an ugly place, and you're a beautiful person. I know; I've lived with you for sixteen years. I'm saying that as your mother and as your friend, too." I didn't know what to say, so I fell back on the best nonverbal communication I knew: I put my arms around her and hugged her tightly.

"Thanks, Mom," I said. "I know you want the best for me. I just wish I knew what to do now."

The sun was sinking below the mountains, and I set to work taking down the canopy. "We should be ready to go in about five minutes," I said.

"Could we—stay for a little while?" she said hesitantly.

"Stay?" I asked in amazement, watching the sweat drip down her face. "For what?"

"I'd like to see the stars come out," she said in a small voice. "Or are these roads too dangerous to drive at night?"

"The roads aren't a problem," I assured her. "I've gone driving

around on them at night more than once just for the fun of it. With my lights off.”

“You’ve *what?*!”

So we stayed. I had my ground pad in the trunk; I tend to leave it there all the time, so I spread it out on the ground and we settled ourselves down with soft drinks and more wet rags for my mother. One after another we saw the stars break through the deepening blue dome overhead, both of us lost in thought and lost in time. It was almost completely dark when my mother finally broke the silence.

“I haven’t seen the stars come out in over twenty years, Hal. Did you know that?” I turned to her, surprised. “It just was one of those things I never got around to doing,” she continued. “When I was in college, some classmates and I used to drive out all the time to a place in the countryside where we could watch for shooting stars. One of us had a telescope, and we’d look at the planets when the conditions were right. I remember that’s when I fell in love with Saturn. It looked so exciting, and so exotic, and so far away from Earth and all of its problems.”

“And then everything just got so busy. I dropped out of school and went to work full-time to put your father through medical school, and then you were born, and we moved twice, and somehow there was just never time to drive out into the country and watch the stars.”

“You dropped out of school?” My mother had actually never spoken to me about her college years, except that she’d met my father there.

She nodded. “He was so idealistic back then. He was going to become a doctor, and do research, and discover great cures. Real B-movie stuff, but we both believed in it then.”

“What did you—what degree were you going for?” I asked.

“I played the flute,” she said. “Pretty well, too.”

“And you quit school for him?” I’d never thought of my mother as a musician; certainly I’d never heard her play, although she usually listened to real classical music rather than the laid-back New Age stuff one might have expected.

“We were very much in love back then,” she said, staring up at the sky. “I don’t know why he changed the way he did. It was as though medicine corrupted him, somehow. It impressed him so much to be around people who made vast amounts of money. They liked to boast about how they funded this lab or that institute, but that didn’t stop them from driving sixty-thousand dollar sports cars—that was a lot of money back then—and living in million-dollar homes. They talked

about how ‘radicals’ wanted to destroy the ‘best health care system in the world,’ and he actually believed that too. And as he slid, I didn’t slide with him, and that just made him angrier with me. I didn’t realize how much he was taking it out on you until that night, when—” Her voice broke.

“Yeah, ” I said. “It’s okay. It wasn’t your fault. Hey, did you see that?” A spectacular streak of light had spread across half the sky before disappearing in a faint shower of sparks.

“Beautiful,” she agreed.

“I wonder which star is Rann’s,” I said. “It’s called Exor, wherever it is.”

“Don’t you know?” she asked, surprised. I shook my head. I was sorry now that I’d never had Rann point it out to me.

“Astronomy’s not one of my strong forces,” I said. “I know some of the theory, but couldn’t for the life of me tell you which constellation is which just by looking at the sky.” We sat there a little while longer, then reluctantly headed for home.

The drive back was a very quiet one. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever seen my mother, who’s usually burbling along on just about every imaginable subject, quite so silent. “You know, Mom,” I said hesitantly at one point, “you really shouldn’t talk about anything you’ve seen today.” I had visions of her calling the newspapers and giving interviews.

I needn’t have worried. “Don’t be silly,” she exclaimed indignantly. “People would think I was totally bonkers if I did.”

“Mother—” I began hesitantly, then stopped. Some things are better left unsaid, I suppose.

I slept in very late the next morning, something I almost never do. I didn’t sleep, actually; it was more that I just couldn’t concoct a reason to get out of bed. When I did finally drag myself into the bathroom it was after eleven, and I felt that much the worse for having had too much sleep.

It became all too evident to me over the next few weeks that our lives had changed course. One sign was the hole I felt inside with Rann’s departure. I began to realize just how much a part of my life he’d become in two short weeks.

To be sure, we corresponded frequently via Internet mail, until the message “No DNS entry for host rp.gov.dt” became as much a part of my life as “Abort, Retry, Ignore?” had when I was first learning computers. Of course Rann had his own email address (rann@rp.gov.dt) so our messages didn’t have to go through the Empress’ mailbox any

more. Not that we had anything particularly steamy to share with each other.

In fact, I quickly learned the sad truth: long-distance relationships just don't work. It wasn't that I didn't care about him, or vice versa; in fact, that was the problem. Always lingering in the background was the reality that I couldn't leave my mother here alone, and I couldn't ask Rann to give up his life on Deshtiris for the lunacy of Earth. After a while our messages diminished to a trickle, and it became harder and harder to bring myself to compose one.

That my mother had been profoundly affected as well became clear to me the day she asked me for a book on astronomy. "I thought you had lots of books on astrology," I said in surprise.

"No," she insisted, "I want something scientific. I want to know just what a light-year is, and why stars form, and how you travel faster than light." Well, I had no problem digging out a pretty good Asimov book that would cover the first two topics, though I myself hadn't a clue about the third one, and as far as I knew neither did anyone else on Earth.

I was altogether unprepared when she returned it after two days and besieged me with a long list of questions she'd compiled along the way. It was obvious that she'd actually read the book from cover to cover, too, and I had to really dig to answer some of them. In the course of trying to come up with accurate yet clear explanations for her I acquired a new respect for her intellect, which until now I hadn't taken at all seriously, much as I loved her.

Which is not to say that she'd abandoned her current philosophies. It was only a few days later that I returned home from the bookstore and walked into the living room to find her standing in the middle of the floor, hands on her head, facing away from the door, feet spread apart, and stark naked.

"Mother?!" I exclaimed. She had, to be sure, gone through a nudist phase the previous fall, but that had met an ignominious end when she absent-mindedly opened the front door to two Jehovah's Witnesses.

"Oh, hello, Hal," she said as though nothing at all was out of the ordinary. As she stepped forward and turned around I saw two small black stones where her feet had been. "Obsidian," she explained helpfully.

"And what does obsidian do?" I said wearily. "Regenerate your aura?"

"Now Hal," she said indignantly. "I know you don't accept any of

this, but you can still show some respect for other peoples' beliefs. After all, I don't make fun of that weird Kwantung thing you told me about."

"That's 'quantum,' " I said.

"That's what I said," she agreed. I started to argue, and thought better of it. After all, I could imagine that such things as "action at a distance" and virtual particles popping in and out of existence might well sound like sorcery. I'd certainly never seen them with my own eyes.

"You're right," I apologized. "I'm sorry. I got carried away."

"Anyway," she explained, picking up the earlier thread, "obsidian is a grounding stone. It calms me and helps me organize my mental chaos. You really should try it, Hal. After all, obsidian is ruled by Saturn, you know."

"Thanks," I acknowledged, deciding to overlook the *non sequitur*. Admittedly my mental chaos could use some organization about now, but somehow I didn't think this was the path for me. "I'll consider it," I promised. "Anyway," I added, handing her the bag I'd carried in from the car, "I found you another good book on astronomy. This one has all the latest stuff on black holes and singularities, so I thought it might answer some of your questions."

We watched a movie together that night, something we used to do a lot. During the past two years I'd gotten out of the habit, though, becoming more wrapped up in physics Web sites and stacks of scientific journals. I'm not sure how we happened to choose it, but the film was Nicholas Meyer's *Time After Time*, in which H.G. Wells pursued Jack the Ripper into the future. I'll never forget the scene where Wells tried to persuade his quarry to return to Victorian England, telling him that they didn't belong in late twentieth-century America. In response, the Ripper began flipping television channels, moving from one horror to another. Even the rock video that appeared at one point was saturated with violence. To this day his reply sends chills down my spine.

"We don't belong here? On the contrary, Herbert; I belong here completely and utterly. I'm home!"



And then one night I woke up in the early hours of the morning and heard strange, almost unearthly music sounding faintly from below. For a while I tried to go back to sleep, but found myself plagued with black thoughts that just wouldn't go away. I finally decided to stumble downstairs and find out what my mother was listening to.

I stopped on the stairwell in amazement. My mother was sitting in the semi-darkened living room, softly playing a flute I didn't even know she owned. There was no music in front of her, and I wasn't sure if she was playing from memory or improvising. Whatever it was, the music was eerie, with strange leaping lines and swirls alternating with ghostly echoes from the bottom of its register. I just stood there, listening, until she finally finished and put the instrument down.

Applause would have been out of place. "That was beautiful," I said instead, as quietly as I could, not wanting to shatter the mood. She looked up at me, and I saw glistening streaks on her cheeks. "Mom?" I exclaimed, dismayed, and took the remaining stairs two at a time. "What's wrong?" She just shook her head and smiled through her tears.

"I'm all right, Hal," she said. "Just a little—"

"A little—?" I prompted her hesitantly.

"A little melancholy, I guess."

"I didn't know you still played the flute."

"I haven't since I was in school," she said. "I could never bring myself to do it. It just reminded me of what I could have done, if it weren't for your father. But I really felt like playing tonight. I hope I didn't wake you up."

"No, I was restless and couldn't sleep anyways," I reassured her. "Were you improvising? That was really neat."

"*Density 21.5.*"

"What's the density of platinum got to do with anything?" I asked, puzzled. She grinned.

"It's the name of the piece, silly. Written for a musician who owned a platinum flute," she explained. "It's by Varèse."

"Wow. And you were playing that from memory?"

"Uh-huh," she confirmed. "I didn't know if I'd still remember it,

but I did. You know, it felt good to play again.” She looked fondly at the instrument in her hand.

“You really gave up a lot for him, didn’t you?” I said. “Your playing, your career. And all for nothing.” I suppose it wasn’t a very sensitive thing to say, but even wide awake I’m not exactly Miss Tact.

“No, Hal, not nothing,” she contradicted me. “You’re hardly ‘nothing.’ I just wish I could have given you a better family to grow up in.”

“No one could have a better mother than I have,” I insisted, throwing my arms around her in a heartfelt hug.

After that night she sometimes spent several hours a day practicing. From somewhere (I have no idea where) she resurrected a box full of flute music, everything carefully stamped with her maiden name, and it wasn’t unusual to hear it echoing through the house at all hours of the day and night.

“Why don’t you start playing professionally again?” I suggested one day after a particularly exhilarating piece. “I can’t believe you’re not good enough.”

“That’s not the way the music world works,” she informed me sadly. “No concert promoter is going to look twice at a forty-four-year-old housewife who hasn’t played professionally in over twenty years. And there’s not much in the way of orchestra work here in Las Vegas.” She had a point there. Years ago the casinos had eliminated most live musicians in favor of recorded backup music. As far as anyone could tell, the tourists had never noticed the difference. “I don’t mean to disappoint you, Hal, but this is for my own satisfaction.”

“We could move to someplace better,” I suggested. “Back to Minneapolis, maybe.” She laughed.

“Oh, you never give up, do you? It’s one of your most endearing qualities, you know. We’ll see.”

After that I started spending a lot more time with her. Besides watching movies together, we had a number of long talks, and it was only then that I discovered just how much my mother needed companionship and how little she’d gotten from my father during the last few years of their marriage. I had distant recollections of a happy, laughing household back when we still lived in Minneapolis, and a father that loved to take us hiking, to the movies, or on trips around the Midwest.

My mother filled in the intervening gap for me for the first time: how as his practice began to grow, and his income with it, it became an obsession with him. How he eventually heard that Las Vegas was a

gold mine for medical practitioners, with some of the highest health care costs in the country, and virtually unregulated.

Moving here had been a jolt to me. I found my classmates to be a much different breed than those I'd left behind. There was a tremendous amount of money carelessly tossed around by parents eager to display their status, and a pervading attitude among their offspring that denigrated study in a state where one could make more in tips (not to mention dealing drugs) than in teaching. I'd had only one good friend since arriving here, Melanie, and her parents had chosen to move out of state after the death of her older brother in the Millennium Eve Uprising.

I found that my mother also felt terribly out of place here, something she'd successfully concealed from me since the divorce. Although she had some casual acquaintances in her New Age circles, she'd once commented to me that they were an "awfully flaky bunch." I found myself dreading the resumption of the school year in September, when my own time would once again be occupied with classes during the day and homework at night.

Several evenings in a row I found her sitting in the back yard when the air was clear enough to see a few stars through the pervasive light pollution. After the third time I bundled her into my car right then and there and drove her for an hour out into the desert, where in spite of the residual glow of the city along one horizon she could actually get a reasonably clear view. There we just lay out under the stars for several hours, like we had the day Rann left. Ultimately we ended up doing this at least once a week.

Always hanging over our heads was the custody battle looming ahead. There had been meetings with the opposing attorney, and testimony taken, and other preliminary details attended to. My mother had spent several long afternoons closeted with our family attorney, the one who'd handled the divorce, and the report hadn't been good. He'd confirmed that my father had considerable influence in town, including a cozy acquaintance with the judge assigned to our case.

There were also rumors, never substantiated, that the street gangs weren't the only organizations following what they called the "Lucie philosophy." Rann told me once that Lucie himself (his real name had been Veladikor Sotok, by the way) had been out for only one thing, and that was power. But he'd skillfully orchestrated a subtle and persuasive propaganda campaign to attract followers to his growing organization, and many of those who hadn't actually gotten burned in the uprising took it all quite seriously, with its message of saving America from

chaos, minorities, immorality and copyright infringement.

Whether my father was directly involved or not was purely a question of which rumors you listened to. There was never anything concrete, of course. Apart from a vocal fringe on the far right, the vast majority of the public considered Lucie to have been a traitor and a reactionary. But I remembered all too well the quarrels, at times almost coming to blows, during the last few weeks before the insurrection itself when Lucie first began appearing in the news. My mother had been appalled at his associations with white supremacist groups, his eagerness to “leash” the press, as he put it, and his call to “bring the creative arts back to sanity.” My father, on the other hand, had made no bones about it being high time, as far as he was concerned.

And now he and the judge with power over my fate were linked by this same red thread, and that was where things stood when the official custody hearing convened at the end of August.



It was shortly before ten in the morning when my mother and I parked near the county courthouse and navigated our way through the maze of metal detectors and armed guards to the designated courtroom. We took our places with our attorney, a well-meaning middle-aged man who admittedly did the best he could with what my mother gave him to work with. I saw my father sitting with his own attorney, one of the less savory local representatives of the breed. Finally the judge arrived, and the formalities began. He explained that today's hearing would give him the information he needed to make his decision, based on the testimony, and that a decision would be forthcoming next week. And then it started.

I won't go into the things my father said on the stand. He'd obviously been well-coached, and presented himself as the most loving of parents, the most patient of husbands, and a pillar of the community. Our own lawyer did little to demolish this, having warned us previously that a direct attack on his character would only harden the judge's position.

To my surprise, my father made no effort to slander my mother as I had anticipated. And then his attorney called Brittany Hawser to the stand.

I blinked a few times. Brittany? *Brittany*? The ultimate airhead? What on Earth could she testify about? I wondered. As she walked up the aisle to the witness stand, I absently noted that her appearance had been carefully toned down; in fact she could have been a budding legislative aide to a conservative congressman. My father's lawyer asked the usual questions, establishing that she was indeed a classmate of mine, had known who I was for several years, and so forth.

"Did you encounter Haley Larkin in the Pecos Mall on the morning of June 15, 2001?" My ears pricked up.

"I did," she said demurely.

"Was she with anyone at the time?"

"She was."

"And who was she with?"

"She was with a young man named Randy."

"Did she say who he was?"

"She said he was a friend staying with her for a few weeks." Aha, I thought. I noticed that the judge looked distinctly displeased at that bit of information, which was no doubt the intention.

"Staying with her, you say?"

"Yes, at her mother's house."

"Did she say anything else about him?"

"Only that he was from Dashtorus." The lawyer looked suddenly nervous; I suspected this wasn't in the script.

"Dishtaris," he repeated, stumbling over the unfamiliar name. "Do you know where that is?"

"Of course. It's the state right next to Rhode Island," she announced proudly. I heard a titter run through the courtroom behind me. Well, so much for her coaching, I thought with grim satisfaction.

"The State of Dashtorus?" the judge broke in incredulously. "Do you mean Delaware by any chance?"

"No, she said Dashtorus," Brittany insisted.

"No further questions," the attorney said, cutting his losses. Our own elected not to pursue the issue, probably a wise decision.

A moment later I heard myself called to the stand.

After summarizing the testimony Brittany had just given, my father's attorney asked if her information was correct. I debated telling the truth, but decided I'd be risking a perjury charge if I did.

"I did have an acquaintance named Randy who stayed at my mother's house for two weeks until his vehicle was repaired," I said carefully.

"And how did you meet this 'acquaintance?' " I was asked. I didn't miss the veiled emphasis on the last word, either.

"I was camping out in the desert and his vehicle broke down near me," I said. "I offered to put him up until he could get it repaired."

"And who else was with you?"

"Nobody. I was alone at the time."

"You were camping out in the desert by yourself?" the attorney asked, hardly believing his luck. "And you are how old?"

"Sixteen," I said.

"And on what day and time did this occur?"

"It was June thirteenth. Late afternoon."

"And where was this?"

"Out in the Mojave Desert, somewhere north of Baker, California." I didn't want to give away the exact location; after all, it was one of my

favorite spots.

"And you took him to your mother's house," he said. "Did you know anything about him? Where he was from? Do you know his full name?" I suddenly realized I might be blowing his cover if I gave the bogus name I'd seen on his driver's license.

"No," I said.

"No, what? You don't know anything about him, you don't know where he was from, or you don't know his full name?" At that our attorney finally broke in, protesting that I was being "badgered." There was a momentary bit of legal mumbo-jumbo, and then the question was asked again, rephrased more politely this time.

"I don't know his full name," I said. "He said he was from someplace called Deshtiris."

"Can you spell that?"

"D-e-s-h-t-i-r-i-s," I said.

"Do you know where Deshtiris is?" I hesitated.

"No," I said finally.

"It's not a state next to Rhode Island?" he pursued.

"Rann— Randy said that, not me."

"Do you normally take strangers home to your mother's house that you know nothing about?" he persisted.

"Certainly not," I retorted. "But I trusted this guy." He changed directions suddenly.

"When exactly did you arrive at your mother's house with this person who you didn't know anything about, didn't know where he was from, and whose full name you didn't know?" Another objection from our attorney, to equally little effect.

"I think it was about eleven the next morning," I said reluctantly, triggering an excited buzz in the room. I winced; I could see this one coming a mile away.

"So you spent the night in the desert with this Randy," he concluded. "And you're sixteen years old."

"It wasn't like that at all," I burst out furiously. "That's a slimy way to—"

"No further questions, Your Honor," he informed the judge and sat down, leaving me spluttering into empty air, only to be instructed by the judge to confine my comments to answering counsel's questions.

Our own lawyer made a valiant attempt to undo the damage, giving me an opportunity to testify that nothing had happened, and that we'd slept on the ground on separate ground pads, but I could see from the faces in the courtroom that I wasn't making much of a dent in their

assumptions. I was finally permitted to return to my seat, my face burning with humiliation and anger.

My mother didn't help much, either. I'd barely sat down when she wanted to know why I hadn't just told the truth. Didn't I know I could be prosecuted for perjury? she demanded. "Mom," I whispered back, "if I'd told the truth I probably would be." Our exchange was interrupted by my mother being called to the stand.

My father's attorney had just established her bona fides, and had begun to ask her about my returning home with "Randy," when she announced that she was going to put an end to all this nonsense right now. *Red alert*, I thought, suddenly feeling sick.

"For your information," she informed the courtroom, "his name is Rann, and he's from the planet Deshtiris, which is thirty-five light-years from Earth. He stayed at our house with my blessing while his spaceship was being repaired. And of course he's a respectable individual. The Empress of Deshtiris herself flew in to repair the spaceship, which was actually hers anyway; he was just borrowing it."

The courtroom was now absolutely, utterly dead silent. I snuck a glance at our attorney, who'd turned a distinctly putrescent shade of green, and was probably envisioning prompt and utter disbarment. Even my father's lawyer looked stunned. Obviously this had *not* been included in anyone's contingency plans.

"And how do you know this?" he croaked finally.

"Because he told me so himself," she announced.

"And you believed him," the attorney said, still in shock.

"Of course I did. Besides, I saw his spaceship when we took him back to the desert."

"And can you describe this spaceship?" The attorney had finally regained his footing, and was clearly going to make the most of the windfall that had dropped into his lap. I slid down into my chair, my chin nearly even with the edge of the table.

"Well," she began, "it looked like a large boulder at first." I heard a titter run through the courtroom. "But then it worfed into a big glass thing that looked sort of like a bullet."

"It—'worfed'?" the lawyer echoed, clearly unfamiliar with "worfing."

"You know, it sort of melted from one shape into another."

I glanced at my father. He had a broad smile on his face. I felt sick again.

"No further questions, Your Honor," the attorney gloated. The judge looked inquiringly at ours.

"No questions, Your Honor," he said. I saw beads of sweat standing out on his forehead as my mother returned to her seat. There were a few further formalities but no more testimony.

"This court will reconvene on Tuesday, August twenty-eighth, at ten a.m.," the judge intoned. "This court will issue its decision at that time." He smashed down his gavel. "Court adjourned." We arranged an appointment with my mother's attorney for Monday afternoon, and despondently headed home.

Along the way, I made up my mind. "Mom," I said slowly, "I'm going to contact Rann."

"I understand," she said. "You're going to go, aren't you?"

"What else can I do?" I burst out in frustration. "If I don't, I either end up back in Dad's clutches or we run away. If we do that, you're liable for kidnapping charges. If I disappear and leave a note or something, they can't hold you responsible if it's obvious that you didn't do it, can they?" She was silent for a long time.

"Hal," she said very hesitantly, "would you ask Rann if I could go along? Do you think he'd let me? Or would it get him into some kind of trouble?" Her question didn't surprise me; I'd seen it coming for a while now, I realized.

"I think we could ask," I said. I had no idea myself what the rules were, or if there even were any. From what Rann had said it was more a matter of custom than anything else. "And leaving you here alone is the one reason I'd hesitate to go."

When we got home, I wasted no time putting together a message. "Well, here goes," I said finally as I entered the 'send' command.

To: rann@rp.gov.dt
From: haley@vegasicomm.net
Date: Fri, 24 Aug 2001 12:57:35
Subject: Emergency

Dear Rann--

I know I haven't written in a long time. It's been really hard for me to deal with this, and I'm sorry. I've missed you so much, and trying to write back and forth to you has just made it worse.

We're in terrible trouble here. My father is getting custody of me through the courts. We don't know what to do.

You once asked if I'd go with you to Deshtiris. Is it too late for me to say yes? And is there any way my mother could come with us? She could face criminal charges if I disappear, and besides I don't want to leave her alone here.

I know this is a lot to ask, but I don't have anywhere else to turn any more.

Love,
Hal

A few minutes later my Internet provider sent back a "No DNS entry for host" message. "So far so good," I breathed.

The following days were the most hellish of my life. I think I must have checked my email every five minutes for the next forty-eight hours. Nothing.

Finally, Sunday evening, I sent a second message in desperation. I knew that it took about twenty-four hours for him to make the trip, and that he might not get the message right away. I told him that we hadn't gotten an answer from him (in case our first message hadn't gotten through) and that we'd be at the rendezvous point at six Tuesday morning whether we heard from him or not. I didn't tell my mother about the second message, but I'd made up my own mind that one way or another I was going.

The next time I checked, the usual "No DNS entry for host" message was again in my inbox. "Rann, where are you?" I whispered.



“Hal,” my mother was saying, “I’m really at the end of my wits. I don’t know what to do now.” We were collapsed on the living room sofa, both of us in near shock. We’d just come from my mother’s lawyer’s office, where he’d been very sympathetic, but at our request had explained our situation all too candidly.

Tomorrow we were due in court again at ten. At that session the family court judge would almost certainly issue an order returning me to my father’s custody. I’d have forty-eight hours after that to comply before my mother would be placed in contempt of court. An appeal was of course possible, but in what the attorney called “the present climate” (a euphemism for the judge’s all-too-apparent bias) it was very likely that the order would be enforceable in the meantime.

“I can’t do it, Mom,” I insisted frantically. “I’ll run away. Surely you can’t be held accountable for that.” There’d been no word from Rann that evening; I’d checked my email the moment we’d gotten in the door.

“Where could you go, Hal?” she asked, weariness heavy in her voice. “It’s just not realistic. You’re only sixteen. You’ve got no way to support yourself, even if you did manage to evade the police. You’d be putting yourself in real danger. Please don’t ask me to go along with that.”

I shook my head in frustration, but she was right. I knew the typical fate of runaway minors of either sex: being forced into prostitution if they didn’t meet a worse fate. “We can still appeal this,” she said. “It just might take a while.”

“Let’s give Rann a little more time,” I said rather curtly.

We made a half-hearted attempt to eat dinner, but neither of us had much of an appetite. You could have cut the gloom with a knife that evening, and the silence as well. Finally, at about ten, the two of us climbed the stairs to my second-floor bedroom to check once again for a reply from Rann.

I started up my email client, my mother watching anxiously over my shoulder. It efficiently informed me I had five messages and began

downloading them as we watched, hardly daring to breathe. Then I was scanning the subject lines, and my heart sank. There was a message telling me how I could buy printer toner real cheap, another on how to make three thousand dollars a week at home, and ads for three porn sites.

“Nothing,” I said despondently and logged off. For several seconds we just stared at each other. “I’m not going to court tomorrow,” I said finally. “I’m going to the rendezvous point. If Rann doesn’t show up, he doesn’t show up.” I told her about the second message I’d sent.

“Then I’m going too,” she said. I shook my head in dismay.

“Mother, the stakes are too high for you,” I protested. “If we knew he was coming, I’d say risk it. But if you go along now you’re facing possible kidnapping charges. You know Dad would love to press them, too.”

“I don’t care,” she said softly. “There’s nothing for me here any longer if you go.” That’s when I melted. I suppose if I’d been older and wiser I would have firmly put my foot down and demanded that she stay. But at the time I’d pretty much convinced myself that message or no message Rann wouldn’t fail me now.

“All right,” I said reluctantly. “Keep your fingers crossed. But we’d better start packing. We’ll need to get out of here by three.”

It was an odd feeling to select what to retain out of the possessions of a lifetime. Fortunately my mother wasn’t a clothes-horse and I wasn’t much of a collector. While I packed I backed up the contents of my computer onto a DVD-ROM; there was no way I could fit the whole system into the car and I assumed that with all their advanced technology there’d be some way to read my files later. I packed a number of other disks as well, a few scientific journals I’d saved for sentimental reasons (including several with articles by or about Alan Brinkman), and the few books I didn’t think I could get along without. I also carefully stashed the *manekineko* I’d bought in Little Tokyo in a safe place. No way was I leaving that behind, I decided.

About the time I’d finished, my computer backup had too, and I carefully put away the disk and entered the command to format the computer’s hard drive. I didn’t feel like leaving anything of myself behind for my father to root through, and most of me was on that disk. It was with a considerable feeling of trepidation that I hit the “Enter” key and watched the machine begin obliterating several years worth of meticulous data collection.

I hauled the five boxes of stuff I’d winnowed out downstairs, where I found my mother waiting with four of her own. She looked

frightened, I thought, and I couldn't say I blamed her. We set to work loading the stuff into the car, barely managing to fit it all into the trunk and the back seat. It was just five minutes to three when we opened the garage door and pulled out of the driveway.

My mother's house is located near the center of one of those rabbit-warren housing developments with no direct way out. We'd just started threading our way through the maze of residential streets when I glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw another vehicle, its headlights dark, pulling onto the street we'd just turned from. My throat suddenly felt dry. At the next intersection, where I'd planned to go straight, I turned left instead and watched my mirror intently. Sure enough, the other vehicle soon followed us around the bend. I fought off a rising sensation of panic.

For several minutes we played cat and mouse in this way, me leading him on an aimless chase through the development as he continued to remain a block behind us at all times. I knew this couldn't go on forever, though; he'd probably long since phoned in a report to my father.

"Where on earth are you going, Hal?" my mother asked, obviously perplexed at my strange behaviour.

"We're being followed," I muttered grimly, and she gasped. For a moment I considered the practicality of a high-speed chase, but rejected it—my little car was hardly in any shape to take corners on two wheels, even if I'd known how to do it without putting us in the hospital.

We'd just turned at another intersection when a car backed out of a driveway about halfway down the street ahead of us, its lights on like ours, and headed away from us towards the next corner. I suddenly realized that in the relatively dim street lights it looked vaguely like my own car.

Several houses ahead on our right was a large SUV parked on the near side of a two-car driveway. Glancing back, I saw that our pursuer wasn't yet in sight. The car in front of us was just about to turn the corner, apparently heading north. As we pulled even with the parked SUV I saw to my relief that it was the only vehicle there, and turned sharply into the driveway, dousing my headlights at the same time. "Mom, put your head down and don't move," I hissed and switched off the ignition.

"Hal?" my mother croaked.

"Shhhhh." She looked put out, but obeyed. The sudden quiet was unnerving, and I shivered. I heard the soft hiss of a vehicle passing by in the street, and involuntarily held my breath. Then the sound faded as

our pursuer continued without stopping. Cautiously I peeked over the dash, just in time to see tail-lights vanishing around the corner.

"Yesssss," I gloated softly. As I'd hoped, in the predawn light he'd mistaken the other vehicle for ours. I knew it wouldn't take him long to discover his error, and quickly restarted the car and backed out of the driveway. "I think we ditched him. Now let's get out of here," I said, doubling back the way we'd come. I took the most direct route I could out of the development and headed south, hoping against hope that we wouldn't run into another of my father's goons.

It seemed to take forever to reach the southern beltway in spite of the deserted streets. At every stoplight I expected to see a police car take pursuit, even though Las Vegas has to be the world's most underpoliced city. People here strongly believe in passing strict laws about virtually everything, then complain vociferously if they're enforced. As a result you never proceed through an intersection without looking both ways: red lights and stop signs don't mean much here, and one rarely sees a police car except at accidents or crime scenes. There just aren't enough to go around. For once I was grateful.

We finally reached the beltway, then after a few miles I took the I-15 southbound exit. But instead of merging onto the through lanes I kept to the right one, which almost immediately became the Blue Diamond Road exit. We passed yet another casino as we turned due west, bumped across the Union Pacific mainline and continued along a relatively minor highway, currently almost deserted at the early hour. "Where are you going, Hal?" my mother exclaimed. "This isn't the way we took before."

"I'm taking the back way," I said.

There's a solid rampart of mountains to the west of Las Vegas, known as the Spring Mountains. I've called them the Walls of Mordor ever since I moved here, due to the seemingly impenetrable barrier they present. Just to the south of them, though, is a pass that leads to the agricultural community of Pahrump on the other side. From Pahrump one can head west into some of the bleakest parts of California, and not incidentally approach Rann's landing spot from the north. With only a few small towns along the way, I hoped that we might be able to get there without being noticed by the police.

We were well out of Nevada by the time the sky began growing light. As we approached the lights of a small crossroads town I realized that my gas gauge was showing only a quarter of a tank left. "We'll have to stop here," I said, spotting a service station that appeared to be open. "Bless you, Hal," my mother agreed warmly. "I really need to

go.”

She disappeared into the women’s room on the side of the station as I removed my gas cap and turned to the pumps. Please Pay Inside, read the tattered sticker on the pump. Damn, I thought. I’d forgotten that not everyone these days had the credit card pumps yet.

Inside was a bored man in his thirties, watching television behind the register. “Five dollars of plain unleaded,” I said, handing him the bill. Then my heart stood still as I heard the announcer on the set.

Police are currently searching for a teenage kidnap victim. Jennifer Larkin, of Las Vegas, is alleged to have kidnapped her daughter, Haley Larkin, over a custody dispute.

“I don’t need a receipt,” I said. I didn’t wait to see if they were going to show pictures. As casually as I could I went around to the side, to find my mother just emerging from the bathroom. “Come on, Mom, we have to get out of here,” I whispered.

“But don’t you need to go too?” she said, slightly befuddled.

“Later,” I hissed, practically dragging her along behind me. I pumped the gas as quickly as I could, and we left in such a hurry that I almost forgot to put my gas cap back. As we pulled out, I saw the attendant staring out the window at us, phone in hand. I hoped there were no active police cars nearby.

We were perhaps half an hour away from the valley, and it was already quite light out, when I heard the rhythmic beat of a helicopter. Keep moving, I told myself, he’s not going to land on top of us. I didn’t know exactly what police helicopters did, but I fervently hoped that their main job was to lead ground vehicles to their prey. By the time they arrived Rann would either be there or he wouldn’t, I reflected grimly. My mother sat frozen in her seat.

We finally turned onto the dirt road leading into the valley, the helicopter still overhead. I could feel a strong wind periodically buffeting the car. Maybe the ’copter can’t land in this, I thought, as we pulled up to the remains of the campsite. I braked the car to a stop and jumped out, looking around in all directions, the wind whipping my hair across my face. There was no sign of Rann or the *Futaba*. The ’copter circled overhead for a few minutes, then, apparently satisfied that we weren’t going anywhere, headed off down the valley in the direction of the Interstate.

I turned to see my mother standing by the car. “He’s not here, is he?” she said dully. I could hardly hear her, even though the wind had momentarily died down again. There was no sunrise; grey clouds stretched from horizon to horizon.

I saw a blue flashing light at the far end of the valley, followed by several more. They were probably about ten miles away. "Come on, Hal, get back in the car," my mother said, suddenly frantic. I took a deep breath.

"Mother, we're not going anywhere. This isn't *Thelma and Louise*. If Rann couldn't make it, then we'll deal with it some other way." For a few seconds she stared at me helplessly, then slowly sat down on the rocky ground. I sat down beside her and put an arm around her shoulders. "It's going to be all right," I said. "We'll get through this together." For several minutes we just sat there in the wind, watching the lights of the approaching police cars. This must be what a rabbit feels like when being stared down by a snake, I thought. Then we both nearly jumped out of our skins as a familiar voice sounded directly behind us.

"Someone here call a cab?"



“Rann!” I practically screamed. A few dozen feet behind him was the *Futaba*, hovering motionless a foot above the ground in spite of the gusts. Then I was in his arms, feeling the warmth of his body as he practically squeezed the life out of me. “Are you all right, Hal?” he asked softly.

“Oh, Rann, you’re really here,” I sniffled, not even looking up, just letting the waves of relief wash over me.

“I really am,” he answered. Gently he disengaged me. “Looks like we’d better get moving, though. Hi, Jennifer,” he called over my shoulder.

“Mom,” I gasped. For a moment I’d almost forgotten her.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked her. “I don’t think I need to ask Hal here,” he added with a grin.

“More than anything,” she answered. We wasted no time lugging our stuff from the trunk and the back seat into the *Futaba*’s living quarters. By the time we finished the flashing lights were much closer, and the helicopter was back.

“Please wait with your hands on the vehicle,” came an electronically boosted voice from above. “Police vehicles are on the way. Do not attempt to leave.”

“Looks like we have about two minutes,” Rann said calmly, ignoring them. I bid a quick but teary farewell to my car which had served me so well for the past year (all right, I’m sentimental about such things) and then we all raced up the ramp and began strapping ourselves in as Rann closed the portal. Just seconds later the police cars pulled up around us and several uniformed officers of the California Highway Patrol piled out and eyed us warily through the short-lived cloud of fresh dust. Then a familiar figure boiled out of one of the vehicles and begun arguing vociferously with one of the officers.

“It’s Matt,” my mother gasped. Rann touched one of the glowing patterns on his panel and suddenly we could hear their voices as clearly as if they were standing next to us, though periodically obliterated by a fresh roar of wind. My father was insisting that the officer do something, and the officer obligingly drew his handgun and pointed it

at the sky.

"Please come out with your hands up," he said through a bullhorn held in his other hand, in that delightful combination of politeness and authority that the CHP does so well. Rann continued to power up the *Futaba*, and I suddenly realized we were gently rising. "Halt!" ordered the officer as my father unleashed a torrent of obscenities. "Halt or I'll shoot!" shouted the officer again, now leveling his weapon at the ship. My mother looked terrified, and I took her hand.

"It's okay, Mom," I said, somewhat more confidently than I felt. "We're safe now."

There was a loud explosion over the *Futaba's* invisible speakers and I saw something spatter a brilliant white against the hull as my mother involuntarily screamed. Moments later everyone outside was diving to the ground. Nice ricochet, I observed, as we continued to rise. There were several more shots, equally ineffective. Then I heard the helicopter's rhythmic beat become much louder and realized that we were now up alongside it. I saw someone inside pointing a video camera at us as the pilot shouted something into his microphone, although I couldn't hear him over the sound of the rotors.

"Rann, they're filming us!" I said in dismay. I didn't know just how many rules Rann could get away with breaking, but somehow I didn't think interplanetary notoriety would be regarded as a plus. He stared at the camera, caught off guard. And then, apparently at an utter loss for what else to do, he pulled down an eyelid, crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue at them as the cameraman stared in utter disbelief and I dissolved into half-hysterical laughter. Then we were clear of the 'copter and he'd pointed the nose skyward as we shot upward at incredible speed, pressing us deep into the padded seats.

A few moments later we'd broken through into the brilliant sunshine, the clouds stretching in all directions below as far as we could see, and both my mother and I were laughing and crying at the same time as the planet dropped away below us until we were in space, and then everything got really bright for a few seconds and afterwards I could see the sun behind us rapidly shrinking as we broke every law of physics I'd ever learned and all of the universe's speed limits as well.

PART II:

Error Loading File



For several minutes I just sat there admiring the incredibly intricate patterns of stars, more stars than I'd had ever imagined existed, gleaming out of the absolute black of space. More than black, really, for the word doesn't do it justice; it was Utter Absence of Light. Against it the stars didn't "shine," they scintillated like a million diamonds in sunlight. The seat I was strapped into might itself have been floating through the heavens, so invisible was the *Futaba's* crystal hull.

And then, just as I was getting my runaway pulse back under control, the universe around us seemed to turn inside out again, until the stars were black pinpricks against a painfully snow-bright background, and I had to shut my eyes against the brilliance. When I cautiously reopened them space was again black.

I felt a tug on the harness holding me and looked up to see Rann unbuckling it. My mother was already shakily rising to her feet, still staring out at the impossibly clear dusting of stars. "We're not there already, are we?" I ventured nervously. I might have lost track of the time, but my bladder at least told me that we hadn't yet been in space for the twenty-four hours Rann had said the trip would take.

"Look behind you," he answered, a big grin plastered across his face. I heard my mother let out a prolonged gasp.

It wasn't only my mother that found herself forgetting to breathe. A huge yellowish globe was stretched out before us, its edges just fuzzy enough to seem slightly out of focus. Circling it was a set of rings, their detail and delicate pastel colors utterly indescribable in comparison to the digitized photographs relayed back by *Voyager II* twenty years earlier. Off to one side was a gleaming, pearl-sized object that I realized was the sun. "Welcome to Saturn," Rann announced grandly.

"Saturn..." my mother breathed, half-afraid to believe her own eyes.

"It was along the way," Rann explained, giving me a discreet wink, "so I thought we'd stop by for a few minutes. I'm sorry we can't move in closer, but its gravity would make us pretty uncomfortable."

We slowly circled the planet for about twenty minutes, my mother and I just drinking in the view. Briefly I kicked myself for not having

any film in my camera (which in any case was packed away somewhere in the back), and then realized that it might be rather difficult to get color slides processed on another planet.

"Had enough?" Rann finally asked my mother.

"I could never have enough of this," she said, still dazed. "Do you think we could we come back here someday?"

"Sure, whenever you want." My mother unwillingly nodded her assent to our departure. "Then let's go home," he said, and we permitted him to point the craft away from the now-miniscule sun and once again leave the laws of physics behind. This time I realized to my amazement that I could actually see some of the stars *moving*, ever so slowly.

"Just how fast does this thing go, anyway?" I demanded. "Even at light speed it should have taken over an hour to get to Saturn from Earth. Seventy-three minutes, to be reasonably precise," I added smugly. I suppose I'm the most unromantic person on Earth in some ways; while my mother had been soaking up the view I'd almost automatically calculated the necessary speeds in my head.

"You would have to ask me that," Rann groaned. "All right, let's see if I can do this. Deshtiris is thirty-five light-years from Earth, and it takes just slightly under twenty-four hours in the *Futaba*."

It didn't take me long to figure out that one: about twelve thousand eight hundred times the speed of light. It was hard enough to imagine the speed of light, but this was mind-boggling. I was even having trouble keeping the decimal point under control, something I don't usually have a problem with.

"Hold it," I protested. "At that speed we would have reached Saturn in a fraction of a second. But we took several minutes."

"That's true," Rann admitted, looking a little bit boggled himself. "I don't take the *Futaba* up to full speed inside a solar system. The distances are so short that it would be almost impossible to stop at the right place."

"So how fast was that?" I teased him. He shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"Kiri programmed most of this stuff into the *Futaba*'s AI," he confessed. "I just tell it where we're starting and stopping, once we leave the atmosphere." Great, I thought. Well, I supposed it beat trying to fly through a star.

"Why don't we head back into the living quarters and relax for a while," he added, hastily changing the subject. "We've got almost twenty-four hours of space ahead of us, and you won't really see much

now except moving stars.” My mother reluctantly vacated her window seat, and we allowed ourselves to be led off to Kiri’s remarkable home away from home.

“I wonder if we made the news,” I said, making myself comfortable on a luxurious sofa while my mother settled into an easy chair. Rann paled noticeably at the suggestion, and I belatedly realized that this was probably not a good time to bring up the subject.

“Let’s find out,” he said, trying unsuccessfully to sound casual, and with a small remote switched on what turned out to be a television set sitting in one corner of the room. He hadn’t flipped through many channels before we spotted ourselves lifting off via a grainy black and white videotape, apparently shot from one of the police cars. Then the scene switched to high quality color as we found ourselves staring directly into the *Futaba* from the helicopter.

“Oh my,” my mother said as Rann made his grimace at the camera. Then we were rising out of sight while the cameraman fumbled frantically to keep us in view.

“Jeez,” Rann mourned. “I’ve really done it this time.”

A blue light on the top of the television lit up. “What’s that?” I asked, pointing. Rann now looked distinctly ill.

“It means we have an incoming message,” he mumbled, and reluctantly pressed a button on the remote. The Empress’ face appeared on the screen, or rather in it, since unlike the television broadcast this was in full 3D. I’d never seen anything like it. It was as though she were actually there in the television (or “telecom,” as I eventually learned to call it). In fact, her face was so close to the screen that it threatened to emerge right into the room with us.

“RaaaAAAAAAAAAANN!!!!!!” If you’ve ever seen a plant wilt in the heat you can picture his reaction.

“Hello, Empress,” he quavered.

“Rann, have you seen the news?” She didn’t even have to specify which news. Her face was twitching, and I wondered if she were going to break a blood vessel or something.

“We were just watching it,” he babbled. “I’m really sorry about what happened. I didn’t know we’d end up on the evening news.”

“The *network* evening news,” she corrected him. The twitching was getting worse. For a moment I was afraid she was going to have him publicly disemboweled or something, and then she broke down completely, howling helplessly with what I finally realized was laughter, tears running down her face. “And you— and then you— Oh, Rann!” Then she disappeared below the screen, though I could still hear

her baying, as well as what sounded like her pounding on something. Rann looked as though he'd been poleaxed, with absolutely no expression left on his face at all.

Another person appeared, a young man of about her age, his grin practically splitting his face in two. "Now look what you've done," he chuckled. "Trust me, though, it'll be okay. These things happen. Besides, nobody's going to believe that footage after the face you made. You might want to keep out of Valkar's sight for a while, though; he's more than a little incensed about the whole incident. But you're missing the best part. Now get back to the news before it's all over." He broke the connection, and Rann dutifully returned us to the station we'd been watching.

We found ourselves watching a newsroom interview. Two men were addressing the camera: one was obviously the host, the other an older, excessively dignified personification of pomposity dressed in a tweed jacket, puffing on an unlit pipe, and who was introduced to us as Dr. Willard S. Halpenner, a recognized authority on "alien landing hoaxes."

Our host informed us that Dr. Halpenner had "scientifically analyzed" the videotapes provided by the authorities and identified them as obvious fakes. "Obvious fakes?" I muttered in disbelief.

The grainy video once again took over the screen. "You'll notice," the Doctor's disembodied voice informed us, "that this alleged 'spaceship' doesn't have a propulsion unit." The video frame froze, and a pointer helpfully appeared out of nowhere. "The object is entirely transparent, and the only contents visible besides the occupants and these seats," and the pointer moved accordingly, "are in this tiny area under the floor. That's clearly insufficient room for a propulsion unit capable of moving an object of this size at the velocities described. The laws of physics simply don't allow it." I heard Rann snicker softly; apparently he was returning to something resembling a sentient state, however slowly.

"And then there's that second tape," he continued. Once again we saw ourselves onscreen, the image now fixed on Rann. "Let's be serious. What sort of space alien, possessing the capability of interplanetary travel, would pause to make a silly face at a cameraman? Now, really."

"Pthhhbtt," I observed.

"So this so-called 'spaceship' is a scientific impossibility, then?" We were back to the talking heads. The Doctor took a long pull at his unlit pipe before speaking.

“Well, Brad, as the famous detective Hercule Poirot once said, ‘When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.’ ” I stared at the screen in utter disbelief.

“That was Sherlock Holmes,* you witless cretin!” I roared at the hapless telecom. Rann looked at me as if I’d gone crazy. My mother, of course, was used to me by now.

We left them discussing the thorny issue of why at least nine experienced law enforcement officers with excellent records would go to such trouble to perpetrate a hoax. I heard later that the network (and the eminent Dr. Halpenner) were sued for a very large sum of money by the slandered officers, though I never did hear how the case turned out. I hope they won. Big-time.

A now much-relieved Rann disappeared for a few minutes, to return with some fruit juice and a plate of rice crackers. “There’s plenty of food if you’re hungry,” he said apologetically, “but I thought you might want to go easy at first after all the excitement.” As we snacked, I noticed my father’s face on the telecom screen, and found that they were discussing the very real disappearance of my mother and myself. There was a clip of my father raging over the “kidnapping,” as he called it, and my mother looked visibly distressed.

“It’s okay, Mom,” I reassured her. “We’re in a different star system by now.” She seemed disoriented, and I realized what a shock all of this must be for her. “Look at it this way. Dad’s going to wonder for the rest of his life how we got away from him.” She grinned weakly at that. “It’s going to be all right. I promise.”

Later Rann told us his side of the story, about how he hadn’t received my first message at all, and the second barely in time to make the rendezvous. He’d asked Kiri on very short notice for use of the *Futaba*, telling her in a few words what was happening. Her response had been, “What the bloody hell are you doing loitering around my office? Get moving, you silly ass!”

On the way he’d answered my second message in a glowing affirmative, assuring us that he’d be there in time, and was horrified to discover that we hadn’t ever received it. Only much later did I hear how a diligent university network technician somewhere in Bemidji, Michigan had discovered a mysterious program residing on his DNS server and removed it, after which he’d spread the alert on the Internet. It had taken one of Qozernon’s best programmers almost a week to come up with a virtually undetectable substitute, after which things had

* In *The Sign of the Four*.—Ed.

quietly returned to normal.



The rest of the trip was relatively uneventful, with no more unscheduled stops and no more surprise messages from Rann's boss. The three of us spent our time relaxing in the living quarters or sitting in the *Futaba* itself, watching the stars in their slow dance. After a few hours Rann saw that we were starting to nod off in mid-sentence, and led us to a comfortably furnished bedroom where my mother and I were able to get the first sleep we'd had in well over twenty-four hours.

As we were dropping off to sleep, I heard my mother's voice in the near-dark. "Hal?"

"Mmmmm?"

"We've always been honest with each other, haven't we?" I'd heard that before; it usually prefaced a confession of some sort.

"Of course we have," I said, and waited.

"Are you frightened?"

"A little bit," I admitted. "Things all happened so fast. Are you?"

"Terrified, I guess. The last time I felt this nervous was the night before I married your father. We're making such a huge leap."

"This'll turn out better," I reassured her. "I don't really know any more than you do what's ahead, but I trust Rann."

"Hal?"

"What, Mom?"

"Thanks for not leaving me behind."

"I won't ever desert you," I said. "Not as long as you need me."

"Hal, honey, please don't say that." She hesitated for a moment. "Sooner or later you may have to choose between Rann and me. If you do, I want you to choose Rann. You have your own life to live."

"We'll worry about that if it happens," I said uncomfortably. "Now, let's get to sleep."

"I mean it," she insisted.

"G'night, Mom."

"Goodnight, Hal." But it was a while before I did fall asleep, haunted by some private qualms of my own.

When we finally got up (almost ten hours later, by my watch), we

found Rann fast asleep on the living room couch, where he'd apparently dropped off after we'd gone to bed. I debated shaking him awake, but thought better of it. I wondered when he'd last slept.

My mother and I were sitting in the *Futaba*, enjoying the view, when he came stumbling in. "Hi, everyone," he greeted us groggily. "We should be arriving in about two hours, so if anyone's up for breakfast this would be a good time for it." By now we were too excited again to eat more than a light meal, though, and were soon back in the *Futaba* to watch the show.

Right on schedule we dropped out of light speed to see a planet looming dead ahead. It was similar to Earth, but noticeably greyer. As we circled it, spiraling downward all the while, I realized that the grey was a polluted haze, not clouds.

"It used to be worse," Rann said. "A lot has settled out during the past two years, since we stopped burning hydrocarbons. But it'll still take a while to clear, and in the meantime we're barely keeping a runaway greenhouse effect from taking hold. Parts of the equatorial region are uninhabitable because of the heat. At least the acid rain's pretty much stopped."

By now mountains, plains and oceans were silently unrolling beneath us. Eventually we'd descended to within a mile or so above the ground, slowed to the speed of an ordinary jetliner, and were passing over an immense barren plain crisscrossed by several highways. "Look over there," Rann said, and I caught my breath.

