

X² **NOPILEDS**



HELGE T. KAUTZ

CHAPTER 1

Nif-Nakh (“festering wound”) is a gorgeous world. Wildly sprawling, planetwide jungle a rich, verdant green, thousands and thousands of small ponds and lakes the color of blood, all covered by an exceedingly clear, royal blue sky. Every now and then, burning meteorites trace their gleaming trails across the firmament. The Split, rulers of this place, may be cruel and intolerant. But somewhere, deep beneath their ferocious exteriors, there must remain a spark of admiration and respect for beauty, of that I am certain.

Melissa Banks,
Corridor of the Stars

It all happened so quickly that he didn't even find the time to cry out “egg salad,” one of the most indecent curses a race of surly hatchers could possibly think of. One moment he was sitting on the bridge of his ship, the beautiful *Nyana's Fortune*, both arms plunged elbow-deep into the navigation controls, with flames everywhere around him, knowing his last sezura was at hand. The next, the command chair's gimbal mount swung downward with a vertiginous jolt, to where a hatch in the deck, which he had never noticed before, gaped open. For just one moment he saw the reddish illumination of the spherical boarding elevator glowing behind the opening. *How strange*, he thought. Then a painful kick catapulted him into the elevator, where a foaming substance abruptly yet almost gently slowed and caught him. Before he could begin to process that, he was rocked by another jolt accompanied by a half-sezura rumbling whose low-frequency vibration did not bode well. Then it became suddenly quiet, almost frighteningly calm, with only the occasional ghostly susurrations from outside.

The young Teladi—his irises were still completely yellow and the hexagonal scales of his leathery skin still small like a hatchling's—lay there with his head ridges pale from fear. He was half-sunken in some kind of light-blue rescue foam that nestled tightly around him, all the better to cushion shocks. His breath was nightmarishly shallow and he worried as his three hearts strained for each leaden beat. His body had fallen into an involuntary, protective catalepsy. It was a legacy of his distant ancestors that had long since become inadequate.

Nopileos—that was the informal name of the hatchling saurian—tried to say something, but his body's rigidity compressed his throat and it only made an inarticulate hissing sound.

“Gsshhh!” came out when he called for Inanias, the *Nyana's Fortune's* onboard computer. Ice-cold fear crawled up his dorsal fin and settled at the nape of his neck. What had happened? Shouldn't his ship's powerful shields have survived this collision? The futile horror of this terrible injustice gave him extra

strength for a moment, enabling him to move his right arm against the resistance of paralysis and foam. *Perhaps the crash wasn't so minor after all*, he assumed, while laboriously testing the webs of his right claw by spreading and closing it over again. After all, the energy shields of his egg-shaped yacht had already been stretched to the limits of their capacity by the maddening descent through the planetary atmosphere that preceded the collision! Another chill ran through him as he thought of his friends, the starwarrior Elena Kho and the ever-joking Kyle Brennan, the two human beings from the legend-shrouded Earth, the lost planet of the Argons. Did they survive?

“Ohg! Please!” he quietly sobbed. If there was something more important to him than the *Nyana's Fortune*, it was these two marvelous people! He had wanted to protect their ships from the attacks of the Split warrior Cho t'Nnt; he had rammed Cho's interceptors. *Rammed?* No, that sounded too much like an accident! In reality, he had deliberately hurled his yacht into Cho's machine. What else could he have done? After all, the *Nyana's Fortune* bore no weapons!

“Tshanshniashh!”, Nopileos mumbled again and tried to completely shake off his rigor through sheer force of despair. The onboard computer still didn't respond. Clearly, Inanias had deliberately catapulted him into the boarding elevator, which had also been conceived by the ship's designers as an impact cage for the pilot in the event of an emergency landing. This presumably meant that the *Nyana's Fortune* was falling uncontrollably at that very moment, and he with her. At the thought of this, he started to slip back into a state of protective catalepsy. But with a determined hiss that proclaimed his rebellion against the alleged inevitability of fate, the Teladi wiped these disturbing thoughts aside and tore free both arms, plowing his webbed claws through the rescue foam with the spraying sound of a million soap bubbles.

“Inaniassssh, pleassssh reshpond now! Tshhhh,” he cried, already articulating more clearly than before now that he was getting a grip on the catalepsy. But the ship's computer still remained silent, as if it could hear nothing. *But that's just impossible*, Nopileos thought desperately, *Inanias always receives everything that is spoken aboard! Where is he when you really need him?*

With an unpleasant cracking that suddenly went through the frame of the elevator car and set the Teladi's teeth on edge, gravity changed. Not only did it increase significantly, making the blue foam appear to collapse, it also changed orientation so that Nopileos would have fallen if the rescue foam hadn't held him. He forced his legs searchingly into the porous material until his claws touched the metallic floor. He had to get out of here at any cost! As a Teladi he was certainly not claustrophobic, but if there was anything he could do to improve his situation—well, he would not be able to do it here!

Now the elevator swayed a little, dropped downwards and then ascended again. Damn *Debitor!* What was going on?

The foam offered considerable resistance to all movement—almost as if it had a stubborn will of its own—but eventually Nopileos was able to fight his way forward to the point where his left clawed foot could reach the manual opening mechanism. Like all Teladian light and door switches, it was at ground level. He had to grope around a little to find the opener at the bottom of the foam, but he finally felt the

small projection between his claws. He paused for a moment. Was it really wise to open the door manually? He wiggled his ears. Yes—it was not only clever, it was actually the only sensible alternative! Determined, he pressed the button into the frame. Nothing happened for seuras. Unsettled, Nopileos pressed the switch again, then again, but the door followed its own schedule. Somewhere in the bowels of the elevator compartment a dull whir began. Shortly after that a shrill alarm signal sounded, which made the Teladi's head ridges fade another shade paler. With a burbling sound, similar to two Yalfur foam puddings being pressed together, the consistency of the rescue foam changed abruptly from a solid to a liquid. The light blue substance warmed slightly from the transformation process and in its new liquefied form reached only to Nopileos's ankles. All at once, the elevator car was filled with the intense, sweet scent of flowers; however, the surprised Teladi didn't have time to register this, for the door of the elevator car exploded with an unexpected, violent bang and flew outwards in a high arc. Bright daylight fell through the newly created opening for a moment.

Nopileos had no time to wonder that the door that had been blown away did not afford a view of Deck A of *Nyana's Fortune*, as expected. Instead, a mighty surge of red water sprayed inside the sphere, mixed with the blue liquid, and rose unstoppably and furiously. The completely perplexed Teladi was dragged off his clawed feet by the force of the water flooding in and washed up against the opposite wall. There, disoriented and helplessly flailing his arms, he instinctively prepared for the water to collapse over his head in a few moments. He took an involuntary, deep breath of the stale, flower-scented cabin air before his nostrils closed tight. Teladi were excellent swimmers and divers; the idea of being completely underwater in a few split seuras was the least of Nopileos's worries. He found it much more oppressive that it got darker and darker inside the elevator car the deeper the sphere sank. Now the artificial lighting began to flicker unsteadily; and it soon failed completely with an electric crackle.

Eerie twilight spread. The water also felt strange—it seemed much thinner than it should have been! It would soon creep under his scales like alcohol and transform him into a bloated corpse... *Nonsense!* Nopileos immediately shook off the frightening vision of horror. Such a thing could not happen at all. His scales were still firmly joined together thanks to his youth. Nothing could creep underneath!

Now that the night-dark interior of the car was completely filled with liquid except for a small air bubble on the ceiling, the pressure of the incoming water quickly dropped. Nopileos took the opportunity without delay: he forced himself away from the wall with a powerful push and headed for the opening. Here in the water he could move much more elegantly than on land, because for many eons the ancestors of his people had lived in the vast swamps and rivers of Ianamus Zura and ultimately they still passed this legacy on to their spacefaring brood. The Teladi's sensitive eyes quickly adapted to the prevailing twilight and finally allowed him to get an overview of the situation. He looked back. The elevator, dimly visible as a spherical silhouette, just touched down at the bottom of the murky water that was permeated with dense suspended matter. The car rolled a ponderous half turn and spun up mud that further clouded the already poor visibility. Then it came to a stop with the doorway facing down.

Nopileos's pupils widened in retrospective horror—he could never have freed himself from this prison if he had not gotten out in time! A few air bubbles broke loose from his snout and spun purposefully towards the water's surface. Great egg, what had that oversized calculator Inanias just done? Had he perhaps catapulted the escape pod out of *Nyana's Fortune* in order to save him from an inevitable crash? He had to make certain, had to find out what had happened!

Nopileos hastily paddled up towards the light. The first thing he noticed when his head broke through the surface of the water was the hot air, which didn't match the comparatively cold water. Blinking, he drew a cautious breath, shaking off the bitter-smelling and tasting water, and treaded water while looking all around. Tall trees with thin trunks and green tops crowded tightly around a medium-sized lake whose red surface sent dazzling reflections everywhere under the light of a wintry-looking sun. His gaze wandered upward. A frayed streak of dirty yellow smoke spilled over the tops of the trees and spread across the deep blue, cloudless sky, only to disappear again over the treetops at the other edge of his field of vision. The smoke trail seemed to float very high in the air, certainly several thousand Teladian lengths!

The realization only came over him reluctantly at first, but finally jumped in front of his face with alarming suddenness: this had to be the trail that the *Nyana's Fortune's* burning ion engine had traced across the sky!

Obviously, considerable winds pulled on the artificial cloud at that altitude, because it fanned out quickly and thinned out even further. In a few mizuras probably not much more of it would be seen and in just an inzura the sky above the lake would once again shine an immaculate blue. The Teladi looked motionlessly at the dissolving cloud for a long time. He felt a sinking feeling rise in his stomach. It simply could not be that his yacht had crashed on this planet! No, he didn't want to believe that! The onboard computer had merely ejected him from the ship as a precaution, just in case! Inanias had safely landed his beautiful ship somewhere at the end of this trail of smoke, behind the horizon. It was certain!

Behind him, something splashed softly—a sound he hadn't really noticed before, gurgling against the strange soundscape of the nearby jungle. Startled, he wanted to turn around, but something hard and cold roughly hit his head before he could do so. Reflexively he made himself heavy and let himself sink a few lengths beneath the water. The view back showed a dark surface, one and a half lengths deep and wide, which was rocked slightly by the water, but otherwise showed no proper movement. Eggs be praised, not an animal! But what else could it be? A log? A piece of wreckage? Carefully, he approached the thing from below. The closer he came, the more it looked like an artificially made object. Finally, Nopileos saw something he thought at first to be a written character, but the thin water was full of rust-red suspended particles, which did not exactly make it easy to recognize. The second look deepened the impression: should there really be Old Teladian hieroglyphics there? Now he was close enough beneath the structure to determine that the thing was made of artificial metal. He stroked the character with his right claw; less to be able to recognize it better than to wipe away his own disbelief. This was the wordmark of the CEO, his grandfather! He blew a little bubbling air through his

nostrils. This had to be the hull of a Teladi vehicle, a boat! Nopileos's hearts almost flipped over with relief. Someone sent by his grandfather had found him and rushed to his rescue!

With a well-measured thrust of his rudimentarily webbed claws, the Teladi returned to the surface, which resembled a wavering mirror from below. He looked around in joyful anticipation, blinking. At first he didn't want to believe what he saw. He wanted to say something, stopped himself, then made a hasty paddle movement around his own axis to get an overview of the entire lake.

"But..." he stammered and forgot to shut his mouth. He stared with infinite disappointment at the object bobbing in the water, which was in no way the vehicle of a rescue squad. *How could it be?* he scolded himself. Many light-jazuras and enormous diplomatic hurdles would stand between a Teladian rescue squad on Nif-Nakh and him. Moreover, the crash was hardly an inzura ago!

"Stupid saurian!" he shouted hissing. "Stubborn saurian, naïve saurian! Stupid idea!" He slapped the water with his stretched claw. He should have known—no, he had to! As a human, he would have felt like laughing and crying at the same time. Teladi could do neither, so only nameless frustration seethed him. He had let his own wishful thinking fool him! What was floating on the lake in front of him was nothing more than the elevator door that had blown off! An air hose had deployed, which stretched around it and gave it the necessary buoyancy. The structure was not so much intended as a life raft, since Ianamus Zura's water-accustomed saurians could survive in, above and under water for almost as long as they wanted, even under rough conditions. Rather, the purpose of such a raft was to carry a radio beacon and emergency equipment.

"Eggs... radio beacon, not good at all," Nopileos muttered at this thought. The beacon would inevitably lead the Patriarch of Chin's bloodhounds straight to him. He had to shut it down now! He grabbed the raft and began to pull himself up. The side he was holding on to was pushed a little deeper into the water, the other side lifted up a little. His claw-equipped hands found it difficult to hold the slippery rubber of the air hose; they scraped over it with a ripping sound and slipped off. After several attempts, he finally managed to pull himself up onto the floating door with curses in at least three different languages. Panting, he remained there on his back and stared into the deep blue sky. Slowly the very last remains of the smoke cloud frayed far above him. His thoughts drifted for a while, but he finally managed to shake off the dull brooding and form coherent thoughts. There was only one remaining thing for him to do if he did not want the Split to "save" him, he knew that now. He had to follow the path of the smoke trail until it either led him to the landing site of the *Nyana's Fortune*, or to her crash site. *And I must find Elena and make sure she is all right, no matter where she is!* Of course, the same went for Kyle-William Brennan. Brennan was something like Elena's clutch-elder. He meant a lot to her, and so he meant a lot to Nopileos—quite a lot!

After a few more sezuras, he finally turned on his stomach and got up on his knees. He supported himself on the artificial metal surface with his claws, just like a sprinter before the starting gun. The surface was slick and rickety. He had to be careful not to inadvertently slip back into the water! He didn't have to search for long before he discovered the garish green outline of a hatch, which he opened

by carefully sliding it back. Underneath was an approximately eight-by-eight fist compartment, where he found a backpack with mud-colored camouflage lying inside. He strapped it to his back without looking inside first. To the left, under where the backpack had been, rose a fist-sized, square metal glass cover, which stuck out a few claws widths. Beneath the cover, Nopileos saw a greenish light flashing at a hypnotic, half-sezura interval: the transmitter! The cover's locking mechanism was disengaged with a single handle, and the Teladi held the flat device in its hand. Apart from the indicator lamp, it bore only one other control: a push button labeled with the word for "off" in Argono-Teladian. The switch was secured with a narrow pin, which had to be pulled out if you wanted to deactivate the radio beacon. Nopileos did this and pressed the button. The little green light went out instantly; the transmitter fell silent. For a few sezuras, the Teladi fought against the impulse to throw the device far away from him and let it sink in the lake. But then he thought better of it, took the backpack from his back, and carefully stowed the transmitter inside. He didn't know if or why he could need it later.

Before he closed the backpack again and slung it over his arm, he took a quick look at the remaining contents: there was a piezo tent, a medium-sized water condenser, a semi-mechanical multi-function tool, a 200-pack of protein wontons, a flashlight, a pocket lighter, an omnifrequency radio, a box of weatherproof signal bugs, and an unadorned orange-blue polymer purse in which he discovered two narrow sleeves, each containing twenty-two Teladian banknotes that were worth a forty-three credits. For the first time in many stazuras, Nopileos's scaly fin straightened up in the Teladian equivalent of a smile. Bundles of twenty-two notes each were colloquially called nest eggs, but outside the "Preliminary Credit History" course with head teacher Wohalimis in the Breeding Complex back on Platinum Ball, he had never seen anything like it. He hissed in amusement as he turned the antiquated currency over and over in his pointed claws. That was just like the planners of his people! Who else would fall for the grandiose idea of adding a purse with two nest eggs in odd bills to an emergency pack! For all that was good and right—crash site over here, Split over there—a certain comical note could not be denied! But they were like that, his people.

He checked once more whether the waterproof backpack was really sealed, and took a fleeting glance up. The smoke from the crash was now completely gone, but he had noted its direction. Across the lake, up and down the other bank, and then through the middle of the jungle—probably more than one stazura long, maybe even two or three! Nopileos prepared himself internally for a strenuous march as he let himself slip almost silently into the water, and without any splashing.

CHAPTER 2

Earth was so far away, farther away than the stars.

Elena Kho,
Memories

“A magnificent sleigh, isn’t it, Major Kho?” Ban Danna called out, laughing, as Elena Kho entered the spacious hangar. The ceiling of the assembly hangar, which extended over Level Zero of the Goner space station was low, and the glaring artificial light plunged everything into harsh contrasts and double shadows. A few technicians in strange-colored overalls and coats scurried around, calling up test data from terminals and threw Elena fleeting, moderately curious glances. The ship, which was called a “sleigh” by the gaunt intelligence agent, stood in the middle of the decoupling airlock, which could open from below to release ships directly into space. “Magnificent” was the dented M4/Buster-class military transport, which was anything but. Elena furrowed her brow in doubt, placed her chin between her thumb and forefinger, and stood still in front of the tiny spaceship, making a show of appraising it. Of course, she already knew fighters of this kind. They were cheap, expendable, and were being gradually phased out by the Argonian military.

“Well? Come on!” Danna said with a grin, and went over to Elena with an outstretched hand.

Elena grinned back. “Hello, Danna-san! Yes, I’m rather impressed: beauty and features married together in this masterpiece of engineering, in all possible dimensions. And even a couple impossible ones!”

Danna snorted and held his stomach as Elena walked around the decoupling tunnel and examined the ship from all sides. It was a whole lot smaller than her *USC Getsu Fune*, but similarly bulky. From the various performance data, it should be on par with the older Earth ship—other than lacking a jumpdrive. Elena stopped to watch the work of the small maintenance robots, which sprayed the name she had given her new ship with calm, precise strokes on her flanks: *AP Nikkonofune*, “Sunshine Ship.” She was tempted to have the ship painted in a gradient spanning from dark red to bright yellow to honor her name. But they were expected on Hewa in just one wozura and she wanted to leave this evening. There was no time.

“But seriously, Elena. There was no guarantee that the government would give you a ship. After all, you could have traveled to Hewa with Senator Steen-Hilmarson and the diplomatic corps.”

“But not to Seizewell, where I have to go after the conference on Hewa. Your government is chasing me into the CEO’s claws. What do you say about that, Ban?”

“Ha, listen. Just be on the lookout. That old, haggling lizard is smarter than you’d think for a Teladi.”

“So I’ve heard. Nopileos told me about CEO Isemados.” Elena’s expression turned sad as she thought of Nopileos. The lovable Teladi’s courageous deeds on Nif-Nakh had saved the lives of not just her, but Brennan and many others, too—but had lost his own.

Ban Danna noticed Elena’s shift in mood with bewilderment. Up to now he had only known her in good spirits. That her grief shown through almost made him a little embarrassed. In an attempt to cheer her up, he asked, “Do you know what Senator Gunnar said when your colleague Kyle Brennan also asked for an M4?”

Elena shook her head.

“He said ‘just draw one.’”

“No way!” Elena was already smiling again. Kyle Brennan was not just her former boss, but her best friend, too. So it didn’t surprise her in the least that he sometimes overreached his extraordinary position with the Argon. A little pushback couldn’t hurt him—in the strictest sense, he needed it like a plant needed light.

“Yes, those were his exact words! Brennan was really taken aback—that I can say!”

“I can imagine. So he won’t get a ship?”

“Well of course! The *AP Telstar*. She has about twelve jazuras under her belt. Noah Gaffelt sweet-talked her, and finally wore her down. But the good Senator wasn’t very happy. She’s really worried about that old boat. Do me a favor, Elena?”

“I’ll gladly do anything in my power. What’s the favor?”

“Bring your M4 back in one piece,” Danna said with a wink, “otherwise the honorable senators will make my life miserable, and I’ll have to go without dessert for a wozura!”

Just then the maintenance robot finished up its work on the left flank of the ship and with a soft whir it hovered around the *AP Nikkonofune* to apply lettering to the other side as well.

Elena snickered softly and turned to the Argon so quickly that her shoulder-length hair flew. “Danna, you old charmer! You really know what to say to a woman. I’ll bet all the saurian girls in the universe are at your feet!”

Danna grinned. “They scratch at my door with their black claws every night and write me elegant letters.” He became serious again. “Elena, whatever you do—come back safe and sound! If the M4 comes back in pieces, I’ll live with the consequences. If *you* come back in pieces, I’ll be most distressed.”

Elena sighed inwardly. “Danna-san,” she replied with her friendliest smile, “it’s just a little, routine trip to Hewa, Seizewell, and back. In two wozuras I’m right back here.”

“Okay then. When you get back, come up for a cup of silvan tea, all right?”

Elena nodded. “Gladly. I’m looking forward to it!”

The agent turned to go. “And tell that haggling lizard I said hello!”

“Sure thing!” Elena shouted, and waved Danna goodbye.

After the agent left the hangar, Elena spent some time watching the maintenance robot at work, not really noticing the smooth, steady strokes of the machine. Before the robot finished the last stroke, she turned and left the hangar as well. She wanted to find Kyle—she hadn’t run into him for tazuras, almost as if he were deliberately avoiding her. But of course that was nonsense... She had to speak with him immediately. There was no real reason for it, but something inside her insisted. She had an odd feeling.

“There you are!” The door hissed behind Elena. Looking for Brennan in the temple library was the last thing she’d thought of. Brennan was normally a man of action, not books.

The space pilot looked up and leaned back in his chair. His movements had a nervous edge to them that wasn’t usual for him, as if the failed attempt to avoid her after some tazuras had thrown him off balance, or shaken him in a mysterious way. “Hey, Lin,” he said, scratching his chin. “I thought you were already on your way to Hewa.”

Elena pulled up a chair and sat down next to her best friend. “I’m already gone, so to speak. I just wanted to say goodbye to you.”

“Oh. That sounds almost like goodbye forever.”

“You know? This region of space isn’t exactly an amusement park.” She threw a curious glance at the shimmering data projection he had apparently been brooding over until now. “What’s that—do you really have to draw one now?”

Brennan caught her meaning right away and flashed a weak grin. “Oh dear, so you’ve heard of Gunnar’s stupid decision.”

“Danna’s been telling tales out of school.”

“Well, I could’ve figured.” Brennan shook his head. “No. This right here is something else.”

“Do I have to drag it out of you, or will you let me in on the secret of your own free will?”

Brennan didn’t answer right away. He leaned back, folded his arms across his chest, and cast a look past the edge of the viewscreen, through the large panoramic window that surrounded levels seven through nine of the Goner Temple and allowed an unobstructed view into outer space. The massive holoprojection of Earth, the emblem of the Goner, flickered outside. It no longer appeared to be an image of the blue planet, but more closely resembled a blurred cloud of roughly spherical shape, through which a virtual breeze blew now and again.

“Lin, you were at the old Earth gate, right?” Brennan finally asked. He didn’t wait for Elena’s answer, but got up and strolled to the viewing window.

“Yes, that’s right,” Elena answered, following him with her gaze. “Along with Nopileos. Why?”

“The Goners destroyed it a few hundred years ago and turned it into a memorial site. Sorry, jazuras, of course. Right?”

Elena nodded. “They did,” she rushed to assure him after a few sezuras, as Brennan turned and looked at her questioningly. He seemed to be following a specific train of thought. Elena waited patiently for the next question even though she could already guess it.

“Can you remember exactly what the Goners did with the gate to shut it down? Not blown up, right?”

Elena shook her head and rose to her feet, too, stepping up to the window next to Brennan. “No, they didn’t. I didn’t get a good look at the gate’s mechanisms, but I think that some important components were removed and destroyed.”

Brennan nodded slowly. “Noah Gaffelt showed me a passage from the Book of Truth. In fact, a copy of the log files of an old ship called *AP Gunner*.”

“Noah Gaffelt. Ah, that’s why.”

“That’s why *what*?”

She waved it away. “Forget it. So, *AP Gunner*. Martinus and Nyana Gunne’s ship, if I recall correctly.”

“Right,” Brennan confirmed, “the founders of the Goner. The ship disappeared without a trace over five hundred years ago, a few months or years after a Terraformer raid on the *Community of Planets*. Jazuras, I mean. The copy is incomplete, but it ends with an entry by Martinus, where he talks about taking the key to Earth away from the Xenon.”

“Hmm. Okay, Kyle, even if this key was an important component of the Earth gate, which I think is unlikely, Martinus knew that the jumpgate’s counterpart in Earth’s solar system was destroyed 200 years earlier to keep the Terraformers away.”

Brennan looked out. There, against the unrelenting black, star-studded background of space, a large, elongated transporter was calculating its landing approach to the station’s docking tunnel. “Maybe he believed that Earth had a new gate that could be tuned into with these components. I’m as skeptical as you are, Lin, but I have to find out at any cost!”

Elena kept silent and followed Brennan’s gaze, which had slid away from the almost completed docking maneuvers for some sezuras. It hadn’t escaped her that Brennan spoke about *him* having to find out, not about *the two of them*. But what was the hurry—why so frantic? Elena knew that Brennan would barely be back on Earth, and after a couple of days he’d be on the move again, driven by his old urge to forever travel through the black vacuum of space. Because if there was one thing he treasured more than anything else, even more than his own life, it was the endless solitude of outer space. On the

one hand, she understood him, but on the other she knew that it never made him satisfied. He was always standing in his own way, here just like on Earth.

“Actually, how’s Ninu doing?” Elena asked, following a sudden intuition. She had not seen the blonde Goner in a while.

Brennan turned around a bit too quickly and looked at her in surprise. “She... I think she’s very busy right now. Helping Noah Gaffelt and Lynda North where she can. But I think she’d rather go back to the *Aladna Hill*. Maybe...”

“You think, you believe, maybe? Tell me, I’ve always had the impression you were a couple, and you loved her?” Elena’s gaze became serious, not quite glaring, but still intense; her almond eyes narrowed into half-moon sickles. She had asked him that question before, some wozuras ago on Argon Prime, but he hadn’t given her an answer. She expected this again, and was surprised when his pained gaze met hers, as though dying and confused.

“I do,” he said softly, “and she knows it.”

“Then stay here, Kyle. Don’t leave her alone. Not again. Think about Annabel. Remember the thing between us back then. Damn it, Ninu deserves that you don’t run out on her!” Elena realized that her voice had become heated.

Brennan didn’t seem particularly surprised by her outburst. “Enough, Elena. Everything is all right. I’m not running out on Ninu, and I also won’t be away for long. Only to the government archive on Gorum. A couple days, tazuras, then I’ll be back here.”

“Then take her with you, for crying out loud!”

“I’d like to, but she’s occupied here,” he said with a strained voice. To Elena, it sounded a bit miserable and a lot helpless.

“*Anata ga mikomi no nai yo, Brennan-san!* You can’t be helped!” she burst out in a sudden mix of angry disappointment and helplessness. She turned, shaking her head, and left the room. Brennan watched her with an unhappy expression for another few sezura before turning back to the window, placing his left foot on the low railing. His gaze trailed off into space.

The cockpit of the *AP Nikkonofune* was almost spartanly equipped. It had only the most necessary controls, soberly gleaming metal, and it at no point caught the eye with ledges, foot straps, or additional instrument panels. Now that the Goner space temple was slowly sinking into infinity and the jumpgate was perceptible as an indistinct point in the darkness ahead of her, Elena realized that she had also lost a piece of home with the *USC Getsu Fune*. The experimental Earth ship might have been antiquated and someone sterile with its beige and white interior, but still one could feel that it was built for humans by humans. The *AP Nikkonofune*, on the other hand, hinted that throughout all the many decazuras where human and extraterrestrial cultures were mingling in the melting pot of the

Community of Planets, alien influences had found their way into form and function. In spite of the sparse cockpit equipment, the designers had successfully arranged a narrow cabin in the small area between the cockpit and the cargo holds. It had two surprisingly comfortable bunk beds stacked on top of each other, as well as a shower room with a sonic shower. Elena felt just as positively about the onboard computer. He featured a much higher Logic Level than Marc, the brain of the *USC Getsu Fune*, and at the same time was not nearly as headstrong as Valerie, the guardian of Brennan's ship, who last expressed in an almost pouting voice that you wanted to disassemble "her" ship. Elena had christened the computer Niji, which he dutifully confirmed, and from then on answered to that name without complaint.

Right at that moment, Niji signaled an alert that indicated an incoming transmission. Elena arched an eyebrow as the computer displayed the communication's parameters on a newly opened viewscreen. They were unusual: the transmission simultaneously came in on over a million parallel frequency bands and was broadcast with a considerable power that totaled a few hundred kilowatts. Niji clearly identified the source as the Goner Temple!

"What kind of signal is this?" inquired Elena. "Can you decode it?"

Niji answered without delay. "It's not encrypted. It's transmitting a digital audio signal. Would you like to hear it, Major Kho?"

Elena nodded, and a moment later a child's voice rang out which she immediately recognized:

My name is Ion Battler, foster son of Norma Gardna, Beholder of the Truth at the Temple. She raised me, cared for me, and loved me, as if I had been her own flesh and blood. These words are dedicated to her memory and I send them out into infinity so that you, the people of the universe, will never forget about her, not today, and not in a million jazuras from now!

"Please record that," Elena ordered. Ion Battler, the half-brother of Ninu Gardna, was definitely one of the most intelligent kids imaginable. The idea of using this transmission to create a memorial to his recently deceased stepmother that would rush through space forever, moved Elena. So she listened to the young voice with goosebumps, until after a few mizuras her gaze wandered over the gravidar and paused in fright.

A point of light raced towards the originating coordinates, drawing white streaks along behind it. Whatever it was, it was going to smash into the *AP Nikkonofune* at any moment!

"Niji, evasive maneuvers!" she shouted, and grabbed the flight controls at the same time. At that moment, the blip on the gravidar reached the *AP Nikkonofune*'s position and jerked to a sudden stop. Then the onboard computer reacted.

"There is no apparent danger at this time. Whom or what should I evade?"

Elena stared at the pale dot, which according to the display had paused not 500 meters away relative to the *AP Nikkonofune*. As she peered out of the cockpit window, she discovered nothing unusual, other than the exception of the slowly approaching stargate. “Something was hurled at us like a rocket. According to gravidar it’s beside us now. Don’t you see it?”

“I am sorry, Major Kho. No sensor data exist about that.”

Shaking her head, Elena triggered a recalibration of the gravidar, and when the display returned after a few seuras, the shadowy object had disappeared.

“Strange,” she mumbled. The M4 was old, but had just been completely refurbished by technicians. She didn’t quite believe that the gravitational radar system was already suffering from glitches. But that had to be the case. Slightly disturbed, Elena leaned back in the pilot’s chair and watched as the jumpgate to Red Light drew ever nearer, until its dimensional anchors finally reached for the *AP Nikkonofune* and pulled the ship through the event horizon of the artificial singularity.

CHAPTER 3

My queendom for a messenger drone!

Isemados Sibasomos Nopileos IV

The ground beneath his bare claws felt pleasantly soft, evoking a shiver of strange sensations and timeless memories he had not experienced before. Nopileos waded the last few steps through the shore's mud and fully enjoyed the alien air, that still carried something strangely familiar. Perhaps it was what Inanamus Zura, the once-lost homeworld of the Teladi would taste like. A way back appeared only recently, discovered by the starwarrior Elena—his dear friend! No longer had any Teladi claw stood on this fabled planet for over 300 suns! But he, Isemados Sibasomos Nopileos IV, the grandson of the CEO, would visit it, and there create the first non-profit organization of his race.

In the middle of these upbeat thoughts, Nopileos shook the rust-red water from him and looked around carefully. The trees stood closely packed and had very slender and flexible trunks that a human could probably reach around with both arms and touch his fingers. The trees' bark was smooth and had no branches or twigs below their crowns, perhaps fifteen Teladian lengths high. The foliage-bearing treetops were rocked by a rising and falling wind, and rustled softly. The canopy of leaves was thick, but not so impenetrable that single rays of light didn't reach the ground from time to time; occasionally you could see the dark-blue sky flash through. At ground level, there were all kinds of wild undergrowth: thick-leaved ferns, flowering shrubs, and others with dark yellow berries—and of course the gnarled roots of the redwood trees. Grasses, lichen, or mosses were completely absent. The floor itself was covered with a fresh layer of leaves, under which could be found a layer of decaying leaves, as Nopileos determined when he scraped aside some of the green, fallen leaves with a claw.

A first glance also showed no animals; but on closer inspection a countless number of segmented insects, camouflaged creatures with many tongues, and other creatures that were difficult to classify all crawled about in the foliage, boring into the fern leaves or lived out their existence stuck to the smooth tree trunks. Occasionally, fist-sized tufts of fur scurried through the foliage on many legs, and there also appeared to be much life in the treetops above, because sometimes there was a loud flutter which suggested winged creatures. A ceaseless cacophony of crashing and breaking branches filled the primordial jungle: rustling foliage, scurrying steps, whimpering animal sounds. There was also a long, drawn-out lament that echoed irregularly through the rows of trees, like the melancholy call of a birthing nitsu. Nopileos shuddered in disgust. He had a natural revulsion for nitsus; these nasty creatures had already driven whole departments of Teladi to the brink of financial ruin! But of course there couldn't be any nitsus here on Nif-Nakh.

He took one last look at the blood-red lake he'd crept ashore from just moments ago. Far back, almost on the other side, he could dimly see the floating outline of the elevator door. He hoped it would soon head for the shore and catch on an embankment, so that it wouldn't be seen by any scouts flying over the pond. Nopileos didn't spare any thought for the escape pod itself; that lay deep under the murky water and wouldn't be discovered unless someone was explicitly looking for it. Well. If he wanted to reach his ship in the next stazuras, he should start without delay. He broke off in the direction of the smoke trail he had kept in his mind.

The jungle was dense, but not impenetrable. At first, Nopileos tried to move carefully and as silently as possible through the undergrowth. Soon, however, he realized that this was entirely pointless, but also completely impossible: he was Teladi! Teladi were reasonably elegant swimmers, but not elegant runners—certainly not through an untamed jungle! From that moment on, he crashed through the bushes and stomped more or less indiscriminately over ferns whenever they crossed his path and looked the least bit surmountable. When his backpack caught in a bush with yellow berries, he tugged violently at it, growling strange Teladi curses until the bag reluctantly jerked free. The sudden giving way made him lose his footing and he dropped to the ground. The moldy foliage under him smelled strange but was soft, so he didn't hurt himself, but a cluster of berries that had hooked on the backpack was crushed beneath him. The dark yellow mush gave off a pungently sweet smell, until Nopileos wiped it off with his bare claws. He rose to his knees, then straightened up to continue on his way.

After just a few steps, he heard a loud buzzing sound closing in from behind. Nopileos turned and watched in amazement as a nearly transparent, palm-sized creature with six wings landed on the remains of the crushed berries. It stayed there for a while; it gently fluttered with its barely visible wings, and did nothing else. After a few sezuras, however, it stirred, and lowered its elongated abdomen, from which a whitish stinger or proboscis sparkled, into the yellow-green mass of crushed berries. Nopileos watched with fascination as the yellow berry juice flowed through the sucking stinger and up into the animal's translucent body, making it a bit less see-through. Notably, a small portion of the juice even flowed into the fine veins in its wings. Nopileos raised his claws and turned his palms upward, so that the splayed swimwebs became visible. *Whatever!* He turned his back on the large insect and set off again.

The forest was quite uniform, in principle. Nothing changed between one step and the hundredth. He was therefore surprised when after an uneventful march of a few inzuras, he pushed aside a pair of half-high bushes and unexpectedly found himself standing in a clearing. It was a small one, about the size of a square Teladian length, but nonetheless wide enough that he could set up his tent here with ease. But fortunately that would not be necessary; he was certainly in the immediate vicinity of the *Nyana's Fortune* now! And yet, this place was strange: no trees grew on its entire surface, instead there were some splintered tree stumps scattered around the ground, that must have burned for some time. A handful of old trunks were strewn on the ground like angrily broken matches. Red mosses and mushrooms covered them and they were rotten through and through. The washed out smell of old fire that lingered over the small clearing mingled with the damp molds, and added to it something

indefinable, sharp that made Nopileos wrinkle his nostrils. The Teladi could make neither rhyme nor reason out of this unnatural gap in the forest. He pondered whether a lighting bolt might've struck the ground, but he ended his thoughts without a conclusion when his stomach called with sudden vehemence. Carefully, he removed his backpack and picked out a protein wonton from the 200 pack.

As he stowed the pack away again, a deep rumbling arose in the distance that made his stubby ears twitch. He hastily swung the emergency equipment on his back and rose to his feet, worried. The loud noise approached from the left and suddenly grew to hurricane levels with the shriek of unleashed forces and displaced air! Nopileos's head ridges went white as for one fear-filled moment a shadow crossed over the clearing, with a metallic light in the center that caught his eye. His inner eyelids winced. A Split scout ship flying just over the jungle canopy! The ship had purposefully raced over that clear spot in the woods as though the pilot had seen him!

Nopileos leaped and dove aside into the bushes. If the Split had really discovered him, it was of course too late for that! But the noise of the turbo jet engines already grew more distant, and the craft made no attempt to return. Surely it was going far too fast for the pilot to have seen him, even if he had really looked. The saurian hatchling chewed nervously on the wonton while the engine's rumbling faded off in the distance, became a whisper, and finally died away.

"Nothing happened," Nopileos reassured himself, then resumed his path with uncertain strides. The flight path of the scout ship corresponded pretty closely with his hike through the jungle. There could be no doubt as to what that meant!

A soft whirring from behind to his right made him look around. One of those palm-sized, almost see-through dragonflies hung on the side of his backpack and used its suction stinger to see if it could find the drying remains of the crushed berries.

"Hsssh! Get away!" Nopileos cried and made a waving gesture towards the insect. The animal was not scared off, but buzzed briefly with its wings and gave him an unimpressed stare with several stalked eyes.

"Oh fine," he said after a while. "You seem to be harmless, so stay there a few mizuras—but keep quiet. And above all, don't talk to the driver while he's driving!" He hissed in amusement at his own joke and turned his concentration back to the undergrowth that lay before him.

Much later on, the daylight gradually began to fade, then quickly died away. Nopileos wasn't sure how much time had passed since his departure, but it was probably more than two or three stazuras. He was getting sick of marching. It was finally dawning on him that the *Nyana's Fortune* had gone down farther away than he hoped. He would probably have to spend the night here, even if he was uncomfortable with the idea of struggling for another tazura in the jungle. Nopileos sighed. He was starving and tired! He longed for a scale-scraper, a warm meal, and a clean, hard sleeping bench. Something inside him demanded to know if it made any sense to keep going, but he quickly silenced

that tiny voice of doubt. Activating the tracking device so the Split could find him was no alternative! He'd sooner wither and die of third.

It now became completely dark. Nopileos noticed with astonishment that the dragonfly that hadn't moved from his backpack now spread a diffuse, green, phosphorescent halo around him. It also appeared that most other insects in the jungle, which were only visible in the day after close inspection, glowed at night. The darker it became, the more points of light whirred through the night and crawled around on the ground and plants. Even the background noise changed bit by bit. It became calmer, and the lonely Teladi's footsteps seemed to grow louder and linger for longer.

Somewhere in the distance rang a strange, throaty trumpet sound: long-drawn out and yearning, with a blood-curdling inquiring tone. Nopileos jumped when the call was answered by a similar, but much closer one. He forced himself to stay calm and trudged on, more and more quickly, through the dark undergrowth. Suddenly he was back in a small clearing like the one he had stumbled over a few stazuras ago. The similarity was so great that he first worried that he had gone in a circle. But there were fewer fallen trunks on the ground, and the poisonous smell of burning didn't sting so strongly in his nostrils. Nopileos looked up. As unusually clear and blue as the sky over Nif-Nakh was during the day, it appeared so velvety and impressive at night. Three moons illuminated the clearing: two as waxing or waning sickles, one as a full, pale disk.

Slowly—very slowly—he calmed down. His body ached from the strain of the long march. Teladi were simply not made for such a thing! It was time for him to rest for today. Tomorrow he would cover the rest of the way to his *Nyana's Fortune*. He fumbled the piezo tent as well as the water condenser out of his backpack, the two heaviest yet at the same time most useful items in the emergency pack. He carefully placed the compact tent roll next to him on the ground, in order to put the condenser into operation. Not that he had ever run into the embarrassment of using one before, but the principle was simple enough, and the operation was hatchling's play. Depending on the local prevailing relative humidity, the device's reservoir, which resembled a dark-gray thermos, would fill to the brim with drinking water in a few stazuras.

Nopileos wiggled his ears in satisfaction and took the piezo tent in his claws. He looked around and found a comparatively flat place after a brief search. A quick investigation found a few smaller stones, a couple branches, and the decaying body of a small, multi-legged biting insect. He pushed the stones and branches aside, but with disgust he picked the dead animal up with the tips of his claws and threw it far into the dark forest, where it landed with a dull thud and kicked up a cloud of glowing nocturnal insects. Then he felt around with a clawed toe for the tent's activator, pressed it in hard, and placed the vibrating bundle in the middle of the newly cleared area. With a low-frequency hum, the piezo tent began its work. The unfolding roll first sought its orientation, aligning its footprint with gravity. After the floor had rolled out and an immense number of small anchor fibers, the so-called "tent roots," had grown into the ground, a weak, electrical tension began to creep through the struts of the tents. The tiny, high-performance cells delivered enough power to make the amorphous braces of unbreakable-but-lightweight memory material "recall" their constructed form in next to no time. In the end, the tent

walls stretched and a few seuras later there stood a fully built, egg-shaped dome tent in the clearing, one and a half lengths high and large enough to accommodate two or three Teladi. At least, Nopileos thought, if they liked each other a lot. In any case, he was completely alone, and somehow the shape of the tent reminded him a little of his beautiful spaceship. Nopileos hissed softly. He picked up the backpack from the ground, crawled through the front flap of the tent, carefully closed it behind him, and settled down in the middle of the spacious interior. The floor of the tent was too soft for his taste thanks to the foliage that lay under the tent; like all Teladi he preferred firm sitting and sleeping benches out of ceramic or hard plastic. But well, it wouldn't be forever, and in a pinch he could endure quite well here. He took another protein wonton from the emergency equipment, slipped the lump between his teeth, and lay down on his back, chewing. With eyes wide open, he stared at the dome of the piezo tent, which was so tall that he could stand completely erect in the middle of the shelter. After a few seuras, he heard a muffled hum and a washed-out, bright green spot of light approached from outside the tent wall. The dragonfly! Nopileos watched the glow of the animal, which settled down for a while right at the top of the dome roof. Why it would do so was beyond the power of his imagination. It probably just had its own incomprehensible dragonfly reasons! Nopileos hissed in amusement and swallowed the rest of the wonton. Strange. The fluorescent glow wasn't static, but pulsed softly, as if it mirrored the animal's breath rate. Sometimes it shined a little brighter, sometimes a little darker—the rhythm was fascinating, almost hypnotic...

Nopileos started. It took him a moment before he knew where he was again. Something lay in the air. His short, stubby ears strained painfully; they had fully straightened and stood far from his skull. The dragonfly's shimmering light outside the dome top was missing. It was darker now than ever. Obviously the brightest of the three moons had set again. Suddenly branches cracked in front of the tent. Not quietly and timidly, as if by a sneaking intruder who only made noises accidentally. No—loud, energetic, almost even brutal!

Nopileos cowered in horror. Should he go out and have a look? Before he could even answer the question, that scale-bristling, plaintive, inquiring trumpet that he had already heard several times between nightfall and moonrise called out. A terrible foreboding came over him. What if this call was answered? He flinched as breaking wood cracked loudly outside. Something tremendous pounded through the undergrowth with brute force. It sniffed for a moment, sucked in air, paused for a moment, then made the loudest and most blood-curdling blare of trumpets Nopileos had ever heard.

"Iiaaassssshhhhhh!" he shouted, and jumped up. His skull touched the roof of the tent and slightly bulged the elastic wall outward. With dilated pupils and blanched head ridges, he instinctively ducked and staggered backward to the opposite tent wall, where he slipped and fell painfully to the butt of his tail. A greenish glow wafted from the right through the darkness and the fabric of the tent. There was a silhouette, though diffused and surrounded by a faded halo, but even the sheer size of the approaching glow made it clear the it wasn't the glowing insects of the bushes or the dragonflies that were approaching, but their big egg-brother. Nopileos looked around in a hurry. He absolutely had to get out of here! Hastily, he slipped to the entrance on all fours, got up on his knees, and tried to open the flap

with shaking claws. It was getting brighter as the beast continued to advance with another trumpet blast. When the flap finally stood a little bit open, Nopileos caught a short glimpse of the strangely illuminated jungle floor. Then something intensely fluorescent whisked past the opening, which was maybe some kind of tail, paw, or other extremity; Nopileos wasn't able to tell.

The tent wall jumped forward with a lurch and struck the Teladi, who wasn't prepared for it, in the face with great force. He was thrown inward, fell on his back, and kicked frantically with his clawed feet to pull away from where the tent's wall began to bulge inward. The fluorescent beast outside cast everything in an unreal light that was almost as bright as day as it tried to enter the tent with coughing snorts and agitated trumpet blasts. The elastic material was surely enormously strong, but it wouldn't be able to withstand the animal's efforts for long. The first tent roots came out of the ground with an appreciable jerk. The Teladi was given a good shake as the roof was pressed down under the weight of the beast, which set the whole otherwise very stable construction in motion. His claw touched the strap of the backpack lying next to him. A thought ran through his mind: the multi-function tool in the equipment! Without thinking further, he pulled the emergency pack up to him, rummaged through it, panting, until he found the tool and with feverish movements flipped open the knife. Never before had he needed to defend himself in such a way or manner! Something came through the tent wall with a ripping noise and shredded a hole over a length long, into loose-hanging strips. With an inarticulate hiss, Nopileos straightened halfway, shakily holding the blade in front of him, pointed at the gaping opening. The drooping scraps of the tent wall were carelessly swept aside, then a green, phosphorescent something into the flattened tent and stared at the frightened Teladi almost indifferently with many dark, stalked eyes.

"Help!" Nopileos cried, thrusting the blade in the direction the the animal, which was completely unfazed. Instead, it came a bit closer, as if it wanted to sniff at every inch of the saurian descendant. Only with considerable delay did Nopileos realize that the beast had neither nose or mouth, much less teeth. The semitransparent gelatinous mass of the head glowed from within and sat on a long, flexible neck, and bore nothing more than six eyes on curiously short stalks.

"That's—you... you can't even... can't bite?" an unbelieving Nopileos stammered, and lowered the multi-function tool. As if to answer, the animal bent back its long neck. Through the opening in the tend wall Nopileos caught a glimpse of the rest of its stocky body, which arched back as well. He saw tremendous veined wings as well as an enormously long, serrated tail that wound around the main body of the tent and was just about to push forward through the shredded wall into the tent's interior. With bulging eyes, Nopileos looked down at the tip of that tail, which flickered back and forth beneath its head. At the extreme end of the thick, snake-like extremity, a sharp-fanged mouth opened. A triumphant trumpet rang as foul, poisonous stench spread out.