Ahead rose a steep mountain range, with snow-capped peaks extending high into the late afternoon sky. Just before it a vast shelf jutted out from the foothills, and sprawled across its surface was the most incredible city I'd ever seen, stretching for miles in every direction, with skyscrapers reaching into the scattered low clouds.

"Welcome to your new home," Rann informed us proudly. "That's Deshti, capital city of Deshtiris."

My mother and I watched fascinated as we passed over suburb after suburb, descending all the while. We could see tiny vehicles everywhere on the intricate network of streets, and then I suddenly realized that they were flying, often well above the ground. Soon we were only a few hundred feet above the buildings, moving much more slowly, and now and then one of the little vehicles would pass us nearly alongside, the occupants staring in surprise. Apparently the *Futaba* was not exactly your everyday transport vehicle, even here.

My mother gasped and pointed at something ahead. I turned to find myself dazzled by a barrage of brilliant colors from the top of a large,

low building ahead. As we drew closer I saw that its roof consisted of an immense crystalline structure of some kind, and that the intensely vivid hues were being reflected from the innumerable facets that comprised it, shimmering and glinting in every color of the rainbow.

"Rann, what is it?" I breathed. It was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen, like a living gem.

"That's the skylight over the palace's great meeting hall," he said, "made of the same material as the *Futaba*'s hull. It was a gift from Qozernon when Will and Kiri started rebuilding the palace."

The palace itself was like something out of a fairy tale, with towers and turrets, massive arched doorways, intricately carved balconies—and yet it took less than a minute to soar over it all as we finally arrived at our destination and settled down onto a large grassy quadrangle in its center. I realized to my dismay that the many balconies on the surrounding buildings were crowded with spectators, and felt myself blushing furiously as we came to a stop a foot above the lawn and the *Futaba*'s portal melted open. (I learned later that this was the *Futaba*'s traditional parking spot.)

When we emerged from the ship the first thing I noticed was the heat, not as scorching as Nevada's but considerably more humid, and reflected in the very light clothing worn by the small party that met us at the bottom of the ramp: cutoffs, light T-shirts with insignia on the shoulders, and the ubiquitous boots. We were apologetically informed that the Emperor and Empress regretted not being present as they were tied up in a meeting.

Rann turned us over to this group, explaining that he had to report in, and set out across the lawn toward one of the buildings with a cheerful wave. I felt like we were checking into one of those thousand-dollar-a-night resort hotels as our hosts bowed slightly and motioned for us to accompany them.

My mother seemed a little out of it so I took her hand and led her along as we proceeded through one of the massive entrances, up a flight of stairs, and down several corridors. We finally stopped before a simple wooden door, which our hosts opened for us. I noticed that there was no sign of a lock.

Our new home turned out to be a comfortable suite about the size of a modest two-bedroom house, complete with a small kitchen. The attendants carefully set down our boxes in the middle of the room, then departed as unobtrusively as they'd arrived.

"Well, Mom, it looks like we're here," I said, looking around, and suggested that she lie down for a while and take a nap. We found the

two bedrooms to be furnished with large luxurious beds, and after a brief discussion as to who got which I left her sprawled out across hers, already fast asleep.

I spent the next five minutes rearranging boxes where I thought they'd be most appropriate. Then I tried one of the other doors, and found myself out on a small balcony overlooking the courtyard. The sun was low in the sky, about to drop behind the mountains to the west, and the grass below had taken on that deliciously warm greenish-yellow glow that comes from sunlight shining through the blades rather than reflecting off them. It seemed unreal, somehow, and I finally went back indoors.

For a while I just sat on the bed, trying to sort it all out as I stared at my belongings neatly stacked on the floor. Several times I went to the balcony and looked out into the courtyard to reassure myself that it wasn't all just a crazy dream. The sight of the *Futaba* hovering motionless a foot above the carefully trimmed lawn was oddly reassuring. I opened one of the boxes and carefully pulled out the *manekineko*, setting it on a shelf. Somehow it made all the difference.

There was a knock at the door, and I opened it to find Rann waiting. "Hi, Hal," he said softly, seeing the cautionary finger I put to my lips. "Is everything all right?"

"It is now," I said, enveloping him in a hug and feeling his warmth against me. We stood that way for a long time, until he gently disentangled himself.

"How about some supper?" he suggested. "You must be starving." A menacing growl from my stomach brought me back to reality, as I abruptly remembered that we hadn't eaten a full meal for at least a day and a half.

"Supper would be good," I agreed.

"I'll be back in about ten minutes," he promised.

I went to my mother's room, to find her awake and sitting cross-legged on the bed. She seemed distinctly unsettled, staring into space. "Mom," I announced, "we've been invited to supper."

"I'm really not feeling well right now, Hal," she said unsteadily. "I think this has been a bit much for me. I'd rather just stay here for a while and rest."

"I'll stay with you," I offered.

"No, don't you dare," she protested, some of her old spark showing through. "You go ahead and have a nice time. I think some unpacking will do me good."

"Well, you ought to eat. How about if I bring back something?"

"That would be very sweet of you, Hal," she said gratefully. "I'll be all right. Just give me a little time to breathe."

A few minutes later Rann returned, and I explained the situation to him. "It sounds like a touch of future shock," he agreed. "Don't worry. She'll be fine."

I wondered what kind of meals one got in a palace as we strolled down a flight of ornate stairs and through what was apparently another residential wing. Our destination, however, proved to be much different than I expected when we entered a cozy, well-equipped kitchen with a small dining area in one corner. It reminded me in fact of one of those fifties kitchenette booths with a curved table bent into a right angle.

I saw someone energetically slicing vegetables on one of the counter tops, and gaped in astonishment. Although she was facing away from us, there was no mistaking that shaggy mane of crimson hair. As she turned to greet us, her brilliant green eyes flashed warmly in approval. "Welcome to your new home," she said with a grin.

"Empress?" I gasped. I wondered if I was supposed to bow or curtsy or something.

"Call me Kiri," she instructed me firmly. "You're family now, you know. I don't take Rann's choices lightly; he's shown good judgment too many times in the past." I gulped.

Just then the young man I'd seen on the *Futaba's* telecom sauntered in. "This is Will," Kiri said helpfully. "Will, Haley." Then, in a stage whisper, she added, "Just so you don't get caught by surprise, his official title is 'Emperor Nendor Wilorian.'"

"But don't call me that if you expect me to pass you dessert tonight," he threatened. By now thoroughly flustered, I could only nod stupidly. Things weren't helped much when a third figure strode in, and I realized I was looking at Alan Brinkman in the flesh.



“Whoa, are you all right?” someone exclaimed as the room swayed around me. I felt Rann’s strong arms around my shoulders and found myself sitting on one of the padded benches around the table. “I’ll be okay,” I gasped, taking some deep breaths. “A little overwhelmed, I guess.”

“Did I do something wrong?” an older voice said plaintively, and I recognized it as definitely Brinkman’s; I’d heard it often enough on PBS.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized. “It’s just that, well, you’ve sort of been one of my heroes for a long time.” I felt myself redden with embarrassment. Slow down, Hal, you’re making a fool of yourself.

“This is Haley, Alan,” Kiri informed him. “She’s the American girl Rann brought back.” I hesitantly glanced up to see him peering curiously down into my face. To be sure, the fair hair was thinning now, and nearly all grey, and the hairline had receded considerably, but it was him, all right.

“You actually know who I am?” he said in sincere surprise. “And you’re a high school student from the United States?” The face, I realized, was a kindly one. His features showed his age, somewhere in his late fifties, and currently exhibited the famous sardonic grin I’d seen so many times in print and video, but in person his eyes betrayed him. They were lonely eyes, I thought suddenly.

“Now Alan, don’t frighten the poor girl,” I heard yet another voice say. I soon matched it up with its owner, a middle-aged woman standing in the doorway. “She’s probably aware of your reputation, and is even now wondering if she should flee while her virtue is still intact.” Everyone roared at that; even Brinkman joined in.

“Hal, this is Gelhinda,” Rann informed me, “the Qozernan Ambassador.”

“You’re Senaria’s mother, aren’t you?” I said, receiving an unexpectedly sharp look from Brinkman.

“Well, Rann,” laughed Gelhinda, “sounds like you’ve been giving her a cram course. Is there anyone here she doesn’t already know?” She sighed. “Alas, apparently I am fated to be known forevermore as

‘Senaria’s mother.’ ”

“Oh, no,” I broke out in embarrassment. “I didn’t mean to—”

She cut me off with a warm smile. “Stuff it, child. I can’t tell you how proud I am to be that girl’s mother. I just wish she were here with us,” she added, trailing off. There was an awkward silence.

“Well,” said Kiri, seizing the moment, “if the rest of you aren’t going to eat, at least I am.” And with that we all sat down and started passing plates back and forth.

Having already provided Rann’s meals for several weeks, I wasn’t at all surprised to find a strictly meatless menu. Since my mother had been a vegetarian for as long as I could remember, much to my father’s disgust, I had no problem adapting (though I certainly can’t pretend that I don’t have some hogs and cattle on my own conscience). I was surprised to find that most of the dishes were pretty familiar, though there were a few items that I hadn’t encountered before. “Everything here on Deshtiris originally came from Earth,” Will explained. “The things you don’t recognize are mostly African in origin.”

“Oh, listen to him,” Kiri snorted. “I remember his first few weeks on Qozernon, when he was afraid to ask what anything was for fear it would turn out to be boiled space leech or worse. He was actually disappointed to find that there wasn’t really any ‘alien’ food on either planet.”

“Haley,” Gelhinda asked, “where is your mother? I was looking forward to meeting her too.”

“She wasn’t feeling well,” I explained. “I think she’s sort of overwhelmed by everything. This wasn’t exactly something she planned in advance.”

“I’ll go check in on her,” Gelhinda suggested. “Perhaps I can change her mind.” I nodded gratefully as she disappeared, and turned to Brinkman.

“Rann told me how you visited Deshtiris and then returned to Earth to teach again for a while,” I said. “So why did you decide to come back here?” I wasn’t quite prepared for the diatribe I got in response, as he bitterly decried grade inflation, budget cuts, and the decline in capable students.

“Well, your timing sure sucked,” I said, starting to feel more at ease. “I was still hoping to take you up on your offer. Then bang!—you’d been supposedly abducted by aliens.”

“My offer?” said Brinkman, puzzled. Suddenly embarrassed again, I pulled out my wallet from a rear pocket and carefully unfolded the treasured letter. “Of course, that was a long time ago,” I said

apologetically as I handed it to him.

For several seconds he scanned the painstakingly preserved relic, and then recognition dawned. "You're Haley Larkin!" he exclaimed. "The one that did that paper for the high school contest."

"You mean you two really do know each other?" Will asked in disbelief. I nodded, still stunned myself.

"It's just as well you're here," Brinkman said derisively. "We don't have universities in America any more, you know. We have life support systems for athletic programs. Or worse."

"Is that why you left Earth for good?" I persisted.

"The simulated gladiatorial combats I could tolerate," he said in disgust. "At least they usually brought money into the university. But last year we had our physics budget cut by two hundred thousand dollars," he went on, his voice rising. "And just why, you ask?" (I hadn't.) "So that the school could set up a Department of Enhanced Consciousness Studies, that's why. A psychic research institute! The New Science for the New Millennium." By now he was in the throes of total indignation. I glanced around nervously, to see the others stifling grins. I suspected that watching Brinkman build up steam was a favorite form of entertainment for them.

"You know where Earth is headed, don't you?" he clattered on. "A new Dark Ages. A world where the average person believes in psychic phenomena, flying saucers, and the supernatural." I suddenly found myself secretly grateful that my mother wasn't present. I had a feeling that sparks would have been flying by now.

"Actually, Alan, they already do," Kiri said with a grin. I had to admit she had a point; the few times I'd watched cable television it seemed as if half the advertisements were for psychic hotlines.

Speaking of psychic phenomena, flying saucers, and the supernatural, Gelhinda chose that moment to make a reappearance with my mother in tow, now looking considerably more at ease. "Your mother is a delightful person, Haley," Gelhinda advised me. "It would have been a crime for her to miss this." She then introduced her to those present as if she'd known her all her life. No wonder she's an ambassador, I thought admiringly.

"This is the Alan Brinkman you told me about?" my mother asked me when the two were introduced.

"That's him, Mom," I said.

"That's wonderful. Perhaps you can study with him after all," she suggested brightly. I looked at Brinkman. "Ummm," I said cautiously.

"Well, Alan?" Kiri asked. "After all, you did invite her to your

workshop.”

“Well, yes, of course, I did,” he answered, thoroughly flustered. “It’s just that—”

“I’m really sorry,” I interrupted. “I didn’t mean to put you on the spot. But if there is some way—”

“Well, why not?” my mother broke in indignantly. Mother, you’re not helping here, I thought.

Brinkman took a deep breath. “You would need to demonstrate at least a certain minimum level of knowledge. Otherwise you might have to do some remedial studies first. Would you mind taking an undergraduate physics exam? That would at least give me some idea of your overall background.”

“Whatever you want,” I agreed enthusiastically. “The sooner the better.”

As we dug into our meal, I quickly discovered that Will (I had a very hard time picturing him as “Emperor Wilorian”) possessed a dry sense of humor that never wounded, but could bring a laugh without him ever cracking a smile. Kiri, on the other hand, was one of the most uninhibited people I’ve encountered, howling with laughter one moment and perfectly serious the next. (She also, as I discovered later, had a definite penchant for practical jokes of an extreme sort.)

Gelhinda and my mother hit it off immediately. Although both were apparently about the same age, I knew that Gelhinda, or “Gelhi” (pronounced “jelly”) as she was called by her friends, must be considerably older; in fact I discovered later that she was almost eighty-four. There was no trace of stuffiness in her demeanor, though. The two were soon deep in conversation, Gelhinda listening with polite fascination as my mother regaled her with the latest information on astral projection and dream interpretations.

Meanwhile Brinkman was in fine form, tossing out nuggets of obscure knowledge and lording it over all present. “For example,” he pontificated, “how many citizens of Earth know that one of the greatest inventions of all time was created in the year 876 A.D.?”

“And just what was so important that was invented in 876?” Will asked skeptically.

“Nothing,” I broke in. All eyes turned to me. I saw embarrassment on Rann’s face, and made a mental note to give him hell for it later. The others appeared puzzled, all except for Brinkman, who looked as though he’d been run over by a truck.

“And just where was nothing invented?” he finally managed.

“India,” I responded confidently. Kiri started to laugh under her

breath. Will was also beginning to catch on. Only Rann still appeared mystified. "I must be missing something," he said at last. I glared at him.

"The zero," explained Brinkman, with obvious awe in his voice. "The first recorded use of it on Earth was in India, in 876 A.D. Now how the hell did you know that?" I smiled demurely.

"I think you just passed your entrance exam," chuckled Kiri. "Right, Alan?"

"We'll start tomorrow," he agreed resignedly.

"Well, I don't know," I said, much to everyone's surprise. Brinkman gave me a quizzical look. "My dad said you're a big time lech," I informed him. "So, are you?" For a moment he looked startled, then laughed.

"It was probably true when he said it," he answered candidly. "But I generally behave myself these days." He grinned, but something in his eyes made me sorry I'd said it.

"It would be a real honor to study with you," I assured him. Brinkman seemed satisfied, if slightly disgruntled at the way the decision had been made for him, and we made arrangements to meet in his office the next morning.

"So," I asked later that evening, "does everyone on Deshtiris speak perfect English?"

Kiri grinned. "For me, living in Southern California on and off for thirty years helped. Will, too, you know. In fact, he grew up there." I stared at them in disbelief. I'd been to Kiri's house above Fontana, to be sure, but this was a bit much.

"And I learned a lot of my idioms and pronunciation from watching television," Gelhinda chimed in.

"Television?" I echoed dully.

"We get all of your networks and satellite channels here," Will informed me with a grimace.

The conversation took on a more serious character as he told the story of how he and Kiri as teenagers had fled the Brizal uprising with only minutes to spare, leaving Deshtiris in a makeshift starship. They'd sought refuge on Qozernon with the former Qozernan ambassador to Deshtiris and his wife Gelhinda. Less than two weeks later a Brizal assassin had almost succeeded in murdering Will as he slept. Desperate measures were considered, and taken.

With his consent, Kiri had erased Will's memories (not knowing if they could ever be retrieved) and hid him on Earth with a trusted retainer. For the next thirty years he'd grown up as an American,

believing his parents had been killed in an automobile accident, while without his knowledge Kiri kept a watchful eye over him. She'd finally identified herself and brought him back to Qozernon, thinking it was at last safe for him to return, just as the long-incubated plans of Tenako, Kiri's father, had exploded into a near war between the two planets. The rest I had, of course, heard from Rann.

By this time my mother was nearly in tears at the pathos of it all. Gelhinda also appeared noticeably moved. Even Kiri seemed reflective as Will finished his tale.

"Bravo," exclaimed Brinkman, applauding loudly, and rather shattering the mood. "It gets better with every retelling." Both Rann and my mother glared at him.

"Hey," protested Will, "it was my fifteen minutes of fame. So cut me some slack, okay?"

"What, being Emperor isn't enough?" observed Kiri dryly. And so it went, until finally everyone said goodnight and drifted off in their various directions. Rann escorted my mother back to our apartment, and then I accompanied him out onto his own balcony to talk for a while.

I was still walking on air at the thought of studying with Brinkman, and thoroughly nervous to boot. "Congratulations," Rann said. "You really think a lot of Alan, don't you?"

"He's been a sort of role model for me for years," I admitted. "I always saw him as a voice of reason against superstition. I'd heard rumors about his personal life, but I didn't really care much. He seems pretty nice in person, though."

"There's more to him than meets the eye," Rann agreed.

We were both silent for a while, lost in our own thoughts. It all still seemed so unreal to me, and having just eaten dinner with the Emperor and Empress of Deshtiris hadn't exactly helped. I wondered if I should bring up the question that had been nagging at the back of my mind all evening; since our departure, in fact. I looked over at Rann, admiring his profile again, seeing his eyes glinting slightly in the fading light.

"Rann—" I began.

"Hal?"

"Never mind," I said as casually as I could, deciding it was a question that could wait. "Nothing, really."



The next morning Rann was at my door right on schedule. “Ready to start your studies?” he asked with a grin. “I’ve been instructed to make sure you find your way to Alan’s office. This is a pretty big place.”

“You bet I am,” I said. “Instructed by who?”

“By Kiri. She told me I was on temporary leave until you’re all settled in.”

“On leave? From what?” I suddenly realized I had no idea what Rann actually did here, other than running secret missions on Earth and buying Japanese cartoons for Kiri. (I learned later never to call them “cartoons”; they were “anime.” Whatever.)

By now we’d found our way back out to the huge central courtyard. Off to one side the *Futaba* still floated gracefully above the perfectly tended lawn. “Technically I’m head of her bodyguard,” he said. I digested that as I followed him to a complex of buildings perhaps a quarter mile away.

“Sort of like the U.S. Secret Service?” I suggested, and got a snicker in response.

“Actually, the job covers just about anything Will or Kiri needs at the moment. Everything from looking decorative at official functions to running confidential errands.”

The building before us, constructed of massive carved blocks of a bluish stone, had the same ancient but perfectly maintained look as the palace. “This is the Imperial Research Institute,” Rann announced. “It’s a descendent of the task force Alan set up to create the anti-gun thing.” He pointed across the courtyard at a perfectly round concrete patch several feet in diameter on the main palace wall, its bottom about a foot above the ground. “That’s a hole one of his more successful experiments left. Fortunately there was no one in the way at the time.” There was a guard at the door, but he didn’t look too concerned as we entered, just nodding good-naturedly at Rann.

Inside were gorgeous marble floors bearing intricately inlaid patterns. After navigating several turns we climbed a large spiral staircase, this time of carved wood. “Just how old is this building,

anyway?" I asked.

"Probably about nine hundred years," he said. "But by the time the Brizali fell the stonework was crumbling from the air pollution, all the wood had rotted away, and everything of value had long since been stolen. What you see now is the work of thousands of volunteers over the past few years, as well as donations of funds and materials. This staircase, for example, came from a town in the Southern Continent famous for its hardwood."

By this time we'd entered a corridor of offices, most of the doors open. Through one I saw Brinkman sitting behind a desk on which papers and notebooks nearly buried a small telecom screen. There were also assorted memorabilia scattered here and there on the shelves and a number of pictures on the wall. Most were ordinary black and white or color photographs, apparently from his years on Earth, but one that caught my attention was a small 3D image of a young woman with shaggy golden hair and striking light blue eyes.

Rann quickly made his excuses and left as Brinkman got down to business and explained how he would proceed. "This won't be like your typical high school class, Haley," he began in a patronizing tone. "Do you know what a seminar is?" I nodded politely; of course I knew what a seminar was, but after all as far as he knew I was still a typical American high school student and so I decided to play along (for now).

Needless to say, he didn't just sit down and start lecturing me on the intricacies of what amounted to thirtieth-century physics. Instead, I was provided with copies of his own class notes from his years of teaching, and after I'd worked my way through a few pages we'd go over whatever I didn't understand at the next lesson.

That session lasted only half an hour, and I walked out of his office with an armload of books, notebooks, and some kind of crystals about an inch square in plastic boxes, which he told me were data crystals and assured me that Rann would know what to do with them. Great, I thought, only my second day on a planet thirty-five light-years from Earth and already I have homework.

"Do you know how to find your way out?" he'd asked, and I'd rashly assured him that I did. Of course I immediately got lost after descending the spiral staircase, and just as I'd decided I was in the wrong corridor I nearly collided with a tall, fair-skinned woman wearing a distinctly unpleasant expression, which she reinforced verbally by snapping out something unintelligible at me.

"I'm sorry," I apologized, wondering what I'd done. "I don't know any Deshtiran yet."

"Oh," she said disdainfully in English, simultaneously wrinkling her nose as though she smelled something unpleasant. "You must be that Earth girl I heard about. Don't you know that this is a restricted area?" She gestured at a yellow sign with several bright orange characters that I'd passed when I entered the corridor. "That means 'Authorized personnel only.' Children aren't permitted here."

"I'm really very sorry," I said meekly, feeling my face redden. "I got lost. Which way is the main entrance?" She gestured vaguely in the direction I'd come and continued on past me without so much as a backwards glance. I turned around and after a few more moments of confusion recognized a familiar corridor and found my way to the exit.

I encountered Rann and my mother waiting for me by the front of the building. "Rann says his mother needs to talk to us," she informed me mysteriously, as he took some of the books and led us back across the central courtyard to another wing of the palace. Along the way I mentioned my encounter.

"I actually met a rude Deshtiran this morning," I said. "Tall, kind of pasty-looking, with short blond hair." Rann winced.

"That's Tosekor Wisela, the lab director," he said. "What exactly did you do to her?"

"I only nearly ran her down in a restricted area," I said lightly. "Nothing major," though I could feel my face reddening again at the memory. "Lab director, huh?"

"Brinkman's her boss," Rann reassured me, "so don't worry about it. He puts up with her because he has to. But everyone tries to stay out of her way."

We stopped at an open doorway with another sign in Deshtiran overhead. Inside were a number of people wearing light blue T-shirts. "This is the palace clinic," Rann explained. He exchanged a few comments with a young man at the front desk, who then spoke into his telecom and directed us down a hallway. "This way," Rann said, taking us down another corridor and into an office. Along the way I saw people getting what appeared to be medical treatments.

Waiting for us was a woman, in years perhaps a little older than Kiri, with one of those faces that are still youthful, yet lightly etched with creases more indicative of past hard times than of age. "Hal, Jennifer, this is my mother Veldra," Rann said as she rose to greet us with a smile. "She's head of the clinic here."

For a while we chatted lightly about our flight from Earth, about what we thought of Deshti, and about Rann (to his considerable embarrassment). Eventually she got down to the reason for our visit.

"You've probably noticed that people here appear young for their age. Did Rann tell you how our own ancestors originated on Earth, brought here by the Virrin?" My mother and I both nodded hesitantly.

"One of the things the Virrin did was to modify their captives genetically, so that we age more slowly. Once we reach fourteen our aging rate slows to perhaps a third of yours, and becomes even slower as time goes on. Rann, who to you appears seventeen, just turned twenty-two a month ago. Both the Empress Mikiria and Emperor Wilorian are almost fifty." I'd guessed their ages, even allowing for what Rann had told me previously, to be around forty. In Earth terms they looked twenty-five or so.

"Over the years," she continued, "we've had occasional immigrants like yourselves from Earth. Although we don't need to do anything to ourselves, we did find it unfortunate, and at times tragic, for some of our people to bring back mates and see them age far faster than themselves. For this reason we've explored ways to artificially replicate the effects that the Virrin created genetically. To a great extent we've succeeded, and with a few simple treatments we can put you onto the same aging schedule." She let that sink in for a few seconds.

"Does that mean I'd become younger?" I asked dubiously. I sure didn't want to go through puberty again. She smiled.

"We've had visitors that wished they could. No, it would just mean that from now on you'd age at the same rate we do. You'd always be a few years older in appearance than a native Deshtiran your age." I looked at Rann doubtfully, and he gave me an encouraging nod. It suddenly hit me that when he turned sixty he'd still physically be about thirty, and I'd be well into middle age.

"Count me in," I said.

"Jennifer?" Veldra said, turning to my mother.

"I guess there are worse things in life than being able to water-ski with my great-grandchildren," she said mischievously.

"Mother!" I exploded, and she laughed. "Listen, Hal, your father stole twenty years of my life from me. Who knew I'd get them back, with interest?" A few minutes later we were in an examining room with an attendant, facing two small glasses holding a clear liquid.

"Drink them down, and don't try to stand up for a half-hour or so," Rann translated for us. The attendant wasn't kidding, either, as after about ten minutes I began to feel woozy. Rann kept a sharp eye on us in case we started slithering out of our chairs, but the feeling soon passed, leaving no unpleasant traces behind.

"You'll need to do this once a day for the next three days," Rann

explained as we headed back across the courtyard. "After that the effects are pretty much permanent. By the way, are you two up for dinner with my parents tonight?"

"Sure!" we chorused enthusiastically. "Meanwhile," I added, "what are we doing for lunch? I'm starved!"

Over lunch I mentioned the 3D photograph I'd seen in Brinkman's office. "That's Senaria," Rann said.

Afterwards my mother drowsily wandered off to her room for a much-needed nap, and Rann offered to show me how to begin my Deshtiran language lessons, delivered via the ever-present telecoms found in every home. In our case, there was one in each bedroom and a large one (which Rann explained doubled as a home theater) in the central living room.

This was my first exposure to the ubiquitous Deshtiran controller. Much simpler than an English language QWERTY computer keyboard, it consists of a five-by-five character keypad, or twenty-five keys total. There are only about fifty symbols in current use for the various Deshtiran phonemes, plus a base-ten number system. Since each key can serve up to four different purposes depending on what other key is pressed with it, these controllers serve for virtually all applications and are found everywhere one goes, from telecoms to starships.

Rann showed me the proper combination for loading the language software, and settled himself comfortably in an easy chair on the other side of the room to watch the fun. Much to my surprise, a flesh-and-blood person (or so I thought) appeared in the telecom, in that disconcerting 3D that still gives me the uneasy sensation of seeing a person imprisoned in a box. He was a young man of perhaps twenty (Earth appearance), and rather cute, I thought.

"Hi," he said cheerfully in English. "So you want to learn Deshtiran, do you?" I nodded. "Why don't you tell me something about yourself first. For example, what's your name?"

"I'm Haley," I said. "But you can call me Hal. I don't understand, though. I thought this was supposed to be software." I glanced accusingly at Rann, sprawled smugly across his chair.

"I am software," my tutor said. "I'm a synthetic construct designed to make your learning more comfortable." I stared at him suspiciously; he looked pretty real to me.

"I can take a different shape, if you prefer," he said, and proceeded to consecutively morph into a young woman, a child of indeterminate gender, a very grouchy-looking old man, and then himself again. "I can even take on the appearance of someone you know, if you have a

picture available.”

Now that sounded like a challenge. “Wait a minute,” I said, and disappeared into my bedroom. When I returned I had my wallet in hand and was digging out a picture of Halogen, my late cat. “What do I do with it?” I asked. “Is there a slot somewhere?”

The figure sighed. “Just hold it in front of the screen.” He leaned forward (I swear he leaned *out* of the box) and peered closely at the picture, then looked up at me with a distinctly annoyed expression. I heard Rann stifle a snicker. For a moment I thought I’d offended my new teacher, then he winked. An instant later he’d morphed into a near-exact replica of Halogen. The shape of the head wasn’t quite right, probably because he was extrapolating from a flat photograph, but it was still impressive.

“How’s that?” teacher-as-cat asked brightly as Rann finally broke out laughing.

“Jim Henson couldn’t have done better,” I said in admiration. “So what’s your name?”

“My default name is Brian, but you can change that if you like.” He looked a little nervous as he said it; I think he’d taken my measure by then.

“Can I call you Halogen?” I asked hopefully. And from then on Halogen he was.



Halogen turned out to be an excellent teacher, or at least a replica of an excellent teacher. We started in on basic vocabulary and pronunciation, but he had a knack for varying the topic just when I started to get tired (analysis of facial and vocal cues, I suppose), and before I knew it three hours had gone by. Rann had long since left.

“Halogen, can we quit for today?” I finally asked, my eyes crossing.

“Certainly,” said my reincarnated cat. “Do you know how to use the controller yet?” I said I thought so. “Good. Just restart the software when you’re ready and we’ll pick up where we left off.” The screen went dark.

I thought back over what we’d covered. I’d learned that the Deshtiran language is actually remarkably straightforward; in fact it’s generally believed to have been created by the Virrin for their human charges as a universal language. The fifty phonemes used to form all words are those easiest for the human vocal apparatus to pronounce. It also has a logic and simplicity that naturally evolving languages lack.*

That afternoon Rann set up computer accounts for my mother and me, something which all Deshtirans are required to have. These accounts are in effect a single central version of the many separate accounts people on Earth currently suffer with (such as charge cards, Social Security accounts, and phone cards). Supposedly they’re well-encrypted enough that there’s little or no danger of someone breaking in and misusing the information. For the time being our status was “visitor,” though Rann said that once we’d been here for a few months

* Ironically, there is an actual Qozernan language, which is almost entirely unused. This language, which dates from the time before the two planets had any contact with each other, has roots that show a definite kinship with an ancient proto-Indo-European language dating to before 2000 B.C., and is probably the only remnant of any language originally spoken by the Virrin’s captives. It almost completely fell out of use once space travel became practical and Qozernon temporarily became an economic colony of Deshtiris.—*Ed.*

we could apply for citizenship and shouldn't encounter any problems getting it.

We had a very pleasant dinner that evening with the Parkors, including Rann's father, whom we hadn't met previously. A precision metal craftsman, he'd been put to work by the Brizali building trucks for many years, and was clearly very happy to be back at his real trade.

I spent the next morning studying the pile of physics files and papers Brinkman had handed me, taking notes and jotting down questions. By the time I felt I'd done enough to justify going back the following day, it was near noon. After wolfing a brief lunch I settled myself in front of the telecom for another language lesson and entered the necessary combination into the keypad. For just a moment the young man appeared on my screen, then morphed into Halogen.

"Good afternoon, Hal," he said. "Would you like to review, or pick up where we left off?" At first I was startled, then realized that "he" could see me just as well as I could see him. It was still pretty eerie, though.

We'd worked for about two hours, I think, when my concentration was suddenly shattered by a metallic clatter coming through the open balcony door. "Excuse me for a second," I said to a noticeably annoyed Halogen, and ran out to see what was going on.

Below me were two figures, stripped to the waist in the heat, wildly clashing swords. Around them a considerable crowd had gathered, though keeping a respectful distance. A number of other residents were watching from their balconies. For a moment I thought some kind of fight had broken out, and then to my astonishment recognized the two as Rann and Kiri.

I've seen the usual Errol Flynn classics, as well as swordsmanship of a highly variable quality in performances of Shakespeare plays, but I'd never seen anything like this. The two seemed to weave a net of steel between them, punctuated by unexpected leaps, rolling dives to the ground, and other startling acrobatics. There was a continual din as they fended off each other's blows, accompanied by cheers and applause from the spectators.

At first I was panic-stricken, expecting a fatally hemorrhaging Rann to be carried off on a stretcher at any second, then remembered that he'd said only practice blades were used for this kind of match. I relaxed and started watching with interest.

Actually, interest is probably an inadequate word, as Bad Haley made an unexpected reappearance and I found myself admiring Rann's lightly-clad physique with something considerably stronger than artistic

appreciation, something that sent my pulse rate soaring and left me feeling strange all over. Before long I was seeing more than just the match in front of me as some pretty startling images began coming to mind, images which I didn't seem to be able to fight off (or want to).

(Meanwhile, Good Haley remained somewhere off in a back corner watching with detached amusement, and making sarcastic comments about my hormone levels. This must be what your father meant about there being nothing less appetizing than a teenager in heat, she informed me. Thanks a lot for all your support, Good Haley. Not.)

The bout must have continued for at least a half hour, and before long both combatants were glistening with sweat in the brilliant sunlight. I had to admit that, little as I knew about fencing, Rann appeared to be acquitting himself quite well, and I felt a considerable bit of pride as the contest continued. It was, however, his sword that went flying as he suddenly found Kiri's at his throat. A cheer, mixed with catcalls, went up from the audience, and then the crowd began to disperse back into the palace as Rann and Kiri slapped each other on the back and headed for the nearest entranceway.

I suddenly remembered poor Halogen, and ran back into the apartment. There I found the telecom screen dark, except for the words

OUT TO LUNCH.

(PRESS ANY KEY TO CONTINUE)

When I finally quit laughing, I pressed one of the controller keys and the screen went completely dark. I'll have to apologize next time I see him, I promised myself.

I was starting to feel a little more under control, so I decided to ambush Rann and stationed myself outside his door until he returned, shirt in hand, and still dripping with sweat.

"What was that all about?" I asked in mock dismay, which quickly turned into the real thing as I found my heart starting to pound again at the tantalizing sight of him standing right there in front of me. "I thought you were going to get yourself killed. Or is this one of Kiri's 'confidential errands'?"

"I'm her favorite opponent," he said proudly. "We usually have a training session during the early afternoon if she's free."

"Why?" I asked, now desperately trying to sound rational, and failing miserably. "Because you lose to her?" He stared at me, then realized I was joking.

"Nobody beats Kiri," he said quite seriously. "Or at least hardly ever. But I guess I come closest of any of them. I've actually managed to win a few bouts now and then, but it's not easy. Look," he said,

changing the subject, “you’ve been cooping yourself up for the last two days with your studies. Why don’t we go poke around the city after I clean up?”

For one precarious moment I found myself on the verge of proposing that I share the shower with him. Fortunately my tongue completely refused to obey, and I stood there instead just staring at him stupidly. “Are you all right?” he asked. “Your face is turning all red.”

I finally managed to stammer something about going someplace where we’d be by ourselves, and his face brightened. “I know just the place,” he said. “How about if I stop by your room and pick you up in a half hour?” I nodded hastily, terrified of what I might blurt out next, and beat a hasty retreat. For the next thirty minutes I oscillated between profound embarrassment at what I’d almost said and profound regret that I hadn’t said it. By the time Rann returned my hormones were finally dropping to relatively civilized levels and I could muster up something vaguely resembling normal conversation.

Rather than borrow the *Futaba*, which wasn’t really suitable for short trips, Rann summoned one of the public vehicles that are always available for loan and we flew up over the city towards the mountains overlooking Deshti. Eventually we left the city behind, skimming the pine forests covering the slopes and climbing all the while, until we settled onto a rocky outcropping overlooking the city far below.

It was well enough into the afternoon to put us in the shade of the magnificent pines behind us, and the air was delightfully cool compared to the city. Now and then a bit of sun would break through the trees behind us. In spite of my distracted state of mind I’d managed to put together a small picnic lunch, and we stretched out on the rock slab and lazily dug into pita bread sandwiches and fruits.

I stole a furtive glance at Rann. This is your home, and I’m the unexpected visitor now, I found myself thinking. I felt again the uncertainty that had been nagging at me since our flight from Earth. For a while I shoved it to the back of my mind as we finished our lunches, sharing small talk and admiring the view.

Even from here Deshti was impressive. We were only a little ways below the cloud layer, and once in a while an unusually low cloud would envelop us, temporarily plunging us into a white fog and then drifting away. And yet there were skyscrapers in Deshti whose upper stories disappeared into those same clouds. Occasionally there’d be a flash of brilliant color from the palace grounds as the ever-changing skylight caught a ray of sun and deflected it in our direction.

We’d finished eating and were sitting side by side, our legs

dangling over the precipice. Feeling much more hesitant than I had earlier that afternoon, I started to put an arm around his shoulders. But I suddenly pulled myself back, once again full of doubts. He looked at me in surprise.

“Rann,” I said hesitantly, “I sent you a plea for help, and you answered it. But you said something else, before you left Earth the first time. It’s not fair for me to hold you to it, but I have to know where I stand here.” I mentally replayed the words and winced at their incoherence. It sounded like something from a bad romance novel, I realized, and decided to start over. Rann stared at me, puzzled. “What I mean, is—”

“I said I’d be willing to take care of you for the rest of my life,” he interrupted me. “Is that what you mean?” I nodded hesitantly. I felt his arms around me and instinctively closed my eyes as I ended up on the receiving end of a kiss that put to shame the one we’d exchanged above Cedar City.

“Did that answer your question?” he said softly into my ear. After the verbal mess I’d inflicted on him a few moments earlier I decided that the merciful thing to do was to answer in kind, and I did.

“Well,” he said at last, disengaging himself, “are you still worried?”

“Mmmm,” I said, eyes glazed over.

“Everything okay now?” he teased.

“Everything okay,” I managed, still trying to focus my eyes.

“I love you, Hal,” he said, suddenly serious. “You do know that, don’t you?” I nodded slowly.

“I’m sorry, Rann,” I said sheepishly. “I was being stupid. It’s just that, well, everything is so upside down now. I was so scared. I don’t ever want this to end,” and suddenly I was crying and feeling his arms around me and giggling all at the same time, and then he kissed me again and I felt so safe and so sheltered that it didn’t seem like anything could ever spoil it. Not ever ever.

We stayed there and watched the shadows deepen and the city lights come on and the stars come out before we finally headed home.



The next morning was my second lesson with Brinkman. As I deposited my load of papers and books on the floor, there being no such thing as clear space on his desk, I saw him eyeing me skeptically. I supposed that he was expecting me to make a fool of myself at this point, and considering the nature of the materials I'd been fighting my way through during the past two days I could understand that.

It'd by no means been light going. I'd had to really dig into some of the books I'd brought from Earth, and found myself sorely missing my computer. There was a lot of material that was simply over my head, but I suspected that one of his intentions had been to see if I recognized that fact. He probably expected me to waltz in and ask him to explain what I'd read a page at a time.

So I think it came as a bit of a shock when I pulled out a long list of detailed questions I'd compiled and cross-referenced against his notes and let fly (I guess it runs in the family). His first reaction was to ask some pointed questions of his own, to see if I actually understood what I was asking. When he realized that I did, I saw a grin start to steal across his features, and it wasn't the sardonic one either.

After that we got down to serious business, and I began meeting with him several times a week. For some reason he seemed pretty pleased with my progress, although I had to say that a lot of what I was studying seemed utterly outlandish to someone just emerging from a background of classical and quantum physics.

Among other things I learned about the drives used in the fliers and starships of the two planets. Even during the excitement of our gala departure from Earth I'd been puzzled at the apparent contradictions. Although we'd been subjected to all the G-forces of a rocket launch during our flight through the atmosphere, once in space Rann had simply entered a command and we'd suddenly seen the Earth drop away from us at an incredible rate, and without the slightest feeling of motion on our part. It was as if the Earth were a gaily colored bowling ball which we'd just tossed off a bridge. And then there'd been the twenty-three-plus hours of travel at almost thirteen thousand times the

speed of light, which of course was a known impossibility.

I found that there were indeed three different drives. The one used in terrestrial fliers, and also by starships when maneuvering around in the atmosphere, relies on the accumulated gravitational force of the nearest large body (generally a planet) to pull itself forward or, alternatively, push itself away in the case of a trip into space. This only became possible once the relationship of gravity to the other universal forces of nature was established, a theoretical construct still in its infancy back on Earth. This is sometimes called an “inertial” drive, since all the forces of momentum and inertia are felt by the drive and by anything or anyone propelled by it.

The second drive, known as the “aninertial” drive, functions on a totally different principle. Working with the fundamentally quantum nature of matter, it causes the vehicle to simply relocate itself to a new point in space instantaneously. Since two particles of matter can’t occupy exactly the same space at the same time, this would normally cause a horrendous explosion as the conflicting matter was instantly converted into energy. For this reason the amount of each relocation is of the nature of a millionth of an inch or so.

Of course, even a millionth of an inch of overlap with existing matter would release sufficient energy to incinerate the craft, even in the near-vacuum of space. Therefore the drive also projects a short-range repulsive field, just powerful enough to keep any unwanted matter several millionths of an inch away from the craft in the direction of travel. With a high enough rate of relocations the speed attained can be incredible, up to thirty thousand miles per second, and with no sensation of movement at all to the passengers.

About the faster-than-light drive I’ll only say that I still don’t understand it, its theory of operation being buried under hundreds of pages of mathematical descriptions. Brinkman admitted that he still didn’t fully understand it either, though he claimed Kiri did. Considering that she’d managed to create a ship (the *Futaba*) capable of speeds several times faster than any other ever built, I’ll give her the benefit of the doubt. About all I could glean at this infant stage of my studies was that somehow the ship and everything in it had its mass reduced to less than zero, which enabled it to bypass the relativistic barrier. And that’s the total extent of my comprehension.

If it sounds like I was having the time of my life, I was. Between my physics studies and Deshtiran language software tutor, I suppose I could easily have watched the days slide by, leaving poor Rann sitting forlornly on the sidelines. I had my own agenda there, however, and

was determined not to let that happen. To be sure, after the first week he resumed his regular duties, but I forced myself to put away the books and shut off the telecom once supper time rolled around, reserving my evenings and weekends for him.

Dinners in any case were relatively quiet for several days, as Gelhinda was tied up with a biplanetary economic conference and Kiri's whereabouts appeared to be some sort of secret (although I caught a few cryptic references to a "Project X"). Brinkman missed several meals working late; apparently it wasn't unusual for him to linger in his office until the wee hours of the morning.

So it was no great problem for Rann and me to skip supper one evening and go exploring in Deshti. I found it to be a fascinating mix of modern, old, and abandoned. A tremendous quantity of resources had gone into rebuilding the city, which had been depopulated for years by the Brizali to provide labor for their industrial centers. Many of its residents had since returned, lured by promises of government aid in rebuilding the countless shops, factories and residences that had fallen into ruin in the interim. Now and then one would encounter an abandoned building, though, and there were still entire districts which remained dark and deserted for the present.

A few days later I asked Rann if there was any way I could use the computer files I'd brought from Earth. "We'd have no trouble reading your data," he decided. "The problem would be running your programs, since they're pretty much hardware-dependent. But I know someone I can ask," he added brightly, and I left it in his hands.

Dinner that evening was a particularly memorable one. This time the whole gang was again present, with riotous results.

"I've had better days," Kiri was griping as Rann and I arrived. "On top of everything else, my last appointment today was with yet another delegation complaining about being exposed to all the 'sin' on Qozernan television."

"Isn't that the third one this month?" Gelhinda sighed.

"Fourth," Kiri corrected her. "Of course, the only 'sin' they seem concerned about is sex, which is certainly there. But considering that you have to do a keyword search to call it up, it's not exactly as if it's being waved in their faces." I'd already discovered that with literally thousands of channels available, one doesn't "channel surf" (unless you're really bored). Instead, you search by keywords that interest you, like surfing the Web.

"They didn't seem to have any complaints about the senseless violence in the Earth programs being broadcast," Gelhinda sniffed.

"I suppose they want you to start censoring again," Rann said, and she nodded.

"There are still a lot of people who seriously believe things were better under the Brizali. Usually younger people, who didn't get caught up in the relocations and forced labor, and who grew up under the regime. This has all been a severe culture shock to them. Their parents, on the other hand, are only too glad to see things restored to the way they used to be."

"Ironical that it's the younger ones finding sex so hard to deal with," Gelhinda remarked. "After all, when you really think about it it's just another natural bodily function."

Brinkman cleared his throat noisily.

"We are conceived amid secretions and born as an excretion," he pronounced. Clearly it was intended as the unveiling of a profound bit of philosophy, a pithy and incisive summation of the discussion so far. And we did indeed stare at him in something approaching awe for several seconds, before the entire table dissolved into hysterical laughter. Only Brinkman failed to join in, instead regarding us with a comical mixture of dismay and injured dignity. "Did I say something wrong?" he finally asked with some asperity.

"That was disgusting," Will observed.

"Alan," Kiri sighed, "as a philosopher you are truly a brilliant physicist. Let's leave it at that, shall we?"

At that point I think the others prudently concluded that the entire subject was now dead, and the conversation hastily turned to other topics. When my mother's newfound interest in astronomy came up, it turned out that Gelhinda also had an interest in that area, and they were soon off in conversation. My mother was fascinated to discover that although we were trillions of miles from Earth many of the constellations were still recognizable. "We're not actually that far from Earth, at least not on a cosmic scale," Gelhinda explained. "After all, most of the stars are tens or even thousands of times further away."

At the same time Brinkman was bemoaning the trials and tribulations of running the Imperial Research Institute. "I'm a physicist, not an administrator," he grumbled. "Getting people to do what I think they should do isn't exactly one of my strengths, you know. If it weren't for the damage that Wisela would probably cause if I weren't there, I think I'd just resign and go back to lecturing full time."

"But look what you've accomplished, Alan," Will argued. "You've got six different teams all working together smoothly now."

"Hmph," Brinkman snorted. "Smoothly except for that political

snitch. I'd love an excuse to fire her ass. I wish I had your power to make things happen," he added, turning wistfully to Kiri. "All you have to do is issue a command, and poof! It happens."

"Really?" she said slyly. " 'Poof'?" I'm not sure why, but I suddenly had a very bad feeling about this.

"Poof," he confirmed.

"Guards!" Kiri bellowed unexpectedly at the top of her lungs. More quickly than I could have imagined, two palace guards dashed in from somewhere out in the hallway, swords drawn. "Lop off this man's head!" she ordered with a peremptory gesture at Brinkman.

For a moment we all sat in stunned silence, then one of the guards cleared his throat. "Uh, Your Majesty, you know I can't do that," he ventured nervously.

"Why not?" inquired Kiri innocently.

"Well, uh, he has to have a trial and all, doesn't he? We can arrest him, if you like, if you'll tell me the charge." He looked hesitantly at Kiri.

"Never mind," she said sweetly. "You can go. Sorry to bother you," and she grinned toothily at a now-ashen Brinkman. Thoroughly mystified, the guards saluted and left.

I had to admit it seemed a pretty heartless stunt, but I was to find it was rather typical of Kiri's and Will's practical jokes. Even Brinkman admitted afterwards that he should have known better, but I suppose it would be pretty disconcerting to hear someone being ordered to shorten you by a head, so I couldn't blame him much.

"Seriously though, Alan—" Kiri resumed.

"Just how serious do you intend to get?" he interjected shakily.

"Sorry about that," she said (and she didn't sound very apologetic, either). "But you should realize that if I'd taken his sword from him and chopped your head off myself, neither he nor anyone else on the planet could have done anything about it, either then or afterwards."

"I beg to differ," Will said earnestly.

"All right, Will, you're the one exception," she admitted. "The authorities couldn't touch me for it, though. But I'd still pay such a high price for it, in lost respect and credibility, that there'd be no point in my retaining the throne. The most important part of the Emperor's and Empress' power is our moral authority. Without that we're just despots, and would probably be quickly removed from office."

"Thank god for that," murmured Brinkman.

Ignoring him, she went on. "Alan, you know that I was opposed to keeping the Virrin equipment intact. I saw what Tenako had made of it,

and I didn't—and still don't—think we're ready for it. But the best scientific minds on the planet felt otherwise, and I didn't believe that my gut instincts justified overruling them on the issue. I might think that it presents a future danger, but unless I can convince people of that, imposing an autocratic decision would have done more harm than good."

"You wanted to destroy it?" I asked in surprise.

"I did," she said quietly. "Does that shock you?"

"Part of it was my own damn fault," she added, a bitter edge to her voice. "I thought the truth about Tar Deshta and the Virrin planar field should be hidden. I thought we were the only people that still knew about it, and that we could keep it secret. That was a mistake. Once we raided Tenako's compound, we found that it was impossible to bottle it up any longer. There were just too many people in the know: his researchers, assistants, even his most trusted military support staff. When it all came boiling out, it looked to the public like a cover-up, and that cost us a lot of credibility. So when the decision had to be made to preserve or destroy the advanced technology he'd resurrected, we couldn't afford to press the issue."

"It wasn't a total loss, Kiri," Will reminded her softly.

"Yeah," she said, sudden sadness in her voice. "I was able to trade it all for one file."

"One file?" I said, puzzled.

"They agreed to erase one file," she repeated, half to herself. "His."

"Tenako's," Will said to me in an undertone. I must have looked as stupid as I felt. I felt a warning nudge from Rann, and decided not to press the issue.

Dinner was just about to break up when Brinkman informed us that he had an announcement to make. "I'm going to be having a *soirée* at my suite in a few days, and of course you're all invited. Although after this evening I'm not sure if I really should," he added petulantly. Kiri and Will didn't seem at all offended by the remark, and I suspected they were pretty used to this sort of thing from him. As for me, I was marveling that anyone in this day and age still used the word *soirée*.

"What day is that?" Gelhinda asked, pulling an appointment calendar keypad from her pocket and flipping it open. Brinkman named a day on the Deshtiran calendar.

"That's the eighth of September, isn't it?" I asked. Just the day before I'd spent an hour with Halogen learning the Deshtiran calendar, and couldn't resist showing off. I saw my mother prick up her ears.

Brinkman momentarily performed some mental calculations before agreeing.

"That's your seventeenth birthday, Hal," my mother reminded me.

"Excellent," Brinkman exclaimed. "Then that can be the *motif* for this particular evening."

"Don't run off yet, Hal," Kiri said to me as we were about to leave.

"I want to show you something. You and Rann meet me at the *Futaba* in ten minutes. And bring along the data disks you brought from Earth."

When we arrived at the *Futaba*, my precious box of CD-ROMs and DVD-ROMs in hand, she led us into the living quarters to a room filled with computer equipment. Most of it was obviously Deshtiran, but there were also some relatively familiar devices, including a DVD-ROM drive, a US-style keyboard and a mouse.