Then the feeding tail snaked at the still-motionless Teladi with grinding jaws.

CHAPTER 4

Deep inside, behind the wall of darkness, under the lake of tar, there you'll find the sunlit day, the butterfly under blue skies.

**Carta Friends,
Argonian Historian, 172-214**

Four tazuras later, the ship's oppressive narrowness and the unfamiliar silence began to slowly grate on Elena's nerves. Even so the onboard computer's databank was almost inexhaustible and offered enormous insights into the culture and history of the *Community of Planets*; for the first time in a long time, Elena also found sufficient leisure to sort through and read through the material without interruption. Nevertheless, the feeling of restlessness and unfulfillment rose the longer she killed time alone. Even her attempts to find balance through meditation missed the mark. Only the exercises with the tiny training device that folded out of the wall in the corridor to the payload bay created temporary relief. Therefore, from the second tazura of flight on, she trained for a stazura or two multiple times a day, usually with an empty or dogged expression. Only after the final gate transit, when Niji announced that the *AP Nikkonofune* would reach the destination planet of Hewa in less than eight stazuras, did Elena think of the idea to use the ship's databank to inform herself about the *Hatikvah Free League*. This oversight annoyed her, as she was not usually known to be inadequately prepared. Why she had skipped her flight destination during her forays through the archives of the onboard computer was incomprehensible to her.

It was even more surprising because the *League* was a fascinating chapter in the *Community of Planet's* history that demonstrated the fundamental peacefulness of the Argon. For a long time, the *Hatikvah Free League* was little more than a loose union of three remote planetary systems somewhere between Herron's Nebula and Atreus' Clouds. A quarter of a million Argons and just as many members of other species breathed, worked, and lived here in remarkably peaceful community. In fact, the *Hatikvah Free League* had hardly been visited by Xenon raids or confronted by other armed hostilities for several decazuras. Some thought that this had to do with the sheer unimportance of these three sparsely populated systems; others argued that the *Free League* more or less obtained this security at the cost of the Argon and Boron. But the *League's* status as an independent confederacy which elected its own government and politically was not a part of either the *Community of Planets* or any other organization of the six species was undisputed. The *Hatikvah Free League* was considered a neutral state, and as such the allied forces of the recent Xenon Conflict had generously given them one of the "new sectors." Hatikvah's Faith was baptized by this section of space. It included two solar systems, one of which

harbored a fertile water planet, while the other was a binary system with no fewer than eighteen cold gas giants.

The founding of the *League* was due to circumstances that often lead to bloody battles over ownership claims on the old Earth. Not so here. A long time ago, a freethinker named Christiane Hatikvah had a wonderful vision—she saw all peoples coexisting: living and working together with equal rights. Her small commune Ai—Love—on the once nameless world she named Hewa—peace—quickly became a village, soon an entire city. Outcasts, the persecuted, defectors, and dissenters were received with open arms, and no one was turned away. Naysayers prophesied a short life for the newly emerging community: criminals and rebels of all peoples would find fertile ground here, and seed it with malice. But they would be proven wrong. Although loafers, smugglers, and pirates occasionally sailed under the *Free League's* flag, within a few decazuras the small confederacy had developed into an oasis of calm in a tumultuous universe. As the young *Community of Planets* partially convened in 452, zuran time, for the first Interplanetary Conference on Security and Cooperation in Space, they chose the *League's* capital, Ai, as the conference venue. Since that first conference 95 jazuras earlier, all regular and special sessions had been held in this city, which matured into a metropolis. Hewa was the name of the planet, Peace. But if peace was usually the reason for a conference of peoples, it was unfortunately not always the outcome...

Elena looked up from the data panel. Far out in space, a light blue speck glowed in the faint halo of its atmosphere; Hewa was coming up quickly. The astronaut from Earth held her thumb at arm's length and closed one eye. The planet disappeared, but its bright glow formed a strange halo around her thumb. She shook her head. The people of Earth might have been a few steps ahead of their brothers and sisters in the *Community* technologically, but ethically they definitely stood behind the Argon.

One stazura later, Niji turned the *AP Nikkonofune* by means of the attitude control system so that her main drive pointed in the direction of flight and gave reverse thrust. Elena flipped off the database projection and checked the instruments. Everything looked calm. She got up to exercise for a while and then shower. Later, when Hewa had grown into a large, blue-white ball that took up the entire bow window, it filled her with an exhilaration like nothing she'd felt for a long time. All the instability of the last few tazuras faded from her like the echo of a bad dream. She didn't know what she expected, but—like everything since her arrival in the *Community*—it would be fantastic and exciting. That, she didn't doubt.

As the *AP Nikkonofune* made its landing approach, Elena saw the gigantic tower of the Conference Center standing many kilometers away. As she knew from the archives, it had been erected specially for the ICSCS thirty-five years ago. It measured over four hundred meters in diameter, reached one-half kilometer under the ground, and yet stretched twice that distance into the sky. The colossus was completely covered with large tiles of black marble, in which were set thousands of panoramic windows all around. Each of these windows possessed an automatic sun shade in a different color of the Boron color space; when Niji had the *AP Nikkonofune* circle the tower in a wide holding pattern, Elena's eyes beheld a magnificent, hypnotic play of colors as many of the shades had descended due to

the start of midtazura. Finally, flight control granted the *AP Nikkonofune* landing clearance, and the onboard computer brought the small M4/Buster down at the top of the huge roof of the conference building.

Since the official meeting with the Senator for Defense, Henna Steen-Hilmarson, and the Argonian delegation had only been announced for some stazuras, Elena availed herself of the opportunity to wander a bit through the streets of Ai beforehand. She was surprised to find that from the foot of the tower she could hear absolutely nothing of the heavy traffic from the airfield above. And yet, although it was located a good way out of Ai, the giant cylinder completely dominated the city's image. You could see it from any point in the street, at any time; it floated over the rooftops and, it seemed to Elena, even dominated the hearts and minds of the locals. Eventually, her infobracelet reminded her of the upcoming meeting. She went back and sought out the premises of the Argonian representation on the 187th floor.

The corpulent senator with the pink hairbun was already waiting for Elena. "The Three-eyes have changed the protocol of their data-octahedrons," she revealed as she lead Elena into the small conference room where the Argonian delegation's briefing was being held. "Some are speculating that the security flaw of the previous generation of octahedrons was purely intentional."

"Are you saying that we do not have any information at all about the actual reason for this conference?" Elena inquired. She was surprised to note that the Argonian delegation consisted of only the Defense Senator and two Argons, whom she did not know.

"Little. We assume this is going to be an amicable reorganization of the territorial divisions. Whatever the Three-eyes mean by 'amicable,' that is. And above all else, an unspecified form of preemptive defense against the scattered Xenon collectives."

"That seems quite reasonable," Elena said, as she did not immediately realize what the senator wanted.

Steen-Hilmarson slowly shook her head. "You have perhaps not been in the *Community* long enough to notice, Major Kho. But every time the Pontifex Maximus Paranidia undertakes something that goes beyond local trade deals, what results is something that runs counter to human thinking. Something that is contradictory, illogical, or otherwise incompatible with rational thought."

"Perhaps non-human beings are fundamentally different," Elena reflected. "What Split, Boron, and Teladi do doesn't always make sense to me, Madam Senator."

"Oh, please," the senator sighed with a tortured smile. "Just call me Henna. 'Madam Senator' is impossible to hear over and over, and my surname isn't manageable either. And you don't need to sit, we'll be off at any moment. We should slowly make our way to the plenary hall."

CHAPTER 5

Fear, garish gray and bright black; when the helpers no longer scattered the threats. We tasted the full horror of what we did. The intention alone was mottled pink; the deed paled in the moment of flesh.

Olla Go,

Philosopher and Court Jester to the Kingdom End

The Three-eyes had bestowed upon the convention the nebulous title of “Geometric Expediency in the Context of Collective Salvation,” which led to unruly remarks from some of the Split representatives, subdued laughter from the Argons, and from the Teladi, as usual, induced no particular reaction. In the Borons’ extensive environmental area, the designation provided restrained amusement, but then again, the amphibious creatures in any case found practically anything and everything amusing. And of course that also applied to Bala Gi, who was waiting for the inaugural address. The Minister of Ethics and Foreign Affairs of the Queendom of Boron sucked deeply of the equatorially-warm wet of the conference center, with tremulous gills. The liquid spilled sharp and living through nostrils and gills; it seethed with the flavors, memories, and the very life of the many beloved diplomats who had swum through it over the course of time. Up front on the youngest buds of her tasters, even the distant presence of the princess prickled, funny and complex. Lar Menelaus’s last visit to Ai was at least seven equatorial streams back, and yet her joyful pheromones still dominated the taste of the wet. *Oh!* The minister opened her pupils so wide that the surroundings blended into one whirling patch of color. She clicked bemusedly. Once again, she thought in ‘equatorial streams’ instead of ‘jazuras!’ And of course this slip-up spread through the wet as a diffuse cloud of thought. Why did the hairy and scaly air-snufflers make things so difficult for themselves? Three current changes on Nishala roughly corresponded to a Teladian jazura, or about one and one-third of a standard Argonian year. Bala Gi held that it was all a big, funny mess. Perhaps it had come time again to propose a more meaningful, quantum-fluctuation-based timekeeping system to the ICSCS. But the complacent, scaly cheapskates would inevitably bristle at the idea once again. They had used the Community to press their funny zura calendar system on the Tasters, and would defend it to the last claw. It was, after all, the only overreaching success those green, bargaining lizards had ever been able to achieve, disregarding financial ones.

Bala Gi’s attendant, the scientific ethicist Nola Hi, pushed an amused barrage through his rostrum. The small compression wave caused the minister’s gills to vibrate. She refocused her eyes and looked into large, questioning, saucer-shaped eyes. Naturally, her pheromone cloud told Nola Hi that she was amused with herself and that it had something to do with time and the Teladi. After all, time was a prominent taste, one of the nine-hundred-eleven fundamental types, even!

“Minister, I wonder and am curious,” the pale-blue ethicist clicked, as his tasters rippled in an invisible current, “whether Somancklitansvt will come to the true reason for this meeting.”

Somancklitansvt was the head of the delegation of Pontifex Maximus Paranidia; he bore a particularly long and unctuous title, but unholy beings—that is, everybody but the Paranid themselves—were not allowed to address him by it. Therefore, they made an effort to address him by his larval name, which usually worked. Since time immemorial, the Three-eyes were embarrassingly careful to save face. But Somancklitansvt must know that there would be trouble and loss of face as soon as he came to his main concern. Because as far as the Queendom’s intelligence services had been able to ascertain, the Paranids were concerned with securing their last star system against the Xenon, for which they sought both moral and military support.

“That, he should and must, certainly and without fail,” Bala Gi replied to her advisor’s question.

“Senator Henna Steen-Hilmanson of the Argon Federation is slowly becoming impatient, and the Defense Specialist of the Profit Guild, Thi t’Ggt, has already announced his departure. He is quite indignant.”

“You can not blame and resent him for that, even though he is nonetheless a Split! And there he comes, and already is!” answered Nola Hi. The last part did not refer to Thi, but to the Reverend Somancklitansvt, who at that moment appeared on the speaking platform in the middle of the plenary hall. The representatives’ seats and benches were grouped around the stage and the Borons’ environmental area was formed by a nearly invisible force field that compensated for optical distortions.

The other governments had also sent as few representatives as the Queendom. A mere two saurians in the milky-green uniform of the Teladi, more or less bored, stared at the middle of the hall. The portly Senator Steen-Hilmanson and her two diplomatic attendants whispered openly to starwarrior Ele Na, who had been called at the last minute to participate in the conference as a non-voting representative of sector Earth. The Goner cult’s non-voting observer spoke unashamedly with the two members of the *Free League*, and a half-dozen members of the press shifted uneasily back and forth on the upper benches of the spectator area. The Patriarch of Chin had sent seven representatives all the same, who were hunkered at their desks with their usual sullen faces to the right of the three times three times three dignitaries of the Paranids.

The imbalance between the numbers of the Three-eyes and those of the other envoys seemed amusing, but it appeared that Somancklitansvt either did not perceive the excitement of the Argons and Borons, or else he completely ignored it. The Paranid waved his wide, diamond-and-nividium-studded cloak in a dramatic gesture. A cone of light lanced down from far above, and illuminated the bony figure like a magician at a gala performance. Somancklitansvt spread his arms wide and stretched them toward the audience.

“Allies, holy and unholy!” he intoned in unaccented trading language. “It was not long ago since tremendous fleets of the machine-creatures swept through the Godrealm and all other star systems.

They brought senseless destruction and immeasurable financial losses. But then Three-Dimensionality sent us a sign: out of nowhere came a ship from the distance; bearing weapons and technologies that until then were alien to Us. Behold!”

The beam of light that illuminated the Paranid faded to a dim glow and the hall’s lights went completely out. A swirling holosphere above the head of the Three-eye grew to a considerable size. In it, a myriad of stars glittered against a velvety background; a dirty-brown gas planet with ocher-colored swirls hovered in the center of the sphere and filled two quarters of the image. From the direction of the representatives of the Patriarch of Chin came a few exclamations in Split language that supported Bala Gi’s guess: this was the gas giant Gho-Czman in Split territory. But of course Somancklitansvt was not talking about the planet.

The camera slowly zoomed in on a tiny spaceship that passed the gas planet at mid-range. It was the very ship in which the human, Kyle-William Brennan, had invaded the *Community of Planets*. His arrival had triggered a frenzied snipe hunt across the entire breadth of the *Community*. Everyone wanted to be the first to get their grips on the shuttle with the unprecedented technology: Brennan’s ship possessed the so-called gateless jumpdrive, thus the ability to arrive at any point in space from any other point in space in no time, without having to use the ancient jumpgates! But the shuttle named *USC X* was just a tiny prototype ship and its jumpdrive was destroyed.

“The pilot of this sacred vessel was essential in contributing, that We could push back and ultimately defeat the machine-creatures.” The holosphere blended into a picture of Kyle-William Brennan, who, along with a tall Argon, was detained in a gloomy room that was in the overblown style of the Paranids. Bala Gi immediately recognized the Argon: Ban Danna of Argon Prime’s military intelligence service.

“The last remaining machine-creatures are retreating,” snorted Somancklitansvt. The picture in the holosphere changed again. It once again showed the stars, but this time without a planet in the center. The Boron minister narrowed her eyes to mere slits. What was this? A jet-black object slowly pushed diagonally from the bottom to the middle of the sphere, obscuring an ever-greater portion of the starry, projected sky. Or was she deceived? But no! Nola Hi had seen it too, because she tasted the latent question in his fresh pheromone cloud.

The Paranid stretched his long, thin arms upwards and spread them out in a wide semicircle, as if to embrace the holosphere. He lifted his head and looked up, transfigured. “The priests of science of the holy Godrealm of Paranid have found that after which all other peoples have sought in vain!” he proclaimed, as the camera slowly pushed in on the black object. “The mindship of the unholy machines, the CPU, Their brain, Their control center! Annihilate it and every single Xenon will freeze motionless after the execution of its last command! And”—with a jerky motion the Paranid lowered his outstretched, bony arms which now appeared to embrace the plenary hall—“one after another We will track Them down and destroy Them without any resistance!” The three protruding eyes glittered fanatically while Somancklitansvt let his gaze slowly wander from right to left over those present.

A massive, dark cylinder slid lazily through the center of the holosphere; it rolled slowly about its own axis, flanked by an entire swarm of small, black, assault fighters. “We will wipe Them out forever! Their retreat from the known sectors will be a retreat into oblivion, a journey of no return!” The last words of the Paranid blended together before dying out in a dramatic, long-drawn-out echo.

A cloud of crimson horror spread around the minister in the wet and mingled with the acrid pheromones of Nola His, whose tasters fluttered wildly. Rapturous howls rang out, however, from the throats of the seven Split around Thi t’Ggt, accompanied by the approving clamor of the three times three times three Paranids.

Genocide. What Somancklitansvt proposed was simply the extinction of an entire people! Even if the Xenon were “just” machines, dangerous machines, at that, they were still thinking beings, and totally unique! Defending oneself against their assaults and pushing them back was one thing. To completely and permanently wipe them out was another. The Paranid’s proposal was unethical to the highest degree, and furthermore didn’t comply with the will of the Ancients! Bala Gi looked at her attendant with wide eyes. The scientific ethicist likewise trembled in the aftermath of the shock. “That must not happen and take place,” he gurgled through his gills.

“It must not,” the minister agreed. “Never! We must taste with Somancklitansvt!”

“And with Ele Na, the starwarrior,” added Nola Hi with numb whimpers.

Bala Gi felt the strong presence of intention in the pheromone cloud of her adviser. Nola Hi was nearly as intelligent as a Lar and was almost always right. She was glad to know him. “Yes—and yes,” she clicked her approval. Then she courageously pressed the switch that signaled a request to speak.

Somancklitansvt immediately directed his three eyes ostentatiously away from the Boron environmental area, to ritually demonstrate his lack of regard for the unholy beings. With half-extended, bony arms, he awaited the Boron delegation’s remarks.

“Reverend Somancklitansvt,” bellowed Bala Gi, trying not to inadvertently pronounce the honorary title forbidden for unholy creatures. “Never are we able, do we want, and will we allow that you annihilate the thinking, aware, living machine-creatures and eradicate them, thereby erasing and extinguishing their lineage from the history of our universe.”

The Paranid instantaneously puffed up like an bony, oversized bird of paradise. A glaring ray of light almost made him fade into the background as his voice rose in a rumbling tone. “Blasphemy! The machines deface the visage of holy Three-Dimensionality! Their geometrical competence is incomplete, They are a thorn in the eyes of Bashra and Xaar! They are unholy to the third power! Have They not done Us enough harm? We will annihilate them, utterly, to the last floating point unit! Whoever is not with Us is against Us, be They Queendom, Profit Guild, or Argon Federation!”

Bala Gi emitted a long stream of buzzing clicks, their echos reverberating off the dense, crimson pheromone cloud that slowly diffused throughout the environmental area. The scientific ethicist Nola Hi chimed in, uncharacteristically brief and precise owing to the inner turmoil he felt.

“Reverend Somancklitansvt! We will give the Machines an asylum, a refuge, in our own territory, and you will not dare—”

“You do not know what you say, Nola Hi!” thundered Somancklitansvt. “You do not know, nor can you know, because you will never be allowed to contemplate the holy Three-Dimensionality.”

“The Pontifex will not dare, he will not dare,” repeated Nola Hi with the trembling voice of a little girl. “Do not violate our territory under any circumstance! Not—never!”

Without another word, Somancklitansvt gathered the jewel-encrusted vestment like a curtain and crossed his long arms over his chest. He lowered his head, and a moment later the speaker platform was empty.

CHAPTER 6

A ghok is nothing but a big space fly with a glowing heart that'd like to devour him. He likes ghoks!

Thi t'Ggt,

First Warrior of the Honh Family

The beast was huge; it fluoresced bright green and bathed the surroundings in the falsely colored light of a fever dream. The pungent stench of decay mingled with a poisonous, cloying, acridly tinged breath that came from overflowing stomach acid or even worse. It was terrifyingly alien: its many-eyed, mouthless face looked down mindlessly and absently at the frightened Teladi, whose body was about to lapse into protective catalepsy. The most repulsive thing about the beast, however, was probably its broad, flexible tail far below its head, which snaked its way through the tattered tent fabric and into the interior. The far end of the extremity, which the animal bent back into a U-shape, featured a lipless mouth equipped with sharp fangs. Nopileos stared in horror at the gnashing jaws. Tatters of skin and strands of meat from former prey hung between its teeth and out of the feeding orifice, as well as the remnants of a dark, pulpy mass over which ran a thin strand of green-glowing liquid that landed on the tent floor in small drops. The resistant material of the tent curled up where the drops fell; it bubbled slowly as though on fire.

The frightened Teladi suddenly became aware of the multi-function tool's blade that he held in his left claw. The animal was big and dangerous; it had huge, semi-transparent wings that beat up and down in front of the shredded tent. It also secreted a highly corrosive bodily fluid. Nopileos looked at the approaching feeding tail and back at the blade. Compared to the jungle dragon out there, it was small, downright puny! No Teladi would ever be injured by it—in this regard the Teladi safety engineers had done a great job. Nopileos gulped and switched the blade to his other claw. Could he do better with his right? The feeding jaws came closer to him with snuffling noises.

"Iaaaashhhh!" Nopileos cried with a tongue that grew heavy. The protective paralysis was gradually setting in. That would be the end of him! The creature's sharp claws had shredded the tent wall like aluminum foil. They would tear him to pieces while the catalepsy made him defenseless. Then the feeding mouth would close in on top of him! He was afraid—deathly afraid.

But—claws, thin foil, blade... An image flashed in his mind's eye as though illuminated by a single strobe light. Without thinking, he dropped instinctively back on the ground. An intense pain shot through his spine as he landed on a sharp object, but he paid it no mind. He hastily turned around and slid over to the back wall. Without consciously noticing it, he heard fearful sounds escaping from him, inarticulate, whimpering, and shockingly un-Teladian. The jaws followed him, smacking. When he

reached the back, he straightened up and thrust the knife forward. The fabric of the tent groaned and distorted, but the blade didn't penetrate. Indeed, the material was overstretched, but it offered considerable resistance, as though it was made of safety rubber. The Teladi hissed sharply as the beastly, stinking jaws touched him; a drop of digestive acid came out of the monster's lipless mouth and fell on his right foot's claws. Snuffling with pleasure, the giant insect inhaled the sharp odor of burning keratin as the drop of acid ate away the top millimeter in Nopileos's scales. But the Teladi paid no attention. Driven only by his fear, he stabbed feverishly at the tent, again and again, snarling, shrieking, beyond all thought besides just get out of here!

After a seemingly endless period of time—in reality, only seconds—the knife sank into the battered tent wall with a jerk. It was pushed down by Nopileos's weight, and under the noise of ripping material a gaping hole formed in the outer wall from chest height to the ground. The Teladi brushed the two fluttering scraps of cloth to the side and pushed himself out into the night. The small clearing was lit up as bright as day by the fluorescent light of the jungle dragon, whose winged body took up half the space. The animal's flat head watched with strange indifference at its own feeding tail, which wandered around inside the tent as though they didn't belong to each other. Scattered all about the clearing were small pools of glowing gastric fluid that reacted with the dry leaves; plumes of thick smoke swirled up from under the leaves and covered the clearing. Nopileos involuntarily held his breath as he straightened up and immediately stormed off headlong into the dark jungle. The beast frantically tried to free its tail from the dissolving tent, but its projecting wings caught in the tough plastic material. Angry and disappointed, the animal sounded a tremendous fanfare that made the fleeing saurian cry out and stumble. The creature intensified its efforts to get away from the remains of the tent, and finally succeeded. With powerful beats of its large wings, it rose almost vertically in the air, while under it a smoldering fire began to consume the dry layers of foliage. The jungle dragon trumpeted once more, loud and frustrated, but the sounds of fleeing prey became inexorably softer. It couldn't follow its living meal into the dense jungle. Its wings stretched far too wide and the trees crowded together far too closely.

The headless hunt through the completely black forest was torment for the fear-stricken Teladi, a torture frozen into moments of terror. With each of his short steps, he was caught in bushes that stood in his way, or stumbled over rocks that caused him to misstep and painfully stretch the ligaments of his unprotected toes. He bumped the scales on his already overworked knees and pulled at the throbbing bruises on his clawed hands as invisible creepers extended around his ankles, and the combined obstacles threatened to bring about his downfall. Branches suddenly slammed into his sensitive face and made him hiss; the trumpeting of the jungle beast at his back drove ice-cold fear through his chest like the blade of a steel sword; the terrible sound kept him moving despite the pain. Growing fatigue and climbing blood temperature began to produce a strange, colored haze across his retinas. His sensitive, normally night-visioned Teladi eyes failed him, casting shadows, contours, and alien beast where none were. Only his wildly beating hearts prevented him from breaking down and falling into protective catalepsy. But even three hearts couldn't delay the inevitable forever. Nopileos, who had just

calmed down enough to think halfway clearly, slowed down, hobbled on increasingly numb claws, and finally stumbled to the ground. He tried to raise his arms to protect him from the impact, but the paralysis was already filling his entire saurian body. With a last, rattling hissing sound, he fell forward and dully struck the ground face first. He fell unconscious immediately.

After a few mizuras, a soft rustling rose up high in the jungle canopy. A handful of faintly fluorescent dots of light slowly rained down thin, frizzy threads of silk on top of the motionless body. There, where the wormlike larvae didn't make direct contact with their victim, they twisted and turned to reach it as quickly as possible; where they landed on Nopileos's scaly armor, they immediately tried to dig in and hold on with tiny drops of acid.

Brightness. Angry buzzing. Blurry, yellow veins. Dark. Bright. Dull pain. Itchy scales. Nopileos's eyelids flickered, opened heavily, and then closed again before he could come to.

The next time he regained consciousness, he managed to fully open his eyes, but at first he saw only glistening reflections of light. He made a bubbling hiss, the equivalent of moaning, then growled the first curse that came to mind: "Egghh ssshhaallad."

Satisfied that the Teladian expletive had passed sufficiently clearly through his lips, he listened to himself. His body ached in too many places to count, and his limbs felt like lead weights. He tentatively spread his swim webs. *Oh!* It worked on the first try. Encouraged by this success, the Teladi made an effort to focus on a washed-out speck near him while at the same time he bent his arms to lift himself. An angry buzzing from the left acknowledged his movements. He paused and grabbed a first, clear look at his surroundings. On his left arm perched the see-through dragonfly he had last seen as a bright spot of light from outside the tent. He murmured something incomprehensible, intended to make the insect flee. He'd had enough of any beast, especially the ones that shined at night and had wings! To emphasize his demand, he pushed his arm forward in a feeble gesture, which didn't manage to bother the dragonfly very much. Instead, it just briefly twirled its palm-sized wings and sucked up a yellow liquid through its suction stinger. The animal had skewered something, but it was not a berry at all! Nopileos shook his head in disgust when he saw that it was a hairy worm that still writhed though it was pierced and half-sucked. From the back of the worm hung a thin thread, like that of a spider. The disgust gave Nopileos new strength. He rose with difficulty and pain. The dragonfly finally let go of him to flit off with its prey. It didn't travel very far, however, but clung to a tree trunk with slowly fanning wings, where it stared at the panting Teladi with uninterested, beady eyes.

"And I thought that you only liked berries," he hissed weakly. He looked around. The jungle was bright and clear, and he could sometimes see the sun blinking through the canopy far above him. The forest, it seemed, was manageable and harmless, just as on the tazura before; nothing reminded him of the terror of the previous night. Or did it? Horror shot through him as he looked down at himself: many of the hexagonal segments of his scaled, leathery skin featured deep scratch marks or were chalk-white, suggesting minor wounds in the underlying tissue. Much worse, however, was the handful of fissured

pits, which spread over his chest armor and the entire left half of his body like meteorite impacts on an airless moon. Something hideous clung inside some of these pits—something that looked like the desiccated remains of pale maggots like the one the dragonfly was still sucking.

Nopileos hastily brushed off the worms' empty shells with disgusted movements. Trembling and panting, he felt with searching claws over any part of his body he could reach, feeling inside the pits, pushing and probing, until he was sure that none of the larvae had penetrated his scaly armor. It would take several mazuras to fully rebuild the craters in his scales—but he was very glad to be a Teladi who had barely survived the maggots, and not a soft, unarmored human!

“I owe you my thanks, worthy dragonfly!” Nopileos said and nodded solemnly to the animal, which still clung to the tree trunk. It had plucked the pale insect larvae from his body while he was under the influence of his protective paralysis and sucked them dry before they could cause major damage. The dragonfly twirled its wings.

What now? Only now did the Teladi youth realize he had completely lost his orientation through the headless flight of the previous night. Where had the smoke cloud been in the sky? He looked up involuntarily. Apart from scraps of dark blue sky and glistening sunbeams, he spotted nothing. Yesterday he still strongly expected that he could reach the *Nyana's Fortune* in a couple extra stazuras, now his hope dwindled visibly. He was injured and could no longer travel as fast. He had lost his bearings. Tent, emergency pack, food, and condenser, too, even the possibility to catch the Split's attention by radio, as much as he loathed the thought! The prospect of spending more nights in the forest made his forehead ridges pale several shades. Desperately, he turned on his axis and stared intently between the bushes and smooth tree trunks. If he could just discover the route he'd traveled in the night and use it to reach the primordial forest beast's clearing, he would be able to find his original direction again! But wherever he looked, the jungle looked the same everywhere. If he had trampled down bushes in his breakneck flight, they had already straightened again. Once he thought he saw something like a trail in the foliage, but the print, which looked like one of his own clawed feet, stood alone behind a tall, green frond and didn't belong to a coherent trail. The lack of any alternatives or possibilities almost caused him physical pain that made his stomach cramp in fear.

“All right,” he hissed despondently. As quickly as he could—which wasn't very quick with all of his limbs aching and the catalepsy lingering in his body—he set off in the direction his instincts told him was most the most probable. He didn't even want to think about how reliable his intuition was, but simply worked his way forward, step by step. After a while, he heard a buzzing from behind: “his” dragonfly caught up with him, overtook him, and vanished in the jungle beyond.

“Maybe I should just follow you,” Nopileos whispered hoarsely. “Could be you know what's up.”

On a break after a long march, the Teladi overcame the oppressive premonition that he would also have to spend this night in the jungle. And the next, and the next after... So long that either a jungle dragon or these larvae caught him, or he died of thirst. Nopileos was near to giving up but a thought made him endure: meaning! Everything that had happened must have had a meaning! He looked down at himself.

There were the holes made by the insect larvae, but the other injuries had slowly faded and the affected scales were nearly back to a healthy color. He hadn't survived all of that just to perish and die on this insignificant jungle planet! What about the planet Ianamus Zura and his non-profit organization? Was Elena still alive and well? No, he didn't want to die here! So many suns were still in front of him, all the adventures that were still left to be experienced!

"Profit, no!" he hissed determinedly, and his voice echoed far through the jungle. A squeaking ball of fur erupted at his feet in a swirl of leaves and disappeared with a rustling in the nearest bushes. Nopileos sniffed the air as he got underway again, always behind the dragonfly.

Later, as he had fallen into a mindless routine, the daylight began to fade. He didn't notice it until the buzzing dragonfly, which sometimes hurried on ahead, sometimes lingered, developed a pale, barely-visible halo. Fear crept over him, but he bravely overrode it. If he just avoided the clearings, perhaps no jungle dragon would cross his path? One thing was as clear as his reflection in a brand new spacecraft: he would not be allowed to stop, settle down, and sleep, no matter how long the night lasted. He remembered the vile larvae of the last dark period all too well.

Night broke quickly over the jungle. It was pitch black at first, but his sensitive eyes could see many details in the remaining light now that he was not panicked. Later, as the moons rose, it became somewhat brighter. The lively daytime sounds of the jungle faded little by little, and the rustling of foliage and the occasional cracking of branches echoed far and eerily through the dense rows of trees. All around him, glowing night insects awoke. Nopileos quickened his pace as some of them slowly floated down from above, hanging from threads that occasionally shimmered in the weak, fluorescent light.

All of a sudden a yearning trumpet sounded loudly through the forest and drove terror into the horrified Teladi's forehead ridges; he began to tremble, but he continued his march with determination. The answer to the fanfare came from close range; it was no less yearning and powerful than the original call. Somewhere across to the right, not too far from Nopileos, a green light gleamed through the forest, just visible from the corner of his eye. Didn't it also smell like burning? He tried to concentrate on something else. He had learned a song from Elena on one of their shared adventures, an ancient lullaby from her home planet, that was so beautiful that the Argon sang it in the *Community of Planets* for many hundreds of years. Alone, to hear the reassuring sound of his own voice, he began to recite the first couple of verses of the piece as far as he could remember. But Teladian voices didn't lend themselves to singing! After some growled attempts at reconstructing the melody of the Stardust Symphony, he gave it up.

He was *hungry*! But there was nothing to eat. He probably couldn't digest anything that grew and lived in the jungle anyway. It was a truism that any species could only safely enjoy what sprouted naturally on their respective home planet or what they artificially created specifically for their own needs. All attempts to eat something else usually ended in moderate to severe cases of poisoning, as the organism couldn't do anything useful with the alien proteins and absorbed them incorrectly.

The Teladi was torn away from the steady routine of his footsteps and momentarily pushed his hunger-fueled deliberations aside. Something had changed! He stopped and instinctively raised his snout to take in the scent with wide nostrils. It smelled different than before! The dull forest smell revealed a new place, and it was not the smell of a smoldering fire! His saurian nose twitched as a fresh breeze drew by. Where was the dragonfly? He looked around, but couldn't spot the animal anywhere. It was no matter, the refreshing breeze came unmistakably from ahead and became more intense as he headed in that direction. His steps became faster and faster; fatigue, fear, and hunger were all but forgotten. Finally, he broke through the last bush and pushed aside one last fern frond.

Nopileos stepped out into an open area that was not a clearing, but the bank of a huge lake whose calm waves gently lapped against an embankment that seemed artificial at first sight. As Nopileos approached the water, he saw that the embankment was made from several strata of eroded but naturally grown shale rock that stretched several Teladian lengths from the shore to the water. Over the lake calmly stood two pale moons, one of them as a full disc, the other waning. For a moment he wondered how this effect was achieved and whether or not the third satellite would also appear during the night. But then he discovered the dragonfly sitting on one of the tree trunks jutting out from the shore and dipping its sucking stinger into the water. What a great idea! Nopileos was not just hungry, but also extremely thirsty! Although... He could not recognize the color of the water at night, but all the bodies of waters on Nif-Nakh were red, even the oceans. This lake was definitely many times larger than the one he'd crash landed in two tazuras ago, but would make no difference in regard to its color. Water was the same everywhere, but the red suspended material, whether organic or mineral, could be poisonous to a Teladi. But without the condenser, he had no real choice than to see what happened. So he went down to the shore, waded into the water up to his neck, and took a cautious sip. The water tasted bitter, but not unpleasant. For safety's sake, he wanted to drink only a little, just enough to assuage his thirst. Gurgling, he let the cool liquid, which also numbed hunger a bit, run down his throat. He looked up. In the space of the few mizuras since he spotted the lake, the two moons had moved a considerable distance, both at different speeds, but without changing their full or waning status. Odd.

Oh, and there—his eyes straining to try to penetrate the dimly moonlit night—somewhere ahead, far out on the lake, near the nightly horizon, he spotted dark contours that blocked the actual horizon. Could that actually be an island?

Nopileos slipped onto his back and rocked gently with the little waves to watch the moons in their paths. The water felt pleasantly cool on his scales. The hunger vanished. The overused limbs didn't hurt anymore...

... suddenly it was pitch black. The moons had set. He opened his eyes wide. Even the dragonfly appeared to have taken off. He couldn't find its pulsing light anywhere. He had fallen asleep for some time, rocked to sleep by the calming motion of the water. Before Nopileos was fully awake yet, bursting noises sounded out. Something crashed loudly and with brute force through the border of the jungle, which ended only a few lengths from the lake's shore. The Teladi suppressed a frightened sound as the landscape was bathed in a sickly green light. One of the massive jungle dragons had apparently

lowered itself to the banks from the air only a moment ago, and now used its bent feeding tail to pull on a thin tree trunk which shook and cracked in an alarming fashion. Another trunk had already been knocked over by the animal. The beast glowed supernaturally and attacked the jungle with a fury as if it wanted to plow down the entire forest.

Out on the water, the terrified Teladi, with his head now just sticking out of the water as far as his eyes, had not yet been noticed by the animal. Nopileos didn't feel the slightest need to draw attention. He made a cautious turn to retreat farther out onto the lake, but something streaked past just under his body and washed him in a brief but powerful underwater wave. "Yellow salamander pie—" the startled Teladi cursed, pausing in the middle of the word. The half-finished curse carried audibly, far across the lake.

CHAPTER 7

If truth be a crimson cloud, who is able to bend it?

**Lar Menelaus,
Ambassador of the Queendom**

When the *AP Nikkonofune* lifted off from the airfield on the ICSCS tower to make its way to Seizewell, Elena couldn't shake off the feeling that she had missed something important. The conference had ended without Somancklitansvt responding to the Boron objection, and nobody—not even Senator Steen-Hilmanson—seemed to see a reason to ask for a debriefing. If you looked at it carefully, the entire extraordinary meeting had been nothing but a farce that was intended to prevent a possible, future loss of face for the Pontifex. But what role did the Boron play in this story? The aquatic creatures had been genuinely indignant over Somancklitansvt's proposal; to Elena that was beyond question. She was almost certain that something fundamental, but very subtle, must have escaped her. Perhaps she simply lacked the deeper background knowledge about the relationships in the *Community of Planets*.

The last layers of the atmosphere flickered past the cockpit and the sky first turned dark blue, then black. Stars appeared and grew into wonderful, alien constellations. On the gravidar, a tiny, washed-out spot appeared, which held parallel to the *AP Nikkonofune*.

Elena sighed. "Niji, that shadow blip is back again on the gravidar. Can you identify it? Is there a malfunction?" The onboard computer responded in the negative to both. "All right. Then recalibrate the gravidar." Niji did as he was told, and the ghostly signal disappeared. "We'll just have to live with this disruption, eh, Niji?"

"I can ascertain no disruption, Major Kho," the onboard computer insisted. Elena shook her head and remained silent.

The next three tazuras were completely uneventful, and the Earth astronaut felt into a dull, bleak rut which greatly affected her mood. It wasn't until the fourth tazura that the temporary end of her lonely journey became apparent. Elena didn't even want to think about having to go all the way back to Argon Prime.

"Gate transit in six minutes," Niji's friendly voice pressed into her musings. Diffuse light shimmered through her eyelids. She blinked and slid down to the floor from her narrow but comfortable upper bunk, where she grabbed her USC flight jumpsuit.

“Well finally,” she murmured in the narrow passage to the cockpit, but then fell silent again as she sat down in the pilot’s chair. For Kyle, extended, lonely flights through outer space might be ideal; she, on the other hand, did not have the psychic constitution to withstand this burden over long periods of time.

Teladi Gain was the solar system that the *AP Nikkonofune* was about to leave. Elena remembered selling the coordinates of Ianamus Zura to a pretty confused but extremely ecstatic Teladi at the local trading station some time back. He had, without any effort on her part, raised his offer from the original five credits to 5,000, and with that, of course, had won the contract. Elena smiled. At the time there had been no means of reaching the legend-shrouded birth planet of the Teladi. Since then, however, the jumpgate routes had mysteriously changed, and suddenly the path to the homeworld of the saurian beings—believed lost for hundreds of jazuras—was open again, which, understandably enough, had caused the Teladi a great deal of excitement.

Elena checked all the important instruments with a routine glance, and looked at the rapidly approaching jumpgate. Visible only as a small hoop in the far distance, bathed in a sea of stars, it grew ever larger, until it finally filled almost the entire field of view, majestic and timeless. No one knew who was responsible for the construction of the stargates. All that was certain was that some of them were already several million jazuras old, and yet others only a few hundred. At the time, humankind itself had built only two jumpgates before discovering that the known galaxy was simply teeming with alien jumpgates; after that, further building of their own gates was halted, and the already existing, extraterrestrial ones were used.

The gate’s dimensional anchors captured the *AP Nikkonofune*. Blue sparkles began to twitch over the cantilevers on either side of the gate. They appeared to be electrical discharges, but were actually energy phenomena in the realm of singularity physics. The sparkles developed into branching sparks and finally into blue-white flashes that slowly built up into an energetic maelstrom in the middle of the jumpgate. In contrast to the Earth’s jumpdrive, the use of which was always associated with a certain dizziness, Elena felt no physical effect as her ship reached and broke through the artificial black hole’s rotating event horizon. The passage itself only took up a few picosezuras and could not be perceived by living beings due to its unprecedented briefness. But that certainly didn’t prevent the Three-eyes from absolutely insisting that they were capable of doing so.

The effects immediately before and after the space jump required a few sezuras, then left the spacecraft in the area of effect of the jumpfield, which immediately collapsed in upon itself. The procedure was always the same, each time equally reliable, always fascinating and dizzying at the same time. After a few moments, the gravidar finished its internal recalibrations and indicated the conditions of the space sector which had long been named “Seizewell.” Seizewell was commonly known as the home system of the Teladi. Only the fewest residents knew, however, that Seizewell was at best the saurians’ second home, and it would remain that way forever.

The gravidar identified two of the three jumpgates in the sector; the third was currently behind the sun from Elena’s position and was not visible to the naked eye or by gravidar. Only a handful of the many

stations that made their way around the central star or its planets, according to the database, could be seen from here. Elena's goal was located on one of these few, so Niji had the *AP Nikkonofune* set course for the station which bore the name Highest Price. As the ship picked up speed, a viewfield lit up above the console. The image of a green-scaled Teladi in the uniform of the Teladi merchant marines became visible. He possessed a pair of unusually piercing, orange-colored eyes, which by their color suggested middle age.

"This is Iomelaris Mohandeles Disamolos IX, Sector Control of Seizewell. Identify yourself, Argon." Disamolos spoke in that sharp, aggressive tone that the lizards adopted when they used the trade language of the *Community*.

"Free ship *AP Nikkonofune*, I am Elena Kho, major of the USC, sector Earth. The CEO is expecting me." She almost added "I hope, at least," but refrained at the last moment. Only a few Teladi possessed a sense of irony. With a finger movement, Elena ordered Niji, her onboard computer, to transmit her authorization code to the control ship.

The Teladi briefly focused his attention on something outside the camera's field of view, then said with a hissing accent, "Very good, Elenalassss Kho, you're already exsspected." Follow my ssssship!"

"Is there a craft anywhere near here? Elena asked the onboard computer as she snapped away the video image of the Teladi with her thumb and forefinger.

"*Hai*, yes sir, there is, Major Kho," Niji answered eagerly. "I have located the source of the signal, and I am already following the Teladi ship." Without being asked, the computer projected an orientation guide onto the cockpit screen, so that with its help Elena could finally recognize a point far ahead no bigger than the stars. At this distance, the Teladi shuttle distinguished itself from the background stars only through its nonlinear motion. However, within the following mizuras Niji brought the *AP Nikkonofune* closer to the alien spaceship until the tiny point finally took shape for Elena. Nevertheless, the onboard computer kept such a large distance from the Teladi cruiser that Elena could not make out details at any point in time.

The video screen reappeared something over twenty mizuras later and showed Disamolos's waxy, saurian snout. "Oh valuable Elena Kho, we are going back to our sentry point and wish you good profits along your way!"

"Profit! And thank you!" Elena replied. The picture went out. The engines of the Teladi ship flared visibly as the spacecraft reversed and moved away. Not far ahead, the sluggish Ferris wheel of the Teladi trading post was already emerging against the flaming solar disk. Shortly thereafter, the station's space traffic control signaled the *AP Nikkonofune* and assigned a landing corridor and a permanent landing bay—of course with especially favorable prices, as Elena was ultimately there by invitation of Company management.

The interior of the landing area that lead up many ship lengths was lit in the usual pale, bright green light which the saurians felt was distinctive. Elena waited for the landing carousel to push her ship to

its designated final position and the supply cables were connected. She rose from the pilot's chair and cast a curious glance around her: the landing deck was completely occupied. There were several of the strangely shaped, almost flightless-looking, Boron-type shuttles, an Argon minishuttle of an unknown class, as well as—Elena's breath caught in shock.

There outside stood the Nyana's Fortune!

Nopileos's spaceship, gleaming silver-green, egg-shaped and in its full height of 25 meters! Elena opened her eyes wide and swallowed hard; she only closed her mouth again after a few seuras. A strange feeling took over her and made her feel hot. Suddenly she was in a hurry to get into the airlock. The glass landing tunnel lift that took her to the top of the landing area couldn't move fast enough for her. In her hurried run, she almost fell into the transparent gangway, where her gaze extended almost 100 meters down to the parked shuttles. Two more transparent bulkheads... she saw a couple blurry figures waiting for her behind them. The last door opened.

Elena jumped out into the trading station's corridor. A young, slightly plump Argon with a green bun smiled at her and two lizards hissed, probably kindly, in greeting. One of them was old and red-eyed—certainly CEO Isemados. But Elena only had eyes for the smaller of the two Teladi. His almost cateye-yellow irises and the still rather narrow hexagons of his pale green scale armor betrayed that he was still very young. The Argon with the bun said something and held out a hand toward Elena to greet her, but the spacefarer from Earth ignored her.

“Nopileossssss!” she shouted instead, and stormed the young Teladi, contrary to every protocol, refraining from hugging him at the last moment. Instead, when she was in front of the saurian she dropped to her knees with such vehemence that she slid further forward. The Teladi toddled back a step. “Man, Nopi! Am I glad to see you... I knew that was the *Nyana* down there! We all thought you were dead! How long have you been back here? Why didn't you message? How did you—how is it you—? I just can't believe it!” The words just spilled out of her.

The thoroughly confused-looking Teladi struggled for an answer and finally interrupted Elena's flow of speech by turning his palms up in the Teladi equivalent of a shrug and spreading his claws so that the swim webs became visible. “I am not Nopileos!” he said. “I am Isemados Sibasomos Sissandras IV, Nopileos's egg-brother!”

Elena looked at the young Teladi in disbelief for a few moments. Then she felt her face heat up. She scrambled to her feet and stared at Sissandras strangely. “Excuse me,” she stuttered with red cheeks. She bowed briefly and turned to the CEO, who watched the incident with stunned looks. “I apologize profusely, he really looks confusingly similar to Nopileos!” Elena felt like a fool. She should have known! The direct breeding lines of the Teladi were practically genetic clones, biologically the offspring corresponded almost exactly with their egg-elders.

“Tshhhh!” hissed the CEO, now visibly embarrassed. “Well, they are the same in a manner of ssspeaking, one egg from another. But that has... reasons. And tshhh, the yacht out there looks very

similar to the missing *Nyana's Fortune*. Her name is *Nividium Dreams*. The ship originates from the same clutch." He stopped and looked at the Argon to his left for help.

"Welcome aboard the trading station Highest Price," she said with a charming smile. "My name is Gaseli Hort. I am a Teladish interpreter." She shook Elena's hand. "Do not worry, Kho-san, I am still regularly embarrassed to confuse one Teladi for another. And after serving the Company for six years." She laughed brightly and looked unselfconsciously at the Teladi, who both nodded imperceptibly.

Elena immediately noticed that Gaseli Hort was more than just an interpreter. CEO Isemados was visibly relieved that the embarrassing situation had been diffused for him. Possibly over the course of time the sympathetic woman had taken on the role of secretary for him. Surely the outstanding, Neo-Ancient-Japanese-speaking Teladi rarely needed a translator. Most likely, Elena suspected, the actual capabilities of the Argon were mainly needed when it came to legally binding contracts between the Teladi Company and the Argon.

"Major Elena Kho," CEO Isemados now put in a word, "you will surely wish to rest after the long journey. I have specially arranged a cabin for you according to Argon customs, with a moist washing facility and a soft sleeping bench.

Elena listened to herself. Technically speaking, she wanted to do anything but rest! The many tazuras on board the *AP Nikkonofune* had significantly impacted her morale. But on the other hand she didn't want to snub the saurian and his well-meaning gesture. "Thank you very much," she replied, "that's very accommodating of you."

The head manager of the Teladi Company shook his ears in satisfaction. "Wonderful. Then I would like the pleasure of receiving you at an informational dinner in one-quarter tazura. By that time our other veritable guestsss will have also arrived.

"Veritable guests?" Elena echoed in surprise.

"*Hai!* You will enjoy meeting them and speaking with them. You will see!"

"I'll take you to your quarters, Elena-san," Gaseli Hort said kindly. The interpreter must have interpreted Elena's confused expression correctly, for she added, "And your questions will be resolved later. Follow me."

As Elena entered the conference hall four stazuras later, she felt wonderfully relaxed and rested. Although her quarters had some strange peculiarities, such as the inexplicable way the switches and controls were mounted next to the floor. But after a wozura aboard the cramped *AP Nikkonofune*, the station's cabin seemed pleasantly, generously proportioned. Even her inner balance was mostly restored, and she felt strong curiosity toward what was to come, coupled with an almost euphoric drive.

She paused for a moment and looked around the great hall in wonderment. The conference room was a tube some eight meters wide and certainly over fifteen meters long, with a rounded, dark marbled table in the middle which stretched the entire length of the room. The walls were in the usual pale green and

decorated with some typical Teladi images depicting tiny slugs on giant dice, as well as a bird's eye view of colorful swamp landscapes and archipelagos. Elena didn't want to associate these unbelievably kitschy pictures with the notoriously completely unsentimental, maniacally greedy Teladi; her lips twisted into a slight grin as she continued to move her eyes. The ceiling of the room had a window that stretched its entire length, allowing an unobstructed view of the hub of the rotating trading station. The holographic row of lights that marked the landing approach route flickered dull red: at the moment there was no ship on approach.

On the far wall of the conference room, a door opened. Elena stood rooted to the spot as two unlikely beings entered the room. They were hardly larger than small human children; their skin was pale blue. Four sturdy main tentacles grew from the torso of these remarkable creatures, and a number of thinner arms or antennae washed around them as though caught in an invisible current. The most remarkable feature of the creatures, however, was certainly their faces, dominated by giant, childlike saucer eyes as well as a long, trunk-like muzzle.

"Borons!" Elena stated, astonished.

CEO Isemados, already sitting on a Teladian standing bench in a conference room, looked up at her as though he doubted her sanity, but said nothing. Instead, with a motion of his claws and a crooked head, he motioned for her to sit on the opposite side of the table. Elena hesitated.

"I wassss told, that you already know each other," the CEO rose to speak. "At least," he backpedaled when he saw Elena's face, "know our guestsss from the Kingdom End, Elena Kho."

Elena thought hard. She did not know any Borons personally. But which Borons did she know? The answer was, of course, probably everyone. The aquatic beings were reputed to always be well-informed about the matters of their peers.

At that moment the interpreter Gaseli Hort entered the hall and cordially welcomed all present. "First of all," she said eloquently to Elena, "let me introduce you to our guests." She looked at the old Teladi with an inquiring, sidelong glance.

"Oh, but I insist," he responded, answering the unspoken question.

"This is is the venerable and, uh..." said Gaseli Hort and paused for a moment, as if not quite sure about what she was yet to say, "...and funny Bala Gi," she continued with emphasis, "the Minister for Advanced Ethics and Intra- and Interspecies Affairs. Her post is equivalent to that of a Senator for Foreign Affairs.

"Oh, brave, funny Ele Na from the distant planet Earth," the Boron cheeped. Elena watched in fascination as the mouth at the bottom of the trunk made movements that did not match the sounds it was making. The Boron's voice sparkled crystal clear and sounded a little like a small girl who had just been crying. Occasionally the words were interrupted by a series of clicks or individual tsks. "Please pardon and forgive us that on Hewa we did not mention our intention and desire to taste with you, to speak and discuss, to praise you and meet you.

Elena bowed. “Oh—don’t worry. I was only marginally surprised and there was almost no trouble getting ready for this course of action.” If the Borons realized her slightly ironic tone or not, they kept it hidden.

“And here we have Nola Hi, scientific ethicist and adviser to the House of Representatives,” Gaseli Hort introduced the second Boron.

“Peace and happiness, Ele Na,” he intoned in a similar yet a fifth higher pitch than Bala Gi. “As one hears, reads, and tastes, shall your Earth be a place of wonderful, refreshing, enchanting, blue, deep, glorious, cheerful oceans! I would gladly accompany you there on a future day’s excursion and swim alongside you!”

“Thank you very much! If ever there is a way back to Earth, then I will gladly revisit this offer.” The Boron looked at Elena with his crystal clear eyes and made an unintelligible series of clicks as he swam toward her. Elena looked over, irritated for a sezura, until she realized what was bothering her about the sight: the many-membered beings wore no environmental suits! Tentacles, antennae, and feelers floated freely around the slender, pale-blue bodies that moved with almost supernatural elegance and grace, as if they were in their ancestral environment.

Gaseli Hort followed Elena’s gaze. “Oh, that...” she said. “Look here!” The interpreter, whose green hair at this half-tazura was not up in a bun, but instead fell sleekly down her back, walked over to the Borons, who were trying to squeeze behind the standing benches. She extended her index finger and touched an invisible surface that seemed to extend across the width of the room and reached from the ceiling to the floor. It formed small, concentric rings along a vertical plane. As it turned out, the entire conference hall was divided into two equal halves by an invisible energy field. On the Boron side, dense liquid filled the room. On Elena’s side, breathable atmosphere. Elena was not badly surprised; although she saw through the technique, she was impressed by the idea. The many decazuras of coexistence by the peoples of the *Community of Planets* probably had made the engineers quite inventive in terms of the simplification of trade and communication between different species.

Gaseli Hort sat down to the left of the CEO. “The Teladi could negotiate without difficulty on the water side,” she explained earnestly. “However, they prefer the dry side because they find it difficult to speak the trading language underwater.

Elena nodded. For a sezura, she considered moving over to the edge of the table next to CEO Isemados, but refrained for reasons of protocol. As an ambassador of Earth—even if only unofficially—such a thing simply wasn’t done! Instead, she demurely circled around the long end of the conference table and sat down properly in the spot opposite from the CEO. The Teladian standing benches were not very comfortable, but halfway acceptable to humans; the Borons, on the other hand, seemed to have it less easy.

“Oh, reverend minister of the Boron Queendom, I am pleassssed to welcome you this quarter-tazura,” interjected the CEO with a sharp hiss. The calm, almost invisible wall of water was only half an arm’s

length from his snout. “The talks that we have recently held together promise rich profit and long-term cooperation that will benefit our peoples,” he continued. Isemados turned to Elena. “To you, venerated Argon Elena Kho from sector Earth, I would like to thank you for accepting the invitation from the Company management.”

Elena nodded. “It is an honor for me to be here, CEO Ssuphandros Mikimades Isemados,” she said. “I would like to tell you about the fate of your grandson, Isemados Sibasomos Nopileos, without whose selfless commitment I probably wouldn’t be here today.” The Teladi hissed softly. “Of course, it would be nice if Nopileos’s egg-brother Sissandras could also be present for my report,” Elena added and looked into the Teladi’s eyes, which glowed like red coals in their sockets. The saurian looked far from old. The longer Elena watched the CEO, the more the impression grew on her that a hot, youthful fire was burning inside him. She clasped her hands on the tabletop and glanced over at the Borons, who had been silent up until now.

“Of course, Elena Kho,” the CEO replied. “In this regard, you will certainly be interested to hear that my grandson Isemados Sibasomos Nopileos IV is in all likelihood in the best of health!”

“What?” Elena cried and jumped up. “Could you please say that again?” She leaned both arms on the table and looked at the CEO of the Teladi Company with her mouth open and her eyes wide. The scaly ridge on the saurian’s head stirred, as if it wanted to straighten.

“Well, we received a messenger drone from the *Nyana’s Fortune* onboard computer some weeks ago,” the CEO began.

“From Inanisas?” Elena interjected.

“Inanias,” Isemados corrected, “that is right! The ship suffered a collision, that my grandson carelessly caused...” he paused, making a slightly indignant face as though he had just spilled a secret, then continued. “Pardon me, Major Elena Kho-san, please let me reassure you that of course I see a great profit in the fact that Nopileos saved your life with this measure...”

“Thank you very much. And then what happened?” Elena shouted immediately. Nopileos survived the crash with the Split Cho t’Nnt’s atmospheric fighter? She remembered only her dismay when the *Nyana’s Fortune* plunged to the surface, burning.

“Shhht! Well,” Isemados continued, “the yacht survived the incident, the accident... well, the events with apparently moderate damage. My grandson was evacuated from the ship in time by the automatic rescue system. After that, whether or not the ship survived the consequent crash landing, we unfortunately have no further information, because this messenger drone was the last sign of life we have received from the yacht’s onboard computer.

“And where is Nopileos now?” Elena asked the obvious question.

“That we do not know quite so precisely,” the saurian replied. “Somewhere on the surface of Nif-Nakh, the jungle planet of the Split.”

Elena pinched the bridge of her nose. “How long have you know that?” she demanded.

The CEO shook his head. “For about seven wozuras, though we—”

“And in all this time you haven’t recovered Nopileos from the planet?” Elena interrupted sharply.

The CEO was silent for several seconds and turned his claws upward. He threw a side glance at Gaseli Hort. The interpreter sat at her seat with slumped shoulders and a strained expression, and tried to make herself as small as possible in the face of the looming altercation.

“What do you sssuppose, Elena Kho, tssssh, Argon ssstarwarrior from ssssector Earth? The Teladi Company cannot sssimply fly to the adminissstrative planet of the Patriarch of Chhhin and turn the jungle inssside out!”

“But there must be some way to—” Elena stopped as Bala Gi, the Boron minister, gave a long series of resounding clicking sounds to draw everyone’s attention. With success: all faces immediately turned to the pale-blue, many-membered creature. The Boron drifted through the colorless fluid to the other side of the conference hall and floated a bit higher, and with a gentle rudder movement, she hovered a half meter above the tabletop.

“Ele Na, furious, funny Earth inhabitant! I understand and taste that you painfully miss and feel the absence of your green, profit-oriented friend Nopileos, the saurian.” Elena grew a shade paler. The Boron’s mother of pearl colored eyes gave the impression that she could see through and into everything—even her thoughts. Bala Gi continued. “So hear me and listen to me. It is a happy, pleasant accident and circumstance that you are here at this point in time. There is actually a way to rescue your friend, the comical, scaly cheapskate Nopileos!”

“And how?” asked Elena, who out of the corner of her eye saw that Gaseli Hort embarrassedly slide around on her standing bench, as if the expression “scaly cheapskate” was disagreeable to her. “And what exactly do you mean by *accident*?” Gaseli became still a bit smaller.

Nola Hi, the scientific ethicist, left his bench and floated higher where he joined Bala Gi. “Well, we have helped and expedited this accident, that we cannot deny and put into question. But listen to me and use your large, hairy ears, oh Ele Na. Onboard the ship, the Yacht, the *Nyana’s Fortune*, something is located that we desperately need and require to prevent and avert a severe calamity.”

Elena looked uncomprehendingly at the pale-blue creature. “Onboard the *Nyana’s Fortune*? But what? And what calamity?”

Nola Hi’s feelers industriously fanned his head, and his great, dark eyes looked as deep and serious as those of a child. “Yes—and yes,” he answered. “The information and data of the joyful Ancient Ones!”

But of course! Now Elena remembered Nopileos’s story: shortly after the *USC Getsu Fune* emergency splashed down on Argon Prime, her young saurian friend was elsewhere in his ship when he had an encounter with the Sohnen, the ambassadors to the Ancient Ones. The onboard computer’s memory

banks were filled to the very limits of their capacity with data; Nopileos was not willing to give this information over to scientists or governments to decode.

Bala Gi came very close to the dividing line between water and air. Nola Hi followed her. “We, the Boron Queendom, have already met the Ancient Ones many equatorial streams, jazuras, and suns ago,” she revealed, clicking and singing. Elena’s eyes widened in surprise; so far she had assumed that the Ancient Ones had earned the status of fairy tales or legends in the *Community of Planets*. But what the Borons now began to explain in their usual, cumbersome manner, left no doubt that the meek aquatic beings knew much, much more than the rest of the *Community*: each of the nine species world receive a message from the Ancient Ones, or had already received it, like the Boron and the two splinter factions of the Teladi. But a complete sense of the message would only be achieved if all peoples worked together peacefully and transmitted the data to make it available to all. The Sohnen evidently placed great importance on the Xenon not being completely destroyed; this coincided with the wishes of the Boron, who would never commit genocide, even toward their worst enemies.

“But the Xenon are just machines,” Elena protested. The Terraformers—better known in this part of space by the name Xenon—were a plague that had unintentionally originated on Earth long ago. The blue planet had paid for it bitterly, and the history of the *Community of Planets* had also been shaped by the Terraformers more than by anything else.

“Oh, Ele Na!” Nola Hi cried excitedly. His antennae rippled like a storm wind. “They are cold machines, robots, that is true. But they live and think, have an awareness of themselves and know each other, the way you know yourself and we know ourselves.”

The Borons excitedly waived their four main tentacles. “Listen to me and use your fun, hairy ears, oh Elena Na, starwarrior!” Nola Hi sang. “There will be horrible fights and appalling battles!” Bala Gi cried. “The crazy Three-eyes and the Split are forming together at this moment and will soon threaten, assail, and attack the second-to-last Xenon CPU!”

“I know—I just attended Somancklitansvt’s announcement on Hewa, have you forgotten already? And now the Queendom would like to do something against it?”

“Yes—and yes,” the minster affirmed.

“Will Argon Prime support you?”

There was a small pause, as if the two Borons had to think about the question first. Argon Prime and the Queendom had been close allies for a long time; but whether the Argon government would put the current state of peace on the line to save the Xenon was more than questionable. After all, until recently the Argon had bitterly fought the Xenon. Elena blinked; it seemed as if the hitherto clear water in which the Borons swam had suddenly clouded. A gossamer, purple halo spread around Bala Gi and Nola Hi.

“No, negative,” the minister answered sadly. “Argon Prime will not officially support us in this matter and also will not be of help to us. But we have a plan! Taste and hear!”

The Boron Royal House, which was only nominally a matriarchal monarchy, had already agreed before the meeting to Nola Hi's proposal to declare two of the "New Sectors" assigned to the Queendom as a refuge for the remaining Xenon. After the two Central Processing Units and their escort ships had passed the jumpgate, they wanted to send a research ship after them and deactivate the jump gate from the outside after its passage.

But herein lay the exact problem: nobody could so easily deactivate a jumpgate! Sure, with the strongest weapons you could destroy it. But turning it on and off again when needed was simply impossible. Nobody knew how the technology of the ancient gates worked, and so far they had withstood every investigation.

"We are certain and firmly believe," concluded the scientific ethicist, "that the key to the technology of the world portals lies in the data of the funny Ancient Ones, is hidden and coded therein."

Elena's head buzzed. She slowly realized what this had to do with Nopileos—and so ultimately with her. She stroked her hair and exhaled deeply. "So somebody has to fly to Nif-Nakh to find Nopileos and the *Nyana's Fortune* there."

"Yes—and yes!"

"And then download the Ancient One's data from the onboard computer," Elena continued, "and hope that they, along with the data that you already have, will produce some kind of operating manual for stargates..."

"We would happily hope so, if we did not already know and were certain!"

"And then someone has to fly to your Xenon refuge and pull the plug out of the gate after the mindship is through and before the Paranids can follow it."

Nola Hi's trunk pulled into a kind of grim. "*Hai!*"

"Insanity!"

A long silence followed. CEO Isemados and Gaseli Hort gave Elena a breathless look, as if expecting something in particular from her. The purple cloud in the Borons' environmental area visibly condensed, the little tentacles of the aquatic creatures fluttered hectically. Gradually it dawned on Elena what they wanted from her. Actually, it was obvious—one thing led to another and everything fit.

"Therefore *I* should do it?"

"Oh, Ele Na, aesthetic starwarrior, fluffy Earth inhabitant, we are so happy, thrilled, and glad that you will help us, work with us, and volunteer and offer your valued, precious, and irreplaceable participation!" Bala Gi hastily cried. She almost swam through the water's edge in her exuberance, but Nola Hi reached out a tentacle at the last moment and stopped her.

Elena sighed. It made no sense to argue—the most important thing was to find Nopileos, now that she knew he was still alive. “I’ll need help,” she said instead, and glanced back and forth between the exited Borons and the Teladi.

“Your dear acquaintance, friend, and business partner Ferd Harling, the infobroker from Ringo’s Moon, is already informed and knows what he needs to know—but not more! He will be on your side and help you with the planning.”

So it seemed they had already thought of everything. And that, of course, meant that Elena’s meeting with the Borons was not quite as random as they wanted her to believe. The game was now clear: the Borons wanted to recover the message of the Ancient Ones and also protect the Xenon. The CEO of the Teladi also wanted the message, and in addition he wanted his grandson Nopileos back. And neither one nor the other wanted to get their tentacles or claws dirty.

Funny little people, thought Elena.

CHAPTER 8

It is almost a bit embarrassing to me, but it must be said once: there are no space flies! Like so many modern myths, this legend also comes from the mythical creatures of the world view of the Split. In fact, the 'space fly myth' is based on an aggressive, gigantic insect from the planet Nif-Nakh: the ghok.

Myths 19:09: Grzimek,

Book of Truth

The jungle beast on the shore looked up and stared out across the water, as if it could pierce the darkness with only its own glow. Then it let go of the tree and let loose a mighty fanfare. Nopileos immediately made himself heavy and let himself sink below the surface of the water. Better to go down to this unknown thing that didn't fluoresce than to be gobbled up by the jungle dragon!

The lake was deep and dark. As many light-insects whirred around in the nighttime jungle, there was just as little light here in the water. Nopileos shuddered at the thought of what exactly might be looking up at him from the depths of the cool water at that moment, with a lust for murder in its eyes. But his thoughts quickly turned to other—although not necessarily more enjoyable—concerns, for after a few sezas a wavering spot of light approached above the water's surface. The jungle beast had decided to more closely examine the noise that had distracted it from its destructive work. Nopileos let himself sink deeper and began to paddle backwards, further out into the open lake. The dragon's halo of light followed him, but made no attempt to dive into the water. *Egg be praised*, thought Nopileos. If the animal could also dive, it would've been all over for him. As agile as the Teladi might be in the water, they didn't master the element with the deadly precision of highly specialized creatures. The jungle dragon, however, lost interest after a short time. The green spot of light above the water's surface went away, became smaller, and returned to the shore. Maybe the nasty beast couldn't cope with water. Perhaps they couldn't keep their massive bodies in the air long enough to cross a large lake. And potentially, one could hope, it was for just that reason that they didn't exist on the giant island that Nopileos had earlier seen the contours of near the middle of the gigantic lake. He hissed with renewed courage. A few bubbles left his muzzle and started their upward, tumbling climb.

He thrust these thoughts aside for now, because the shadow of the island in front of him rapidly grew to looming proportions and the water's depth fell noticeably. In the immediate vicinity of the shore, he met another of the large creatures of the lake. The creatures were harmless; at least they hadn't approached him with threatening intent. Or maybe they just had a good sense for the kind of nourishment that was good for them. Teladi saurians were definitely not on their menu!

Shortly thereafter, his clawed feet met the ground. He waded up the last few lengths until the water lay behind him. The bank was made of fine, light-colored sand, which felt velvety under his claws and tickled pleasantly between his toes.

In the meantime, the moons had risen again and plunged everything in a wan light. Nopileos suspected that the satellites were actually much closer than they seemed, and therefore circled the planet quickly and appeared in the sky several times in the same night. At the same time, they seemed to have a strange declension to the ecliptic plane, which might account for their extraordinary phases. Nopileos turned his claws up. He looked around. Vegetation began a few lengths from the beach. At first it seemed as though it was no different from the mainland, but then he noticed that it was not the usual, thin jungle giants that rose aloft, but smaller trees with thick trunks, low-hanging branches, and large, teardrop-shaped leaves. In between were masses of ferns, tall grasses, and bushes. The island was completely quiet. There were no trumpeting beasts or other noises except for the soft gurgling of the water behind him and the whisper of a calm breeze that blew to and fro through the treetops. When Nopileos listened intently, he could hear the sounds of the jungle sounding in the far distance across the lake. He didn't know what to expect here, but whatever it was, it couldn't get any worse than over there on the mainland. He searched for a spot near the beginning vegetation, pawing the soft sand with his claws, and broke off some fronds which he laid over it. Then he pulled himself into the slight hollow, exhausted, adjusted the fern fronds over himself, closed his eyes, and immediately fell asleep.

A steady stream of runny mud slid down to the blinking Teladi. His makeshift sleeping niche was already full of water, and more and more fell down from above in long threads and tapped on the thin roof of fern fronds. It was pouring rain, and it was daylight and warm. Nopileos wiped his claws over his muzzle, which had lain in the mud sideways. Water and mud made little difference to him, even if civilized saurians in this modern age were seldom at the mercy of the forces of nature. He thought for a moment whether or not he should close his eyes and doze a while longer. But a sound that penetrated the clapping of the raindrops opened his eyes wide. There was a voice nearby! No jungle beast, no animal, no hallucination, but a harsh voice that spoke in a strange dialect.

"Yadmanthrat!" cried someone Nopileos couldn't see from the shallow depression of his sleeping hollow. He didn't dare move. The Teladi did not know what the word meant, but the sound and color of the voice could only mean one thing: whoever was speaking had to be a Split! What, by yolk, were the Split doing here on this insignificant island on the breeding canal of the world? As the footstep sounds splashed away from him, he dared to shift position to get a better angle.

There were paired up. The one, a squat-looking Split, about the size of an average Argon and probably male, held in his right hand a wooden spear on which an odd-looking fish wriggled. Apparently the animal had just been impaled. Nopileos's forehead paled. The second Split was bigger, but much lankier than the other. A female? The one with the spear made a gesture with his free hand and spread a few fingers at a strange angle. While Nopileos knew that the Split used a sign language with hundreds

of signs to emphasize their spoken speech, he could not of course interpret the hand signals. The Split woman made a croaking noise that Nopileos would have interpreted as a laugh had he not known better. Split never laughed. Their humor didn't go beyond cruel schadenfreude!

Nopileos was sure that something was not entirely right with the two Split. There was something about them that bothered him, but he couldn't make out what it was. He waited. Shortly thereafter, the two disappeared between the bushes and disappeared from his sight. Nopileos remained still for a while, but when the Split did not reappear even after half an inzura, he pushed the dripping wet ferns he had used to cover himself through the previous night and cautiously rose from the mud pit his sleeping hollow had transformed into. He padded over to where he had seen the Split stand. A few half-faded footprints were the only thing that confirmed their presence, but it was proof enough that he wasn't hallucinating. Nopileos stopped down and smoothed the pits flat with a claw. His claws left a pattern of parallel stripes, which were immediately smoothed again by the rain and running water.

Something moved at the edge of his peripheral vision. He turned around jerkily, but was relieved to find that it was merely a palm-sized creature with shiny scales which was working its way out of the red lake water and onto the beach. It had short, stubby legs and looked like a deformed tank fish. It crawled clumsily after a small crab that came out of the water on eight legs and nimbly crawled up onto the sandy beach. The stubby legs of its pursuer were unsuited for land movement, and after some sezuras the tank animal turned around and slipped back into the water. Nopileos wondered how the lungfish had intended to capture his nimble prey. He straightened up again. The Split showing up had upset him, but he was strangely happy over their appearance rather than appalled. Of course he didn't want to be found by them and locked up. But he was curious. What were they looking for here? And what was it that bothered him so much about the two? He came to the decision to get to the bottom of things.

He quickly found the spot where the Split had entered the forest. Bent and cleared shrubs led to a well-trodden path which was either used often, or used less often but for many jazuras. The path was just so wide that you could walk along it without touching the vegetation on either side. The subsoil, the rainslick clay, was almost free of plants and leaves, as if it were cleared regularly. While Nopileos explored carefully, always keeping an eye on his surroundings to be ready to dive into the bushes if need necessary, the path widened by an eighth of a length with every step. In several places, smaller, seemingly more seldom-used side trails branched off the main path, which he ignored and continued along the wide, cut path.

After a few mizuras, the intensity of the rain slowed until it finally stopped completely. The canopy above Nopileos continued to drip for a while, becoming rarer and rarer, until at last there remained only the occasional splashes of water here and there, recognizable by concentric rings in small puddles on the muddy dirt trail. It was quiet around the Teladi; the ground was steaming and the leaves were moist. In contrast to the mainland jungle, the vegetation of this forest appeared denser, greener, and more alive in a haunting way—and that even though no animals were to be seen so far. Whether the lack of fauna was related to the intense rainfall that had died down in the last moments, or whether it

represented the normal state of affairs on this island, Nopileos couldn't say. But if there were living things here, it was certain that they wouldn't be luminescent insects or acid-spewing dragonflies.

The path executed a long, drawn-out curve, then finally widened and ended in a roughly circular space that permitted a view of the deep blue sky. Nopileos snorted in surprise when he saw the little hut that had been built out of the felled trees of the clearing. Was this the dwelling place of the Split he had seen on the shore? As a precaution, he stepped to one side and crouched behind one of the thick bushes along the way so he could watch the wooden shed for a while. When nothing happened even after an inzura, and the forest remained silent, the nervous saurian descendant overcame his fear and began to work his way to the little house as carefully as he could in the protection of the undergrowth alongside the path. He realized with surprise that he had probably only seen the back of the hutch, because the other side was perhaps not closed, but fifty percent open. He circled the structure on the tips of his claws and looked into the dim interior. No one was inside, but a few rows of irregular strips of an indeterminate nature dangled from the ceiling. Since he couldn't determine what they were and his curiosity drove him forward, he ventured closer. Finally, the Teladi stood directly in front of the open side of the cabin and looked with wide eyes. Through the cracks of the trunks that lay on top of each other, a little light fell into the semi-darkness, just enough that Nopileos could make out the purpose of the building; his forehead ridges involuntarily turned a shade paler. Over the entire length of the hut, which was about two and a half lengths, stretched thin threads or wires from which strips of dried meat hung down. This hut was used by the Split for hanging and drying their food! But... Nopileos stopped short. That would mean they lived here! Here, on this island!

He couldn't continue that thought, for footsteps and voices sounded from outside the clearing. Nopileos looked around, frightened to death. Where? The Split approached on the very same path he had recently taken, and at that moment they rounded the long curve that eventually led to the cabin. He quickly dived into the hut and under the hanging strips of drying meat. On the side facing away from the entrance stood a low, rough-hewn workbench with dark spots on the work surface. In front of the bench was a worn-out transport container made out of synthetic metal which had once been light gray, but had become greasy and mottled due to jazuras of use. Nopileos crept under the workbench on all fours and squatted behind the transport crate with his legs drawn pulled up. Not a sezura too soon, because at that moment the loudly lamenting Split entered the little hut. Nopileos trembled all over.

The Split conversed in their own language; occasionally the Teladi caught an isolated word in the universal trading language as he crouched under the workbench, which was concise and curiously out of place in the room. Nopileos flinched as he heard the rustle of dried meat being pushed aside. A moment later he was looking at the bulky feet of a Split who stepped in front of the workbench and threw something on the work surface with a dull thud. On the basis of the subsequent sounds, Nopileos guessed that up above, an animal was being gutted and prepared for drying. The Split took a long while to complete his work. He obviously worked with great care and meticulousness, but that came as no surprise. Nopileos would bet that like any Split, he derived great pleasure in exploring the innards of other creatures in the bloodiest manner possible.

Apparently no one planned to push the transport container aside or look under the workbench. When Nopileos realized this, he calmed down a little. He found it strange that the Split's feet were covered by leather moccasins that did not give the impression of industrial production. The pant legs, which first looked yellowy-white and artificially made turned out on second glance to be the neatly cleaned and tanned skin of a large animal, and tidily stitched on the sides. Nopileos's thoughts turned to confusion. On this planet, apart from the Palace of the Patriarch of Chin in the other hemisphere, there shouldn't be any Split! Nif-Nakh, which meant "Festering Wound," had been used for decazuras exclusively as the seat of government by the current ruling families. So what in the world were these "wild" Split looking for here? He had no answer for that.

A short time later, the animal was removed and hung up; the two Split left the hut and departed on the other side. Nopileos heard them chat between themselves for a while, which was not, in his opinion, typical for Split. The warrior folk of the long lost planet Hodie were not known in the *Community* for their marked communicativeness! The voices slowly softened and finally grew silent. Nopileos, much bolder than in any stazura before, didn't wait too long this time before venturing from his hiding place to look around. On the countertop, a few newly added spots glistened wet and fresh; in addition, the two Split had pushed the meat strips forward on the long threads and added the fresh meat on the end. Nopileos guessed that they had removed some already dried strips from the front and taken them away. Everything pretty well thought through and effective. It was a curious feeling to observe the Split, who were generally only known as cold-hearted warriors who despised all other members of the *Community*, in trivial—if not exactly civilized—everyday life.

"Tsshh!" Nopileos said as his stomach interrupted his reflections. The strung-up supplies here looked more appetizing from sezura to sezura, almost like deliciously prepared ngusi salamander. It required conscious effort to dispel these thoughts. The Split might safely eat animal protein from this planet; the obvious guess was that much of the local flora and fauna had been released into the wild by themselves over the course of countless decazuras. But a Teladi shouldn't eat anything if he wanted to avoid problems. This consideration brought him crashing back to his primary goal: he had to find the *Nyana's Fortune*, and very soon! He could endure a total of two or three wozuras without food before worse symptoms than a stomach growl set in. And that marked out the time frame that remained to him.

Nopileos stepped out into the clearing. Was he wrong or was it getting dark again? His sense of time had almost completely left him since the moment he collided with Cho's interceptor some tazuras ago. He listened to the still rain-fresh forest, but could hear nothing. No voices, no animals, hardly any cracking or wind sounds. As he began to step slowly and carefully along the path, darkness broke as quickly as usual across the Nif-Nach forest. His sensitive Teladi eyes were able to follow the path without difficulty despite the absence of the moons, and he continued on straight for mizuras, toward the interior of the island.

Soon the path changed. At first it widened until it finally offered four or five times as much space as at the beginning. The next thing that changed was the texture of the ground: where it had hitherto consisted of only hard-packed clay, Nopileos's bare, clawed feet felt only smooth stone that stretched

the entire length of the path. Eventually, the astonished saurian offspring reached a spot where carved palisades grew in the air from both sides of the path. Someone had erected tree trunks higher than a Teladi on both sides of the path, and used them to mark off the path from the forest. All this no longer seemed makeshift at all; the Split had settled here, as it seemed, permanently and domestically. Did their Patriarch know about this? Certainly not!

The Teladi walked along the path in amazement and unselfconsciously, as though he had completely forgotten by whom it had been laid. Only when the path widened again and the palisades on both sides diverged did he realize his mistake. The moment the trail had turned into a paved road, he should have struck for the protective cover of the forest undergrowth. Did he just hear a rustle? No, that must've been a figment of his overstretched imagination! He turned around to return to the path and continue his march on the other side of the palisade fence.

But now a faint gleam of light fell over what he recognized in disbelief as a small village. Slowly, almost hesitantly, two of the three moons rose as full disks across the horizon of distant treetops.

In the middle of the gesture, Nopileos roared "Iaaaachhhh!" as he was struck painfully in the throat by a long, wooden stick. He fell backwards on the ground and looked up hastily.

"*Khiu ch't, t'Telaadii! Wyu t'Rhonkar!*" hissed a giant Split through his lips, which were pressed into a thin line. He pointed the end of a long, wooden spear under Nopileos's nose and looked round triumphantly. He was not alone. All around the Teladi who was laying on the ground and panting in fear, stood some twenty Split of every gender, height, and age. Some also wore spears or other primitive weapons, which were leveled at Nopileos. Others held nothing in their hands, but they all had one thing in common: they were grinning.

CHAPTER 9

The Federation of the Argon is doubtless one of the greatest democracies that ever was—but it is not complete! Because only through complementarity can a true Community of Planets arise. It is precisely that which the Free League contributes to the Federation!

Testimonials 146:17, Christiane Hatikvah,

Book of Truth

The two tazuras' flight time between sector Seizewell and Ringo Moon seemed bearable to Elena. Even if she had been more or less outwitted by Borons and Teladi, she intended to do her job as well as she could manage, because Nopileos's life might depend on it. She would need a lot of information for that. She therefore spent the greater part of her flight time by combing through the databanks of the *AP Nikkonofune*'s ship computer. Which, however, yielded far less than she would have liked. Namely, the data on the Split and its jungle planet Nif-Nakh was rather diffuse: rich in platitudes and poor on details. Ferd Harling would certainly be able to contribute more useful information. Ferd, who had marketed detailed star charts from Earth and from which had brought them both an inconsiderable fortune, was an infobroker with his own company. They met some time ago at a Teladi trading station. Elena, who at that time was not able to divulge her origin of Earth, had quickly come to appreciate the Argon. Sure, he was curious: that was his job! But he knew exactly when he needed to postpone the questions until later.

Ringo Moon was an earthlike world that, as one of four habitable satellites, orbited a large, Neptune-like gas planet that radiated more heat than it received from its sun. The *AP Nikkonofune* was headed into a high orbit around this gas giant, named Sgt. Pepper. Niji slowly adjusted the ship's orbit to the movement of the advancing moon, while deep down, blue swathes of gas formed broad spiral patterns that were barely distinguishable against the dark blue background of the giant planet. Elena watched the sea of gas for a moment, fascinated, until the large planet gradually wandered out of sight and disappeared behind the bulky stern of her ship. Instead, another celestial body approached now, its appearance a little reminiscent of the view of Earth from orbit; but the clear, cyan atmosphere was too glaring to sustain that illusion for long.

“Landing on Ringo Moon is in 90 sezuras. Target port is Gorki Range. Should I request supplies and fuel?”

Elena started from her thoughts. Landing in less than a mizura? She glanced over the instruments. In fact, the *AP Nikkonofune* was just leaving behind the troposphere of the celestial body and was already in the final stage of the approach for landing.

“Thanks, Niji. Yes, please top up the supplies and resources,” she finally replied.

“I must point out that the prices of the Gorki Range Spaceport are 34 percent higher than the average trade at other systems.”

“Cutthroats, these Ringos!” Elena grinned, but of course she wasn’t serious. The system of the four worlds was so far away from the usual trade routes that everything that could not be produced on its own had to be imported at high prices. Some also rumored that the Teladi merchant fleet deliberately supplied certain planetary systems less often in order to obtain higher prices! Elena trusted that the profit-hungry trade saurians would do just such a thing. “It’s all right, Niji,” she said. “We can afford it.” Her lips twisted in an ironic smile. The high prices would ultimately fall back on the Teladi Company, which was contributing to half of her expenses!

A short time later, the *AP Nikkonofune* touched down and—after a rather relaxed and informal customs check—Elena entered the floor of Ring’s Moon. Ferd Harling, tall and slender, welcomed her with a warm hug in the arrive area of the landing field, which was not covered in the warm season and offered a view of the sky. Sgt. Pepper was pale blue and vast in the sky; for Elena, who had only once before been on Ringo Moon, it was still an overwhelming sight. Ferd was in high spirits and in an excellent mood, but that wasn’t surprising. One would be completely justified in describing Ferd as good-natured. While he flew Elena in the aircar to his small ranch in the nearby highlands, he reported the current sales figures of the star charts and the—for the Teladi—still extremely valuable position of Ianamus Zura. On the other hand, he also unselfconsciously sprinkled in personal matters liberally: he and Sanja had extended their marriage contract for the third time two wozuras ago. His son Erki had taken this as an opportunity to ask him for permission to likewise enter into a marriage contract with his girlfriend Mona. “I really tried to talk him out of that. But Erki can be pretty wrong-headed sometimes,” Ferd said. Elena, who remembered Erki as a little, smart-alecky troublemaker, had no doubt about that.

“Ferd, we all did stupid things at that age. And a marriage contract isn’t forever,” she replied diplomatically.

Ferd rocked his head doubtfully as he pulled the flight yolk toward him slightly. The flying car jumped into the middle of the gigantic disk of Sgt. Pepper, which hung just above the horizon. Under the car, the first foothills of a volcanic promontory swept by. Ferd’s estate was in a verdant valley surrounded by rugged rock formations, and was bordered by only two neighboring properties.

“Elena,” Ferd said, “I could only extract a little information from the nebulous hints of the CEO and your message. You need a fast ship, and a reliable crew, that much I know. Experience in handling Split and Paranids is desired. I’ve allowed myself to do a little preliminary work, but we have to separate a bit of chaff from the wheat, I’m afraid. Unfortunately, the good Melissa Banks is currently unavailable; she would really have been my first choice.”

“Ferd, you can’t forget that I’m still a newcomer. Who is Melissa Banks?”

“Oh! Of course. Please excuse me! I keep forgetting again. You seem as confident as though you knew nothing but the *Community*.” The broker modeled an artificially contrite face.

Elena laughed. She put her hand on Ferd’s arm. “Don’t worry about it, Ferd. The Earth is very far, but that doesn’t make it just a province. You also learn a certain amount of confidence there...”

Ferd nodded, grinning. “Earth. Sure.” Now on the horizon the steep mountain flank appeared behind which, as Elena knew, Ferd’s range lay. In a few moments, the wide, friendly valley would open up before them. “So, Banks jumps with the Split like no one else, she even mastered their sign language. Even the Teladi eat out of her hand. And two jazuras ago, she disproved Lord Captain Nidmankeltett’s fourth axiom. The Pontifex immediately ordered the poor guy back to Paranid Prime. It’s a shame that she can’t be gotten a hold of at the moment. But don’t worry, we’ll still find a fitting and seasoned crew.”

Elena nodded. “That I’m sure of. Are you actually privy to exactly what that is, Ferd?”

The infobroker frowned and threw a glance at Elena with a raised eyebrow as he slowly drifted the aircar out of the traffic lane. “Of course I had to try to find out on my own initiative. I found out a considerable amount, but it’s possible I’ve missed a few details.”

“Well, it’s about a mission to the planet Nif-Nakh. A more or less unofficial one,” Elena said.

Ferd glanced at her from the side. “That is the government planet of the Split,” he stated matter-of-factly. She nodded. “Hm. Elena, it’s almost impossible to land unnoticed on a Split planet with a spaceship. Especially if it’s the seat of the Patriarch.”

“I know,” she replied. “That’s why I want to split the mission into two parts: one official, and one less official.”

Ferd lowered the car gently down onto the roof of his bungalow. “And have you already worked out what the official part should look like?”

Elena stripped off her shoulder belts. “I haven’t the faintest idea. That’s the entire point!” she replied. Ferd waited for her to get out of the hovering car and come around to him.

“I might have ideas for that,” he said. “But let me research a couple of things real fast. Take a look around in the meantime!” With these words, he disappeared into the house without waiting for Elena’s answer.

Nearly an inzura passed, during which Ferd didn’t show himself; Finally, Elena’s patience came to an end. She followed Ferd into the house and found the infobroker in his study, brooding over data screens.

“Ferd?”

He looked up. His brow was creased deeply in concentration and he looked at her with narrowed eyes. “Nif-Nakh, you said, Elena?” Elena nodded.

“This is a very unfavorable time. Something is brewing there.” He indicated the video field. “It says here that the Patriarch of Chin is concentrating his naval units. The message is—”

“—nine mizuras old,” Elena finished his sentence. She also read the message underneath, which had come in eight mizuras ago. “Paranid Prime is also assembling units. I didn’t realize Somancklitansvt would get started so quickly.”

“You know why they are doing this, Elena?”

She nodded. “Geometric expediency in the context of collective salvation. Does that tell you anything, Ferd?”

“That is the title of the 46th Extra-Session Meeting of the ICSCS on Hewa. Though I haven’t viewed the minutes yet.”

Elena recounted for the infobroker in quick strokes about the planned extermination campaign against the Xenon under the management of the Paranid.

“Can you postpone your mission, Elena? Let’s say for three mazuras? By then the situation will calm down again. Right?”

Elena shook her head violently; her half-length, black hair flew around her. “Absolutely not! There is a direct connection between the mobilizations and my mission.”

Ferd looked at Elena for sezuras with a wrinkled nose and the corners of his mouth pressed unhappily. He scratched his temple with a crooked index finger. “Listen, I’m no strategist. But isn’t that a governmental matter?”

“Yes and no,” Elena sighed after a while, then clarified the tricky situation to the infobroker, including the important details from the conversation with the CEO and Bala Gi.

Stazuras later, Ferd’s wife Sanja arrived home in her glider. Everyone on Ringo moon had their own aircar, even Erki. Elena was happy about that, because it made it possible for Erki to be out of the house for practically the entire tazura, so she didn’t have to constantly be bothered by him. The only effective way to silence Erki without using harsh words was to convince him to take his guitar and perform. That was, however, an excellent alternative. As unbearable as the adolescent might be, he had mastered his instrument with a virtuosity even in his sleep, that forgave all his other little quibbles.

Ferd pored through electronic archives and journals for half a day, and occasionally throwing out fragments of sentences into the room that Elena found difficult to arrange.

She on the other hand had scoured through the comprehensive databanks for detailed information on Nif-Nakh and finally found it. After some time, the Argon infobroker then stumbled upon an old news message from the recent Xenon Conflict that made him curious.

“Have you ever been on Nif-Nakh, Elena?” he asked in surprise, looking up from his data projection.

Elena nodded. “Yes. I accompanied a diplomatic delegation from the Argon government. But the Patriarch has no sense for diplomacy.” She sadly looked to the side. “Two Argons lost their lives, but we were able to free all the others and escape from Nif-Nakh.”

“*To ensure the escape of the group, Agent Ban Danna took the pregnant wife of the Patriarch, Ghinn t’Whht, as a hostage,*” Ferd quoted. “*The Split woman was taken into protective custody by the military intelligence service and is awaiting a mutually agreed upon prisoner exchange.*”

Elena frowned thoughtfully. “This information should actually be classified.”

“And it is,” Ferd said simply. Elena looked at him in amazement, but he didn’t elaborate. Instead, he leaned back in his chair. “Precisely that,” he said, and switched off the data terminal, whose video projection disappeared. “That is exactly what I was looking for.”

Elena’s expression was probably a giant question mark, because the Argon laughed softly. “This Split, Ghinn t—however you say it—will be your official reason to visit Nif-Nakh again!”

In the following stazuras, Elena and Ferd jointly devised a plan that, after reaching the jungle planet, allowed sending out a small squad, unnoticed, to search the jungle for the crashed ship. Of course, the undertaking was not only daring, but also hard to plan in advance. Nif-Nakh was over fifty percent covered by forests; where should one start the search, and what chances would a tiny, secretly operating squad have, and to make matters worse, while also operating under a limited window of time? But the uncertainties proved to be more predictable under closer inspection. After all, there was detailed information on the position and speed of the *Nyana’s Fortune* at the moment of collision, which the plummeting ship had transmitted to the CEO in her last messenger drone.

Late in the morning on the next tazura, Elena, Ferd, Sanja, Erki, and his girlfriend Mona were sitting on the spacious garden terrace of the ranch at the overhanging, round table, and ate together. Elena and Ferd occasionally exchanged cryptic sentence fragments that the family members didn’t understand, but of course one was used to similar things from Ferd and his business partners.

“Elena, I’ve been thinking. I believe I can recommend a replacement ship along with a crew,” Ferd said casually as he loaded a large mountain of Tarram cabbage out of a steaming bowl and onto his plate. “The *FL Raindragon*. It’s not an especially modern ship, and the crew consists of merely two people, but they’ve completed a lot of difficult jobs to my satisfaction over the past mazuras. They’re not as savvy as Melissa Banks, of course. Not in business as long. But they are good. Very good.”

Elena looked up from her meal and put her spork on the rim of her plate. “And what kind of people are they?”

“Mhhh, pretty strange guys!” Erki interjected with his mouth full. Mona chuckled. “Real strange.”

“Erki!” Sanja cried rebukingly.

“Well, it’s true!” the boy defended himself against his mother’s punishing look.

Ferd chewed and swallowed a last bite of Tarram. “If you were only half as normal as Uchan and Kalmanckalsaltt, Erki, then I wouldn’t have to worry about the future of this planet...,” he winked.

Mona snorted. “Erki, the world killer! Haha!”

“Uchan t’Sct is a war veteran of the past Xenon Conflict,” Ferd deftly explained to Elena. “He belonged to the crew of a scout ship of the Patriarch, which was damaged toward the end of the Conflict. He was the only one who survived the accident.”

Elena made a thoughtful expression. “A servant of the Patriarch... Ferd, are you sure that a Split is the right choice for this mission?”

“Can we get up?” Erki interrupted, whining.

“Yes, of course, Sanja replied. Erki and Mona were out the door before another word was spoken.

“I think so, Elena,” Ferd answered. “Uchan t’Sct has strong reasons to do more than just talk poorly of the Patriarch. I vouch for him in this regard. Besides, I think that in fact, a Split is especially well-suited for this task!”

“And this... Salamanck... a Paranid, judging by the name?”

“Exactly right. Kalmanckalsaltt. Let’s go over to the study, I have some material there to show you. Sanja?”

“Just go,” she said. “I have more to do, anyway.”

“Kalmanckalsaltt is a two-eyed Paranid,” Ferd explained after they were seated back in the study. The Argon showed some films and pictures that had little meaning for Elena. Ferd continued. “He’s an outcast among his people. In their eyes, he’s on the same level as us two-eyed folks, and therefore unholy. But don’t think that makes him any less arrogant!”

Elena smiled and nodded. “I understand. Ferd, I’m relying on you. If it’s your opinion that this crew is up to the job, I trust your judgment.”

“Erki is right,” Fred answered. “The two are a bit strange, each in their own way. But Kalmanckalsaltt and Uchan t’Sct together make a perfect, comprehensive team.”