"This is the equipment I use when I want to meddle with Earth's computer systems," she explained. "Rann said that you needed to work with your data and programs. Our systems can emulate most of Earth's popular computer configurations. This is what you type into the keypad to tell it to simulate a PC." She scribbled a string of characters on a scrap of paper and instructed me to key them into a Deshtiran keypad. A half-second later a familiar graphical interface appeared on one of the monitors.

"You can use the equipment in this room to load your data into your Deshtiran computer account. After that you won't need your discs any longer because your data will all be online." She rummaged around in a cupboard for a minute, finally pulling out another keyboard and mouse, and a small box, which she handed to me.

"With this," she said, indicating the box, "you can use the telecom in your room in the same way you did with your own system. Just route the cable through this first, then plug the mouse and keyboard into it as well. Use the keystrokes I gave you to temporarily reconfigure your telecom. Don't worry about fouling anything up; the commands set you up in your own virtual software space, so that you can't modify any of the other configurations. And since it's all simulated in software, you can easily restore the defaults if things go really wrong. Any questions?" She turned to see me—well, Rann said later I looked like a fish drowning in air, mouth opening and closing without producing anything audible.

"Thank you," I finally croaked. She excused herself, leaving me staring blankly at the equipment.

"Think you can use this?" Rann said curiously.

"We'll find out," I said, still dazed. I inserted my DVD-ROM with

the backup of my own computer and began copying files. I quickly discovered two things: the virtual computer she'd configured had most of the programs currently popular on Earth already installed, and this machine was *fast*. The graphical user interface I was used to normally ran at a snail's pace (in fact it traditionally got slower with each update), but not here. I worked well into the early morning hours installing my own software and testing it out, and found that it all ran perfectly and far faster than it ever had at home.

Rann had long since fallen asleep on a couch in the *Futaba's* living room when I finally finished. By the time we staggered back to our rooms it was well after three.



I had to admit that Brinkman's *soirée*, as he called it, was actually a lot of fun. Much to my surprise his circle of friends wasn't confined to his fellow scientists (a species that can verge on the irremediably tedious at times), but also included, in addition to our little dinner circle, a number of professional musicians living in Deshti. I discovered that it was customary at these get-togethers for several of these musicians to put on an impromptu performance. This particular evening we were treated to an hour of traditional folk music, performed by a small ensemble of instruments that I didn't recognize at all, and which I assumed were Deshtiran in origin.

To my considerable embarrassment Brinkman did make my birthday the theme of the evening, announcing it early on. My mother and I found ourselves to be celebrities of sorts, being the first Earth immigrants in several years; in fact, Brinkman had been the last one before us. My head was soon swimming with faces and names, and though I did my best to be sociable it's admittedly not one of my better-developed skills.

I soon saw that I wasn't the only one ill-at-ease. Off in a corner was a tall, rather gaunt man, in appearance perhaps a few years younger than Brinkman but presumably much older, standing aloof and carefully nursing his drink. He had an unusually interesting face, I thought. His features were deeply lined but his hair was still a solid black, of medium length and parted on one side, with an errant clump perpetually slipping down his forehead into his eyes, and which he absently brushed back every few minutes. I was on the verge of introducing myself when the musicians began tuning up and Rann tugged at me to sit down.

The musicians were very good, as was the music. It was unlike anything I'd heard before, but wasn't unpleasant at all to my off-world ears. That shouldn't have surprised me, I suppose, since the fundamentals of harmony originated from mathematics in the first place, and mathematics still works the same way here as on Earth.

I noticed one of the musicians, a very attractive young woman,

who seemed to be on especially friendly terms with Brinkman. I was more interested in the instrument she'd been playing, though, which was a fascinating blend of ancient and high-tech, consisting of strings which were drummed on with small mallets. Below these was a complex web of other strings, which apparently resonated on their own with the ones struck by the performer, and which over time would build up a kind of halo of sound that filled the room.

"Is there an amplifier inside this?" I asked after the performance, once I'd verified that she also spoke English.

"An amplifier?" she repeated, obviously puzzled by the word.

"A device to electronically make the sounds louder," I explained.

"Oh, no," she said with a smile. "It's all done naturally."

"Naturally? How?" I still vividly remembered the impressive volume of sound produced. She explained that the intricate network of strings and reflectors under the fingerboard had been developed over many centuries, originally using hand-calculations and later computers. Any sounds produced by the performer wound up being passed from one string to another, the resonances reinforcing each other all the while, until the resulting sounds were powerful enough to escape from the web and emerge with remarkable strength.

"Sort of like a laser, but using sound," I suggested.

"Very much so," she agreed. I then set about pestering the other musicians about the operation of their instruments, all of which proved to be equally ingenious devices.

Throughout all this I noticed that the same lone individual I'd seen earlier was still lurking in his corner. As far as I could tell he hadn't spoken to anyone the entire evening, though he did nod at Brinkman once when the physicist greeted him in passing.

I don't know why, but it annoyed me somehow. Who did this guy think he was, anyway? So I walked right up to him and said, "Excuse me." He started visibly and turned to me with an almost frightened expression as I put on my sweetest smile.

"I'm Haley," I announced. "Do you speak English? What's your name?" For a moment he just stared at me, utterly at a loss for words.

"Rokun," he finally choked out.

It was my turn to be baffled. "Rokun," I repeated helplessly. "Is that your name?" To my relief he nodded.

"How do you do," he added. He said it stiffly, sounding as unused to actually speaking English as I was of Deshtiran, which I didn't really feel like attempting this soon with a total stranger. (He also had a very strong accent, which I won't attempt to replicate here.)

"You've been in this corner all evening," I accused him. "Don't you ever talk to anyone?"

He colored slightly. "Well, parties, lots of people, it isn't my easiest place..." He trailed off.

"Well, will you talk to me for a bit?" I said, feeling a little less aggressive now. I realized that he wasn't aloof, just shy—almost pathologically shy, as I was eventually to learn. "I don't know many people here either," I added.

"You are from Earth, is that right?" he said awkwardly. "And your mother is here, too? I hear about you from the other staff. You are very—er—brave, to do something like that."

And so it went for a good ten minutes, me wringing conversation from him whether he liked it or not, before Rann showed up and towed me off to meet one of his instructors. "I'll see you later," I promised, although I can't say he looked all that happy at the prospect.

The next day Brinkman asked me if I'd be interested in a job.

"A job?" I replied, surprised. "As in, making money?" It hadn't occurred to me that people here had to make money.

"Something like that," he said dryly. "You perform services for someone, and they pay you. Here it goes into your computer record, rather than a bank account, but it pretty much works the same way."

"Well, sure," I said. It suddenly occurred to me that Rann must have been paying any bills I'd been incurring, whatever those might be. "But what can I do that a Deshtiran can't do better?"

"Now Haley," he said patiently, "we may be from Earth but we're not totally useless, you know. For one thing, you speak excellent English."

"Well, of course I do," I said. "I've spoken it all my life. But I don't speak any Deshtiran yet, or only enough to ask where the toilet is, so what good does that do?"

"Actually, quite a lot," he explained. "Many people here also speak English, but that doesn't mean they know the nuances the way you do from a lifetime of use. For example, there's a certain researcher here who studies a lot of Earth's scientific literature, but gets stuck quite often. In fact," he added with a slight note of annoyance in his voice, "this person frequently comes to me to get passages interpreted. Now if you'd be interested in working as a translator, I'm sure you could derive some income that way."

"And just who is this person?" I asked cautiously. I had a nightmare vision of myself as Tosekor Wisela's assistant, tied up in leather straps and—well, never mind.

"His name is Mohantor Rokun," Brinkman began. "He's a researcher in—"

"Oh, him," I broke in, relieved. "I met him last night. At your *soirée*," I added, drawing out the word in what I thought was an oh-so-sophisticated manner, then reddening when it came out more like a Texas drawl. Brinkman stared at me incredulously.

"You *met* him? You mean he *spoke* to you?"

"Well, not very willingly," I admitted. Then a thought struck me. "Just when did he ask you about this?" I demanded suspiciously.

"It's been a few weeks," he said, looking embarrassed himself. "I kept forgetting to follow up on it."

"Oh, okay," I said, mollified. "Sure. It sounds interesting," and so after my lesson Brinkman took me over to the other wing of the research institute to meet my employer-to-be. Poor Rokun practically jumped backwards over his desk when he saw who it was accompanying Brinkman. The look on his face was truly priceless when Brinkman introduced me as his new assistant; I think he'd considered himself lucky to have escaped me when he did the night before and now I'd have the opportunity to torment him regularly on a paid basis.

Before I could actually begin work I had to submit an application, which was done online and was of course all in Deshtiran. With Rann's help I filled in the necessary fields and sent it off to wherever it went, and after that it was a matter of waiting for the necessary approvals.

The following morning I accessed my Deshtiran computer account and found my returned job application form waiting for me. Naturally I had no idea what it said, though two fields near the bottom which had been blank before now contained Deshtiran characters; in addition, each field also contained an odd background pattern which resembled nothing quite so much as a fractal computer graphic.

I finally managed to locate Rann, and had him translate for me. He explained that the background patterns in each field were digital signatures, which are unique to each individual. The first field, he said, was signed Tosekor Wisela. I felt my heart sink. "This character," he said, pointing to the last one in the field, "means 'disapproved.' Too bad," he added flippantly.

"And the other one?" I asked, bitterly disappointed, and admittedly hurt as well at his apparent indifference.

He pointed to the final character of the last field. "This one means 'overruled.' Signed Alan Brinkman," he added with a big grin.

"Yessss!" I exclaimed, giving him an enthusiastic hug. That

afternoon I showed up at Rokun's office and started in at my very first extraterrestrial job.



The job actually worked out quite well. I spent an hour or two a day going over difficult passages in various scientific papers with him, explaining some of the more obscure sentence constructs, and looking up terms when necessary and putting them into straightforward English. I found that most of the papers dealt with neurophysiology in various forms, especially research in things like brain waves and their interpretation using computer algorithms. He actually understood English pretty well overall, but since he rarely had occasion to speak it and didn't watch much Earth television his accent was interesting, to put it mildly. (Of course, I suppose that those who had to suffer through my efforts at Deshtiran probably thought much the same thing.)

As my own Deshtiran improved he also began using me to recopy his notes into usable form. Before long I realized that he was part of the research group examining the Virrin mind machine reconstructed by Tenako and which had eventually destroyed Jack Lucie. On one occasion I asked if I could see it, and he explained apologetically that it was in a tightly restricted area. Not wanting another confrontation with Wisela, I hastily dropped the subject.

Speaking of Wisela, it didn't take me long to discover that she and Rokun got along particularly badly, even more so than most of the staff. As best as I could determine, he resented the fact that in spite of his abilities Wisela insisted on keeping him on a tight leash, requiring approval of virtually every new direction taken by his research team. She, on the other hand, clearly saw him as not being the "team player" that administrators cherish so much. My own sympathies were with Rokun, of course; I prefer people who actually do things to people whose profession is finding least common denominators.

There was an especially ugly confrontation one morning less than a week after I'd started my new job. Fortunately at the time I was sitting on the floor in one corner, pretty well hidden by a desk piled high with journals, working my way through the latest stack of research papers from Earth. This particular quarrel degenerated into an outright shouting match, ending with Rokun threatening to resign right then and

there.

“You won’t quit,” she taunted him. “You’re dying to know how that crystal works. You wouldn’t walk away from it if your life depended on it.”

“Don’t be so sure about that,” he snapped, but I could hear the hesitation in his voice.

“Very well, then,” she said. “Quit. Right here. Right now. All you have to do is say it.” She paused, and the silence was oppressive. “Well?” she finally said, a little more softly. Another pause.

“Good,” she said in satisfaction. “We understand each other, don’t we?” I heard her leave, her footsteps echoing down the marble hallway, followed by a crash uncomfortably nearby as Rokun hurled a heavy glass paperweight at a bookshelf, causing a small avalanche of books and papers.

During all this I’d kept as quiet as possible, wanting to spare him the embarrassment of letting Wisela know that his humiliation had been witnessed. Not to mention that she was decidedly a person I’d just as soon not be better known to.

For several minutes Rokun just sat in his chair, silently fuming. Finally he muttered something unintelligible in Deshtiran.

“Did you say something?” I asked in my most innocent voice, getting to my feet with some difficulty after finding that both legs had quietly gone to sleep. He looked up, startled. I guess that in all the fuss he’d totally forgotten I was present. Then he grinned, a rather bitter grin.

“I thing in Engliss the dranslajun wood be ‘pomposs ess,’ ” he said in his inimitable Deshtiran accent.

“I think that would be about right,” I confirmed.

After that he became much less uptight around me, occasionally making a sarcastic comment about “polidikgal azholds” as he called them. Apparently some things are built into human nature itself, and the tendency of manipulative mediocrities to work their way into positions of power was not altogether unknown on Deshtiris, or even in the Imperial Research Institute.

At my next session with Brinkman I cautiously brought up Wisela’s name, rather expecting to be told what a great personage she was in spite of her abrasive personality. “That pompous ass?” was what I got instead, delivered in a tone neatly combining disgust and frustration into one package. “What’s she done this time?” When I could finally stop laughing, I said only that I’d noticed she didn’t seem to treat people too well.

“Oh, did you witness one of her bouts with Rokun?” he fumed. “If

she keeps that up I'm going to lose one of my best researchers, and then I'm really going to raise hell. She's incompetent, does no real science of her own, and antagonizes some of my best people."

"I thought you were head of this establishment," I said naïvely. "Why can't you just get fire her?"

He shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "Haley, Haley, you have much to learn about the ways of organizations. Who do you think pays for all this?" he asked rhetorically with a vague wave of the hand. I shook my head. "The civilian government, that's who. And civilian governments are run by politicians."

"Okay," I said, still mystified.

"Tosekor Wisela is one of those people who knows how to ingratiate herself with politicians. She knows that what they want more than anything else is something to show the voters at election time, and she's good at stage-managing announcements of new discoveries and making sure that the right people get to bask in the glow. She knows who to hobnob with and who to flatter, and how to cover her tracks. She's a protégé of Senator Nokamian, you know."

"When Kiri set up this institute, and barred those scientists who had dirtied their hands on weapons research for the Brizali, Wisela was one of those remaining," he went on, boiler pressure clearly on the rise. "The excluded scientists all went running off to their politician friends, complaining about how the planet's recovery was being hampered by 'Imperial intransigence,' and she made herself their 'clean hands' spokesperson. The result was that when Kiri went to the civilian legislature for funding for this institute, one of their conditions was that Wisela be placed in a high administrative position."

"But she doesn't actually do anything useful," I protested. "She's never in the labs, except to get in people's way, or to insult someone."

"And that's a good thing, believe me," Brinkman responded fervently. "On the rare occasions when she does involve herself in a project, people waste so much time trying to follow her directives that we're all better off this way."

"What's Rokun doing, anyway?" I asked, as much to change the subject as out of curiosity. Brinkman lowered his voice and whispered conspiratorially, "It's all top secret."

"Oh," I said, disappointed. To my surprise he got up and closed the door. "If there's one thing I've learned living with Kiri and Will, it's that we don't keep secrets in the family. To hell with secrets. I take it you're not going to call the media as soon as you walk out of here?"

"The moment I get to a telecom," I assured him. "So what's it all

about?”

That was when I found out that there'd been more to Tenako's forest base than just the Virrin mind machine. Apparently quite a few devices had been found, some with Tenako's notes but others with no accompanying information at all.

I remembered having been more than a little shocked at Kiri's comment that she'd have been quite happy to have simply destroyed the entire assemblage. "This is technology that we haven't earned," Will had asserted when the subject came up again the following evening. "It's far too easy to just take it, without any sense of responsibility for having created it. It's like handing power to a child. The past thirty years should have shown us that."

However, theirs were no longer the only voices heard on the matter. The civilian government had demanded that the materials be studied, backed by most of the remaining scientific establishment of the planet. Any chance for a rational debate had been shattered by the simultaneous revelation of what Tenako's real goal had been, the "planar field" that would supposedly have provided inexhaustible energy. There'd been hysterical debates over the pros and cons of his scheme, and over the secrecy that Kiri and Will had previously imposed, thereby incidentally reinforcing the wisdom of their original decision.

Most painful of all to the Empress Mikiria had been allegations that it was hypocritical for her to take a stand against retaining the Virrin technology; after all, she'd already personally benefited from it. She'd made no public response to that, but Gelhinda once told me in confidence that she'd been reduced to tears when it was first relayed to her. Although her giant emerald eyes and crimson hair had, if anything, enhanced her natural beauty (and made her a planetary landmark to boot), and her extra heart had saved her life at Tar Deshta, she'd still fought all her life against an internal perception of herself as a "freak."

"In some ways she's still the devastated little girl she was when she and Will first showed up on our doorstep over thirty years ago," Gelhinda had observed sadly. "If she could only see herself the way the rest of us do. She's probably the most beloved person on Deshtiris, and quite possibly Qozernon as well. The insensitive comments of a few malcontents don't change that one bit."

And then there was the crystal.

Tenako's original deviation from the path of a brilliant scientist and leader had resulted from his discovery of a data crystal, at first thought to be an unknown mineral, but then found to hold the entire technological knowledge of the Virrin and accidentally left undestroyed

during their hasty departure thousands of years ago. It was with the knowledge in this crystal that he'd first genetically reengineered his own unborn daughter Mikiria in a misguided effort to protect her from an accident of the sort that had killed his first child. The fallout from this decision had cost him his family, his position and his freedom for several years, and eventually led to the creation of the Brizali and the brink of an interplanetary war. During the confrontation at Tar Deshta which had brought down the Brizal regime Will had destroyed the crystal, thought to be the only one in existence.

But a second crystal had been found among Tenako's possessions at the secret base.

Because of the tremendous implications, its existence had been kept utterly secret, known only to the royal family, the researchers, and a tiny circle of political leaders in the civilian legislature. On this subject Kiri and Will had been, if anything, even more insistent than before, and had consented to its continued existence only if this secrecy were maintained.

At first it had been assumed that it was another technology bible, like the first one. But all efforts to decode it had been utterly in vain, even with the aid of Tenako's secret files. It soon became clear that if this crystal had indeed been a copy of the first, its secrets would have yielded by then.

Rokun had provided the key.

The Virrin mind machine had apparently been designed to upload the complete neural engrams of a human brain into a computer file. In effect the resulting file was a snapshot of a mind, complete with its memories, its emotional responses, value systems, in fact everything that made a human being something more than a biochemical machine. This file could be reloaded into a person, the same or another, either replacing the original personality entirely or being added to it, as though a second mind were present in one brain. It had been the conflict between no less than three such minds in the clone to whom Tenako's reloaded engrams had been entrusted that had resulted in his ultimate decision to bring an end to what he'd started.

There had been at least thirty such files found with the mind machine when the base had been raided. One, Tenako's, had been ultimately erased at Kiri's adamant request. "Let the dead rest in peace," she'd insisted, and on this one issue her wishes had been respected. It was, after all, her own father's mind, and she'd entered the necessary command herself. But she had been unable to prevent the other files from being retained for purposes of research, with the

understanding that under no circumstances would they ever be reloaded into a living human being. It was these files that Rokun had been investigating.

He hadn't had any direct involvement with the group studying the second crystal. But he'd attended some of the top secret in-house lectures given by the researchers, and at one he'd seen a detailed breakdown of the data header that formed the beginning of the crystal's content. With a shock he'd recognized the twin of the mind files he'd been working with so closely and had interrupted the lecture in his excitement, which was quickly shared by the others as they realized that it was the key they'd been looking for.

It was indeed a mind file, but not actually a twin of those from the base; oh, no, not quite a twin. For one thing it was much larger, vastly larger. For another, the organization was hauntingly similar, but not at all identical. For weeks they'd puzzled over the differences, ignoring the obvious answer. And then one of the other researchers had finally suggested rather timidly that perhaps it was of a Virrin mind.

The possibility had stunned those in the know. The Virrin were shadowy legends out of humanity's past. For a long time their very existence had been doubted, dismissed as primitive folklore. It had taken two shattering events to reestablish the reality of their existence. One had been Tenako's data crystal and the use he'd made of it. The other had been Mikiria's Flight.

Now enshrined almost in legend, although only a few years distant, it was something schoolchildren read about in their classes. Fascinated by the legends of the Virrin, of their sudden departure, and of a supernova that had supposedly appeared one hundred twenty-three years later, she'd taken off in the *Futaba* and spent over six months overtaking the transmissions from that ancient time, now several thousand years old but still dispersing at the speed of light. She'd caught them, she'd decoded them, and she'd once and for all proven the tragedy that had overtaken the Virrin's interstellar empire, of their own "planar field" run amok and vaporizing their corner of the galaxy in one giant flash. If perhaps she also had personal reasons for leaving her world and all human contact for well over a year, that ought not diminish the luster of her achievement.



In any case I wound up getting along famously with Rokun, and soon made myself indispensable, or so I thought. Certainly as far as maintaining his journals was concerned I managed to insert some organization into what had previously been utter chaos, and before long he asked if I'd do the same with his electronic journals as well. For this he gave me the password to his working computer account (though not, of course, to his personal records).

What I found was a chaotic jumble of files, some of which were journals, some papers in progress, some just miscellaneous data files he'd found interesting and dumped into his account. With his permission I began creating a directory structure and index to everything I found, and as my proficiency with the Deshtiran computer systems grew I also created an introductory menu system that let him quickly put his hands on the working materials he needed most.

It didn't take long before I discovered that I was getting badly out of shape. Without realizing it I'd managed to construct a life for myself here without any physical exercise at all. I made the mistake of mentioning this to Rann, and immediately regretted it.

"I know just the thing," he suggested eagerly. "Why don't I start teaching you swordsmanship?" In my mind's eye I saw Rann again weaving his net of flickering steel, and then visualized myself pitted against him as the rest of the palace staff watched in stunned horror. The picture that came to mind was not at all a pretty one: me blundering about, waving a sword around like a conductor's baton and making a total spectacle of myself, and ultimately poking out one of Rann's eyes.

"Huh-uh," I said, repressing a shudder. "I'll leave the combat with barbaric relics to you, if you don't mind."

"Ba—Barbaric relics?" he stammered.

"I'm kidding," I assured him hastily, seeing the sudden hurt in his eyes. "They're wonderful, really. But it's just not my kind of sport, okay?" For once I was immune to his pleadings and puppy eyes, and remained adamant. "I suppose I could run, or something," I pondered.

"There's a gym in the palace basement," Rann said sullenly, clearly still smarting from my cruel remark. "Maybe something there will give you an idea." Which it did, as I saw several individuals performing various sorts of gymnastics over in one corner. I'd done gymnastics since junior high, so once I learned how to use some of the less familiar equipment it became a regular part of my schedule.

Between gymnastics, studies, and assisting Rokun my life had now become extremely busy. I was grateful for my mother's newfound fascination with astronomy, particularly as Gelhinda also had an interest in it and had begun spending a considerable amount of time with her. Although Rann never complained, I finally realized to my dismay that I was basically fitting him into odd corners of my time (and not incidentally driving Bad Haley to distraction, to be perfectly honest about it).

It was about three weeks after our arrival that I came home one afternoon to find Gelhinda in our living room waiting for my mother, who was in the shower. Recently my mother had begun diligently translating a paragraph at a time of her astronomy books, and would then sit down with Gelhinda who'd patiently go over what she'd done. Today, however, they were going out to dinner instead.

I'd grown to like Gelhinda very much, and no longer thought of her only as "Senaria's mother." Several times she'd given me advice on one or another matter of social perplexity I'd blundered into, and it had always proven solid.

"Hello, Haley," she greeted me warmly. "Do you ever slow down?"

"Not lately," I admitted. "I was never this busy in high school, that's for sure. Now I have to grab a shower as soon as Mom's done and then go work for Rokun for an hour."

"She should be finished in a few minutes," she assured me. "Why don't you sit down and talk to me while you catch your breath?" It sounded casual, but somehow it felt like a subtle command, and I obediently plopped down on one of the cushions and let out an exaggerated sigh, eliciting a smile from her.

"So how are things going with Rann these days?" she asked. She still sounded casual, but I felt her eyes boring into me, and shifted uncomfortably.

"All right, I guess," I said. "But it seems like we're always too busy over one thing or another to spend much time together."

"Is that so?" There wasn't the slightest change in her voice, and yet I felt like a child caught in an obvious lie.

"No, it isn't," I confessed. "It's really me that's too busy all the time." And I told her how I'd let my days get so crowded that I was lucky sometimes to see him at all, and that half the time when I did my mind was on a million other things. "But I don't know where to cut back," I finished in frustration.

"You know, Haley, you're the first girl Rann's really shown any interest in since Senaria left. It's not as though he hasn't had any admirers, either, but he just never seemed very interested. You're very special to him."

"Haley," she added very seriously, "you're the only one who can decide your priorities, and what's most important to you. But don't just react to things." She glanced at the bathroom door, where we could still hear the sound of the water through the door, before continuing in a low voice. "Be careful when making sacrifices for the sake of others. It's one thing to sacrifice your own interests, and another thing altogether to sacrifice someone else's without their consent." I heard the water stop, and the scrape of the curtain rod. "Just give it some thought," she said with a wink. "Now, I think the shower's free, isn't it?"

I felt sorry for Rokun that afternoon, as my mind was busy chewing over Gelhinda's observations for most of the allotted hour. Fortunately I don't think he realized just how distracted I was; I can spout scientific jargon in my sleep if I have to and it probably wasn't until later that he realized just how incoherent I'd been. The second my time was up I headed back to our suite and lay in wait for my mother, my mind now made up. To my relief she was alone when she returned.

"Mom, can I talk to you?" I said hesitantly. She looked surprised; it wasn't that I never had long talks with her, but I didn't usually ask permission first.

"What is it, Hal?" she asked.

"I'm going to stay with Rann tonight," I blurted out. To her credit, she hid her surprise quite well, only raising an eyebrow (something she'd perfected from her Trekkie days, before her New Age thing hit). "And how does Rann feel about that?" she asked evenly.

"He doesn't know yet," I said. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, quickly suppressed as she cleared her throat. "I see." She patted the cushion alongside her, and I obediently sat down.

"Now Hal, I know you're not here to ask my permission. You're seventeen and can make your own decisions. I've always trusted your judgment, and you've never let me down. Well, almost never." I winced; it wasn't the first time she'd alluded to the infamous incident of the magnesium brick and the blowtorch, though she rarely actually

brought it up. "And you certainly don't need any birds and bees lectures; you know more about biology than I do by a long shot."

"You do really love him, don't you?" she continued. I nodded vigorously. "And he loves you back. No, don't nod like that again, you'll shake your poor brains loose. I know he does. So how clear are your feelings about this?"

"They're a complete muddled mess," I admitted.

"Then you're on the right track," she said approvingly. "Just one question," she added as I started to stand up. "What are you going to do for birth control?"

Oopsie. "I hadn't really thought about it," I confessed. She sighed. "Children are so impractical these days. They're advertising condoms on buses back on Earth, and when our kids' hormones start flowing they still forget all about it. Well, it's a good thing your mother's on the ball. I got the scoop from Gelhi last week, and let me tell you it's a real corker."

"Mother?" I gulped in astonishment.

She explained that on both Deshtiris and Qozernon all males are inoculated before the onset of puberty with a genetically engineered virus that renders them sterile for an indefinite time. The virus permanently resides in the body, doing no damage except for rendering the host's genetic material nonviable. This strategy is more or less a necessity, considering the longevity of the inhabitants and the corresponding need for a very low birth rate, and has been in use for centuries.

When a couple does decide they want to have a child, and their names come up on a waiting list (population control is really strict here), the male is given an antibody that destroys the virus. Within a few weeks he's once again capable of fathering children, and remains so. If resumption of birth control is needed, the couple can either resort to conventional means or the male can once again be inoculated with the otherwise harmless virus.

"So," she finished, "don't worry about it. But if you need someone to help you sort out your feelings, you know I'm always here for you, Hal."

That's my mother. Just when I think I have a real bombshell for her, I find that she's already ten laps ahead of me. I left feeling distinctly chagrined.

As for Rann, he survived. I, on the other hand, walked into my next morning's lesson with Brinkman bearing a remarkable resemblance to a full-fledged zombie. He finally sent me home in exasperation, telling

me to get some sleep.

It wasn't long before I was spending three or four nights a week at Rann's quarters, often only coming home in time for breakfast. It was when I returned unusually early one night that I belatedly realized there were other consequences to my actions.

I was just about to open the door when I faintly heard the sound of my mother's flute softly threading through an intricate, haunting melody. I quietly opened the door to find her sitting on the couch playing. Seeing me she turned away quickly, but not quickly enough for me to miss the tears on her cheeks.

She insisted that nothing was wrong, it was just the music, but I finally managed to worm the truth out of her. Although she'd never said a word about it, she'd found her days becoming terribly lonely. Not speaking much Deshtiran yet, she was limited in what social contacts she could manage, and while Gelhinda had been very kind to her and spent considerable time with her, taking her sightseeing and introducing her to people, her own duties left her unavailable much of the time.

"I'm really sorry," I said, suddenly ashamed of myself. "I've been neglecting you horribly. All I've been thinking of is myself ever since we got here."

"That's harsh, Hal," she protested. "You have Rann, and you have your studies. It's not your job to be my babysitter. I'll be fine. I just need to get out a little more, that's all." Nonetheless, after that I made a point to spend more time with her during the day, and for a while I brought her along whenever I could when Rann and I went sightseeing. To his credit he made no complaint; in fact I do think he really enjoyed her company as well. As it turned out, the situation eventually resolved itself in any case, though not quite in the way I expected.

Besides, we now had our nights together. (Ahem.)



About a month after Brinkman's *soirée* we received an invitation to a second, with the promise of more music. Rann regretfully declined, explaining that Kiri and Will were visiting one of the northern cities that evening for a ceremony of some kind and his presence was expected. He warned me not to make any plans for the following day, though.

My mother, who usually considers dressing up to consist of throwing on some indifferent clothes and draping herself with amulets and other assorted junk, took an unusually long time that evening to get ready. When she finally emerged from her room, I did a double-take.

"Wow," I exclaimed. "You look really nice." In addition to putting on one of her best dresses, she'd tied her reddish hair up into a kind of topknot, I guess you'd call it, and crowned it with the jade comb I'd bought for her in Little Tokyo. I'm not much into clothes myself, but I had to admit the results were pretty impressive. Besides, scientific skepticism aside, the jade couldn't hurt, I thought; there'd been several men at the last *soirée* who'd struck me as being just her type.

When we arrived we found quite a few guests already milling around. Over in one corner two musicians were setting up. One was unpacking a violin, and the other was attaching legs to some kind of small keyboard instrument. Brinkman came over to welcome us, and I promptly interrogated him.

"That's an Earth instrument," I said, pointing to the violinist. "Is she from Earth too?"

"Not at all," he said, looking amused. "She's native-born Deshtiran. So is the other one."

"What's that thing?" I asked. "The one he's putting legs on?"

"It's a harpsichord."

"So there are Deshtirans who specialize in Earth music? Is that unusual?"

"Very," he assured me. "I think there are only a dozen or so on the planet. But since Deshti is the capital city, most of them live and work here." I digested that for a while, as Brinkman wandered off to greet more newly-arrived guests.

"Interesting," I remarked. "All his friends seem to be either fellow researchers or musicians, except for Kiri and her circle."

"Well, it's only natural, Hal," my mother said. "After all, didn't you say he was a musician himself?"

"Uh, I think so," I confirmed half-heartedly. Yeah, right, I thought. He'd played in a rock band for a year or two back when he was working at Lawrence Livermore, while he was still in his twenties. He'd once been asked why, during an interview for PBS. "To meet girls, of course," he'd responded with a stage leer.

The music turned out to be quite good. I don't know an awful lot about classical music, but my mother sat enraptured by the playing, applauding enthusiastically. Once they'd finished several pieces and called a break, I took advantage of the general hubbub to ask her a question.

"Can you play as well as they do?" I wanted to know.

"Oh, Hal, you know I haven't played in so long," she demurred.

"Spare me the modesty crapola," I said impatiently. "You know if you're good or not. Well?"

"Well, I suppose so," she said hesitantly.

"I knew that. Don't go away." I hunted up Brinkman, and once I got his attention I told him he had another potential performer if he was interested.

"Certainly," he said. "Does she have her instrument with her?"

"She will in about five minutes," I said and ran up to our room, returning in considerably less time than that with her flute case.

"Are you sure about this, Hal?" my mother asked uneasily. I could tell she was embarrassed, but I wasn't going to let her get away any longer with playing in the dark to herself.

"We have a surprise performer," Brinkman announced, after clapping his hands a few times to get everyone's attention. "Jennifer Larkin, from Earth, is going to play the flute for us." I saw the two other musicians pause and look at each other, then leave their instruments and find seats. By that time my mother had unpacked her flute and was warming it up, blowing air through it and checking her tuning. Hesitantly she turned to the assembled guests.

"This is *Syrinx*, by Claude Debussy," she stammered, looking for all the world like a jittery junior high school student doing her first recital. Then she closed her eyes and started to play, and after that all anyone was conscious of was the music, growing out of a single simple phrase, repeating, expanding, weaving a web of sound around and through everyone present, until it faded away into silence.

When she stopped there was no sound at all, just an utter hush. She finally put her flute down and looked at the floor in embarrassment. Only then did anyone venture to break the silence with hesitant applause, after which the whole room erupted in an ovation. Loudest of all were the two musicians we'd heard earlier.

"Could you do that piece I heard you play back in Vegas?" I asked, when things quieted down a little. "You know, the platinum thing?" There was an immediate outbreak of entreaties for her to go ahead, and she finally bowed her head in acquiescence.

"All right," she conceded to her listeners. "*Density 21.5*, by Edgar Varèse. Twenty-one point five is the density of platinum," she added timidly.

I remember as she played seeing Gelhinda, lips half-parted, eyes wide and almost unblinking, raptly watching my mother as though she were trying to see every note as it emerged from the instrument. When the piece finished, it was almost as if she were reluctant to let go of the music, only finally applauding when my mother made a deep bow to acknowledge the enthusiastic audience.

"Would your mother be interested in playing with us later?" said a hesitant voice at my elbow. I turned to see the violinist we'd heard earlier. "We've got music for a Telemann trio sonata," she said. "We'd love a chance to try it out."

"I'll bet she would," I said. I wasted no time laying the idea in front of her. "What?" she exclaimed, horrified. "You want me to sight read it in front of all these people?"

"Sure," I said. "Look, it's a party, not a concert. At least give it a try." I was already so euphoric over the way things were going that I think by this time she knew I was unstoppable, so she reluctantly agreed.

I was all gung ho by now for them to start immediately, but my mother demanded that the guests at least be given a few minutes to actually socialize; after all, as I'd said myself, it was a party, not a concert. It did give me an opportunity to observe Brinkman a bit, so I didn't really mind.

It didn't take long for me to notice that one guest, the very attractive young woman who'd played one of the Deshtiran instruments at the previous *soirée*, was doing her best to let him know that she was, not to put too fine a point on it, available. Now this could be interesting, I thought, remembering his reputation as an alleged rake. He certainly didn't object to her presence, and the two were deeply engaged in conversation for a good part of the time. I couldn't hear the

conversation, but I got the definite impression that he was putting on one of his “performances.” At least once I spotted her discreetly running a finger up one of his legs. I was just beginning to really enjoy my first foray into sociological data collection when my mother and the other two musicians began tuning up for their sight-reading.

It went very well, with only a few stops here and there for one or another to find their place again. It turned out none of the three had ever attempted the piece before, so it was a level playing field, so to speak. The winner, of course, was the audience, which was delighted. It was well after eleven before the exhausted musicians, my mother included, were finally allowed to put away their instruments.

By now the guests were starting to drift away. One of them, to my considerable surprise, was the young woman who’d been so energetically pursuing Brinkman earlier. She finally left wearing what I thought was a distinctly crestfallen expression.

My reflections were interrupted by my mother, who was clearly in a state of rare excitement. “Hal,” she said, “you’ll never guess what happened.” I was going to guess, but she didn’t give me time. “They want me to join them on a regular basis, doing trios. In concerts. Real concerts!”

Apparently the flute is regarded on Deshtiris as a highly “exotic” instrument, and here she was, a trained specialist. It couldn’t have worked out better if I’d planned it that way, which I hadn’t, much as I’d like to take the credit. Well, her excitement couldn’t help but be infectious, and so the evening came to a close on a thoroughly upbeat note.*

I was going to walk her back to our suite, but when I turned around next she was already deep in conversation with the other two musicians again, so I just told her I was going ahead. We did, after all, live in the same building as Brinkman, so it wasn’t like I was abandoning her in a deserted neighborhood. Besides, Gelhinda assured me she’d see her back, so I finally stumbled off to bed by myself a half hour later, feeling thoroughly satisfied with the havoc I’d wrought.

I was awakened about two hours later as my mother stumbled into our suite. As best as I could extract the story from her, she and Gelhinda had spent the intervening time celebrating in a highly liquid manner. Mother, you’re going to regret this tomorrow, I thought sadly, but I kept my comments to myself and just made sure that she made it safely into bed while hoping for the best.

* Enough with the music puns already, Haley.—*Ed.*

"I'll never get to sleep at this rate," she protested as I tucked her in. "I'm just so excited about everything that's happened."

"It's really wonderful," I agreed. "Besides, you can sleep in tomorrow morning. Let me know if you need anything."

"Goodnight, Hal," she said. As I was about to leave, she added, "Thanks for what you did tonight."

"Goodnight, Mom," I said gently. When I looked in on her five minutes later, she was fast asleep.



The next day was more or less a weekend for me; I didn't have a lesson scheduled with Brinkman, and wasn't due in Rokun's office until late afternoon. I slept in for an extra hour, and had just lazily dragged myself out of bed and started heating some soup when I discovered a message from Rann waiting for me on the telecom. "I have a surprise for you this morning," his recorded visage announced enthusiastically, "so come by as soon as you're up."

Gulping down my soup as I dressed (no easy feat, that), I left my mother still sleeping off her celebration and wasted no time getting to his apartment, where I found him impatiently wondering what had taken me so long. From there he led me to a building near the very edge of the palace grounds, a ramshackle structure that looked more like an industrial warehouse than anything else.

"Hi, Grenn," he greeted the mechanic that met us at the door. "Is it ready to go?" Grenn nodded, giving us a friendly grin.

"Just be careful with this thing," he said. "There aren't a lot of them left, what with all the roads being recoded again," and led us to the back, stopping before a grimy, utilitarian-looking flier. It was considerably different than the public ones we'd used, being much heavier and boxier.

"Hop in," said Rann, motioning towards the far seat. He climbed in after me and fiddled for a few seconds with the controls, after which we slowly rose through an aperture in the roof. With a last wave to Grenn Rann steered us away from the building and across the city, carefully following one of the major avenues below.

"This is one of the last of the Brizal fliers," he explained. "Since it doesn't read the coded roadways I have to steer it manually, at least until we're out of the city and away from traffic. The other vehicles' collision-avoidance circuitry keeps them away from us, but you have to have a special dated permit to use one of these, since if there were two of them in the air at one time they could fly right into each other."

"So why are we taking something like this?" I asked, fascinated. "What will it do that the public vehicles won't?"

"This," he said with a grin as we passed the city limits and he steered us out over the barren plain that stretched away from the city as far as the eye could see. A curved transparent shield suddenly rose in front of us and extruded itself partway along either side, reminding me of one of the *Futaba*'s transformations, and a moment later I felt myself forcefully pressed back into the seat as we accelerated and began climbing with breathtaking speed. I involuntarily let out a yelp.

"These vehicles can go a lot faster than the public ones can," Rann explained over the roar of the wind. "Only the emergency ones have this kind of acceleration now, and you can't sign one of those out on a lark. I had to get Kiri's okay for this."

It suddenly hit me that in spite of the aforementioned "roar of the wind" I didn't *feel* any wind. Gingerly I poked a finger outside the side of the craft, only to have it nearly blown off by the airstream. "Careful," Rann cautioned, "we're doing about a hundred eighty kilometers per hour now. The wind screen aerodynamically reshapes itself based on our current speed to create a still pocket of air inside. If it suddenly disappeared we'd probably both be blasted right out of our seats. So don't stick your head outside."

Now he tells me. "I thought the Brizali used internal combustion engines."

"They did for most civilian uses," he explained, "but this was a military vehicle for when they needed real speed." As he said it I felt myself abruptly forced backwards again as we accelerated even harder. I could see the wind screen subtly change shape as we did so, and was fascinated to note that if anything the wind noise decreased.

"Where are we going?" I demanded, reminding him that I did have to work that afternoon. "Just to poke around," he answered. "I thought you might like to see something besides Deshti for a change."

I looked out dubiously at the barren desert now far below. "I can't say there's much to look at down there," I observed.

I saw Rann's jaw muscles tense for a moment before he spoke. "That used to be a really beautiful plain," he said, "covered with wildflowers for most of the year. Now it's part of the Brizal legacy." He was quiet for a few minutes. "A lot of the changes have occurred in just the last ten years," he finally continued. "Recently enough that I can remember how some of it used to be. We had wonderful trees in my own home town. They were so green, and so cool, even in the summer, and I used to climb them all the time. When I was eight, we had to move away to one of those industrial centers, and it wasn't until after Kiri came back that I could go home again. When I did I found

that the trees had all died and been torn out, and nothing was growing anywhere. What the heat didn't kill the acid rain did." His voice trailed off.

"But it's turning around now, isn't it?" I said hopefully.

"Sorry," he said, forcing a grin. "I didn't mean to get so depressing. We're out to have fun today. Yeah, it's turning around. You saw how nice that spot up in the mountains was that we visited a while back. That whole forest was on the verge of dying a few years ago from the acid rain, and it's recovering pretty quickly. Nature's not as fragile as it seems sometimes, but still we were lucky. Even with irrigation this plain won't come back until the average temperatures have dropped a few degrees, and that could be decades away."

"So you just wait?" I asked. "Is that all you can do?"

"What do you think of our sunrises and sunsets?" he asked cryptically.

"What kind of answer is that?" I retorted, mystified.

"Haven't you noticed anything different about them?" he persisted. Seeing my honest perplexity, he suddenly grinned. "You haven't seen a single one since you got here, have you? You can't really see the sunsets because of the mountains to the West, and you're never up in time to see the sunrise." Sheepishly I admitted it was true. I'd been so busy, with studying and everything, that I usually didn't get to sleep until late, and by the time I crawled out of bed the sun was well up over the plains to the east. "So what's so special about your sunrises and sunsets?" I asked, now full of curiosity.

"I'll show you this evening," he suggested. "We'll swing around to the west of the mountains behind Deshti so you'll get a good view."

"I have to work this afternoon, remember?" I reminded him petulantly. He mulled over that. "All right, I'll just have to drag you out of bed early some day this week. Then I'll tell you. But you have to see it first."

"Hey!" I protested, but he wouldn't say another word about it and eventually I gave up on the subject, although now being eaten alive with curiosity. Rann, you're getting to know me a little too well, I muttered silently.

After about a half hour we started to see signs of life below, first in the form of a light green scrub, and then more and more leafy vegetation until we were passing over actual farmlands. "It must be wetter here," I observed.

"We've been going almost due north, so things are getting cooler," he agreed. "You'll start to see some towns soon." Which we did, finally

descending and stopping in one for lunch and a much-needed bathroom break. (I realized then just how spoiled the *Futaba* had left me.)

The locals regarded us with obvious suspicion as we landed, apparently recognizing the outline of one of the hated Brizal vehicles from a considerable distance, but their attitude changed remarkably when they spotted Rann's palace insignia on his T-shirt. After that they fell all over themselves making us at home and shyly asking what we did there, and how were the Emperor and Empress, and did we ever get to actually see them up close, until it was with real regret that we had to make our apologies and head out again. They wouldn't even let us pay for the lunch.

We'd been in the air again for another hour, and Rann had become unusually silent. "So," I finally said, "what's eating you? Still thinking about acid rain?" He shook his head.

"No," he said, "nothing like that."

"Well, what then?" I demanded. "You're not usually the moody type." He chewed his lip.

"Hal, you know how I feel about you, don't you?" he stammered. I regarded him suspiciously.

"Well, of course I do, silly," I said. "And you know I feel the same way. You should by now; after all, we've been sleeping together for the past three weeks," I added mischievously, knowing that would bring out at least a blush, which it did.

"Hal," he blurted out, "would you like to move in with me? I know my place isn't all that big, but neither of us has a lot of stuff, and—" He trailed off, seeing the unhappy look on my face.

"Rann," I said finally, "I can't, not right now. My mother's having a bad time, and I'm afraid she'd die of loneliness if I did. I'd love to, really. But give me time to get my mother settled first." He nodded, and we dropped the subject for the remainder of our excursion.

We ended up making a giant circle, swinging around the back of the massive mountain range to the west of Deshti and approaching the city from the south, arriving just a few minutes before my appointment with Rokun. Rann dropped me off on the front steps of the Institute and floated off to the hangar with a jaunty wave.

I arrived just in time to catch the tail end of yet another shouting match between Rokun and Wisela. I tactfully made myself invisible around a corner until she stalked off, flinging a final caustic taunt behind her, and after a decent interval presented myself to a freshly infuriated Rokun.

By this time I'd gotten a much better idea of just where the friction

between the two originated. Rokun had rather grandiose visions, which he'd mentioned on several occasions, of major medical breakthroughs resulting from his work with the Virrin technology. What he couldn't seem to see, and what Wisela obviously did, were the implications. As a seasoned manipulator she could smell political dynamite from a long ways off and had no intention of being caught in the blast. Even Brinkman recognized that Rokun, for all his brilliance, was potentially a very loose cannon on deck.

In a way I might have almost felt sympathy for Wisela's position, if only she hadn't insisted on taking such evident pleasure in being spiteful. Of course, the fact that since our first encounter she'd declined to even take note of my existence, consistently treating me as though I weren't there, admittedly might have colored my opinion of her somewhat.

Later that evening, while Rann and I were relaxing on his balcony, I asked him about Brinkman. I'd been growing more and more intrigued by the contrast between the physicist's reputation (something which his friends had great fun with) and his actual personality. I told him what I'd seen the previous evening. "She practically invited herself to spend the night with him," I said, still surprised, "and he must have turned her down. She was really beautiful, too." Rann nodded.

"Alan's changed quite a bit in the past two years," he mused. "Apparently it had a lot to do with Senaria." I remembered the odd look I'd gotten from Brinkman when I'd first mentioned her name. "I think he was actually in love with her. Maybe he still is. In any case, ever since she first disappeared and then moved back to Qozernon he's pretty much avoided any close personal relationships. It's too bad; he's probably got another seventy or eighty years ahead of him, and underneath all the showing off he seems really lonely." Bingo, I thought.

"Tell me more about this Senaria," I asked. It seemed that everywhere I turned she popped up, one way or another.

"Ummm," Rann said thoughtfully. For a few moments he looked as though he were going to start a very long story, then thought better of it. "Let me go get something," he said instead, and disappeared inside for a few minutes. When he returned he had a bound volume in hand, which he handed to me.

"This is an unofficial version* of what happened several years ago,

*A rather sensationalized version of this document, including several classified references to the ultra-secret Watchdog Organization, briefly appeared on Earth

after the Brizali were kicked out. Part of it was written by Wilorian, but he asked Senaria to write the last part herself because she knew the most about what really happened. You've heard the basic story already, but not in this much detail, and not from her viewpoint. If you want me to I'll translate it as best as I can," he offered.

"Thanks," I said, handing the book back to him. My Deshtiran was coming along well but not that well, I thought, eyeing the thick volume warily. "If you can spare the time, then fire away. This isn't classified or anything, is it?" He grinned.

"Some of it is, but you just won't hear those parts. There are advantages to being the translator, you know. Besides, you do need to know what's going on with the people you're living with, right?" I agreed, and we went back inside, where I sat on the floor while he reclined on the couch and started translating.

When he finished, almost three hours later, I just kind of sat there shell-shocked. "And she's still on Qozernon?" I asked, dazed.

"Yeah," he said.

"Do you ever hear from her?" I pressed.

"Oh, sure, she stays in touch. But it's all pretty much surface talk; you know, how her job is going, that sort of thing. We're going to be visiting her next week," he added, brightening perceptibly. "Will and Kiri have a little surprise for her. Would you like to meet her?"

"I would," I said.

at one time under the title *The Three Minds*. Fortunately for all concerned it was not taken seriously and appears to have sunk without a trace.—*Ed.*



It was a few days later that I stumbled across the photograph. I was digging through Rokun's bookcases, the industrial kind without a back, looking for one particular paper he'd asked to have retranslated. After awkwardly juggling an especially slithery stack of journals, and finally seeing half of them end up on the floor, I picked up the remainder of the pile in disgust and set them on a desk to sort through. When I glanced back at the shelf I noticed a photo hanging on the wall behind the bookcase.

A motley crew of workers was posing for the camera, distinctly unwashed and wearing well-worn work clothes. One of them, off to one side, I recognized as Rokun. On the other side was a young woman wearing a sweat band and what looked like a dark mask over her eyes. In the background was part of the palace, half-hidden behind a web of scaffolding.

"I didn't know you helped with the palace reconstruction," I said, pointing to the photo. "Rann told me it was done entirely by volunteers."

Rokun stared at the photo in astonishment. "So that's where that went," he said. "I haven't seen that picture for a long time." I wondered what else was buried in the archaeological dig he called an office.

"Why's one of them wearing a mask?" I asked absently, picking up stray journals off the floor.

"It's not a mask. It's painted on," he said. Surprised, I looked more closely.

"Some kind of festival?" I suggested. Something about the mask sounded very familiar, although I couldn't quite place it. Not getting a response, I glanced over at him. For a moment he stared into space, then abruptly looked embarrassed and cleared his throat.

"Oh, it's a long story," he said reluctantly.

"I'd love to hear it," I said, adopting my most ingratiating persona. "After all, it would be part of my cultural education, right?"

I actually expected him to refuse, but to my surprise he leaned back in his chair, the same distant look still in his eyes. "It's not as though I

played an important part, but it was exciting for all that. Thirty years under the Brizali was a very long time, and it's still hard to believe that it's all in the past now. As for the girl with the face paint, her name was Senaria."

"What?" I choked. Looking at the picture more closely, I confirmed that it was indeed one and the same person as that hanging on Brinkman's wall, though between the dark band over the eyes, the dirt streaked across her face, and the tangled sweat-darkened hair it was easy to miss at first. A mental bell finally rang, as I remembered the tale Rann had translated for me few days earlier. There'd been something in there about face-painting to grieve for a lost loved one.