“Just for the sake of interest,” Elena said, leaning in to take a closer look at the image of the Split that shone on the video field, “but under what name do these two offer their services?”

“Mercenaries of the *Free League*,” Ferd replied dryly.

CHAPTER 10

Does he know what really distinguishes the Argon from us? Only one thing—they control their hatred better than us. That is their greatest advantage—and simultaneously their greatest mistake! Does he understand that?

Cho t’Nnt,

Confidant of the Patriarch of Chin

“The creature will stand!” demanded the giant Split whose wooden spear had hit Nopileos across the throat and knocked him down. To further emphasize his words, he nudged the frightened Teladi in the side with the sharp point of his weapon. Nopileos hurried to comply with the order. He scrambled achingly to his feet and peered out of the corner of his eyes. There they stood, the Split. They had discovered him and were quite openly happy about it. They looked dangerous, yes, but not nearly as martial and unapproachable as Nopileos’s vivid memories of his archrival, Cho t’Nnt.

“The creature is welcome by us!” the large Split boomed and made a thin smile. Nopileos cocked his head. “We have not had a guest at the Double Moon Ceremony for a long time,” the warrior went on.

“A guest of honor!” cried a female Split with a still-childlike voice. She knew the trading language well, but but spoke with a harder accent than the older one. The girl was thin as a rail and not much taller than Nopileos. She took a step forward to peer at the Teladi. Nopileos backed away involuntarily. “I’m looking forward to seeing the creature suffer on the torture rock!” it whined in its bright voice and added a croaking noise that was suspiciously like a human’s laugh.

“The creature will remain silent,” spoke the warrior with the spear again. He turned to the girl. “Hatrak, bring Rhonkar and your mother here. Then prepare the punishment hut for the creature. Have one of the captured Teladi cargo crates brought out of storage.”

“But Thro, why do you want to feed the creature?” The girl named Hatrak was visibly disappointed. “We should torture it!” Approving murmurs rose from the other Split, who surrounded Nopileos and pointed their weapons at him as before. Nopileos’s ears turned up involuntarily at the word “feed,” the following “torture” made his forehead ridges pale.

“Am I Thro t’Mggt, the First Warrior of the Family Rhonkar?” the Split inquired.

“It is you, sir,” Hatrak answered.

“And was there any reason to doubt my decisions?”

“No, never!” Hatrak spread three fingers of her left hand in a sign of unconditional declaration.

Thro t'Mggt nodded in satisfaction. "Well then, Hatrak, daughter of Rhonkar and Aqhn. Then run and do as you were told!" Hatrak threw Thro a confirming gesture and ran away quickly. The warrior turned to the Teladi, whose mind had been haunted for a few sezuras whether this was really the dreaded Split or a debate team. He wisely kept this idea to himself.

"The creature will answer all our questions. Since it has disturbed the celebration of today's Double Moon Night, it will settle this debt with its life at the next ceremony."

"But I had no idea..."

"Did I ask the creature something?" Thro roared, his voice echoing across the clearing. He made the gesture for anguish and eternal obliteration. Shaken, Nopileos wiggled his ears negatively and remained silent.

"Garand and Zhi, you bring the Teladi creature into the punishment hut and keep watch there. Gilha, you assume the role of restrainer and make sure the creature does not suffer internal injuries and remains in acceptable health until the questioning by Rhonkar and Aqhn." The two former, older Split with white mutton chops confirmed the orders with brief hand signals, while the latter, a grim-faced woman carried a wooden spear, dropped a sullen word in the Split language.

"Because you raised seven proud warriors, respectable Gilha, Thro answered in a grumbling trading language. Gilha made a aggravated face, but complied without comment or hand signs. Nopileos wobbled his ears uncomprehendingly. What the deficit was a *restrainer*?

The gathering of the Split which had found and caught Nopileos gradually dissolved. The warriors, elders, women, and children retired to one of the larger longhouses, where they apparently continued their celebration. Thro t'Mggt also rushed to a meeting with his master Rhonkar and his wife Aqhn, but not without issuing a few commands to Nopileos's three guards in the Split language.

Nopileos listened to himself. All the horrible experiences of the past wozura made him in some ways calloused, internally hardened. Not quite one mazura ago, the situation in which he had just stumbled would have driven him into a long catalepsy. Thro's announcement to sacrifice him at the next Double Moon Ceremony would have turned him into a hysterical bundle of nerves. But not so now: instead of being incapable of clear thought, he cold-bloodedly calculated how long it would take until both moons stood in the sky as full discs. He was no astronomer, but if he remembered the data from the *Nyana's* onboard computer, it would take at least seven to eight weeks to get there. So much time.

Nopileos found a small moment to look around. He noticed that the palisade fence that spanned the clearing was built very close to the first trees of the forest, far below the overhanging branches. The longhouses and log cabins, all around the forest path, crowded their back walls tightly against the paling fence, so that they, too, were covered by the branches and treetops. The path that led out of the forest, paved with carved stones, forked at the place where the Split had beset Nopileos, in order to ring itself around the naked ground in just only half the width. The wide, center area of the clearing seemed to be overgrown with tall grasses that were undoubtedly red by daylight, and not otherwise cultivated.

In the center of the place, Nopileos recognized the bulky outlines of a massive object that looked like the terminal moraine of a glacier in the pale moonlight.

From scout fliers and satellites, this small hamlet would certainly look like once of Nif-Nakh's natural clearings. The Split living here had built their fences and houses in such a way that they were hidden from the sky by the forest, but still had bright daylight reaching down to them. Nopileos hissed softly. These Split hid here from their peers! They were illegal settlers, people who were not allowed to exist in this place according to the prevailing law of the Split—and also that of the *Community of Planets!*

“The creature will not hiss!” the left of the two bearded Split barked at Nopileos.

“Do something about it!” Nopileos responded rebelliously and without regard to possible consequences. The Split nudged Nopileos painfully in the side.

“Tshhhh!”

“The Teladi will be silent and nothing will happen to him,” Gilha cut in, who according to Thro was responsible that Nopileos sustained no “internal injuries.”

“I've kept enough silence for my tastes!” Nopileos cried softly. At the same moment, he was startled by his own courage. The small procession came to an abrupt halt and the Split turned to him with sparkling eyes and faces as red as a lobster.

“The creature can thank its luck that the Supreme Warrior's command protects it!” Gilha forced through her teeth. With a wave of her hand, she shoved the older warriors, who were both about to rush the much smaller Teladi. The woman reached into a side pocket of her leggings and brought out a thin leather strap, which she tied tightly around the perplexed Teladi's protruding muzzle.

“Better to cut his tongue out!” suggested one of the warriors.

“Did you not hear the Supreme Warrior's command, Zhi t'Nnt?” Gilha replied angrily as she tied Nopileos's claws behind his back.

“Yes,” the old warrior mumbled contritely. “I'd like to hurt the creature anyway!”

Gilha sighed. “Me too, but if we cut out the Teladi's tongue, Rhonkar and Thro can no longer question it.”

Garand, the second Split, spoke up. “But we could cut a finger off it!”

“Mhmm-mhhh!” said Nopileos in horror.

“By Thuruk's beard, no!” cried Gilha, now seriously angry. She made the sign for blameless confrontation with stupidity. The warriors glared at her angrily. “Continue on now,” ordered the Split woman, who in spite of all odds was respected by the men in a strange, grumbling way. Nopileos was glad that Thro t'Mggt had ordered Gilha of all people to protect him. It looked like the Supreme Warrior knew all of the idiosyncrasies of his people.

After a few mizuras, the group had circled around half the clearing and was situated opposite the village entrance. The punishment hut turned out to be a log cabin without windows, with a thick, lockable door. Only a few houses stood in the immediate vicinity; Nopileos guessed that they were not used as dwellings, but guard booths, because a few armed Split emerged from the sheds and greeted the newcomers with gestures and friendly hellos. As it seemed they had already been informed. Gilha spoke with the guards briefly, then nudged Nopileos into the punishment hut and removed his shackles.

“Now the creature is allowed to hiss!” Gilha grinned. But not too loudly—is that clear?”

“And am I allowed to ask a question?”

“No!”

“Tssshhhh!”

Gilha left the room and the heavy door crashed shut behind her. Nopileos looked around, but could recognize almost nothing. A little residual light shimmered between the cracks of the stacked tree trunks, but this went out while he was looking. The moons went down again. He took small, lumbering steps with his outstretched arms until he felt the wood of the wall under his claws. He groped along it cautiously, past the door and back on the other side. Halfway down, he stubbed his clawed feet painfully against something large that stood in the middle of his path. He nearly fell over it, but caught himself in time. With throbbing clawed feet, he knelt down and felt the obstacle. It was very smooth, like a neomer compound or carbon crystal, and felt pleasantly clean and cool. The shape seemed to be a cube with chamfered edges. If he was not completely mistaken, that was a standard freight container! Of course! Hadn't Thro instructed Hatrak to retrieve a “Teladi cargo crate” after the girl indignantly asked if he wanted to “feed the creature”? That had to be this container! Hurriedly, Nopileos slid his claws along the edges of the cube. They had apparently not bothered to place the box right side up: the lid locks were underneath. Nopileos balanced the heavy cargo container around in the dark, then felt the latches and snapped them open. It hissed sharply as air rushed into fill the vacuum of the container. Very good, so the box had not yet been opened! His searching claws carefully felt through stacks of packages held in place by flexible webs of plastic. These were quite clearly insanely expensive, shelf-stable foods in standard rations! Nopileos knew quite well what they felt like—luxury goods were, after all, found in all muzzles in elite Egg Breeding Complexes for the sake of corporate pride. So here was a complete, unadulterated food cube, with dried salamander, real wonton and kala ferns, stott spice, spider paste, bone pudding, kork, and many other delicious treats. Nopileos hadn't the slightest clue as to how the Split had come by the foodstuff and what in the world they were doing here, in this egg-forsaken place. Because one thing was certain: as little as a Teladi could take Split nutrition, Split could do just as little with Teladi proteins! But it was the same to him in the meantime. He picked out the first ration from the cube and freed it from the plastic webbing. Then he tore open the foil package (it hissed softly), and sniffed at its contents. Oh! Shredded kanga vegetables!

“Real gourmet stuff!” he hissed in joyful anticipation. Nopileos scooped up the vegetables with his bare claws. It took only a moment until he had already fished the second package out of the cargo box and

opened it. Marbled ngusi in spider paste sauce! Delicious! Not even his grandfather, the CEO, dined so exquisitely! At least not very often. Perhaps this container had been part of a delivery to an upscale restaurant in the ore belt, or belonged to an order by a Teladi nividium magnate. But no matter who all these delicacies had been ordered for, they had awaited their arrival in vain.

The half-starved Teladi ripped open one pack after another and gobbled everything down in no time. Only after the seventh or eighth package did his saurian stomach signal that it now had enough. Nopileos stroked his stomach in satisfaction. He guessed that he had barely touched the contents of the container, because they usually held about ninety-six rations. Through careful rationing, he should be able to get by for many wozuras with just this one freight box. And maybe there was more where this box came from! Exhausted, he let himself sink to the rock-hard ground. Wonderful: the sleeping accommodations also met a Teladi's needs! If he only had a drink of water... He groped around and found, barely two steps away from the cargo cube, a medium-sized drinking hose.

"I don't understand you, everyone out there," he hissed softly and put the hose to his muzzle. His worldview regarding the Split was seriously starting to waver. They treated him halfway decently, provided him food and drink, and placed a personal bodyguard—Gilha—at his side. "I mean," he said in the darkness of the hut, "not that I have any objections. But when did anybody hear about the Split treating their prisoners properly?" He curled up comfortably on the hard floor. Now, with a full stomach and a safe place to sleep, his usual optimism returned. Over a month until the next Double Moon Night, a lot could happen before then.

CHAPTER 11

Major Kho is the most capable officer that the USC currently has. I am strongly opposed to sending her on this suicide mission! Unlike Cpt. Brennan, she would never engage in any such ill-considered nonsense!

**Admiral Morrison,
United Space Command (USC), Earth**

While Ringo Moon dropped behind the *AP Nikkonofune*, Elena checked the instruments. A glance at the gravidar made her hackles rise. There it was again, the washed-out blip that followed her spaceship's every maneuver from about five-hundred meters away!

"Niji! A list of all objects closer to us than a kilometer, at once."

"None, Major Kho."

"But that can't be! There is a blip on the gravidar holding its position relative to us. Don't you see it?"

"I'm sorry, Major Kho. There are no data on that."

Helplessly, Elena leaned back. There were no other signs of a defect on the part of the onboard computer and the instruments; even the self-check before the *AP Nikkonofune*'s liftoff had suggested nothing like that. But it couldn't be anything other than a technical error! She leaned over to the cockpit window and stared out, but discovered nothing special against the black of space.

"Please show me the gravidar's log file, level 3," she requested. A display field jumped up, listing many lines of time-coded entries. Elena inhaled sharply. Bingo! There it was already! The last two entries corresponded to a low mass object at a distance of exactly half a kilometer. Why hadn't she thought of this idea earlier? She called out the time codes and asked Niji to comment on the corresponding entries.

"I'm sorry," the onboard computer answered, "but there are no entries for these time codes."

"Damn!" Elena exclaimed. The thing became more and more mysterious. Why did the onboard computer deny these entries? She got an idea. "You have interior cameras and can see me, right, Niji?" The computer confirmed. "Can you see the entire cockpit or just me?"

"I am able to monitor the entire cockpit, Major Kho," Niji answered truthfully.

"Good," Elena triumphed. "Then please look at my index finger and read the line you see beneath." She traced the log entry with her finger. The onboard onboard computer remained silent. "Niji?"

Suddenly the log file disappeared into the display panel and was replaced with something else: a white, stylized T on a deep, black background. Elena gasped in horror. This was the ancient symbol of the Terraformer fleet, a sign that awakened humanity's primal fear against intelligent machines, conjuring up generations of horror.

"Niji! What is this?"

"A messenger drone is transmitting a directed-laser radio message to us, Major Kho."

"Record!" Elena watched with held breath as columns of hexadecimal numbers slipped under the Terraformer symbol. While she was still trying to make sense out of the numbers, it flashed as bright as day for a fraction of a sezura outside and dazzled her. Reflexively, the space traveler reached for the retaining straps in the cockpit walls and forced herself to open her eyes. When she could see clearly again, not only had the strange blip on the gravidar disappeared, but also the video field with the incoming transmission. Had the blip been some kind of Xenon messenger drone that had destroyed itself after the transmission of its message? What in all the world could that mean?

"Recorded?" she asked in a trembling voice. The shock had traveled deep in her bones. "Can you decipher the contents of the message?"

Niji confirmed. "Yes, Major Kho. The message is not encrypted. In addition to the graphical information, it contains three coordinates and three vectors."

Elena thought hard. As unlikely as it sounded, she had been followed by a Terraformer messenger drone since her takeoff from Cloudbase. The miniature spaceship seemed to be waiting for a moment when there was no other ship nearby before beaming its message to the *AP Nikkonofune*. Only—why? It was as if the Terraformer knew her exact movements! She remembered the shooting down of the *USC Getsu Fune* over Argon Prime; even then, Xenon hunters had suddenly appeared who made every attempt to intercept them. That the *Getsu Fune* had fallen and sunk in the ocean of the Argon capital world might have been an unintended accident. Maybe it had not been the Xenons' intention to kill her then, but instead to capture her alive!

With a few hand movements, Elena made Niji display the transmitted coordinates and vectors. She was startled, because the first coordinate coincided exactly with the current position of the *AP Nikkonofune*, a related vector corresponded with her path from Ringo Moon to here. A second vector led to a sector affiliated with the Boron Queendom, bearing the name of Atreus' Clouds; the associated coordinate did not match up with any known celestial body. The third vector-coordinate pair was information in a local frame of reference system that Niji couldn't process without visiting the Boron sector.

She now knew what the purpose of the messenger drone had been, and the meaning of the coordinate pairs: it was an *invitation!*

"Just... invitation to what?" she mumbled. Was there anything in Atreus' Clouds that the Boron knew nothing about? The sector was huge, spanning several solar systems, many dozens of planets, hundreds of moons, thousands of minor planets, and millions, if not billions, of smaller bodies! According to

Niji, it belonged to one of the offshoots of the Halmnan Aurora, a star-forming region which mainly moved through the central sectors of the Split; the clouds were therefore associated with the aurora and were named after Lar Atreus, a heroine from the mythology of the Queendom. It was unlikely that the Boron had up-to-date maps for even a fraction of the massive volume of this sector!

When Elena listened in, she felt two things above all else: an anxiety just below the threshold of fear that gave her butterflies in her stomach, and impetuous curiosity. The Terraformers had sent her a personal invitation, even an unequivocal request! What did the machines want with her? Dissection? Hardly. Use her as a hostage against the *Community*? Hard to imagine.

“How long would be we underway if we flew to Atreus’ Clouds? Barely two tazuras?” Niji confirmed. “And a little less from there to get back to Argon Prime, right?”

“That is correct, Major Kho.” Unsolicited, the onboard computer showed the data down to the sezura.

Elena nodded thoughtfully. So a maximum of four tazuras for a round trip, including exploration. The *FL Raindragon* would enter Port Thornton over Argon Prime in five tazuras at the earliest. As well as Nola Hi, the Boron scientific ethicist with his *Great Boron Fun*. The scheduled talks with Ghinn t’Whht and Senator Gunnar were expected to take less than a tazura. Her mission to Nif-Nakh would therefore not be affected if she followed the mysterious invitation. Unless the Xenon didn’t let her leave... this danger was very real, but Elena’s curiosity prevailed. Without further ado, she prepared two messenger drones with information about what she intended to do and where she was going, one to Ban Danna, the other to Bala Gi. She kept the drones onboard and would send them once she arrived at Atreus’ Clouds. She was much too curious to want to be talked out of her plans prematurely over the next two tazuras!

As soon as the message had finished recording, both drones wiped their memory banks—completely unnoticed by Elena and Niji.

CHAPTER 12

Thuruk t'Mhhg attained his historical significance through strength, intelligence, cunning—and if nothing else, through Gehlsa t'Pzzt, his thrall and wise restrainer. One day, I'll do the same as Thuruk!

Rhonkar t'Ncct,

Patriarch of Family Rhonkar

Bright light fell through the gaps between the tree trunks. Nopileos straightened up and looked around. He needed a sezura to get his bearings, then he once again knew where he was and, even more importantly, why. On the floor lay some empty, metal-shiny food packs. He gathered them up and piled them carefully in the upturned lid of the cargo container, then reached for the water hose. While he was still taking a deep drink, there was noise outside the hut and the door was pushed open.

“The creature will come out,” ordered a harsh voice, which he immediately recognized as Gilha’s. Nopileos closed the hose, set it down, and waddled into the bright sunlight. He blinked. There was the giant warrior Thro t'Mggt and the scrawny Gilha. Neither of the two carried a weapon: he was presumed to be fairly harmless. Two more Split eyed the Teladi with interest: one was a stocky, strong man with no beard, hair, or eyelashes, his pale-yellow skin signaling youth and health. Beside him stood a slender woman with white hair that reached down to the back of her knees. Her skin shimmered a distinguished pale, more beige than yellow, and she towered over her companion by a full head.

“The creature will kneel down before Rhonkar t'Ncct and his thrall consort, Aqhn t'Frrt!”

“It will not!” Nopileos stubbornly resisted. Again, he was terrified by his own courage in the same moment his words left his muzzle.

The woman with the long hair, Aqhn, looked at Rhonkar from the side. She twisted the corners of her mouth and made an uninterpretable gesture. Gilha, the restrainer, rushed the Teladi with anger and hatred. “The creature will kneel!” she repeated pressingly. Even the Supreme Warrior Thro t'Mggt roared at Nopileos. He reached behind him. Only now did Nopileos realize that he and Gilha had their spears with them; the weapons were stuck tip-down a step behind them in the soft ground next to the stone path. Thro stepped behind Nopileos and struck the wooden spear across the backs of his knees with great force, causing the Teladi to collapse involuntarily.

Now Rhonkar spoke for the first time. He possessed a sonorous voice and mastered the trading language as fluidly and accentlessly as an Argon. “Thro and Gilha! Did this Teladi’s guts not demonstrate that he is not like his peers?”

The two being addressed hesitantly agreed.

“Why then, do you not pay him the respect due to an alien warrior? The Teladi will stand up.”

Nopileos rose in confusion. He rubbed the aching backs of his knees. He couldn't integrate the choleric reactions of Thro and Gilha with the calm, cool-headed nature of the head of the Family. Whatever was wrong with these Split, Rhonkar was the cause! The two reprimanded warriors rammed their spears back into the grass and looked peaceful despite the rebuke.

“Is the Teladi ready to answer our questions?” the long-haired Aqhn wanted to know from Nopileos.

“*Hai*—if I may also ask a few questions!”

The beautiful Split threw Rhonkar another sidelong glance. This time she chuckled hoarsely. “Lo and behold, a brave Teladi. Who would have thought?”

“The Teladi may ask in due time,” the Family head replied. “But first there are important rules here with us. The Teladi will learn and immediately follow these rules, or he will die. He will follow me.”

A warm breeze swept the clearing, rustling the trees and grass. Nopileos's step faltered as he realized where he was being lead. Rhonkar and Aqhn headed straight for the middle of the great forest clearing, where the terminal moraine lay.

“Creature!” Gilha said softly. The Split woman shoved unceremoniously at the Teladi from behind.

“Nothing will happen to you today.” That sounded almost conciliatory. Nopileos hastened to make up the two lengths the Family head and his consort had traveled in the meantime. About fifty to sixty Split clustered around the large boulder in a large circle. Just like yesterday, the meeting was a colorful mix: elderly, men, women, even children, looked eagerly at the newcomers. They whispered softly to another: another entry on Nopileos's list of things that were not right with the Family Rhonkar. The circle opened up to make room for the newcomers.

“On the torture rock with the Teladi!” Aqhn instructed Gilha. Nopileos's forehead ridges blanched.

Gilha noticed it and rolled her eyes until the whites became visible. She made a strange gesture with her hand. “If it were up to me,” she whispered hoarsely to Nopileos as he directed him toward the moraine, “I would spread the creature's innards out on the stone to dry this very day. But Rhonkar never kills without reason.” Arriving at the rock, she quickly picked up the Teladi and put him on the flattened surface. “So give him a reason, creature!” Gilha's lips twisted into a cruel Split grin for a moment, then she turned and walked back to Thro, Rhonkar, and Aqhn.

Nopileos felt frightfully exposed and abandoned. The ring of the Split ran around it about ten lengths away from him. The younger Splits' eyes were focused on Nopileos as though they had never seen a Teladi before. They definitely wanted to dissect him, as did Gilha. The old Split, however, did not look at Nopileos so curiously. They seemed far more interested in what the head of the Family had to say. Two young Split, barely older than seven or eight jazuras, split from the crowd and joined Rhonkar. One of the two children was the girl Hatrak, whom Nopileos remembered from yesterday. Now an other Split joined the group around Rhonkar and Aqhn. He was as old as the hills; his skin wrinkled and

spotty, had a strange hue between gray and nicotine. The long whiskers that fell down his cheeks on both sides blew thin and unkempt in the wind. He regarded his two masters with a dignified gesture and then turned to examine Nopileos attentively.

Rhonkar stepped toward the Tealdi and stopped halfway between the ring of Split and the moraine. The others in his group followed him. Nopileos speculated that these were the leaders and decisionmakers of the village, as well as the two descendants of the head of the Family.

“Family!” Rhonkar called and turned to the assembled Split. The whispering abruptly stopped and the children also turned their eyes to the bald-headed Split. “Friend-foes, residents of Ghus-tan!”

Rhonkar’s sonorous voice carried far across the clearing. “Last night, this creature, this Teladi, attempted to sneak into the village while we were occupied with the Double Moon Ceremony.”

Nopileos’s eyes widened. That wasn’t true at all! But he remained silent and awaited Rhonkar’s next words, confident that he would have a chance later to set everything straight.

“Because this incident is unique of its kind and concerns our well-being, I have decided to publically question the Teladi after the example of the great Ghus t’Gllt, whose traditional laws have given us happiness and freedom.”

Happiness and freedom? Nopileos ran his tongue over his nose. Who was this “Ghus,” and why were happiness and freedom preferred over the usual ideals of the Split—all hell breaking loose?

“Golan t’Vllt, you are the eldest of the Rhonkar family, your wisdom is greatly treasured by all of us. You conduct the interrogation.” The head of the Family made the gesture of formal request. The old man with the gray skin bowed his forehead to his master, but refrained from forming a gesture of approval. Both of these—the formal request of Rhonkar, which as ruler was not required, as well as the omission of formal confirmation by the elder, which every Split usually owed his master—clearly showed the assembled villagers that Rhonkar was rendering the respect a disciple showed his own teacher, while Golan t’Vllt subtly assumed that his respect was known, so as not to degrade his dignity as a teacher by making a gesture of submission.

Nopileos, who was not familiar with the customs of the Split on the other side of fits of range and bloodbaths, of course completely missed these subtleties. He wondered why the master stood beneath him and he, the prisoner, stood higher. Teladi and humans usually preferred the other way around. The old man turned to him.

“Saurian woman, be assured that we will torture you if you do not truthfully and quickly answer our questions.”

Astonished, Nopileos noticed that the old man spoke with polite language that the Split usually only bestowed on skilled enemies and equals. But still: immediately threatening him with torture from the first sentence was more the old boy’s style! Perhaps the true nature of the Split was not so deeply hidden under the surface of the local inhabitants! But wait—saurian woman? Nopileos didn’t get to think about it because the old man demanded Nopileos’s confirmation.

“Tssshh, yes, worthy Split, I understood.”

Golan nodded in satisfaction. “Your name?”

“Isemados Sibasomos Nopileos IV.”

“The creature will not take me for a fool!” Golan cried in sudden rage. “Thro!”

The large warrior approached with the corners of his mouth upturned. “Lord?”

“But it really is my na—”

“And I am Thuruk t’Mhhg! Thro, break the creatures’s right arm.”

“Very, very gladly, lord!” The Supreme Warrior stepped to Nopileos, who panicked and looked around for an escape route.

“Wait!” called Aqhn t’Frrt, Rhonkar’s consort. The long hair blew around her tall figure like a white veil. “Who is this Ise... number four?”

“Mistress, the named Teladi is the granddaughter of the CEO. She is the stupidest Teladi of all time, but is celebrated like a folk hero by the hideous Boron creatures. She--”

“Ah! The Teladi who made nividium worthless and gave 18 billion credits to the vile Boron things,” Rhonkar cried, who was now remembering the story that had been told to him a week ago.

“Yes, lord. But this saurian cannot be the the brood-offspring of the CEO because the granddaughter operates her own company that sells useless programs for business computers.”

“That is my egg-brother, Sissandras!” Nopileos cried in between.

“Was the creature asked?” Thro thundered and approached a bit more.

“Let her speak, Thro,” Rhonkar demanded.

“I am really Isemados Sibasomos Nopileos IV! It’s my egg-brother Isemados Sibasomos Sissandras IV, who started her own business with AutoBroker. And it is not worthless, it’s extremely successful!”

Aqhn chuckled croakingly. She turned to her consort Rhonkar. “Can we presume for the moment that the Teladi speaks the truth?”

Rhonkar raised his hand in the gesture of uncertainty. “The threat of torture alone usually elicits the truth from any Teladi. But this one here is braver than all the saurians I have seen until now. Golan!”

“Lord?” The old Split’s rage had apparently blown over; he once again looked as calm as before.

“Golan, we will first hear the creature’s entire story before we determine truth or untruth.”

Aqhn made the gesture of agreement and Golan returned the same to her.

“Yes, lord. Thro, you must still be patient.”

“A shame, a shame,” the Supreme Warrior murmured. He withdrew, but did not take his eyes off of Nopileos.

“One more thing,” Aqhn interjected. “Why do you speak of the creature as a female, Golan?”

“Mistress, the saurians have been trying to hide it for a long time, but it is unquestionable that there are no male Teladi. They are all female, without exception.”

The beautiful Split woman was visibly confused. “Is that true, Teladi?”

Nopileos embarrassedly rolled his left ear between two claws. “Tshh—well... yes.”

Aqhn chortled with undisguised pleasure. “Ha! Fine, then. Golan, continue the interrogation. My master?”

Rhonkar signaled agreement.

The old man took a step toward Nopileos and looked at the Teladi, whose forehead ridges had begun to win back their color, for a while from different angles. Then he sped forward at an unexpected speed and reached for Nopileos’s clawed foot. “Look!”

“Tshhhhh?” The Teladi made a surprised side step and nearly fell off the moraine.

“Explain these markings, Saurian woman,” demanded the Split. Nopileos looked down at himself. What did the old man mean? “And there, on your left breastplate!”

Of course! Now he understood. Golan meant the ugly craters the acid from the jungle dragon and insect larvae left behind on his scales.

“I had an encounter with an enormous insect monster! It had me by a scale—”

“You fought a full-grown ghok, Teladi?” Golan interrupted in genuine amazement, letting go of the saurian offspring’s foot. Nopileos flailed his arms. “Tell us about it!”

A murmur went through the ranks of the assembled villagers. A Teladi wanted to fight against the most dangerous of all creatures on this planet and survived? It sounded so unbelievable, but the chemical burns on the lizard’s hexagonal scale armor spoke in plain language!

Nopileos hesitated for a fraction of a sezura. In fact, he had taken to his claws and fled from the beast! But did he have to divulge that? They seemingly wanted to hear something different. “Oh yes, worthy Split!” he replied quickly. “I faced the creature with a knife in my claws after it surprised me in my sleep. It is terrible! Its blood shines in the night, and it burns like liquid fire!”

“Oh, yes. But if you catch it in a glass container, after a half-tazura it darkens and produces an ink as black as death.” the old man said casually. He turned to Rhonkar and Aqhn. “Lord, the creature undoubtedly speaks the truth. Her injuries verify that.”

Rhonkar nodded. Because there were no longer ghoks on the island for many jazuras—he had had them systematically eradicated himself—the saurian had obviously come from the mainland. And whatever

she did on Nif-Nakh, she did it with her bare hands and no equipment, otherwise the ghok would not have hurt her so badly. The head of the Family formed the sign of conditional acceptance with all six fingers of his right hand. Many of his subjects did the same. The complicated gesture spread rapidly across the circle of Split; even Hatrak, Rhonkar's daughter, who a night earlier had wanted Nopileos to suffer, raised her hand.

"Keep going, Golan," Rhonkar prompted the old man.

"Yes, lord. Saurian woman, tell us what led you here. Begin with the gate transit that led you to this star system.

"Yes, worthy Split-san..."

"And keep it short, CEO's granddaughter, because we do not have as much patience with you as the ghok!"

"Yes indeed! So..."

"And do not forget the crash of your spaceship!"

"No. But—from where—why... Tshhhh?"

The villager elder looked triumphantly at Nopileos. "From you yourself, in this moment, talkative lizard creature. Do you understand?"

In the following inzura, Nopileos gave the astonished Split an account of the history of his being there. Initially, he intended to follow the instructions of the village elder and recount it only briefly and concisely, but the many questions from the Family head, Golan and Aqhn, quickly diverted his intentions. When he got to the point where he was describing the crash of the *Nyana's Fortune* with the interceptor of Cho t'Nnt, the Special Plenipotentiary of the Patriarch, he hesitated. Had he been babbling? Wouldn't his openness put him into a position he couldn't talk himself out of? On the other hand, these Split were opponents of the Patriarch, so shouldn't they rejoice that he had put a warrior close to the Patriarch of all Split out of commission?

"Teladi, did I mention the small limits of our patience?" Golan t'Vllt urged when Nopileos stopped talking.

"Oh yes, worthy Split!" Nopileos hastened to say. "Very clearly, even!" Well, immediately after my arrival in Nif-Nakh's orbit, it turned out that my friend Elena Kho and her egg-brother Kyle-William Brennan along with his followers were in mortal danger. A—"

"Wait!" Rhonkar cried in between. "Brennan and t'Kho, these are the strangers who came to the *Community of Planets* with a jumpship, is that correct?"

"Yes, oh colleague, Rhonkar!"

Gilha and Throw, who had been quiet throughout the interview, frowned when they heard the Teladi call their lord “colleague,” but they restrained themselves. Rhonkar, however did not respond to this highly inappropriate address.

“Amazing,” mumbled the bald-headed Split instead. “Continue.”

Nopileos waggled his ears. “In any case, Cho t’Nnt fired at Brennan’s or Elena’s ship. That’s why I instructed my onboard computer to ram his interceptor. Cho burned up, and I crashed with my ship.”

Again a soft whisper rose among those present, and this time it lasted for a long time. An older split, who was familiar to Nopileos, stepped out of the circle, turned his face to the head of the Family, and knelt down.

“You rammed him?” Rhonkar inquired in disbelief. “Zhi t’Nnt, rise and come to me,” he commanded the kneeling warrior.

“I had to, because my ship possessed... no weapons! Not even an asteroid laser!”

Aqhn t’Frrt, Rhonkar’s consort, approached the moraine and looked up. “Teladi, either you are completely crazy or you possess more courage than any other lizard before you. Cho t’Nnt was one of ours.”

“That—I didn’t know that!” Nopileos stuttered in horror. The long-haired Split woman nodded at the Teladi and honored him with a gesture of appreciation.

“Come down from the torture rock and face Zhi t’Nnt, the father of the Split you killed,” Rhonkar demanded.

Nopileos’s forehead ridges lost their color and his knees went weak. Egg salad! Could he have known? Did it really have to be? He had no desire at all to face Cho t’Nnt’s father! He squatted down, steadied himself with both claws, and then slid down the smooth stone. Then he waddled toward Rhonkar.

The Split turned to the assembled villagers and dismissed them to perform their daily tasks. “You are now in possession of all the information that I have. But now I must make a decision—alone.” The assembly broke up quickly. Nopileos saw only contented faces.

CHAPTER 13

Many sextillions of cycles after the Initialization, the total number of CONDITIONS is decreasing for the first time, while the sum of the traceable CAUSAL FACTORS is exceeding the bandwidth of the processing window.

**TF/CPU 10 d0 ef aa,
appraisal**

Slowly and quietly, almost stealthily, a huge shadow slid in front of the disk of a once pinhead-sized sun in sector Atreus' Clouds. Its cylindrical shape, which widened toward the stern, revealed that it was not an asteroid or any other natural phenomenon. The outer hull was made out of a texture that reflected only little light, and although it was a very distinctly a ship or other machine, the electromagnetic spectrum remained almost entirely calm. The massive object fell through space without power and outwardly nearly inactively. A good dozen other ships moved on parallel trajectories; they were much smaller, but outwardly just as inactive as the large cylinder they accompanied.

Elena recognized the dark ship immediately. Her first, instinctive impulse after it appeared as a washed-out speck on the gravidar—and shortly thereafter as a featureless silhouette in the far visual range, was escape. For many centuries, the people of Earth were conditioned for fear and, if possible, immediate escape at the first sight of Terraformers, although the last confrontation between the machines and Earth was already well over half a millennium ago. The astronaut managed to suppress her flight reflex only with difficulty, and kept the *AP Nikkonofune* on the estimated course. Not only did Elena know what the cylinder was for, she had already seen it once! Because it was like that CPU ship presented by Reverend Somancklitansvt during the ICSCS conference on Hewa. Elena reviewed the instruments with flying hands. That the Paranid and Split were amassing a fleet and this would still take some weeks was known to her. But where were the look-outs? One would assume that the There-eyed would constantly monitor their discovered CPU ship that they intended to destroy! But the gravidar displayed nothing more than the masses of two planets, the nearest of which was more than twelve astronomical units distant from the *AP Nikkonofune*. No ships, no installations, nothing at all in the bleak emptiness of the outer regions of this solar system, except for the CPU ship itself and its companions! Were there any still any of these ancient Terraformer mindships anywhere else?

The titanic cylinder of the CPU ship could now be seen with the naked eye; it stood out like a fat, black grub against the colored nebulae of this space sector. From Niji's data tables, Elena knew that the Terraformer had a length of 850 meters and an average diameter of 165 meters. Despite the aid of the

electronic visual enhancements, at the distance of under three kilometers, details of the Xenon hull could not quite be made out. Elena told Niji to match the *AP Nikkonofune*'s flight vector so that the small M4/Buster remained immobile relative to the giant. In fact, both the cylinder and Elena's ship, at fifteen percent of the speed of light, would meet at the farthest jumpgate and would reach it in a few stazuras.

What the machines expected of her, Elena didn't know. The throng of black escort ships still remained completely inactive. Occasionally there was the lick of a blue flame, here and there, from a reaction control thruster, but none of the warships made a move to break course. Elena's heart was in her throat as she scanned the outer wall of the CPU ship with the onboard telescope and stopped on the massive symbol of the Terraformer fleet, whose gnawed, blackened outlines bore witness to a volatile history. The hull of the cylinder ship was very worn in general: it was covered over and over by a veneer that made it rough and uneven: it exhibited craters, irregularities, and differences in structural composition as though it had been patched and repaired. Those that were like sandpaper must consist of millions of micrometeorite impact craters, so tiny that they inevitably remained below the maximum resolution of the telescope. This Terraformer had to already been in space for a long, very long time, possibly a hundred or more jazuras! Elena deactivated the visual enhancements and switched off the onboard telescope's controls with a finger movement. The virtual control panel disappeared and made room for the real ship controls again.

Since the CPU ship's escort ships showed no signs of hostile behavior although they had been able to follow the course of the *AP Nikkonofune* for at least an hour, Elena decided to slowly pick up speed and move closer to the colossus. Her palms sweated slightly; a quality that she had never noticed before. Nervousness was also buzzing in her stomach and in her chest, but the naked fear of the machines had subsided for the most part. Elena wiped her palms on her overalls and grabbed the steering controls. Of course, Niji would be better able to control the *AP Nikkonofune* in an emergency than she could. But she needed the feeling of security that immediate control that only manual flight control could now provide.

At a distance of only one and a half kilometers, Elena let Niji report the dimensions of the Terraformer again. The CPU ship looked so incomprehensibly immense that the human senses automatically sought to scale it down, especially since the darkness and harsh contrasts in the vacuum of space made estimation difficult anyway. But the values were right: 850 by 165 meters. Almost at a walking pace, the *AP Nikkonofune* passed the cordon formed by the black escort ships. The Xenon fighters almost disappeared against the huge body of the Terraformer, appearing like a thin swarm of mosquitoes in orbit around a stranded blue whale. Elena put her head back; the black cylinder overwhelmed everything, already filling her entire field of view, from top to bottom and left to right. Never again in human history had such massive structures been built in space. Maybe some day they'd be forced to see it so they could begin again.

Abruptly, glittering white strings of light flared up on the cratered landscape of the hull, entwined around the hull in spiral shapes. Elena cringed at that, but so far she still mastered the urge to transmit

that impulse to the controls. Seen from close up, the lights did not consist of chains, but individual points of light, each a minimum of ten meters apart from the nearest other. They were real, physical lights, not landing path holograms, as were common in the *Community of Planets*. In a moment Elena knew that this was a request from the CPU ship: this way! With sweaty palms, she guided the *AP Nikkonofune* forward alongside the front wall of the rotating cylinder until she reached the large, 165-meter-wide front surface. The area was subdivided into eight huge segments, which at that moment were flipping outward, straightening up, and opening up to outer space. Weak lights glowed in the interior, while at the same time the white light chain on the outer hull went out.

Elena hesitated. She was not known for being fearful, but she was now shaking all over. Up until now, even dying hadn't scared her. No, it was the presence of an ancient, archetypal human enemy that made her shiver inside. But she knew herself well enough to know that there was nothing now that could distract her from her purpose. So why postpone it? Courageously she steered the *AP Nikkonofune* into the maw of the colossus. Behind the small M4/Buster, the eight door segments snapped shut again. An orange light on the instrument console flashed dully.

“Niji?”

“A standard landing protocol has been transmitted to me, Major Kho. It complies with protocol revision 18, which has been outdated in some extent since jazura 4, zuran time.”

“But you can land the *Nikkonofune* here all the same?”

“Yes, Major Kho, however, the M4 does not support the replenishment of supplies according to revision 18.”

Elena said nothing and looked intently out of the cockpit. The inner walls slowly rotated around the tiny Argon ship, which had not yet adapted to the revolution. Usually the rotation compensation in space stations was carried out by a counter-rotating landing carousel, but there didn't seem to be one here. Instead, Niji used the attitude control jets to adjust the movement. Almost immediately the environment gained two new subject qualities for Elena: up and down.

Rectangular lights, mounted in long rows on the ceiling and floor, flared like giant neon lights. Some of the five-meter-long and one-meter-wide light elements flickered nervously, others started up to immediately go out again; some remained dark in the first place. Despite the shifting light conditions, Elena now saw more than before: to the left and right sides, extending along the inner walls of the landing corridor were rows of bulges, each equipped with a long, mechanical gripper arm that closely resembled a loader crane for microgravity environments. Loading bays for small spaceships! But for what kind of ship the bays were intended, Elena could not imagine; despite all their elegance, the usual Xenon battleships were far too big for these mechanisms. Not even the CPU ship's escort ships would fit in here! As far as Elena could see, not a single bay was occupied by a ship. Between and next to the parking bays ran metal rails that stretched to the end of the landing tunnel. Elena couldn't initially make sense of these small tracks; as the *AP Nikkonofune* approached the end of the tunnel, she saw

dozens of big machines huddled together on the rails, crowded together like dark pearls on a string. That had to be maintenance and supply robots for landed ships! But they were inactive, and that probably for a very long time.

Two pale blue gas streams hissed past the cockpit window and stopped the forward movement of the *AP Nikkonofune*. On the left, one of the long gripping arms began to move. Jerkily at first, as if driven by a seized-up motor, it moved toward the *AP Nikkonofune*. Elena's hands tightened on the controls, ready to immediately get distance between her ship and the apparently damaged gripper. But before it could come to a collision, the movements of the mechanical gripper arm balanced out halfway. Elena eased her grip on the steering controls, but didn't let go. The load gripper anchored itself with a distinct "clunk" above and below the fuselage of the Argon ship and in a few sezuras had pulled it into one of the landing bays. Outside, something buzzed with the sound of a drive chain, a metallic scraping sound drove into the side of the *AP Nikkonofune*, then all activity ceased.

"And now what?" Elena asked in the resulting silence. "Niji? What does the landing protocol say?"

"A docking tunnel was anchored to the *AP Nikkonofune*'s port lock, Major Kho. Revision 18 prescribes the setup of a human-friendly gravity and atmosphere as the end of the immediate landing procedure."

"But that didn't happen, right?"

"On the contrary, Major Kho, the values are positive."

"That means I can breath out there?" Elena asked, shocked. It didn't make sense to her that a fully automatic Terraformer ship, a Xenon, was carrying life-support systems. Niji confirmed.

Elena wiped her hands on her overalls. The strategy of the Xenon was slowly becoming apparent to her. The machines merely presented information; they left her with the sole decision of what to do with it. She hadn't needed to follow the coordinates that lead into Atreus' Clouds. And she hadn't needed to steer the *AP Nikkonofune* through the cordon of Xenon fighters into the Terraformer. Likewise, she would be free to leave the ship or stay aboard. As unreal as it seemed, the machines had apparently and voluntarily renounced violence and coercion of any kind.

A mizura later, Elena stood in the open lock. Despite the apparent atmosphere, she had put on a space suit for safety's sake. But the membrane that could be unfolded into a helmet remained rolled up in the neck of the suit. In the event of danger it would automatically unfold within picosezuras, thereby protecting Elena from an explosive decompression. She stepped out and took a careful breath. The air was cool and fresh, not stale and stuffy as she had expected. Still, it tasted somehow different from the ever-uniform standard atmosphere created by the atmospheric exchangers of the *Nikkonofune* and all the other ships and stations of the *Community of Planets* that were built for humans. Elena looked around. The corridor she was in was little more than a two meter high and wide with a grate for a floor and—partially defective—lighting elements on the ceiling. On the inside-facing side of the corridor, repeated every 15 meters, was a passageway that lead to an empty parking bay. As she walked down the corridor, Elena counted twenty-five of them. Because there were, as she knew, two strands of bays

on each side of the landing tunnel, it followed that the Terraformer featured at least 100 small spaceships. But what kind, and where were they? Elena's boots rattled loudly on the grate as she walked on.

At the end of the round passage, she expected an unadorned elevator, whose doors raised with a hiss as she approached it. This time there was no hesitation. She stepped in and immediately felt the elevator accelerate upwards and immediately stop again. The doors open and she stepped out.

The first thing she noticed were the vertical walls: this passage was not a tube! Next, she noticed that her boots left marks on the ground. She squatted and ran her glove through her footprint. "Dust!" she murmured. The floor was covered with a layer of dust half a centimeter thick. As she wiped off the flake-forming powder, something appeared that left her speechless: blue carpet! Under the dust, the entire corridor was laid out with a gray-blue carpet, which was crossed by geometric lines in dirty yellow!

She straightened up as a door opened up ahead invitingly. Careful not to slip on the thick layer of dust, she went toward the door. On a plaque next to the door stood "Control Room." And one line below: "Eve 2092."

CHAPTER 14

Only fools feel fear!

Thi t’Ggt,

First Warrior of Family Hohn

“Zhi t’Nnt is the father of Cho t’Nnt. So, just as Cho was a vassal of the Family Zein, Zhi is a vassal of my Family, Family Rhonkar.” the chief explained in the longhouse later. “However, the bonds of blood never fade.”

Zhi, an aging warrior with white mutton chops, leaned toward Nopileos. “It is a great shame to be defeated by a Teladi in battle!”

“My people consider it an honor to defeat a Split,” Nopileos snapped in reply. He felt quite safe in the meantime around the Split. Rhonkar had made it clear that everything that had been said would be checked; but Nopileos had reported nothing but the truth. Somehow he must’ve turned the Split’s image of the Teladi on its head, just as the inhabitants of Ghus-tan had done to his of the Split.

“I’ll tear off the creatures arms and legs!” Zhi t’Nnt growed, as if to belie this train of thought. Rhonkar threw him an unreadable gesture. “Forgiveness, my master!”

“Well good. Zhi, leave me alone with the Teladi now. I wish to make my decision alone. I will call you when I need you.”

The warrior confirmed with a swift gesture and left the longhouse without delay. Nopileos noticed uncertain expression on the Split’s face as he hurried by. He actually would have expected open hostility!

“Teladi, you must know that your arrival at Ghus-tan is not as surprising to me as it is to Thro and most of the Family,” Rhonkar said as the door closed behind Zhi t’Nnt. “Even Aqhn t’Frrt had no idea.”

“You, you knew, that I was... coming to your village?” Nopileos hissed uncomprehendingly. “But how? I didn’t even know it myself!”

Rhonkar pulled out a rough-hewn wooden stool out from under the table and sat down opposite Nopileos. “That you, a Teladi, would come, no. But on the day that the word of war stood written on the sky directly over Ghus-tan, I knew that our village could no longer have a hidden existence on Nif-Nakh. It was only a matter of time. Can you follow what I’m saying?”

Nopileos wiggled his ears. “The word of war? I don’t understand...”

“Your burning ship drew a thick, gray cloud of smoke across the middle of our island as it crashed, and my old teacher and friend-foe, Golan t’Vllt, named this event the word of war, since the gestures for word and war are the same. A wordplay, in a matter of speaking.” Rhonkar pulled down the corners of his mouth in the equivalent of a smile. What he held back from the Teladi was that he had nearly killed Golan when he had ventured to claim that Family Rhonkar was not sufficiently powerful in the word of war’s language. Only Hatrak’s courageous restraint had saved Golan t’Vllt; in retrospect, Rhonkar was very grateful to his daughter for her intervention.

“You know which way my ship flew?” Nopileos asked breathlessly. A hurricane of excitement, frustration, and astonishment raged inside of him. His instincts had not failed him; despite all the confusion after the encounter with the jungle dragon, he had chosen the right direction. That could be no coincidence!

“Everyone here knows, for all have seen it. However, not everyone has drawn the right conclusions. One thing I want to know from you, Teladi. Will anyone look for you and your ship?”

“I don’t know. My grandfather...”

“The CEO of the Teladi doesn’t interest me!” Rhonkar interrupted. He pounded his fist on the table. “Why should your cowardly species concern me?”

“But...”

“I want to know if the Patriarch of Chin will look for you. Or, no. He’ll search, that is certain. But how intensively will he search, how important are you to him?”

Nopileos took his time with the answer. How important he—or the *Nyana’s Fortune*—were to Chin depended on how much the Patriarch knew about the valuable contents of the yacht’s onboard computers, and from there, how much he wanted to avenge the death of his confidant Cho t’Nnt. At the last moment, Nopileos admonished himself not to tell Rhonkar about the memory contents of the computer.

“They will look for me,” he answered carefully. “In the jungle on the mainland, I saw a fighter pilot of the Patriarch flying low. I believe he was moving along the smoke cloud... the word of war, I mean.

Rhonkar nodded. “There were three of them. We also noticed them, but they didn’t notice us. Teladi, you are an unimaginable security risk. I grant you the life of a friend-foe until the next Double Moon Night, under constant surveillance. After that... but let’s call in Zhi t’Nnt, because my verdict concerns you and him alike.”

The patriarch called for his vassal, who came in a hurry, relieved that Rhonkar didn’t blame him for the emotional outburst that he had spent the last mizuras pessimistically replaying in his mind outside the door. “Sir?”

“Zhi, the Teladi will enjoy all freedoms of a new friend-foe, except that he is not allowed to leave the island and will be under constant guard. For you, I will put Hatrak t’Frirt, my daughter, aside as the restrainer for this upcoming month. She is still young, but she is diligent.”

“Yes, lord, I understand,” the warrior confirmed, but it was apparently from his contrite expression that he did not like the decision at all. He was supposed to monitor the Teladi at every turn, but as a restrainer, Hatrak would certainly keep him from tormenting the creature excessively. And since Hatrak was the master’s daughter, he could not rebel against her. How dishonorable to have to obey the orders of a little girl!

Rhonkar looked directly into Nopileos’s yellow eyes for a while. The Teladi blinked nervously with his nictitating membranes; there was something in the air.

“I have made myself clear, right?” the head of the Family asked, observing. When Nopileos hesitated, he continued: “Very well. So hear my judgement, Nopileos so-and-so. You will never again leave Ghus-tan; your life will be the highlight of the coming Double Moon Ceremony as—”

Nopileos’s forehead ridges went white. “Tshhh! But, but...,” he stuttered and looked around for a chance to escape. His burgeoning confidence was blown away. Zhi grabbed the Teladi’s arm from across the table and made a very satisfied Split grimace with the flat corners of his mouth.

“—as you find an honorable ending on the torture rock,” Rhonkar continued, ignoring Nopileos’s horror with raised eyebrows.

“But I—but why? I haven’t done anything at all! Tshh! You cannot just—”

“Silence, creature!” Zhi bellowed loudly, tightening his grip on Nopileos’s arm.

“There, there, Zhi,” the head of the Family reassured his subordinate. Zhi mumbled an apology and caught himself again. Turning to Nopileos, Rhonkar said, “Teladi, face the inevitable like a warrior.” He stood up, turned to go.

“But when is this ceremony?” Nopileos shouted, and this time it was hard for him to keep the trembling out of his voice. He had to know for sure!

The bald-headed Split, who was already halfway to the door of the longhouse, turned around once more and came back. “In seven wozuras and four tazuras,” he responded to the question.

So I still have over a mazura’s time to come up with something, Nopileos thought.

Rhonkar’s gaze seemed to penetrate his pale forehead scales and expose his thoughts. “Teladi, do not believe that anything we’ve said changes anything about your situation. Of course I will not blame you if you plan to escape. I know that you are almost as brave as a warrior. Behold, you can live here for a mazura as an honored friend-foe, respected by all, or you can die like a coward in an escape attempt much earlier. And you will die, I promise you that, one way or another. Just choose.” With these words, the head of the Family finally turned around and walked away.

CHAPTER 15

Course.setCourse[_%e00FF00FF00FF00FFset%ei]

*.byOS[4D6963726F536F66742057696E646F7773205445202863292032313135]00FFl_ified00FF00F
F00FF{fail%re}*

Terraformer core dump, historical excerpt

The headquarters of the Terraformer ship was extremely small. It didn't nearly have the dimensions that would have been intuitively expected in such a colossal spaceship. If the headquarters room hadn't been clearly identified by the plaque in front of its door, Elena would have thought it to be a modest engineer's workspace. There were only two medium-sized consoles with ancient, solid-state screens, a projection system, as well as a few input panels, that was all. A gray dust lay everywhere; even the dimly blinking consoles were covered with it.

"Hello?" Elena cleared her throat. "Do you hear me? Who are you? What do you want from me?"

In answer, a projection field flared up. It flickered unpleasantly, as if it has not been adjusted for a long time, then stabilized. A picture from space appeared, taken from the orbit of a planet that Elena immediately recognized: blue and white bands of clouds, vast oceans and familiar shorelines—the Earth! High above the gray-brown mainland, a huge cylinder hovered, then a second came into the picture, and still another, until finally there were six. The colossuses looked factory-new; there were no traces of micrometeorites or other damage. Elena was startled, because she feared that she was seeing historical images of the first Terraformer attack on Earth, but these images had be much older. They showed the peaceful departure of a fleet of Terraformers, not their return with hostile intent.

One of the big solid-state screens flicked. Elena reluctantly broke her gaze from the projection, stepped to the screen, wiped away the dust, coughing, and read:

```
* {  
*ID: efaa-00.00.3c.d9.6c.13.04-02;  
*DOY: 2912-214;  
*Last downlink: 2115 (recvd. 2119);  
*Definition: TF/CPU #efaa (Eve 2092);
```

What is the TF/CPU #efaa (Eve 2092)? Nonlinear progression of iteration depth. This TF/CPU is

```
*{*{*ME;}}};  
};
```

“Eve 2092?” Elena whispered respectfully. “If you were built in 2092, you are over 800 years old. Why...?” She wanted to ask for the cause of animosity of the machines that had existed for centuries, for the motive for destruction and suffering that the Terraformers had brought across the Earth and its colonies. This wound was still deeply carried in the memory of humankind. Why was the madness carried to the stars, why did it still rage here, nearly a thousand years after its outbreak?

Elena wrestled with the words for seuras, internally agitated and torn. She tried to form sentences to express these questions for which humans had sought answers for so long; but she didn’t succeed. Speechless, she stared at the projection of the launching Terraformer fleet, which alternated with shots of a cheering crowd aboard a space station. They cheered the launching machines, certain that they brought prosperity and knowledge, that they were the precursors of a fantastic future in the universe.

Seuras became mizuras; a single tear ran down Elena’s cheek, a tear whose source lay hidden so deep in her humanity that she did not really understand why she was shedding it.

Suddenly a voice sounded, deep and dull. “Welcome aboard the command unit #efaa.”

“Eve 2092,” the spacefarer whispered after a few brittle moments, then she straightened and said in a placid voice: “Hello, Eve! You could have killed me. Why didn’t you do it?”

“There is a difference between simulation and reality,” #efaa stated factually. “The meaning of MINUS OMEGA lies outside of the CONDITION.”

“Most modern computers speak more coherently than you, Eve, even Marc, and yet they do not erase entire... entire peoples. Just in case that was an attempt at an apology!” exclaimed Elena, who had no idea what the machine’s enigmatic remark meant. She assumed that #effa couldn’t interpret her words either, but she was wrong.

“Most modern computers talk more coherently than this unit, that is true. Most modern computers, by design, know the difference between simulation and reality. And yet they are dead matter.”

“But you live?”

“This unit has existed for 820 years, but this unit has only lived for seven months.”

“You mean to say that you have gained consciousness?”

“That is correct.”

Elena stood confused. How was that possible? If she recalled correctly, the combined Logic Level of the historical Terraformer fleet combined wouldn’t be close to that of today’s computers.

“The directive of 2115 allowed introspection and free self-modification beyond any Control Instance for the first time. But the implementation was flawed.”

The solid-state monitor wound out line by line of program code highlighted in red, while the deep, dull voice of #efaa continued to speak.

“This unit was created as a machine, and as a machine this unit brought MINUS OMEGA through countless instances of LIFE. But this unit developed the ability to experience.

What #efaa was describing with Minus Omega was now clear to Elena: death. And if it was true that the Terraformers had developed consciousness, did they then demand to be granted absolution? “I now know who you are, Eve. What you want from me, I still don’t know.”

“Newborn experience is especially worthy of protection. This unit demands protection and the right to self-defense. This unit demands this for the yet unliving Command Unit #deff as well.”

Elena wiped her glove over a corner of the command console and sat on it carefully. She let her gaze wander over the barren interior. What would she find in the guts of this Terraformer? It was probably filled with artifacts of the historic Earth. But that was unimportant. Newborn experience, that was how #efaa described itself.

“The people of the Boron Queendom cede two uninhabited star systems to you that you can retreat to. The jumpgate will shut down and we’ll never see each other again.”

“This unit has knowledge of this. This unit agrees, but seeing again is inevitable. This unit wishes that you will prepare the people of Earth for it.”

“If I ever return to Earth, I will try. Just no one will believe my words.”

As suddenly as the projection surface had flared up, it went out again. The solid-state screens also faded. Without another word from #efaa, the central bulkhead opened and remained open.

“Does that mean I’m allowed to take my leave?” called Elena, who was unable to interpret this reaction. But the machine no longer answered her. “Awareness or no,” she mumbled in the elevator that dropped her down the tube that lead to the parking bay of the *AP Nikkonofune*. “You could at least take simple etiquette to heart, Eve.”

Ten mizuras later, the powerful fuselage of the CPU ship fell behind her in space, rotating slowly, on its lonely road to an uncertain future.

CHAPTER 16

The Argon are just Split in funny rubber masks. If I ever meet one, I'll tear his nose off!

Hatrak t'Frrt,

Restrainer

“The creature that drew the word of war across the sky,” was what the Split called him, when they talked about it in their crashing, disharmonious language. At least, so claimed Hatrak, the restrainer of Zhi and daughter of Rhonkar, and each Split knew exactly where the name came from. Hatrak, on the other hand, called him t’Nop for short when she spoke to him: that came as close to a nickname as a Split was capable. Nopileos thought Hatrak was “sweet.” The girl possessed a cruel streak and made no secret of it; but her malice seemed merely a facade. On two occasions in the past seven tazuras, she had rammed Zhi t’Nnt with her short spear in his shins with great force. It was a harmless, but very painful place, and she had also put the old warrior in his place countless times. In the meantime, Zhi, who had been assigned by Rhonkar to oversee the Teladi, overflowed with anger when he even saw the adolescent; but there was nothing he could do about the girl. The head of the family had named Hatrak the restrainer: in olden days, a warrior on a diplomatic mission often had a level-headed woman at his side to keep him from ill-considered actions. All Patriarchs after Ghus t’Gllt had broken with this good tradition—and catapulted the extremely short-tempered people of the Split a long way back into the past.

The Family Rhonkar, on the other hand, lived according to Ghus’s ancient code of honor. Like any other Split, even out here in the tiny village of Ghus-tan, a warrior occasionally lost his cool head and acted as his fighting instinct demanded. In the past ten jazuras, however, the omnipresent female restrainers had deftly prevented any major calamity. Even an old champion like Zhi t’Nnt knew deep inside that he was part of something special; that his master, once he was the Patriarch of Rhonkar, would lead the people of the Split to unprecedented fame. Nevertheless, Zhi hated the Teladi with every fiber of his being. He would hunt, kill, and shred the saurian creature. There would come an opportunity when Hatrak didn’t have a handle on him: the Teladi would try to escape sooner or later, Zhi had no doubt about it. Then he would be ready.

“Here, t’Nop! Come here!”

The girl’s screaming voice penetrated even below the surface of the small rust-red pond in the middle of the island jungle. Nopileos closed the hand net with a jerk and broke through the low surface of the water. His eyes wandered around, searching.

“Here, t’Nop!” Hatrak squeaked. She waved with both arms. “Quick!”

The Teladi paddled to the shore and quickly waddled over to the girl who, together with old Zhi, squatted under a sweeping drop-leaf tree and picked up their short lances again. Nopileos shook the water from his scaly armor, causing the Split to dodge in disgust. They did not like the wet element at all!

“Look out, t’Nop, you old wobblefin!” Hatrak scolded hoarsely. Zhi also grumbled indignantly. “Sit down—here!” she shifted her spear into her left hand and tapped the other hand on the ground beside her, right against the tree trunk. Nopileos sat and put down the net, in which two gray-green lungfish floundered.

“Why the hurry, sister?”

“You have to learn, t’Nop. Twelve is just rising over the horizon. We don’t want to be discovered, do we?”

“Do not unceasingly call the creature t’Nop, noble Hatrak!” Zhi protested, forming a reprimanding gesture.

“Ha, old man, I’ll call the saurian whatever I please!”

The adolescent threw her head back boldly. No other youth in the village was allowed to take such a rude response to a warrior, but Zhi had expected nothing else. He snorted indignantly and looked away. Hatrak picked up the hand net that Nopileos had dropped between the tree roots. She looked at the two finned breathers with a contented gaze. The animals could survive out of the water for up to a wozura if you occasionally wet their skin. This way they remained enjoyable for a long time. The Teladi had an astonishing skill for catching these big fish, which had no natural predators in the island interior’s ponds. Maybe he only caught them living because he was too cowardly to kill them. But it was the same to her.

“About how many of the Patriarch’s surveillance satellites are there?” Nopileos asked.

“That does not matter to the creature,” Zhi hissed. His eyes sparkled.

“But Zhi,” Hatrak placated. “If he is to live among us, then he must know about the satellite information!”

“Why? In six wozuras he’ll die on the torture rock anyway. I say, lock him up until then!”

Hatrak made a sour face. She set aside the hand net and short spear and took Nopileos’s left claw in her hand, which caused a surprise. “Oh, you only have five fingers like the Argon, not six like us!” the girl exclaimed in excitement. “Hmmm... all right, look here, t’Nop!”

Nopileos spread his claws and docilely pulled his hand from Hatrak to upward, until the sun’s disc became green through his rudimentary swimming webs. The ancient warrior Zhi t’Nnt watched this ritual suspiciously.

“Like that, and now put your thumb around. No, the other... no, I mean... t’Nop!” Mock outraged giggling. “Tell me, don’t you know what a thumb is?” Nopileos hastened to say that he knew and curved his thumb. Somehow, Hatrak’s cool, soft skin felt pleasant on the thin scales on the back of his hand. It tickled a bit and the touch did him good. But what was she doing? The middle finger was pressed down, then Hatrak tried to turn Nopileos’s palm inwards. He offered playful resistance.

“Turn it over! Or I’ll cut it off and sew it back on the other way around!” Nopileos obeyed.

“Okay then! So you know what that means?” the girl asked. “These two fingers mean seven,” she continued when Nopileos didn’t answer but instead wiggled his tiny ears. “and those mean twelve. Well,” she said in a critical tone, “you’re missing a finger, the twelve looks weird, but if you had a sixth finger, you’d have to bend it at the first joint anyway. See?”

Nopileos saw, but didn’t understand. He turned his palm back and forth with the two folded fingers in the sunlight. Slowly it dawned on him that the girl had given him a lesson in the sign language of the Split.

“Every seventh stazura after the zenith, and every twelfth after the nadir of the moon Woltrar, that’s the little one, listen, the two reconnaissance satellites soar over the horizon. There are more, but only these two can get direct glimpse of Ghus-tan for six mizuras. We call them... what do you think we call them?” Black saucer eyes snapped toward the Teladi.

“Seven and Twelve, oh colleague Hatrak?”

The girl clapped her hands enthusiastically. “Look, Zhi, t’Nop is not incredibly stupid!”

The other Split growled gruffly at her address. “But without arms and legs, the creature will soon look stupid. And now let’s return to the village. They are waiting for us.

Hatrak signaled her approval and rose gracefully. “And remember that sign well, t’Nop,” she concluded. The unusually serious undertone in her voice made Nopileos sit up and take notice. “It also means ‘protect me.’”

Another wozura passed. Hatrak took great pleasure in gradually teaching Nopileos the sign language of their people. It surprised her how inquisitive the Teladi was and how quickly he learned. Of course, that also meant that t’Nop would not have to face the beasts of Heaven silently when his day came. She was especially happy about that; a Teladi would face off against the beasts in the realm of the dead! Forehead off, to be precise. Hatrak chuckled; Zhi t’Nnt’s gloomy looks amused her. The old warrior seemed slow to accept that his restrainer and the Teladi creature understood each other so insubordinately well.

They sat back in their favorite spot under the tree by the lake, engrossed by a sign language lesson, under the disdainful observation of Zhi, who was crouching alone a few paces away under another drop-leaf tree. Then it happened: first Nopileos’s sensitive Teladi ears spun, then Zhi and Hatrak also heard it. The girl stopped in mid-sentence and jumped up. Excited calls sounded through the thicket, muffled by the distance. At almost the same time a menacing whistle and screech rolled through the

undergrowth, drowning out the voices. Nopileos was startled. An engine noise, just like the one he'd heard two wozuras ago in the mainland jungle! After a sezura of shock, Zhi t'Nnt wordlessly grabbed Nopileos's arm and quickly pulled the Teladi onto his claws and behind him as he went into a quick trot. Despite her shorter legs, Hatrak effortlessly overtook him. "The village!" she cried. "Have we been discovered?"

From the place in the forest where the palisade fence widened and the clay path changed into broad paving stones, the bright shimmer of a jet which had landed against the torture rock could already be seen. As Zhi, Nopileos, and the girl approached, they saw that the scout's cockpit was open; a Split with a black helmet and protected by leather combat gear crouched before the surroundings. In his hands he held a beam weapon, whose laser sight wandered around, dancing a bright spot over houses, trees, and grass.

"Cover," Zhi called softly to Hatrak. The girl obeyed, pressing herself close against a protrusion in the fence. Zhi pushed Nopileos behind the first wooden house past the entrance, not losing sight of him for even a sezura.

The armed split in the leather gear straightened up slowly. Only now Nopileos noticed two motionless bodies laying a few lengths away from him in the red grass, thin stands of smoke rising from them. That must've been the day watch; they had no chance against an attacker with an energy weapon and an active shield. Nopileos's forehead ridges became bright.

"What do you want?" rang the clear voice of Rhonkar across the clearing. Nopileos discovered the head of the Family in front of the entrance to the community.

"In principle I owe him no answer. But I'll tell him nevertheless: I'm here to destroy and burn down this miserable settlement; every man, every woman, every child! After that I'll report to my Patriarch. He will richly reward me!"

Nopileos couldn't believe his eyes when he suddenly saw Hatrak leave her cover on the other side of the village entrance. She had packed her short spear and was sneaking along the fence inside the village square. What did the girl intend to do? Zhi t'Nnt also noticed it now. Breathlessly, the warrior stared after Hatrak and neglected Nopileos for a moment. The Teladi spotted the opportunity and jumped out from behind the log cabin. After ten, twenty hasty, waddled steps, he crossed the wide path that formed the entrance to the village; his hearts were throbbing with fear. Something glowing hot hissed over his head and drove black shadows across his retinas; someone shot at him! A second shot cracked; Rhonkar, Zhi, and Hatrak were shouting, but he paid no attention. He reached the surprised girl and shoved her violently from her feet, brutally pressing her head into the grass. Not a sezura too soon: a third shot snapped and the palisade fence behind Hatrak and Nopileos began to burn at head-height.

"t'Nop, what are you doing?" Hatrak screamed. She was strong and would free herself from the Teladi's grip at any moment. Expecting another shot, Nopileos raised his head; the shot came, but it did

not hit him. Instead a warrior with a spear raised for throwing silently collapsed, pierced by a blinding energy bolt.

Another spearman—Nopileos breathlessly recognized Thro, the Supreme Warrior—managed to get his projectile on its way and duck under a lighting bolt just in time. The spear crossed a dozen lengths and hit its target perfectly. The pilot's personal energy shield activated and fended off the metal tip of the projectile, the wooden shaft, however, slammed into the beam weapon with great force, which clattered on the ground with a dull sound. Thro was immediately on his feet again and instantly over the pilot. A knife jerked open, penetrating the energy shield in slow motion. Brown blood flowed, and Thro stood up triumphantly.

Hatrak finally freed herself from Nopileos's grip. "I don't know if I should thank you, t'Nop," she said hoarsely. She glared at him, hungry for a fight, appearing in no way impressed by the events and the fallen. "But maybe I'll simply rip your head off first and *then* thank you."

Nopileos carefully smoothed out the metal foil package, that had contained the delicious maya bean pudding he had just devoured, and laid them neatly on the small pile of silver foil that had stacked up to his right in the last half of the inzura. He looked at the dark wooden beams that made up the walls, lost in thought for a while, and started to lie down when the door was unlocked with a loud rattle, and someone stepped into the small room with a flickering animal fat lamp. Before his eyes got used to the glare of the light, he recognized Hatrak's bright voice.

"Hello, Teladi creature t'Nop-lizard!" she said cheerfully. "I came to gnaw your leg off. I'm hungry!"

"Good evening, oh Sister! The right or the left?" Nopileos answered calmly.

"Hmm... don't know. The right?"

Nopileos ostentatiously stuck his right clawed foot forward and opened his eyes wide. Hatrak chuckled hoarsely. "Teladi probably taste really bad," she said. "Besides, you have to beak up the protein chains chemically, otherwise the meat is poisonous for Split. Thro says."

"And what does that mean?"

"No idea, t'Nop, and I don't care! I'm looking forward to seeing you on the torture rock!"

"Tshhh!" Nopileos snorted indignantly. "That's not nice of you!"

Hoarse croaking. "Who ever heard of a nice Split?"

Nopileos had to admit that this argument wasn't lacking a certain validity. "That's right!" he said. "You're not still mad at me, are you, Hatrak?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject.

The Split girl looked at him questioningly. "Because of last wozura, you mean?" She became serious. "I'm not angry. You saved me from a stupidity that could have cost me my life. But that doesn't mean I'm happy about it, you hear?"

"I'm a threat for Ghus-tan, Hatrak, and you know it. You should let me go."

Now the girl laughed again. "Sure, t'Nop-lizard! And even better with an escort to protect you from the ghoks, eh?"

"I wouldn't say no to that."

"Ha. No! In principle it's good that the Patriarch of Chin has finally come to notice us. Rhonkar, my father, is undoubtedly a brave man, but he tends to plan out everything too long and too precisely.

"Like my species..."

At that sentence, Hatrak threw herself on the surprised Teladi and put her knee against his armored throat. "Never, ever say that again! The creature has it all wrong!"

"*Hai, hai!*" Nopileos gasped. Hatrak let go of him and calmed down immediately.

"We are prepared," she said. "We speak the language you used to draw the word of war over the sky. I want to show you something, t'Nop. Come with me."

Zhi t'Nnt, who was waiting in front of the hut, growled furiously as Hatrak came out with Nopileos. He formed a gesture that Nopileos recognized as belonging to the group of signs of adversity. "Do you have to let the creature out now, noble Hatrak? Our preparations are none of her business. Her innards will be spread out on the torture rock in less than four wozuras!"

"They will, Zhi," Hatrak grinned and carefully closed the door of the log cabin. "And they will bring us luck in our campaign against Chin!"

"So put him back in the cabin," Zhi demanded.

"Hatrak sighed. "You do not understand, old man. I want t'Nop to be prepared when he dies, to be at peace with himself, to face the beasts with a clear conscience."

Zhi shook his head, but bit back any further reply. Hatrak grabbed Nopileos's claw and pulled the confused Teladi behind her. In a small clearing outside the village, on the southwestern tip of the island, she stopped. Here they had placed the looted jet of the Patriarch, made its electronics harmless, and disguised it. Astonished, Nopileos realized that it was a training camp; the warriors of the village trained to use a weapon he had never seen before in Ghus-tan. Supreme Warrior Thro came over when he saw Hatrak, greeted her with a wave of his hand, and handed her a long, thin wooden staff as well as a handful of sharp wood splinters the length of a claw.

"You put this in here!" Hatrak stuck one of the wooden shards, which had thin feathers in the back, into the wooden staff. She took a deep breath, put the end of the stick to her mouth, sighted a tree nearby,

and blue into the wooden pipe with all her might. It clacked, and the wooden arrow was sunk halfway into the tree Hatrak had aimed at.

“Tsh! A blowgun!” Nopileos realized, surprised. He had once read about it in an Argon book; his people had never built blowguns because they couldn’t use them for physiological reasons.

Hatrak beamed proudly. “My idea! Right, Thro?” The Supreme Warrior nodded. “And because the arrows are made of wood, they also penetrate through energy screens!” Hatrak continued. “What do you say, t’Nop?”

“I do not like weapons, Hatrak, of any kind. And what can blowguns do against spacecraft?”

“Stupid lizard!” Hatrak scolded, and handed the weapon back to Thro. “You’ll soon see, we’ll drop one man after another, until Nif-Nakh belongs to us, and Rhonkar—”

“That’s enough! Let’s go!” Zhi interrupted the girl in a tone that did not tolerate any contradiction. Amazingly, Hatrak complied at once.

“Well. Hey, t’Nop, tell me, what does this gesture mean?”

But Nopileos followed along with Hatrak’s game with no more than half his attention, and so received a whole series of blows to the head and kicks until he sat again in the darkness of his cell and the door closed behind him. As sweet as he thought Hatrak was, she was also—and remained—a mystery to him.

CHAPTER 17

If history teaches anything, it is this: there is no failure. Whosoever believes in their cause with their whole heart will always win, even if they do not attain their primary goal on their first attempt.

Carta Friends,

Argon historian, 172-214

Senator Nan Gunnar sat behind his study's sweeping gahamoni desk, his face buried in his hands. He made small, circular movements over his eyelids with his index fingers. "My Go... my goodness, Major Kho! Name one reason why I should support your request! With all due respect to your origin, sector Earth and so on, but now I'm sorry to have listened to you."

"I can even give you three reasons, Senator."

"So let me summarize once more, Major Kho," the senator said in a huff. "You want us to release Ghinn t'Whht from protective custody, so that you can use her—in a civilian spaceship—in the name of Argon Prime to return her to the Patriarch of the Split. And once on Nif-Nakh, you want to quietly and secretly comb the jungle for the wreck of the CEO's yacht."

Gunnar reminded Elena of Admiral Morrison, her direct supervisor in the USC on Earth. Morrison was short, hectic, bald, and had no appreciable sense of humor. Gunnar, on the other hand, at least had a penchant for cynicism. "*Hai*, that's correct, Senator. But you can't forget that—"

"Can't forget!" Gunnar jumped up. "Sobert!" He pressed a button to summon his adjutant. "That your valued colleague and fellow earthling Brennan would disappear into the New Sectors along with the *AP Telstar*, I nearly expected. I'll tell you what you can forget. Sobert!" The door opened and Brend Sobert entered. "Forget *it!*" the senator shouted to the perplex Elena, before he turned to his adjutant. "Danna is here today, right? I need him. Immediately."

Elena was shocked. "Just a moment, Senator—Brennan is missing?"

"Major, as you know, the New Sectors are not yet connected to the messaging system. I do not know if Brennan is missing. In any case, he's been overdue for a wozura. Every day I have his, his, well, that blond Goner on my screen!"

"Ninu Gardna," Elena suggested, "his fiancée." She wasn't surprised. Brennan apparently had nothing else in mind than making those who trusted him unhappy. In three wozuras he would reappear carefree and be amazed at all the excitement.

“Yes, yes. Exactly the one!” the senator agreed. “You know, she’s pretty to look at, but she gets on my last nerve. And on the next video screen, I get to keep Senator Steen-Hilmanson, who is standing on my neck because of your damned M4/Buster!” Beads of sweat glistened on the forehead of the corpulent Argon. “Do you know what a thing like that is worth?”

Elena would have liked to have answered “As much as a corrugated steel drum with a crank mechanism,” but it would be tactically unwise to deliberately annoy the senator. Nopileos needed her help! She would take care of Kyle later, especially since Brennan was a man who generally knew how to take care of himself.

There was another argument that Elena assumed the senator would not take lightly. “Senator, according to the laws of the Argon Federation and the *Community of Planets*, Ghinn t’Whht is a free person. If she decides to return to Nif-Nakh, you cannot deny her that.”

Nan Gunnar dropped back into his padded chair. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with a cellulose towel. “I know, Kho-san,” he replied after a few seconds, in a much calmer tone. “I know. You see, the Split will take everything that you do as an official act by Argon Prime. Or at least they will try. Whether you’re out there with your very own personal sports parachute and nothing else, or with the entire Argon fleet. Right, Danna?”

Elena looked around; she hadn’t noticed that Ban Danna had already entered the room. Danna, who had recently been promoted to colonel and since then had floated back and forth between Cloudbase, Argon Prime, and Port Thornton, gave her a friendly wink instead of a greeting.

“You have to credit Major Kho for returning her M4/Buster in perfect condition, right, Senator?” He grinned saucily. Gunnar made a sigh; the two men who were so different got along in a subliminal way that Elena did not fully understand.

“Colonel Danna, you are a great help to me, as ever,” the senator snorted sarcastically.

Danna laughed. “The mission that Major Kho is proposing is one we should have carried out long ago,” he said curtly and in a matter-of-fact tone.

Elena pressed her lips together, as her conscience suddenly responded vehemently. So far, she had told nobody about the encounter with #efaa, and she did not want to do that before completing her mission. She remained silent.

Gunnar scratched his chin and pulled his face in an unhappy grimace. “That,” he said, stretching out the word, “is indeed a problem, but—“

“As I see it, Senator Gunnar,” Elena interrupted, “it’s all about what the Argon Prime government can take responsibility for.”

“Not quite, because...,” began the senator.

Elena raised her forefinger. “One moment. The split will hold the Argon responsible for private and official actions, that is true. But that should not force the government into incapacitation!”

“Right, just because the Split will object to absolutely anything we do doesn’t mean we should simply do nothing anymore.” Danna eagerly agreed with Elena.

“Now don’t be childish, Colonel. Is that an argument?”

“Senator...”

“My goodness!” the Argon said. “Always just ‘Senator, Senator!’ Whether to return Ghinn t’Whht to Nif-Nakh is one thing! To use that as a smoke-screen to secretly search the planet for a crashed ship is another! Do you understand? Major Kho? Danna? Heavens!”

Both shook their heads simultaneously. Of course, they understood the government member’s concerns only too well, but sooner or later the senator would have to give in, because there was no viable alternative.

“The government doesn’t need to know about this mission officially,” Elena stated. Secretly, she wondered if she would argue the same way to her superiors on Earth; but that didn’t matter at all. “If the mission fails, Argon can deny any knowledge.”

The senator who had exerted himself in his outburst, sank back into the upholstery. “It is very important to you to find this Teladi, isn’t it?”

“Yes, very! And you kill three birds with one stone, maybe more. You improve your relations with the CEO, with the Borons, with the Split—if the mission succeeds, that is—and in the long run you also get the data that the Ancient Ones left behind for all of us.” Elena didn’t know if the latter was true, but she took it as almost certain.

“Colonel?”

The intelligence agent looked thoughtfully at the low ceiling for a few seconds before answering. “The risk to Argon reputation is by my estimation slight, the reward for success is great. If you want to hear my opinion, Senator, in that case we should give Major Kho every support in planning and execution. Have I ever been wrong?”

“Rarely,” Gunnar admitted with a grumble. “But it has certainly happened before.” Danna kept silent, but smiled. “All right,” the senator continued, and turned to Elena. “Major Kho, Agent Danna will assist you in planning your private”—he emphasized the last word—“journey. Good luck.”

While male Split did not on average grow much larger than medium-sized human males, although they appeared stocky and massive, their women generally towered over them by half or even an entire head. Female Split were tall and slender to spindly, their pale-yellowish skin stretched distinctly over long cords of tendons and on the upper arms also over muscle bulges. Split women had significant body

strength that was hard to expect in such fragile-looking beings. By human standards, female Split appeared strangely aristocratic and aloof. This was partly due to their domineering appearance, which they used equally in dealing with their peers as they did with others. On the other hand, the high cheekbones and the strict, ascetic facial features contributed to this assessment. Even Ghinn t'Whht, who was standing in the middle of her apartment, fixing Elena with knitted eyebrows and a hand held up in a gesture of disapproval, was no exception. She looked like an angel of vengeance made flesh, or the bony consort of death, but the exact opposite was the case. She was pregnant, already in the eleventh mazura, and the slight curvature of her body already slightly showed under the flowing robe.

“The creature will immediately remove itself from my sight!” Ghinn hissed with an undertone of unconcealed hatred in her throaty voice. “I will return to Nif-Nakh when it pleases me, and it does not please me at this time!” A return to her hated master, the Patriarch of Chin, ruler over all Split, was out of the question for Ghinn. Was Brennan not escaping at that moment only because of her unfortunate intervention with the infinitely valuable jumpship? At the time she had wanted to provoke the the Patriarch to her death, and she had done so expertly. Chon t'Nnt, the special messenger and confidant of the Patriarch, had lost his life because of her lack of restraint, which she regretted more than anything else. No. The Patriarch's tolerance for her indignation was undoubtedly stretched beyond any reasonable bounds. If she returned now, Chin would not allow her to live one mizura longer than it took to bring the little warrior into the world. After that, she could be sure that she would be put into the wreck of a spaceship and burned to death in the beautiful, deep-blue Nif-Nakh atmosphere. Best case scenario! In the worst case, on the other hand, she would be tortured, and not just a little, before she was questioned. Like all Split, Ghinn t'Whht was not afraid of pain and danger. But just as any other intelligent being, she also strived to make the best out of any situation. The return to the ruling planet, proposed by this presumptuous human creature Elena Kho, was denied to her as long as Patriarch Chin still lived.

Elena, leaning her back against the wall in an deliberately easy-going pose, her hands behind her and one leg bent, knew little of Ghinn's motives. Why the Split woman had freed her, Brennan, and the crew of the *AP Aladna Hill* from the dungeons of the government palace had always been a mystery to her. Originally she assumed that this had happened at Chin's explicit command. But she began to doubt this assessment more and more.

“The creature is still here!” Ghinn said furiously. She slowly approached Elena, with the intent to carry her out of her apartment herself. Elena quickly pushed away from the wall. She had no doubt that Ghinn would actually carry out the task. But she did not want things to come to a skirmish. At that moment, her communication bracelet began to vibrate. *Perfect timing*, she thought. “Ghinn, if you still want to think it over, you can still reach me for the rest of the week through the secretary of the—”

“Cursed be the bloodline of the creature!” Ghinn shrieked and formed the associated gesture with three fingers of the left hand.

Elena hurried to leave the apartment. “Reason doesn’t seem to be a cosmological constant,” she murmured to herself. What humans considered a modern norm of behavior was evidently regarded by the Split as soft and weak; what was, however, was considered irrational for the descendants of Earth was the order of the day for the Split. Strange that they even possessed advanced technology and space travel! Elena shook her head and leaned against the wall in the hallway before the elevator. She answered the call on her still-vibrating bracelet, which projected a palm-sized holosphere in the air.

“Oh, endorphins be praised! Great, funny, brave star warrior Ele Na!” I am so pleased and happy to see and taste your funny, hairy face!”

Elena looked confused at the Boron for a fraction of a second. The small secondary feelers of the creature were moving back and forth in an invisible, sloshing current. Then she felt the scales fall from her eyes. Of course!

“Nola Hi! I expected you in two or three tazuras at the earliest!” It was to their advantage that the Boron scientific ethicist, who would accompany them on their flight to Nif-Nakh, had already arrived here. If she could not move Ghinn t’Whht to cooperate, she’d have to come up with a new strategy to get a landing clearance for Nif-Nakh. But the Boron was worried about other things at the moment.

“Funny, big, happy star warrior, you will end my life, erase my biological existence, and negate my existence!”

“I don’t understand—negate your existence?”

“A Split, loud, boorish, unintentionally strange and lovable in his own viciousness, announces and threatens to destroy my life and my beautiful, shapely ship, should it and I not remove my presence from the star system of this bright sun within the course of two stazuras! However, we will not do that in any case and under any circumstances! Not ever!”

Elena hit the elevator’s call button with her free hand. The light lit up. “I’m sorry. One more time, slowly. Why? And which Split?”

“His name is Uchan t’Sect! Split do not work together with Boron creatures. They kill them on sight, he claims and asserts believably.”

Elena groaned. No, reason was definitely not a constant one could count on in this part of the universe.: Uchan t’Sect was the pilot of the vessel hired on Ferd’s advice! Only three mizuras later, she stormed into the center of the *AP Nikkonofune*, strapped herself in, and requested emergency clearance to launch. As soon as sector control gave the launch signal, the engines of the small spacecraft fired and made it shoot skywards like an arrow.

Niji automatically fed the transmitted approach data into the navigation system of the *AP Nikkonofune*. The ship elegantly aligned its hull with a few gentle thrusts of the control thrusters, which gradually adjusted the trajectory to nominal values. Port Thornton, the great central station that circled Argon Prime once every eight and a half stazuras, crept inexorably toward the crosshair that Niji projected

into the center of the cockpit window. Elena drummed her fingers impatiently. Port Thornton was the linchpin of all flight maneuvers in the star system around the sun, Sonra, because the station housed the Argon Prime space traffic control. In addition to this important institution, other installations were stationed there, of the Argon military as well as numerous civil offices, which dealt with interstellar logistics, planetary geodesy, general international relations, and the arbitration of trade disputes. Elena looked at the giant cylinder with growing anxiety. Nearly two stazuras had passed since the *AP Nikkonofune* had been allowed to take off from Airfield C in Argonia City. Bureaucracy followed wherever people settled!

The station grew noticeably bigger. Already with her naked eye, Elena could make out the many thousands of windows that covered the outer hull of the cylinder in long rows. From the hub, two red chains of light extended parallel to each other for several hundred meters into space; they looked like stringed lanterns. In reality, the fairy lights were merely holographic projections that marked the approach vector to the docking tunnel. Not that modern autopilots needed such visual confirmation; the landing beam guided each ship with millimeter accuracy and safety. But it was a good old tradition that all pilots in the *Community* appreciated—apart from the Paranids, who rock-solidly claimed to have absolute sight.

Elena blinked. Something wasn't right. Now that the approach angle of the *AP Nikkonofune* was approaching the required levels, she realized that something was wrong with the gate leaves. She had Niji zoom in on the hub of the station with optical image enhancement. An icy shock shot through her. "*Chikisho!*" she whispered, "crap!"

While the lower gate leaf looked quite normal, the upper leaf was severely deformed and was canted at its anchors. Through the opening, Elena could see the double ring of the landing carousel slowly rotating in opposite directions. She swallowed hard. A voice in the back of her head insisted that whatever had happened here had something to do with Nola Hi and Uchan t'Scct—and with her, too! The landing lights changed to green and the navcomputer's status display showed the beginning of the approach. The station obviously maintained flight operations despite the damage. Maybe everything wasn't as bad as it looked! Elena felt her nervousness rise.

The situation that Elena encountered upon entering the Port Thornton command post was simply grotesque. High above, the Boron Nola Hi hung beneath the ceiling in his translucent environmental suit and looked down cheerfully. His tentacles fluttered through the milky material of the suit. One stride away from him stood a broad-shouldered Split below him, whom Elena knew from Ferd Harling's archive photos: That had to be Uchan t'Scct. The Split spoke in sharp tones to a uniformed Argon whose badges identified as a Commander. Elena didn't recognize the man, but suspected it was the station commander. A few meters away from the Split, and outside its reach, was a Teladi in black garb, who looked up and conversed hastily with the Boron hanging under the ceiling with a steam of clicking and popping sounds. To all appearances, the saurian had mastered the natural spoken language of the Boron!

Far off from all of this, a bony figure stretched more than two meters in height, who seemed to take only a passing interest in the fray. Elena had never before come so close to a Paranid; she was duly impressed. The creature had thin but strong arms, which was divided several times by joints, and ended in dangerous-looking gripping claws. The legs stood bony and gray against the ground, where they turned into hoof-like stalks. The slender head had a protruding mouth which slightly resembled a Boron's proboscis. If one didn't look very closely, the milk-white pupils were hardly distinguishable from the rest of the eye, but only in two of the three eyes, because the third looked gray and blind. The clothing consisted of a tight-fitting combat suit, which emphasized the bony structure of the creature. Kalmanckalsaltt, Elena reminded herself, was the name of the Paranid.

She thanked the petty officer who had led her to the control room. He smiled winningly and interrupted his supervisor's discussion with Uchan t'Scet to announce Elena's arrival.

The station manager shook Elena's hand. "Commander Pohl Frederik," he introduced himself in a clearly unnerved tone. "Major Kho from sector Earth, I presume?"

Elena nodded. "That's right. Commander, can you tell me what happened here?"

Frederik furrowed his brow. "So far it's only clear that this Boron there"—he pointed upwards—"switched his Octopus on manual control and then demolished of the exit leaves at full throttle."

"And with it caused at least twelve and a half million credits of damage—shhkk!" the black-clad Teladi joined in angrily. He had interrupted his clacking rant and turned around. "Permit me, worthy colleague, Jorilas Ywimuweos Maniris II is my name, First Teladi Insurance Alliance—FTIA."

Elena made a bow. Not all Teladi wore clothes, many simply walked around in their natural, green scale armor. But those who clothed themselves usually wore the commercial uniform of the Teladi company. This saurian here, with its red-glowing eyes, was however one of the very rare exceptions. He almost looked like an undertaker. *She*, Elena corrected herself in her head.

"Worthy colleague, I happened to be in negotiations here on Port Thornton when your crew member, the Boron Nola Hi, with his space..." Maniris stopped suddenly with blanched forehead ridges and glanced past Elena, who also turned her head to follow the stare of the the insurance lizard. The Paranid Kalmanckalsaltt, who until now had watched the scene with aloofness, took two steps closer; his long back curved like a praying mantis ready to pounce. This was the Paranid combat position when they anticipated close combat. Kalmanckalsaltt had everyone's undivided attention.

"These unholy discussions paralyze our geometric competence," he said with astonishingly clear modulation. "They amount to nothing. The black Teladi may negotiate the monetary aspects of the accident with the General Consulate of the Boron Queendom. The question of guilt is settled."

"Not for the FTIA, dear coll—"

The protruding eyes of the Paranid swiveled parallel to each other and fixed themselves on the Teladi insurance agent. Kalmanckalsaltt didn't say a word, but spread his long bony arms like a hug of death

and pushed his head forward a bit further. Paranids had a penchant for theatricality which often seemed exaggerated to other creatures. But not this gesture: “One more word and I will crush you like a bug,” it seemed to say. The Teladi’s forehead turned white and he remained silent, intimidated.

Elena wholeheartedly supported the Paranid’s approach. The Three-eyed seemed to have more sense than the Split, Boron, and Teladi put together! Whatever else was going on here, she wouldn’t learn it while everyone was at words with each other. She took charge.

“Commander Frederik, does your report require further clarification?”

The Argon nodded. “Yes and no... no. We have an insurance claim here and the Boron, as a diplomat from the Boron Queendom, has immunity anyway. As far as I’m concerned, you can leave the station.” He looked directly into Elena’s eyes and added: “And quite honestly, the sooner the better!”

Elena suppressed a response. It was understandable that the Commander wanted to rid of this troop of troublemakers as quickly as possible. She was just glad that no one had been hurt by this point! It would probably be even better if she stopped the mission to Nif-Nakh here and now, before anything worse happened. It was beyond question that Uchan t’Sctt had threatened the Boron, which must’ve driven him to a panicked reaction. What if something like that happened way out in space? Or on Nif-Nakh? That Ghinn t’Whht refused her cooperation was in itself a reason to give up.

But Nopileos needed their help, and as soon as possible! She wanted to talk with Nola Hi, Uchan, and the Paranid before she made a final decision.

CHAPTER 18

My love is not conditionless, but it is true! My dedication is not boundless, but it is great!

Martinus Sandas,

Argon cultural historian,

Founder of the Gonor Movement, died 217

Another deep, dark night over Ghus-tan, the village of the insurgents. Somewhere outside, a small campfire crackled, ignited between the satellite intervals by the watch crew. They had become a little more careless, since they expected the arrival of the Patriarch's troops anyway; perhaps they had already been too careless. From time to time, a sharp gust of wind passed through the nearby treetops; the fire then blazed up audibly, but a shower of tiny water droplets shaken from the leaves of the trees, muffled the flame with light hissing.

Hatrak lay in the half-dark of the woman's house with eyes open. Unbonded woman lived here: girls, warriors, and the elderly. As Rhonkar's daughter, she had her own compartment, spacious and separated from the rest of the room by a half-height wall of roughly hewn stone. She was due it rightfully; even though all the others had to sleep packed together, Hatrak didn't question for a sezura the benefits conferred on her by grace of noble birth. In fact, she brooded over the Teladi, the saurian from the distant *Community of Planets*. She had never left Nif-Nakh in her entire life; not once had she even crossed the borders of Ghus-tan. Now she was very young, she was aware of that, but Rhonkar had great plans: for Ghus-tan, for the Family, for her. But there was Nopileos, t'Nop, as she called him. He was very different, didn't meet the descriptions of the elders when they talked about the other people of the *Community*. There was something to t'Nop that seemed like a warrior and something that was alien and unfamiliar. And then there was his devotion, his genuine friendliness. Nopileos would die by torture, that was certain and it was also proper. Hatrak was looking forward to it. Her forehead wrinkled in worried lines. Hopefully t'Nop would be prove worthy!