"I was teaching at one of the universities when the Brizali took over," Rokun said. "For a while they left us alone, except for arresting some of the more vocal opponents of the regime, but then they started reorganizing the university curricula. Apparently the powers that be didn't see any need for researchers in neurophysiology, and for the next three decades I went from one factory to another, doing routine electronic control development."

"Couldn't you have refused?" I asked.

He gave me a sorrowful look. "I know enough about your history to understand what you're thinking," he said. "Collaborating with an immoral regime, and so forth. But for us it wasn't really like that. Remember, we had never experienced anything like this. And except for throwing out one set of rulers and putting in another, they didn't seem to be persecuting any particular set of enemies. We didn't find out until much later that they'd been systematically liquidating the ruling class ever since taking power. And there was never any hint of war with Qozernon until the last minute."

"Of course things did gradually get worse and worse. Even with the news as controlled as it was, there was no way not to see what was happening to the planet, especially when the greenhouse effect started taking hold and entire regions began desertifying. But by then the Liquidators had made their appearance, and they were far more terrifying than any Brizal could be. It was as if something from our nightmares had acquired tangible form, and the Brizali had allied themselves with them. Now that we know they were just biological machines they do not seem quite as fearsome, but at the time—well, I cannot really describe the impact they made."

"I was working in one of the industrial cities when the news came. I was staying in an apartment for workers, sharing a room with three others. One of my friends was shaking me awake, and I remember him

being utterly incoherent. 'It's over,' he was saying again and again. 'Rokun, wake up. It's all over. They're out. It's actually on the telecom.' "

" 'Who is out?' I remember mumbling. 'What are you talking about?' "

" 'The Brizali,' he babbled. 'Teyn's dead. The military's taken over. And the Liquidators are dead. All of them. It's over, Rokun.' " Somewhere in the background I heard a telecom blaring.

"After that I wasted no time getting dressed. For a while I watched the telecom, but it soon became obvious that the near-hysterical announcers did not know much more than we did. There were several military communiqués confirming that the dreaded Liquidators were dead, as was Krigghin Teyn, and ordering all Brizali to submit to local military authorities."

"I decided to take a walk, and found the streets filled with fellow workers having the same idea. Everywhere the mood was a combination of relief and uncertainty. We were all glad it had happened, but totally in the dark as to how, and what it really meant."

"It was shortly after I returned to my apartment that the telecom announced a broadcast by the head of the Deshtiran military, requesting the attention of all citizens. Of course we were all dying of curiosity so I don't think you could have pried us away in any case. We were expecting some surprises, but nothing compared to what we heard."

" 'Fellow citizens of Deshtiris,' he began, 'thirty years of Brizal rule ended early this morning with the destruction of the administrative city of Tar Deshta and the death of Krigghin Teyn. Several other Brizal installations were destroyed at the same time. Without them the Liquidators, which we have all feared, could not survive. The Deshtiran military has taken control and is in the process of occupying Brizal facilities. As of today all Brizal authority to issue orders to any citizen is hereby abrogated.' "

" 'My fellow citizens,' he continued, 'we in the Deshtiran military are ashamed to say that we did not accomplish this feat. You owe your freedom today to the bravery of just four individuals. They are Prince Nendor Wilorian, Princess Romikor Mikiria, Princess Nendor Zyanita, and Amkor Senaria, daughter of the former Ambassador from Qozernon. Princess Zyanita lost her life in this struggle, and Princess Mikiria is currently receiving emergency medical care.' As he spoke pictures of the four appeared onscreen, and I remember that we sat utterly stunned, for we were all old enough to remember the Royal family, although Senaria's was a new face to us. Even then I found

myself thinking, She's only a girl. What courage it must have taken."

"The commander's speech was followed by a news report, possibly the first uncensored news report we had seen in thirty years. There were satellite images of what was left of Tar Deshta, now only a giant smoking crater. We also saw the unconscious Princess Mikiria being carried through an air lock on a stretcher, with Prince Wilorian and Senaria hovering around her and the medics like guardian angels. Her condition was reported as serious but not critical, and for hours afterwards we exchanged stories about her and her remarkable accomplishments as a child, still remembered from so long ago."

"For us it was a very uncertain time. We were all glad to see the Brizali out, but the military did not have a particularly good reputation either, although for the most part they had managed to avoid doing the Brizali's dirty work. There had been much loose talk about the coming war being a sign that the military was gaining dominance over the civilian authorities. We did not know anything about Tenako or his master plan at the time, of course; in fact even his existence was just a rumor."

"It was two days later when the news came through that Wilorian and Mikiria were going to rule Deshtiris, which only muddled things further. We were all thrilled to hear that they would be heading the civilian government, but we were also very uneasy, not knowing if they were just going to be figureheads, with the military the real power behind them."

"Their first telecom appearance took place a few days later and was probably the most-watched broadcast in Deshtiran history. I do not remember a lot of what they actually said; it is in all the history books now anyway. But we were stunned when they announced that the military was being reconverted back to its traditional role as a disaster relief force, and that anyone who chose to would be mustered out and sent home. That was when we finally realized that the long nightmare was over. I think all three of us were crying by that time, and for all I know half of Deshtiris as well."

"And then at the end the Princess—Empress now, actually, and she looked every inch the part—asked for volunteers to rebuild the royal palace, and it hit the three of us like a lightning bolt, as it did thousands of others, and we decided that no matter what it took we were going to be there."



“Of course, transportation was a shambles, what with the war having swallowed up so much of the planet’s resources, but we found an unused Brizal vehicle in a lot, and when we told the guard on duty why we wanted it he told us with a wink to take our truck and get out of his sight. We scrounged our way to Deshti like that, with people giving us gasoline out of scarce stocks when we explained where we were going, and managed to show up on the second morning after our departure.”

“For the next few weeks I worked harder than I ever had for the Brizali. I ended up with the group rebuilding the palace’s communications systems, doing everything from drawing up schematics to crawling through ceilings stringing cables, and I think it was one of the happiest times of my life. Several times we were joined by the Emperor or Empress or both, who seemed endlessly fascinated with everything going on.”

“They reminded me of little children watching their first tree house being built,” Rokun added with a soft chuckle. I suddenly realized that I’d never heard him speak so long at a stretch, or seen him smile. I think he’d forgotten my presence by then, and I was careful not to say or do anything that might bring him back to the present.

“They didn’t just stand around and supervise, either,” he reflected. “I remember Empress Mikiria emerging from a crawl space, her hair practically black and gripping a cable in her teeth, blinking dust out of those beautiful green eyes and looking for all the world like she had just found buried treasure. But then this was not just their home to be, but a symbol of everything they—and we—had lost for so many years.”

“A few days after I arrived someone pointed out a girl with a dark band painted over her eyes and said that it was a very old Qozernan custom, now rarely seen, done to honor a lost loved one. That was Senaria. A few weeks later she joined our group for a time, explaining that she was helping out wherever she could. I was amazed at her enthusiasm, especially considering that she was Qozernan, not Deshtiran, but someone told me that she had grown up with Mikiria as her adopted older sister during the Princess’ long years of exile and

practically worshipped her.”

“She was a hard worker, somewhat soft-spoken but enthusiastic, and seemed to revel in anything involving strength. Oh, but she was dazzling—her smile, her personality, her optimism. But I could also see the pain in her eyes when she thought no one was looking, and it was apparent that her loss, whatever it had been, had hit her very hard.”

“Did you ever talk to her?” I asked cautiously, trying not to break the spell he seemed under. He shook his head gravely.

“Oh, no,” he demurred, “I could never have invaded her private grief like that.” Maybe, I thought skeptically, but more likely he was just too shy to speak to her. “And then one day she moved off to another group. After that I would see her sometimes from a distance—there were times when she seemed to be everywhere at once—but our paths never managed to cross again. After a few months the restoration project was nearly done, and I had received a teaching offer at one of the universities that was rebuilding, so I bid Deshti farewell.”

“It came as a terrible shock when I heard a few months later that she was missing and presumed dead in a flier accident somewhere in the South. It affected me very badly; I didn’t meet my classes for a week after that and could not seem to get her out of my mind. I had just managed to get back into the routine of teaching again, something which I was proving much less suited to than I had expected, when the news came of the raid on Tenako’s base and her rescue, complete with footage of her being led dazed and bloody onto the Empress’ ship for the trip home. I finally got up my courage and decided to see if I could at least speak to her once. But when I tried to reach her at the palace I learned that she had returned to Qozernon.”

His voice had been gradually trailing off, and was now nearly inaudible. There was a long silence, and I carefully focused my attention on an obscure scientific paper in front of me.

“I think I have said too much, haven’t I?” he suddenly stammered, obviously embarrassed.

“It was very informative,” I said blandly. “After all, you’ve been an eyewitness to some major historical events. I appreciate your sharing it.”

“No, no,” he persisted. Poor Rokun, I thought, he’s one of those people who insist on celebrating their own embarrassment. “I mean what I said about Senaria. It could be misunderstood, and you’re very close to some of her people. Oh dear,” he added miserably, “I don’t even quite remember just what I’ve said.”

“It’s only between us,” I reassured him. “Don’t worry about it.

Now, is this the article you asked me to translate for you?"

So Rokun had been in love with Senaria, I mused on my way back to the palace. How people could go through life feeling things like that and never saying anything was a mystery to me. Of course I didn't mention anything about it to Rann or the others; it was Rokun's own business and no-one else's, and it didn't concern them.

I was woken up at an ungodly hour the following morning by Rann, gently shaking me. It was still nearly dark out, with just the beginnings of light in the east, and I would have dearly loved another few hours' sleep, but he was insistent. Reluctantly I dressed and allowed myself to be led up various stairs and passageways, eventually entering a narrow circular stairwell that went up and up until my legs were aching. This had better be good, Rann, I thought ominously.

We finally reached a landing of sorts with low walls and railings on all sides and a magnificent view. I realized then that we were in one of the many ancient towers that decorated the palace, and which were mostly unused these days.

The palace was located near enough to the west side of the city to be considerably higher in elevation than most of the buildings between us and the vast plains to the east, and with our additional height our view was almost unobstructed. Apparently this was to be the recently-promised sunrise. Rann looked at his watch.

"It should start in just a few minutes," he said cryptically, and I stared out at the lightening horizon, wondering what I should look at. It turned out I was looking in the wrong place, as Rann nudged me and pointed upwards.

At first I saw just a few gently glowing tracers hanging in the sky above, dark grey gossamer streamers against the darker sky, but then they began acquiring color, gradually turning every pastel shade imaginable and spreading across the sky, soft blues and greens overhead, shifting to yellows and oranges and reds as they reached the horizon, which was now much lighter. For the next half hour the show was breathtaking, like a dawn aurora borealis, continually shifting and brightening and intensifying until you felt the horizon aching to release the sun from its captivity.

Then just the faintest edge of the sun broke over the horizon and the sky exploded into brilliant light. First a blinding yellow streak spread from both sides of the emerging sun along the horizon far to either side, then it was as if a magnificent curtain of light swung upwards into the sky, lifting us with it, setting everything aflame.

I felt Rann's arm on my shoulder and realized I'd been afraid to

breathe for—well, I don't really know how long. There were no words that seemed adequate at the time, and so we just stood there and watched until the sun had risen completely over the horizon and the sky had begun to return to normal, with only hints of fading green here and there as a reminder of what had just been.

"This is payback for that wonderful sunset you treated me to in Utah," he said with a soft smile.

"Thank you, Rann," I whispered, putting my arms around him and kissing him. We ended up staying there longer—um, actually quite a while longer—than he'd planned.

During the long descent back, Rann trying his best to appear nonchalant, he explained what it was we'd just seen. "For the past two years we've been using some of the old Brizal battleships to discharge special crystals into the upper atmosphere," he said. "I don't know all that much about chemistry, but supposedly they're transparent and extremely flat and thin, and reflect a lot of the sun's rays back into space. All of our astronomical research is done from satellites, so they don't cause a problem there. And—what's the matter with you?"

"I got a splinter in my butt," I complained.

He rolled his eyes. "Serves you right. Don't you have *any* self-control?"

"Don't I—*Excuuuse* me!?"

"Anyway," he continued, ignoring me, "the crystals are a form of sugar compound, so they'll eventually break down into water and carbon dioxide."

"And so you're trying to balance the greenhouse effect by reducing the sunlight," I finished for him, still ruefully rubbing my backside.

"It's a pretty tricky operation," he admitted. "If we go just a little too far in the wrong direction we could trigger an ice age. But it's supposed to save several decades in restoring Deshti's original climate, letting the planet start to cool while we scrub all the excess carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere, including what the crystals themselves introduce."

"But because of them you'll have to wait until we get to Qozernon to see what a real night sky is like," he added, reminding me that our trip was the next day.

We had just reached the bottom of the stairwell when a question occurred to me. "Rann, what's a 'Liquidator'?" I asked innocently. To my astonishment he froze in his tracks and turned very pale. *It was as if something from our nightmares had acquired tangible form*, Rokun had said, and I suddenly felt cold.

“They were creatures Tenako created using the Virrin’s genetic technology,” he said finally. “They had a third eye in the center of their forehead that radiated light, and a set of sound-producing organs on either side of their heads. With those, they could destabilize organic matter.” He stopped for a moment. “They could literally liquefy a person in a few seconds. The Brizali used them as enforcers and assassins.” I just stared at him in shock; it was hard to believe that a society as civilized as this one could have unleashed such a hideous thing.

“Senaria had a lover killed that way,” he added. “That was why she insisted on going along to Tar Deshta, even knowing how dangerous it was.”

“How horrible,” I breathed.

“They’re gone now,” Rann said, trying to ease the sudden shadow my question had cast. “They all died when the power stations were destroyed. Besides, the technology they relied on was what Alan used to create his anti-firearms device, so at least some good came out of it.” Nonetheless I sorely regretted having brought up the subject, and it took a good part of the morning to shake off the chill it had cast as I prepared for our trip.

As it happened, Will and Kiri extended an invitation to my mother as well. They’d also be attending to some errands in Lernesdi, Qozernon’s capital, so there’d be sightseeing for us too. All in all it sounded like tremendous fun, and as far as my mother was concerned the matter was settled when she learned that Gelhinda would also be going. Ever since my mother’s planetary debut as an exotic instrumentalist she and Gelhinda had been thick as thieves, with the ambassador spending what appeared to be virtually all of her free time with her, listening to her practice the flute for hours at a stretch as well as helping with her language lessons and her astronomy.

I was delighted to see the friendship flourish, especially as our first month on Deshtiris had been so hard for her. Now she had a career, a friend, and a future, and I no longer felt nearly so heavy a responsibility. It was with a relatively light heart that I began packing.

Rann and I agreed that I’d stay at my mother’s that night. We both wanted to get a good night’s sleep this time, and besides I expected her to be pretty nervous. I found, though, that she was more excited about her astronomy studies, practically bubbling over with her latest discoveries.

“I learned the most fascinating things today, Hal,” she enthused as we prepared for bed. “Did you know that Deshtiris and Qozernon aren’t

the only planets the Virrin modified?"

"Is that so?" I said, without a lot of real interest. I was glad to see my mother engrossed in a new hobby, but I have to say that neither astronomy nor ancient history particularly sets my own pulse a-poundin'.

"There are actually three other planets, in a whole separate star system," she continued. Mercifully my apathy didn't seem to register with her. "It's about halfway to Qozernon," she added.

"So what's so special about these three planets?" I asked, more out of politeness than anything else.

"Well, apparently the Virrin were only part way through trafficking—terrafin'—"

"Terraforming?" I suggested.

"That," she confirmed gratefully. "Anyway, all three of them have Earth-type atmospheres, even though the conditions there prove that they couldn't have developed that way on their own. One of them was almost complete when the Virrin left, they think, with lots of water and lakes and plant life, but no animals. The second one has the atmosphere and water but no life. And the third is just a dead ball of rock, with no water or life at all, just the Earth-like atmosphere. Isn't that fascinating? It's like looking through a time window or whatever you call it." I nodded in agreement. Her face clouded. "They use the first one as a prison planet, you know."

"A prison planet?" Now that sounded interesting.

"There's no technology there, no way to ever leave. They don't have a death penalty, so they put the worst hard-core criminals there and leave them on their own." I remembered from Rann's narrative that Kiri had told Jack Lucie he'd be sent to a prison planet. Was this it?

My mother's voice dropped. "They sterilize them first. How horrible," she said darkly.

"Oh, I don't know," I said, my cold-blooded streak emerging. "After all, it wouldn't be fair for children to be born into such a place, would it? And these must be pretty awful people to end up there, I'd guess."

"The worst," she confirmed. "Gelhinda told me that only those who have committed really terrible crimes and are unwilling to be mind-adjusted get sent there. I suppose it's more humane than a prison, though." Her voice trailed off.

"Maybe not," I suggested, my mind lighting up at the possibilities. "It's probably a dog-eat-dog existence, with the strongest coming out on top. Sort of a savage throwback to our primitive ancestors. Pretty

appropriate, if you ask me. So what about the other two worlds?"

She thought a moment, evidently having some difficulty remembering the less unsavory parts. "I think they're doing some weather experiments on the second one, the one with the water but no life. Nobody pays a lot of attention to the third planet, since there's nothing much of interest there."

"Do these planets have names?" I asked idly.

"You would have to ask that." She glared at me. "Let me think. They were—ummm—Aastya, Lamuna, and—darn, what was that third one again?" Her eyes brightened. "I remember. It's Rouaas. I remember because it sounded so exotic. Yes, that was it. Rouaas."



Naturally I turned out to be the one who hardly slept that night. Apart from the trip itself, there was the added bonus of meeting the legendary Senaria, who in spite of her unexpected appearances in conversation remained for me a shadowy and mysterious figure. I have to admit I felt a certain amount of insecurity as well; after all, this was the person Rann had been so in love with, and I couldn't help but feel I'd be subjected to close inspection, however subtle. I'd introduced the Earth custom of shirt-swapping to Rann, and decided that this would be a good occasion to wear his Groucho T-shirt.

There was no sign of him when my mother and I stopped by his room. Assuming he was already at the *Futaba*, we headed on down to the courtyard, where we found Will, Kiri and Gelhinda waiting. As we boarded, I looked around in dismay.

"Where's Rann? Isn't he coming along?" I demanded. Kiri grinned mysteriously.

"He'll be there, but he's gone separately. He has a special errand to run. It involves 'Project X,' " she added, her eyes gleaming.

"Project X, huh?" I grumbled. "I keep hearing it mentioned, but no one will tell me what it is. And couldn't you have come up with a better name?"

"Somebody got up on the wrong side of bed this morning, didn't she?" my mother observed tartly.

"You'll find out tomorrow," Will assured me. I could see they were enjoying this, and sulkily decided to pretend indifference.

Since there were only four seats in the *Futaba*, Gelhinda volunteered to go back to the living quarters and put together the afternoon's meal. This puzzled my mother considerably, as she well remembered the ritual of strapping herself into the flight seats and the ensuing forces she'd been subjected to. "She'll be in a different universe, and won't feel the takeoff at all," I tried to explain, but I could tell she was still baffled and somewhat concerned for Gelhinda.

"Trust me, I'll be fine, Jennie," Gelhinda assured her, and waltzed back to the rear of the craft, disappearing through the steel door. A few

moments later we were on our way.

Although I'd been up in the *Futaba* before, it was nevertheless a thrill to feel myself pressed back into the seat by the acceleration as we shot into the sky, and even more to see the planet suddenly drop away behind us without the slightest sense of movement when Kiri engaged the aninertial drive. And that shift to hyperspeed—well, it still gives me the shivers. No, I don't think I'll ever get tired of it.

The trip itself took the same amount of time as our flight from Earth. I'd long since learned that the three planets were roughly equidistant, a factor that had been crucial to Tenako's aborted plan to set up his inexhaustible energy field. It also meant we had almost twenty-four hours to kill on the way, which we easily filled between meals, chitchat, and Kiri's seemingly inexhaustible supply of movies (and a fully equipped theater to watch them in). That was when I had my first exposure to the Japanese animation she and Will were so fond of. Needless to say I was startled to see Rann's now infamous gesture—the pulled-down eyelid, crossed eyes, and stuck-out tongue—appear on at least three different occasions, at which point Will explained that it was a gesture familiar to any Japanese child.

"So you're the ones who infected Rann with it," I pronounced. "Served you right, then."

We all had a good night's sleep, although I missed Rann's warmth next to me, and after a light breakfast the next morning we dropped out of hyperspace to see a brilliant greenish-blue ball hanging in space ahead of us. Unlike Deshtiris, there was no trace of grey surrounding the planet except for the crisp cloud patterns scattered here and there across its surface. It looked startlingly like Earth, as a matter of fact, and I heard my mother catch her breath as it swam into view.

All five of us were forward in the *Futaba* watching the show, Will standing in the aisleway. I was sitting up front with Kiri, who explained that since we'd be coasting down there was no need to strap ourselves in, while Gelhinda gave my mother a running commentary on the planet's major landmarks.

We took quite a while to land, dropping in a long slow spiral to the planet's surface. Kiri remarked that it was as much to give us a chance to see the landscape as to keep air friction down, and it must have been a good three-quarters of an hour before we were finally skimming low over a rolling golden-brown landscape broken only by an occasional cluster of dwellings and a winding road now and then.

"Just so you know, it's about two in the afternoon here, everyone,"

Will announced.* By then we were only a few dozen feet above the ground, slowing to a stop as we pulled up to a large two-story house with a separate garage and a well-kept lawn, the latter shining a brilliant green in the sunlight. An odd-looking vehicle that looked like a milk carton lying on its side was parked over the lawn a few dozen feet away. Standing in front of the house watching us was a tall, athletically built young woman with a tousled mass of golden blond hair, dressed in short pants and an open windbreaker.

We let Gelhinda out first, who wasted no time dashing over to her daughter and giving her a fond hug as the rest of us disembarked. The air was cool and just a bit crisp, though the bright sun kept us from feeling chilled in our T-shirts as we joined the two. I noticed Kiri was carrying a small duffel.

"It's good to see you again," Senaria said quietly to the royal couple. The voice was unexpected: it was soft and carried a lot of warmth, something that seemed slightly at odds with the powerful but well-proportioned build of its owner. But not with the face, which had far more vitality than any static 3D photo could impart. Only a thin and almost invisible scar broke its symmetry, running from just below one eye to the corner of her mouth. I wondered where she'd gotten it, and what the occasion had been that she'd felt it worth preserving.

She turned to me, and I felt two penetrating blue eyes gazing at me in considerable interest. "You must be Haley," she said. "I'm glad I could meet you," and to my surprise she sounded like she meant it. "Looks like Rann is taking good care of you," she added with a slight smile.

"You bet," I confirmed, feeling suddenly tongue-tied. I was relieved when Gelhinda interrupted us to introduce my mother. We were just about to go inside when Rann finally arrived in a modest two-person flier, pulling up about thirty feet from the *Futaba*. I absently noticed the word "Noriko" stenciled on both sides of the little vehicle.

"Well, we're all here," he announced cheerfully as he trotted up to join us. "Hi, Sen."

"Hello, Rann," she said. "Glad you could make it."

He grinned. "I wouldn't miss this for anything." He seemed

* A Qozernan day is almost twenty-five Earth hours long and the Deshtiran one closer to twenty-three and a half, and the hours are also of slightly different lengths. It's possible to keep track of the time on both planets using complex calculations, but far easier to just check one's watch—most watches have a dual-planet function built in.—*Ed.*

exceptionally buoyant about something, as were Will and Gelhinda. Kiri cleared her throat.

"Sen," she said, "We're also here on official business. We knew you wouldn't accept the idea of a public ceremony, and so Will and I have been delegated by both the Deshtiran and Qozernan governments to give you this." She pulled a small rectangular object wrapped in expensive-looking fabric from her duffel and handed it to the clearly dismayed young woman. "Go ahead, unwrap it," she said helpfully. A moment later Senaria was holding up a glistening object (I guess you'd call it a "plaque," more or less) and reading the inscription skeptically:

Presented with gratitude to Amkor Senaria, to whom two worlds owe the preservation of their freedom.

It was signed by an impressive array of names, including the heads of the elected civilian governments of both planets and, of course, the Emperor and Empress of Deshtiris. For just an instant her eyes seemed to light up, then it was as though the life drained out of them.

"Yeah," she said bitterly, setting the plaque face down on the porch railing. "I screwed up, broke someone's heart, nearly tore my leg off, and ended up getting several people killed."

"That's not fair," I burst out. She looked at me in surprise. From what I'd heard of her I expected a fierce glare in return, but the ice blue eyes fixed on me were more startled than angry and, I thought, even a little bit grateful. "You know that's not what it really added up to," I rattled on. "Getting stressed out and making some bad choices doesn't make you a criminal, and it was hardly your fault you got shot down. You're not being fair to yourself and you know it."

Rann grinned. "Looks like you have a new defender," he said to Senaria.

This was Kiri's big surprise? I thought, rather peeved by this time. A plaque? Reluctantly Senaria turned it back over and leaned it upright against one of the posts. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "I don't mean to be ungrateful."

"Like it or not, Sen, you are a national* hero after all," Kiri said wearily. "Besides, it's not just the plaque." She turned to Will.

* The actual Deshtiran word used here is difficult to translate. There is no native word for "national" as we think of it, since there are no nations *per se* on Deshtiris or Qozernon. Perhaps a better, if clumsier-sounding, translation would be "hero of the interplanetary community."—*Ed.*

“They—and we—thought you ought to have something more in keeping with what you did,” he announced with a broad grin. “Therefore—we proudly present ‘Project X!’ ”

With a theatrical flourish the two turned to Rann’s little flier, Kiri addressing it in a ringing voice. “*Noriko* transform: starship!”

I’d already seen the *Futaba* do it a dozen times by now, but it still sent chills down my spine to see the diminutive surface craft Rann had arrived in suddenly enlarge and repour itself into an almost exact replica of the *Futaba*. I turned to Senaria to see her staring open-mouthed and distinctly drained of color. For a moment she gasped for words. Kiri put an arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. “Yes, it’s yours, Sen,” she said quietly. “Courtesy of two grateful planets. And that includes me, too.”

Senaria tried to speak again, clearly about to protest, but Kiri didn’t give her the opportunity. “This ship isn’t a gift, Sen,” she informed her, her voice suddenly stern. “You paid in full for this, with your own blood and pain. Unless the currency was counterfeit, this is a legitimate transaction and you have no business rejecting it.” I watched, hardly breathing, as Senaria warily digested this for a long minute.

“No,” she said at last, “it was real, all right.” Slowly the tall young woman approached the ship, gently running her hands over the glass-smooth hull. “*Noriko*: portal,” she said hesitantly, and was almost instantly rewarded by the familiar opening and ramp near the front. She turned back to us. “You even programmed in my voiceprints already?”

Kiri nodded. “It’s ready to go. Of course, you can rename it if you want. I had to call it something for configuration purposes.”

Senaria entered the ship, where we saw her poking around at the controls. Then she turned and walked to the back of the ship, opening the doorway in the back. Like the *Futaba*, there was no corresponding doorway on the outside of the ship. It was as though she simply stepped out of existence.

“Come on,” Will said. “The surprises aren’t over yet.” We followed him through the *Noriko* and its rear doorway into its living quarters, where I received another surprise. Instead of the football-field-long hallway of the *Futaba* with doors branching off to each side, I felt as though I were stepping into the living room of a comfortable home, complete with stairs going both up and down to other stories. We found Senaria a few rooms back, admiring a fully furnished kitchen complete with well-stocked shelves.

She turned to us, now with a broad smile lighting up her features. “Lunch, anyone?” she suggested.



She turned out to be quite a good cook, even if it was sandwiches and salad, and we managed to stuff ourselves pretty well in spite of having eaten only an hour or so earlier (which fact we tactfully kept to ourselves). After lunch there was no question but that Senaria should take the *Noriko* for a test drive, but first Will and Rann disappeared into the *Futaba* and emerged carrying an object somewhere between a door frame and an archway, vaguely resembling one of those security detectors stores make you walk through to see if you're stealing anything.

"Your spare gateway," Kiri explained as they lugged it into the house. "Where do you want it, Sen?"

Senaria, who was still somewhat in shock even after our lunch, tried half-heartedly to think and gave it up. "Just leave it in the living room for now, I guess," she finally decided.

Once the two returned Senaria took us up for a ride, which she did quite skillfully, flying us out to Qozernon's only moon (a diminutive chunk of rock nothing at all like Earth's magnificent satellite, and barely visible from the planet). She was clearly an experienced pilot, bringing us right into some of the nooks and crannies of the rugged little planetoid, which was hardly round enough to even call a sphere.

When we returned she invited us into her house, where we were greeted by a cat unlike any I'd seen before. Larger than an adult house cat, he was mostly yellow, leaning towards orange. There was a white splotch on his head as well as the beginnings of black stripes, which changed to spots towards the back. He didn't seem alarmed to see us, jumping up onto a table and eyeing us intently.

"Hi, Tora," Rann said affectionately and stretched out a hand, which promptly got licked.

"That means 'tiger,' doesn't it?" I asked. (That and *manekineko* were the sum total of my acquaintance with the Japanese language.)

"Close enough," Senaria agreed. Tora wasted no time jumping into my lap once we'd seated ourselves in the living room, and spent the next hour purring vigorously as Rann and I took turns petting him into

a stupor.

I may not be the most perceptive of persons, but it didn't take me long to realize that there seemed to be an unspoken agreement to stick to safe, conventional topics. In spite of the obvious affection which Senaria and the members of our party held for each other the conversation never got much below the surface. I remembered the story Rann had translated for me, and found myself shivering in spite of the warmth of the house. Just how deep had the wounds gone, I wondered.

I saw the "spare gateway," as Kiri had called it, still sitting in the living room. "Why do you need a spare gateway?" I asked.

"It's one reason I'm still alive today," Kiri said quite seriously. "It connects to a second gateway in the back of the living quarters, so that if something happened to the ship and the occupant had to take refuge in the living quarters they wouldn't be stranded there for eternity. Almost happened to me once," she added offhandedly.

"Couldn't you have one of these on Deshtiris and the other here?" I asked. "Wouldn't that make it unnecessary to spend a day getting here?" Will shook his head.

"It certainly would. It'd also make it possible for an invasion force in either direction to just walk through from one planet to the other, removing the time buffer that saved our butts a few years ago. If this had been available to the Brizali this planet would be a Brizal protectorate today."

"Oh."

"Maybe someday," Kiri added. "But I'm still paranoid about where I put these things for the time being."

Eventually I wound up deep in conversation with Senaria, who wanted to know how Rann and I had met, as well as all the details I could remember of his stay on Earth. I knew that she herself had been to Earth several times, though not since she'd returned to Qozernon, so I told her about our visit to Kiri's house above Fontana. "But I was too late to see the crater," I added.

"The crater," she repeated absently. There was a long pause. I looked at her in surprise, and realized that her eyes seemed to be somewhere far away. "Senaria?" I prompted her hesitantly. She abruptly became aware that I was staring at her, and looked flustered. "Cute shirt," she said.

It was my turn to be confused, until I realized she was referring to the Groucho quote I was wearing. "Actually, it's Rann's," I explained. "I borrowed it for the trip." I was more than a little astonished to discover that she not only knew who the Marx Brothers were, but had

seen most of the movies.

"I watch more Earth television than I should," she admitted ruefully. She'd also, I discovered, seen the news broadcast of our sensational departure. "Funniest thing I'd seen in months," she said with a grin. "I'll bet Valkar was spitting nails."

I'd met Valkar a few days after our arrival. He was the palace major-domo, and, yes, I told Senaria, Rann had carefully avoided him for the next three weeks.

"We do need to be going, Sen," Kiri said finally. "We've got some things to do in Lernesdi, and we'll be staying there tonight. But we'll be back tomorrow morning, unless you object."

"Of course not," Senaria said. "You know you're always welcome here."

"Oh, by the way," Kiri said very casually, "Alan would've liked to have accompanied us, but he's already on Qozernon doing some lectures. He said he might stop by if he got the chance." She seemed to be watching Senaria warily as she said it. I saw just a flicker of an indeterminate emotion pass across our host's face.

"That's fine," she answered evenly. "If he shows up I won't chase him away. I assume he'll call first?" She turned to me. "I'm sorry you can't stay a little longer. It was just getting interesting."

I looked at Kiri hopefully, but she and Will were already standing up. I turned back to Senaria. "I wish I could," I said apologetically.

"Why don't you stay here tonight?" she suggested unexpectedly. "The others could pick you up when they return tomorrow morning." She turned to Rann with a slight grin. "That's of course if Rann can part with you for a night." She was immediately rewarded with the usual shade of pink.

"Hal, don't you want to see Lernesdi?" my mother protested. "It's the capital, you know."

"I can see it another time," I said. "It's not going anywhere. I'd rather stay, if it's all right with everyone." Rann looked at me suspiciously, probably suspecting (correctly, as it happened) that Senaria and I would end up swapping stories about him, but made no objection, and my mother was spending more time with Gelhinda than with me in any event these days, so it was agreed. A short while later Senaria and I gave them all a parting wave from the front porch as they floated off down the road, packed into a large flier of Gelhinda's that they'd commandeered from the adjacent garage.

"Well, now you're alone with the ogre," Senaria said. "So am I as bad as everyone says?"

"Certainly not," I said, and then blushed. "I mean," I stammered, "they don't say you're an ogre, or anything like that. They just wish you were happy. I meant what I said earlier," I added. "About being fair to yourself."

"Thanks," she said, unexpectedly putting on a perfect Texas drawl. "Ah do need a good whack upside the haid once in a while, ya know."

"Where did you learn to do that?" I asked in surprise (or maybe horror), referring to the accent, of course.

"Watching *Dallas*," she said with a grin. "Aren't you sorry you asked?"

She seemed to unbend with me a lot more than she had with the group as a whole, asking a lot of questions about Rann, and how the two of us were doing together. I wondered if I were going to inadvertently hurt her feelings somehow, but then decided that I wasn't going to go for subtlety, which I'm not exactly good at in any case, and so I just told her the facts as best as I could. She seemed pleased, both with the fact that Rann was obviously happy with the current state of affairs, and also with my directness. I got the distinct feeling that people had been handling her with kid gloves for quite a while and that she was getting tired of it.

"Are you seeing anybody now?" I finally asked.

"No," she said. I decided not to press the issue.

It was about an hour after the others left that Brinkman called to tell Senaria he'd be coming by in a half hour, if it was okay with her. He arrived right on schedule, and it didn't take long for me to sense the tension in the air. I thought he looked a bit dismayed to see me there, nor had I misread him as it turned out. Senaria finally asked if I'd mind if they left me alone for a little while. Of course I agreed, and they stepped out into the back yard, well out of earshot.

I wasn't prepared for what happened next. It was just about fifteen minutes later that Senaria unexpectedly came storming into the house, her face red, and practically ran up the stairs to her room, slamming the door behind her. Shortly thereafter a thoroughly ashen Brinkman followed, appearing for all the world as though he'd been ordered to commit suicide. He looked at me helplessly, the question obvious on his face.

"She went to her room," I stammered, and he sat down, or rather practically collapsed, onto one of the couches, staring dejectedly at the floor. I finally tiptoed up the stairs to her room and listened for a moment. I couldn't hear anything, except for what might have been an occasional muffled sob, and so I made a silent retreat back to the living

room. Brinkman glanced up at me hopefully as I returned. I shook my head.

"I think you probably should go," I suggested, not really knowing what to do. I don't think I'd ever seen a man look so utterly defeated, but I had no idea what else to tell him. He nodded slowly and soon left.

I made myself comfortable and looked through some of the reading material in the room, which from what I could tell dealt primarily with emergency medicine. The light was fading outside when she reappeared, a silent ghost in the living room doorway, holding Tora in her arms. I hadn't even heard her come down the stairs.

"I'm terribly sorry," she said quietly. "I guess I'm not much of a host, to leave you like this for so long." Her eyes were rimmed with red, but she appeared calm, and was clearly embarrassed.

"Don't worry about it," I reassured her. "It gave me a chance to look at some of your training materials. This is what you do for a living, isn't it?" I'd actually forgotten about her occupation until I saw the books, though Rann had mentioned it several times.

"It's a pretty interesting job," she said as she sat down opposite me. For the next few hours she shared stories of her emergency duties, explaining that she was called a PET, or Planetary Emergency Technician, which I gathered was similar to paramedics back in the States. She was clearly very much taken with her work, and although her tales varied from the hilarious to the horrific I soon realized that the one thread running through them all was her concern for the people she was helping.

"You must see some awful things," I ventured at one point, after a particularly gruesome tale.

"I can handle blood and guts," she said matter-of-factly. "I'm not sure why, but it's never bothered me. It's the sadness that wears you down—the child gone forever, the lover gone forever, the parent gone forever. I know how it feels, all too well. But maybe that's why I can help them survive that awful first realization of loss." By now her eyes were somewhere far away, and seemed to have faded somehow. She shook her head, as if to throw off the unexpected mood.

"Let's get you set up for the night," she said in a businesslike tone. "It's getting late."

She gave me the spare bedroom on the first floor, and after making sure I knew where to find the essentials (such as the bathroom), she bid me good night and disappeared up the stairs, Tora close on her heels.

For a long time I lay awake, my mind spinning in random ellipses. Of Senaria I found myself an instant admirer. I could easily see how

Rann would have fallen in love with her, for there was a warmth to her, not at all far below the surface, and a vulnerability as well. I remembered that Rann had told me her father had died suddenly when she was just ten, and thought about how shattering that must have been. My own parents' divorce had occurred several years later in my own life, following several years of deteriorating relations, and it had left me confused and resentful for a long time.

I found myself absently wondering how my father was doing back on Earth. Was he worried about us? Did he miss us? Was he angry? Hurt? He'd seen the two of us literally "abducted by aliens," and for all he knew we could have been captured for food. And on that ludicrous note I finally drifted off to sleep.

I was awakened by a horrifying shriek. For a few seconds I remained sitting bolt upright in bed, the sound still echoing in my ears. Then I grabbed the first heavy object I could find (a large book) and ran frantically up the stairs, passing Tora fleeing in the other direction, his tail inflated to several times normal size. I pounded on the door, then threw it open, half-expecting to see an intruder crouching over the bed or climbing out the window.

Senaria was sitting up, her eyes wide and staring, her mouth still half-open. "Senaria!" I cried, and at first got no response. "Senaria?" I said again, and slowly she became aware of her surroundings. Her hair was sodden and her face deathly pale.

"I— I—" she stammered, then seemed to regain some control over herself. "It was just a bad dream," she managed, but I could see that she was shivering uncontrollably. I didn't know what else to do, and she looked terrible, so I sat down on the side of the bed and put my arms around her and held her until she calmed down somewhat. She felt ice cold to the touch.

"I'll be fine," she said finally, but made no effort to push me away. "It was just a nightmare. I used to have them a lot, but it's been a while."

"Can I get you something?" I suggested. "Maybe a glass of juice?" She nodded shakily, and I disengaged myself and went down to the kitchen and poured a glass of apple cider. Tora warily accompanied me back up the stairs, having evidently decided that the coast was clear again. Senaria gratefully gulped down the juice, I suspect as much because the tart taste was reassuringly real as out of actual thirst.

I could see that she didn't want to try going to back to sleep yet, so I stayed with her for a little while, making small talk. To my surprise, she brought up Brinkman on her own; after the afternoon's events I

wouldn't have dared raise the subject.

"What's he like these days?" she asked. "You know, today is only the fourth time I've seen him since I came home. Is he still chasing after anything with two legs and tits?"

"Oh, no," I remonstrated. "He's nothing like that. At least not since I've been there. In fact, he seems to avoid relationships entirely." I told her what I'd seen at his *soirée*. "He pretty much keeps to himself," I added, "except for his work and family. The rest of his acquaintances seem to be purely social."

"Family?" she said in surprise.

"You know, Kiri, Will, your mother," I said. "They're our family too, now," I said proudly.

"Kiri'll make someone a great mother someday," she observed unexpectedly. "I just don't think she realizes it yet."

We talked about Brinkman a while longer, and I even extracted a half-hearted smile from her with my description of Kiri's playful attempt to have him beheaded. She finally sent me back to bed, assuring me that she'd be okay now. I left her with Tora curled up by her side, her blue eyes still half open in the dim light as I closed the door behind me. I settled myself back into bed, for a while nervously alert for further screams, but all remained quiet this time and when I opened my eyes again it was morning.



When I ventured out of my room I didn't see any sign of her, although I heard periodic scuffing sounds, mixed with an occasional grunt, from somewhere out back. After splashing my face with cold water, I put on my clothes and set out in search of the noises.

The sight that met my eyes as I opened the back door was fascinating. I found Senaria in what looked like a homemade training area along one side of the extensive yard, working her way through a strenuous program of exercises that seemed to involve every muscle group ever discovered, and apparently enjoying it immensely. I'd done gymnastics since junior high school (never caring for so-called team sports), but certainly nothing this vigorous. Her agenda seemed to emphasize agility as much as endurance, including jumping on and off various platforms, sometimes doing a complete back flip in the process, and invariably landing squarely on her feet.

"Bravo," I exclaimed, applauding enthusiastically, when she finally reached a hiatus of sorts and stood panting with hands on knees and head down as she regained her breath. She looked up in surprise and gave me a friendly smile, one which lit up her face quite remarkably and made her seem almost a different person than the rather dour young woman I'd first met yesterday.

"Good morning," she managed after a few more gasps. "I don't suppose you do sword training, do you?"

I shook my head in surprise. "Sorry," I said. "Rann's tried to talk me into it a few times but, well, to be honest I was always too embarrassed to."

"What do you care what other people think?" she said scornfully, the cherished *bon mot* startling me coming from this Qozernan Amazon. I'd gotten so used to switching between Deshtiran and English by now that it took a moment for the fact to also register that she'd said it in English.

"Richard Feynman," she added helpfully, watching my expression with amusement.

“Arline Feynman, actually,” * I corrected her, still amazed. “Where’d you hear it?”

“I read his autobiographies a few years ago,” she said, as though that explained everything. Between our conversation last night and now this, I was finally beginning to realize that she was not at all what she seemed at first glance.

“So how about it?” she continued. I must have looked pretty blank. “I was asking you about sword training,” she reminded me. “Want to learn some? Great way to keep in shape.” There was something so encouraging about the way she said it, and not at all mocking, that I felt my resistance leaking away like the charge on a capacitor. “All right,” I conceded. “But don’t expect too much.”

She disappeared into the house and returned a minute later with two practice blades, virtually identical to those I’d seen Rann and Kiri using. No sharper overall than a letter opener, and with a smoothly rounded point, the main danger they posed was indeed that of poking out an eye by mistake. But they could inflict some pretty impressive bruises, as I’d seen on Rann more than once.

Senaria showed me one of the basic moves, had me copy it, and we took it from there. Although I felt awkward at first, the blade itself seemed to guide me along, being perfectly balanced and very easy to wield in spite of its size. I quickly found myself having a great deal of fun.

“Don’t you have anyone to train with?” I asked during a pause for breath. “It must be hard to keep in practice just doing your exercises.”

“I have a few friends from the EMRN that train with me on our mutual days off, and another one that comes in from Deshtiris now and then,” she said. “But it’s fun to train someone from scratch, especially when they’re having as good a time as you are.” She was right, too, I realized, and renewed my assault with what I hoped might be something like a samurai yell. It did incapacitate her, although it was with laughter, not fear.

I soon lost track of the time, and so it came as a shock when we stopped for a moment and a chorus of cheers erupted from behind us. I spun around to see that my five tripmates had returned from Lernesdi and were watching us with fascination. I turned to Senaria accusingly, feeling myself turning pink.

“All right, how long did you know they were there?” I demanded.

* The legendary physicist’s first wife; for a long time he misspelled her name as “Arlene.”—*Ed.*

"For the past ten minutes," she said gleefully. "But if I'd told you, you would have missed those last ten minutes of training, right?"

"How did you talk her into this, Sen?" Rann protested. "I couldn't get her to even touch a sword. She told me they were 'barbaric relics.' "

Kiri turned to Will. "I thought you had the only 'barbaric relic' here," she giped.

"That's not what you called it last night," he shot back with a leer.

"Children, please," Gelhinda broke in. My mother just stood there, taking it all in with a silly smile.

"Senaria, you've bewitched my mate," Rann insisted.

"Serves you right for neglecting her education," she jeered back. "To the victor belong the spoils!" she cried, unexpectedly scooping me up with one arm and throwing me over her shoulder as though I weighed nothing (I don't), where I dangled flailing and kicking uselessly. Then she ran like a deer into the house, dumping me unceremoniously onto the couch. I should have been outraged, but there was something about seeing her like this, so unlike the day before and so utterly without inhibitions, that I couldn't help but giggle.

I saw a shadow pass over her face. "Please don't mention what happened yesterday," she said to me in an undertone as we heard the others pouring through the back door.

"Sure," I agreed, startled at the sudden change. Then everyone else came thundering in and her grin returned as if nothing had happened.

We finally managed to get ourselves packed up for the trip back, waving a farewell to Senaria through the thick crystal as we lifted off. I thought she looked a bit forlorn standing there, shrinking into invisibility as we rose into the air and left the planet behind.

I noticed that my mother still looked a little out of it; not unhappy or anything, just kind of spacey. I wondered if all the sightseeing had been too much for her. It was after we'd gone to hyperspeed, and the ship had been left to run itself for a while, that she asked me to stay behind in the *Futaba* after the others headed back into the living quarters.

"Hal," she said hesitantly, "can I talk to you for a few minutes?" Surprised, I agreed, hoping nothing was seriously wrong.

"I've felt closer than ever to you over the past few months," she said. "I feel that you're as much a friend now as my daughter. I really don't think of you as a child any more."

"Thanks, Mom," I said, self-inflating at the thought. "You know how much your trust means to me."

"You haven't kept secrets from me," she went on. "I've really

appreciated that. I don't want to keep secrets from you, either." And then she told me what had happened at Lernesdi. I was astonished, to say the least, and it took a few minutes for it to all settle down in my mind into some kind of sense.

"You're upset, aren't you?" she said anxiously, and I hastily shook my head.

"No, I'm not," I said firmly, and I meant it. "I'm really happy for you. I just wasn't expecting this. I hope it'll work out." She looked relieved. "Things are different here, aren't they?" I observed wryly. She smiled radiantly at me.

"Yes, they really are. Thanks, Hal." As we walked back along the *Futaba* to the living quarters, I noticed she again had the jade comb in her hair. Maybe that stuff really does work, I marveled.



We found the others engaged in a heated argument over who'd originally developed the system of birth control in universal use on both planets.

"I know I read somewhere that it was a religious cult," Will was insisting.

Kiri scoffed. "How could a religious cult come up with technology like that? Even if the original virus was a random mutation, the antibodies are engineered to fit it like a glove. I still think it was some kind of Virrin technology they got hold of."

"A religious cult?" I interrupted. I hadn't heard this particular bit of lore before.

"It's so long ago that the details are uncertain," Gelhinda explained, "even before space travel between the two planets. Similar to what your archaeologists do and don't know about ancient Mesopotamia. It was at a time when Qozernon was starting to face severe overpopulation. Somehow a plague of childlessness started spreading across the planet, and no one could stop it. It looked as though the entire human race would die out within another two hundred years at most, at least on Qozernon."

Kiri picked up the thread. "Then a religious cult is supposed to have announced that it was the result of widespread wickedness, and that only those who repented and joined them would be allowed by the Virrin to reproduce."

"So this was while the Virrin were still here?" I said. It didn't make a lot of sense.

"No," Gelhinda explained patiently. "This cult worshipped the long-gone Virrin as gods, claiming they'd risen into the heavens and were watching over them from the spirit world."

"I see," I said. My mother looked absolutely fascinated.

"Those who joined the cult and swore allegiance to the Virrin-gods," Kiri continued, "and, more importantly, to the cult's human leaders, went through a ritual that somehow rendered them able to conceive children again. The ritual was complicated, but among other things involved drinking a 'magic potion.' "

“Since the only way to undergo the ritual was to join the cult and swear allegiance,” Gelhinda said, “it became extremely powerful and in fact ruled the planet with an iron hand, and a very greedy one. But then someone discovered that the key to the whole thing was the potion, and smuggled out the formula for making it. When the truth emerged there was a terrible retribution, which ultimately ended with the cult’s leaders being hunted down and slaughtered. The administration of the antibodies was put in the hands of the government, which saw an ideal way to control population growth, and it’s been there ever since.”

“So what’s the problem?” I asked, remembering the heated argument in progress when we’d arrived.

“No trace of the original formula still exists,” Gelhinda sighed. “It’s been analyzed and researched for so many centuries since then that what we have now is relatively recent technological data. But we have no idea what information the original cult used to invent the stuff, and whether someone somehow stumbled on it by accident or found something the Virrin left behind.”

“So it’s an argument that can’t be settled,” I said in disgust.

“That’s what I told them,” Rann confirmed wearily.

Mention of the Virrin reminded me of what my mother had said the day before about the three Virrin worlds.

“Do you really maroon criminals on a prison planet?” I asked. “It sounds so inhumane.”

I had to wait for an answer. Kiri looked rather uncomfortable, and several times Will looked as though he were going to say something, then thought better of it.

“When we have to,” she said finally. “It’s not something we’re proud of, and we generally try any and all alternatives first. But sometimes it becomes necessary.”

“Alternatives?” I asked. “Like what?” I think I’d felt safer in Deshti, including walking the streets late at night with Rann, than I ever had on Earth. Back in Las Vegas my mother wouldn’t have considered leaving the house unlocked, even when we were home, but here virtually anyone could walk into the palace, up the back stairs and to any room they wanted to, without much danger of being apprehended.

I’d once asked Rann if there was any way to lock my door. He’d looked at me in astonishment. “Just close it,” he’d said. “No one here would dream of opening someone else’s door without permission, except in an emergency.” Such as screams in the night, I thought.

“Alternatives,” Kiri mused. “Well, first of all, we police ourselves. Someone actually witnessing a criminal act would never think of

walking away and pretending they hadn't seen anything, especially if a life were at risk. But it happens so rarely, because that's just not how we're raised. Respecting another person's rights, whether to privacy or safety, is something ingrained in us from the time we're born."

"Still, you will get people who break the laws. We try to avoid imprisonment as a punishment, as it usually does more harm than good. An offense that would warrant a sentence of less than a year or two is much better handled through other means, and imprisoning someone for longer than that causes measurable brain damage. We'd prefer not to get that barbaric."

"Instead, people are fined according to a percentage of their means, and they may also be required to do community service in their free time. Most of the ex-Brizali will spend anywhere from a month to ten years helping rebuild the planet's infrastructure to make up for what they did. If someone is hurt because of their actions, they're also expected to make full restitution to the victims."

"Sometimes you do get someone who, for whatever reasons, simply chooses to knowingly wrong their fellow citizen. They may have to be imprisoned and provided with counseling until they're considered to be rehabilitated. It's rare for that to require more than six months or so. We don't confine offenders together; one look at Earth's prison systems makes the reasons for that pretty evident."

She paused. "Sadly, one thing we've realized over the centuries, after subscribing to one philosophy after another, is that there really are people who are simply evil, who enjoy doing evil for the sake of evil, and who no counseling or punishment can save. These people are offered a choice. They can be psychologically adjusted, using a device similar to the one once used on poor Will here. We do not—ever—subject someone to that without their consent, no matter what the crime. Instead, we offer them the alternative of being left on a prison planet to fend for themselves, to make their own way, deal with others like themselves, and survive or not as chance allows."

"You've already encountered the shock waves one person like that can trigger. That person was Jack Lucie. If anyone ever truly deserved the death penalty, he did."

Just before we fell asleep that night, Rann hesitantly asked me again if I'd move in with him.

"You bet," I told him. "How about tomorrow?" There was a very long silence, and I grinned to myself in the dark, picturing him feeling like someone who throws themselves at a locked door only to have it open an instant before they hit. Be careful what you wish for, Rann, I

thought wickedly.

“Will your mother be okay by herself?” he finally croaked.

“She’ll be fine,” I said confidently.



“That poor man,” I said, fighting off tears again. “I just can’t believe this. Will he recover?” Before me was Rokun, lying unconscious on a bed in the palace clinic, enmeshed in a web of monitors and other medical equipment. His face and what was exposed of his arms were badly bruised, and both eyes blackened. A band encircled his head, with several indicator lights glowing softly.

“Until we find out for sure what he did to himself it’s impossible to say,” Veldra answered. She looked inquiringly at Brinkman standing next to me.

“We’re got members of his team examining the machine now,” he said, and his own voice was hoarse with fatigue and anguish. “We should know soon.”

It had happened just yesterday, two weeks after we’d returned from Qozernon. I’d been going over my latest assignment with Brinkman when one of the other researchers had interrupted us and asked to speak to him privately. Her agitation was obvious, and apparently contagious, because when he returned he curtly told me that our lesson was over for the day and not to bother reporting to Rokun that afternoon. And then he’d dashed out of the room in a tearing hurry.

I’d wandered back to Rann’s apartment, now shared by the two of us, filled with anxiety. I hoped Wisela hadn’t finally provoked Rokun into quitting. Rann was out when I arrived, so I spent the afternoon working on my Deshtiran and aggravating Halogen no end with my distracted state of mind.

True to my word I’d moved in with Rann the day we returned, after a long talk with my mother. She’d given us her blessing, and I’d promised I wasn’t going to forget about her existence, after which she’d helped us move my things. So far everything had worked out well once we agreed on the basics, like where we were going to keep our toothbrushes and who was responsible for which housekeeping chores.

Rann had wasted no time pestering me again to start sword training with him, and after being caught red-handed with Senaria I no longer had a leg to stand on, so I relented. Naturally we didn't train in the central courtyard. It's one thing for an Empress to put on a spectacular performance and incidentally disrupt everyone's afternoon duties; it would have been highly resented if I'd started doing likewise. Instead we used the palace gymnasium. Although I felt awkward at first, I soon noticed that many of the others training at the same time were clearly there for the exercise and wouldn't have survived five seconds in a real fight. After that I started enjoying myself.

Getting back to Rokun, I found out that same evening at dinner what had happened. My mother and Gelhinda had been absent, having gone out to eat somewhere, so it'd been just Kiri, Will, Brinkman, Rann and myself. Neither Brinkman nor I had ever mentioned what had happened on Qozernon, as though an unspoken agreement had been made between us, but after that I was much more aware of the loneliness lurking behind his eyes.

"Alan, I think you can safely tell these two what happened," Kiri had said. "Hal was his assistant, and Rann has my total confidence as well. I'd just as soon they didn't need to keep secrets from each other."

The woman who'd brought my lesson to an untimely end was one of Rokun's lab assistants. She'd only a few minutes earlier entered the room where the Virrin mind machine was kept, to find Rokun on the floor, apparently utterly unaware of his surroundings, thrashing about wildly in the throes of severe convulsions. She'd called the palace clinic and then gone to fetch Brinkman. He'd followed her downstairs to the restricted area, where he found emergency medical personnel from the clinic already converging.

The medics were frantically trying to subdue the unfortunate researcher, but discovered that in his current state he seemed to have far more than normal strength. He'd already badly bruised himself in his frantic flailing, and it took the efforts of four medics to hold him long enough to administer a sedative, in the process getting severely battered themselves.

Once he was safely in the clinic, a "sedator" (the band I saw around his head) had been applied which dampened neural activity sufficiently to render chemical sedatives unnecessary, and that was the state in which I found him when Veldra advised Brinkman that it was safe for us to visit.

Later that evening Brinkman reported to us what the other members of Rokun's team had found. "Although the machine was

constructed by Tenako according to the original Virrin specifications, he designed the computer interface himself. That means there's a log that shows what commands were entered. From what we can decipher, Rokun attempted to download the Virrin mind crystal into himself."

"He *what!?*" Will exploded. "Was he crazy?"

"He was sane enough to use the setting which should have added the Virrin knowledge and memories to his, instead of replacing his own personality entirely," Brinkman answered. "But the machine was apparently never designed for such an eventuality, and as a result the effects proved to be unpredictable. Just what it did to him we don't know yet. Wisela," and he spat out the name with contempt, "has appointed herself acting head over what was formerly Rokun's research unit and is leading the effort to determine what the exact effects must have been."

"And how is he now?" Kiri asked.

"Under total neuromagnetic sedation, to keep him from injuring himself further. According to Veldra his autonomic nervous system and lower brain functions are relatively intact, so there's no danger of any immediate deterioration in his physical condition. But the brainwaves associated with higher brain functions and consciousness are utterly unlike anything she's familiar with. There are several specialists coming in tonight to see what they can make of the situation."

Over the next week there was a slow but measurable improvement in his condition. Each time they began easing down the sedator's effects, the seemingly aimless thrashing would resume, but with decreasing intensity. Apparently he was gradually regaining control of his motor functions. However, there were no signs that he recognized any of his visitors, and he made no attempts at speech other than an unintelligible wailing sound from time to time.

A conference between Veldra, Brinkman, and the specialists ended in stalemate. Rokun's team (in spite of Wisela's meddling) had successfully determined that Rokun had stored a copy of his own neural engrams prior to his disastrous experiment, and one suggestion was to simply reload them. Brinkman had been aghast at the idea. It would in effect have killed any remaining traces of Rokun's real consciousness, replacing them with a copy. As long as there was any hope of removing the Virrin mind overlay, he insisted, that was not a viable option.

A second idea was to overlay his stored personality onto the existing one, rather than replace it, as he'd intended to do with the Virrin mind engrams. A heated debate immediately broke out over what the effects would be of having two copies of the same personality

in one mind. Further study was required, it was finally decided.

The disaster cast a pall over what would otherwise have been an occasion for major celebration, as my mother was informed by the Deshtiran Cultural Affairs Office that she and the other two members of her chamber group had been awarded a five-year contract to perform around the planet. This meant that she no longer had to worry about an income for a while, and would be getting paid to perform to her heart's content. Kiri and Will threw a small party for the group and we all did our best to keep up appearances. My mother, of course, knew nothing about what had happened to Rokun.

The next day I headed across the courtyard for my lesson with Brinkman, to find armed guards scattered all over the quadrangle. Although Will and Kiri normally kept a token force around the palace, it was more for show than anything else, and in most cases sentries were armed with practice blades if at all. But this morning every soldier I saw wore a sword belt, and several doors were guarded by soldiers holding naked blades.

When I arrived at the research institute I found more armed guards at every door. They made no effort to question or detain me, so they were evidently looking for someone else.

"What's going on?" I asked Brinkman the moment I reached his office. He motioned for me to sit down, his face grim.

"Rokun nearly killed a doctor this morning and disappeared," he said.

"What doctor? Not Veldra?" I asked, suddenly apprehensive.

"No," he said, and I felt relief wash over me. "One of the others. She was terribly beaten. They're not sure if she's going to make it at this point. Apparently he just went totally berserk."

"And he's disappeared?" I asked incredulously. "Where could he go in his condition?"

"A small flier is missing," he said. "But we don't know yet if he's the one who took it, or if someone else just happens to be using it. For all we know he could still be hiding somewhere on the grounds."

He looked at me intently. "There's a meeting of his staff this afternoon. I'd like you to be there, since you've worked pretty closely with him for the past two months."

"Sure," I said, still stunned. "I'll be there."

When I arrived, most of Rokun's co-workers were already present, but there was no sign of Wisela or Brinkman. We must have waited for a good ten minutes before the physicist strode in. There was an expression on his face that I couldn't quite interpret, but I thought I

read a mixture of anger, satisfaction, and disgust all rolled into one. I wondered what had happened now. Wisela arrived a minute or two later.

"Proceed," Brinkman said curtly.

Wisela took her place at the front of the assemblage. I saw no sign of concern in her expression. Rather, it was as though she were addressing a routine departmental meeting. Doesn't she think this affects her? I found myself thinking. On the other hand, with her connections perhaps it didn't.

"What is this child doing here?" was the first thing she said, gesturing at me. "This is supposed to be a high-level classified meeting."

"She has my authorization to be here," Brinkman snapped. "She was his assistant, after all." Wisela started to say something else, only to be cut off. "Proceed," he repeated.

Things didn't improve when she began her presentation. It was glaringly obvious that she only had the vaguest grasp of the technical issues involved, substituting embarrassingly banal generalities whenever facts failed her, which was almost continually. Several times a researcher from one of the other sections attempted to get specific details, only to have her invariably turn to her assistant for the answer. About ten minutes of this ensued, out of which we managed only to glean the general idea that the mind download hadn't worked properly. (Duh.)

It was when she declared that clearly Rokun's had been a maladjusted personality, which somehow the mind download had exacerbated, that I couldn't take it any more. "That's a total lie," I burst out. "He was no more maladjusted than you. He wouldn't have hurt a fly before this happened."

For a moment Wisela simply stared at me, as though I were a stray dog that had wandered in by accident and urinated on the floor. Then she turned to Brinkman. "I demand that this child be removed," she said haughtily. "I will not be interrupted in this manner." Slowly he stood up, fixing her with a steady stare.

"Wisela," he said icily, "shut up and get out."

"How dare you," she gasped. "That is totally unprofessional behavior."

"I've seen enough unprofessional behavior today to last a lifetime." He gestured in the direction of the door. "Now get out."

She stared at him in disbelief. "What?" she finally croaked. "What are you saying?"

"I mean," he said, "that you're fired. Canned. Sacked. Effective

immediately. You can remove your personal belongings from your office at once. Any items in dispute will be settled later. Now get the hell out of my sight." As if by magic two guards materialized in the doorway, and I realized that they must have taken their positions shortly after the meeting had started.

"This isn't the end of this," she stormed, but her voice was shaking. "You're going to learn an expensive lesson, I promise you."

"Go!!!" he roared, and she practically ran from the room, followed by the grinning guards. For a few seconds there was dead silence as we carefully suppressed our collective urge to cheer. Finally one of the older researchers spoke. "That may not have been a good idea, Alan," he said cautiously. "She does have friends, you know."

"She does indeed," he answered, a thin smile on his lips. "I was speaking to Senator Nokamian on the telecom just before this meeting. He's the kind of 'friend' that doesn't like to be publicly embarrassed. There's a major scandal in the making here, and I'm afraid she's going to discover that she'll make an ideal scapegoat. After all, this happened on her watch, under her directorship. Besides, the alternative is to go after me, and to do that they'd have to publicly take on Empress Mikiria. It's a pretty simple equation, after all. Now, will one of you who actually knows what you're talking about be so good as to continue?"



I was startled by the change that took place once Wisela was out of the picture. Another woman, Rokun's lab assistant (the one that had brought such an unexpected end to my lesson) took over the session. Unlike Wisela, she clearly knew exactly what she wanted to say and how to say it.

"We know that Rokun downloaded a Virrin mind into his own," she began. "The question is precisely what happened as a result. We think we have a good idea at this point." She entered a command into her keypad, and the wall behind her, doubling as a display screen, lit up with a large diagram.

"This is a schematic representation of a human brain," she explained. I looked at it curiously; it didn't look anything like a brain to me. Instead, it resembled a complex flowchart, with numerous rectangles of various sizes, connected by an intricate network of straight lines. I'd seen enough electronic schematics to know that depicting a complex system (such as a computer or a brain) by function rather than by structure would produce results that only vaguely resembled the real thing.

"We don't exactly understand how the Virrin device works," she continued, "but our exploration of the code contained in the files seems to indicate that each unit of data is in two parts. The first represents the physical location within the brain of the stored data, and the second is the data itself. Since the brain stores data as a complex combination of networks of dendrital connections and molecular configurations within the cell bodies, the form in which the data itself is encoded remains unclear. But we have been able to create a complete catalog of all the locations encoded, even though we can't yet determine what physical locations they represent."

She keyed in another command, and a complex series of colored rectangles appeared, overlaid exactly onto the original schematic. "Let's say for the sake of argument that these colored rectangles represent the locations encoded in a human neural engram file, and which obviously correspond exactly to the physical locations in a

human brain. Each piece of information has its destination, and everything works as it should.”

“We’ve also created a catalog of all of the location codes in the Virrin mind file.” She touched her keypad again, and a new set of rectangles overlaid the original schematic. This time, instead of each colored rectangle fitting neatly over a corresponding one beneath, there was little or no relation between the two, with colored rectangles overlapping two or more underlying ones, and some spilling far off the sides of the schematic.

“What we found was that many locations in the Virrin file have no equivalent in the human ones, and those that do appear to be storing completely different forms of data, presumably for functions that the human brain has no equivalent for.” She paused.

“Sort of like a computer memory overrun,” I blurted out. She looked at me in surprise.

“Yes, exactly like that. And like a computer memory overrun, in which the data is larger than the memory allocated to it, the extra information overwrites something else unrelated and causes serious problems.” At this point she turned the floor over to one of the other researchers, a young man who identified himself as the bioneurological specialist for the group.

“It appears that this overrun is the reason that the overlay damaged Rokun’s original personality,” he said, “instead of simply becoming part of his memories and knowledge. Essential parts of his personality have been overwritten. We don’t even know if any of his original personality is intact. It’s obvious that some of his memories are still accessible, though, as he was able to dress and leave the building without attracting attention.”

“Why the attack, then?” Brinkman asked. “And why so brutal? I knew Rokun quite well. He was one of the gentlest of men. I can’t imagine him doing such a thing, even now.”

The speaker shook his head sadly. “Apparently among the areas badly overwritten were the centers governing emotional responses. We’d already seen evidence of serious deficits there once we were able to reduce the level of sedation. Laughing and crying at inappropriate times for example, which are indicators of damage to these centers.”

He paused significantly. “In effect, Alan, we may now be dealing with a dangerous madman.” And on that ominous note the meeting was adjourned.

Little did we know at that point just how dangerous he was to become.



“Apart from the bizarre killing of the victim, the crime appears to be just one more in a string of mysterious thefts that have puzzled investigators during the past week. No motive for the murder has been established, and it is surmised that the victim unexpectedly surprised the killer.”

It had been a month and a half since Rokun disappeared. The unfortunate doctor he'd nearly beaten to death was slowly recovering, though it was evident that she'd suffered permanent brain damage and would probably be severely disabled for life.

Of Rokun himself no trace had been found, nor of the small two-person flier that had vanished at the same time. An extensive search of the city had turned up no clues, and it was finally surmised that he'd disappeared into one of the unreconstructed areas of the immense metropolis. It should have been possible to locate the flier by its magnetic signature, but the attempt had been unsuccessful.

“It's theoretically possible to mask the signature,” Kiri had said, “but if he did, he clearly knows how to do something we don't.” And that was the last we'd heard of Rokun. Until this evening.

To me it sounded like just another crime report, although crime was admittedly pretty unusual here. Something about the announcer's wording must have caught Kiri's attention, though, because she grabbed for the telecom's controller and furiously keyed something in. The words, “Caution: violent content. Continue?” appeared onscreen, and she irritably punched at a key. From the menu that appeared, she chose “Crime scene images,” and a moment later a thoroughly gruesome scene met our eyes. It appeared to my shocked gaze that someone had virtually exploded. I wondered why Kiri would want to see such a horrible thing.

I suddenly realized that all eyes were on Will for some unexplained reason. Kiri muted the volume and for a long second there was utter silence.

“It wasn't me, I swear it,” Will said, his face visibly pale.

“Of course it wasn't you, Will,” Kiri snapped. “But that was one of your bolts. It had to have been.”

Will just shook his head voicelessly.

Kiri turned back to the telecom and entered something else into the controller. A logo appeared on screen, followed by a man in uniform. "Deshti Domestic Security," he said, then his eyes widened as he recognized the Emperor and Empress.

"Hello, Weldan," Kiri said.

"Good evening, Your Majesties," he said. "How can I serve you?"

"I want to speak to whoever's investigating these strange thefts," she said. "Especially the one that just showed up on the evening news. Who's handling these?"

"That's detective Onija," he said after consulting another monitor. "One moment; I'll see if she's in." The police logo briefly appeared again, followed by an older woman's face. "Onija here," she said. "Empress?"

"Onija, I want to know about these thefts. There's been a killing, I understand?" The detective nodded.

"Up until now it's just been surreptitious break-ins. Apparently this person got unlucky. But we're utterly baffled as to how it was done. There were no traces of explosives of any kind, just electrical burn marks on the remains."

"Yes, I saw the news report. Onija, can you get me a list of everything taken in these thefts? All of them?"

"Certainly, Empress. Just one second while I get the information together." She looked off screen, presumably manipulating her keypad, and then a series of Deshtiran characters began scrolling down the screen like a mass of subtitles, finally coming to a halt and disappearing. "You have them all now," she confirmed.

"Thank you, Onija. Do you have any idea what they are?"

"Yes, Empress. We've identified most of them as materials used for genetic modification. The remainder are a bit of a mystery, but our sources indicate they're all biochems or equipment for manipulating biochems of one sort or another. Is there something we should know?" she added hesitantly.

"Yes, there is," Kiri said. "How many people at your level are involved in this case?" Perhaps twelve, counting field investigators and researchers, the detective responded, now clearly alarmed. "Onija, I'm going to have this case classified as top secret," Kiri went on. "You and your staff, and everyone above you that's had any contact with this case, are going to be sworn to secrecy. I'll be contacting the head of DDS next. In the meantime you're not to discuss this case further with anyone, or release any information whatsoever. Is that clear?" There

was no anger in her voice, only clipped efficiency. I suddenly realized I was seeing the legendary Mikiria in action.

“Yes Empress.” The woman paused. “Have we—failed you in some way?” She looked distinctly distressed. Kiri smiled reassuringly. “No, you’ve done very well. But you’ve slipped into some deep waters. Don’t be surprised if this whole thing ends up at a very high level.” The detective nodded, looking relieved, and then we were back to the desk officer.

“Get me the head of DDS,” Kiri said.

For the first time since I’d arrived on Deshtiris, I found myself feeling apprehensive. A strange and horrible murder would have been a commonplace on Earth, but here it seemed far more frightening set against the peaceful backdrop of this placid society. But I think it was really Kiri’s and Will’s reactions to it that left me with a knot in the pit of my stomach. It felt like some kind of movie, it’d happened so fast. I felt an irrational sensation of dread, as though a terrible storm was about to break.

“So now it’s all top secret,” Brinkman was saying. “Will you please explain what this is all about?” Kiri had finished her conference with the head of Deshti Domestic Security, and we were all still in a daze. I was glad that Brinkman had asked the question, as I certainly didn’t dare.

“You think this is Rokun, don’t you?” Will asked, and got an answering nod. I think she must have seen the utterly blank look on my face, and turned to me.

“Well, Haley, you certainly seem to have worked your way into high places. Now you’re going to be privy to something only a few people on Deshtiris know.” She gave me a half-smile as she said it.

“You already know that my father Tenako genetically modified me. Fancy eyes, permanent dye job, extra heart, all that stuff. But it wasn’t just me.” Her eyes turned to Will, her affection evident. “Will got a present, too. If he chose to, he could point a finger at you right now and blow you to pieces.” Will gave me a sick grin. I just shook my head uncomprehendingly.

“Every cell in his body contains a kind of microscopic battery. Individually their charges are miniscule, but combined they can accumulate enough power for him to project an energy bolt a good fifty feet or more. The power in that bolt is sufficient to turn every bit of water in the target region to steam and blow it apart like an old-fashioned boiler explosion. It’s not pretty,” she added. I remembered the ghastly sight on the news a few minutes earlier.

“Will?” I said incredulously, turning to him.

“It wasn’t me, I swear it,” he insisted again. I think he was serious, too; he still looked really stunned.

“We know that, you ninny,” Kiri snorted. Her face turned serious again. “The point is, it was Virrin technology that Tenako used to modify us.” She let that sink in for a few moments.

“Oh my god,” Brinkman said finally.

“Now we have no choice,” Kiri finished slowly. “We have to find him. And, if necessary, kill him. Because he’s now the most dangerous person on the planet.”



It was a very unhappy Kiri that sat down to supper about a week later. "It's infuriating," she stormed. "Worse than that, it's humiliating. It's not supposed to be possible. I even added my own encryption firewalls, and they still got past them."

"What happened?" I asked, rather alarmed. It seemed like way too many things were going wrong for comfort these days.

"Someone broke into her computer account," Will explained, eyeing her warily. "Apparently nosed through all kinds of secret files."

"Whoever it was now knows as much about the *Futaba* as I do," she muttered. "I can only hope it was just some prankster testing their skills. At least they didn't destroy anything."

"Rokun?" I suggested.

"I've considered that possibility," she said. "But why would he want information about the *Futaba*? There's no way he could build a copy without attracting attention. It's not that easy to accumulate large quantities of amorphous diamond." And that was the last we heard on the subject, although I had no doubt that she'd be exerting all of her formidable skills to track down the perpetrator.

Brinkman was also unhappy, for he'd recently been advised that Wisela, although no longer part of the research institute staff, had been hired as a "consultant" by the legislative committee overseeing the institute's funding, and he'd been ordered to provide her with access to the building. He'd done so, but warned her that she had no authority to give anyone orders. She'd smiled sweetly and replied that she wouldn't dream of it; she was simply pursuing a "routine investigation."

"Can you say 'witch hunt'?" he fumed. "Having her poking around is the last thing we need, especially now. Dammit, she has more lives than a cat." Apparently she was occasionally seen wandering the maze of corridors late at night, vaguely reminiscent of the legend of the Flying Dutchman.

A few days later one evening I answered a telecom prompt and found a distraught Senaria on the other end of the line, who told me that—well, I'll leave that part of the story to her. Anyway, we talked for a little while, and I told her what had happened with Rokun. It

turned out it was the first she'd heard about it, and I suppose I should have been worried about giving away state secrets, but I knew Kiri and Will well enough to know that Senaria was considered family as much or more than I. In return, she asked about Rann and me, and we chatted a while longer, making small talk, until I could see that she was feeling better.

During this time I'd been put to work straightening up Rokun's office—not so much for the sake of tidiness, but in hopes of finding further clues to his disappearance. It took me about a week to organize all of his books, papers, and notebooks. I hadn't looked at his computer files since the accident, since I'd been keeping them pretty well up to date until then. I'm not sure what led me to go back in, unless it was to double-check one last time for anything I might have missed.

I was logging into his account from the second bedroom we'd turned into a study. The only light in the suite was the dim glow of the telecom, Rann having long since gone to bed. The familiar menu system I'd created appeared, and I felt a lump in my throat. This is business, I told myself sternly, and entered the command to bypass the menus and look directly at the file listings.

It took only a few moments to realize that something wasn't right. All the files I'd so carefully organized were still in their proper places, but there were a number of additional ones that hadn't been there before, dumped willy-nilly into the root directory. I scanned the names and dates, and all had been accessed since the accident. My pulse racing, I started up a utility that would create a keyword index from the new files, and waited impatiently for the few seconds it required.

Scanning over the resulting lists, it didn't take me long to spot such telltale words as “futaba,” “gateway,” “amorphous,” and “diamond.” There were of course many others, some common words, and others that I didn't recognize. One caught my eye; it was “rouaas.” Where had I heard that word before?

I opened one of the files containing it, and the program that automatically launched turned out to be some kind of star navigation program, with coordinates, quadrants, and star charts. I opened another, and found myself viewing a very old folder containing reports of exploring and prospecting parties. There was also information on atmospheric composition, temperatures, and rock samples.

It was as I was about to close the file that I suddenly remembered where I'd encountered the word. It was my mother's voice that I heard echoing in my head.

Nobody pays a lot of attention to the third planet, since there's

nothing much of interest there.

I logged off and debated what to do. Although it was well after midnight, and I knew Kiri and Will usually retired relatively early, I didn't feel right leaving the matter until morning. I glanced at my watch and realized that Brinkman was probably still working in his office. I could have called him on the telecom, of course, but the thought of a refreshing walk in the cool night air was irresistible, so I quietly slipped out of the suite and set out across the courtyard for the research center. I noticed a small flier parked above the grass in an alcove just outside one of the smaller side entrances, and idly wondered who it belonged to. I went on to the main entrance, nodding at the guard on duty.

I was halfway to Brinkman's office, puzzling over why there hadn't also been a guard posted by the side entrance, when someone stepped out of a corridor behind me just as I passed. I suddenly found a hard, knobby object pressed against my mouth, stifling my scream, as something grabbed my right arm and twisted it painfully behind my back.

Although immobilized, I was able to turn enough to see who had assaulted me. To my horror, I found myself looking at what might have been a human face, once. There was no doubt about it, it was Rokun; the outlines of the features were there, but the flesh was lumpy, shiny, hard-looking, like porcelain. Only the eyes still looked human. He was dressed in the ragged remnants of the same clothing he'd left the hospital in. The hand, for such it was, covering my mouth released its grip enough for me to croak out a question.

"Rokun," I gasped. "What do you want from me? It's Haley, remember?"

He pointed to his mouth, then ran a finger across his throat in an unmistakable gesture. I shut up.

He half-led, half-dragged me down several corridors, deserted at this hour. And then we turned a corner and came face to face with a familiar figure at the other end. "Wisela, run!" I screamed. Instead, she froze. I saw Rokun raise an arm and make an odd pointing gesture at her. An instant later there was a blinding flash and a muffled bang echoed back from the far end of the corridor.

For a moment I was blinded by the flash, and then, as the afterimages in my eyes faded and the pall of smoke lifted, I saw— I saw—

I won't tell you what I saw. I'd rather not ever tell you what I saw. I remember my knees giving way, and everything spinning around me. I have a vague recollection of being tossed over Rokun's shoulder and

carried like a sack of flour, and of shouts and moving lights. When my brain finally began functioning again, I found myself in the passenger seat of the small flier I'd seen earlier, with Rokun at the controls. I looked down to see the subdued lights of the city flowing beneath us at high speed. Then they disappeared, and there was only darkness below.

At first I thought we'd left the city altogether, then I saw more lights far ahead. Here and there below us a solitary street lamp shone dimly, probably for navigational purposes, revealing deserted, crumbling storefronts. I realized that this must be one of the areas that hadn't yet been rebuilt, even after several years of reconstruction.

I remembered Wisela, and shivered. Was it Rokun? Had some remnant of his mind, not totally overwritten, remembered the endless catalog of petty grievances built up over time, and exacted a horrible revenge?

Or was it the Virrin mind that had been responsible, acting in what it saw as self-defense? A human being might have been no more than a bug to it, and this bug could have spread an inconvenient alarm. A typical Virrin might not have thought twice about destroying it. And if so, why was I alive and in this flier?

We descended into an utterly black courtyard, enclosed by what had apparently once been apartment buildings. Producing a small hand torch, he illuminated the way to an entrance. Once inside, we proceeded down a crumbling hallway and through one of the many doorways on either side.

I found myself blinking in sudden illumination, surrounded by equipment of various kinds. Although my acquaintance with Deshtiran science was still sketchy, I recognized several pieces as being among those reported stolen over the past few months, and realized this must be where he'd been hiding out.

I took my courage in my hands, and ventured a question. "What do you want with me?" I quavered. "What good am I to you? What are you going to do with me?" (All right, so I ventured several questions.) In response he went to one of the keypads scattered around the room and typed in one word. I felt my blood chill as the Deshtiran characters appeared on a nearby telecom screen.

"Insurance," they read.

"Rokun," I began again hesitantly. He typed in a few more characters.

"No Rokun. Rokun gone."

He pointed at a chair in one corner, and I sat silently as he worked at a keypad for a good half hour. At one point I suddenly saw one of the

other screens come to life, and much to my surprise found myself watching one of Kiri's televised speeches. As she spoke, Rokun (or whatever he was now) continued typing at his keypad. Several times I heard Kiri's voice change timbre in response to something he entered. Finally he seemed satisfied and switched off the speech.

Turning to me, he pointed at a doorway to another room of the suite, and I reluctantly entered. This room contained more equipment, and in one corner I recognized a replica of the gateway between the *Futaba* and its living quarters. Deftly running his fingers over its keypad, he elicited a flashing light in response, and then opened the handle. To my astonishment, I found myself looking down the long hallway of the *Futaba's* living quarters.

Stepping through after me, he closed the gateway behind him and pulled a small gadget from the remains of his trousers, pressing a button on its side. I heard an oddly distorted version of Kiri's voice* say "*Futaba*: unlock," followed a moment later by the *Futaba's* own voice.

"Programming unlocked," it said.

I think that's when I finally realized just how much trouble I was in.

There was only one logical reason for his actions, and that was to block Kiri out of her own gateways. That meant we were going somewhere, and I knew where, though not why. I also knew that there was no ship on Deshtiris even remotely capable of catching us. If we were going where I thought we were going, it would take them the better part of a day to catch up once we landed. A lot could happen in a day.

He finished keying commands into the gateway, and received a "Programming locked," acknowledgement in return. Beckoning for me to stay in the living quarters, he proceeded to the other gateway, the one leading into the *Futaba* itself, where he repeated the procedure, then disappeared into the ship.

I had to do something, I decided. Remembering the telecom in the living room, I tried it first. Not surprisingly, I found it disabled. I sat

* A Deshtiran voice lock is never programmed to respond to an exact match of a person's "normal" voice, because there is no such thing. Just as no one signs their name exactly the same way twice, so neither can one ever speak the same phrase identically twice in a row. For this reason, a voice lock is programmed to respond only to those distinctive elements in a voice which remain unchanged, even if the person is speaking in a different tone of voice, or is hoarse, for example. A synthesized voice built only out of these unique elements may not sound at all similar to the actual person, but a voice lock programmed for that person will still respond.—*Ed.*

down in one of the luxurious chairs, fighting off panic. There had to be some way of letting them know where we were and what had happened, I thought.

And then an idea occurred to me. It was a desperate one, but worth a try.

It was several doors down where I found what I was looking for, the room full of computer equipment. To my relief I quickly located the software for accessing Earth's primitive Internet, as well as an ordinary US-style keyboard. It took only a few minutes to compose a message.

```
To: mikiria@rp.gov.dt
From: haley@futaba.gov.dt
Date: Fri, 4 Jan 2002 23:52:36
Subject: Help!
```

Dear Kiri and Will,

I'm in the Futaba's living quarters. Please tell Rann I'm OK so far. Rokun has control of the ship. He did something to the gateways with a copy of Kiri's voice.

Haley

Rereading it, I hastily typed a postscript:

PS: I think we're going to Rouaas.

I was just entering the "Send" command when I heard a noise behind me and whirled to see Rokun in the doorway, an enraged look on his disfigured face, with a finger pointed either at me or the equipment behind me, I wasn't sure which. I had just enough time to dive for the floor before feeling a distinct electric shock as the bolt flew past me, blasting the equipment into a shower of sparks and foul-smelling smoke. I lay there on the floor, cringing, expecting to be incinerated at any instant, but nothing further happened. I finally looked up to find him gone.

The equipment was utterly ruined, some of it literally melted out of shape and the rest still sizzling. With a sick feeling at the pit of my stomach I realized that I couldn't remember if I'd hit the Enter key or not. Well, I'd tried.

I curled myself into a ball on the floor and just lay there shivering for a very long time.

PART III:

Divide By Zero



Hi. Remember me? Yeah, it's Senaria again. I thought I'd be free of writing chores after finishing that account for Will of what took place back on Deshtiris,* but, well, more stuff happened, and this time it was my own decision to write it all down. I'm glad I did; it already seems so hazy and so long ago, like memories of memories.

It wasn't much of a homecoming for me when I finally arrived back on Qozernon after the three-day spaceliner trip. I'd arranged at the spaceport for my things to be delivered, then caught the next train to Nedro, where I'd borrowed a public vehicle for the drive to my mother's house. It was winter, and the sky was a leaden grey from horizon to horizon.

I heard a puzzled chirp from the carrier in my hand as the chilly air wafted through the openings in the side. "It's all right, Tora," I said. "It'll be warm inside. And there'll be something there for you to eat." My own stomach was growling; I hadn't wanted to linger any longer than necessary at the crowded spaceport, knowing that the noise and smells would be rather frightening for the little cat.

Tora was a notable exception to the general rule against confining animals. Pets are almost unknown on the Twin Planets, at least in the Earth sense of the word. Respected as sentient beings, animals are not leashed, caged, or kept indoors against their wills. It's not at all unusual for someone to befriend an animal, and even to install pet doors to allow it to come and go as it pleases, but that's as far as it goes.

Both Qozernon and Deshtiris are populated by plant and animal species taken from Earth several thousand years ago by the Virrin. Because all of the dangerous species of animal were genetically modified by them, instilling a benign indifference to humans, it's not unusual to see a mountain lion or wolverine snoozing contentedly on someone's back porch (or, occasionally, their sofa).

Tora's was an altogether different story, though. Captured by the Brizali for god knows what experimental purposes, he'd been yanked

* In *The Three Minds*.—Ed.

out of his natural habitat and confined for an unknown amount of time. I'd rescued him from the filthy cage in which he'd been kept, and since then he'd been a faithful companion, staying with me in the little room I'd been assigned during my own captivity.

Once free of the Brizali, I was faced with the choice of turning him loose in the wild or dealing with the legal restrictions involved. Since I could easily demonstrate that he was both content to remain indoors and probably incapable of fending for himself in the wild, I'd requested and been granted special permits from both the Deshtiran and Qozernan governments to keep him and if necessary confine him. I'd received a number of curious stares, some of them not very friendly, on the three-day trip from Deshtiris. Anticipating such a reaction, I'd made a point of getting copies of the necessary permits in paper form (in addition to notations in my computer records), and waving these at some of the more aggressive observers had generally sufficed to quell any hostility.

As I pulled up to the house in the pale afternoon light I felt an overwhelming emptiness. There were no signs of life except for the verdant lawns, still automatically watered and fertilized during our long absence. For a moment I felt my resolve weaken, then shivered at the thought of returning to Deshtiris, and keyed in the command to return the public vehicle back to the nearest docking station. Unlocking the front door with a voice command and entering the deserted house I glanced around, took a deep breath, and set down Tora's carrier.

I looked forward to watching him explore my mother's not inconsequential home, a two-story dwelling located several miles from her nearest neighbor in an area that Will has described as reminiscent of the plains of western Nebraska. I didn't plan to install any pet doors to the outside for his convenience, however; it wasn't unusual to see coyotes hanging around our back yard, and Tora would've made a one-gulp meal for any of them (the Virrin-instilled indifference applied only to humans). Not that Tora was likely to make an effort to slip out in any case; he clearly knew a good thing when he saw one. Needless to say, I made setting up a litter box my first priority, as he watched with ill-concealed impatience.

I spent the rest of the evening unpacking and settling back into my former home. For a while I felt as though I were moving into a tomb, and then I happened to glance up at one of the shelves to see a pair of gleaming yellow eyes staring down at me. Suddenly the place didn't seem quite so empty any more.

It was only after I'd unpacked the last box and scattered its contents around the living room that I noticed the blue message light on

the telecom. I found a letter* from my mother waiting, welcoming me home and suggesting that I call when it was convenient. I entered the "reply" command and a few moments later she was eagerly appraising me from the screen.

"Hi, Mom," I said hesitantly. "I just got your letter."

"Hello, daughter," she answered warmly, looking me over. "How are you? Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine," I said. "So's Tora."

"How's the leg doing?"

"Still hurts a little when I walk, but the trip did wonders. And my arm's pretty well healed already. How's everyone back there?"

"Worried about you," she said in her usual direct manner. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

I nodded. "I just need some time. Do some things on my own."

"And get out of the web," she said. I looked at her in surprise. "Things can get pretty tangled, can't they? It becomes difficult to keep it all straight, after a while."

"Mom," I began, and stopped. She gave me a warm smile.

"You didn't invent the human psyche, you know," she said. "Take some time to think things out. You'll be fine. I have faith in you. I always have, you know."

"You've always been wonderful," I said. For a few moments neither of us said anything.

"Do you want me to keep the others away for a while?" she asked. I nodded wordlessly. "Not for good, though?"

"No," I blurted out. "I love all of you. And I already miss you. But just for a while, okay? A little while?"

"Leave it to me," she said. "But they are worried about you. Please don't cut them out of your life."

"No," I insisted. "Just for a little while." She nodded. We exchanged a bit of small talk and said goodnight. For a long time I found myself staring at the blank screen.

For the next few days I just sat around the house, watching television and getting some light exercise in the backyard training area. I knew I was going to have to come up with something useful to do with my time, but after several weeks confined in Tenako's compound I found myself unable to do much of anything now that I was free again. I half-heartedly turned over a few ideas in my mind, but couldn't seem to muster up enough energy to think them through.

* A video message.—*Ed.*

Posttraumatic stress disorder, I told myself, dredging up some of my former medical training. Inability to concentrate, withdrawal from friends, lack of interest in favorite activities; I mentally ticked off a few of the symptoms. I'll get over it. I just have to give myself time. The days blurred together. Wake, eat, watch television, exercise, eat, watch television, sleep.

I jerked upright as I realized there was someone in the darkened room with me. "Lights," I said, but nothing happened as the shadowy figure approached the bed. "Who's there?" I called out nervously. I reached for a nearby switch on the wall, and felt my hand sink into something yielding and vitreous. Then finally the lights came on.

I looked at my hand. It had sunk several inches into the wall, which seemed to be rippling, as if it were liquefying. With a gasp I yanked it free and looked up at the figure standing over me.

"Oh, it's you," I said in relief. "What are you doing here?"

"Senaria," he said softly, and I felt desire unexpectedly stirring in me as I realized he was naked.

"So you've come back," I said hoarsely. "Do you mean it this time?" I threw aside the covers, revealing myself to him.

And then he started to laugh, and as he did so the flesh began to melt from his bones until only the eyes were left in their sockets, and then the eyes too were melting, flowing down the still laughing skull like raw eggs—

I woke up screaming. For several seconds afterwards I stared wildly around the room, my heart pounding furiously, until I could convince myself that it really had only been a horrible dream. The walls remained reassuringly solid this time.

"Shit," I muttered fervently, running a hand through my hair and finding it soggy with sweat. I took a deep breath as I saw Tora gingerly emerging from the back of the closet where he'd taken refuge. That does it, I thought in disgust. That's the third time this week. This is not going to work.

The next morning I was on the telecom, making an appointment with a recruiter for the Emergency Medical Response Network.



The EMRN is technically under the jurisdiction of the Qozernan military forces, but under normal circumstances functions as an independent agency. Primarily consisting of what on Earth would be called paramedics, they are here known as PETs (Planetary Emergency Technicians), each with their own specially equipped high-speed flier. When an emergency occurs, the dispatcher notifies the nearest PETs, who converge on the scene from all directions.

Although most PETs remain at home when on call, there's a two-month intensive training period during which recruits must board at one of the training centers scattered over the planet, and it was this training period that concerned me most when I showed up a few days later in Karuda for my appointment with the recruiting officer.

"Your med school record looks good, Senara," he observed genially, scanning through my application files on his desk telecom. "Senara or Senaria? I see it both ways here."

"Senara's my legal name, but I normally go by Senaria," I explained. "Personal reasons."

He nodded, undisturbed; it wasn't particularly unusual for a person's public name to differ from their official one. "So why'd you drop out? It certainly wasn't your grades."

I explained that six months in medical school had convinced me that I wasn't cut out to be a doctor, not so much out of any squeamishness as because of frustration over the ever-present paperwork and red tape involved. I'd been seriously considering applying to the EMRN instead at about the time the Deshtiran invasion thing had blown up.

He nodded again approvingly. "Any other special qualifications or problems I should know about?"

"Well," I said casually, "I have a Deshtiran driver's license." I saw his expression brighten noticeably at that. Most Qozernan vehicles are designed to follow roadways that have a coded pattern of strips laid down alongside them, and which the vehicles read and interpret like a continuous barcode. The drivers of such vehicles input their destination

and desired top speed via the keypad, and the vehicle takes care of the rest. This is the sum total of most Qozernans' driving skills. The Qozernan death rate from traffic accidents is practically nonexistent.

The high-speed fliers used for emergency, peace-keeping and military purposes, on the other hand, utilize two of the three types of drive in common use: the ground-based drive used within the atmosphere (and which subjects the passenger to normal acceleration forces) and the aninertial drive used outside the atmosphere. (The faster-than-light hyperspace drive is found only in starships.) Because they don't rely on a barcoded highway, these vehicles require actual piloting skills, which are rather uncommon on Qozernon.

Until very recently Deshtiran fliers also didn't rely on barcoded roads at all, due to years of Brizal neglect of the planet's infrastructure. For this reason, possession of a Deshtiran driver's license meant a very substantial savings for the EMRN in training (and possibly wrecked vehicles). I didn't mention that I also had considerable experience piloting the fastest starship in the galaxy.

It took him only a moment to confirm my claim on his screen. Qozernans (and Deshtirans) don't carry wallets bulging with credit cards, driver's licenses and the like; instead they carry a small plastic card with an identification code, holographically encoded and encrypted to a level making it almost impossible to forge, which is linked to their online computer records. Information such as credit accounts, licenses, etc. is stored in these records, which are protected as appropriate with passwords, or in extreme cases iris scans.

"It might be another week or so before I can do anything really strenuous," I ventured. "I was sort of in an accident myself recently. There's a medical report in my application files if you need to see it. Nothing serious." I didn't volunteer any details, and was relieved that he didn't seem particularly interested.

In fact, by this time he was practically beaming. "I really don't see any problems with your application, Senaria. We have a training group starting the beginning of next week, and if you're agreeable we'd certainly welcome you."

"Well," I said hesitantly, "there is one other thing. I have a pet."

"A pet?" he said, looking momentarily blank.

"A cat," I clarified.

"You have a *pet*?" he stammered. I realized that I might be the first person he'd ever met actually living with a pet.

"I really can't leave him alone for two months," I apologized. "He's housebroken, and used to living in a small room. I have all the

permits.” I waited in an agony of suspense. Because pets are so rare on Qozernon, very few establishments have such a thing as a “no-pets” policy. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t turn down my application. He looked through my files again.

“I see a reference here to ‘paper copies of pet permits in owner’s possession.’ Why on paper?” I explained that I’d requested paper copies in order to deal with the inevitable harassment I was liable to encounter. “Could I see them, please?” His tone wasn’t unpleasant, just extremely cautious. I produced the permits from my carrying case and carefully unfolded and handed them to him. He scrutinized them for a few seconds, then I saw his eyes widen as he encountered the signatures at the bottom.

“Romikor Mikiria?” he gasped, glancing up at me. Then he looked back at the paper, and I could virtually see the wheels turning in his head. The other signature, for Qozernon, would be of Amkor Gelhinda, Qozernan Ambassador to Deshtiris. By now it was probably starting to sink in, and I sighed. He looked at me, and at the form again. “You’re *that* Senaria?” he said incredulously. I nodded, thoroughly embarrassed, and getting angry as well. It hadn’t been a good week. “You’ve been all over the news, you know,” he said, now sounding slightly miffed. “Why didn’t you say something earlier?”

“Actually, I’ve been watching Earth television since I got back,” I said shortly. “I didn’t know I was in the news.”

He shook his head. “You have no idea,” he said. “I can’t believe I didn’t recognize you. I guess I wasn’t expecting—”

“Enough, dammit,” I finally exploded. “Look, I just want to work as a PET. I don’t want anyone kissing my ass, and I don’t want any special favors. Except I have to take care of my cat. *Okay?!?*” I bit my lip in frustration; I figured by now I’d blown it big time. I debated excusing myself with apologies and going back home.

Except that when I walked out five minutes later I had the job and was due to report for duty in six days, ready to stay for two months’ training. And I had permission to keep Tora in my room with me.

Just under a week later I was standing on the station platform at Nedro, duffel in one hand and Tora’s cage in the other, once again waiting for the train to Karuda. I’d also made sure that I had Tora’s permit handy in a shirt pocket. Because Nedro is a relatively small town, several expresses had whooshed by at high speed on the sunken center track before my local pulled to a near-silent stop.

Within a few minutes I’d settled into a compartment and introduced myself to my two fellow passengers, a pre-teen boy and girl

who excitedly explained that they were on their way to visit their grandparents, also in Karuda. At least with them I had no problems over Tora; in fact they were fascinated by the wrinkled piece of paper that allowed me to actually keep a cat with me.

In spite of the high speed of the train (over three hundred miles per hour by Earth measure) the ride was smooth enough that Tora made no complaints, and after exploring the compartment he soon settled himself onto my lap for yet another nap. In less than an hour we were slowing for our stop, and I'd stuffed him back into his carrier for the ride to the training center.

The two children had no trouble setting out for their destination (they had only to key the address their parents had given them into one of the omnipresent public vehicles' keypad and press the "Go" key, something children are taught at a young age on Qozernon), and I was soon unpacking at mine, a small room in the training center's dormitory. For a moment the cramped quarters brought back unpleasant memories of my confinement in the Brizal compound, but I shook them off and looked over my schedule for the day. I found I had just enough time to shower and grab a bite to eat before the opening session.

It turned out I was one of a class of fifteen people, of varying ages and both sexes. We were soon joined by our instructor, an older man with a grave demeanor that spoke eloquently of his long years of experience in emergency work. Our classroom was pretty spartan, the walls as usual doubling as 3D viewscreens (there are no loudspeakers as you think of them, since the screens themselves generate the sounds electrostatically). We each had workstations with our own telecoms and keypads. All in all a pretty primitive setup; I was to learn that the EMRN was chronically short of funds most of the time.

After the usual introductory speech from our instructor, telling us how hard we'd all be working, *et cetera, et cetera*, he had each of us introduce ourselves. Though I didn't give my family name, I received a few startled looks, but nobody said anything out loud, which was a relief. Then he looked slowly at each of us in turn, until the room was dead silent.

"Hard work alone is no guarantee that you'll make it through this class," he said finally. "You're all smart, or you wouldn't be here. You've also shown in one way or another that you can deal with the sight of blood and guts. Some of you have medical school experience; those of you who don't have taken the psychological stress test and survived it." I felt a shudder run through the class. Although I'd been exempt from the test, I knew that it involved some horrifyingly realistic

accident videos using full surround holographic simulators. It wasn't an experience for the squeamish.

"What nothing can prepare you for," he went on, "is the emotional distress you're going to experience. Cleaning up what's left of accident victims is easy. It's dealing with the survivors that can break you. If it does, and you wind up dropping out, you can go home knowing that you tried. There's no shame in being too sensitive to the pain of others."

"One of the reasons we only use given names here is to provide you with a certain amount of anonymity." Yeah, right, I thought wryly. "No one outside the EMRN knows you started this course except for those people you've told yourself. So don't let yourself be torn apart. If it's more than you can take, come see me privately and I'll arrange for you to drop. We'll all be better off if you do that, rather than needing trauma counseling for a year."

Needless to say, after that there was a considerably subdued cast to the proceedings as we started in on the basics of emergency first aid.

During the first break one of the others, a young man in his thirties, couldn't resist sounding off. "Who does he think we are?" he scoffed disdainfully. "A bunch of little kids? Sure, you have to deal with hysterical people sometimes. It's part of the job. The secret is to not let yourself get involved." I heard that refrain from him several times during the next few days. *The secret is to not let yourself get involved.* I wondered if that was what I needed in my own life. Somehow it sounded too easy. Although the days of training were so intensive that several times I fell asleep across the bed without even undressing, I still eventually woke up, my heart pounding and my throat dry, a fresh nightmare in memory.



On the third afternoon we were in the middle of a detailed lecture on using a cardiac stimulator when a uniformed officer quietly stepped into the room and signaled to the instructor. For a few moments they conversed in whispers, then our instructor announced that we were going out on our first call.

“You’re just observers,” he warned us. “If the uniformed PETs ask you for help, do anything they ask you to. Otherwise stay out of the way.” He led us to a parking tower* attached to the building, where we piled into several large high speed fliers outfitted for emergency use. A few minutes later we were headed almost straight up, out of the atmosphere, at which point we’d be able to engage the aninertial drive that would enable us to travel several hundred miles in a few seconds. Our vehicle could actually reach any point on the planet within twenty minutes at most, although normally the nearest PETs are called to any given accident scene.

I looked around curiously. The vehicle I was in was completely unlike the passenger fliers in common use. It was rectangular rather than rounded, with a horizontal wedge-shaped front and the driver’s compartment glassed in for visibility. The entire back wall of the vehicle hinged up to provide an entrance into the rear, where injured passengers would be transported and the emergency equipment kept.

Each EMRN vehicle also included an intercom audible from anywhere in the craft, and ours soon crackled to life as our instructor filled us in on events. We were heading for the outskirts of another, smaller city about a hundred miles away. Apparently a large freight transport vehicle had left a barcoded roadway and was floating towards an unloading dock in the industrial part of town, when the driver had

* These parking towers have been described in considerable detail in *Mikiria*. Basically they are twelve or more stories high, with railed platforms jutting out on all four sides just wide enough for a person to step out onto. Vehicles are left floating next to these platforms until needed. Parking towers are usually brightly painted, and often feature an onion-shaped decorative dome on top.—*Ed.*

received a notice via her telecom to change destinations. The truck had slowly altered direction into the path of a smaller vehicle.