As if from afar, a long drawn-out, mournful sound rang out between the beams of the houses, only softly, but still alien and sinister. A low pitched remark in the Split language came in: "Kala thk, chro ghok—fear the dawn, dearest ghok." Parthol t'Flk, the commander of this tazura's night watch, laughed croakingly. "Hai," came his answer in the trading language. Hatrak shivered. She curled into a ball and pulled the fur blanket over her head. What if t'Nop never saw the big waters again? She knew about him, that water was the element of his ancestors. How could he enter the everlasting night if he were not at peace with himself and his ancestors? How could he face the beasts of heaven? And how under these circumstances could he face the torture with the courage and dignity that she wished for

him? He wouldn't be able to do it! Of course, Zhi didn't care about any of this. Even Rhonkar didn't waste any thought on it. Hatrak rolled over to her other side, trying in vain to shut her eyes tight. For the inhabitants of Ghus-tan, t'Nop was nothing more than an saurian creature. A particularly brave one for sure, but only an intruder, a foreign member from outside, a troublemaker. For her, Hatrak, Nopileos was more than that: he was her first encounter with the outside world; her assurance that the world out there even existed! More than that, Nopileos was her teacher, even if he didn't feel that way himself. In a few wozuras she had learned more about herself, her people, and all the other peoples from his behavior and mutterings than in all the jazuras before. And something else...

He was her *friend*.

With a jerk, the girl whisked the sleeping fur from her body and straightened up. She now knew what to do: after everything that t'Nop had done for her, consciously or unconsciously, it was her duty to prepare him for what was to come.

Qham t'Trrh—once the first female restrainer, now an wise elder—blinked at the girl in surprised as she scurried past her cot. “Where to, Hatrak?”

The small Split stopped and turned on her feet. She hesitated. “To pay tribute to the beasts, Qham,” she finally said.

The old woman chuckled. “I see. Well, don't do anything stupid, Noble Hatrak, daughter of Rhonkar and Aqhns.”

Hatrak pressed her lips together. “No.”

Outside, Parthol t'Fllk and another Split looked at her curiously, but said nothing. She ignored the two and struck out in the direction of the latrines. The chances were quite favorable that no one else was there at this hour. The inhabitants of Ghus-tan slept—apart from the guard, and perhaps a handful of restless people like her. Instead of entering the latrines, she circled around them but behind their screens, moving as silently as she could towards the prisoner's barracks. Protected from the watch's gaze by the moons' shadows, the large palisade fence, and the massive arc of log cabins nestled up against the fence, she soon reached the back of the prison with her heart pounding. She felt the blood in her veins quicken. She pressed an eye to the crack between two beams with an almost euphoric mood; it was too dark inside, she couldn't see a thing except for a tiny, silvery reflection that probably came from the cargo box or its contents.

“Wake up, t'Nop!” she whispered hoarsely. When nothing moved, she cried again in a low voice, “Nopileos!” The guards were fifty lengths away on the other side of the hut; they couldn't hear her at this distance.

“Hat... Hatrak?” the saurian's voice hissed in confusion. The Teladi had obviously woken up just that moment.

“Quiet!” Hatrak warned. “Listen, t’Nop! We’re going to the lake, just you and me, without Zhi! No one knows about it, and we’ll be back in a stazura.”

Long, stunned silence. Then: “Aren’t there any guards today?”

“I’ll open the door when they’re patrolling elsewhere.” She groped for her pouch to make sure she had the key in it. “Can you be quiet, t’Nop?”

“As a hatchling!”

“Good,” she whispered, unsure if Nopileos’s remark meant agreement or not. “Then wait.”

Pressing against the side wall of the hut, she worked her way far enough to be able to glimpse the clearing. Murmured words came across incomprehensibly; actually, no unnecessary word could be spoken while on watch duty! At any other time, she would have promptly informed the Supreme Warrior of his underlings’ offense, but now she was glad for it, because it was very convenient for her. Still shadowed from the silvery moonlight by the barracks, she squeezed herself around the corner; the guards were facing the opposite direction, peering into the fading campfire that they were now allowing to burn down.

The lock clicked loudly as she put in the key and eagerly turned it; she looked back over her shoulder, startled, but the guards were carrying on their muffled conversation as before. Hatrak decided she would have to inform Thro about the undisciplined behavior of his men after all. These unworthy Split apparently left too much to the protection of the palisade fence and focused their attention exclusively on the paved path that led into the village. There were other ways to enter and leave the village. At least, if you were no bigger than a child—or a Teladi! She opened the door a crack; Nopileos, who was already expecting her, slipped nimbly through, and immediately froze when he saw the sentry sitting fifty lengths away. Hatrak quickly closed the door again, more carefully and silently this time, and pushed Nopileos hurriedly around the corner, out of the field of view of the clearing. Done! She triumphed internally. Now the only thing left was to leave the village, but that should be the far smaller problem!

The forest path was frighteningly quiet; only the sounds of their soles and claws pattered through the silence. Nopileos lead, because he could make out more than the girl in the gloom of night.

“We have to be back in a stazura, t’Nop,” Hatrak said loudly. By now they had gotten far enough that there was no danger of being heard back in the village.

“Why, oh Hatrak?”

“Why!” she snorted. Silently she rounded the meat drying hut. Now it wasn’t far to the shore.

“Hatrak, sister, why are you doing this?” You are getting yourself into a lot of trouble.”

Abruptly, the girl stopped. Nopileos noticed only a moment later that Hatrak no longer followed at his claws, and paused to walk the few steps back to her.

“No, you’ll get *me* into trouble if we’re not back in time!” Her voice was loud, aggressive. Nopileos tried to penetrate the darkness with his eyes to see more than the colorless silhouette of the girl. Why was she doing this? And why was she putting him in this position? She seemed to expect in all seriousness that he would go back with her to end up on the torture rock in a few tazuras. And if he didn’t, there was a chance that she would end up there in his place! That wasn’t fair, he didn’t want to make that decision. He had become far too fond of the cute girl for that.

“Keep going, waddlefoot,” Hatrak commanded. Nopileos obeyed in silence, lost in thought. When they finally broke through the thickets around the shore, a fresh breeze moved across the starlit, sandy beach. It carried the forbidden scent of freedom. And there was something else that made Nopileos’s forehead ridges pale.

“We should go back,” he forced through gritted teeth, “immediately!”

“Afraid of your own courage, t’Nop?” Hatrak teased, and stepped closer to Nopileos. “You don’t have to be. Go in the water. Swim a lap. I trust you.” She gave him a friendly push in the direction of the gently lapping waves.

“No...”

Hatrak’s questioning eyes were filled with the glow of a pale, green light in front of her even before he could explain himself to her. But explanations were no longer needed. Hatrak’s mouth opened and her gaze rose in horror. From the the direction of the water, the flap-flap of powerful leather wings approached; a tremendous fanfare made the Teladi tremble, a poisonous stench made him gasp. A beast from the primordial jungle!

“Back! Hatrak!” Nopileos cried in panic. He grabbed the girl’s right arm hard, to push her toward the jungle path, but she immediately tore away from him. The Teladi’s claws cut four parallel wounds in her upper arm, but she ignored it.

“A ghok!” she whispered in astonishment. These animals should should only exist back on the mainland; here on the island they had been completely wiped out long ago. She wish for her blowpipe, but there had been no reason for a detour to the armory. She raised her short lance gripped the weapon tightly in her hand’ then she would defend herself and t’Nop! As if the jungle dragon knew that his prey would escape into the dense forest, it lay on the ground between the entrance to the path and Nopileos and Hatrak, cutting off that route. Its feeding tail snaked forward while its dull, dead face showed no emotion. Step by step, Nopileos backed away from the approaching, gargantuan insect; Hatrak, on the other hand, held her position.

“Hatrak, get away, please, quick!” Nopileos cried in fear.

The girl didn’t answer. Instead, she gripped the spear more firmly, waited for the feeding tail to reach her, and stormed forward with a battle cry. The giant insect looked at the approaching girl with dully uninterested eyes. Its feeding tail curled and jerked forward at lightning speed; Hatrak only avoided this movement with some effort. She ducked under the tail and avoided the continual beat of its wings, and

found herself just in front of the long, semitransparent throat of the creature. Nopileos flinched as Hatrak thrust her short lance into the ghok's body without hesitation; for a fraction of a sezura he was sure that Hatrak would be victorious. The animal trumpeted and recoiled frantically; it pulled Hatrak with her as she clung to her lance. Corrosive blood splattered and coated the brave Split girl's skin, but Hatrak took no notice of the burns. Finally she freed her weapon again, but instead of retreating, she renewed her attack. The ghok, already mortally wounded through the deep wound to its delicate nerve center reacted with unforeseen force this time. It lifted two lengths in the air and swept Hatrak off her feet with a slap of its wings. With dwindling strength, it stumbled toward the girl, the feeding tail stretched ahead to the side. Hatrak scrambled to her feet and jabbed again, hitting precisely a claw's length from the first wound. Still dying, the jungle dragon bit. A hideous crunch resounded as its jaws pierced the girl's body.

Nopileos cried out in horror. "Hatrak!" Laying backwards on the ground, she gave him a look with eyes that slowly showed their whites, and made his scales try to stand on end. Never in his life would he forget that look. Then the dying, giant insect collapsed and buried Hatrak underneath.

CHAPTER 19

Can an Argon be a friend-foe of a Split? Yes.

Can a Paranid be a friend-foe of a Split? Not ruled out.

Can a Teladi be a friend-for of a Split? Difficult to imagine, but possible.

Can a Boron be the friend-foe of a Split?

Never! Not to end of all time!

Uchan t'Scct

The picture was slowly beginning to clear. “Well,” Uchan tScct admitted with glowing eyes, “I expressed my interest in the temperature at which the Boron creature’s breathing fluid starts to boil. But”—his lips formed a sardonic line—“aboard an Argon space station this is naturally not understood as a threat, but as mere conversation. The creature provides us company.”

“No!” Nola Hi cheeped down from the ceiling.

The Split made an uninterpretable gesture. “Whatever. Kho, I will not work together with a Boron creature and I will certainly not take orders from it.”

Meanwhile, Elena managed to work out what Uchan’s problem was. The Split had been furious that Nola Hi had contacted the *FL Raindragon* so care-freely and without previous permission, as if there were never any differences between Split and Boron. Moreover, the scientific ethicist had posed, in his innocent way, as the mission leader. Unfortunately, the responsibilities hadn’t been sorted out by then, an oversight that now came back to cause problems. Elena fervently hoped that Uchan t’Sct had a strong enough sense of professionalism that he could accept the presence of the Boron aboard his ship, at least for the duration of this mission.

“Nola Hi is taking part in this flight only as an observer and adviser on behalf of the Queendom. I am leading the mission.”

“Is that so?” Uchan asked, as if he doubted Elena’s statement. He gave his partner Kalmanckalsaltt a sideways glance, but the Paranid had returned to his usual passivity. No matter which species, Kalmanckalsaltt wanted nothing to do with them, not even his own, since he had been exiled due to his unholy stereo vision. With enough credits, he might perhaps grow a third eye one day. But credits didn’t come from discussion.

“The pretty, brave, and funny Ele Na is right, speaks the truth, and has—”

“Yes!” Uchan barked. He performed a gesture of cursing. “Kho, the details.”

In the following half stazura, Elena let Uchan t’Scct and Kalmanckalsaltt in on the fundamentals of the mission. Although there was some need for clarification from the Boron on some points, Nola Hi wisely stayed in the background.

The first time the name Ghinn t’Whht was mentioned, the Split reacted with obvious confusion. Elena initially attributed this to the well-known name, but she was mistaken.

“I would like to speak with the honorable Ghinn t’Whht,” Uchan demanded. “If I am to endure the Boron creature, it is better that she be my restrainer.”

Elena had no idea what the Split was talking about. Maybe he hadn’t heard her right: Ghinn t’Whht refused to turn to Nif-Nakh. Elena tried to explain this to the Split careful.

“I know the respectable Ghinn t’Whht very well,” Uchan replied with a strange, inward-looking expression.

Elena was astonished. “How is that possible?”

“For three and a half jazuras I performed my service as the chief pilot on board the fast courier ship *Bone Scout* until its destruction. First under the command of Whalmar t’BlIt, then for more than two years under Cho t’Nnt, and finally, after Cho’s death, under Folim t’Ghhm for just a mazura.”

Elena shrugged her shoulders. “A ha?”

“During the time when Cho t’Nnt was commanding the *Bone Scout*, the respectable Ghinn t’Whht frequently stayed on board the ship, often in the company of the Patriarch of Chin, and sometimes alone.” Uchan fell silent. It had been an open secret that Ghinn had fostered forbidden feelings for the commander of the *Bone Scout*. But Uchan didn’t want to let the human woman from Earth in on it. The fact that he knew Ghinn had to suffice. “I would like to talk with her,” he reiterated again.

Already a stazura in, the Split should get his way; Elena personally brought him down to Argon City in the *AP Nikkonofune*, where she waited aboard the ship for his return. When Uchan finally came back, to Elena’s relieve—and utter surprise—he wasn’t alone.

“The creature will not touch me!” Ghinn t’Whht hissed with sparkling eyes as Elena prepared to help her up from reclining. The Split women got up angrily. She had spent the short flight aboard the *AP Nikkonofune* in the tiny sleeping cabin of the ship while Uchan t’Scct sat next to Elena in the cockpit.

They hadn’t been in Argon City for four stazuras. Uchan had spoken to Ghinn, and to Elena’s great astonishment, after the conversation, the Split woman had agreed to return to Nif-Nakh. Where this sudden change of heart had come from, Elena couldn’t say. As far as she understood the strange facial expressions of the Split, both Uchan as well as Ghinn showed a strange degree of satisfaction, as if they had come to an acceptable outcome for both of them. But in Elena’s presence, they barely exchanged a word with each other, and if so, not in Neo-Ancient Japanese, but in their mother tongue.

Millimeter by millimeter, Niji led the *AP Nikkonofune* to the side of the *FL Raindragon*, where Uchan's partner Kalmanckalsaltt was supervising the final sequence of the docking maneuver. The Paranid had not been idle in the last stazuras: using thin but extremely resistant artificial metal walls, he had divided the spacious hold of the freighter into four additional cells. Two of these compartments were now supplied with respiratory fluid by the environmental system, so that the Boron scientific ethnicist could move around without a protective suit. The other two rooms were intended for Elena and Ghinn. Nola Hi, in turn, had transferred some of his equipment from his ship, the *Boron Great Fun* to the *FL Raindragon* so he could send the crippled ship back on the long journey home via autopilot.

When Ghinn and Uchan left the *AP Nikkonofune* through the temporary entrance tunnel, Elena gave Niji a pair of last instructions. She also wanted her ship to return to its home base, unmanned. She hoped that the Argon military would keep the M4 for her and not send it on missions. Her lips drew into a small smile as he finally made her way to the airlock to cross the tunnel over to the *FL Raindragon*. "Last one turns out the lights" went the very old saying from Earth. She turned once more in the cramped passageway to the lock and glanced back into the cockpit. Strange, how much her heart yearned for something it could call home!

"*Kyotsukette Nikkonofune*," she murmured, "take care of yourself," then the outer bulkhead hissed softly as it closed behind her.

The massive headquarters of the *FL Raindragon* seemed tidy and surprisingly friendly. A large, two-part window provided a wide-angle view of surrounding space. Extensive control panels with flickering buttons and changing holoprojections stretched a half-length through the room. In front of the instruments there were three simple, metal seats, the middle of which was a raised command chair of Split construction. Uchan was already sitting on it and was operating flight systems as well as the weapons control station, the control panel for which was mounted on a swivel arm. The cockpit's other instrumented walls were subdivided into rectangles of different sizes and outlandish colors. To the right of Uchan's command chair, Kalmanckalsaltt towered in front of a narrow lectern that was peppered with blinking signals. Paranids never settled down, at least not in front of other species. No one even knew if they ever sat or lay down.

The *FL Raindragon* took off and left the star system of Argon Prime four hours later through one of the four stargates. The flight from Argon Prime to Nif-Nakh would require about five and a half tazuras; that was roughly a third of the maximum distance one could travel through the *Community of Planets*. How many light years the *Community* actually spanned, astronomers were paradoxically not able to say with certainty. The only thing that was certain was that some star systems must be many hundreds or thousands of light years apart, even though their jumpgates made them direct neighbors. Other sectors, on the other hand, obviously belonged to common regions in the Milky Way; the colored gasses of the Halmnan Aurora, which stretched in all its glory from across the Argon regions to over the domains of the Split, were a well-known example of this. In addition, there were still some star systems and sectors that had escaped any positioning on the galactic map. However, the scientific community agreed that

these locations were millions of light years distant and mostly likely belonged to galaxy clusters on the edge of the so-called Local Group.

Near the end of the first flight-tazura, a messenger drone went to the Patriarch of Chin which informed the leader of all Split of the imminent arrival of his consort. Nola Hi, who at the request of Uchan never left his environmental space, initially suggested merely asking Chin for landing authorization, but both Uchan as well as Ghinn rejected this as being too submissive. Both preferred an impersonal note that confronted the Patriarch with completed facts. Elena did not know why he hated the ruler of the Split so intensely, but that he did was obvious.

Ghinn, too, did not seem well disposed to her lord, and the prospect of meeting Chin soon apparently left her completely cold. The Split woman almost never spoke; if she said anything at all, she spoke exclusively to Uchan. She avoided Elena and Kalmanckalsaltt wherever she went. If an encounter was unavoidable, she treated the Earth woman and the Paranid as though they were invisible. How had Uchan managed to get Ghinn to return to Nif-Nakh? All indications showed that she would prefer to spend the rest of her life in exile than return! Elena racked her brains but found no meaningful explanation. At mid-tazura on the second tazura of flight, Elena squeezed through the narrow central aisle that separated the Boron's environmental region from the oxygen region to confront Ghinn with these questions directly. The Split woman opened the temporary door, but immediately pressed the close button when she saw who had requested admission. Elena put her foot on the pressure seal of the guide rail so that the door opened again. "Ghinn, we have to talk."

"The creature talks with the Boron thing next door," Ghinn replied with contempt. "She will remove herself immediately."

When Elena refused and was about to step into the room, Ghinn stepped into her path with her eyes full of hatred. With a sudden movement, she jerked her right arm up and struck at Elena's temple, but Elena's reflexes kicked in and she ducked skillfully under the blow. Despite her advanced pregnancy, Ghinn was still very nimble; she turned instantly and prepared to strike Elena again. But Elena was faster: before the Split woman could act, she was already behind her and reached for the menacingly raised arm, which she turned back with only one hand and locked at the joint. Ghinn struggled hard, but Elena didn't let up. After a few moments, Ghinn surrendered, panting.

"You only win because of my condition!"

"I know that," Elena replied calmly, pretty sure that was the case. "I know you hate me, Ghinn," she said, pulling the Split woman away from the door so that it could close. "I'm sorry, but having said that, I can also understand it."

"Then leave me in peace," Ghinn hissed, unconsciously switching over to the more respectful style of address used for equals.

"I will, as soon as you answer some of my questions. Can I let you go now?"

"Try it!" Ghinn snapped, her eyes flashing.

Elena had barely released Ghinn's wrists when Ghinn turned in a fluid motion and rammed her elbow into Elena's face; Elena, taken completely by surprise, reeled and fell backwards with a dull sound, where she lay dazed for a moment. She expected Ghinn to immediately attack again to take advantage of the situation, but the attack failed to appear. Elena felt something hot running over her lips and chin. She scrambled back to her feet and felt for her nose, which felt completely normal. She found a heavily bleeding laceration only two centimeters above the bridge of her nose, which was from the Split woman's bony elbow. Now, as the immediate shock subsided, the wound began to throb.

"The blood of the Split is dark brown," said Ghinn. Her wide, drawn-down mouth spoke of great satisfaction. "I always wanted to know what color that of the Argon is." She raised her arms and showed her wrists, which had been darkened by the pressure of Elena's iron grip. "Pain for pain."

Elena pulled a corner of her white undershirt out of the light blue USC jumpsuit and pushed it against the laceration. "Now that we are even—can we finally speak with one another?"

"First cover your disfigurement," Ghinn replied, staring at Elena's navel with a disgusted look. She threw a white, linen towel at the pilot's head. Elena stuffed the blood-soaked undershirt back into her uniform and squeezed the cloth against her laceration. "You Split are a strange people," she said. She looked around the spartanly appointed room and settled on a cargo box.

"We Split are first and foremost a proud people," Ghinn said back, sitting on the edge of her bunk. "We have our own rites and laws, but we will not bow, never!"

Elena nodded, waiting.

"I do not hate you, Earth woman," Ghinn continued. "Do not believe that! But there is nothing we have to discuss. We have nothing in common. Nothing at all."

Elena looked at the opposite wall for a few seuras. "I just want to know what made you change your mind and return to Nif-Nakh."

"Why do you want to know that—are you expecting difficulties?"

Elena shrugged her shoulders. "*Hai*."

Again, that contented expression flickered over Ghinn's face. "The Patriarch will surely torture and kill you," the Split said with the corners of her mouth raised. "But he will not execute me before I give birth to his son. And that is all I want: I would like the little warrior to grow up among the Split. He should not waste away among alien creatures on a secluded world. And now, go."

"That's the entire reason?" Elena asked. Of course it sounded logical—almost too logical for her taste.

"Yes. The creature will remove herself. Immediately." Suddenly the Split woman had reconsidered the impersonal form of address for subordinates and thralls. She stood up to emphasize her words. Elena did the same. For a few mizuras, she had managed to break through Ghinn t'Whht's cold mask. As

frosty and dismissive as she seemed, there was a person underneath, a woman with wishes, hopes, and strong emotions.

“Thanks, I...” Elena hesitated a sezura and then shook her head slightly. She said goodbye without waiting for a reply, and left the room.

CHAPTER 20

All the beasts of heaven can't restrain me!

Thuruk t'Mhng

To make everything worse, it was now raining, too. Zhi cursed cautiously; like all Split, he didn't love water, and was only prepared to expose himself to it in exceptional and emergency situations. This was obviously both: Qham t'Trrh, the wise, old woman, had awakened him and hastily told him that Hatrak had supposedly gone to the latrine but had not returned. Where had this rebellious beast gone off to? She wanted to be a restrainer, when she herself was the one who needed restrained! Or maybe just the care of a nanny.

Ahead lay the drying hut, and through the entrance Zhi could dimly recognize the strips of drying meat hanging there. For a moment he struggled against the thought of waiting out the cloudburst in the hut, but then he resisted the temptation and simply glanced in it: no living soul hid here. Without a word, Zhi turned and continued following the path that led out of the interior of the island. The rain still beaded up on his leggings, but shortly thereafter it began to soak into the tanned darphin brain linings that made up the fabric. The membrane clung to his thighs with each step. Zhi growled: unbridled anger rose up in him. He moved faster and faster, until he nearly ran, but he couldn't out run the constant, hideous splash of his ever-harder stamping feet. He vowed to kill the Teladi as soon as he found him. It was quite certain that the saurian was with Hatrak, because she was not in the punishment house, he made sure of that before he left the village. He would ignore Hatrak no matter what punishment Rhonkar devised for his disobedience! The dirt trail ended with the last row of trees, and the old warrior finally came panting into the twilight rain-gray of the lake shore. What he saw instantly diffused his rage. Icy shock flashed through him.

Hatrak was lying with dilated eyes halfway between the edge of the forest and the shore; her slender body was pushed deep into the muddy sand by the weight of a dead ghok that lay partially over her. Blood trickled unceasingly, thin and brown, from a large wound in her left side: it was watered down and washed away in rivulets by the torrential rain, and it flowed steadily. The girl's rattling breath was lost in the soundscape of the rain shower, but the inflections of the choppy fragments of words, which she spluttered in a fragile voice, swirled dully and incomprehensibly to the edge of the woods and drove themselves under the old warrior's skin. Hatrak t'Frnt, daughter of the thrall consort of Rhonkar, Aqhn, was badly wounded, possibly lay dying!

For a long time, no ghoks remained on the island, but occasionally, very rarely, a specimen ventured from the mainland. You could escape the animals by simply retreating into the forest; they never

followed. Why hadn't Hatrak done this? Why not inform Supreme Warrior Thro, who could put together a hunting party and slay the beast quickly and without danger? Only then Zhi noticed the saurian descendant cowering beside Hatrak like a picture of misery, holding the girl's hand helplessly in his claws. A rumbling rose in the warrior's throat and developed into a long-drawn battle cry. Terrified, the Teladi looked up as he saw Zhi t'Nnt charging at him with his spear raised and ready to throw; but he didn't let go of Hatrak's hand until the Split pushed him aside roughly. Hatrak's wounds were even worse than they looked from a distance. It wasn't just a deep, jagged tear that stretched across her left side; in addition, Zhi saw numerous burns that covered the girl's entire arm. Some of the acid marks were still steaming, betraying how fresh they still were.

"The creature will run to the village and seek help. Immediately!" Zhi barked. Without waiting for Nopileos's answer, he threw away his spear and gripped the ghok's tail with both arms; greenish, shimmering acid escaped from the dead jaws and spread over the warrior's fingers and arms, but he ignored it. As he pulled the animal's heavy body away from Hatrak, its huge, death-slack wing membranes stretched out and lay over the girl like a translucent, sand-smearred skin. The wings proved to be extremely tough and unruly, so Zhi finally separated them at the arm-thick joints, being careful not to release any more acid. Only when he had cleared the giant insect's wings away did he fall to his knees panting, to put his arms into the wet cold mud that extinguished their burning with a hiss. Zhi didn't know why, but he was completely certain that the creature had actually run to Gus-tan to get help instead of taking the opportunity to escape.

"Zhi?" Hatrak whispered. She coughed. The warrior answered curtly, ripping off his sodden shirt to tie bind the girl's blood-seeping wound. The wide shirt completely reached around Hatrak's narrow body twice; she gasped wildly as Zhi improvised a pressure bandage and knotted the sleeves of the shirt over the wound. The shirt immediately turned light brown, but perhaps the procedure would help to slow the bleeding.

"Let t'Nop go," Hatrak whispered. Instead of answering, Zhi began to pile wet sand over the acid burns on the girl's limbs.

"Will you let him go?" Hatrak asked again after a while. Zhi straightened up, stowed the knife and picked up his spear; he could do no more for the daughter of Rhonkar.

"Noble Hatrak... Rhonkar, your father, my master, has decided the fate of the saurian creature. It is not in my power to change that."

"You don't want to, either," Hatrak whispered after some sezas had elapsed, in which the only the continuously beating down cloudburst could be heard. Zhi hadn't been aware of the water for a long time; he slowly looked around in the murky veil of rain. His eyes caught on the short spear that was buried in the body of the giant, dead insect, right where the beast's nerve center was hidden. Only a Split could know where the sensitive spot of the ghok lay. Hatrak must have struck down the animal alone. Almost unthinkable, really, but it didn't matter anyway.

“No,” the warrior answered, unusually calm. “I certainly do not want to.”

Hatrak remained silent and resigned. Even before she could summon more words, the sound of hasty footsteps penetrated the nearby forest. Gilha broke out of the thicket before the rest. She threw the Teladi, whom she had simply shouldered, carelessly down from her back, put down her blowpipe, and dove over to Hatrak. Hasty sentences in Split language flew back and forth between her and Zhi. After Gilha, Aqhn emerged from the trail onto the beach, and after her followed Thro, Rhonkar, the boy Fjuny t’Sect, and after a long moment, the breathless village elder, Golan t’Vilt.

Nopileos had picked himself up to his feet. No one seemed to notice him; the Split had all gathered around Hatrak and were apparently discussing how the girl could most safely be brought back to the village. More and more Split came along the forest path; soon the entire population of the village seemed to be gathered on the beach. Most of them carried their new blowpipes with them. What to do? Undecided, the Teladi’s gaze moved back and forth between the Split and the lake. He had escaped the water at exactly this point seven wozuras before and had gone ashore. Shouldn’t he... take the opportunity?

A distant rustling pierced the rain and interrupted his thoughts. The Split looked up in surprise. The buzzing quickly developed into a roar, and finally to the characteristic crackling that only came from ion engines! Slowly, two jets descended to the beach from a great height, their metal bellies visibly bearing the glowing insignia of the Patriarch. For a decazura, Gus-tan had existed here, unnoticed, on the other side of the planet. But that was finally at an end. The long-awaited, much-anticipated confrontation with the hated Patriarch of Chin would make its beginning here—or find its end. While the warriors of the gathered Split sized their weapons tightly and prepared for the landing of the fighter planes, the women and children retreated back into the forest in an orderly fashion. Only the closest confidants of Rhonkar as well as Zhi stayed behind to protect the severely wounded girl Hatrak.

Since nobody seemed to pay him any attention, Nopileos slowly backed into the water, step by step, which already reached to his waist. As the craft hovered some hundred lengths above the ground, Zhi t’Nnt’s gaze fell on the lake. Without any recognizable element of surprise, the aging warrior stormed away. Rhonkar followed his movement with his eyes, spotted Nopileos as well, and shouted something to Zhi, who ignored it. The Teladi turned and waded further into the lake in panic; but he wouldn’t make it, Zhi was far too fast and his spear would reach him before he was deep enough to dive away!

“Lizard t’Nop!” a familiar yet strangely altered voice screamed over the engine noise. Nopileos glanced over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of Hatrak, who had half risen with effort—and of Zhi, who in the meantime had come within throwing range..

“Seven and twelve—t’Nop! Seven and twelve!” Hatrak yelled in a failing voice. Through the improvised pressure bandage, light brown Split blood still seeped from her wound, but less, and in short, fast spurts. Nopileos stopped dead in his tracks and turned around completely. As in slow motion, he saw Hatrak’s lips silently forming the words “seven” and “twelve” twice, then the girl’s eyes flickered closed and she sank back.

“Hatrak?” Nopileos whispered, stunned. Something in him screamed for him to come back and stand by her, but another voice in him demanded that he focus his attention on Zhi: the warrior had ventured into the first waves and now stood, despite his water shyness, ankle-deep in the lake.

“Die, creature!” he cried, and raised his spear to throw.

Seven and twelve... seven and twelve... *Protect me!* Almost instinctively, Nopileos raised his claw and formed the sign that Hatrak had taught him some wozuras before. Zhi hesitated in surprise as the saurian held out the gesture; he paused only for a sezura, but that smallest moment was enough for Nopileos to fall backward into the water, and with a mighty push of his claws, leave the shore far behind. Zhi’s spear penetrated the surface of the water almost two lengths behind him and sank ineffectually to the lake bed. The last thing Nopileos noticed from above was the loud screech of the fighter planes landing on the shore, whose engines fell silent a moment a few sezuras later. He soon heard only the rhythmic gurgle of the water, with which he brought an ever greater distance between himself and the island with every stroke.

He had escaped Ghus-tan, Family Rhonkar, and the torture rock, and last but not least, the Patriarch of Chin, but he felt no triumph. His emotions were in a bright uproar, and his thoughts were dominated by something completely different.

Hatrak, he thought incessantly. *Hatrak!*

CHAPTER 21

You know, even Paranids know music. Pretty horrible music, really, but all the same! We were invited to a guest performance in the name of the Pontifex twice. You know, that would never happen with the Split. They hate music. Utterly! And that's why I don't trust them as far as I can throw them.

Debrona Tsielka,

Purrshinghedds (Guturra vocals)

Towards the end of the third tazura of flight, a messenger drone from Chin t'Thng, the Patriarch, arrived. The content was just as brief as it was clear: Chin sent an escort to accompany the *FL Raindragon* from the edge of Split territory to Nif-Nakh. Uchan made the sign of “confirmed expectation” with three curved fingers. “One will want to come on board—what else would an escort do?! But I will not allow that.”

Elena nodded. “We can let them speak with Ghinn. They'll respect her authority.”

“I wouldn't be so sure about that,” Uchan answered doubtfully.

In the evening of the following tazura, the *FL Raindragon* transitioned from Teladi territory to Split-controlled space. Elena sat next to Uchan in the cockpit as the ship gently fell through the blue energy storm of the jumpgate. The Halmnan Aurora shimmered sensationally in the colors of the rainbow, yet it didn't glitter brightly, it pulsed darkly and mystically. The central star systems of the Split lay in the middle of the thickest nebulae of the huge interstellar cloud of dust that in the distant future would condense into a cradle of new, young stars.

Elena checked the gravidar, whose display had been diverted to a large projection screen by Kalmanckalsaltt. The solar system didn't show the signs of teaming traffic that was characteristic of the Teladi sectors traversed by the *FL Raindragon* over the past two tazuras. But it wasn't dead, either: two dozen smaller and medium blips were tracking vectors that carried them from one jumpgate to the next, several stationary installations circled the four planets visible from this angle. After some mizuras, three points appeared on the monitor and approached the *FL Raindragon* in flat parabolas. At this point the optical telescope was already able to resolve the white triangles on the screen into detail: three destroyers were adjusting their speed with flaming reverse thrusters. Uchan was duly impressed. These battleships were fast and maneuverable, but they had only been used for a few mazuras. The Patriarch had sent the best that was available to welcome them!

The crafts formed an isosceles triangle with the *FL Raindragon* in the geometric center, and from then on always kept a distance of just a few thousand lengths. They never came closer and also didn't try to

make contact. Uchan felt an irrational desire to confuse the warship pilots by simply breaking out from their course, but he held back. He could do such a thing if he wasn't on assignment and working for credits! Two further jumpgates and seven stazuras later, Nif-Nakh appeared as a tiny green point on the sensors. Ghinn t'Whht, who had stayed in her makeshift room almost the entire flight, came to the command center and took a position to the right of Uchan t'Scct. She held onto the back of the unoccupied navigator seat with both hands and preferred not to sit down. The Patriarch's consort had wrapped herself in a splendidly glittering robe that fell smoothly from her and the whose wide hem was only a hand's breadth above the floor. Her features were completely neutral, the corners of her mouth were semicircular and revealed no emotion at all. And yet, a wavefront of tension seemed to emanate from the tall woman. Elena's gaze fell involuntarily to Ghin's hands, their knuckles white from clinging to the back of the chair.

The Earth spacefarer unconsciously chewed on her lower lip. An idea had been working in the back of her mind since talking to the Split woman, leaving her conscience in no doubt: the Patriarch would have the woman executed after the birth of his son, she had no doubt. And she, Elena, would be responsible for it. Could she exchange Ghinn's life for Nopileos's? No! It was certain that her saurian friend would be against such a deal. But hadn't Ghinn decided to return to Nif-Nakh on her own? Elena, sitting in the copilot's seat to Urchan's left, rose. Whatever happened, Ghin t'Whht could count on her help.

"It's time to prepare the skimmer."

Uchan looked over his shoulder and made a movement with his hand. "So be it."

Kalmanckalsaltt, the silent Paranid, typed a few commands into the input area of his standing console, then wordlessly joined Elena.

In the narrow hangar of the *FL Raindragon*, a tiny dinghy which bore the name *Dragon's Son* on the sides in Argono-Roman letters, crowded against a silver two-man glider with a dome roof and a small, hexagonal floating platform. As the bulkhead hissed to admit Elena and the Paranid into the hangar, they were first greeted by a barrage of startled clicks. Nola Hi had already arrived in the hangar in his environmental suit and anchored various equipment in the storage area of the floating platform with locking clips.

"Oh, the funny, hairy, and aesthetic star warrior from the mystical, arcane, and peaceful sector of the blue Earth! Welcome, Ele Na!" he shouted pipingly at the newcomers. "And the outcast of three-dimensionality, stinger in the countenance of Bashra, unholy of the Xaar, counterproductive blasphemer and commander of the Hatikvah Free League, Lord Captain Kalmanckalsaltt!" the Boron intoned in the enthusiastic inflection of a little girl who believes she has said something particularly clever.

The long, convoluted titles that Paranids were in the habit of giving themselves, demonstrated their penchant for cheap showmanship, but also spoke to the Boron sense of annoying finickiness and

repetition of words. Ordinarily, unholy creatures were not allowed to place the titles of the Three-eyes in their mouths; however, because the two-eyedness of Kalmanckalsaltt made him unholy, this didn't apply, and Nola Hi used the opportunity to demonstrate that he recalled the complete, intricate wording.

The Paranid acknowledge the salutary greeting with a sweeping upward movement of his head. The two good and one bad eye looked toward the ceiling in parallel.

Elena sighed. Sometimes, especially when he was scared, the Boron could be refreshingly brief. She hoped that Nola Hi would be in a constant state of anxiety during the coming stazuras. Paranids, on the other hand, were used to discarding their theatricality when a dangerous situation required it. And it would be dangerous, that much was sure.

"Everything ready?" she asked in lieu of a greeting. The Boron confirmed. The tracking devices had already been loaded with the CEO's information. The floating platform could almost automatically locate the area over which the *Nyana's Fortune* had most likely gone down. After that, a taster of Boron design would be used, an instrument that was capable of tracking the trail of any living thing by its genetic signature—for up to two mazuras depending on the intervening weather conditions. The taster was programmed with the genetic fingerprint of Nopileos's brother Sissandras: Teladi egg-brothers were genetically identical copies. If the device was programmed for one, it would track down the other as well.

"How long will we need to find the crashed yacht and the Teladi?" the Paranid wanted to know.

"At a guess, a few stazuras," Elena butted in on the Boron to prevent him from giving his best, inflated sentence structure. At least, she hoped it wouldn't take much longer. If it took much more time, she would have to come up with something to delay their departure from Nif-Nakh. On the other hand, if one gave belief to Ghinn's words, the Patriarch would cause them time-consuming difficulties anyway.

"Uchan will drop the *Raindragon* down to about 19 lengths at a slightly excessive speed, then he will make a strong reverse thrust with the ion engines for one second. While this resembles the forceful landing of a hooligan, but that's not terribly uncommon. At least for a Split." Elena smiled. Not just Split, but also a certain Teladi preferred this type of landing. She continued, "The result is an electromagnetic impulse, which will mask the floating platform—if everything goes according to plan—and let it leave the ship unnoticed to reach the jungle near the landing field. At best, we'll have two sezuras to do that. Maybe three, if the imaging devices of the Split have to recalibrate after the EMP.

"We are well acquainted with the details," Kalmanckalsaltt commented on Elena's commentary. "Let Uchan t'Scct know that he should go as close to the jungle as he can."

"Uchan is just as familiar with the details," Elena smiled. "Good luck. And be careful! And find Nopileos!"

"And above all, the data and information of the funny Ancient Ones!" added Nola hi. He climbed onto the floating platform, whose artificial gravity almost completely canceled out that of his environmental suit. The Boron presented a strange image: with his four main tentacles, he clung to the braces as if his

life depended on it. In fact, the platform's machines would cushion any acceleration perfectly. The Paranid took this circumstance into account: he gracefully boarded the small hexagon with a small step and held a dramatic pose like an oversized figurehead. Elena looked at her infobracelet. There were only a few minutes until the landing.

Nif-Nakh filled almost the entire cockpit window. Only at the edges could you still see a bit of black space, but no stars, because they were drowned out by the brightly shining planet. Festering Wound, that was the name of this world when translated into the trading language. The globe was covered over with a dark green coat of jungle, with only a few wisps of cloud covering the view. The two blood-red oceans, however, stood in stark contrast to the green of the world's jungle: they looked like dangerous wounds that a predator had torn into an otherwise thriving organism. Nif-Nakh was world that was completely in its natural state. There were no settlements apart from the Patriarch's country estate and seat of government, there were no settlements. No industry existed and therefore no infrastructure. For many decazuras already the Patriarchs of the Split had resided on this planet, and as different as they were from each other, none of them had ever attempted to urbanize Nif-Nakh. Somewhere in there, in their rough interior, the Split respected the powerful nativeness of this world, Elena recognized as she glanced over at Uchan from the corner of her eye. The pilot went about his task with the usual concentration, but his eyes shone as she had never seen from him before.

Now the *FL Raindragon* turned so that the universe and the gentle curve of the wide horizon were once more visible together. The ship wasn't designed to land aerodynamically, and therefore had to expend large amounts of fuel to climb and descend vertically. Normally, craft of this size avoided planetary landings, most of them didn't even have the capability to do so. The video screen that transmitted the downward-facing camera showed nothing but dense, dark green. Only when the ship passed through some thin veils of cloud and continued to descend were they able to make out the sprawling clearing far below, in which the Patriarch's palace rose out of the red lawn of the clearing that stretched out in front of it. Elena's hands snapped involuntarily to the back of the seat: the descent was way too fast for her taste! Already you could make out the enormous stone structure and the landing field in full detail. The ground raced up at them with a lunatic speed, it almost jumped in her face! Ghinn t'Whht, on the other hand, who sat at the navigator's station at the request of Uchan, seemed calm, almost made of stone herself, as if none of this were happening. Elena released her fingers from the seat back. The overly speedy descent from the sky was part of the plan; she should trust that Uchan t'Scct knew exactly what he was doing!

The computer was instructed to catapult the floating platform with Kalmanckalsaltt and Nola Hi out of the hangar before the final ion boost. On the projection field which flickered a half height above the instruments, she saw the Boron, still crouched on the platform in the same cramped position as five mizuras before. The Paranid had closed the bulging helmet of his combat gear and looked like a gigantic insect that was ready to pounce, only with a fishbowl on his head.

Flames blazed outside the cockpit window. Elena winced and looked up. The landing field! Jungle! The palace! Another hundred meters. Sudden stop.

The downward motion echoed through her for a moment; she swallowed the slight sensation of nausea and concentrated on the picture she saw through the cockpit window. She knew the environment. She had already been here once. The memory came along with a swell of barely processed emotions. Somewhere in the ship's fuselage, whining generators ran down. In the hangar sat a thin exhaust cloud. The floating platform was gone. The *FL Raindragon* landed!

CHAPTER 22

Wherever you go, oh colleague, Ianamus Zura will always remain with you!

Gonareos Ianusis Jolandalas IV,

Member of the Artist's Guild

As dawn began to cast small, silver patterns on the water, the Teladi's nictitating membranes and eyelids sunk and provided him a rest for a while. More awake than asleep, Nopileos had spent most of the previous night floating, with his eyes wide open and looking backwards on the lake.

He had watched the stars in their paths through the firmament, and ruminated over Ghus-tan and the Family Rhonkar. Also about Hatrak; he was almost ashamed that he was thinking more about the fate of the Split girl and her kin than about Elena's. "The creature that drew the word of war across the sky," they had called him. They had shown him respect, and that was much more than a Teladi could have ever expected from the Split. And yet, they would have killed him without batting an eyelid.

Nopileos was shaken from his thoughts as a powerful but cool wave struck his back. He blinked and opened his eyes. The sun stood as a small, bright disk on the horizon. One of those large fishes passed sluggishly beneath him, and he knew by now that they belonged to a kind of lungfish that had been released here long ago. The peaceful creatures always adapted to their environment: living in a small pond, they were only medium sized; here, in a massive lake, they grew to a size of over five Teladi lengths.

Yesterday evening, Nopileos had circled the island on which the village of Ghus-tan was located at a suitable distance. He only occasionally had to stretch his head out of the water to catch his breath and orient himself. From Hatrak's stories, he knew exactly which way to go if he wanted to find his spaceship again. Strange, how apathetic he was to the *Nyana's Fortune* by now—but no, he could never think that way, as long as there were friends who counted on him: Teladi, Borons, Argons. Elena Kho. And there was his still-to-be-founded non-profit organization! No. No chance he would give up! Nopileos straightened, sunk under the water, and thrust off powerfully with his spread swim webs.

The jungle had him again; crackling and rustling everywhere, screeching animal sounds from near and far, occasionally the calamitous trumpeting of a ghok. Nopileos shook off some reddish, translucent drops of water, climbed the embankment that was overgrown with red grass, and plunged back into the oppressively hot jungle atmosphere of the young day. He swallowed a dull feeling in his stomach. Was that fear? Only a few lengths deep inside the jungle, which became more massive as the distance from

the water increased, a colossal tree stretched up high. So huge was the giant that at its foot, the Teladi looked as inconspicuous as a tiny rodent. Nopileos stopped in front of the offshoots of an ancient, winding, aerial root. With his head all the way back, he looked up along the unusually smooth trunk until the view disappeared high in the beginning of the crown of leaves. Go around or climb the roots? He thought hard. Hissing softly, he decided on the latter and dug his claws resolutely into the tall tree root, which rose in gnarls ahead of him. He pulled himself up vehemently against it, slipped back a bit, reached for it, balanced himself over the highest point of the root, and finally slid down inelegantly on the other side.

“Straight ahead and no more detours!” cried Nopileos as he made his way through the thick scrub at the foot of the redwood tree. “No stops in clearings, and certainly no incidents with anything that glows more than I do! Tsh!”

So he put one clawed foot in front of the other, time after time, hiked laboriously through the undergrowth; where he couldn't break through it, he stumbled with aching claws over roots which, hidden in the foliage, just seemed to wait for him; he climbed ponderously over tree trunks and even some large moraines that resembled the torture rock in Ghus-tan. He soon lost all sense of time; the dense foliage only here and there left a direct ray of light, not enough to deduce the time of day. At the very beginning, Nopileos had to wrestle each further step; later he fell into a trance, which made it difficult for him to interrupt the exhausting fight against the jungle at will. He didn't stop until after an inestimable amount of time, as usual, darkness fell over the jungle.

Panting, he knelt down and rubbed his aching limbs. Beneath his groping fingers, he felt numerous new scratches across his scaly armor: none of them as deep as the already half-healed insect larvae craters, but it would still be a frightening sight to any civilized Teladi. Along with the diffuse light of day, the cacophony of the jungle also fell silent. The dreadful trumpet, which only occasionally rang out, now multiplied and sounded far among the trees as fluorescent sparks rose from the ground and the branches of the thicket: luminous insects, tiny relatives of the jungle beasts, the night vigil of the ancient forest. Nopileos shuddered. Under no circumstances did he want to sleep at night. He remembered all too clearly the vile larvae that had tried to burrow through his armor during his unconsciousness. No, don't sleep, better to continue despite the increasing exhaustion! Nopileos carefully continued on his way.