Normally this wouldn't be a problem, except that this smaller vehicle had a malfunctioning collision sensor which the driver had illegally bypassed via some jury-rigged software code. He was just on his way to a repair station, navigating manually via keyed-in commands, when the truck had swung in front of him. As luck would have it he was looking down at his keypad, in the process of entering a direction change, and had glanced up to see the truck when it was too late to stop. He'd hit it just behind the passenger compartment, where the control conduits are located, and bounced off with minor damage to his vehicle. The truck, on the other hand, its drive disabled, had dropped like a stone for a hundred feet onto a densely populated residential district.

Our brief jaunt in space over, we descended into the outskirts of a city. Below I could see a patch of flashing lights standing out from the otherwise orderly pattern of streets and buildings. Passing several heavy transports hovering over the scene, we soon landed within a cordoned off area and piled out of the vehicles.

Before us was the remains of a modest home. Half of it was relatively intact. The other half was rubble beneath a badly battered transport vehicle, its undercarriage visibly flattened. PETs in protective suits were already in the process of welding hooks to the side of the truck. The heavy transports overhead waited with chains dangling, ready to raise the vehicle as soon the hooks were ready. Judging from the large hole cut in the passenger compartment, I guessed that the driver had already been extricated.

I started towards the wreckage only to be roughly pulled back by our instructor, who was clearly keeping a close eye on us. "Not without a protective suit," he said sharply. "We don't need any more casualties." One of the other PETs called to him, and a moment later he was back, pointing towards a cluster of people near the undamaged part of the house. "Go over there and help with first aid," he said. "That'll free up the experienced PETs to work on searching the wreckage."

"You mean there's someone underneath that?" I choked, but he was already chasing one of the other trainees who was wandering somewhere he shouldn't.

There was just one victim being bandaged, a young woman in her late thirties with multiple deep gashes along her arms. I learned later that she'd been in the undamaged part of the house; the cuts had resulted from her efforts to dig into the wreckage looking for her daughter. She was close to hysterics as I took over the job of washing

out the cuts and applying heavy cloth bandages to the deeper ones. It must have hurt terribly, but she didn't seem to feel any pain.

"Please let me go," she said repeatedly. "I've got to find Nanza. Please."

"They're working as fast as they can," I said, trying to keep my own voice steady as I started applying light biodegradable bandages to the shallower cuts. "They can find her a lot faster than you could. Just try to hold still. How old is your daughter?"

There was a major commotion as the truck was lifted off the wreckage, dangling from the chains attached to the vehicles overhead. I felt sick as I saw the flattened remains of the house beneath. There was always the basement, I thought. Perhaps the girl had been in the basement.

"Ten," she said distractedly. "She's only ten. She must be terrified. Please let me go find her," she said again.

I was applying another, smaller cloth bandage when a second heavy transport flier slowly lifted off the remains of the roof and ceiling to uncover what was left of the little girl, which wasn't much. I turned to see the young mother staring numbly in shock at the harrowing sight, and grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her away. I saw one of the other trainees retching over by the emergency vehicles.

Later that evening, after we'd finished up what we could do and the mother had been transferred to a hospital for further treatment and assignment to a counselor, we returned to the training center. I was rinsing my face in the locker room sink when I felt a hand on my shoulder. Looking up, I saw the instructor eyeing me intently.

"Are you going to be all right?" he asked. "That was pretty rough for a first call." I turned back to the sink to splash some more water on my face. "Yeah," I mumbled. "I'm fine. Dammit. That poor woman. That poor, poor woman."

"Look at me, Senaria," he said. There was a warmth in his voice that didn't usually emerge in class. I turned back to face him, wiping the water from my face. "You've learned a lesson that some of us take a long time to grasp. Those who don't either burn out in a hurry or turn into something that I'd rather not turn into."

"And that lesson is—?" I said, wiping some more water from my eyes that I'd somehow missed the first time.

"Grieve for the survivors, not the dead," he said. "Life is for the living."

That night, although images of the horrors I'd seen floated before my closed eyelids, my mind seemed somehow indifferent to them. But

I still vividly felt that young mother's body in my arms, shuddering violently as I whispered "I'm so sorry, so sorry," into her ear through my own sobs. I finally drifted off into a deep sleep.

I don't know why, but that was the night the nightmares stopped.



I had a message on my telecom the next morning advising me that the first class of the day would start an hour late. When I arrived, it didn't take long to see that there were four fewer people than the previous day. One of the missing was the young man who thought the answer was to "not let yourself get involved."

The instructor made no secret of the absences. "Some of your classmates found out yesterday that this wasn't the job for them. Don't think less of them for that. Not everyone can cope with the kind of things you're going to encounter. Most of what we respond to are minor accidents, like people falling off ladders or having a mild heart attack. There will be days, though, when you'll find yourself wondering if it's worth it, at least until the first time you see someone walking the streets that would be dead if it weren't for you. But if you think you're going to become a casualty yourself, then let me know and we'll make the necessary arrangements."

For the next two months I worked harder than I could ever remember. I found that focusing on the countless procedures and medications that had to be learned was far easier than I'd expected. In med school I'd been so turned off by the endless forms and reports involved that I'd somehow turned off my attention as well, to the point that I'd found it difficult to study. Here I had no such problem. In fact, it was with a distinctly heavy heart that I realized the two months were almost up, and that it was time to go home.

We'd gone out on accident calls with increasing frequency, and more and more were permitted to take part in the operations. Some were, as the instructor had assured us, rather trivial (though not to the hapless fellow who'd managed to get his head trapped in an electronics rack, for example, and had to have the equipment dismantled around him to general merriment). But we continued to experience our share of wrenches as well.

Considering that in the United States firearms and motor vehicle accidents cause over half of all deaths from non-natural causes, you might wonder whether we'd have anything left to do on a civilized

planet like Qozernon. But any technological society is going to be a perilous environment to live in, even though Qozernans are a lot less tolerant of businesses that deliberately overlook hazards for a slice of extra profit. After all, there are always plenty of idiots around (some with very high IQs) ready to do stupid things because they're in a hurry or think cutting a corner here and there "can't hurt anything." And don't think I've forgotten about that little ride I gave Alan and Rann back on Deshtiris.* I still get the shivers when I think what I could have caused.

(By the way, the driver of the rigged flier that resulted in our first call was later sentenced to ten years of community service and full financial restitution to the victims of his own particular mistake.)

Most of our calls didn't involve any actual danger to ourselves, but like the first one there were several later on where we were exposed to hazardous wreckage of one kind or another. Because of this we were eventually issued the protective suits I mentioned earlier, routinely worn on all incident responses. These are essentially glorified suits of armor, made of light but very tough plastic with flexible joints at the necessary places. There's also a light helmet with a clear face guard that can be raised or lowered, like a welder's eye guard, as well as puncture-resistant gloves and boots. Unlike the suit, the helmet and gloves are normally worn only when needed.

These outfits aren't at all airtight; in fact they allow a remarkable amount of air circulation, especially around the joints, and are much more comfortable than they look. But they do protect the wearer from being impaled on broken glass, splinters, and all of the other infinite variety of dangers exposed by an unexpected explosion or wreck. In addition, the outside of the suit is electrically conductive and the inside thoroughly coated with an electrical insulating compound, which provides protection against accidental contact with live power lines. For chemical spills and the like there are more sophisticated sealed suits with their own air supplies, audio telecoms and environmental controls, but these are only worn by ERTs (Emergency Response Technicians) specially trained for this kind of disaster.

Built into the suit are various pockets and clips for carrying medicines, medical implements, and other essential tools, freeing the wearer's hands for more important tasks. One of the suit's most important tools, however, is the inconspicuous keypad fastened to the right thigh. With it one can access the suit's built-in utility module with

* See *The Three Minds*.—Ed.

its exotic feature set, enabling one to send communications signals, pre-programmed sequences of control commands to other devices, and other functions too numerous to list.

The first time I donned my protective suit and saw myself in a mirror I had to laugh; I looked like a cross between a *Star Wars* storm trooper and *Zeiram's* Iria. (Not to mention that I somehow had to stuff all my hair into the helmet so it wouldn't be in danger of getting caught on anything.) But I quickly discovered that it was light, comfortable and restricted the wearer's movements almost not at all. As for being protective, our instructor challenged us to drive a nail through a piece of one with a heavy hammer, and though several brave knights eagerly took up the challenge all departed vanquished from the field of battle, the battered scrap of material still victorious.

Of course, having protective suits didn't mean we charged into collapsing buildings or flaming wreckage. Becoming an ERT was a special training course in itself, one consisting of a full four months of intensive weekend classes, drills and endlessly repeated exercises. That's next, I promised myself.

"We're home, Tora," I told the little cat as I let us in and turned him loose. The house looked no different than when we'd left two months ago, but now I had my PET certification on my computer record. Even better, my personal emergency vehicle would be delivered within a day or two. I found myself feeling like a much different person, and a lot less shaky. Once I had Tora's essentials set up again to his satisfaction, I wasted no time calling my mother.

"That's wonderful news," she said proudly when I told her about my certification. "Don't you think you ought to call some of the others too? They'd love to hear from you."

"Ummm," I said, not really understanding myself why the thought made my stomach knot up.

"I won't press you on this, daughter," she said. "It's your own decision. It's just that—" and she hesitated.

"Just that—?" I prompted her nervously.

"Well, you know that when your father died you stopped talking for months." I nodded. My own memories of that time were oddly vague and confused, as though of an old movie I hadn't seen since childhood. "It was such a loss for you," she added.

"It was for you too," I said slowly, suddenly ashamed to realize that only now, all these years later, did I really understand how hard losing her husband would have hit her. "I must have been a terrible trial to you."

"It wasn't your fault, child," she reassured me. "You were hurt, and you reacted. How could you know at that age what other people were going through?"

"I should have known better," I insisted. "And then to add insult to injury I nearly scared you to death with Kiri's sword." That was where the scar on my cheek came from; I'd managed to dig Kiri's swords (real ones, not her practice blades) from their hiding place and talked a neighbor boy into "sword-fighting" with me, leaving me with a spectacular gash running halfway down my face. My mother winced.

"Never mind that," she said hastily. "My point is, I wonder if you're doing the same thing now."

"What same thing?"

"Withdrawing from everyone. Retreating into yourself. You know, daughter, you don't live in a vacuum. What you do affects your friends, too. People miss you, and they worry about you. And they wonder if they've done something to hurt you. As do I."

"I'm sorry, Mom," I said contritely. "You know it's not your fault. And as for the others, I just need a little time. Besides, I've been so busy with my training. Look, I promise I'll start calling people soon, okay? Especially you." I hesitated for a moment. "Mom?"

"What is it?" she asked.

"Are you ever lonely these days?" For years, until Kiri had retrieved Will from Earth, the three of us had lived together as a family in this same house on Qozernon. I'd grown up, in fact, regarding Kiri as an older sister until I hit puberty and began to realize that I saw her as something considerably more.

"Sometimes," my mother answered slowly. "I still see Will and Kiri almost daily, same as when you were there. But, you know, even when we were on Qozernon I had days..." Her voice trailed off.

"You never told me about that," I protested.

"You never asked," she said candidly, and I winced. We'd always been honest with each other; I was glad to see that hadn't changed, even if the truth hurt sometimes.

"Have you ever thought of finding someone again?" I persisted. She smiled slightly.

"More than once," she admitted. "But your father was a hard act to follow. And I don't have the patience or the fortitude to go looking. If the right person comes along, then, maybe—" She shrugged her shoulders, again leaving the sentence unfinished.

"Mom?" I said.

"What?"

"I hope he does," I said.

After the screen went dark, I absently fingered the almost invisible scar on my cheek. It had actually happened when I was eleven, a year after my father died. I'd idolized Kiri at that time, watching fascinated as she honed her astonishing swordsmanship on whoever she could persuade to train with her. When I'd managed to filch her blades and get myself "wounded in battle," I remembered being so proud when she and my mother had come running due to the frantic pleas of my erstwhile opponent, to find me happily wiping the blood from my face.

Kiri, of course, had been anything but pleased with what I'd done; in fact it was one of the very few times in my life I remember her being actually furious with me. But we did come to an agreement, namely that if I'd diligently learn my skills with practice blades she'd give me a real one for my sixteenth birthday, and she was as good as her word. But by then she was no longer the idolized older sister, for I'd fallen hopelessly in love with her.

The next morning I concocted one excuse after another to hang around outside, much to Tora's disgust. Finally, a little after noon, two vehicles descended onto my front lawn. One was a simple two-person flier; the other was my very own emergency vehicle. On the side, stenciled neatly in red, was "Amkor Senaria, PET," reflecting the EMRN philosophy that paint is cheap and pride priceless. The technician who'd piloted my new vehicle had me add my digital signature to his requisition keypad with my ID card, then they both departed in the small flier with a cheery wave. I spent most of the remainder of the day poking around in every possible corner of the craft, making sure that all the equipment was present and in perfect shape. Tomorrow I'd be on call like any other full-fledged PET, and I intended to be ready.

I say most of the day, because there was one unexpected interruption. I'd had all my messages forwarded to the ship's cockpit, and early in the afternoon I received a telecom message from someone identifying himself as Deshtiran Domestic Security and asking if I'd be willing to meet with several investigators for an hour or two. My first instinct was to say no; being a Qozernan citizen and on Qozernon to boot I could have legally refused, and I begrudged every second away from my new toy, but on a moment's reflection I realized they probably wouldn't be bothering me over a trifle, so I agreed.

There were three of them, two men and a woman, all very polite and very respectful. They even showed me a letter from Qozernan security confirming that they were there legally and with the knowledge

of the appropriate officials. I did my best to make them welcome, brewing up some hot tea, and then we got down to business.

"We're here to investigate the actions of certain Brizali during the Jack Lucie incident," one of them began. "You're among the few witnesses we have; otherwise we wouldn't trouble you like this."

"What do you need from me?" I asked. "I mean, you have records of their Brizal party membership and all that. How many charges do you need to file?" Quite honestly, I felt that enough was enough, and that driving a few more nails into coffins wasn't going to help anyone.

"Senaria, we're actually more concerned about the ones that tried to oppose Lucie," the investigator explained patiently. "Right now, as things stand, we could probably get them all sentenced to ten years of community service apiece without a lot of trouble. But from what we've heard from the other witnesses, there are mitigating circumstances in some cases. Several of them were even killed trying to stop Lucie's men."

On Earth, of course, it would be defense attorneys trying to do what they could for their clients, and prosecutors single-mindedly seeking the heaviest sentences possible. But that's not how Qozernan and Deshtiran law works. It's the duty of investigators, who aren't responsible to either side, to determine the facts as best as possible and then let the judge decide. Of course a defendant can always hire an investigator of his or her own if they feel they're being treated unfairly, but it rarely happens.

I gave them what information I could. My recollection of the actual conflict was rather hazy, especially as I'd been fighting for my life with Lucie himself during a good chunk of it, but after gentle but persistent questioning I did manage to resurrect memories of some of the Brizali who'd fought Lucie's goons, and identified them as best as I could.

After they left I turned to Tora, who'd been discreetly hiding under the telecom for the duration. "Well, Tora," I said, "who'd have thought I'd end up as a defense witness for the Brizali?" And I went back to work preparing my new vehicle for its first call.



Although it may sound superficially glamorous, being on emergency call is anything but, resembling more a form of voluntary house arrest. You can't leave the premises, you can't start any major projects that can't be interrupted, in fact you're reluctant to even spend a long time in the bathroom since you have to bring a portable telecom in with you just in case an emergency call arrives.

I did finally get a call, in late afternoon, and then there were four in a row, almost back to back, so that hardly had I gotten back home and started to wash up than I was off again. Happily none of them were life-threatening situations, and when I did finally go off duty that night I was feeling very good about myself. So good, in fact, that I decided to take my mother's advice and start getting back in touch with my friends back home.

Impulsively I keyed in Kiri's telecom address. For the few seconds it took for the connection to route, I tried to mentally compose a reasonably sane-sounding message to leave. To my horror, it was Kiri herself that appeared on my screen.

"Hi, Sen," she said, looking a bit surprised. "It's really good to see you again. It's been a while." To my embarrassment I found myself at a loss for words, and croaked out something unintelligible. It took several tries and a throat clearing before I managed a near-incoherent reply.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked, looking slightly worried at my evident distress.

"No, no, everything's going great here," I said, finally getting my voice back under control. "I just wasn't expecting you to answer your telecom. I thought all your calls went through the palace switchboard, and I was going to leave you a message." I reddened, realizing how lame that must have sounded.

"They do," she answered. "We get thousands of calls every day here. But I have several names programmed in for direct connection to my office, and yours is one. If you'd like, I can hang up and you can leave a message," she added with just a hint of a smile.

"No, don't do that. Sorry, I just got a little flustered, that's all. I

finished my training and thought I'd call to say hello."

"Congratulations," she said warmly. "Gelhi's been keeping us informed on how it's gone. I hear you're a full-fledged PET now. How do you like it?"

"It's great," I enthused, finally relaxing a little. "I really feel like it's what I've wanted to do." I proudly told her about having my own emergency vehicle, and how the Deshtiran driver's license had come in so handy.

"Speaking of PETs, how's the cat?" said another voice, a male one, and a moment later Will's face crowded into the screen from one side.

"Hi, Will," I said. "Tora's doing fine. He loves the house. Runs it the way Valkar runs the palace, with an iron paw." I saw the two grin at that. "Look," I said, "I know you two are pretty busy these days, but I did want to let you know I haven't forgotten about you."

"We all know that," Kiri said. "We miss you here. We'll be looking forward to hearing from you again." Awkward good-byes were exchanged, and I closed the connection.

I realized I was shaking. Dammit, Kiri, I thought I was over you.

I didn't attempt any calls home for a while after that. For one thing, I found that one can become *very* tired after a few days on call. On top of that, PET training doesn't end after the initial two-month training period; in fact, trainees barely scratch the surface of what they need to know during that brief time. A standard PET week consists of four days on call, two days in training (sometimes requiring a trip to Karuda, sometimes done at home via telecom), and two days off.*

The initial PET certification, which I'd received after my two months' training, only authorized me to handle certain basic medical procedures and non-life-threatening situations, except in genuine emergencies when more qualified personnel weren't available. As a PET works his or her way through the supplemental two-day sessions the certification is progressively upgraded. It takes about six months to reach a level high enough for one to begin the more advanced courses for ERT (Emergency Response Technician).

I also found that I wasn't the only one with reservations about resuming contact. My attempts to reach Rann were gently rebuffed, my calls only answered indirectly through my mother.

"He asked me to tell you that he'd really rather not, right now," she explained gently. "I guess things hit him pretty hard too." I heard over time that he did make occasional attempts at dating one woman or

* The Qozernan week is eight days long.—*Ed.*

another, only to break things off. It wasn't that they weren't interested, either; apparently he had a number of admirers who would have been only too happy to become his mate, permanent or otherwise.

It was about a month after my first call to Kiri that I returned home from one of my weekend training sessions to find a message from her waiting. For a while I delayed viewing it, finding lots of little chores that had to be done first, such as feeding Tora and cleaning out his litter box, emptying wastebaskets, all that sort of thing. I finally took a deep breath and retrieved it, only to find that she wanted me to call her back, saying that she needed to talk to me in person. Well, I decided, this business of putting off my friends with my "need for time to myself" was going to start wearing thin very soon, so I squared my shoulders, put on my best face, and keyed in her address. A few minutes later she was there onscreen in front of me.

"Hi, Sen," she said, appraising me carefully.

"Hello, Kiri," I said as cheerfully as I could. "How's life as an Empress going?"

"Busy. We're getting ready for the celebration of the century, you know."

"It's already been a year since you kicked out the Brizali?" I asked.

"Since *we* kicked out the Brizali," she corrected me. "Stop trying to avoid credit for your deeds. Yes, that's the one, and it's going to be really something." For a while she filled me in on the details. I could see that she was uncomfortable, not at all like the last time I'd spoken to her, and I finally told her so.

"I'm sorry to call you like this, Sen," she admitted. "I know you're trying to put things back together, and what I'm going to ask you isn't going to help. But I think you deserve to be asked."

"Asked what?" I said, feeling my stomach knotting up again. "You don't usually beat around the bush like this, Kiri. What is it?"

"It's Jack Lucie." I made an unintelligible noise in response.

"He's dying, Sen."

"Good," I finally managed. It came out as a snarl, not altogether to my dismay.

"His body can't survive forever without a mind. His systems are starting to deteriorate. He might live another month or so."

I felt anger beginning to rise. "Why do I need to know this?" I demanded. "Do you think I'm sorry for what I did to him? As far as I'm concerned, I killed him when I used the mind machine. I don't give a shit what happens to his body. You can use it for fertilizer as far as I'm concerned."

Kiri looked even more uncomfortable, and I suddenly realized it wasn't because of my outburst. "There's more, isn't there?" I said apprehensively.

"Yes, there is." She took a deep breath. "Sen, we still have Tenako's mind file. We could download it into Lucie's body. But only if you want us to." It took several seconds for it to sink in.

"My god," I whispered hoarsely. "You mean those files still exist?" She nodded slowly.

"You didn't destroy those files?" I said, no longer whispering. "You still have them?" A horrible thought hit me. "And the machine too?" I was almost shouting by this time. Kiri looked like she was on the verge of tears. "I thought you were going to have them destroyed," I said in dismay. "You as much as promised me before I left. What were you thinking?" I looked away from the screen, fiercely biting my lower lip.

I heard her soft voice, but didn't trust myself to look her in the eye. "I'm sorry, Sen," she was saying. "I was overruled. There was strong feeling here that the technology should be preserved for possible treatment of mental illness and the like. You know yourself what the Qozernan mind wipe device did to Will for so many years. I did what I could."

"You were *overruled*!?" I suddenly blurted out in a strangled voice, turning back to her image. "The goddam Empress of Deshtiris, and you were *overruled*!? By *who*? By *what*?"

"By the imperative to be a ruler, not a despot," she said quietly. "I know this doesn't make sense to you right now, but you know that I've never lied to you, Sen. Not once, not ever. I'm not lying to you now. I did what I could. I've never in all the years we've known each other had to ask you to trust me, but I'm asking you now."

I digested this for a long time, wiping away several stray tears that had somehow found their way down my cheeks. I saw Kiri doing the same, and suddenly felt thoroughly ashamed for what I was putting her through. It's time I stop just thinking of myself, I thought angrily.

"When was the upload made?" I finally asked, a little more calmly. "Which Tenako are we really talking about?"

She gave me the date and time. It was only a few days before the final confrontation with Lucie and Tenako's own death. This Tenako would know me, remember me, have my own memories in addition to his. This was the Tenako who had confessed that he loved me. Say a few words, and I'd have him back, in a different body, to be sure, but the body I'd known him in was Krigghin Teyn's, anyway.

“Tenako’s dead,” I said finally, as much to myself as to Kiri. “Reloading a set of memories and responses into some other body isn’t going to bring him back. His consciousness—the one that I knew—ended when he died back there. Creating a perfect copy would be just—,” I groped for words for a moment, “—obscene.” To my surprise Kiri smiled a sad, warm smile. I suddenly realized it was the first time she’d smiled during the call.

“I know, Sen,” she said softly. “But I had to know that you agreed.”

“Can you do anything?” I asked. “Is everything out of your hands on this?” I saw her jaw set, the old familiar set that I knew from so many years of friendship.

“I’ll have Tenako’s file destroyed. I can’t do anything about the others, but I will take care of his. That’s a promise. Even if I have to enter the command myself.”

“Thanks, Kiri. I know you will.” She nodded, and broke the connection. I found out long afterwards that it had indeed been her who had entered the necessary command.

I remember that it was two months later when she called back to inform me that Jack Lucie was dead.

I thought I would have felt elation, or at least a certain savage satisfaction at the news. But I felt nothing at all. It was like reading a newspaper from a century ago, or being told an ancient folk fable: it simply had nothing to do with me.

At the same time she told me that Alan was back on Deshtiris, and had expressed a desire to see me. I told her I’d just as soon not. At least for the time being.



It was on my twenty-third birthday, eight months after I'd first arrived back on Qozernon, that I finally yielded to my mother's entreaties not to shut everyone out of my life. It seemed like a good time; I was getting a great deal of satisfaction from my work as a PET, I wasn't having nightmares, and my stomach no longer knotted up every time I found a message from Deshtiris waiting on my telecom. It was a relatively small party, too, held at the house, with just my mother, Kiri, Will, and Alan, whom I'd reluctantly agreed to include.

Rann had sent his regrets. At least he was honest, not coming up with some excuse about being "otherwise engaged."

It wasn't just my birthday we were celebrating. I'd finished the required six months of weekend training, and was now qualified to start the next level of training as an ERT (Emergency Response Technician). Unlike PET training, this would involve spending up to a week at a time at advanced exercises, including working with simulations of burning buildings, railroad derailments, and other dangerous situations. I could hardly wait.

It was a pleasant enough get-together. Will described what it was like to go rock-climbing with Kiri, something they'd also done as children before the Brizal uprising. (Apparently rock-climbing with Kiri could be a rather hair-raising experience. What a surprise.) My mother filled us in on the latest diplomatic scandal, this time involving the Deshtiran ambassador on Qozernon and a certain high official's daughter. I even spoke to Alan for a while, who told me of the research institute Kiri was in the process of setting up. Everyone carefully stuck to the most superficial of topics and no one said anything startling.

Afterwards I realized we'd all been dancing on eggs. But at least it was a start. I did manage to find out that Kiri was having Rann work on his English, and that she had some special projects in mind for him.

For the next six months I was busier than ever. My schedule was similar to before, with four days a week on duty, two for training, and two off, but every third week was spent in emergency training exercises. At times it was a challenge to make sure Tora was properly fed and

otherwise taken care of, but somehow I always managed to find someone where I was staying who would agree to see to his needs. I felt guilty leaving the little cat alone for as long as two days at a stretch, but from all reports he simply spent the intervening time sleeping.

We had another party when I completed my ERT training, just four months after the first one. I felt more relaxed this time, and even Rann showed up.

"It's good to see you again, Sen," he said uncomfortably. "I'm sorry about not coming last time, but—"

"It's okay," I interrupted. "I'm just glad you could make it." We made some surface conversation about my job, and he even tried speaking English with me until we both broke out laughing.

"I guess I've got a little ways to go," he admitted.

"You're doing great," I assured him. "You only started a few months ago, remember? So what's Kiri up to, anyway? I can't believe she just wants to nurture your intellectual development." He grinned mysteriously.

"She said she needs someone to run confidential errands for her on Earth now and then," he whispered conspiratorially. "Something to do with—" and now he whispered directly into my ear, "—the Watchdogs."*

"Wow," I said, wide-eyed. "That's big-time." He looked proud as a peacock, and I knew him well enough to understand that it wasn't the importance of the job that inflated him but the knowledge that his beloved Empress trusted him that much. As a matter of fact, it impressed the hell out of me too. For the first time since I'd come home I found myself feeling just a little left out. Maybe that's a good sign, I thought.

But when everyone had finally gone, I realized that the conversation had been almost as shallow as the first time. It wasn't really their fault; in a way they were respecting my privacy by avoiding subjects that they felt I'd rather not touch. That left the ball in my court, though, and I wasn't quite ready to lob it back.

* The Watchdog Organization. When it became apparent early in the twentieth century that Earth was on the verge of developing nuclear technology, the decision was made to plant operatives in key positions in all the major Earth governments. More than one nuclear confrontation was defused by these agents, unbeknownst not only to Earth but also to the general publics of Qozernon and Deshtiris. The Watchdog Organization is probably the best-kept secret on the Twin Planets.—*Ed.*

Privacy is regarded with far more respect on Qozernon than on Earth, where it's given a certain amount of lip service and otherwise ignored. The "right to privacy" constitutes one of the fundamental principles of Qozernan law and is deeply embedded in the entire legal system. On a planet where everyone is in effect interconnected all the time, where all of the essential information about one resides in computer records stored in a planetwide net, and where one can get almost anywhere within a few hours, it's the mechanism that preserves sanity in what really amounts to a very small world.

A key element of this planetwide net is the telecom found in every home, sometimes in every room. Far more than a "television," it's also the equivalent of Earth's telephone, Web browser, and personal computer all rolled into one. From it one can call a friend on another planet, access one's tax records, watch *Dallas*, download and print out books (or write a novel if you prefer), or view a news program that aired twenty-three years ago.

Because of this, certain things are simply not done. The affront to civilization which on Earth masquerades under the euphemism "salesmanship" is regarded with extreme distaste at best, and such advertisements as exist are very low key and non-intrusive. There are regular news programs devoted to new products, more akin to magazines that review products than to advertisements, and one can also do a search if something specific is needed, but indiscriminately shoving products into the citizenry's collective face is considered unthinkable. There's no equivalent of Earth's "telemarketing" here; anyone who attempted it would quickly find themselves facing felony charges.

This stricture also applies to visiting someone without advance warning. Some years ago I'd stayed with Kiri for a few days in her home near downtown Fontana (the same one she'd later brought an unsuspecting Will to when she'd made up her mind to take him back home), and I'd been horrified at the endless parade of religious advocates, junk peddlers, and even children hawking candy.

Which was why I was surprised a few months later when the front door signal sounded. As a rule, people just don't drop in unannounced for a visit, not even close friends; it's considered rude at best. I'd long since shut off Kiri's intruder alarm, which now seemed somehow like a relic from a very bad dream.

I didn't check out my unannounced visitor through a peephole (Qozernan doors don't have them) but simply opened the door, to find a burly fellow with a hangdog look on his face that was so apologetic it

was downright amusing. I guessed his age to be in the mid-fifties; in Earth terms he'd have looked about thirty. "Hi," I said. "I'm Senaria. So what do you want?"

He looked away for a moment. "You probably don't remember me," he began in obvious embarrassment.

"You're right," I responded truthfully. "And you are—?"

"The name's Kizuko," he said. "You, uh, whipped my ass once back on Deshtiris about a year ago." From that I finally recognized him. "When you stayed at Tenako's base," he added helpfully. I broke out laughing.

"When I was a prisoner wearing a restraint collar, you mean," I retorted, but somehow the whole thing seemed so utterly unlikely as to be actually funny.

He'd seen me sword training in the compound's gym, and after making some obnoxious remarks had quickly found himself maneuvered by his companions into a duel with me. He'd lost. Badly. To my surprise he'd also been quite good-natured about it, and although I'd only seen him a few times between then and the liberation of the compound he'd ultimately left me with a distinctly favorable impression.

I discovered later when testifying for the Deshtiran investigators that he'd been among the few Brizali who'd resisted Jack Lucie and his psychopathic goons, and had nearly paid for it with his life. He'd been left for dead after ending up on the wrong end of a burst of machine gun fire, and was only later discovered to be still breathing. Since then I hadn't heard anything further of him, or of the other Brizali taken into custody.

"Come on in," I said. "I don't know why, but it's nice to see you again." The puzzled look on his slightly bovine face indicated that he wasn't quite sure if he'd been insulted or not, but he accepted the invitation gladly and made himself comfortable while I prepared a few snacks.

"I'm sure sorry to show up uninvited like this," he said while I poured some juice. "It's just that, uh, I didn't know what you'd say if I called first, and I really wanted to see you." I stifled a snicker at that. His logic was unassailable, if not very, well, logical.

"It's all right," I said, sitting down across from him and handing him a glass. "So why did you need to see me?"

I could tell he was working very hard trying to come up with the right words. Apparently this was not an easy project for him, and his first few attempts ended in a morass of 'uhs' and 'ers.' Finally he

managed a passably coherent sentence. "I wanted to say thanks," he stammered. "You know, I spent the past year rebuildin' railroad tracks. If it hadn't been for you, I might be doin' it for another ten years. They said it was your testimony that kept me and a bunch of the other guys out of the major criminal category."

"And you came all this way to say that?" I said in amazement.

"Yeah," he said. "I thought it would be pretty cheap to just send you a card or something. You're a good kid, and a lot of us guards thought you were pretty special back then."

"I'll bet you did," I snorted, and he reddened.

"I don't mean like that," he backpedaled, "although some of us—I mean, some of the guards—anyways—" I sat back and eyed him with a wicked grin as he dug himself in deeper. "Hey, nobody ever bothered you, did they?" he protested.

"Just Jack Lucie," I said with a shudder. Seeing the look on Kizuko's face, I reassured him. "He grabbed me once. That was as far as he got." As if on cue, Tora trotted drowsily into the room. "My pet tiger nearly disemboweled him before he did anything else."

"That little thing?" Kizuko said incredulously. "You gotta be kiddin'!" Tora looked up at him and yawned, revealing two rows of fine gleaming teeth. "Don't you threaten me, you little wuss," Kizuko growled at him, and in response Tora jumped up onto his lap and settled down for a comfortable nap. Kizuko looked at me helplessly. I shrugged my shoulders.

"I'm only his life support system," I said. "Looks like you're going to be here for a while."

Much to my surprise, the afternoon went quickly. Somehow the events of a year ago didn't seem quite so painful any more, although I wasn't quite sure why. I asked him how he'd ended up working for Tenako. He was old enough not to have grown up under the Brizali, and didn't seem quite the type, certainly not the sort of sadistic thug that Teyn had preferred to surround himself with.

"I don't think I ever woulda joined 'em on my own," he said thoughtfully. "But in school I hadda teacher I really liked, even though I never did too good, and I guess he thought I was an okay guy too, even if I didn't have a lotta smarts. Then he disappeared and we all thought the Brizali had done him in. Well, one day he showed up, healthy and all, and came up to me and said, 'Kiz, I'm working with someone that's going to do the most wonderful things, and I'd like you to work for me.' Well, I trusted him and said, 'Okay, sure.'"

"It turned out that he wanted me to work at this secret base, the one

you, uh, 'visited,' and he needed someone he could trust to do everyday sorta stuff. Well, that's what I do best, the everyday sorta stuff, I mean, and I'd been there ever since. I was kinda sick when he told me I'd have to join up with the Brizali, but he promised me that it wasn't like that in this place, and mostly he was right. It was only near the end that the prisoners started showin' up, and I think that was Teyn's doin', 'cause he thought he was gonna use it as a hideout if things went smash."

"It didn't take long to find out Tenako was the real brains of the outfit. He never did bother much about keepin' secrets from his staff. 'Course they did warn us about keepin' our mouths shut outside the compound, but inside everyone knew Teyn was just a figgerhead. After a while my prof shared the real secret, the plainer field or whatever it's called, and just how great it was goin' to be for everyone, and I was as excited as everyone else. We all felt like we was doin' somethin' really altavistic."

"I think that's 'altruistic,' " I suggested politely.

"Whatever. Hey, you wanna hear this or not? Anyways, one day Teyn shows up lookin' like a zombie or somethin', and a few hours later we gets told to go to the meetin' room. And Teyn comes in lookin' like a completely different person, same face and all, but different somehow. And he tells us that he's really Tenako, that Teyn got a brain transplant or somethin' because the real Tenako got whacked and this is his stored memories reloaded into Teyn. Well, it sounded really nuts, but all the smart guys around me believed it, so I figgered it must be true."

"It was," I said sadly. "Trust me, it was."

He stopped for a moment and looked at me shrewdly. "So the stories was true, then. You really did care for him. I heard rumors and all—" He stumbled to a halt, seeing the apparent pain on my face. "Sorry if I stirred somethin' up I shouldn'ta," he mumbled awkwardly.

"It's all right. It was a long time ago. Go on."

"Well, that's really about it. You know the rest, anyways. A few of us tried to stop Lucie's guys when they started shovin' people around with firearms, and the last thing I remembered was one o' them thugs pointin' his little toy at me and laughin'. I woke up in a prison hospital. After that..." He shrugged. "I heard the Emperor and Empress got those guys back pretty good. Dumped them in a desert back on Earth or somethin' like that."

I nodded. Although the Twin Planets have no death penalties, I'd taken a savage delight in hearing that at least thirty of the returned

ringleaders had been convicted in the United States of treason and executed. Those thirty thugs won't ever terrorize innocent people again; if that's not a deterrent, I don't know what is. The others had landed prison sentences varying between one and forty years.

"Jeez, look at the time," he exclaimed suddenly. Tora stretched and sedately jumped down from his lap. "I'm gonna miss my train if I don't get goin'."

"Kizuko, it was really nice to see you again," I said sincerely. "How about stopping back if you get a chance?"

"Hey, you really mean it?" he said in amazement. "You don't mind?"

"Really," I assured him. "Just let me know you're coming first, okay?"



Kizuko was certainly an unlikely candidate for best friend, but nonetheless that's what he ended up becoming. Blunt, not particularly well educated (though not at all unintelligent, as I was to find), and definitely lacking in "couth," he had the supreme virtue of wearing no masks, and of being exactly who he claimed to be. With "Kiz," as I ended up calling him, I always knew where I stood. In some ways he reminded me of a big, burly, warm-hearted teddy bear.

Before long he was visiting whenever his work schedule allowed, which was typically every few weeks. He'd been offered a job as a trackwork supervisor on the very same railroad division on which he'd been serving his community service sentence, so good had his record there been. I eventually wound up looking forward to his visits the way many Earth children look forward to Christmas. We'd go sight-seeing, sword train in the back yard, or just watch movies together.

It was in fact with Kizuko that I watched the news reports of the second annual Deshtiran Freedom Celebration, if anything more festive than the first. "That Empress, she's really somethin' else," he marveled after Kiri had opened the festivities with a particularly moving speech. Of course, the fact that she'd been wearing her ceremonial attire (a few scraps of decorative cloth held together with bits of wire, and which did virtually nothing to hide her slender figure) hadn't exactly put him off either.

"She's my big sister," I proudly informed him.

"She's everybody's big sister," he responded, still awestruck.

"No, I mean really," I insisted. "She used to live with my mother and me when she was in exile here on Qozernon. In this very house, in fact."

He looked at me suspiciously. "You pullin' my leg, Sen?" In response I called up some of the home video files my mother had taken over the years, and we spent the rest of the evening watching family movies of her in birthday celebrations, vacation trips, and all the other everyday things that find their way into such collections. I realized later that if I'd watched them on my own I would have ended up in another

bottomless depression, but somehow sharing them with Kizuko left me filled instead with memories of the affection and happiness we'd all shared together. He was so child-like, and so warm-hearted, that in an ideal world we should have just fallen in love and lived happily forever after.

In fact, we tried. It was two months after his first visit, when he'd accumulated enough leave time to stay for a full week, that we ended up in bed together. By the end of that same week we both sadly realized it wasn't going to work.

More than one friendship has crashed onto the rocks after such an episode, but we were lucky. We agreed to let things go back to the way they'd been, and rather to our surprise we succeeded. If anything we were closer than before, though I shuddered at how near I'd come to wrecking one of the best friendships I'd ever had.

I made sure that Kizuko was among the invitees when my mother began making arrangements for my twenty-fourth birthday a couple months later. Naturally she was a little surprised when I explained who he was, but considering that the head of Will's and Kiri's bodyguard was also an ex-Brizal (that being Rann) she wasn't particularly perturbed.

Speaking of Rann, she mentioned in passing that Kiri was away for several days fixing the *Futaba*; it seemed that Rann had taken it to Earth and gotten himself marooned there, of all things. "According to Kiri, he met quite a nice young woman there, too."

"So is he bringing her back?" I asked. She shrugged her shoulders.

"I have no idea. I suppose that depends on her." I heard later that he hadn't; apparently she'd turned him down. Too bad, I thought. I didn't ask him about her when he arrived for the birthday party, thinking it might be a sensitive subject, nor did he bring it up himself. He did seem unusually preoccupied though, and I suspected that he wasn't too happy about the way things had turned out.

By now I had plenty of stories to tell about some of my more interesting experiences. I noticed that Alan turned distinctly pale at several of my tales, once asking if it wasn't a rather dangerous profession to be in. "Of course it is," I said lightly. "But dangerous situations happen, and someone has to deal with them. I'd just as soon I was one of them." So far, though, the exercises had been more hazardous than any actual calls I'd answered, much to my disappointment.

"Sen, why are you doing this?" Alan said to me later, catching me alone in the kitchen.

"Doing what?" I asked. "My job? It's what I do, Alan, just like you do your physics stuff. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Is that really it?" he pressed.

"I'm not sure what you're trying to get at, Alan," I said, feeling unexpectedly tense. "But I like my job, and that's why I'm in it." I deftly slid past him and retreated to the living room, leaving him staring at me with an odd expression.

"Anythin' wrong, Sen?" I turned to find Kizuko watching me.

"Just Alan being strange," I grumbled. "He probably thinks I'm trying to get myself killed or something. I just don't understand that man."

"No, I guess not," he observed.

"He's such a jerk, sometimes," I added. "I don't know why I even put up with him." I looked up to see him smiling to himself. "Now what's with you?" I said in exasperation.

Speaking of Kizuko, it was about two months after the party that I got a telecom call from him. "Hey, Sen, turn on the 'Merican news. You gotta see this." I did as he suggested, leaving him in a corner of the screen, and after switching through several networks found myself looking at what was unmistakably the *Futaba*, apparently filmed somewhere in one of the southwestern U.S. deserts. It was a grainy black and white image, and not terribly easy to make out, but a moment later the scene shifted to a much better picture, now in color, and I realized I was staring at Rann, of all people, who was staring back directly into the lens. With him were two women, one quite young and one a little older. Then Rann made a rude gesture that I'd seen more than once in Kiri's Japanese anime, and I broke out laughing so hard my sides hurt.

"Oh, Rann, you've really done it this time," I gasped. "Whatever were you thinking?" I was finally able to glean from the voice-over that he'd allegedly "kidnapped" the two women, who were involved in some kind of custody dispute with a divorced father. I noticed Kizuko silently saying something in his corner of the screen, waving his hands to get my attention. "Sorry, Kiz," I managed, switching the audio to his channel. "I almost forgot you."

"Weren't that the Empress' ship?" he demanded, obviously bursting with curiosity.

"It sure was," I confirmed. "I'll bet there's a fascinating story behind all this. I heard something about Rann falling for an Earth girl when he was there a few months ago. I wonder if one of them was her?"

"Yeah," he said. "I noticed he was kinda out of it at the party." You don't miss anything, do you, Kiz, I thought, and grinned.

I called my mother a few days later to get the scoop, and found that Rann and the girl were about as inseparable as you can get. She was also some kind of physics whiz and was already starting studies with Alan. "He doesn't waste any time, does he?" I observed in some alarm.

"Daughter, please," my mother scolded me. "It's nothing like that. You're really being rather cruel to him, you know."

"Sorry," I said. "But I'd hate to see Rann get hurt again."

"He can take care of himself these days," she informed me. "You know, just because you've sealed yourself away for two years doesn't mean everyone here has become frozen in time. People change. You really ought to try reestablish some communication with your friends. These are people that really care about you."

"I have been," I said defensively. "Weren't we all together just a couple months ago?"

"Nobody said anything about anything," she said in evident disgust. "You talk to everyone as though they were your co-workers instead of your friends. And in return they all resort to small talk." Stunned, I digested this for a while. My mother waited patiently; one of her many conversational skills is to know when not to say anything, and not to be intimidated by the long silences that result.

"I know it's all small talk," I said finally. "Is it really my fault?"

"People take their cues from each other," she said. "People are treating you the way they think you want to be treated. Everyone knows what you went through, and nobody wants to intentionally hurt you. But that was two years ago, girl. How long are you going to wallow in this?" Her voice softened. "I'm not trying to be harsh. But you are my daughter, and as your mother I think I have to say something. You really need to start dealing with it, not hiding from it."

I do want to deal with it, I told myself after we broke the connection. I know things aren't right, somehow. But I just don't know where to start.



Naturally, I was wary when Kiri contacted me to ask if I'd like to meet Rann's new girlfriend and her mother; after all, it had been less than three months since my birthday. I smelled a rat, but I really couldn't resist seeing who it was that had actually managed to capture Rann's heart after so long, so I agreed.

Sure enough, when they arrived I found myself the recipient of the Interplanetary Order of the Plaque (my private and not very respectful name for it). But the *Noriko* was something else. I knew how much time Kiri must have spent on it; it had taken her years to build the *Futaba*, literally with her own two hands, and even though she'd probably had a hangar full of technicians working on this ship there was just too much secret technology involved for her to have entrusted much of the work to others. I later managed to worm out of Rann the information that "Project X," as it had apparently been dubbed, had occupied much of her time for the past four months.

But the real surprise was Rann's new mate Haley, or Hal as everyone called her. My first impression was of a short, rather plain girl with light brown hair and greyish green eyes set in an unassuming face. But that lasted only until she opened her mouth and gave me a well-deserved chewing out for my self-pity (guilty as charged, I admit) while everyone else gaped in astonishment. After that I took her a lot more seriously. I had the feeling that, like Kizuko, she'd tell you what she really thought, not what she thought you wanted to hear, and we hit it off almost immediately. Besides, Tora gave her his stamp of approval, and he had yet to go wrong in his evaluations of my acquaintances.

I couldn't help but be curious about how Rann, who I didn't exactly see as being one of the more socially adventurous of individuals, happened to acquire such an unlikely mate. I wasn't disappointed; Haley's tale of their chance encounter in the middle of the Mojave Desert was so outrageously implausible as to have all the smell of truth.

"Not only that, but we were nearly mugged in Los Angeles," she added proudly.

"You were what?" her mother broke in, and she reddened suddenly.

"Oops," she muttered.

"What's this about a mugging?" her mother persisted. Reluctantly she explained how she and Rann were nearly held up by an armed thug in a parking garage.

"You should have seen Rann," she said proudly. "Cool as a cucumber. He even tricked the low-life slug into turning on the Brinkman gadget for him. Then he punched his lights out." By now Rann was clearly contemplating a discreet getaway.

"You never told me about this, Hal," her mother remonstrated. "You said everything was fine when you got back."

"Well, it was, Mother," Haley asserted, obviously embarrassed. "It's not like I told you a lie or anything. Besides, your amethyst amulet protected us," she added placatingly. Mollified, her mother let it pass as Haley continued.

"We also stopped at Kiri's mountain house on the way in," she said, proudly lifting a leg. "That's where I got these boots." She anxiously turned to Rann, who'd almost succeeded in slipping out of the room. "Rann, you did ask Kiri about these, didn't you?"

"Of course he did," Kiri broke in with a grin. "They look good on you, too."

"But I was too late to see the crater," Haley added sadly.

The crater, I found myself thinking. Kiri's house above Fontana. I was sitting on a rock in the darkness, and looking down into a sea of lights swimming hazily far below, disappearing into the distance. *Not again, I'd been thinking. Not now, of all times.* My heart was pounding unexpectedly.

I suddenly became aware of Haley staring at me nervously. "Cute shirt," I said, seizing on the first thing I saw, and it seemed to safely re-anchor me in the real world. Groucho Marx. Earth movies. The moment passed as unexpectedly as it came, and within a few minutes the memory had faded. But the strange feeling lingered for some time afterwards.

I was delighted when she accepted my invitation to stay over while the others visited Lernesdi. But as luck would have it, we were soon interrupted by Alan, who just had to choose that time of all times to pay another visit. This one, however, proved to be rather different than the previous ones.

It started out blandly enough, with the usual surface generalities, but I could tell that there was something churning inside him. I didn't think I'd ever seen him fidget so much.

"Do you mind if we go outside?" he asked finally, glancing at

Haley. I nodded, already feeling a bit apprehensive.

"Hal," I apologized, "will you excuse us for a few minutes?"

"Sure," she agreed amiably, and we stepped out onto the back lawn. It was a pleasant day, cooler than usual, with a thin high cloud cover keeping the sun under control.

"So?" I said, turning to him. "Has something gone wrong back on Deshtiris?"

"Are you—okay here?" he asked hesitantly. "Is everything all right with you?"

"Sure," I answered cheerfully. "Hal said you're doing lectures at the university in Lernesdi. How's it feel to be an interplanetary celebrity?"

"It feels fine," he said, oddly impatient. "But what about you?"

"What about me? I have my job, my cat, my friends visit me when they can, so I'm doing fine, too."

"Fine?" he repeated. "Is that it? Fine?"

"Yes, fine," I answered, feeling more than a little annoyed. "Did I say something wrong? I'm fine. Fine, fine, fine." Even as I said it I realized how juvenile it sounded. I was letting him get to me, and I didn't understand why.

"Look, Sen," he was saying, "we've seen each other how many times?—four?—since you left, and you know as well as I do that we've just been dancing over the surface. It's as if we're total strangers, reading from a script that's had all the dangerous stuff hacked out. We discuss meaningless topics and make polite conversation."

"Dangerous?" Something about the word made me uneasy. "I'm not sure what you expect from me, Alan. I'm not a science genius like you or Kiri, and I know it. If I'm boring company, then don't waste your time on me. I didn't invite you here, you know." I felt control of the conversation, of myself, slipping away.

"Stop trying to turn this into a contest," he snapped. The edge in his own voice warned me that I wasn't the only one losing control. "I'm not comparing you to anyone."

"I'm sorry," I said defensively. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"I just want to have a real conversation with you for once. It's as if you're always locked away in there somewhere and all I can see are the walls."

"I'm the same person I always was," I insisted. "And I still don't know what you mean by 'dangerous.' What are we supposed to be talking about, anyway?"

"Christ, Sen, can't you see I'm still in love with you?" he exploded, then froze, paling as he realized what he'd just said, and leaving me suddenly floundering for air.

"You said that once before," I finally managed. My own voice sounded strange in my ears, half-strangled almost, and I stopped, the rest of my rebuke left unspoken. Something was boiling up deep inside me, something I didn't understand and couldn't control.

"I know that, and I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what I did to you and even sorrier about what it led to. I'll grovel and bang my forehead on the ground if you want, but I can't help how I feel." He trailed off, staring at the expression on my face.

"Why did you have to tell me that?" I half-whispered. "Dammit, Alan, don't do this." I looked away. "I'd rather not see you again," I said. "I can't deal with this. I just can't." He stood there in horrified silence as I unseeingly studied a distant hillside.

"I really didn't know I'd hurt you that much." His voice was almost inaudible, barely under control. "Please don't do that to me, Sen. I won't bring it up again. Whatever you want. Just don't tell me I can't see you again."

At that something inside me finally snapped. "Fine," I shouted hoarsely, "have it your way. It's your damn promise, not mine. See if you can actually keep it." I whirled away from him and stormed back towards the house. All I could think of was to run away and hide, and when I found myself sitting on my bed, heart pounding furiously, I realized that I didn't even remember getting there. For several seconds I stared helplessly at the faceless door, then threw myself down on the bed and surrendered to sobs that seemed to be pouring from some long-buried place in my soul.

I don't know how much later it was that I finally felt a little bit of sanity returning, and realized what a wretched host I'd been. One look at the bedraggled, red-eyed creature that stared back from the mirror was enough to warn me that some repair work might be in order before I subjected Haley to my distinguished presence, and so it was several minutes later that I took a deep breath, put on my best façade, and gingerly ventured back into the hallway.

Of course, the very first living thing I encountered was Tora, waiting patiently in front of my door. As I emerged he looked up at me and chirped uncertainly; he'd apparently been too nervous to return via the pet door I'd cut for him. I scooped him up and gave him a thorough rumpling, no doubt alarming him again somewhat (but not enough to prevent him from purring violently against my cheek).

I was still holding him when I stepped into the living room, where I found Haley puzzling her way through an EMRN training manual. With an effort I mustered an apology, and in spite of everything we ended up spending an enjoyable evening together. She turned out to be a very good (and very patient) listener, as I babbled along senselessly about my job for what turned out to be several hours.

And of course it was that night, of all nights, that I wound up having the first nightmare I'd had in almost two years. Dammit, Alan, I raged inwardly, this is all your fault. But of course I knew better.

He must have been more on my mind than I realized, because to my own surprise I asked Haley about him (she'd come dashing to my rescue, apparently as a result of the unholy shriek I'd let out when I woke up). The picture she painted, though, was a much different one than I expected. I eventually dozed off and slept through the remainder of the night without further incident.

I woke up the next morning in a fabulous mood, verging on the hyper. Great, I thought, now I'm turning manic-depressive. But nonetheless I went through my training routine with far more enthusiasm than I had in some time, and even talked Haley into learning the rudiments of sword handling skills, something apparently Rann hadn't managed to do. In addition to being ruthlessly outspoken (as I'd already discovered the previous day), she also turned out to be a lot of fun to have around. Perhaps it was the realization that Rann was finally in good hands that put me in such a good mood. Unlike the previous visits, when I'd secretly heaved a sigh of relief once I was again alone, I was sincerely sorry that day to see everyone depart for Deshtiris.

And yet it was her surprising description of Alan that kept coming to mind at the most unexpected times.



“You know, Alan, you do puzzle me,” I was saying.

Two months had gone by since the presentation of the *Noriko*. It had provided me with a freedom I hadn’t enjoyed since flying the *Futaba*, and in fact I often spent my off-duty days exploring. I’d even brought Kizuko to Earth briefly, leaving the *Noriko* at Kiri’s house above Fontana and driving her Mishima SUV to Utah, where I took him through Arches and Canyonlands. While at Kiri’s house I found myself drawn to the overlook over the Los Angeles Basin, but somehow in the pale winter daylight it seemed unfamiliar and uninteresting.

During those two months I’d heard that Haley had moved in with Rann, and that her mother had been meeting with considerable success in her concert career. I’d also celebrated, if that’s the right word, the start of my third year back on Qozernon and of my career with the EMRN. But what I really found coming to mind again and again was Haley’s description of Alan, although I didn’t understand why. “He’s nothing like that,” she’d protested. Why did the words so unexpectedly lift my spirits? *A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma*, England’s Churchill had once said. He’d been referring to the Soviet Union, but he could have just as well have been describing the sorry state of my own self-comprehension.

So when Alan called and asked if he could see me again, I agreed somewhat more readily than I expected. After breaking the connection I found that the date coincided with another of Kizuko’s visits, but when I approached him about it he was adamant that I go ahead. “Besides,” he said mysteriously, “It oughta be interestin’. I can tell this guy’s somethin’ else.”

I didn’t warn Alan that Kizuko would be there, hoping for a bit of fun, and sure enough Alan was visibly alarmed when I introduced him and told Alan he was staying for a few days. “Take it easy,” Kizuko reassured him, seeing his startled expression, “Sen and me is just good friends,” spoiling my hopes for manufacturing some real confusion out of the situation. Eventually we left the burly Deshtiran sweating in the training area and went inside to talk.

"I thought I knew you once, and I turned out to be wrong," I continued. "Then I thought I'd seen through you, and understood what you really were, but everything I hear about you now contradicts that too. I have to admit that you're a total mystery to me."

"Just what are you hearing that puzzles you so much, Sen?" he asked curiously. "And from whom?"

"I'd rather not say from whom," I answered cautiously, reminding myself that Haley studied with him, and that there was no point in creating trouble for her. "But people tell me that you keep to yourself, that you devote yourself to your work, and that you even turn down invitations from beautiful women. And you keep coming back here, although I've let you know in no uncertain terms that I don't want a relationship, with you or anyone else."

"Anyone else," he repeated thoughtfully. I suddenly realized I'd handed him the keys to the vault. Time to change the subject, I decided.

"Why did you really come back from Earth, Alan? I don't believe that hogwash about budget cuts and psychic research institutes. You've dealt with that all your life. Something happened. What was it? I'd like to know."

Why, I wondered. Why am I asking this? Something within me was moving me along, taking me somewhere, and I had no idea what or where. *Like a twig on a torrent.*

"You really want to know?" he asked, and I nodded in spite of myself. "I promised you last time that I'd never bring up a certain subject again," he said uneasily. "Temporary amnesty?" I nodded again.

"Just this once," I added. *A twig on a torrent, I thought again. What's ahead? Rocks? Rapids?*

"I returned to Earth the month after you left for Qozernon," he began. "Part of it, I suppose, was that I had obligations: students to advise, seminars to meet. But I knew that wasn't really it. They'd have found someone else easily enough."

"But I was also ashamed. I knew I'd hurt you. I read it again in your face when I saw you after the rescue. And what was worse was that I knew myself too well. I knew that three months earlier I wouldn't have cared. Three months earlier I could have just walked away, indifferent to the pain I'd caused. That was who I was then, and I knew it."

"If it hadn't been for what you did, we'd all be saluting Jack Lucie now," I interrupted. "Those of us that hadn't been shot. It was for the best, Alan. You have to know that."

"It didn't have to be you playing the hero," he insisted. "It could

have been someone else.”

“ ‘Could haves’ aren’t really the issue here, are they? I still want to know, Alan. Why did you really leave Deshtiris?”

He took a deep breath. “Because I knew that I’d really lost you. That after what I’d done to you I didn’t deserve to be your friend, or—anything else. That there was no way you could ever respect me.”

“But you came back,” I said softly.

“I spent the next three months trying to fall back into my old routine,” he resumed, “trying to absorb myself in the trivialities of faculty politics, the minutiae of teaching. Attempting to convince arrogant graduate students that the ultimate secrets of the universe weren’t really on the verge of revelation. I even tried in desperation to resurrect the ‘old’ Brinkman, lurking in campus hangouts at night and flirting with brainless young things, trolling for a companion for the night. But after a few minutes it was your face I was seeing in front of me, not theirs, and I’d end up making my excuses and going home.”

“I woke up one night in March around three a.m., staring into the darkness, fighting off the blackest thoughts I’d ever faced. The ‘hour of the wolf,’ it’s called. I ended up getting into my car and driving up to Kiri’s mountain house in the dark. I remember how black it was; no stars, no moon, just the headlights on the dirt road. I finally reached the house, and everything was so dark and dead. I knew I couldn’t get in, but that wasn’t what I’d come for. I walked over to the bluff and sat down on that big rock where I’d remembered you sitting that night, and looked down at the lights, shimmering in the distance. I stayed there for a long time, a very long time.”

“I was still there when the grey morning light came up, frozen to the core, but I’d made up my mind. I was going to come back here, and I was going to do my damndest to make up to you for what I’d done, and I wasn’t going to give up this time. No matter what it took.” He turned to me, and gave me that inimitable grin, but there was no life in it. Then it faded, and he stared off through the window at the distant rolling hills.

Cataract, I thought. A twig on a torrent. And a bottomless abyss.

For a while neither of us said anything. I was the one that finally broke the silence.

“Thank you for being honest with me, Alan,” I said. “I’ve misjudged you, and I’m sincerely sorry for that.” I stood up. “If you want to keep seeing me, I won’t fight you any longer.” I turned to him, feeling only sadness. “You should find yourself someone else to put on a pedestal, Alan. You deserve better. I can’t be the person you want me

to be.” He just sat there, staring off into the distance.

“Maybe you should go now, Alan,” I suggested gently. “I do have another guest, you know.” He rose to his feet.

“You’re right,” he said. “I’m sorry. This is painful for you, and I have things waiting for me back on Deshtiris. But I have to tell you this, Sen, and I mean it: You’re not going to disappear from my life. I won’t let you, no matter how hard you try.”

“It’s your funeral,” I said as lightly as I could. It was with a profound sense of relief that I saw him off.

I felt sorry for Kizuko that evening, as in spite of my best efforts to put on a cheerful face I was probably about as pleasant to be around as the Black Death. He made no mention of the day’s events, reinforcing my perception that under the uncouth exterior was an exceptionally sensitive human being.

Even Tora seemed affected by my generally dark mood, only eating about half of his usual meal. “Sorry, friend,” I apologized to him. “You’re just too well attuned to me for your own good.”

It wasn’t until the next morning, as Kizuko was packing up for the trip back to Deshtiris, that he brought up Alan’s visit. “You looked like a ghost when I came back in,” he observed. “I didn’t say nothin’ then ’cause I could see you was upset. You know, there are times when I feel like your father, and other times when I wish I could just make you forget it all like we used to.”

“Let’s not bring that up now,” I said curtly.

“Look, I know things didn’t work out right for us that time,” he added, unruffled as always by my ill temper.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered. “It was a mistake to start with. I was lonely and really messed up.”

“It’s okay. I’ve told you that before. Besides, I like you a lot more as a friend. It ain’t your fault; your heart just weren’t in it.”

“I don’t have a heart, Kiz,” I snapped. “You know that.”

“Yeah, you’ve told me often enough,” he retorted. “I know it ain’t true, too,” he said, a little more quietly. I looked at him in surprise. “You still got a heart in there, whether you admit it or not, and it’s still his after all this time.”

“His? Whose?” I said stupidly

“Who d’ya think?” he shot back.

Bullseye, I thought, and reddened. “Where did you get that idea?” I snarled; at least, it was supposed to be a snarl, but the words didn’t quite come out the way I wanted them to.

“You talk in your sleep,” he responded with a grin. “At least, you

did back then.”

“I ought to slug you one,” I muttered helplessly. “Jeez.”

“Look, Sen,” he said more seriously. “I don’t think anythin’s changed. You don’t hafta do this to yourself. Why don’tcha just tell him how you feel?”

He looked at me. “You know whatcher problem is, kiddo?”

“No, Kizzo,” I said sarcastically, my voice finally starting to obey its lord and master again. “What is my problem? Wait, first let me try a guess. You’re going to say that I live in the past too much. Is that it?” Was it? I wondered.

When he answered his voice was soft, and it hit me dead center and broke me into little pieces. “No, kid, you don’t live in the past. And you don’t live in the present, which is where all the rest of us is. You’re tryin’ to live in the future, and it don’t exist yet. You’re always afraid to start anythin’ ‘cause you look too far ahead and see that no matter whatcha do now, it’s goin’ to end someday, and you can’t face that. And since the future ain’t happened yet, there’s nothin’ left for you.” He stood up. “I’d better get goin’ before I miss the train.”

I tried to speak as he unexpectedly gave me a horrific bear hug, but only a strangled gulp emerged. He tousled my hair for a moment. “You’re an awfully good kid, Sen. Take care of yourself.” For a long time I stared at the spot where his vehicle had disappeared over the horizon before I finally shook myself free and stumbled back into the house.

That afternoon I answered an emergency call reporting a child choking. It took only six minutes to reach the scene in my emergency vehicle, and for once I was the first to arrive. As I descended I saw two adults hovering over a prone figure on the grass. Even before I reached them I could see that the person lying on the ground was a young boy, apparently unconscious. Asking them to please stand off to one side, I knelt down and saw to my horror the unmistakable contour of a restraint collar around the boy’s neck, buried so deep in the flesh it was almost hidden.

Restraint collars are vicious devices, and something I’d had a rather personal acquaintance with. They’re made of the same amorphous diamond as the *Futaba*’s hull, in this case formed into a collar that fits around a human neck. At one time used as a form of “house arrest,” they were programmed to contract as the wearer moved further and further outside of a predefined area. Several horrible incidents led to their being banned long ago on both planets. Revived temporarily on Deshtiris by the Brizali, they’d made their last known

appearance at Romikor Tenako's secret base well after the freeing of the planet by Kiri and Will. I'd worn one for several weeks, along with the other Brizal prisoners, during my confinement.

Although possession of such a collar is strictly illegal, they are after all virtually indestructible, and one will still occasionally surface in an attic or monastery.* If accompanied by the control unit it will sooner or later find its way onto the neck of a curious victim, not infrequently resulting in a call to the nearest EMRN unit. Thus the necessary deactivation codes have been long since added to the standard PET protective suit. With shaking fingers I keyed the combination into the little box fastened to my thigh, and the collar expanded, retracted into a half circle and dropped into the grass below.

It took only a few seconds to assess the situation. I felt sick as I saw that the boy's face was not the swollen purple of a simple choking, but a dull grey. That told me that the collar had not just choked off the veins to the boy's head, but the arteries as well, including the deeply buried carotid artery. There was no pulse, no respiration, and most ominously no sign of eye reflexes. I removed a small device from one of my many pockets and placed it on the boy's forehead as several other PETs arrived at the scene. The total lack of any flickering from the several indicators on its surface told me everything I needed to know, that there was no remaining brain activity at all.

As the other PETs began the obligatory resuscitation efforts, I found the control box for the collar off to one side, smashed. I could reconstruct the scene all too well. The boy appeared to be about twelve, a favorite age for acting out adventures, captures, daring escapes. He would have accidentally keyed in a deadly code. In my mind I could see the parents spotting their son collapsed on the grass, frantically trying every combination they could think of on the controller to no avail, finally futilely smashing the device in desperation. I wondered how long they'd fought with it before calling for help. It would have taken at least fifteen minutes without blood flow to have caused the irreversible damage my sensor had reported. I felt rage boiling up inside and strode over to where the parents stood off to one side, their faces white. The father started to say something and I ruthlessly cut him off.

* Although neither Qozernans nor Deshtirans would be considered a particularly religious people by Earth standards, there remains a tiny cult on Qozernon that worships the Virrin as gods, and maintains several monasteries for this purpose.—*Ed.*

"How did he get these?" I demanded coldly, holding up the collar and the control box.

"It's a family heirloom," the father stammered. "My grandfather passed it along to us from his days as a prison guard."

"Don't you know it's illegal to possess these?" I snapped. The mother looked shocked at my evident insensitivity.

"It was so old we didn't think it would still be in working order," the father began defensively. "What about our—"

"Your little boy's dead," I said brutally, spinning on my heel. Even as the words emerged from my mouth I couldn't believe I'd spoken them, but all I could feel was fury; fury at the incredible arrogance and stupidity of parents who'd leave such a thing lying around, an illegal device, and with no purpose whatsoever except to maim or kill. I called the police and then helped the other PETs with the necessary follow-up until they arrived, made my report, and left as soon as I could. On the way home I absently wondered if I'd get demoted or fired for what I'd said, but at this point I didn't care. I was angry with the parents, I was angry with the world, and I was angry with myself, and I had no idea who I was or where I was going any more.

As it happened, I received a call from the district supervisor later that evening. "The parents complained to the magistrate about your behavior," he said. "Don't worry about it. He told them that what you said barely scratched the surface of what they deserved. They're being charged with criminal neglect as well as possession of an illegal device."

"Thanks," I said absently.

"The other PETs were pretty shocked," he went on, "but when they realized what had happened they were as sick about it as you. It happens. Just try not to kill someone one of these days," he advised me with a sad grin. "There are going to be times when you'll want to."

"I did," I said. "Today. It wasn't a good feeling, either."

He offered to put me on the off-duty roster for a few days, and I agreed. Normally I wouldn't have, but I was worried about Tora. That evening he'd barely touched his food. "It's off to the vet with you tomorrow," I told him as I picked him up. He seemed lighter, too, somehow, and bonier. "Please don't get sick on me now," I whispered to him as he revved up his engines and began rumbling happily.



“He’s dying?” I croaked, suddenly finding it hard to breathe. The veterinarian, a middle-aged man of my mother’s generation, nodded.

“Tora’s a very old cat, you know,” he said. I felt my face burning and fought off an impending wave of tears as he continued. “There’s no telling how old he was when the Brizali captured him, or how long they had him there. But he’s not sick. He’s just dying of natural causes.” I nodded clumsily, not trusting myself to speak again.

“His liver is failing,” he said as gently as he could. “It’s very common with older cats. But even without that, his kidneys are functioning at about a fourth of normal capacity. It’s only a matter of time.”

“How long?” I managed hoarsely.

“Maybe a week, maybe two, maybe three. It’s hard to tell.” I looked at Tora, sitting unconcernedly on the examining table, licking himself in an indelicate place. The room suddenly turned into a watery blur and I felt the tears running down my cheeks.

“Tora,” I whispered. “Please don’t do this. Please.” I felt the vet’s hand on my shoulder.

“How long have you had him?” he asked.

“About two years.” He already knew, of course; he’d been Tora’s health protector since I’d brought him back to Qozernon.

“He’s been your friend and companion all that time, hasn’t he?” he said. It was more of a statement than a question. I nodded.

“Life’s not a free ride, Senaria,” he said. “There’s a price for everything, especially for a relationship with another living being. The moment you decide to love something—or someone—you’re accepting the fact that sooner or later one of you is going to lose the other. It’s a contract, and an unbreakable one. We’re all mortal creatures, and no matter who we are we have to honor it eventually. Would you rather have foregone these past two years?” I was silent now, half-listening, half of me hearing another voice.

You’re always afraid to start anythin’ ’cause you look too far

ahead and see that no matter whatcha do now, it's goin' to end someday, and you can't face that.

I squared my shoulders and tried to blink the tears from my eyes. "What do I have to do?" I whispered.

He gave me a handful of small plastic tubes, and explained how to get Tora to swallow the liquid they contained. "This will spare him undue pain," he explained. "Just give him one of these every other day or so, and he should remain comfortable." He paused. "I'll send you the data on what you'll need to do when he's gone. Just remember: he's still Tora, he still loves you, and he doesn't know that anything has changed. Don't pull away from him. Just keep treating him like you always have."

I spent the next two weeks watching Tora die.

They were the longest two weeks of my life, and the saddest, and they flew by so quickly. I called the EMRN and asked to be taken off the duty roster until further notice, and spent every minute I could with him. I took him places in his carrier, let him wander for a day around the great planetary park filled with every known wildflower. I kept him company as we watched television together, he fascinated as always by the strange moving objects inside, with shape and depth but mysteriously lacking scent. He slept on my bed at night as he always had. And yet always I could see him slowly slipping away, always a little weaker than the day before, his naps longer, his appetite fading into nothing.

And then one morning I woke up to find him asleep on my bed as usual and reached out to stroke him and realized he was gone.

I spent the day taking care of the formalities. I brought the body to a crematorium which handled animal as well as human remains, and made the necessary arrangements. I filled out and transmitted what seemed like endless reports to the Qozernan and Deshtiran animal protection bureaus. Late in the afternoon I stopped back at the crematorium and picked up a small opaque white container, perhaps two inches on a side and five inches high.

When I finally returned home I set the little box up on a shelf until I could decide what I wanted to do with it, and sat down in the kitchen. It was then that the silence of the house hit me like a physical blow, and I felt myself to be utterly alone, more alone than I'd ever been in my life.

I absently turned on the telecom, not looking for anything in particular, just idly flipping channels. At one point I found myself watching the New Year's celebration in Earth's Times Square,

watching the ancient ritual of the dropping ball, and the crowds singing *Auld Lang Syne* at the top of their lungs. Somehow it just made me feel more alone than before, and I ended up switching it off.

Eventually I tried calling my mother, only to receive an automated message that informed me she was out and wouldn't be back for several days. I knew that usually meant she was running some kind of diplomatic errand. I could have overridden the setting and gotten through to her wherever she was, but to do that in anything less than an emergency would have been extremely rude, so I gave it up. Kiri and Will were also out, as was Kizuko, and I decided not to leave a message. I just couldn't bring myself to call Alan or Rann. But—

"This is Hal," said the youthful face in my telecom. "Oh, hi, Senaria." She paused, scrutinizing me intently. "Are you all right? You look really terrible." That was Haley all right, I thought; never any punches pulled where she was concerned. I told her about Tora, suddenly fighting off tears again.

"You must be really lonely," she said sympathetically. "Is anyone there with you?" I shook my head. "You have the *Noriko*," she suggested. "Why don't you come visit us for a while? Rann and I would love to put you up for as long as you'd like."

"Mmmmm. Maybe later," I said, and changed the subject. "So how are things with you? Studies going okay?" It was then that I heard for the first time about the disaster that had occurred.

"And he has Will's bolts?" I said incredulously.

"You know about those too, huh?"

I nodded grimly. "I've seen Will use them twice," I said. "You've got a real problem, I'd say."

"Yeah," she confirmed. "Did you know him? Rokun, I mean. He had your picture in his office, you know."

"Mohantor Rokun," I mused. "No, the name's not familiar. A lot of people at the palace seemed to know who I was, a lot more than I knew personally. It's too bad. You liked him a lot, didn't you?"

"He was a really nice man," she confirmed, blinking a few times. "I just hope they can do something for him when they find him. But he's so dangerous now—"

"I understand," I said as sympathetically as I could. "So how's Rann these days?" I added, not wanting to belabor a sensitive topic. Her face brightened.

"Oh, he's doing really well. Did you know I moved in with him the month before last?"

"That's wonderful. You two do make a great pair, you know."

She blushed. "He's really sweet. It's a good thing I never met anyone on Earth like him, or I'd probably still be there."

"He's grown up a lot since I left," I acknowledged. "And Alan?" I asked casually.

She shook her head. "This whole mess has left him really depressed. But he still keeps plugging along. I've heard rumors that he's in a lot of trouble with the politicians over the whole thing. They're afraid it's going to blow up into a major incident. There's even talk he could wind up deported back to Earth as a result."

"I can't believe Kiri would let that happen," I said.

"I hope not," she agreed fervently. "By the way, you wouldn't believe how pissed she is right now. Apparently someone—she thinks it might even have been Rokun—broke into her computer files the day before yesterday."

"Into *Kiri's* files?" I said, astonished. "Is that possible?"

"She says whoever did it had an incredible mind. That's why she's worried."

"I can see why," I agreed. "By the way, I don't suppose you know where my mother is? Her telecom says she's unavailable for the next few days. I was hoping to talk to her."

"She and my mother are touring up north for a few days," she explained. After a few more pleasantries, we broke off the connection.

There's nothing like hearing about someone else's problems to help put your own into perspective. I stared at the blank screen for a few minutes, then connected to EMRN headquarters and had myself put back on the active duty roster.



I woke up to the sound of the telecom alert. I'd gone to bed early, after an unusually exhausting day, and was dead to the world when it awakened me shortly before midnight. At first I thought it was a PET alert, and was already halfway into my protective suit (though considerably less than half-awake) when Kiri's face appeared onscreen. Behind her were Will, Rann, and Alan. It was just four days since I'd spoken to Haley, days in which I'd begun to feel I was finally dragging myself out of the emotional pit I'd so diligently dug.

For a moment I just stared at the image. "Kiri?" I mumbled stupidly, throwing on the nearest T-shirt. "I thought you were a PET alert. What's going on?"

"Sen," Kiri said, "we're in trouble here. Real trouble. We desperately need your help." I suddenly noticed that Rann was deathly pale. I felt a sickening feeling of foreboding.

"My help?" I echoed, still groggy.

"Haley's been kidnapped," Will said.

That woke me up. One hundred percent. "Haley? *Haley*?" Crime is unusual enough on the Twin Planets, but kidnapping is practically unheard of. "By who? Is there something I can do?" Will looked as if he were about to say something further, but was interrupted by Kiri.

"I'm going to make this as brief as possible," she said. "We're racing the clock here. One of our researchers downloaded a Virrin mind into himself—"

"Yeah, I heard about that part," I acknowledged.

"—killed at least four people, and took her with him. We think we know where they're going, but the fastest ship we have will take over a day to get there."

"Even in the *Futaba*?"

"He took the *Futaba*. It's at least twice as fast as anything we've got. We think they're going to Rouaas."

"He took the *Futaba*?" I exclaimed. "How—"

"Somehow he forged my voiceprint. He's also blocked me out of the living quarters. Probably used the same voiceprint to override the

security lockdown and reprogram the access combination. He apparently entered via a gateway of his own and took off right from the palace courtyard.” She let me digest this for a few seconds.

“The *Noriko*,” I said slowly, finally understanding. “You need me to take the *Noriko* and follow them.” She nodded. “And where the hell is Rouaas?” I demanded, but even as I said it I remembered. It was one of those things you learned in grade school and promptly forgot.

“Rouaas is only about thirteen hours from Qozernon with the *Noriko*,” she answered, tactfully ignoring my question. “We’re already underway, but even in this ship it’ll take us over a day to get there. And with Haley a hostage we have to keep a low profile with any pursuit.”

“Sen, please,” Rann broke in. “Please save her. Please.”

I gave him a reassuring grin, or at least the closest thing to it I could muster. “You know I will, Rann. Did you really think you had to ask?”

“We’ll fill you in on the details once you’re underway,” Alan said, speaking for the first time.

“Fine,” I assured them. “Is there anything special I need to bring?”

“Yes,” Kiri said slowly. “Do you remember where I stored the mind wipe device I used on Will all those years ago?” I nodded, rather surprised. She’d shown it to me once, though at the time she hadn’t told me who she’d used it on. It was quite small, about the size of a telecom’s remote control. “Bring that and a case of microtools,” she said. “And your protective suit. You’ll need it.” Thoroughly mystified, I complied. Possibly ten minutes later I was streaking out of the planet’s atmosphere, pressed back into my seat by the acceleration. I’d had just enough time to contact EMRN headquarters and let them know I was temporarily unavailable again for emergency calls.

Rouaas is located a little over halfway from Qozernon to Deshtiris, a few light-years off a direct line between the two. Like the *Futaba*, I had only to inform the *Noriko* of the coordinates of our destination and the rest of the necessary calculations were performed automatically. The ship promptly notified me that we would reach our destination in approximately 13.150684 hours.

Once the *Noriko* was safely at hyperspeed, aimed at Rouaas, the four began filling me in on recent events. I wisely refrained from a well-deserved “I told you so” on hearing the full story of what had happened to Rokun. Besides, it wasn’t just Rann who was filled with apprehension for Haley. In the brief time I’d known her the Earth girl had succeeded in unsettling my life much more than she might have imagined. It had also taken me very little time to see how much she

meant to Rann.

"He's somehow genetically modified himself," Alan was explaining, the stress apparent in his voice. "His skin has mutated into some kind of nearly indestructible protective substance. One guard hit him square on with the point of his sword without even scratching him, and was silently electrocuted for his efforts. We have a recording made by a security camera, and from what we can see only Rokun's eyes are still intact. He might be vulnerable to a green laser blast, but unfortunately the only laser rifle left in working condition is on the *Futaba*. And don't forget he has Will's energy bolts."

"Believe me, I remember that part," I said fervently. "So what am I supposed to do?"

"You're going to modify the mind wiper," Kiri said. "Because he still has a human brain, he's vulnerable to its effects, or at least we think he is. The architecture of his mind, however, is different now from that of a human mind. That actually operates to our advantage. I've worked out a configuration change that will make it effective on him but won't affect a normal human brain within range."

That leaves me out, I thought a bit sourly. Will turned and nervously whispered something in Kiri's ear, and I saw her expression harden in return. "Because I tested it on myself, that's how," she snapped. Will, stunned, slowly sat down, disappearing temporarily from sight. "Sen," she continued, a little less harshly, "you know I'd never consider having you use this if I thought it would put you in greater danger."

"I didn't ask, Kiri," I said softly.

So I would have a weapon of sorts. Nonetheless it was pretty clear that in his reincarnated state Rokun was going to be one tough character. This would definitely not be a simple PET rescue operation, not by a long shot. "So what do I do when I get there?" I asked skeptically. Rouaas was now twelve hours away.

In a long series of precise, clear instructions Kiri had me dismantle the mind wiper. It turned out that the actual device was very small, about the size of a matchbook. The rest of the space was taken up by the keypad and command buttons. Kiri explained how to interface the core of the device with my PET suit's command module. The device itself I mounted on the back of my right glove. Altogether the procedure consumed a good four hours, and by the end of it my fingers were stiff and my eyes threatening to burn themselves into the back of my head.

"I'm sending you a code subroutine to modify the behavior of the

mind wiper, so it'll resonate with Rokun's modified brain configuration. Download it into your command module the same way you would any other software update for your suit. Once you do, pressing the triangular key on your keypad will activate it. If you're close enough, and if we actually understand what we're doing on this end, it should wipe his mind completely and permanently."

I shuddered, remembering Lucie. "That's two too many ifs," I said dubiously. "How close?"

"Within about thirty feet," Kiri said.

"His energy bolts have killed people from as far away as two hundred feet," Alan broke in. "You've got to be very careful."

"Two hundred feet, huh?" I said, mustering a weak grin. "Kind of makes Will's bolts look feeble, doesn't it?" No one smiled.

"Looks like I'll just have to stay at least two hundred and one feet away, while getting within thirty feet," I observed dryly. "Piece of cake."

"I'm sorry, Sen," Kiri said. "We have no one else to turn to."

"This is my fight too," I snapped, suddenly angry. "Of course I'm going to do this. Hal's a nice kid. I'm not about to let anything happen to the little squirt. Got it?" There was a stunned pause.

"Thank you, Sen," Rann finally said, his voice unnaturally hoarse.

"Please be careful," Alan added. Simple words, and directly from the heart, I realized. I gave him the Qozernan equivalent of the thumbs up sign in return. "Now, how do I find the *Futaba*?"



Rouaas, although known to both planets for hundreds of years, is still *terra incognita* to a surprising extent. Sharing a star system with two other partially terraformed planets, it's by far the least-explored of the three, primarily because of its lack of water and therefore life.

These three planets occupy orbits around their sun roughly analogous to Venus, Earth and Mars in the Terran solar system. Of these, Rouaas occupies the one corresponding to Venus, and is accordingly the warmest.

However, unlike Venus, Rouaas lacks a greenhouse atmosphere, and although considerably warmer overall than Earth it has nothing like Venus' inhospitable climate. The general consensus is that it would have almost no atmosphere at all, much like Mars, were it not for the Virrin.

All three planets, in fact, possess atmospheres very similar to Earth's (and by extension Qozernon's and Deshtiris'), one of the chief reasons it's assumed that they're incomplete terraforming experiments by the Virrin. Supporting this theory is the presence of plant life on the middle planet, Aastya, all of it Earth-based, which led to its current use as a prison planet.

It's not that Rouaas hasn't been explored. In fact there are several mapping satellites in orbit around the planet continually adding to the available store of data. Its landscape is known to be extremely rugged in nature, with many large craters pocking the surface. There's ample evidence of seismic and volcanic activity, including numerous active volcanoes and the remains of vast lava flows. In addition, the surface is broken in many places by gigantic rifts, some many miles deep.

Contributing to the savage nature of the landscape is the almost total absence of weather, which would otherwise contribute the softening effects of erosion. Although the atmosphere was apparently identical to Earth's at the time of terraforming, in the intervening thousands of years some of the oxygen has been bound up in the form of oxides. A certain amount of sulfur dioxide has accumulated due to continuing volcanic activity, as has what little water exists in the

atmosphere, which would otherwise have been permanently bound long ago into hydrous minerals.

Even with the vast database of information provided by the satellites, little is really known about the planet. Unlike Earth, for example, there's an almost complete absence of metals: Rouaas is for all practical purposes a giant ball of solid rock. Such minerals as are easily accessible are far cheaper to mine on one of the Twin Planets, for even with advanced technology the transportation of tons of low yield ore almost twenty light-years is simply not economic. For this reason, although trillions of bytes of data on the planet are available, very little of it has actually been looked at in detail. Add to this the fact that though Rouaas is slightly smaller than Earth literally all of it is land, and looking for the *Futaba* began to take on the aspect of searching for the proverbial needle in a haystack.

And always the question remained: Why Rouaas?

Kiri provided the answer to the first riddle. "It's not well known, Sen," she said, "but amorphous diamond will reflect a hyperspace pulse of the proper phase. In effect it rings like a bell, but in hyperspace rather than normal space." She explained how to temporarily reconfigure the comm system to send out a hyperspace pulse of the right phase and how to set up the *Noriko*'s sensors to detect only the reflection. "Just be ready to pick it up the moment you transmit," she said. "I don't know what kind of alarms he might have set for himself, but if he does detect the pulse it's better if he thinks it's a one-time anomaly."

"Won't he recognize what's happening?" I asked. "Last I heard he'd managed to snag all your files on the *Futaba*."

"That's not in those files," she said with a grim smile. "The information on the 'hyperspace bell' phenomenon was in a separate set of files dealing with the early experiments I'd done on amorphous diamond. He didn't touch those; probably didn't realize there was anything of value there."

"What about him tracking the *Noriko*?"

"Not likely, for the same reason the Brizali didn't detect us when we landed on Deshtiris. The ship's too damn small. Just try not to poke around too long before you land. He might get suspicious if he detects several hundred pounds of metal floating around without visible means of support." I nodded.

"One last thing, Sen. Once you drop out of hyperspace I think you should maintain comm silence. It's almost impossible to tap communications that originate in hyperspace, but once in normal space

they'll make you a sitting duck. Any questions?"

I paused. "If I don't make it back—I love you all," I said, and broke the connection.

I soon had everything set, ready for the drop out of hyperspace. I put together several telecom messages and stored them without transmitting, and took care of one last piece of business, programming in a series of instructions for the *Noriko* that I could trigger from the keypad on my suit. After that it was simply a matter of donning my protective gear and waiting. It seemed like an eternity before the *Noriko* finally sounded a warning and a moment later Rouaas swam into view directly ahead. Here we go, I thought.

On the panel before me was a small image of the giant dull-brown sphere suspended in space before me. I pressed a key, sending out the pulse. Almost immediately a small flash appeared on the screen, somewhere in the southern hemisphere of the planet, and I entered a command to zoom in and magnify, overlaying with topographic and geologic information from the centuries of accumulated data. I found that it originated within one of the deep rifts breaking up the planet's surface.

I zoomed in again, wondering if Rokun had landed at the bottom of the chasm, which according to the data was over three miles deep. That didn't fit the information on the returned pulse, though, which apparently had been reflected back from a location just a few hundred feet below the level of the planet's surface. I zoomed in again, with similar results, and zoomed once more. *What the hell is that?* I found myself wondering.

What I was seeing just didn't look quite right. The satellite data originated from directly overhead, of course, but even from that angle I saw what appeared to be excessively regular curves and straight lines, barely detectable so close were they to the edges of the chasm. I queried the database for information on prior construction on Rouaas, but even as I waited I knew that no humans could have built on this scale without an immense investment of resources, for the evidence of intelligent construction extended for dozens of miles in either direction. A half-second later the database returned the available information on the only known construction, a few very small prospecting plants built several hundred years ago.

Instead of a slow glide, I took the *Noriko* straight down towards the rift, applying just enough power to keep my descent under control. I was only a thousand feet above ground level, about to descend directly into the chasm, when I saw it.

At first glance it might have been a series of natural ledges, resulting from the different erosion rates of layers of differing strata, except that here there was no erosion to speak of. Then, as I moved in closer, they took shape—a series of terraces, cut into the solid wall of the cliff and extending out of sight in either direction. The lowest one was perhaps six hundred feet below the lip of the chasm, almost even with the cliffside, with each one above set further back into the rock. They were spaced vertically about sixty feet apart, with almost vertical walls sloping slightly inward from one up to the next. Below the bottom ledge there was a sheer drop into the abyss, straight down for nearly three miles.

As I continued descending below the lip of the rift, I saw that a section of the topmost ledge had no wall behind it. Instead, a vast cavern had been cut into the rock, extending back into utter darkness. The opening had to be at least two hundred feet in height and easily a thousand feet in width. I realized that a Deshtiran battleship could have entered with plenty of room to spare.

I soon determined that the *Futaba* was somewhere inside. The hyperspace pulse and the *Futaba's* echo weren't affected by solid rock, which was fortunate, as my readouts placed it several hundred feet back within the cavern.

For a moment I debated taking the *Noriko* in, then decided against it. There was a good chance I might need to make a fast getaway, especially if I succeeded in finding Haley, and I had no idea what surprises lay inside. Coming in closer, but well to one side of the immense opening, I saw that the top ledge was a good sixty feet deep. There were also periodic vertical outcroppings on the walls behind the ledge, resembling columns, which would block any view from the cavern. I gingerly brought the ship down on the far side of one of these.

I took a deep breath. "*Noriko*: portal," I said, and stepped out of the ship, cautiously sniffing the air. It proved breathable enough, if very dry. There was a thin feeling to it, as though I were at a much higher altitude, due to the slightly diminished oxygen content. There was also just a faint trace of a sulfurous tang, but all in all the air was considerably more breathable than Deshtiris' had been under the Brizali.

I turned back to the ship. "*Noriko*: close portal." I put on my helmet, raising the visor for better visibility. Then I headed for the opening, hugging the wall as much as possible. In a few seconds I was inside.

I noticed that the actual entrance to the cavern was surrounded by deep grooves cut into the rock. There was a brownish residue along the

bottom of these, and I guessed that it had been metal once. Here and there were other traces of what might have once been machinery or conduits, now long since crumbled into dust.

Still hugging the near wall, I worked my way into the cavern. I hesitated to use my hand torch for fear of attracting attention, and so my progress at first was slow, as I allowed my eyes to adjust to the darkness. For the first hundred feet the walls were featureless, without openings of any kind, but after that I began to see occasional openings carved into the solid rock, which became more frequent as I progressed.

I saw a glint up ahead, as light from the now distant opening reflected off something shiny, and soon found myself face to face with the *Futaba*. There was no sign of life inside, although of course I had no way of knowing if anyone was in the living quarters.

As my eyes continued to adjust to the dim light, I realized that the *Futaba* was parked almost at the very back of the immense hangar. From here I'd have to enter one of the many openings scattered along the walls. For several moments I remained motionless, looking in all directions for any sign of movement, my ears straining to hear any sounds other than my own pulse pounding in my ears. Satisfied, I set my torch on its lowest setting and carefully examined the ground around the *Futaba's* doorway. To my dismay I found no footprints or other traces I could use as a starting point. Although several millennia's worth of dust had drifted into the vast cavern, virtually none of it had reached this far back.

Frantically I looked at the maze of corridors, utterly at a loss as to where to begin. And then I saw the blood.



It wasn't a lot. Most of it was on the ground in a small area along one wall, smeared about as if several pairs of feet had milled around uncertainly. A trail of drops, perhaps a foot apart, led away down one of the corridors. I knelt and touched a gloved finger to one of the drops, and it came away sticky.

My heart by now racing wildly, I forced myself to remember my PET training. Find out what caused the injury, I told myself, and almost immediately located a stone projection some two feet before the start of the bloodstains, about four feet from the floor, with a sharp edge where a fragment had broken off long ago. There was a shred of blue cloth clinging to the projection, and a slight dark smear which I assumed was blood.

I remembered Haley's blue shirt with the Groucho quote. She must have fallen or been pushed against the projection. At least she was still alive when it happened, I realized to my relief, and so I set out along the pathway I'd been so unexpectedly given.

At one point the trail began to vanish, the telltale dark circles growing further and further apart. Then suddenly there was a small puddle, now congealed, and the drops once again became frequent and closely spaced. She must have reopened the wound somehow, I thought.

I found myself traversing a vast maze of corridors and junctions. As I moved deeper into the complex I began to see more and more recognizable traces of furnishings and equipment in various stages of disintegration. The atmosphere felt still and rather stale, and I surmised that with little or no air movement the contents had been subjected to less and less of the corrosive effects of time.

I saw bits of what might have been metal, now just crumbling shells of oxide. There were occasional odd shapes of some kind of durable material that had withstood the ages, intermingled with the powdered remains of equipment long gone. I would have long since become hopelessly lost if it weren't for the trail continually leading me onward.

At one point I stepped through a doorway into what seemed to be a

large room, for the walls on either side receded into the darkness and I could hear my footsteps echoing back hollowly from all directions. I froze, listening for any other sounds, and heard only silence, so I held my torch above my head and moved the control slider to the full illumination position, flooding the room with light.

I was in a vast chamber possibly seven or eight hundred feet in diameter, the ceiling at least two hundred feet above me. It could have been an immense meeting hall, with tiered ledges rising from the central well to the outer walls on all sides. Of the thousands of seats it must have once held there was only jumbled rubble.

Picking my way across the floor, following the trail to one of the many openings on the other side of the room, I tried to imagine what the Virrin mind I was tracking must be going through. The last thing he (or was it she?) would have remembered would have been the experience of having his mind uploaded into the Virrin mind machine, and I shuddered, remembering my own experience.

He would have next awoken in a strange body unwilling to obey his commands, unable to communicate, surrounded by what should have been his captives, who were now apparently in control. He would have seen none of his fellows anywhere, and slowly the realization would have sunk in that he was now imprisoned in one of his captors' bodies. Mingled with this would have been the confusing set of memories and knowledge, apparently belonging to the body's former owner, telling him of things that could only have filled him with horror and despair, of the frantic flight of his peers to their home world, and of the utter destruction of their civilization.

He would have remembered this remote base, and in desperation had worked out a plan to return, perhaps in the forlorn hope that he would still find some of his fellow Virrin here, or at least some familiar surroundings. And he would have found this, a hollow shell of what once must have been a thriving, perhaps even cheerful home away from home, its contents long crumbled into dust and scrap. I switched off my torch and just stood there in the pitch dark, utterly overwhelmed by the sadness of it all. It took a powerful effort to shake off the mood and refocus on what I'd come for.

Switching my torch back on, once again using its dimmest setting, I resumed my pursuit of the trail Haley had left. I'd gone a good three thousand feet or more along the maze of corridors, hoping nothing would somehow erase the trail behind me, when I heard a peculiar sound far ahead. I can only describe it as a kind of braying. For some reason the sound sent chills down my spine, but in spite of its being in

the direction I was headed I quickened my pace.

I'd advanced only a hundred feet further when I emerged into a small nook where several corridors converged. A human figure was huddled miserably in one corner, and the head jerked upright as I stepped in.

"Haley," I exclaimed in relief. Her face was deathly white, and what was left of her T-shirt was tied around her left arm. Even against the dark fabric I could see the bloodstains. At first she shrank away from me in fright, and I remembered the helmet and pulled it off as I reset my torch again to fully illuminate the room. She stared at me in utter disbelief for several seconds.

"Senaria?" she said weakly. "It's really you?"

"The one and only," I reassured her, reaching down to help her to her feet. "Come on. We've got to get you out of here." Off in the distance, but closer this time, I heard the braying again.

To my surprise Haley shook free of me. "Please get out of here," she said frantically. "You're in terrible danger. He'll kill you. He's horrible." I could see her shivering uncontrollably.

Thinking she was hysterical, I tried to take her arm again, only to see her shrink away. "You can't help me," she said, clutching at something around her neck. "He put this thing on me, and if I try to go more than a few feet it chokes me. Please, Senaria, never mind me, just get out of here while you still can."

To my horror I realized that she wore a restraint collar. I wondered how Rokun had managed to acquire one, then remembered that he'd been part of the project analyzing the technology found in Tenako's secret compound.

"It's okay, Hal," I reassured her, tapping the master combination into the keypad on my right leg. The collar shrank into an open half-circle and fell to the floor. "Now let me look at that arm," I demanded.

For a moment she looked stunned, hardly daring to believe she was actually free. I could imagine her terror, feeling the collar constrict around her neck every time she tried to slip away from the alcove where she'd been left. "Never mind my arm," she said shakily, and I could hear real panic in her voice. "We've got to go. He'll kill us," she repeated. I heard the bray again, closer now, and felt her shudder.

"I'm not going to have you lose an arm to an overly tight bandage," I snapped, untying the shirt from around her arm. The gash I uncovered was ragged and long, but not particularly deep, and was no longer bleeding much. To my relief I saw no signs of impaired circulation. I quickly retied the shirt around the wound. I heard another

bray, much closer now.

I wasted no further time in discussion, and taking her uninjured arm led her as quickly as I could back along the trail I'd followed, my helmet tucked under my other arm. I watched her carefully; she'd lost a significant amount of blood and I couldn't afford to have her unexpectedly pass out at a critical moment. "So how did that happen?" I asked as we threaded our way along the maze. "Did you trip, or did he push you?" She mustered a weak grin.

"I saw that broken piece of rock and sort of threw myself against it," she said rather sheepishly. "I had to leave some kind of trail, and I couldn't think of anything else to do. It worked better than I expected, and I had to tie my shirt around the cut. After a while, though, it stopped bleeding and I had to pretend to trip and use that as an opportunity to reopen it."

"You mean you did that on purpose?" I said incredulously. My estimate of this diminutive Earth girl suddenly increased about ten-fold. I didn't want to think about how much that must have hurt.

"I want to see Rann again," she said resolutely. "I'll do anything it takes."

In spite of her arm, we managed to make good time for a while. As we crossed the vast auditorium, I heard her say, "It must be terrible for him."

"Huh?" I said, neither of us slowing our pace.

"To see what's happened here. This must seem like a horrible nightmare." I wondered if Virrin had nightmares. "He'd have been so much better off never to have been awakened." She stumbled and nearly fell. I turned my back to her and told her to put her arms around my neck.

"I'm going to carry you," I said, and in spite of her protests she rode the rest of the way on my back, her legs locked around my waist. "Let me know if you start feeling light-headed," I said.

For a few minutes we continued on in near silence, the only sound being the crunching of my boots in the debris. I decided I'd better make some conversation so she didn't pass out on me. "Is there anything you can tell me about this Rokun that might be useful?" I asked.

"Rokun's gone," she said flatly. "He said so."

"He?" I echoed, not understanding.

"The Virrin or whatever he is now," she said. Her voice was unsteady, and I realized she was on the verge of crying. "He told me, 'No Rokun. Rokun gone.' " Her voice broke. "He was such a nice man."

"You said he knew me?"

"He told me one afternoon about working with you when the palace was being rebuilt. He even had your picture in his office." She hesitated. "I think he was in love with you." It was a good thing she was hanging on by herself, because otherwise I probably would have dropped her in surprise.

"He what?" I stammered.

"I wouldn't have told you about it if this hadn't happened. He was pretty embarrassed when he realized how much he'd said. But I thought maybe you should know."

"He certainly never said anything like that to me," I protested.

"You don't know how shy he was," she said. "Well, it doesn't matter now, I guess."

By this time we'd reached the *Futaba*. "Where are we going?" Haley exclaimed in dismay as I carried her right past it and out onto the ledge.

"The *Futaba* won't answer my voice commands," I explained. "You're getting out on my ship. The *Noriko*'s just around that projection." A moment later we rounded the corner, and I felt a huge surge of relief to see that it was indeed still there.

"*Noriko*: portal," I shouted, and then I was lugging Haley up the ramp and into the ship. "Strap yourself in fast," I commanded, unloading her into a seat and turning to leave. "It's going to be a tough takeoff." She stared at me, bewildered, seeing me standing there in the doorway. "Do it!" I snapped, and a moment later she was secured.

"The ship is on autopilot," I said as I backed out of the portal. "It'll take you to Qozernon where you'll be safe." I paused for a moment as she stared uncomprehendingly at me. "If I leave now he'll follow in the *Futaba*, and this whole mess will just start over again. Kiri and the others will be along in about ten hours, and I've got to stop him once and for all before then. If I don't make it back, there are some messages in the telecom to send. Good luck, Hal," I added, a little more gently. "*Noriko*: close portal." Only as the doorway began to shrink did she finally seem to realize what was happening.

As I leaped off the now retracting ramp, I heard her anguished cry through the disappearing opening. "Senaria! Please, no!" I reached down and touched a button on the keypad fastened to my leg, and the little craft rose horizontally, turned its nose skyward and shot upwards. I had one last glimpse of Haley's horrified face, mouth open in a silent scream. "I screwed you over once, Rann," I murmured as the ship faded into the cloudless sky. "I'm not going to do it again. I'm sorry, Hal."



That was the easy part, I thought ruefully as the *Noriko* disappeared from sight. Out of habit I put my helmet back on while I debated what to do next.

But not for long. I heard Rokun's howl again, this time just inside the cavern, and realized he was probably already at the *Futaba*. Looking around wildly, my first thought was to run along the ledge, which extended for several miles in either direction. However, sooner or later I'd run out of ledge, and there was no guarantee that any doorway I entered wouldn't be a dead end.

I glanced over the edge of the ledge, and saw the next one some sixty feet below. The wall sloped down to it, but it was very steep, almost vertical, and even a slight misjudgment could send me rolling right off the ledges and into the abyss. Then I noticed a series of holes at regular intervals, and saw that at one time there had probably been rungs or a ladder of some kind set into the wall. The holes were about two inches in diameter, enough for me to climb down with, though rather precarious for my large boots.

I'd just reached the bottom when I glanced up to see Rokun directly above me, looking down. I didn't wait for a bolt to be launched in my direction, but dove for the nearest doorway a dozen feet away and ran as fast as I could along the passageway. There was no longer any need for stealth so I set my torch at full strength, which was fortunate; otherwise I'd probably have broken my neck when I unexpectedly encountered a steep ramp leading downwards.

To my dismay I found no branching corridors as the sounds of Rokun's pursuit grew nearer. I'd hoped to slip into a side corridor and activate the mind wiper once he was within range, but instead I found myself the quarry, and at a real disadvantage. The tunnel wound downward, apparently in a spiral, and I must have descended several hundred feet before it finally leveled off. Almost without warning I found myself emerging onto one of the lower terraces, this one much narrower than the ones above. I saw another doorway about two hundred feet further along the ledge.

There was a noise behind me and I saw Rokun emerge from the

opening I'd just come through. I turned to run.

Not even I expected him to act so quickly. Almost before I'd broken into a stride I felt a tremendous electrical shock, as though I'd grasped a live power line, and an instant later was lying helpless on the ground, muscles shuddering uncontrollably as I tried unsuccessfully to draw a breath, a single breath. I was on the point of blacking out when I finally managed to regain enough control of my diaphragm to suck in some life-giving air in ragged, convulsive gasps.