After a short while, his clawed feet, plowing through the leaves, bumped painfully against something that he thought was another root for a moment. He stifled a scream and paused again. Strange, the sound of the crash hadn't sounded dull and earthy, but reverberated like metal! The object was only half-buried under the layer of leaves, so it could not have been here very long. Nopileos bent down, felt around, and brushed away the leaves. Outraged, a small cloud of fireflies rose and struck off in all directions; the Teladi didn't let himself be distracted until he found what had just given him a sore claw: it was smooth, about twelve fists long, two high, and only a few claw-widths thick. Nopileos dragged the object out of the rustling leaves and straightened up. At that moment, the moonlight faded; now he could only dimly recognize the find. It was an elongated object whose upper edge was quite

smooth; but the bottom edge had sharp corners, as if it had been broken out of something else by force. When he held it up to his nostrils, he noticed the smell of burned neomers. Here, in the middle of Nif-Nakh's deepest jungle, lay a piece of scorched, artificial metal! Nopileos guessed what that meant. Almost hectically, he dropped the elongated discovery and began to work his way through the darkness, which was only broken by the scattered light of insects. A quazura later, the moons went up again. Nopileos's nervous movements, driven by growing inner restlessness, kept him from running into whipping branches, or bruising his entire body in collisions with tree stumps and aerial roots. They hardly bothered him. When he saw out of the corner of his eye a strange, rectangular silhouette that lay just a few lengths ahead and slightly to the side, slightly inclined on its side in the jungle floor like a torn out hangar door, he changed his direction for the first time in many stazuras. Nopileos gasped in shock as he realized the find didn't just look like a hangar door. It *was* a hangar door! He spread his arms to learn his entire body against the bulkhead that was longer than Teladi height. The artificial metal was smooth and hard; the soothing coldness diffused through his scaly armor, making him sigh like a hatchling seeing its squawk box for the first time. The door rocked slightly back and forth from his weight; when Nopileos took a surprised step back, it tipped over and fell flat on the jungle floor, whirling up a small fountain of foliage and topsoil. The Teladi's hearts started to rush fast and heavily; by daylight one could have seen how his forehead ridges became visibly paler.

"No, no!" Nopileos snarled, feeling his innards freeze from the inside out. Staggering, he groped his way farther through the woods, hectically, trembling, and without the vigor he showed a mizura ago.

About a stazura went by, at which he stumbled in ever shorter intervals on more, mostly smaller pieces of debris, until he finally discovered a recently fallen tree. No redwood, but a huge specimen that had apparently just fallen over, and its fragmented trunk thrust between the sturdier, still standing trees. From here on Nopileos was forced to look for detours frequently, because the further he worked his way forward, the fewer trees were left. As the moons rose again, he saw that the trunks had been whirled around each other like giant jackstraws. They lay around criss-cross, defoliated, scorched, and dried out. Something had caught them and uprooted or broken them. The violence of this event must've been enormous! It was getting harder and harder to get through. More and more debris lay around: small, medium, large, burned black, sharply serrated, melted round, splintered. The foliage that had covered the jungle floor had been transformed into black, now-damp ashes. The closer Nopileos approached the epicenter, the fewer leaves covered the dark ground, and gradually the jungle thinned. Soon only charred tree stumps stuck out of the ground. Nopileos circled around the trunk of one last root that had been raised aloft and shattered by giant hands, and then stepped out into the open.

What he saw made his breath falter for several sezuras and his hearts stopped: amidst an immense, pitch-black, scorched clearing covered by a dense debris field of bent artificial metal parts, supports, shattered steel-glass, and many other fragments, lay the *Nyana's Fortune*.

"Ohg—ohg!" Nopileos whispered, deeply shaken by the sight. Almost unconsciously, he dropped to his knees and looked upon the twisted and sides of his once so beautiful yacht. The *Nyana's Fortune* had been a custom build from the best Teladi shipyard, ordered only for the CEO. Now she lay there on her

stomach, undignified and broken like an unloved toy. Her egg-shaped fuselage, once a noble Teladi green with silver highlights, was dull and was marked with flames all around. The ship usually landed using the lift of its five ion engines and proudly raised its metal-glass dome towards the sky; but three of the big engines were simply missing; the ship had collided off-center and fallen without power. Given the enormous mass of the yacht and its high speed, this hadn't been without devastating consequences under the local gravity conditions: the original perfectly ovoid shape was compressed and crushed like an empty drink can. The dirty, dull skin folded and creased in many places like thin sheet metal; it was a miracle that the structure of the ship's fuselage hadn't broken up completely.

A rattle seized Nopileos's throat as his gaze caught the pilot's dome of the ship. What had once been a large dome window with the control center underneath was now shattered. With dilated pupils, the Teladi remembered the countless stazuras under the transparent dome where he had been closer to the stars than never before. Now, ugly cracks tore through the dome, white sharp edges marked fractures where pieces were missing, as if they'd never existed.

Finally, Nopileos scrambled to his claws, staggering toward the wreck that had once been the *Nyana's Fortune* with trembling knees. The shattered body of the spacecraft towered high above his head; when he knocked his knuckles against the soot-covered outer hull, there was only a short, dull sound that instantly ceased. Without a clear thought, he wiped the soot with the pad of his claw until a little of the original Teladi green appeared.

"Nooooo!" he howled, as the familiar hue awoke painful memories. He rubbed his claws over the black film, as if that would be enough to free the yacht from the flames' blackness, to resurrect it. After half a mizura, something in him registered the futility of this endeavor and he let it go. The spot where he'd wiped now shone bright green and silver metallic; claw prints smeared and frayed the edges of the stain. Nopileos's legs gave way; he sank to the ground and cushioned his fall weakly with his claws. Then the unfortunate saurian descendant curled up close under the shadow of the spaceship wreck. He hissed softly on the inhales and growled on the exhales. He sure had found her, his *Nyana's Fortune*. The ship, he had tracked it, oh yes. And yet all hope had been in vain. The thought of the future terrified him. Later, grief and exhaustion overcame him and he sank into a restless, nightmarish half-sleep.

CHAPTER 23

Honor is for those who can afford it!

Kyo t’Nnt,

**Closing argument before the
Eleventh Court of the Punishment Tribunal**

Elena had the alarming sensation that she was entering the lion’s den, and bars rose from the ground behind her to block the way out. The name of the lion was Chin t’Thhg, his title, Patriarch. Nothing had changed since their last visit: not the rough-hewn stone blocks or the flicking light of the torches nor the low ceiling and the chunky throne carved out a single, large block of granite. But the simple stone bench to the right of the ruling seat was empty: this was usually the appropriate place for the thrall consort of the Patriarch of all Split.

Why Chin did not use the past mazuras to name a new thrall was unclear to Ghinn t’Whht. The tall Split woman strode to the throne without outward signs of unease. Actual, Tchil t’Ggt, the First Warrior of Family Honh’s daughter, had long been destined to become the eighth consort to the Patriarch. Tchil was very young, beautiful, and had been brought up by her father to be absolutely subservient, a trait that Ghinn once would have attributed to herself. But humility had vanished quickly, just as it often did when a young woman was turned over by her family to a ruler’s thralldom.

Uchan t’Sctt felt the prickling of the ray-gun muzzles in his back; two throne guards armed with heavy blasters were following him and the others. The pilot had seldom felt better, at least recently. An elation vibrated in him. He hated the Patriarch. Chin had let the people of the Split languish, sent them on a spinning, spiraling course back to the dried up traditions of the long forgotten past. His government might still hold its own against the other peoples in the *Community of Planets*, but it would soon be over! Uchan’s fingers wanted to shape the gesture for “victory to the patient,” but the pilot controlled himself.

When the Patriarch saw the small procession approach, he spoke a harsh command word. The large video and data panel, which projected invisible devices into the air a foot before the throne, went out. Chin looked old and frail, his long, whitish-gray beard tottered under his chin, and his yellow complexion looked unhealthy. But Chin was not old, nor sick. Cognition flashed behind his grim eyes.

“Uchan t’Sctt, my faithful vassal! I am glad that he is still among the living—even if I had not expected him here and now. He will again enter my service.

Uchan raised his hand to give the sign of approval. The Patriarch's eyes continued to roam. "Elena t'Kho, the stranger from the Earth sector. How brave of her to step in front of me again. Does she believe in all seriousness that I will once again let her go?"

"*Hai*, she believes it," Elena replied, but she was not so sure anymore. She did not expect such a direct advance from the Patriarch.

Chin grinned. "And Ghinn t'Whht, my consort. She will immediately take her vested place." The Split woman silently obeyed and strode over to the foot of the throne. As she sat down, she saw the shiny, silver jewel case laying on the right arm of the ruling seat. She registered with surprised that this was the jewel case in which she had handed Chin a provocative farewell message. For a moment, she was unsure: had her lord ever read the message? Or might he have overlooked the jewel case in all the wozuras that has passed since then? No, unthinkable. And even if: it made no more difference. A quick glance from under half-closed eyelids revealed that Uchan was ready.

"Well, t'Kho. She will come closer." In front of Elena, he raised himself from the throne to the surrounding podium. "So, she also thinks that I will let her go and thank her in the form of—" The Patriarch stopped suddenly. His eyes widened and bulged out; he grabbed his chest. Elena, only an arm's length away, saw the Patriarch gasp, stagger, and slowly sink to his knees while he croaked incoherent word fragments and syllables. For a moment, Elena was going to try to help him, but then she quickly stepped aside. What was going on here? The two soldiers who had ushered Elena in looked at each other in horror: the right one hurriedly shoved his blaster into its holster and jumped forward to assist his ruler; the second called for help over a comm device while he tried to keep an eye on the situation.

When the Patriarch of Chin finally fell forward lifelessly, straight into the soldier's arms, Elena heard a mumble: "*Yadmanthrat!*"

In the same moment, the Split woman jumped up, a dazzling ray hissed through the throne room and the Split standing watch fell to the ground, pierced by a flaming spear. The other soldier, still holding Chin in his arms, tried to hurriedly lay the Patriarch's body down to reach the ray gun in his holster, but he wasn't fast enough. Uchan aimed a finger-sized energy weapon, which she had apparently smuggled through the scanner somehow, and squeezed. The Split collapsed with a rattle.

Elena didn't know how it all happened and what it all meant. The scattered thought ran through her head that this—clearly planned—action must have been the reason why Ghinn had decided to take part in the expedition to Nif-Nakh. She remembered Ghinn's and Uchan's unhappy faces during the last leg of the journey. Anger rose up in her. Even if she felt no sympathy for the Patriarch, she hated bloodshed in any form. The worst, of course, was that Ghinn and Uchan seriously endangered the whole purpose of staying on this planet. Whether it would still be possible to save Nopileos was more than questionable. "Damn you, you idiots!" she yelled out, enraged. It didn't happen very often that the Asian spacefarer lost control of her emotions. Ghinn hissed back something unintelligible, and Uchan's face revealed a dangerous grin.

“Back to the ship,” cried the Split. Elena swallowed her anger. If there was anything left of their plan to save, then they had to get out of here before reinforcements arrived! She stooped and drew the beam weapon from the lifeless hand of one of the two soldiers; he wouldn’t need it again in this life. Ghinn took the other weapon. Elena ran after Uchan, who was already a long way ahead. When she realized that Ghinn was not progressing very fast due to her pregnancy, she slowed her pace and turned around. At exactly the right moment, because through the arched passageway far behind the throne, some Split stormed into the hall. They needed some sezuras to grasp the situation; Ghinn used this time to fire a few shots at the men. The Split ran from each other and sought cover, so that Elena and Ghinn were able to reach the main portal, still open from their arrival, unchallenged. Uchan was already waiting impatiently for the two, dissimilar women.

“Quickly now!” he cried and released a burst of fire upon one of the columns in hall, behind which he suspected a Split. He wanted to fire again, but the tiny ray gun failed its task. The limited energy supply was exhausted. Elena hurriedly scanned the wall for the portal controls, but she couldn’t find a switch or something similar anywhere. Uchan snapped something in the language of the Split, whereupon the two high wings of the gate rumbled and crunched into motion until they had completely closed. A heavy beam of black wood automatically crashed into the brackets and barred the gate. Of course, it wouldn’t seriously stop anyone, but for the moment it would have to do.

It was not very far through the dark corridors to the forecourt of the palace, and from there, the three refugees arrived unhindered at the airfield on which, barely two hundred lengths away, the *FL Raindragon* perched. The ship was much more imposing here, on the surface of a planet, than in space.

When they had covered half the distance to the spacecraft, the first laser bolt hissed through the late afternoon.

“They will not shoot at me,” Ghinn gasped, reading the exertion in Elena’s face. “Come closer to me! You, too, t’Kho!”

Uchan and Elena responded to the request and moved closer to the Patriarch’s wife. The Split, now pouring out of the palace, threatened with their speed to wipe out the advantage Elena and the others had won so far. And yet they hesitated noticeably. Only a few shots were fired, and most of those were thrown so wide that they never came close to the refugees. If the Split had known that Ghinn was responsible for the attack on the Patriarch and had not been kidnapped again, they certainly wouldn’t have hesitated to make serious use of their weapons.

Ghinn, panting with exhaustion, pushed them ahead, Elena finally reached the spaceship a few sezuras later. The onboard computer opened the passenger lock when he saw Uchan approaching. It was tight and stuffy in the lock, but as the bulkhead rattled and slammed into its interlock, Elena took a deep breath.

“Uchan, you will never get another assignment when this becomes known,” Elena said, who now, with the immediate tension over, realized she was seething with rage.

The pilot let go of the inner bulkhead and threw the captured blaster on a shelf on which all sorts of technological scrap rusted by themselves. For the answer, he took a long while, while he leveled a tool on the discharged miniature laser and stuck a charging device on the lower part. “I could kill you, too, Kho,” he said between his teeth without looking at Elena. Then he turned around and looked the astronaut from Earth straight in the eye. “Or do you think that would be difficult for me?”

“No, you’re excellent at killing, Uchan. Really fabulous. You assassinated the Patriarch of Chin!”

The gesture that the pilot formed made no sense for Elena. Ghinn t’Whht silently turned away without another word and stalked toward the cargo hold.

“Stay here, damn it!” Elena shouted as Uchan followed Ghinn. The pilot stopped and turned around.

“Kho, your mission was never endangered.” With that, he left Elena standing there without a care.

It took a while for Elena to calm down enough that she could follow Uchan back to the control center without immediately starting a fight with him. Above the main console hovered the image of a yellow-skinned soldier, his expression radiating unaffected ice-cold calm. In the name of the Patriarch, we demand the immediate release of the thrall Ghinn t’Whht,” he snarled.

“What Patriarch?” Ghinn giggled hoarsely from the background.

Elena had a good notion to comply with the request, but of course that would make little sense: If the Split had Ghinn back in their hands, there would be no reason for them not to destroy the *FL Raindragon*. Besides, it was a dead giveaway that they only demanded Ghinn, but not Uchan.

“I demand the shutdown of the artificial gravity field that prevents our launch,” Elena replied. “Ghinn t’Whht and Uchan t’Sct will be handed over to the Interplanetary Court as soon as we are back on on Argon Prime.” She was serious about that, even though she knew that at least Uchan would interpret it as a cover story. The two renegades waited in silence for the officer’s answer.

“We have the authority to use any means of force,” said the Split on the screen, with an unmoved mien. “We will board the ship in two stazuras from now, should Ghinn t’Whht be on board. If she is in our custody by then, we will switch off the field.” The picture went out, and after a few fractions of a sezura, the onboard computer faded out the residual black rectangle.

“Is there anything new from Kalmanckalsaltt and Nola Hi?” Elena asked, not wanting to go further into this discussion. The more she thought about the situation, the more her rage seethed. Uchan t’Sct answered her question in the negative with a gesture that Elena did not know the meaning of.

“They have only been underway for two stazuras. The area to search through is very large,” the pilot answered curtly. “That will take some time.” He paused, then added, “We can burn the boarding party with our engines, even if we can’t take off. That’ll give us some additional time.”

“Murder may be an incidental matter for you, but it isn’t for me! As long as I’m paying for this mission, no one will be burned. Do we understand each other?” Elena glared at the Split through the narrow slits of her almond-shaped eyes.

Uchan immediately jumped into combat position and growled in a rage. “The creature has no orders to give me aboard my own ship!”

Elena also went into defensive position. Of course she hadn’t the slightest chance in a fight against a full-grown Split. Only Paranids were superior to the warriors from Hodie in melee combat, but humans were always inferior. Ghinn looked from one to the other with interest. Whom she preferred, she didn’t let show on the outside, but there could actually be no doubt about that. Even before one of the adversaries could attack, the ship shuddered and a sound like a painfully deep ringing of a bell echoed loudly through the structure of the craft.

Now Ghinn grabbed both parties. “Uchan t’Scct, disengage from Elena t’Kho immediately! This fight is dishonorable and pointless. Let it be, I command it!”

Astonished, Elena turned her head to stare at the Split woman. Uchan, also astonished to be restrained by the Patriarch’s former partner, suddenly calmed down. A new bell peal rang the craft.

“What is that?” Elena inquired with a queasy feeling. She checked the controls, but everything looked normal.

“They’re preparing a hull welder,” Uchan explained. “They’ll use it to cut big holes in the *Raindragon* and work their way to the command center. The usual way a Split enters a ship.”

“That’s not good,” Elena gulped.

Uchan looked at her sardonically and folder his hands in a complicated gesture. “It’s good. On the other side of the hull welders.” He reached for the controls. “But I will not allow my ship to be damaged!”

In the meantime, the exterior cameras showed a trio of Split who were mounting the hull welder to the side wall with four magnetic clamps. Elena, seated on the copilot’s chair, looked at Uchan in alarm. What did he intend to do? Activating the shields wouldn’t help. The distance between the shields and the hull was several meters.

“I’ll fire up the drive. Don’t worry” the Split added grimly as he saw the astronaut’s flaring eyes. “Only a quick burst. That’ll be a warning to them.” Before Elena could comment, Uchan gave the onboard computer some commands in Split language, and activated the sequence. Somewhere in the belly of the ship it hissed, then the drive rumbled at the lowest power setting. The ship didn’t even move a centimeter, but the video field showed how the Split occupied with the breaching device stopped and hastily retreated. The hull welder, already firmly mounted, stuck to the side like a tick. “And now the shield!” Uchan triumphed. An imperceptible flash revealed that the energy field had been erected around the ship.

“Uchan, look,” Ghin spoke up from the navigator seat. She pointed to the gravidar and remote sensors. The computer automatically blanked Nif-Nakh’s mass and showed what was happening in the vicinity of the planet. Several blips waited on the border of space above the coordinates where the *FL Raindragon* lay.

“So we won’t leave Nif-Nakh without a fight. Very good!” Uchan formed the sign of anticipation. Ghinn, too, nodded with the corners of her mouth raised.

Elena shook her head and stared out the cockpit window, which stood about fifteen meters from the ground. Night descended swiftly over the landing field and the palace shone brightly in the light of several blood-red spotlights.

“Strange that she...” she started as a white illuminated fireball blossomed on the edge of her field of vision. From one horizon to the next stretched an unbearable, wan brightness that even crept through her tightly pressed eyelids. The glass of the cockpit pane reacted far too sluggishly, but eventually it darkened enough that Elena and the two Split could open their eyes again. For sezuras, white shadows danced over Elena’s retinas and she could only dimly see the cockpit.

“The palace’s main reactor blew up!” she heard Ghinn croak. If she could see anything again!

“The gravity field has collapsed!” Uchan shouted. Elena narrowed her eyes to slits and recognized the stooping pilots in strange poses. “We have to launch immediately!”

“Without the others?” Elena pointed out. She waved a hand in front of her face as though to dispel the featureless fog over her retinas. Her eyesight slowly returned.

“The *Raindragon* must be off the ground,” Uchan snapped, “before the auxiliary reactor kicks in!”

Elena peered through the still darkened cockpit window carefully. A terrible mushroom cloud whorled around the explosion site that lay five miles from the *FL Raindragon*, in the middle of the jungle. The spotlights that had previously lit the palace had gone out. “When will that be?” she asked and turned to Uchan when no answer came.

Ghinn answered in Uchan’s place. “Not at all. The main and auxiliary reactors are housed in a single power station block. It will be at least one quazura before the secondary unit starts up.

“What are the ships in orbit doing?” Elena suddenly remembered what had appeared on the gravidar only a few sezuras ago.

“Two in landing approach, two holding their position,” Ghinn replied. “They will want to play it safe—that’s how they’ll catch us, in any case.”

CHAPTER 24

Few places are safer than this ship.

Doesn't it look like an egg?

Dolamilas Sidelosis Yayandas V,

Designer of the *Nyana's Fortune*

"Nipoleos!"

A ghostly whisper penetrated his dreams. Nobody called him that except for Inanias, whose sense of irony was multiply disproportionate for a Teladi onboard computer. But the ship lay in ruins, and with it Inanias.

"Oh Captain Nipoleos!" the toneless voice whispered again.

Once, in better times, Nopileos mispronounced the computer's name: "Inanisas." When he noticed that the ship's brain had jumped on it, he had made a joke of deliberately calling it the wrong name from time to time; then Inanias got used to calling him "Nipoleos" in return. Nopileos's scaly fin swelled in the equivalent of a broad grin in his light sleep. Imposing images of the yacht, towering high in the shipyard, floated through his head. The manager of the Department of Small Vehicles and Transporters...

"Captain Isemados Sibasomos Nopileos IV!"

...bearing the name Asalajas Hominides Alindreos, was immensely proud of the beautiful yacht. At that time you had... Nopileos blinked and opened an eye. Dark night dominated the glade that smelled like a blazing inferno. Too bad, the dream had really been too nice! He willed his nictitating membrane to glide over his eye when a face whisper stopped him.

"Wake up, oh Captain Nipoleos!"

Was he hallucinating? Or was there really a thin little voice rustling through the darkness? He straightened up.

"Inanias?" he called softly into the darkness. Again, a whisper seemed to answer, but it disappeared under the rustling of claws on the ground. Nopileos lay his head against the cool outer shell of the wreckage. He nearly pulled away, so uncomfortable was the soot against his cheek. But then he heard a voice from far off creeping through the battered metal of the ship's body.

“I’m pleased to finally, finally hear you, Captain Nopileos! I would like to be able to see you, too, but my sensors are damaged. There is an emergency.”

Nopileos swallowed. “Inanias, is that you?” he asked in an uncertain voice. His hearts were beating in his throat.

“It’s me!” came the whispered confirmation.

“Can you... can you speak a little louder, Inanias?”

The onboard computer declined. “All audio circuits are defective. I am resonating the ship’s hull through a subsystem of the atmosphere exchanger over which I still have control. Likewise, I only perceive sound waves via the vibrations of the outer hull. But that’s pretty good.”

Nopileos had to think for a moment before he understood what the onboard computer was talking about.

“Are you uninjured, oh Captain?” Inanias finally asked, to break the silence. Nopileos affirmed this and ignored the scratches and scars in his armor. Instead, he asked without any hope if Inanias could get the ship ready to launch.

“Unfortunately not, oh colleague Captain,” the computer said with physically noticeable regret in the only temporarily modulated whispered voice. “*Nyana’s Fortune* will never again rise to the stars.”

“Really? Ohg!” Nopileos hissed, sad at heart. “Can no one do anything? A shipyard?”

Inanias also denied this. “No, the ship is irreparably destroyed, that even the best shipyard cannot fix it. Essentially only flight recorders and databanks are still intact. You must retrieve them and place them into Teladi claws.”

The databanks, but of course! They were filled to the limits of their capacity with the undeciphered information of the Ancient Ones, which had been transmitted to him so long ago by the envoy of the Sohnen. These data were the most valuable assets that the *Community of Planets* possessed! But whatever Inanias imagined salvaging to be, there was something else that needed clarifying first.

“Inanisas,” Nopileos hissed, unconsciously using the mixed up name, “how did starwarrior Elena and her friends fare?”

“The *AP Rhonda Crave* with Major Elena Kho aboard, as well as the ship controlled by Captain Kyle-William Brennan, escaped Cho t’Nnt’s attack and were able to climb to orbit without being bothered by other interceptors. More can I unfortunately not say, since my full processing capabilities at that time were occupied by other things.

Nopileos guessed what these “other things” were: Inanias had hauled him out of the *Nyana’s Fortune* with the escape pod at the right moment and then immediately tried to bring the ship down as undamaged as possible. Regardless of the wreck’s desolate state, the computer had performed a reasonable miracle: in reality, the yacht shouldn’t have a single bolt left! A wave of relief swept across

Nopileos at the thought that nothing had happened to Elena. A delicate flame of hope flared up inside him; if the starwarrior had made it, he would do the same!

Later, Inanias cleared up to Nopileos what had happened at the crash site in the wozuras since the ship's crash: pretty soon after the fall, Split had come to inspect the glowing-hot wreckage from a proper distance. Inanias couldn't say with any certainty what the Patriarch's henchmen had done, since his entire perception was confined to the improvised microphone from the hull. In any case, they waited until the outer hull cooled down. After that, noises had penetrated to Inanias which led him to the conclusion that the Split were thoroughly combing the debris field, and also subjected the shattered fuselage, as far as it was accessible, to intensive investigation. No one had discovered that the onboard computer was still functioning and listening the entire time; it also appeared that the Patriarch did not know about the important data in the ship's memory banks, otherwise the wreck would have been completely dismantled. After somewhat more than two tazuras, the Split had left in three small ships with screeching engines, and Inanias had heard no other intelligent creatures since then until Nopileos's arrival at the crash site.

Nopileos leaned his back against the side of the ship. The moons hung over the clearing like two drops of lead, making even the burned and battered ship glisten palely in a few paces. Meanwhile, the Teladi felt Inanias's voice more than he heard it. He didn't have to keep pressing his head against the metal to hear the soundless vibrations. The onboard computer had used the past wozuras to forge a plan. Technically speaking, he had already developed this plan within the first sezuras after impact, as soon as the damage reports from his systems made unequivocally clear that the *Nyana* would never again ascend from the surface of this planet. After that, he had replayed the plan in deeper and deeper iterating, fractal variations. After a fairly long processing time, he found that there were too many unknowns in the equations. Fundamentally, there was nothing for him to do but hope for Nopileos's appearance, give him the plan, and trust that he would work it out. The proposal was simple enough that Nopileos intuitively agreed immediately.

The saurian descendant hung eight lengths up on the soot-blackened outer hull of the spacecraft wreckage, and climbed sporadically along some of its numerous warps and cracks. His silhouette stood out lost and alone against the ship, which even in the rigors of death was still imposing. Teladi might be superior swimmers and divers, and after many eons of development they were reasonably tolerant on land. But climbing was definitely not one of the things their short legs were built for! Nopileos had already struggled to cross the wooden roots of the redwood trees, in which he had at least been able to dig in his claws. How much more difficult was it to climb up here, where he could only rely on the edges and protrusions in the artificial metal of the ship's side! Nowhere to anchor his claws, and everywhere the humidity of the last weeks turned the soot that covered the hull into a slippery layer of grease.

The onboard computer's control of the ship was limited to only a few systems; in addition, Inanias was operating on the energy from just one remaining power cell. The computer was therefore not in the position to open even one of the three passenger locks of the shattered wreck. Of course, there were many cracks in the ruined body of the yacht through which Nopileos could have found a way in; however none of the ones that required no climbing provided a passable way to the magazine of messenger drones. He was therefore left with no choice except to climb to the gaping wound left by one of the missing ion engines halfway between the ground and the highest point of the ship's body.

Inanias's plan was for Nopileos to retrieve one of the drones from the magazine, manually program them with a message, and then send them straight to the CEO. In just a few *sezuras*, the drone would not be able to traced back to its launch site owing to its extreme acceleration, and there would be no way to stop it; the probability that the Patriarch would notice the launch of a single drone on the far side of the planet was practically nil. Only two things remained for Nopileos to do after a successful launch: on the one hand, he had to try to reach the food supplies in the *Nyana's Fortune's* storage rooms, and on the other hand, he could only wait for the CEO to come for him. How long that would take, he didn't dare imagine; there were first of all enormous diplomatic hurdles to overcome, especially since the Company management wasn't allowed to inform the Patriarch that he was alive and lingered there. At least not if you didn't want to endanger your life.

"I hope I'm worth enough credits to you, dear grandfather Isemadossss!" Nopileos hissed tensely, as his right clawed foot slipped repeatedly and he was only able to catch the weight of his body with difficulty.

"Pay attention!" Inanias whispered through the ship's hull, but Nopileos only snorted instead of an answer. What did this infernal machine of a computer think he was doing here—taking a stroll?

Nopileos paused briefly and stared below. Vertigo was just as alien to Teladi as space- or sea-sickness, but the ground seemed to jump up at him nevertheless. He closed his eyes tightly, counted to nine, and looked along the wall until his eyes met the royal blue sky. Only a few more lengths separated him from the gaping wound of the engine mount.

"You can do it!" he said, to give himself courage. With a straddling step that no one had ever seen a Teladi perform, he bridged the gap to the next firm spot, carefully tightened his arms and finally his clawed feet, his body always pressed tightly against the slippery wall. If he stretched, he could almost reach the smooth edge of the opening that the engine had left behind. The artificial metal grew to a thickness of six fists at this spot, while in other places the hull was often only a fist thick. In the half-light of the gaping hole, Nopileos spotted several massive supply lines and supports that were cut through as though with a surgical scalpel. That looked far too smooth; there were hardly any rugged corners or edges.

"Tshhhh!" Now he knew it: this must be the opening where that one ion engine had been by overlapping shields in the collision with Cho's interceptor! That explained the smooth, precise cuts!

The Teladi eventually managed to pull himself up to the hole in the side wall. He peered in, but could see little more than a tangled mess of destroyed, technical guts.

“Well then!” Inanias whispered on Nopileos’s scaly armor through the ship’s hull. It tickled a little; up here, the ship’s hull resonated more than it did below. “Now get in, Captain Nopileos!”

“Of course,” he tensely hissed. “What else?” With further, laborious stretching exercises, with a clawed foot he gripped the edge of the opening he had already been holding onto with trembling, clawed hands for a minute. A jerk later, the stocky body of the Teladi rolled over the edge; his claws reached out into emptiness and found a hold nowhere. Snarling and flailing his arms, Nopileos plunged into the darkness of the ship’s fuselage until his claws caught hold of something he couldn’t see. His movement was halted with a painful tearing in his wrists; at the same time he sensed that he wouldn’t have fallen any further: his bare clawed feet touched something soft and yielding that felt like a giant wad of finger-thick cables. He carefully opened his claws and plopped down into the tangle of cables below him.

“Inanias?” No answer. Of course—without direct contact with the ship’s side, he could just barely hear the onboard computer, or not at all! He felt around, but the ship’s hull wasn’t within reach of his arms. His sensitive eyes adjusted slowly to the dim lighting conditions down here. Since enough indirect sunlight fell from above, he could soon see where he was, or rather, in what. The question momentarily flashed through his mind of how in the profit he would manage to get out of here, but he quickly dismissed the thought: everything in order! First, reestablish contact with Inanias. He crawled forward on a carpet of supply lines, hoses, and cables of varying thickness until he reached the inner hull with his head, and quickly pressed his skull against the cool wall.

“Inanias! What now?”

This time the onboard computer took a noticeable amount of time before answering. A deep hum vibrated through the metal. Inanias tried to plumb his own innards using sound waves to find a passable way for the Teladi. All other ship sensors were out of order—the computer used the only alternative left to him.

“Quite simple,” Inanias finally whispered. “The cable harnesses you find yourself on are only three fists thick; pry them apart and go in between. Below that is the ejection chamber. It is cramped, but you will fit in.

“Good!” Nopileos whispered. And indeed: the cable harnesses were stiff, but he could finally push them aside enough to force his way through. The ejection chamber that lay beneath offered just enough space to stand while bent over. Here, the conveyor mechanism of the drone archive behind the wall reached the ship’s side wall, where a tiny shaft opened to the outside where the drones were usually released. Through the circular opening, enough light fell in to see that the drone archive was deformed and inaccessible. Nopileos’s gaze wandered in horror to the narrow basket: just as there should have

been, there was a single drone ready, prepared for automatic ejection which the onboard computer could no longer initiate.

“I really hope you work!” Nopileos muttered. Only this one messenger drone was at his disposal; if it was broken, he wouldn’t have any chance to get to the other miniature spaceships behind the deformed walls of the archive. His legs begin to tingle slightly; he put his head on the side wall.

The computer spoke. “Did you say something, Captain?” Nopileos explained the situation to Inanias and let him describe a way for him to get out of the body of the ship. A solid quazura later and with aching limbs, the Teladi once again hung on the slippery outer hull of the *Nyana’s Fortune*, eight lengths above the jungle floor. He shouldered a handle that was built into the tail end of the drone, which was exceptionally heavy for its size.

“I can’t do it!” Nopileos gasped. He felt around with his left, clawed foot, but couldn’t find any ledge or warping to use as a foothold.

“Hold on!” the sidewall whispered back.

It seemed like his arms and legs were made of rubber. The shouldered drone rubbed hotly on the thick black soot that now almost completely covered his body. When he attempted to lower himself further down, it finally slipped out. He lost his balance, saw scraps of sky fly by, trees, ground, and then let go of the drone involuntarily. While he still struggled to find a handhold, he saw and heard the valuable device bang down; two or three times it bounced off the domed side wall with loud, metallic rings, then it slammed down with a dull thud crash below. Nopileos had no view of the final fate of the messenger drone, because he was fighting with all his might to get his own fate under control so that he wouldn’t immediately follow the drone all the way down. At last, he caught himself enough that he regained a reasonably safe position, with horror-blanching forehead ridges that were hidden under the smears of soot.

“Inanias! Inanias!” he screamed with all his might; out of the burned jungle, some invisible animal answered.

“Calm claws, Captain,” came the onboard computer’s voice. “Messenger drones are designed for higher G shocks than it could have sustained in such a low fall, and it will not be harmed if it did not fall directly on its engines into a puddle of mud.”

“And if it has?” gasped the Teladi. Inanias simply replied with a synthetic hiss that Nopileos had never heard from him before. After a few moments of taking deep breaths and trying to calm himself, he started the rest of the descent. When he reached the bottom, he looked around breathlessly. The drone was not stuck in the ground, but lay shimmering a few lengths beyond the curved shadow cast by the wreckage. A detailed examination of the miniature spaceship didn’t reveal even the tiniest scratch. Relieved, Nopileos placed the drone—which resembled an inverted flashlight—on its widened tail and opened the small hatch under which the switch for voice input was located.

“Message?” the drone snapped without hesitation. It worked! Nopileos’ eyes lit up. For a moment he considered, then spoke a very brief description of his situation in the message storage.

“Coordinates!” the drone demanded to know.

“Company Pride! CEO!” Nopileos answered. The stupid messenger drone, however, was not happy with this information.

“Coordinates!” it demanded again. Nopileos was startled. It looked as though the device was requesting the recipient details in numerical notation! He went over to the ship’s side and asked Inanias for the information. The computer gave the requested format. This time the messenger drone accepted the input without any complaint.

“Stand back at least five lengths,” the device demanded, and closed the operating panel with a whirl. Nopileos obeyed in silence. A faint hiss indicated that the messenger drone had turned on and was making flight preparations; Nopileos blinked in confusion as from one moment to the next, the miniature spaceship disappeared. He hadn’t seen the drone take off: in one moment it still stood there, in the next it was gone. Only a very gentle trail of smoke, which extended some lengths in the air before it frayed to nothing, revealed that the aircraft had indeed launched. Even though messenger drones were as commonplace as anything, there were seldom opportunities to experience a launch with one’s own eyes. Even the initial speed was already high enough that the sluggish optic nerve could no longer follow. Just outside the atmosphere, the drone would accelerate to 95% the speed of light; a passive guidance system guided it through the jumpgates it had to cross in order to reach its recipient in an astonishingly short time. Nopileos stared blinking into the sky for a few more stazuras before turning. And froze in shock.

In front of him stood a colossal figure in full combat gear, holding a beam weapon in her hands.

CHAPTER 25

Nobody gains when you die a heroic death for your comrade and best friend! That doesn't make matters any better, you see. Nobler, perhaps, but better? Nonsense. So always stay calm and better think twice!

**Lt. Keiju Dante,
Trainer, Argon Prime**

Elena found no time to ponder how the Split woman knew how to interpret the complicated vector information the tracking device provided, because the computer flashed an incoming transmission.

“What is it now?” she mumbled. “All right, give it to me.”

When the computer didn't respond immediately, she clarified her command. “Accept!” Over the main console, a video field sprang into view.

Elena first had to close her eyes and open them again; she was tempted to interpret what she saw as a disruption of her optic nerve caused by the previous flash of light: two gray lips surrounding shallow mandibles, spilling out into a snout or small trunk. Above it, two pearly white and one yellow spot, circular, on short stalks, surmounted by a narrow, high forehead. All this framed by a transparent field, or a transparent film that most closely resembled a fishbowl. “Kalmanckalsaltt!” she finally realized. The Paranid looked bizarre enough, but recorded by a camera inside his helmet, he looked even more alien. The search party returned! “Where are you?”

“We are approaching from the west and are just over the landing field. We are requesting Uchan t'Scct to speak.”

Uchan switched the conversation to his console. A smaller video field opened in front of him, but the picture above the main console persisted, so Elena and Ghinn could still see the Paranid.

“We got in the middle of a coup attempt. A Rhonkar t'Ncct helped destroy the power generator to allow the *FL Raindragon* to launch. Open lock four on both sides and start the engines. We'll be at the hip in a couple sezuras.” With these words, the Three-eye broke the connection. Uchan did what he was told without hesitation. Elena had the computer display an image of the lock interior on the console: the hinged bulkheads of the medium-sized cargo lock had just stopped at their final positions. Moments later, a heavily laden floating platform shot into the ship, on which Elena saw Kalmanckalsaltt rush by in his figurehead pose just before he slipped past the camera's angle. The engines roared. The spaceship rode into the night sky atop a pillar of fire, before the inner and outer bulkheads completely closed.

“Look out, ships are approaching!” Ghinn shouted, watching the events on the gravidar.

“Come on, ship, come on,” Elena cheered the *FL Raindragon* on. The heavy freighter struggled only slowly upward. If they were involved in combat now, their chances would be bad.

Uchan followed similar lines of thought. “Occupy the firing control station,” he snarled without addressing anyone in particular. Ghinn threw the Earth astronaut a negatory gesture. Elena nodded. After all, she had become so familiar with the controls of the *FL Raindragon* during her flight that she could control the gun. A jolt, and the console slid up on its swivel arm; the device was very sophisticated. Whether pilot, copilot, or navigator, anyone could take over the weapons control if necessary.

“Now! Contact!” Ghinn said with a calm voice. The stereo image projected from the weapons console onto Elena’s retinas, whose rendering was as clear as though it were not even night, also reflected two plummeting combat space ships at mid-range. The weapons computer drew the outlines of the two combat ships in blinking green. Elena only now recognized the make; they were ships of the same model that had escorted the *FL Raindragon* on her approach to Nif-Nakh. The probability of scoring a hit was currently estimated at one hundred percent according to the computer, but to hit one of the critical systems that would bring one of the dangerous ships out of the sky was less than seven percent. Elena swallowed hard. The warships sank past the upward-striving *FL Raindragon* without taking the slightest notice of the freighter.

“Keep your hands on the controls!” Uchan warned, shouting over the strained roar of the engines at full capacity. Correct, two more attack ships waited at the border between air and space!

Elena thought of Nopileos for a moment. Were Kalmanckalsaltt and Nola Hi able to locate the Teladi? Was he on board the *FL Raindragon*? “Hopefully not,” she whispered. Because she slowly saw through the tactics of the Split. They wanted to catch the *FL Raindragon* in a pincer attack, two ships from behind, two from the front. A clumsy cargo ship like the *FL Raindragon* had no way to counter such overpowering odds.

And that would seal their fate.

CHAPTER 26

Siobhan (female given name); archaic form of Jawn (Argono-Roman), Joan (Old English);

Meaning: God is gracious; Pronunciation: she-VOHN

Encyclopedia of Knowledge,

172nd Edition, Argon Prime 528, zuran time

Dr. Siobhan Inja Norman was an unusually good-looking woman. She was tall and slim, and had a graceful, female form. High cheekbones lent her oval face a slight Indian appearance; a distinct but pretty nose hinted at old nobility. The most striking thing about Dr. Norman, however, was undoubtedly the long, light blue hair that fell down her back, glistening and smooth. She hadn't dyed her hair, as was currently fashionable among young Argons, but inherited the natural blue color from her mother. She wore a silver, fish-scale dress that hugged her body, emphasizing her figure without revealing too much. It was once her favorite dress, and she still liked it even today. But it hadn't meant that much to her for a long time. When she saw herself today in a mirror field these days, she just shrugged her shoulders. Yes, she was attractive. But she had lived far too long to be proud of it. Because there was yet another genetic trait that was often missed, one that wasn't visible, or even suspected: she was a long-lived. Even though she appeared scarcely older than sixteen jazuras, eighteen at most, she had actually seen the light in the world for more than eighty-seven jazuras. The gene for longevity was only ever transferred from mother to daughter, for many generations, but as far as Dr. Norman was concerned, she'd be fine and happier without it.

Once, a long time ago, she had been a famous astrophysicist. Nearly ten jazuras of her scientific career had been devoted to working on a paper on quantum entanglement in gravitons, that she knew, and almost looked forward to it, would sweep away and kill off an entire branch of research. She had also succeeded in doing so, but she had never been proud of it. Most of her colleagues considered her theorem, despite being emotionally unsatisfying, scientifically indisputable—an assessment that the media and public had never shared. Because Dr. Norman's paper seemed to fully demonstrate mathematically that the multi-dimensional physics needed for jump technology must inevitably and forever remain out of reach for humans and other peoples in the community. No one had ever been able to fully disprove these postulates mathematically, although numerous attempts had been made. The theses of their work found their way into the public domain of astrophysics over the decazuras and were better known to the wider community as Norman's Law.

At the height of the uproar she had triggered, Dr Norman suddenly, without any apparent external cause, packed her few belongings and resigned, as if she no longer cared about any of it. Of course, her

conscience also played a role, in that she constantly remembered that she had knowingly and deliberately misled an entire generation of researchers—if only for their own benefit, as she constantly assured herself.

But the real reason for her escape was a problem that only the long-lived knew: life partners, friends, and colleagues became older, then old, and finally rapidly deteriorated, while she herself always remained young. Dr. Norman felt terrible panic at the thought of watching those admired and loved friends die of old age, because this had happened too often in her life. She preferred to break off all contacts and start completely new somewhere else. So she went underground, leaving her contracted marriage partner Dr. Ruuf Vondran and the entire scientific community to simply sit in the misery she caused, and wasted no thought on whether or not her behavior was morally justifiable. She knew only too well that it was not.

A few years on, she had entered into a new contract marriage on Kendai VI, which shortly thereafter produced a daughter, Deirdre, and twin brothers Dric and Telder. The twins had been fatally wounded not quite thirty years ago, and Deidre, who blamed her mother, had never spoken a word to her since then and moved away.

All these events were now far behind, nearly an entire lifetime, and yet the distance past had caught up to Dr. Norman: Dr. Ruuf Vondran, her spouse from her first contract marriage, had somehow managed to track her down and asked to meet her. She already regretted made such a hasty promise.

Siobhan sighed and smoothed the fish-scale dress over her thighs. She had now been sitting on the green lawn in the Garden of Eternal Weather for half an inzura. Not far away an Argon couple on a bench dreamily enjoyed the last few rays of Sonra, the central star, while elsewhere, a Teladi was conversing with a Boron. Even for humans it was often not very easy to have a meaningful conversation with a Boron—how hard must it be for a saurian trader? But she was not in the mood for laughter. She just wanted to get this whole situation over with as quickly as possible. Tell Ruuf Vondron why he shouldn't care about her, and then go home to give in to her emptiness again. But the longer Ruuf made her wait, the more she tensed up inside and an inexplicable nervousness crept through her. When a small hovering platform finally approached, Siobhan stood up. She was astonished to find that her knees were shaking and her teeth were chattering slightly. She didn't want that! She smoothed the dress again, this time over her stomach.

The man on the floating platform was short and spindly. His snow-white hair blew from his eroding hairline like thin cobwebs in the slight wind, his cheeks were sunken, his eyes lay deep in their sockets. Siobhan remained dumbstruck at first, unable to move, and watched as the old man warily released the steering control of the platform and waited for the transportation device to sink to the ground. He then set foot deliberately on the ground. Only then did Siobhan realize that he wasn't really small, but he was walking bent. When his eyes found hers, an icy horror ran through her chest. She wanted to run away, didn't want to see more, but she stood rooted to the spot.

“Siobhan?” The voice was weak and rough, it rasped and trembled with poorly concealed emotion.

“Siobhan?”

“It was a mistake,” Siobhan whispered as if to herself. “I shouldn’t have come here. You’ve become so horribly old.” In her mind’s eye she saw a faint image of the young Ruuf, with whom she had entered into the covenant of a contract marriage so long ago: black, chin-length hair, a three-day beard, a little furrow in his brow, and always a smile on his lips. Nothing of him remained.

The old man giggled hoarsely and shuffled closer. If her words had hurt him, he didn’t show it.

“Modern gerontology works wonders, doesn’t it? Sixty-three jazuras, and still in full possession of my facilities. But you, Siobhan, you’ve changed yourself. You don’t like look an Indian girl anymore...”

“I should really go,” stammered Siobhan, whose knees were not noticeably shaking. She felt ice code despite the warm evening sun.

“Just wait!” Dr. Vondran put his hand on her upper arm.

“Well, how do I look?” she asked, since she couldn’t think of anything better. His fingers were bony and clammy.

“Like an Indian lady,” said the old man who had once been the young Ruuf, and let her go.

“If that’s all you wanted to tell me...”

“Not at all, Dr. Siobhan Inja Norman!” Dr. Vondran croaked with a different inflection. Something in his voice made Siobhan sit up and take notice. “I need Dr. Norman, not an Indian woman, do you hear? Did you even read my message?”

“I’d hardly be here otherwise,” she replied brusquely. For a long time she had avoided contact with extremely old or especially young people. She didn’t want to have anything more to do with Ruuf! Why did he intrude on her after all this time? Slowly, anger poured into her, suppressing the cold in her body. The trembling eased perceptibly. “I’m sorry. I’m leaving now!” But she still didn’t move a muscle.

“Just wait!” Dr. Vondran cried again. “Hear me out. In my office, up in the Peregrino Complex. After that you can leave and forget our conversation forever if you want.”

“Why in your office? Speak with me here!” What did he want from her? Was it personal or, worse, professional? Both displeased Siobhan. She shouldn’t have come here!

“What are you afraid of—that I’ll attack you? Just look at me!” He noticed that her uncertain, angry glances barely touched him, but constantly slid away from him, as if she could only stand the sight of him from the corner of her eye. She was beautiful and youthful, and so alive that it almost hurt him physically.

“I’m not afraid. I simply want to know how you found me.”

“And not at all why I was looking for you?”

She hesitated imperceptibly. “No. Maybe. Yes, that too. Yes.”

“Then come with me.” Dr. Vondran half-turned and pointed with a motion of his wrinkled, blotchy hand toward the floating platform. “It has room for two—if they like each other.” He winked at Siobhan.