For a moment I wondered why I hadn't been blown apart like the other victims. Then I realized that the suit, conductive on the exterior and insulated inside, had protected me from what was after all an electrical charge. But even the heavy-duty insulation, capable of protecting the wearer against contact with a high tension power line, hadn't been able to entirely block out the shock. I could feel my heart erratically skipping beats, and knew a second jolt like that could kill me.

I became aware of Rokun again, standing motionless in the doorway. I desperately tried to slither away and felt my still quivering leg slide out over empty air. I turned my head to find myself lying on the very lip of the ledge, a dizzying drop beyond, and realized I was starting to slide over the edge. As he again raised a finger I fumbled for the box on my leg, knowing even as I did that he was too far away to be affected by the mind wiper.

The second bolt didn't hit me directly. Instead it struck the ground a few feet in front of me, the resulting shock wave blasting me violently backwards out into nothingness, my body twisting wildly as I grabbed unsuccessfully for the ledge. For one horrible moment time seemed to stop as I plummeted helplessly into the abyss. And then, only seconds later, far sooner than I expected, I had a glimpse of the ground rushing up at me like a brick wall and an instant later hit with a frightful ghastly crunch. I think I must have bounced once or twice before I came to a stop.

For I while I felt nothing further at all and just lay there stunned. I gradually became aware that I'd somehow landed on the last narrow ledge below, the very bottom one. I was lying partly on my left side, staring insensately at the border between sky and ground like a dropped video camera. Then the pain began, horrible intense waves of pain like nothing I'd ever experienced, washing over me and overwhelming any conscious thought.

I must have passed out; I don't know for how long. It might have been seconds, or hours. As I slowly became cognizant of my surroundings again, the pain returned, but this time dulled somewhat. I

suppose my brain had begun blocking it out, or maybe I was just too battered to feel it much any more.

Or at least until I tried to move my head; that triggered a whole fresh set of fierce stabbing pains, mostly in my left arm and side. The arm was doubled up beneath me; my left leg was visibly bent at a horrid angle but I could feel nothing at all from it. The realization finally began to sink in that I was in very deep trouble. Then I heard Rokun's braying.

I found that if I took great care not to move my torso I could turn my head enough to look in the direction of my feet, up at the wall. There, on the ledge where I'd been, I saw his silhouette observing me with interest. Soon he'd be climbing down.

A wave of red suddenly obscured my vision, and for a moment I thought I was done for; without sight I had no hope of surviving. Trying to blink it away, I discovered it was only in my left eye, and that if I closed it I could still see. Blood from a scalp wound, I guessed. Then I saw Rokun at the base of the wall. At his feet were two strange hemispherical objects, which I recognized after a moment's puzzlement as the shattered halves of my helmet.

The pain no longer mattered. It was it or my life now, I knew. My right arm lay behind me, and as slowly as I could I raised my right hand to my leg, towards the small keypad on my protective suit, trying to ignore the waves of agony triggered by every slight motion. I had to literally drag my arm along with my fingers, as any attempt to lift it was unendurable, threatening to black me out again.

Rokun slowly advanced in my direction, staring strangely at me. Fighting the blurring that kept threatening to overwhelm my vision, I forced myself to keep my eyes on him as I fumbled for the box on my leg. Then my fingers felt its hard edges and I frantically sought the proper button. It was triangularly shaped, and normally I could have found it in my sleep, but now it was as if all the buttons had suddenly become indistinguishable beneath my numbed fingers.

Rokun was only a few feet away when he bent over and peered into my face. The nearly unrecognizable features reshaped themselves into an almost human expression, and I heard him make a noise completely unlike the unintelligible braying I'd heard until now. At first I couldn't make it out. Then, through the pain and the roaring in my ears, I understood.

"Se—na—ri—a," he was saying. "Se—na—ri—a."

"Yes," I mumbled. "I'm Senaria."

"Hurt Senaria," he said. I saw a tear roll down one misshapen

cheek.

“Yes.” I had to speak very slowly to make the words intelligible. “You hurt me. But it wasn’t your fault.” I finally located what under my nearly useless fingers felt like the correct key, but for a long moment I hesitated. “I’m sorry,” I said finally, and then I pressed it, the exertion sending another paroxysm of pain through my torso. I closed my eyes.

When I opened them again I saw a crumpled figure lying a few feet away from me. *Your journey is over*, I thought. *And so is mine*.

After that there was nothing left to do. I just lay there, slowly feeling the pain easing, being gradually replaced by a sensation of softly floating in midair. I no longer felt connected to my body at all, and couldn’t have moved if I’d wanted to. Live in the present, Kizuko had said, and I guessed now was as good a time to do so as any.

I must have closed my eyes, because I remember seeing a series of scenes following one after another. At one point I was fighting Kiri in the back yard of my mother’s house on Qozernon with practice blades, and an accompanying sensation of deep happiness flooded through me. Then I was helping clean rubbish out of the abandoned royal palace at Deshti, holding one end of a large heavy piece of steel as Rann maneuvered the other end. A moment later I was giving Alan his first lesson in Deshtiran and marveling at how such a brilliant man could be so bad at languages.

One after another the scenes kept coming, but always growing more distant, somehow, as if I were watching them on a screen gradually going dark. Finding Kiri’s blood-covered body in the tunnels under Tar Deshta. Sitting in a restaurant arguing with Alan. Hugging my mother the morning after being rescued from Jack Lucie. Somehow one face kept returning again and again. At last I understood.

It seemed as if I heard his voice calling to me from far away, and his face floated directly before my eyes. “I love you, Alan,” I whispered, and then everything faded away completely.

PART IV:

Restart



For an eternity I drifted in a ghostly nothingness. I had no thoughts, no consciousness. I just existed, somehow, but with no mind, no body, no me. At times there were voices, sometimes pleading, sometimes soft and reassuring, sometimes just businesslike. There was an occasional sensation of light, but without form or shape or color. There was no beginning or end, just an endless perpetuation. Only the voices seemed out of place, and it was as if they were slowly, gently pulling me out of the oblivion in which I had become marooned.

Then, somehow, a nebulous light began to take on form. I became aware of strange geometric patterns, which slowly resolved themselves into "things." One was an odd white glowing sphere that floated in midair before me. For a very long time I contemplated and admired it. And then, as if someone somewhere had thrown a switch, it metamorphosed into a ceiling light fixture.

"She's looking around!" someone said excitedly, and another, less regularly shaped object appeared between the fixture and myself. For a moment I was puzzled, and then I remembered that it was a face. "Can you hear me?" the face said. "Can you understand what I'm saying?"

At first I just listened to the words in fascination, the first words I'd comprehended in aeons. Then I realized that they were grouped into questions, and that I was expected to say something in response. The effort brought out only a strangled squawk followed by a violent coughing fit. By now there were quite a few faces floating around me. Someone sprayed something cool and sweet into my mouth once I'd stopped coughing, and I tried to speak again. "Imogay," I finally managed, discovering my tongue to be oddly thick and sluggish to respond.

"Don't worry," said one of the other faces, "you're doing fine. Can you remember your name?" "Thenahia," I mumbled. "Good," it continued approvingly, "and how old are you?" I had to think about that, and thinking was hard. "Tweddy vore," I finally answered.

"I think she's going to be all right," I heard the voice say reassuringly to someone else in the room. Somebody shone a light in

my eyes, eliciting a mumbled growl from me, and they expressed satisfaction with the results. Then a new face floated into view.

"Alan," I said in recognition.

"Yes, Sen, it's me," he said. "Don't worry about your voice not working right. You've been in a coma for several weeks, and it'll take you a little while to get things working again. You're doing just fine." He turned away, and I heard him say again, in a strangely garbled voice, "You're doing just fine."

Gradually I found the world around me resuming its familiar appearance. At first my thoughts were hazy and unfocused, and I'd be unable to recognize faces or understand simple sentences, then something would "click" and yet another connection would have been reestablished. I discovered that I was in a hospital on Qozernon, where I'd lain with multiple fractures and internal injuries for the past nineteen days, ever since what was widely becoming known as the "Rouaas Incident." Apparently I'd broken my left arm, leg, collarbone, lots of ribs, and, more critically, my back. Most life threatening of all had been a severe blow to the head that had fractured my skull (supposedly impervious, that) in two places.

For four days I'd hovered between life and death as my body's biochemical systems oscillated wildly from one extreme to another and the medical team fought to stabilize my condition. They'd finally succeeded, but I had then failed to regain any semblance of consciousness. I'd remained in that state for over two weeks, with only a glimmer of detectable brain activity remaining, like the shadow of a thought. As day after day had passed without signs of responsiveness, hopes had begun to fade of my ever recovering. It had only been two days previously that some signs of eye movement had been detected. In the meantime, I found, my friends had taken turns staying by my bedside, talking to me, reassuring me, or just holding my hand. That's one debt I can't ever even begin to repay.

On hand were my mother, Kiri, Will, and of course Alan. They were soon joined at one time or another by Kizuko, Rann, and Haley on what appeared to be a rotating basis. Kiri and Will stayed as long as they could, but as Emperor and Empress of Deshtiris they finally had to attend to managing their planet. My mother had stuck around for another week after that, making sure I was going to be all right, before also returning to Deshtiris to resume her duties.

I soon realized that I was paralyzed from the waist down, with no sensation or motor control to speak of. The broken back (two vertebrae, to be specific, and a mangled spinal cord) accounted for the total lack

of sensation in my hips and legs, as well as my inability to move them. I won't even try to describe the considerable inconvenience this caused for all concerned. Well, it could have been worse, I thought cheerfully.

Once I was able to sit up a bit and could again speak reasonably coherently I began to receive a deluge of visitors, something the doctors encouraged. I discovered to my astonishment that practically everyone I'd ever met in my life, as well as some I hadn't, knew the way to my hospital room. The first few weeks were to a great extent a blur, much of it a jumble of faces and voices, mingled with all of the medical pokings, proddings and seeming abuse that inevitably appear so mysterious (and sadistic) to the unfortunate patient. My first clear memories date from about two weeks after I woke up, when Alan (who seemed to be there virtually all the time, from what I can recall) informed me that Haley and Rann were back for another visit.

"Another visit?" I said. I vaguely remembered seeing their faces, hearing their voices, but that was about it. I felt like I was emerging from a fog into a bright morning sun; my head felt clearer than it had in ages. But whatever memories I had of the fog I was leaving behind stubbornly remained there.

"They were here just three days ago," he said, looking worried. "Don't you remember?" I shook my head helplessly. "Well, they're right outside," he sighed, and left to fetch the pair.

"This is the place," I called out, seeing Rann peering warily around the door. "Get your butts in here." He was followed by Haley.

"Hi, Sen," Rann said cheerfully. Haley tried to say something but failed, mustering a feeble smile instead.

"It's not so bad," I said. "I'll be walking around in another month or two, and then watch out." To my astonishment she looked utterly taken aback by that. "Of course you will," she choked out, her eyes brimming over with tears, and then she abruptly turned and ran for the door, leaving a pop-eyed Rann in her wake.

"Hey—HEY—HEY!" I shouted after her. "What did I do?" I turned to Rann, who appeared as stunned as I. "Bring her back," I ordered. For a moment he hesitated, then ran after her. A few minutes later he reappeared alone again, with a weak grin on his face.

"It's all right," he said. "She doesn't understand. I guess I should have explained to her, but she thinks you're in denial or something."

"Denial?" I said, puzzled. I saw her hesitantly peeking around the doorway. "Haley," I said a little more gently, "please come back in here." Reluctantly she took one of the chairs. Her eyes were now rimmed with red. Boy, she's fast, I thought.

"All right now, what's this all about?" I demanded. She stared at me, eyes starting to overflow again.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled. "But you gave up so much for me." She tried to say something else, but at that point I also finally understood, and started to laugh, eliciting a look of pure horror from her. I suppose she thought I'd completely lost it by that time.

"I need to explain something to you," I said firmly. "Yes, I had two broken vertebrae, and I'm currently paralyzed from the waist down. But that's really not a big deal. Our doctors deal with that all the time. I should be walking again in about a month."

"But—" she began hesitantly.

"But?" I echoed.

"But you can't regrow central nervous system cells, can you?" she stammered. "What will they do, implant some electronics? Will you be like some kind of cyborg?" She looked like she was going to cry again. Rann looked utterly astonished. I guess it had never occurred to him to explain.

"Yecchhh," I said, making a face. "No, they're not going to put any microchips in me. They're just going to fix the damage." Seeing her skeptical look, I explained. "Of course you can regrow nerve cells, including ones in the central nervous system. It's just that doctors on your world haven't quite figured out how yet. They're only starting to do the basic research needed, but since most of your research money goes for military applications, it's going to take them a while."

"They can really regrow nerve cells?" she asked hesitantly.

"You just have to reverse the biochemical damage from the original killed cells and prevent glial scars and cyst formation, and the axons will grow back," I reassured her, my medical school studies unexpectedly flooding back. "Regrowing the nerve bodies is more difficult, but by re-establishing a glial infrastructure you can restore the—" That was when I realized that she wasn't comprehending a word I was saying. Not that I was sure I did, either. "Look, you may be the physics brain of the century, but you really don't know beans about medicine, do you?" I sighed. She shook her head vacantly, a vast smile lighting up her features.

"You're really going to be all right?" she asked in delight. In response I reached out and grabbed her hand, yanking her onto the bed on top of me and giving her a squeeze that threatened to demolish several of her own vertebrae.

"You bet I will," I said. She looked into my face, only a few inches away from hers.

"Is it safe to hug you back?" she asked hesitantly.

"The broken bones are all mended by now," I reassured her, and in response she put her arms around my shoulders and gave me a hug of her own, though still a rather tentative one, her face buried in my shoulder. When I finally released her back to Rann, I saw her face was wet again.

"And for your information," she said, forcing a smile, "Earth is not 'my world.' That honor now goes to Deshtiris."

"Me too," I said softly. I saw Rann's eyes widen as it sank in.

"Does that mean you're going to come home?" he asked hesitantly. I nodded.

"Just as soon as I can get around on my own again," I answered. "But I'd appreciate it if you'd keep it to yourselves for the time being."

His eyes lit up. "You're going to need practice to get back into shape," he said eagerly. "I'll be glad to train with you whenever you want."

"Thanks, Rann," I said. "I believe I'll take you up on that." I gave Haley an evil grin. "But are you sure you want to trust him with me, Hal?"

"I'd trust you with my life," she pronounced solemnly. There was a depth of feeling there that the clichéd words belied.

"You're no fun," I protested. "Jeez."

"Besides," she said slyly, "I don't think you'll be coming home alone." Rann looked totally nonplused, both at her comment and at my evident astonishment. "I was with the rescue party, remember?" she added in an undertone. I nodded.

"That's just between us two for now, okay?" I murmured to her.

"Sen? You mean you finally have someone?" Rann blurted out. Slow but sure, that was Rann, all right. I grinned.

"Yeah," I said. "Only he doesn't know it yet."



In spite of my optimistic tone with Rann and Haley I knew I had a long row to hoe ahead of me. Nerve fibers do indeed grow back, and even with a totally severed spinal cord one can eventually recover full use of the entire body. But it's not just a matter of waiting for everything to switch back on.

Imagine accidentally cutting through a six-inch diameter phone cable buried in your back yard. You're looking at several thousand mangled ends of wires on each side. Now imagine that all those wires are exactly the same color. You might, with a lot of patience, be able to splice each wire to a wire on the other end. But the result is that there are going to be a lot of people getting wrong numbers.

Nerve fibers work the same way. Each axon grows to and connects with the first broken end it encounters, without regard for whether a fiber controlling a leg muscle is connecting to a fiber coming down from the brain centers for toe movements. Once the connections begin reestablishing themselves, their owner finds that they can indeed move parts they couldn't move before—it's just that when they try to wiggle a toe they bend their ankle instead. Even more disorienting is the bizarre sensation of touching yourself on the shin and feeling the sensation on your thigh.

Fortunately the brain can eventually sort things out. But it requires a lot of hard work on the part of the recuperer to regain the kind of control we all take for granted. And in the meantime the unused muscles will have atrophied considerably, which means regaining a tremendous amount of lost ground. I suspected it would be quite a while before I'd be clashing blades with Rann or Kiri again.

Of all the weeks I spent in the hospital recovering, the first few after I emerged from the coma were by far the worst. It wasn't that I was in pain; I'd already done a considerable amount of mending, and almost as soon as I could follow instructions I was immersed in the rigorous process of retraining my poor abused and disused body. No, it wasn't that at all.

There were days when I woke up with my brain submerged in an

impenetrable haze, and the only emotion I could feel was an overwhelming depression. At times like that even thinking was a torture; I was like a little child who'd stayed up past her naptime. I found myself wanting to cry when presented with the tiniest obstacle, and must have been a real trial to my ever-loyal friends. I just can't live like this, I'd tell myself in despair, but the doctors would reassure me that it was a temporary result of the long coma, and that it would pass in time, and gradually it did.

It was about two weeks after Haley's and Rann's visit, when the blurry spells were finally becoming less frequent, that Will and Kiri arrived accompanied by several officers in Deshtiran security uniforms, and asked me if I was in any shape to tell them what had happened back on Rouaas. At first the question threw me; then I realized what a baffling scene they must have found when they landed. "I'll do my best," I agreed, and began recounting the events as well as I could.

When I reached the part where I was lying on the ground waiting for Rokun to descend the wall, something stuck in my mind, something about two hemispherical objects lying on the ground.

"Hemispherical objects?" Kiri said, puzzled. Then her face brightened. "Are you talking about the two halves of your helmet?"

It rang a bell. "Yeah. It must have broken from the impact."

"Hell of an impact," Will commented dryly. "That helmet undoubtedly saved your life."

I nodded, and resumed my tale, up through the part where I'd mind-wiped Rokun. The rest was my own business, I decided. "So somehow what remained of Rokun's mind recognized you, and was able to restrain the Virrin mind just long enough to keep him from frying you," Kiri observed. "Sen, you might not think so, but you really do lead a charmed life."

That's when it hit me, and I found myself starting to giggle, much to their alarm. Then I was laughing until the tears were running down my face, laughing at the absurdity of it, and how simple it all could have been. "Sen?" Will said rather hesitantly. He and Kiri glanced at each other, and I suspected they were on the verge of pressing the emergency call button.

"It's okay," I gasped, only partially regaining control. "But don't you get it? All that time, running for my life, almost getting electrocuted, finally doing a pretty good Humpty-Dumpty impersonation, and *all I had to do was take off my helmet.*" And then I was off again. I'm not sure why, but for the rest of the afternoon I found myself getting unexpected attacks of the giggles. Well, a good

knock on the head can do strange things, okay?

(I realized later that I also owed my life to Rokun's second blast. Had I simply rolled over the edge, I would almost certainly have bounced off the steeply sloped wall and far out into space, and then nothing would have saved me from hurtling into the seemingly bottomless abyss. My shattered body would probably lie there today.)

After the investigators left, Kiri asked Will if she could speak to me alone. I had a feeling that something uncomfortable was impending, and I wasn't too far off.

"Sen," she said softly, "there's something you need to know. You're not going to like this, and I want you to know that both Will and I opposed it. But what's done is done, and it can't be reversed now." I stared at her, wondering what had happened.

"When we retrieved you from Rouaas, we also retrieved Rokun's body. It was still alive, of course, even though the mind had been wiped, and it was sent back to Deshtiris." She looked down at the floor as she continued. "The genetic alterations have been reversed or removed, so that it's more or less in the state it was before Rokun did that terrible experiment." Get to the point, I wanted to scream, but I knew Kiri well enough to realize that whatever had happened, this wasn't easy for her.

"In the process of gathering experimental data, Rokun had done several uploads of his own mind to the Virrin neural engram machine." Oh, no, I thought dully. *No*. "Once his body was restored to its original condition," she went on, her voice now wooden, "his most recent file was downloaded into the body. Except for some physical anomalies left over from the alterations, he's pretty much back to his former self." I started to speak, but she cut me off.

"Sen, I know. It shouldn't ever have been done. Will and I were both opposed to it, but there was tremendous pressure from the civilian authorities. They're terrified that the full story will get out and cause a major uproar. In addition, the top leaders of the scientific community insisted that it would be a tragedy to lose a mind like his. Our position just wasn't strong enough to justify overruling them." For the first time since I'd known her she seemed indecisive, unsure of herself. I suddenly felt very sorry for her.

"There's really no harm done," she said, but her voice gave the lie to her words. "As far as he knows, he's still Rokun. We had to tell him what had happened, of course." She hesitated. "He wants to see you. Naturally he feels terrible about it, and blames himself. As he should, I suppose."

No harm done, I thought. Not yet. What was it someone once said

about a slippery slope? The rest eluded me.

"Will you see him, Sen?" she was saying.

"Sure," I said softly. "It's not his fault. He didn't do it." She looked at me sharply and considered saying something, then thought better of it. "Thank you, Sen," she said instead. "I really appreciate it."

"Kiri," I said as she got up to leave. She turned back to me apprehensively. "I know you did the best you could," I said. She gave me a little nod of acknowledgement.

"But I wouldn't want your job for anything," I added. She said nothing, only shaking her head slightly as she left, her shoulders slumped. For just a moment, I thought, she looked much older than her years.

It was a few days later that I was told Rokun was here to see me. I took a deep breath. "Send him in," I said.

He looked little the worse for wear; the only remaining signs of the genetic alterations were some slightly discolored patches on his face and an odd lumpiness to his ears. Seeing his real face, I remembered him vaguely from my days at the palace as a serious, excessively shy individual that I'd briefly worked with and occasionally saw staring at me from across a courtyard.

"Hi. It's all right; I don't bite," I said as genially as I could. Perhaps I should have said it years ago, I thought. For a minute he just stood there, absently twisting his fingers.

"Why don't you sit down?" I suggested, waving at a chair, and he reluctantly did so.

"How are you doing?" he finally stammered uncomfortably.

"I'm doing really well," I said. "I'm supposed to be out of here in another month. Looks like all my parts are starting to work again. So no harm done, right?"

"Senaria," he began awkwardly, "I can't tell you how sorry I am about what happened." Knowing what Haley had told me, I couldn't begin to imagine how hard this must be for him. They say you always hurt the one you love; how bitterly true it had become for Rokun.

"What I did was incredibly reckless, and now you're paying for my mistake," he was saying, stumbling through the words. "I'm just grateful that you made it through. I hope you can see fit to forgive me someday."

"It wasn't your fault," I said, the words trailing off. *No, it wasn't your fault. That person is dead. He died when the Virrin mind replaced his own. You're just an innocent copy.*

"Is something wrong?" he asked hesitantly. I shook my head.

“Sorry,” I apologized. “My mind still wanders sometimes. Probably something to do with being out for so long. Don’t mind me.” *It’s not his fault, Senaria, I told myself angrily. He couldn’t know. He has all of Rokun’s memories; for him it’s like waking up in the morning and remembering what he had for supper yesterday evening. It’s all perfectly real for him.* I did my very best after that to put on a cheerful and upbeat face for him, and he did seem somewhat less downcast by the time he departed, although as shy as he was it wasn’t easy to know for sure.

After he left, I found myself wondering why they’d done it. Even Tenako’s reloaded mind had known. “The original Tenako’s consciousness died at Tar Deshta, just as Teyn’s did when he was assassinated. The intention was that my work would go on, of course,” he’d said to me. Yet they’d gone ahead and reloaded Rokun’s stored mind. Did they just want to return everything to the way it had been before and pretend that everything was fine again? Press the ultimate reset button?

Just study the Virrin technology to improve treatment of psychologically disturbed patients. But save a great mind so that it won’t be lost. Now reload someone you loved into another body so you won’t lose him. *Step right up. Replace your old tired body with a new, young, beautiful one. Never mind where it came from.* That long, slippery slope.

By now my head hurt, and I decided I really needed to sleep. Senaria, don’t ever become a philosopher, I mused. You’d tie yourself into mental knots before you knew it...



With everyone else gone most of the time, it was Alan who was somehow always there as I began the laborious process of learning to walk again. That was no exaggeration, either; at times I felt like a toddler as I began the painful process of reviving muscles that hadn't been used in many weeks.

Slowly I found my lower body once again starting to obey my brain's commands. It was Alan who caught me when I started to fall, who brought me reading materials when I threatened to go out of my mind with boredom, and who insisted that I push myself a little harder each day, even when in frustration I just wanted to crawl back into bed and let the whole business go to hell. And, true to his word, he'd never again brought up the issue of his feelings for me.

It was about two months after the "incident" that I finally asked him an unusual question. I was walking mostly unaided now, although I still teetered unexpectedly once in a while, and the two of us were sitting in one of the hospital lounges sharing a snack. It was the wee hours of the morning, and most of the patients were asleep; we were alone in the little room.

"Alan," I said gravely, "you told me a lifetime ago that you loved me. You promised never to bring up the subject again, and you haven't. But I need to know if you still feel that way." He stared at me, speechless.

"The truth, Alan," I persisted, although the look on his face already told me what I wanted to know. Slowly he nodded.

"Alan, I want you to tell me something," I said. "You were in the party that rescued me. I want to know exactly what you found there." He fidgeted uncomfortably.

"Well, we found you, and we found Rokun, and the *Futaba*."

"No," I said, looking directly into his eyes. "I mean me. What did you find?"

"I'd really rather forget that," he mumbled. He suddenly looked grey, I thought.

I was insistent. "I'm sorry, Alan, but I have my reasons for asking. What did you find?"

He paused for a moment as he unearthed what was clearly a profoundly unsettling memory. “You have to do this?” he said finally. I nodded gravely. He took a deep breath.

“Well,” he said tightly, “you were lying on your side. Your leg was—uh, obviously broken, sticking out at an unnatural angle.” He shuddered involuntarily and went on. “There was blood all over your face and a lot of it under your head. We all thought you were dead. And then—” He stopped.

“And then?” I pressed.

“You opened your eyes for a few seconds, and I knew you were alive.” He blinked a few times. “I don’t think I could ever feel such sheer joy again to equal that moment,” he added softly. *You’re wrong, Alan. You can and you will.*

“Did I say anything?” I inquired innocently. I saw him pale noticeably, and I knew. I watched as he fought some kind of battle within himself.

“No,” he said at last. “No.”

I laughed gently. “Alan, you’re a liar, and not a very good one. Of course I said something. I said, ‘I love you, Alan.’ I know that you heard it, too.” Slowly he nodded, his expression frozen. “What’s more,” I continued, “I meant it then, and I mean it now.”

He sat there stunned, apparently afraid to say anything for fear the moment would shatter into a thousand pieces. Finally he spoke. “When did you decide, Senaria?”

It had taken me a long time to find the right words, but I’d had a lot of time. I knew that we were both about to cross a divide and that neither of our lives would ever be the same again. “I’ve loved you since that day that you and Kiri and Will and Rann and I all sat on the mountainside overlooking Fontana,” I began slowly. “I remember listening to you, listening to every word you said, and not daring to even look in your direction. I’d had someone I loved literally destroyed in the most horrible way, practically in front of my eyes, and the one other person I’d ever really loved was sitting there next to you with her newlywed husband. I sat there still hurting so much inside, and I couldn’t believe it was happening to me again, and I told myself I couldn’t love someone again, I couldn’t take the loss again.”

“I realize now that I jumped at the first excuse I could find to end it, even though everything in me fought it and nearly tore me apart, and since then I’ve tried to shove you to the very farthest back corner of my mind. And you’ve stayed there, never leaving me, no matter how much I tried to make you go away. I finally recognized, lying on that ledge,

that nothing I was doing made any sense. With no tomorrow left, living for whatever time I had left, I decided that it was time to let you out of your box and become part of me.”

I paused for breath for a moment. “Now I have my life back again, and I still want you to be part of it. If you’re willing, of course.” I gently ran a hand over his face, feeling the deep lines of age, the two-days’ growth of stubble.

“I really have changed, Sen,” he whispered. “I’m not the same Brinkman that I was before.”

“Actually, Alan,” I said, “you haven’t changed at all.” His face fell at that; for a second he looked for all the world like a kicked puppy. “You’re the same Alan Brinkman you used to be,” I continued. “Except that you’ve finally scraped off all those years of accumulated crud and grime and cynicism, and polished what was underneath until it gleams.”

“But somehow I knew who you really were that first day I met you. I guess that’s why I was so surprised and disappointed when that other Alan Brinkman treated me the way he did. Now Alan, don’t go getting all blubbery on me; that’s ancient history now.” I reached out and wiped a tear from his cheek. “But we’re going to be honest with each other, aren’t we?”

He nodded, unanswered questions still in his eyes, clearly not yet fully trusting the reality of what was happening.

“Why only now?” he said uncertainly. “Why so long? A test?”

“I suppose it was,” I said. He looked hurt again, I thought.

“Yes, it was a test,” I repeated ruthlessly. “You know, Alan, that the wounded wield a tremendous amount of power. Whether they intend to or not, they can bind people with almost unbreakable shackles of compassion, of misplaced duty, of loyalty. Even though those are the finest of impulses, they can lead to the wrong decisions for the wrong reasons, and a lifetime of misery.”

“I didn’t want you tied to me by bonds of pity, or duty. Only love. And I had to make sure, for your sake, that that’s what held you.” He stared at the floor for a long time before speaking.

“Why did you do that?” he said finally. “Put me through all that about Rouaas? I still don’t understand.” I took a deep breath.

“Because I know what it’s like to be haunted, Alan. By images that burn themselves into your brain, that appear in your nightmares, that redirect your life down all the wrong paths. I knew what you saw. I was still conscious there, if only barely. And knowing how you felt, I knew what it could do to you. Am I right?” He lifted his head, and I saw two fresh streaks glistening on his cheeks. “For those first three

weeks, when you thought of me that was all you could see, wasn't it? The broken thing you found on Rouaas, or the living corpse in the hospital bed that you kept vigil over for so long." He nodded wordlessly.

"But now you know the truth, Alan," I continued softly. "That even when I was lying there on Rouaas, lying in my own blood, closer to death than I've ever been, I was thinking of you. And I want you to remember that, not the horror, for the rest of your life. Can you?" He was staring at me in astonishment now. "Can you?" I repeated, more insistently.

"I can," he said, and I took him in my arms and kissed him.



“Hello, daughter.”

“Mother, I’m coming home. In about two weeks.” I’d have preferred to tell her in person, but the 3D telecom image would have to do as she’d been tied up on Deshtiris for the past few weeks with diplomatic duties. She smiled warmly at me.

“So they’re letting you out at last,” she said. “How are you feeling these days?”

“Almost like new,” I assured her. “I can walk again; I’m still a bit clumsy, but I’m told that if I work hard at it I’ll be back to my old self in another six months or so.”

“So would you like some of us to get the house ready for you? What day will you be there?” I took a deep breath.

“I’m coming *home*, Mother,” I said again, and paused a moment before continuing. “To Deshtiris. Where you are, where my friends are. Where my life is.” She looked at me with an odd expression for several seconds, blinking, before she spoke.

“Welcome back, daughter,” she said finally. “You’ve been gone a long time. We’ve missed you.”

Apparently the word spread like wildfire, because within a few hours I was getting calls from everyone on Deshtiris I’d ever known, offering help with the move if I needed it and telling me how much they looked forward to seeing me again.

The main thing I needed was someone to pilot the *Noriko* back, which was still hovering patiently over the front lawn of the house. I couldn’t have flown it myself due to the fuzzy spells which occasionally recurred, though far less often. Alan, of course, had never piloted a starship in his life. (In fact, he confessed later, it had taken considerable willpower on his part to even set foot in the *Futaba* again after the ride I’d given him a few years ago. He’d found himself fighting off the cold shakes when he’d boarded it for the trip back to Earth that had ultimately ended in the destruction of the Lucie revolt, although he’d never before admitted that to anyone.)

It was finally agreed that Will would bring Rann to Qozernon on

the *Futaba*, leaving him behind to pilot the *Noriko* and taking the *Noriko*'s spare gateway back to Deshtiris on the return trip. Kiri suggested that I simply step through the *Noriko*'s living quarters and the spare gateway to Deshti, saving myself the one-day flight, but I refused.

"That's too easy," I said. "I want to feel like I'm really coming home. Stepping through two doorways just doesn't work for me. Does that make any sense?" She nodded agreement, her eyes bright. "Besides," I added mysteriously, "I have something I need to do on the return trip."

Two weeks had passed since I'd spoken with Alan in that little hospital lounge. In the intervening time we'd explored every corner of each others' psyches, trying to figure out where we were going from here. Alan had offered to move to Qozernon, where he could support himself by lecturing at the major research institutes, but I'd rejected that out of hand. "Your life is on Deshtiris, Alan," I said. "And the people I care about are there as well."

"But I thought you loved your work with the EMRN," he protested.

"I do," I said. "It's the most satisfying work I've ever done and I wouldn't consider leaving it. But Deshtiris also has its equivalent, and I don't see any reason why I couldn't work for them once I've recovered a little more." So Deshtiris it was.

There was one other thing: I asked Alan not to say anything to the others about our relationship. I'm not sure why; perhaps it was a sense of mischief reasserting itself, but I decided I wanted to save the announcement for just the right time, and he reluctantly agreed.

I did make an exception, and that was Kizuko. He appeared delighted at the news, although I thought I detected just a trace of regret as well. I've always had the nagging feeling that our earlier decision to break off our brief affair wasn't the one he really preferred. But beneath his rough exterior he was far too much the gentleman (to use an old-fashioned word) to ever let anything slip out.

I got quite a send-off from the hospital staff when the day of my release finally came. You make a lot of friends in three months, especially when they're people you see every day, sometimes several times a day. An amazing number of my co-workers in the EMRN were there as well; I'd sent in my resignation with regrets, and they wanted to make sure I knew I'd be missed. I was admittedly disappointed that none of the "palace gang," as I'd come to think of them, were able to make it, pleading other engagements, and it was just Alan and I that finally set off in a borrowed public vehicle for the train station and the

ride to Nedro. Once there, we hunted up another vehicle for the brief drive to my mother's house a few dozen miles away.

Alan was about to punch in our destination when I told him I wanted to make a stop in town first, and told him what it was. "Are you sure about this?" he said, his eyes widening. "I am," I said. "Unless you have an objection, of course." He didn't.

When we reached the house late that afternoon, the *Noriko* was floating above the lawn and the lights were on in the living room. There we found Rann and Haley—well, let's just say being *very* friendly. Greeting them with a grin as they disentangled themselves in considerable embarrassment, I announced that we were back and ready to go once things were packed.

"Packed?" Rann asked, still blushing furiously.

"Pack what?" Haley added innocently. I looked around. It only took a second to realize that everything I'd brought with me from Deshtiris, as well as the few things I'd accumulated in the meantime, were gone.

"Everything's ready to go," Rann informed us proudly. "You didn't think we were going to have you lugging heavy boxes around in your condition, did you?"

"My *condition*?" I roared. "What do you think I am, pregnant?"

Asking them to excuse me for a few minutes, I roamed alone through the now near-empty house. Although I'd grown up there, and I'd lived there again for the past two-plus years, I realized that I didn't have any sensation of leaving home. Home was ahead, thirty-five light-years away.

I found what I was looking for, an inconspicuous little white box sitting on a shelf. I'd had a feeling they'd miss it, inconspicuous as it was. Returning to the living room, I slipped it into one of the duffels Alan and I had brought back from the hospital, and we closed up the house and headed out to the *Noriko*, still waiting patiently on the lawn. A few minutes later we'd strapped ourselves in and Rann had pointed the ship's nose skyward. Then Qozernon was dropping away behind us, and I felt as though a great weight had dropped away with it as well.

"We're on our way," Rann announced cheerfully, once the *Noriko's* faster-than-light drive had been engaged. "Anyone for some relaxation in the living quarters?"

"I could go for that," chimed in Haley. "How about you two?"

Actually, now that we were underway I was feeling a bit of a letdown. I'd been looking forward to this day for weeks, and to be perfectly honest I felt rather disappointed that only Rann and Haley had

been able to join us. I stared moodily through the crystal at the shifting stars, feeling a wave of the old self-pity washing over me. Don't be such a child, Senaria, I scolded myself.

"Sure," I said brightly (probably too brightly), and stood up. All three were smiling, and it seemed as if they were laughing inwardly at my discomfiture. I fought off a flicker of resentment. I must be really tired, I thought to myself, following them to the back of the ship and through the door to the living quarters.

To my bewilderment, it was dark as we entered what should have been the living room. What happened to the lights, I wondered. And then the room was illuminated with a blaze of light.

"SURPRIISE!!"

I don't know how many throats it pealed from, but to my half-blinded eyes it appeared that there were at least several dozen people there, all cheering or blowing on noisemakers, crowding around me, clapping me on the shoulders, hugging me, kissing me. Someone led me to a sofa where I sat down heavily, trying to take it in, only gradually making sense of it all. A recording of Deshtiran pop music started up in the background, and out of nowhere my mother appeared with a huge glass of some frosted drink, which I downed in several enormous gulps, then broke out coughing.

"You're supposed to drink that stuff, not inhale it," came Veldra's voice from somewhere.

"Hey, kiddo, you all right?" I looked up to see Kizuko peering down at me affectionately. "Hi, Kiz," I wheezed, trying to get my voice back. "What was in that, anyway?"

"Don't ask," Will broke in. "It's Kiri's own special concoction."

"Wow," I said, already feeling slightly lightheaded. A moment later Kiri herself appeared. "Hope we didn't startle you too much," she said with a grin.

"You practically scared the pants off me," I said.

"I'd pay money to see that," interjected Kizuko with a mock leer.

"You already have, remember?" I glared back. "Hey, Kiz," I added, forestalling his hasty retreat. "Thanks. For what you said earlier." He looked puzzled. "Tell you later," I added, and he shook his head, still mystified.

I found my mother sitting with Jennifer, and both looked up as I approached. I remembered Haley's mother only vaguely; apart from the party where I'd been presented with the *Noriko* she'd visited me once in the hospital before my memory had begun to work properly again. "I'm glad to see you're better," she said warmly. "I owe you so much

for what you did.”

“Jus’ doin’ mah job, ma’am,” I said in Texan English, trying to make light of it. I hoped I wasn’t going to spend the evening being thanked by everyone; it’s a much drearier form of entertainment than it sounds. “How’s the flute going?” I had a dim memory of Haley saying something about her mother playing the flute, and hoped I wasn’t too far off base.

“It’s okay,” she said modestly.

“She’s got a regular concert career going,” my mother interrupted. “She’s doing two performances this week alone, and getting more offers than she can accept.”

“I just can’t believe it,” Jennifer added. “I never thought I’d be playing again at all. And now this.”

By this time most of the others had drifted over, and the conversation turned to Rouaas. “I’m still amazed that I managed to survive for half a day until you got there,” I said. “If I’d been my own patient I wouldn’t have given myself more than a few hours at most.” I saw least a dozen pairs of eyes directed at me in astonishment.

“Half a day?” interjected Kiri.

“You never told her what Haley did?” Will demanded, looking accusingly at Alan.

“I guess I forgot,” he admitted shamefacedly.

“Hal?” I said, turning to her. “All right, spill your guts. Now.” She cringed in embarrassment.

“All I did was call Kiri’s ship on the *Noriko*’s telecom once I lifted off and found I couldn’t make the ship change course. I told them what had happened, and Kiri showed me over the telecom how to override your security lockdown.”

“Your very simple security lockdown,” Kiri added smugly. “We had her head straight for us at top speed, we all transferred to the *Noriko*, and then raced back to look for you. Along the way Rann slipped into your mother’s house via your spare gateway and summoned the PETs, so that by the time we found you we had an entire team on board. After they did what they could for you on the spot, they took you back through the *Noriko*’s spare gateway and rushed you straight to the hospital. I’ve never seen them move so fast, by the way.”

“Haley’s maneuver saved a good five hours of precious time,” Will observed. “The doctors said those hours made all the difference.”

“Saved your life,” Rann added proudly, looking at a now fiercely blushing Haley.

“I guess I owe you one,” I said to her softly. “Thanks.”

"Owe *me* one!?" she exploded. "You're the one that saved me, remember?"

I grinned. "As for you, Rann, that's now two I owe you," I said to him.

"What's the second one for?" he asked in surprise. I hadn't forgotten the first one either; he'd taken a nasty sword thrust during the fight with Jack Lucie's goons.

"For filching this little gem from Earth," I said, only adding to Haley's discomfiture. "You two make a perfect couple. Every time I see you together I see more and more of you in each other." Rann looked uncomfortable and started to say something, but his voice came out as an embarrassing squawk. "Clear your throat and try again," I instructed him to general merriment.

"Ahem," he said, triggering a fresh outburst of chuckles from those present. He looked around nervously, avoiding my eyes. "Well, uh, that is, you see—"

"We got married the day before yesterday," broke in Haley impatiently. "Isn't that wonderful?"

"Yesss!" I exclaimed. "That's great! Congratulations to both of you!" Rann looked startled by my exuberance, while my mother stifled a small smile. I raised my glass enthusiastically, sloshing some of the contents down my arm. "A toast," I announced, looking around. "To—"

"Hold it," Kiri interrupted, now grinning broadly. "Before you make that toast, we have some more news. You see, it was a very special event." I wondered at that. Marriage ceremonies, rare as they were, were normally informal affairs in an official's office without guests present. If they so chose, the newlyweds might throw a party sometime afterwards.

"Special?" I said uneasily.

"It was a double wedding," said Will, turning to Gelhinda, who put an arm around Jennifer's shoulder as Haley beamed.

"It seemed like a good time for both of our new citizens to 'git hitched,' " my mother said. "Sen, meet your new stepmother."

"Mother!?" I gasped in astonishment as it sank in.

"It was so cool," Haley bubbled. "A mother/daughter double wedding. I just love this world." I felt my head spinning.

It wasn't that same-gender relationships are unusual here (they're not), and she had of course known of my own feelings for Kiri for years. I wasn't shocked, really, just startled out of my wits. She was, after all, my mother, and she'd been alone for so long.

“Did you really?” I finally managed. “After all these years?” To my embarrassment I felt my eyes brimming over, and ended up wiping them with my shirt bottom. Slowly I stood up and walked over to the two and sat down between them, putting my arms around both. There I remained while the next few minutes were consumed in endless toasts to the four newlyweds.

Kiri lifted her glass. “To Senaria,” she proclaimed, triggering a fresh hubbub. I slowly rose to my feet and held up my hand, not taking part in the toast, and kept it there until everyone finally took notice and the room grew quiet. I wondered how people would react, but I knew it was time. During my convalescence I’d had a lot of time to think. I had in fact thought about it from every imaginable angle, and I’d made my decision.

“My name,” I said gravely to the now silent room, “is Senara.”

I saw startled faces all around me. Then I held my breath as Kiri slowly stood up.

I’d used the name Senaria since childhood. I’d first taken it in hero worship of the slender, resolute woman standing before me, and retained it out of love. Hurting her was the very last thing I ever wanted to do, and for a moment I thought my heart would stop, wondering if she’d understand.

She stared into my eyes for a few seconds, and then a slow smile spread across her face. “I’m very glad to meet you at last, Senara,” she said quietly. And then we were in each others’ arms, exchanging great squashing bear hugs as the room again rocked with cheers.

Later that evening I took Kiri aside and told her I needed a small favor. As I explained what I wanted she looked surprised, then concerned. “Are you sure you’re up to this, Sen?”

“I have to do this, Kiri. It’s the last piece of unfinished business I need to take care of before I can get on with my life.”

“I’ll make the arrangements,” she said quietly. “When do you want to do it?” I said I’d prefer that it be before the rest of the visitors awoke, to keep it from turning into a public event.

As I turned to rejoin the festivities, I found Haley at my elbow. “Hi, little sister,” I grinned, rumpling her hair. She looked at me in surprise, then her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open.

“Wow,” she said, delight spreading all over her face, “that’s right.” Then her expression became serious again. “Can I talk to you privately for a moment?” she asked hesitantly.

“Sure,” I agreed, and we discreetly slipped off to the kitchen.

“Rokun told me he visited you in the hospital,” she said. “He

seemed really relieved. He said you were awfully nice to him.” I nodded, remembering the conversation all too well. “I know how hard that must have been for you,” she added.

“I’m not really the vengeful type,” I said. “Besides, what the Virrin mind did wasn’t his fault.”

“Well, actually it was. But that’s not what I’m talking about. I mean about his having been reloaded and everything.” Sharp girl, I thought to myself.

“I thought you ought to know that I’ve gone back to work for him,” she said. Seeing my surprise, she continued. “I really felt sorry for him, the reloaded Rokun, that is. This Rokun suddenly woke up and found that he’d done all these horrible things that he didn’t even remember. I felt he needed all the help he could get. Thanks for not treating him like a pariah, Sen—Senara.” I chewed on that as we returned to the living room.

By now it was clear that some of our guests were on the verge of nodding off. “Listen, everyone,” I announced, “I just wanted to tell all of you once more how happy you’ve made me.” I grinned inwardly as I prepared my little bombshell. “I’m really looking forward to settling in back on Deshtiris.”

“Your old rooms are all ready for you,” Kiri said eagerly, falling into the trap.

“Thanks, but I won’t need them,” I said. “I have living arrangements already. With Alan.” I took him by one arm and raised him to his feet. “And now, if you all will excuse us, it’s time for me to haul him off to my cave for the night.” As everyone watched in astonishment I took him by the hand and dragged him towards the doorway, a silly grin on his face. There was a stunned silence, broken by a distinctly concerned Kiri.

“Sen?” she said anxiously, all too clearly remembering Alan’s and my disastrous fling back on Deshtiris two years ago.

I paused, savoring the moment. “It’s okay,” I finally announced merrily. “It’s our honeymoon, too!”

I pulled an unprotesting Alan up the stairs with me to our bedroom, accompanied by the almost rhythmic thumping of multiple jaws hitting the floor behind us.



I felt someone gently shaking me awake, and saw Kiri's emerald eyes glinting down at me through the near dark. "It's time," she said very softly, so as not to wake Alan.

"I'll be there in a few minutes," I whispered back.

For a little while I just lay there, listening to Alan's soft breathing and thinking about yesterday's festivities. I grinned to myself as I pictured the effect my own announcement must have had on them, considering their smug satisfaction with all the surprises they'd sprung.

We'd stopped in Nedro on our way to my mother's house and hunted up a notary. There'd been no fuss, no visitors (witnesses aren't required for a wedding on Qozernon). We'd filled out some forms, signed our names, and it was all over. Or it was just beginning. Whatever. I'd sworn Alan to silence, thinking the news might be another entertaining surprise if saved for the right moment.

Looking ahead into the future, I knew that once I had my full strength back I could find employment on Deshtiris with its equivalent of the EMRN. Alan of course had his position as head of the Imperial Research Institute. Beyond that, life would take its course. We both recognized that I'd probably outlive him by many years, but I just didn't care any more. The future may exist in the mind, but life exists in the present, and that's where we're going to live it from now on. I dressed as quietly as I could and slipped out, taking care not to awaken him.

I stepped to the front of the *Noriko*, a small plastic box in one hand. "Sen, you'll need this," Kiri said as she threw a light jacket over my shoulders. "It's going to be absolutely frigid out there." She then buckled a harness of plastic straps around my torso, securing it to one of the *Noriko*'s chairs with a length of sturdy rope.

"Is that really necessary?" I protested.

"I've nearly lost you twice now," she snapped, but with a strong undercurrent of affection. "I'm not about to go scrape you off those cliffs down there. Are you really sure you want to do this alone? You're not quite back to your old self yet, you know."

"Don't rub it in," I said with a mock glare. "Thanks, but this is sort

of private.”

She nodded understandingly. “*Noriko*: portal,” she commanded, and I realized that she hadn’t been exaggerating as a stiff icy breeze swept through the little craft.

With a second command she extruded a horizontal plank from under the opening, railings along both sides. “I’m going to close the portal most of the way once you’re out there,” she warned. “Hang on tight. That harness could still hurt if you slip.” Gingerly I limped out onto the plank as the portal sealed itself gently around the rope behind me, and looked out at the dimly lit panorama. It was at least an hour before sunrise, and although the sky was lightening along the horizon the stars were still bright. The Deshtiran terrain far below looked oddly familiar, even though I’d never seen it from quite this vantage point. I recognized the river, with its impossibly tall banks of solid forest, and a few seconds later an opening in the trees came into view, as though a tributary was emptying into the river at that point, and I knew I was seeing the camouflaged entrance to Tenako’s base. I contemplated the small plastic box in my hand.

“I guess this is as close to anywhere you could call home that I know of,” I said to the box. I faced away from the wind, and pressed a small catch. There was a large white puff, almost instantly gone as the wind swept it away into the distance. I pressed a second catch and the box itself disintegrated in my hand into a cloud of small pellets. I saw them dancing in midair for just a moment before they vanished. They would biodegrade within a few days, I knew.

“Goodbye, Tora,” I whispered. “And thanks. For everything.”

Seconds later I was back inside the ship, and only then realized just how frozen I was when I broke into an uncontrollable shivering fit. “Are you okay, Sen?” Kiri asked.

“Just damn cold,” I stuttered through chattering teeth, and she put both arms around me and held me tightly against her until I felt some warmth seeping back into my blood.

“All right now?” she finally said softly, still holding me, her lips beside my ear. “Yes,” I said. “Yes, I am. I’m all right now, Kiri. Thanks to all my friends.”

She finally let me go, and fixed me with those wonderful green eyes. “You know I’ve always loved you, Sen, and I always will.”

I nodded slowly. “I know, Kiri. And I’ve always known that. It just took me a while to realize what it really meant.”

Soon the *Noriko* was climbing and picking up speed, knifing through the atmosphere several miles above the ground. All around us

the sky was metamorphosing into a brilliant tapestry of incandescent color, while below I saw the forests drop behind, to be replaced by villages, a city, mountains, and then the ill-famed Sea of Doom. I shuddered as I remembered the hours I'd spent in my little flier sweltering in the superheated humidity, now far below and falling behind us within a few minutes.

Still more familiar landmarks began to appear as we began our descent, until finally, just as the sun was breaking over the vast plains to the east, the city of Deshti swam into view, its magnificent skyscrapers towering over a mile into the air above us, gloriously festooned with giant vividly colored banners celebrating the planet's return to freedom just three years ago today. Then at last I saw the spires and turrets and towers of the royal palace, and finally the great skylight, scintillating in the morning sun with every hue of the rainbow, scattering brilliant shards of color in all directions in a never-ending dance of light, a beacon to home.

The End