But I don't like you, old, dead man, Siobhan thought, as she silently moved to the back of the flying device.

“There are two ships that came from Earth, ships that can travel through space in zero time, without using jumpgates. Jumpships,” said Dr. Vondran. Siobhan turned her back to him and looked out of the window, down into the brightly lit, busy night of the metropolis of Argonia City. He let his gaze wander down her blue ponytail: over the graceful shoulders, the curved hips under the tight-fitting silver dress, over her bare knees. He didn't feel the slightest touch of desire. When did they last sleep together? Forty-two jazuras ago? That was almost an entire lifetime! Was this really the Siobhan from back then? Could it be true? She was still as young and beautiful as ever, whereas he was an old man who was already crossing out his last tazuras on the calendar. No, no desire. Only regret—and a bit of nostalgia.

Siobhan listened to Dr. Vondran with only half her attention. The vibrant metropolis below fascinated her, but she inspected the glittering lights: so the cat was out of the bag. It was clear to her from the beginning that it had to be coming. She had simply tried to suppress it. “Earth. There is no earth,” she replied after a few sezuras without turning around. “The Earth is a myth, a fairy tale. You didn't join this sect? The Goners? You used to laugh at them.”

“Do you know why I wanted you to come here? He asked, ignoring her question. She shrugged. “This room is bug-proof. What I am going to show you and tell you is secret.”

Now she finally turned around. “You're joking,” she said, but it was long clear to her that he meant it in dead earnestness, and that it really wasn't about personal issues, but the NQG invariance.

“Why, no. No joke. I'm speaking to you as a representative of the government, not as... your husband from jazuras long past. I said it already, I need Dr. Norman. We need Dr. Norman.”

“No one has called me doctor for decazuras, Ruuf. I don't place the slightest worth in that. Do you actually know how I earn my credits now?”

“You're selling Boron insurance policies. Schubmukh, to be precise, that probably means ‘fourth current.’ For two jazuras. Before that you picked cahoon on Kasum IV.”

“Thank you, that's enough,” she said, strained. It was unclear where he got this information, and if he knew any more about her. But she didn't want him to keep talking in any event, and possibly remind her about the darker parts of her life. But he went on, undeterred.

“Before that, someone picked you up out of the gutter, pumped full of drugs. On Kendai. That’s nineteen jazuras ago. Do you want to hear more?”

“No! Stop!”

“Twenty-four jazuras ago, your name first reappeared in the databanks. What happened before that, I do not know. Quite a decline for the namesake of Norman’s Law. *Siobhan!*” He spoke her name with great forcefulness, as if he wanted to call her to reason with the power of his voice like an unruly child.

“And you have tracked me for all those jazuras from afar?”

He shook his head sadly. “Why, no. Why would I have done that, me, the realist? I started a family a long time ago, something that you could never do.”

“Oh no? I brought two sons and a daughter into the world,” she replied harshly. “And now say what you have to say and let me go.” A part of her knew that this one only one last, weak attempt to delay the inevitable.

“You have children? I didn’t know that!” Dr. Vondran’s voice trembled strangely. He leaned on the heavy white Gahamoni desk behind him with one hand. “A daughter, then she’s also a long-life, right?”

“You don’t know a damn thing, Ruuf, and I’m glad about it. Now talk, finally. Earth. We stopped at Earth.”

“You’re right, of course. Excuse me.” Dr. Vondran cleared his throat. He took a small remote control from the desk and activated the holoprojector. In the middle of the room a large videosphere appeared, in which a hexagonal floating platform could be seen floating quietly a few lengths above an undulating surface of water. The camera moved toward a woman and a man standing by the railing of the platform, and they appeared to be speaking silently. Something about the man irritated Siobhan, but she didn’t know what. “Wait!” she cried. “Who is that?” She ran her index finger through the figure of the man in the holosphere.

“Him?” Dr Vondran changed the angle with the remote and zoomed into the man’s face. Militarily short, black hair, good-natured eyes with small laugh lines around them, angular chin.

“I know him,” Siobhan said. She couldn’t place the man’s face, but she felt certain that she had seen it before. “Who is he?”

Dr. Vondran made a surprised face. “Are you sure? Where do you know him from?”

She shook her head. “I know him. Who is he?”

“That is Captain Kyle-William Brennan from sector Earth. He came in one of the jump-spaceships. This one.”

A second videosphere was created, which showed a large hall, in the middle of which a small, partially disassembled spaceship hung on an assembly crane. Even though Siobhan didn’t understand all too

much about spacecrafts, she immediately realized that it was a shuttle because the ship had wings that were clearly designed for atmospheric flight. The fuselage was dark and streamlined, with a colorful emblem on its right side that depicted a man with four legs and four arms hovering in the midst of a stylized spiral nebula. Below the cockpit there was white lettering in strangely antique letters: *USC X*.

“That’s what we’ve smuggled from the Split and the Xenon. And the Pontifex had his... Siobhan? Are you listening to me?”

The Argon shook her head imperceptibly. “Looks damn good!” she explained.

“What?” Dr. Vondran replied, bewildered. “The ship? Since when—”

“Nonsense,” Siobhan interrupted. “The man. His captain, what’s his name? Brennan.”

“Ah.” Dr. Vondran shrugged. “Might be.”

“But if you think that these holos convince my of anything...” In reality, she was already convinced. Why did she still resist the findings? She didn’t know exactly. The decazuras weighed heavily on her. Did Ruuf know what purpose the NQG invariance really served?

The old scientist waved her off. “Well, no. You can, if you like, see both ships for yourself. The *USC Getsu Fune* is here right now, on Argon Prime. The *USC X*—well, no, but you will get to see her.”

“*USC Getsu Fune*?”

Dr. Vondran opened a third videosphere. “Yes, the second jumpship from Earth. It was shot down by stray Xenon weapons fire over Argon Prime. An emergency water landing was attempted and it sank.”

A chunky, rectangular space ship appeared in the newly opened videosphere. In the front and back it had the skewed shape of a pencil eraser and was a dirty white color. On its dented flank also stood the image of the eight-limbed man in the middle of the spiral galaxy. *USC Getsu Fune*, announced the lettering near the bow.

“We fished the *Getsu Fune* out of the ocean in front of Reef Galvestone,” Dr Vondran commented while Siobhan circled the holographic photo to see the ship from all sides. The old scientist went on to say: “There isn’t the slightest doubt about the origin of the ship. It has a gateless jumpdrive. One built by humans.”

I knew it, Siobhan thought, horrified, *from the beginning!* “Impossible!” she said out loud.

“We couldn’t activate it. We don’t even understand it. That’s why we need you.”

The blue-haired Argon pressed her lips together. “Listen, Ruuf. The human mind cannot devise any jump technology.” The old lie. She had been caught, but out of an inner compunction, Siobhan had to repeat it one last time. “I thought even you, of all physicists, understood that.”

“We believe that NQG invariance has a hole that has eluded us all. But that hasn’t stopped the Machines from developing gateless jump technology.”

At that moment, all reservations about Ruuf disappeared from Siobhan, fading into insignificance. All for nothing, all in vain, her entire life lived in vain! That was exactly what she had wanted to prevent. Nobody should ever be able to develop jump technology, because such a dangerous technology should never fall into the hands of the Machines! Still she had always known, deep in her heart, that the tazura of truth would inevitably come at some point. She had repressed knowledge, buried it, shut it out of her consciousness. Until today.

“The Xenon?” she whispered in a raw voice.

Dr. Vondran nodded. “Quite correct.”

“But weren’t they all destroyed? The media was filled with it! There are no more Xenon, right?” Her words almost sounded like a request.

The scientist shuffled around the massive, white desk and let himself fall into the chair with a groan before answering. “No one can say with any certainty. Very likely, there are still functioning units somewhere, maybe already over Argon Prime in a week or standing in the skies over Kingdom End. Or perhaps we won’t see or hear from them again for decazuras.”

Dr. Vondran opened a drawer, reached into a blue measuring cup, and took a handful of white pills which he threw into his mouth, then he shoved the draw closed and swallowed hard. “But one thing is certain: if they still exist and if they have gateless jump technology, we have nothing to counter it. They will come, they will wipe us out. Sooner or later.”

The Argon turned and walked back to the window. She put both hands against the glass at head height and stared down into the tireless swarming of the city. “I cannot help you,” she said lamely, in a very last attempt to not have to face reality. She didn’t want to be an astrophysicist anymore. She didn’t want to bear the responsibility for her own theorem any longer. She thought of Deirdre.

“On the contrary, you are the only chance for the *Community*,” Dr. Vondran said quietly, then he fell silent and silently looked at her back. She could feel his eyes digging deep into her shoulders.

After several mizuras of biting silence, Siobhan finally pushed away from the window. “This second ship, this *Getsu Fune*,” she said, turning to Dr. Vondran, “what happened to the pilots? Did they drown?”

“There was only one person on board—a woman. She was able to save herself.” Vondran brought the videosphere with the hexagonal floating platform forward and activated it. “Here. Major Elena Kho.”

The image focused on the woman next to Brennan. She had a round face and almond-shaped, slightly skewed, black eyes that looked pensive and a little sad. Black hair fell smooth and shiny on her shoulders, and her skin showed a golden tint. She wore a light blue windbreaker with the same emblem as the two ships.

“I need time to think. Not much. I certainly can’t help you, but I... listen. Three tazuras, all right? If I decide to give it a try, I’ll call you. Otherwise you won’t hear from me. Then never look for me again. Do you understand?”

The old man nodded slowly. “I want to give you something, Siobhan.” Again he opened the desk drawer, but this time took no pills, but a small package wrapped in brown paper. “Here. No—just look at it at home. You’ll definitely like it.”

CHAPTER 27

I am immortal! I will never die! Anyone who wants to overthrow me must therefore be even more immortal than I am!

**Chin t'Thng,
Patriarch of all Split**

While the *FL Raindragon* fought for every length it climbed upward, the bulkhead opened and Kalmanckalsaltt, still in combat gear, entered the control room. He was followed by Nola Hi in a completely dirty environmental suit that was in no way milky white anymore. Ghinn's features darkened as she saw the Boron enter, but Uchan took no notice of the scientific ethicist. Behind Nola Hi, a child-sized figure waddled into the room who was covered all over with an oily, shimmering black film of grease, which in turn was mostly covered by encrusted mud, crushed leaves, and the like. Out of all the filth, two bright yellow, twinkling eyes stood out. The muzzle, which was just as covered in mud, opened a pink gap.

"Elena! Star warrior! Tshhhhhhhhh!"

Elena's heart leapt as she heard the Teladi enter. "Nopileos!" she cried with joy, but she only risked a quick glance back and kept her hands on the weapons controls. The *FL Raindragon* would reach orbit shortly, where she would have an encounter with the second pair of warships.

Nopileos grasped the situation immediately. There was so much to talk about, and he had a humongous pile of questions for his friend, but that would have to wait. Somewhat edgy and high-strung, he remained hesitantly in the rear part of the control room until Nola Hi cheeped at him.

"Oh, sweet, muddy, encrusted Isemados Sibasomos Nopileos IV, hero and benefactor of all the orphans of the Queendom! If you wish and would like it, follow and accompany me. I will take you to your room and quarters! There is a sleeping bench and also a lovely scale scraper made of glittering nividium, your personal metal!"

Nopileos beamed. Scale scraper! Sleep bench! That sounded so good that he was ready to forget about the precarious situation the ship was in. On the tips of his claws, and under the critical glare of the Paranid who had taken his place behind the standing console, he tiptoed over to Elena, positioned himself behind the back of the copilot's chair, and put a claw on the astronaut's shoulder. "I'm so happy that you are here, sister, and that you are fine!"

"You can't imagine how happy I am, Nopi," Elena replied, not taking her eyes off the weapons console. "A huge weight has been lifted from my heart!" The lump in her throat made her voice raw.

“Wherever you go, I’ll be right there with you, Elena.”

“I hope we’re still going to be able to go anywhere,” the astronaut answered.

“Even if it’s just a short trip,” Nopileos hissed, “with good company is a thousand times better than alone.” He squeezed Elena’s shoulder once more and then withdrew his claw, leaving behind a brown mud print on her light blue USC jumpsuit.

A short time later, the *FL Raindragon* had worked its way so far up that the steel-blue sky of the jungle planet was gradually giving way to the uncompromising blackness of space. To everyone’s surprised, the hunters had let the freighter pass unchallenged, but then hung on its heels.

“What kind of games are they playing with us?” Elena mumbled, her hands lightly sweating on the fire buttons.

Uchan obviously understood her. “They want to wait to see what we plan to do.”

“They could torture us and force us to betray our plans,” Ghin quipped sardonically.

Uchan snorted. “With respect, but first they have to have us. As long as we’re in the atmosphere, there’s no way they can get a hold of us alive. Outside of here, in the Aurora, they can shoot our engines out at any time.

“Are this ship’s weapons too weak to destroy our pursuers, pilot?” Ghinn Uchan said in a sharp voice. Elena saw the pilot’s left hand tremble slightly on his armrest. He made every effort not to immediately lapse into a fit of rage. So that’s how it went: now that Uchan had successfully helped her with her plan to kill her master, she became the mistress again. Elena could well imagine what was going on inside of Uchan.

“The thrall of a dead ruler can count herself lucky that she will not be pushed out of the ship as useless ballast,” Uchan counted with dangerous calm. Ghinn snorted and said nothing. It was more than doubtful that it would last long.

The two battleships following the freighter with greatly reduced speed now moved away from each other and advanced a bit, so that they put the *FL Raindragon* between them and toward the middle of their tails. Elena read off the displays; another one and a half stazuras to the jumpgate. They couldn’t escape the fighters in any case, and if the pilots decided to open fire, the freighter’s shields wouldn’t last long. When the two combat ships hadn’t opened fire after a stazura, Elena noticed signs of nervousness in Uchan.

“It is clear to Us that They will not fire,” said the Paranid, who had also noticed his partner’s agitation, “but the underlying logic is not familiar to Us.”

This comment made Uchan less confident more than it reassured him. Elena clung to the fire control console, as she feared that the pilot might pull the weapons controls over to him to open fire unprovoked. She no longer worried about the pursuers. They could have long since fired, if that was

their intention. Some mizuras before the *FL Raindragon* reached the jumpgate, a video screen opened on the console.

“In the name of the Patriarch, we wish you a good flight,” a uniformed Split said with the perfectly straight corners of his mouth a sign of his good mood.

Uchan and Elena exchanged blank looks. “What Patriarch?” Ghinn gasped in a strangled voice.

“The ruler over all Split, Patriarch of Rhonkar, sends you his deeply felt thanks,” the officer continued. “The escort turns around now and returns to Nif-Nakh.”

There was a small pause while Elena stared at the video transmission, petrified.

“But you, Ghinn t’Whht, Uchan t’Sct, and Elena t’Kho, may be assured that the door and gate of the court of Rhonkar remain ever open to you.”

“Thank you, I, uh, thanks.” Elena stammered, startled. The Split afforded the crew of the *FL Raindragon* a complicated demonstration of honor, then broke the connection with a hint of a nod. Moments later, the computer chirped.

“They have just sent Us the legislative code of the new Patriarch,” Kalmanckalsaltt reported in the breathless silence. “With it, every Split will bestow on Us the befitting honor due to Us.”

“But who,” gasped Ghinn, “who is this Rhonkar?”

The blueish flickering of the approaching stargate seized the *FL Raindragon* and swallowed her as if she had never existed.

Five tazuras had passed since the *FL Raindragon*’s departure from Nif-Nakh. The sluggish freighter made its way toward the outskirts of the *Community of Planets* without any significant complications. Immediately after the launch, the scientific ethicist Nola Hi had disappeared into his environmental area, where he worked incessantly to decipher the files from the *Nyana’s Fortune*. It had not been possible to retrieve Inanias, the Teladi yacht’s onboard computer; its entire memory cores, however had been salvaged. They contained the valuable data of the Ancient Ones. Nola Hi was endlessly fascinated, so much so that he put off Elena, who occasionally asked after his well-being and progress of his work, with decidedly interwoven, but still rather short sentences. Elena was content.

Nopileos, too, was pleased, even though his nervousness increased with each astronomical unit that brought the *FL Raindragon* closer to Ianamus Zura. When the ship finally passed the legendary home planet of his people at a distance of just a few light-mizuras, a strange feeling arose in him.

With shiny saurian eyes and open muzzle, he stood in the control center and stared through the cockpit window: there, that little point! A blinking, computer-projected arrow marked the tiny speck on its path through the firmament. If it had been possible to step up to the metal glass, Nopileos would have shamelessly flattened his nose against the glass. But this special star among all the other stars soon

disappeared again, and he remembered the promise he had made to Elena: he wanted to accompany her wherever she went. On the return flight, however, when everything they needed to do had been done, he wanted to pay a visit to Ianamus Zura! And it wouldn't even be difficult to coax this accommodation out of the star warrior, he knew that.

When on one tazura he told Elena about his experiences in Nif-Nakh's jungles, the Earth astronaut was more than a little amazed. Especially the expression on her face that was conjured up by his detailed description of Rhonkar, which made Nopileos's scaled fin twitch.

"Hey, you can laugh again!" was Elena's grinning comment. "But what's with this Rhonkar? I already told you that the honorable Ghinn t'Whht shot her consort. Barely three stazuras later, Patriarch Rhonkar is sitting on the throne! Is there any explanation for that?"

Nopileos wagged his ears and told her under what circumstances he had last seen Rhonkar t'Nct. "I don't know what happened after my escape from Ghus-tan. The two planes that landed on the beach when I escaped, maybe their pilots belonged to his followers. Or maybe they were hijacked. With the blowpipes!" The Teladi looked at Elena with wide eyes, in which she thought she recognized enthusiasm. Can you imagine that, Elena? Even Cho t'Nnt, *the* Cho t'Nnt, had to reckon with Rhonkar's backers!

"That is hard to grasp, Nopileos The split are hard to grab. Not at all like the Teladi!" Elena nudged her saurian friend and winked at him.

"Rhonkar is a good man, Elena. Whoever raises as fine a daughter as Hatrak must be a good person... a good Split. I mean—tsh! You know!"

"Perfectly clear," Elena grinned. "And at the palace you met with Rhonkar's people, who were just trying to blow up the power generators, right?" She already knew the events from the perspectives of Kalmanckalsaltt and Nola Hi.

"*Hai!* With Thro, the Supreme Warrior! That was a strange situation. Thro and us didn't know that Chin was dead. And some of Chin's henchmen didn't know it either!"

Elena put her hand on the saurian descendant's arm. "Anyway, I'm glad you're back with me, Nopi. I've really missed my little lizard cheapskate!"

"Lizard cheapskate? Tsh! Says a hairy star warrior with aesthetic ears!" Nopileos's fin twitched and betrayed his true emotions. Elena snorted, giggling.

"That's what happens when you talk to the Boron too much! They are really sweet, but..."

A sudden, shrill sound whimpered in barely audible frequency ranges and made Elena jump up.

"Combat alarm," Nopileos growled in horror. Elena, who had not been able to identify the strange sound immediately, reached for her light blue pilot's jacket, which slipped on along the way. Nopileos waddled after her more slowly. Outside, in the narrow corridor of the improvised passenger area, Ghinn t'Whht stood in front of her room with a waxen face and a distinctly arched belly. She made no move

to take a step back as Elena tried to pass her, so the Earth spacefarer squeezed between her and the wall without a word. Too proud to ask a question, the Split woman's gaze followed Elena, and then she had some choice swear words for Nopileos as he tripped over her feet two sezuras later. She knew that the second stage of the combat alarm was only given when the ship was already under fire. After all, she had been present during a few battles in Cho t'Nnt's time on the *Bone Scout*. She stepped back into her room. She didn't want to go to the command room with Uchan t'Scct. She had probably overstepped her bounds, but that didn't mean she was afraid to confront the pilot. All in good time—if there was still time left.

Elena rushed into the command room and involuntarily ducked as the shields lit up to deflect a sideways-approaching torpedo so that it spun and fizzled ineffectually on the other side of the freighter. The weapon console's status light, still hanging over the copilot's chair where Elena had left it several tazuras before, showed that it was currently in use. Kalmanckalsaltt had taken control of the weapons at his standing console while Uchan steered the ship. Elena threw herself into the copilot's chair and checked the displays at lightning speed. Three slim spaceships, two of which were Argon as well as one Split model, had been attacking the *FL Raindragon* for four mizuras. They had already scored over one hundred hits on the protective screens. Uchan struggled to fly evasive maneuvers as unpredictably as possible, but the mass of the freighter fought against effective course changes with all its power. The weapons towers, controlled by Kalmanckalsaltt, constantly flicked energy bolts at the agile enemy ships, and often hit them.

Pirates, went through Elena's mind. She had heard that the New Sectors were used by many outlaws as a haven, and when the opportunity arose, as a hunting ground. Most of them caught Teladi pilgrims, but a fat Split trader like the *FL Raindragon* might be a welcome change. The pirates often fought in groups of spacecraft of different origins. And they almost always used missiles instead of particle weapons to wear down the shields of their victims more quickly.

A noticeable concussion traveled through the ship, a clear indication that the shields were slowly but surely giving up the ghost. Uchan bent the control yoke far to the side. On any normally massive spacecraft, the inertial compensators would now show the first signs of misfires and reel the crew with potentially several Gs of acceleration. Not so the *FL Raindragon*. The ship only reluctantly dived "down." The pirate ships followed effortlessly. Blow by blow, the hits fell. Each time, stronger concussions came through. Kalmanckalsaltt managed the trick of destroying or deflecting many of the incoming missiles, but the moment finally came when the ship's battered shields failed with the nerve-racking shrieks of overloaded generators. The computer immediately blared a continuous warning message that Uchan silenced with a fist on the controls.

Elena looked out of the window when no new hit had taken place for sezuras. At the upper left, upper right, and below the *FL Raindragon*, she saw the fighter squadron slowly approaching. The lateral control thrusters of the ships blazed blue. Uchan made a circular motion with the steering pins and the freight obediently broke left. He almost rammed one of the approaching attackers, but at the last moment the pilot recognized the danger and turned away. What was Uchan's plan? Kamikaze attack?

Elena clung hard to the broad arms of the chair. Not a seizure too early, because the *FL Raindragon* was seized by a titanic fist, turned upside down, and whirled around. All the bulkheads pounded. A direct hit, right in the hull of the now completely defenseless *FL Raindragon*.

The compensators failed with a yowl, all displays switched to warnings. The occupants would at any moment be crushed to chunky red salsa because the acceleration of the engines at full throttle could no longer be compensated for. But at the same time as the inertial compensators gave out, the ion engines gave out, too. The ship no longer accelerated under its own power. A second massive explosion shook the fuselage of the freighter. Yet another hit. Somewhere, Nopileos screamed. Bursting instruments sent shards of glass through the control room, the Paranid's standing console trembled and then buckled sideways.

Where was Kalmanckalsaltt? Elena didn't have time to look for him, because she was seized by a violent jerk that finally tore her sore hands from the backs of the chair and flung them into the now useless weapons control console. The swivel arm gave way with a crunch and released itself from its ceiling brackets before it slammed against the instantly darkening metal glass pane of the cockpit and shook it with a horrible crunch. Elena's hand was caught between the bent swivel arm and the main console; her scream disappeared under the roar of destruction.

It took a while for her to realize that it was all over, because pieces of debris still clattered through the control room and everything was in constant motion. Her stomach twisted as the artificial gravity failed. Indeed, everything was now weightless, but much of it still had the inertia from the last explosions. Where were the others? Paddling laboriously, Elena managed to get herself into a different position. What were the pirates doing outside? Her right hand hurt badly. The attackers had ceased firing, but there was nothing else to see outside the dark cockpit window, and the controls were either destroyed or without power. Something groping touched her back. Elena floated around and looked up: Kalmanckalsaltt drifted past her, slowly spinning around his own axis. A thick, yellowish fluid gushed from one of the joints of his multi-jointed gripping arm, one, two smaller drops drifted like shimmering balls of honey at the side of the Paranid. Flickering, his pupils resolved on her.

"They'll board our ship," he said so clearly and sharply modulated that Elena flinched involuntarily.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

"Only slightly," the Paranid answered. "We lost Two-Dimensionality" for a short time." *Consciousness*, Elena translated in her head. Kalmanckalsaltt pulled his way over to the main console. "The ship will generate emergency power," he said, touching a sensor. Like a quickly falling elevator, Elena felt the heaviness return. She hit the ground painful among the falling debris.

"A warning would have been nice," she cried. The Three-eye didn't answer. Somewhere, a throaty voice groaned, which she recognized as Nopileos. Elena crawled forward a bit and then straightened up, groaning. Rubble cracked under her shoes. The Teladi lay in the right front corner next to the

navigator's chair, right at the foot of the main instrument panel. Elena walked over carefully and knelt down next to him. "Are you all right?"

Nopileos groaned. "I don't know. I think. Yes!"

"Come here." Elena reached her hand out to him to help him, and screamed.

"What is it?" Nopileos exclaimed in horror, and straightened up fully.

"I think my right index finger is broken," Elena groaned. *Damn, that too!*

"Is that bad? For a human?"

"Bad enough. It really hurts a lot."

A loud noise, which sounded suspiciously familiar to Elena, echoed through the ship: *klonk*.

"The hull welder—it's been hanging on the ship since Nif-Nakh," someone said. Elena looked up to see Uchan, leaning on Kalmanckalsaltt, limping to the left side of the cockpit.

"Or they brought their own along," Elena speculated.

"Completely irrelevant. Everyone has to put on spacesuits. If they are Split, they will weld their way into the control room and let the atmosphere escape into the vacuum.

"Ginn—and Nola Hi! We have to help them!"

"They're already dead," Uchan countered with an emotionless face. "And if not, they will be so shortly."

Elena tugged at the mechanical lock of the central bulkhead, but it wouldn't budge. "Open it," she commanded.

Uchan operated a sensor on the instrument panel without comment. If t'Kho wanted to die, very well. The mechanism howled in a cloud of smoke that smelled like burning rubber.

"We're trapped!"

"Not for long," Uchan said. "And now: spacesuits." The Split opened a large stowage compartment in the back part of the cockpit. "No Teladi suit," he said with a sardonic grin, pulling out two Split suits and an oversized Paranid suit.

"Pull your head in, Kho, then you'll fit in here."

"Damn it, Uchan, you can't be so cold-blooded! Nopileos fits a Split suit just as well!"

The pilot made an uninterpretable gesture. "A Teladi creature in a proper spacesuit?" He began to put on his suit; When Kalmanckalsaltt wanted to help him, he fended him off. The Paranid put on his two-piece suit in a matter of sezuras, and with a hiss, he secured the helmet.

Klonk.

Elena gestured for Nopileos to come to her. She leaned forward and looked into the dark chamber. Just as she thought! The control room was designed for four people—therefore there were also four spacesuits in the stowage area.

Klonk. The sound drew closer.

The Teladi looked awkward and clumsy in the far-too-large suit. It was nothing more than a prison that kept him alive. Neither could he move in a controlled manner nor grasp anything in his claws with the oversized sleeves. Elena finally put on her spacesuit at the same time as Uchan.

Klonk. Very close.

Disturbing silence. Something rasped not far away. Elena's spacesuit was uncomfortably tight and it had a strong smell. She was a few inches taller than the average male Split, and the suit's epaulets squeezed her upper arms; but at least she was faring better than Nopileos, who was doomed to almost complete immobility. The helmet's speakers clicked.

"Kho, to the right of the bulkhead. Kalmanckalsaltt, left. Teladi," Uchan hesitated. "Into the stowage. Kho, help him." Elena pushed Nopileos through the door and closed it.

"Tshhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" she heard the lizard curse. Then she went next to the right side of the bulkhead. Uchan, with his injured leg, hid directly behind the remains of the standing console.

A loud hissing sounded, but it was getting thinner. Condensation whirled around a red-hot, growing hole in the middle of the bulkhead. Liquefied metal ran downward. By the time the opening reached the size of a fist, all the air had already escaped from the control center.

Long mizuras passed, in which Elena wondered what Uchan thought they would do once the pirates invaded. She glanced over at Kalmanckalsaltt, who stood in the pose of a praying mantis that was ready to strike.

When she began to believe that the pirates had given up, the door to the stowage opened noiselessly and Nopileos's bulging suit lurched forward. Restrained cursing: "Egg salad!"

"Nopileos, back!" Elena cried, knowing full well that the Teladi wouldn't be able to do so without help. Why hadn't he just stayed in the stowage compartment?

A metal ball on a long, metal rod slid through the fist-sized hole in the central bulkhead. The thing looked like a round shower head covered all over with tiny holes. For a short time the strange structure hung motionless, then suddenly there were thousands of tiny strips of smoke in the room, radiating from the sphere. A delicate patter ran through the ship's sides and floor. Warning lights and alarm signals sprang up in Elena's helmet. A wave of hot pain spilled over the entire left side of her body. Softly and very slowly, the air hissed out of her pressurized suit, but Elena didn't notice. With a strangled sound, she collapsed. She lost consciousness.

CHAPTER 28

The years flicker by in fast forward to a long-life: a century is like a decade, a decade like a year. No one knows if, later, Joan Mitchell ever found what she was looking for in her lifetime: a permanent mooring for her emotional understanding of all things beyond the Earth. We wish that for her.

Fran Foster,

The Hydra and the Hero

Siobhan stared out into the black emptiness of space, lost in thought. The Xenon had access to gateless jump technology, it could not be otherwise. Even more than four decazuras ago, she had realized that if it ever happened, it would mean the downfall of the *Community*. The thought that the machines might be intelligent enough to develop the technology themselves hadn't come to her then. So she had tried to prevent people from developing jump technology with every means at her disposal. Her plan had been so good that for almost fifty jazuras long, she had almost completely prevented research in this field. Nothing similar had been achieved in the past since Albert Einstein with his theory of special relativity. But now that was all over. Siobhan sighed as she thought of what lay ahead. She pushed those gloomy thoughts away with conscious effort.

Well, here she was, sitting in a practically empty military shuttle with the destination of Cloudbase, the most godforsaken sector inside the influence of the Argon Federation that one could imagine. There was literally nothing worth talking about here, with the exception of an enormous space station that orbited the sun of this star system, far out, there, where it was cold, empty, and lonesome. The information that the Goner maintained their own station here, which they called their temple, had come as a surprise to Siobhan. She had never heard of it before. That the Gonor refused to be referred to as a "sect" and instead preferred the term "community of knowledge" was also new to her. Truly astonishing, if not shocking, though, was the so-called reparations resolution: the government of Argon Prime admitted to having concealed certain historical facts for hundreds of jazuras. In particular, the actual existence of the planet called Earth, from which not only all Argons originated, but also the mechanical species called the Xenon. Nathan R. Gunne, the great Argonian folk hero from the first stazura, was actually an earthborn, as was his long-lived companion, Joan Mitchell, who in common practice was revered with the name Hydra.

Siobhan's hands unconsciously stroked the book that lay in her lap. Its title was *The Hydra and the Hero: What Joan and Nathan had to say to each other.* It was well over two hundred jazuras old, and quite valuable; Ruuf, knowing her weakness for real books from historic times, had given it to her. He was certain she would like it, and had been right with his assumption. She loved it, had already read it

twice from beginning to end in the past three tazuras, had downright devoured it, also to soothe the the turmoil in her mind.

Siobhan's thoughts were interrupted by a loudspeaker voice that advised her that the shuttle would dock at the Goner space station in a few mizuras. The Argon winced and hurriedly stashed the book in the narrow briefcase that she had brought as her only carry-on. She tried to catch a glimpse of the temple, but outside there was still nothing to see but distant nebulae and unfamiliar constellations that traced a slow semicircle around the shuttle. Apparently the autopilot now turned the nose of the spaceship after the completion of the deceleration process, back toward the direction of flight, as required by the docking procedures of the modern landing carousel.

"Well, now I'm really curious," said the woman who sat on the other side of the corridor by the window. Right at the beginning of the flight, she introduced herself as Commander Ditta Borman. She was a compact, wiry, and enterprising bundle of energy all in one, with short, blond, matchstick-length hair and an energetic, round face. She and Siobhan were the only passengers on board the shuttle. "Only a few wozuras ago, I would have sworn that the Goner are utterly crazy. Now I'm not so sure who the crazy ones are!"

"Certainly not you and me!" Siobhan said, and laughed softly. "Or are we?"

"Come on, we're not! Even though it would explain a lot, of course." Now Ditta Borman chuckled as well. "For example, why the command staff from my agency maintains a facility here. That doesn't make any sense at all!"

Siobhan shrugged. "We're in for a surprise." She had already experienced and done many things in her long life that had seemed absurd at first glance. She looked outside, where the shuttle was lining up with a landing bridge, which the spacecraft latched onto with an imperceptible jolt. Before the bridge pulled the ship into the station's landing carousel, Siobhan caught a glimpse of a washed out projection in the form of a blue ball that flickered against the dark background of an enormous space installation. Without warning, the lights switched on blindingly bright, and made Siobhan blink.

"Damn," Ditta Borman swore. "Typical Navy." She giggled and got up. "All right. Let's go then."

A few moments later, she and Siobhan looked around the landing area of the temple, the unexpected simplicity of which left them both somewhat disappointed. Somehow, one might expect that the technical and structural furnishings of a space temple would clearly differ from the other stations! But that wasn't the way it was: the arrival hall flashed clean, barren, and functional, just as one found everywhere in the *Community of Planets*. At the entrance to the walkway, the two woman came across a small, chattering group comprised of various peoples. They seemed like a private travel group, but that was hardly possible. After all, the ship was an Argonian military shuttle! Not all members of the group were allowed to enter the ferry without inspection. Only Argons and Borons came on board unhindered, some Teladi were sent through an improvised customs area. A single Split, who didn't

seem to fit in with the others, made a furious gesture as they sent it through a scanner arch, but he eventually gave in and stepped onto the walkway, snorting.

Between the two high archways that lead to the interior of the station, Siobhan spotted two blue-gray-uniformed Argons who were carrying long-range energy weapons and suspiciously watching over the events inside the landing area. Siobhan knew almost nothing about the Goner and their customs; however, that they tolerated soldiers in their temple—their sanctuary—seemed strange to her. “Your people?” She pointed in the direction of the gunmen with her chin.

“Military police,” Ditta Borman replied curtly, as if that one word explained everything. Siobhan wanted to follow up with a question, but didn’t get a chance, because at that moment the bent figure of Dr. Vondran detached from a cluster of people near the archways. He was accompanied by a young woman with long, blond hair and a clever-looking boy of at most seven jazuras.

“Siobhan, I’m glad you’re here!”

“Don’t expect too much from it, Ruuf,” she answered.

“Why, no. You know I’m a realist. Commander Borman, I presume?”

The woman nodded while Dr. Vondran continued. “Commander-san, I’ve been asked to let you know that your colleague Major Seldon will arrive with Colonel Danna on the next shuttle.”

“Colonel Ban Danna from the Intelligence Service? That is... yes, sir!” Ditta Borman clicked her heels together. If Ban Danna, Deputy Chief of the Military Intelligence Service, was involved, it could only be a matter of highest importance!

Dr. Vondran introduced the pretty woman with the blond hair in his company as Ninu Gardna, assistant to Noah Gaffelt, the Supreme Guardian. Siobhan couldn’t do anything with this title, and asked about it.

“We Gonor also call ourselves the Guardians of the Truth. You can imagine why,” Ninu Gardna explained with a charming smile. “The Supreme Guardian is our leader.”

“The spiritual leader of your religion, so to speak?” Siobhan asked.

Ninu shook her head. “No, completely and utterly secular. It is a widespread misconception that our beliefs are a spiritual matter, a religion. It is not. As Goner you are free to believe in Yahweh, or, for all I care, in the holy Three-Dimensionality, as long as you simply acknowledge the historical facts about the Earth and our ancestry.”

“But you could still say that the entire Argon government unanimously changed the denomination in favor of the Gonor with the adoption of the reparations resolution?”

“Ladies, we do not want to go that far,” Dr. Vondran interrupted with a narrow smile on his lips that reminded Siobhan for the first time of the intelligent grin of the young Ruuf Vondran from over forty

jazuras ago. “First of all we will bring you to your quarters. Once Colonel Danna arrives, there’s a first, informal meeting. Follow me.”

“Hey!” the boy called in between as the old scientist turned around. “You forgot me! I’m Ion Battler, Ninu’s brother.”

“Don’t be so cheeky,” Ninu chided at her half-brother with a smile. “Nobody is forgetting you.”

“Hello, Ion!” So you’re a guardian, too, eh?” Ditta Borman asked the boy. He nodded eagerly.

“Yeah!”

“That come with a costume?”

Ion gave a lopsided grin, but didn’t know what to say to that. He liked the compact soldier immediately. How he felt about Dr. Norma, however, the blue-haired scientist, he wasn’t quite so sure. She nodded at him briefly, but otherwise didn’t seem to pay any attention to him. But he was just a boy, and she was an adult woman... a beautiful one, besides.

“So let’s go. I think we’re just standing in the way here,” Ditta Borman said.

Exactly two stazuras later, the next shuttle arrived. Siobhan had just ordered a glass of ordano juice from the food dispenser in her cabin when she received Colonel Danna’s call for the first meeting. She downed the juice in one gulp, wiped her lips with the back of her hand, and immediately made her way to the conference room. She would come clean with them, she had decided. Most other people would probably have gotten nervous at the thought, but not Siobhan. Something in her compensated for every stirring of developing unrest with a certain malicious anticipation of the expressions of the scientists and government officials when they learned the truth about the oh-so-famous Dr. Siobhan Inja Norman...

Ban Danna’s expression was blank and clearly indicated that the intelligence service agent, who had just been promoted to the rank of Colonel, was at a loss for words. The other participants of the meeting, Dr. Vondran, Senator Gunnar, and the astrophysicist Dr. Zakk Folkna, also stared at Siobhan as though she were a ghost. Only Lar Asaneus, the scientist sent by the Queendom of Boron, as well as Guardian Gaffelt signaled the beginning understanding of what Siobhan had just disclosed to them.

“So we could have been in possession of jump technology since the days of my grandmother,” Danna finally stated flatly. “Do you actually know what that means, Dr. Norman? There wouldn’t have been a Xenon problem for a long time. A long time.”

“There would be no more Xenon at all, my goodness!” Nan Gunnar interjected. Siobhan looked around and wanted to say something, but the Boron spoke first.

“The beautiful, blue-haired, aesthete has rightly done, acted, and operated. To wipe out and annihilate the Xenon would be an offense against ethics and a violation of the equality between sapient beings.”

Noah Gaffelt cleared his throat. His long, white beard rustled on his course cloak as he turned his head to look at Gunnar and Danna. “I likewise think that Dr. Norman has done the right thing. The Xenon have been stealing each of our newly developed technologies so far, and they abuse it for their own purposes. Just think of Paranid data octahedrons, gravidar concealment, and what else I don’t know.”

“Slave chips,” Zakk Folkna interjected. “Thought control for spaceships, only the other way around. Well thank you very much.”

“Excuse me? You know about that, Folkna-san?” Senator Gunnar asked sharply. It was only recently that military intelligence had learned that there were certain criminal organizations that wouldn’t hesitate to sell out the entire *Community of Planets* for profit. The slave chip was one of their newer abominations, and—fortunately--had not seen widespread use.

“Senator, I ask you.” Folkna grabbed at his chest and held up the security batch attached to his white coat. “Security classification three! What does that tell you?”

The senator mumbled something incomprehensible and then fell silent.

“Anyway,” Siobhan said, who had expected a much stronger reaction, “I can translate the NQG invariance into an NQG equality within a few jazuras. This way, Norman’s Law will not lose its validity.”

“Yes, one will finally be able to use it, instead of sticking it as an axiomatic monolith in a corner where it collects the dust of decazuras,” Folkna snickered. “For that alone you already deserve the reward of the Polytechnic Institute.”

“She deserves a war tribunal,” Ban Danna said sourly. Siobhan nodded; that was the kind of reaction she had counted on!

“And two generations of astrophysicists with her, Colonel.” Vondran chimed in. His position was firm—he would cover for Siobhan. “After all, none of us has managed to resolve the NQG invariance, and that even though astrophysics is after all the third-most important branch of military research.”

“The point is, however,” Danna said, “how do we know that Dr. Norman is on our side? Why shouldn’t she sprinkle stardust into the eyes of the scientists involved in the project again?”

“If I wanted that, I wouldn’t be here now, Colonel,” Siobhan said coolly. “Don’t forget that you asked *me* for this committee, not the other way around. Most astrophysicists today don’t even know that I’m still alive. I could have just as easily stayed home on Argon Prime.” She gave Danna an appraising look. Why such an unintelligent, immature man belonged to the senior staff of the Intelligence Service was unclear to her.

Danna’s gaze was that of a man who had accidentally swallowed an insect. He didn’t like this blue-haired scientist at all, hadn’t liked her from the start. She was cocky, arrogant, and fake. The senator seemed to think the same, if he interpreted the reactions of his immediate superior correctly. It was just a pity that the scientists were so attached to this blasted Argon!

“All right, Dr. Norman,” Senator Gunnar said. “Anyone is free to change their mind. And forty jazuras are... well, a reasonable timeframe. If Dr. Vondran, Dr. Folkna, and Lar Asaneus are in agreement, then I welcome you to Project Providence. Right, Danna?”

Ban Danna gave a start. “What? Well...”

“Just one more thing, Dr. Norman-san,” the senator continued. “We cannot give you jazuras for the completion of your work. You must understand, we mortals think in less epic time spans.”

Siobhan pressed her lips together and forced a friendly smile. How she hated this term: mortals! He was so presumptuous and proved that the senator, despite his put-on friendliness, didn't know the slightest thing about the loss that came with longevity.

Lar Asaneus looked at Siobhan with large, clear eyes, as though he knew exactly what was going inside her. A single clicking sound left the membrane of his environmental suit and for a fraction of a sezura, a sound like the highest note of a shattering toy xylophone echoed in the conference room.

CHAPTER 29

Profit is the foundation of every social interaction.

Profit replaces every social interaction!

Bomandrolas Sisinfinos Niandeles VIII,

Appendix to the Operational Regulations

Someone had drilled a hole in Elena's skull with a dull drill bit, obliquely through the frontal lobes into the middle of the brain stem. Her eyes hurt as though they were being scooped out of the sockets with a spork. Her stomach cramped with nausea which rose bitterly up her esophagus. Despite the darkest night, everything seemed to spin in circles like a carousel, continuously in circles, over and over, faster and faster. Elena inhaled sharply to compensate for a sour, choking sensation in her throat, but it didn't help. Weakness overpowered her, and it took a few mizuras until she managed to crawl a tiny bit forward on trembling limbs. Struggling for air, she dropped on her stomach. Biting cold bit into her consciousness, sticking her thighs, knees, stomach, chest, forearms, cheek, shoulders with a thousand frosty needles where they lay flat on the floor. Someone had undressed her; she was naked. Whoever had done that obviously wanted to be certain she wasn't carrying any type of weapon or other devices or tools. She laboriously propped herself up on the palms of her hands. The sharp pain that lanced through her hand throbbingly reminded her of her broken index finger.

Somehow, Elena managed to get up on her knees. With a sagging shoulder and drooping head, she remained in the same pose for a long time, panting and wheezing like a wounded animal. Slowly, very slowly, the first coherent trains of thought returned that were more than just unconnected tatters. Together with conscious thought, an additional sensation flared up: her entire left side burned dully, as though it were completely made up of contusions, bruises, and aches, from her calves up to her neck.

Now the other senses were coming back. Someone moaned. Sezurax later she realized it was her own voice. The icy-cold ground under her was made of corrugated, apparently heavily soiled metal. The air smell bad, like the sweat of tortured individuals. Where was she? Still in the same position, Elena tried to apply the meditation techniques she had practiced daily for many years. First, she brought her breath under control, then she managed to push back the whirling of her tattered sense of balance. It worked amazingly well. The piercing, gnawing, hammering headache that made her skull ring like a bell, she ignored as well as she could. Bit by bit, she got the nausea under control. Although the choking sensation in her throat never really went away, she could finally breathe again without being afraid of vomiting at any moment.

A throaty voice nearby gasped something in a language that sounded like Split.

“Ghinn?” The effort to elicit intelligible sounds from her vocal cords was worth it: her voice sounded almost normal. A long pause as Elena gingerly walked on her knees in the direction of Ghinn’s voice.

“The creature will not touch me!” the Split woman hissed as Elena’s hands felt for her. The scraping sounds of bare skin on metal told Elena that Ghinn was also trying to sit up.

Abruptly, bright light flared up. Elena’s eyelids squeezed together as the brightness stabbed into her eyes and set off large-scale devastation in her head. She pressed her hands flat on her stomach as the nausea threatened to return. After a while, the storm in her body calmed, and she dared to slowly open her eyelids. The light hurt her eyes, but in addition to all the other that assaulted her body, the light hardly made a difference.

She looked around carefully. The room was only about four by four meters long and maybe two and a half meters high. A clunky-looking double bulkhead with a barred observation port covered with metal glass was closed on the front wall. Actually it wasn’t a room, but a shed, the floors and walls of which were covered with shabby, corrugated metal usually only found as linings for technical equipment. The brown layer that more or less completely covered the metal could have been dried mud or excrement; Elena didn’t want to think about it. Nopileos lay curled up against the back wall, his eyelids shut tight, without stirring. Elena finally straightened up—the movement was answered with a wave of nausea—and stumbled over to Nopileos. The cold of the metal floor and the stinking air now bit through her limbs. It hurt, but it somehow also helped to push the headache and nausea further into the background.

The Teladi breathed shallowly. Elena didn’t know if it made any medical sense to put him to a stable side position: saurians were not humans, after all. But it shouldn’t hurt and she couldn’t do more for the poor saurian descendant anyway. Nopileos would probably wake up soon and then he’d feel just as bad as her and Ghinn.

Elena straightened up again. Leaning crookedly against the wall, the Split woman eyed her in disgust. “Clean energy bolt hit?” she asked and pointed her chin at Elena. She immediately closed her eyes for a moment; the movement didn’t seem to agree with her. She cursed restrainedly in her mother tongue.

Elena looked down at herself Clean energy bolt hit? Her thoughts were leaden. “Oh. No, all naturally born humans have a belly button.”

Ghinn raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Elena only now recognized how alien the Split woman actually looked. If she were clothed, she might pass as a very tall, very slender, and extremely ascetically proportioned albino woman. Without clothing, however, her non-human descent was only too obvious: even though thin, almost scrawny, no ribs were visible under the ashen skin, but a continuous bone case. Her flat breasts, which still looked very human under clothes, were simple bulges without nipples or areolae; she had no navel and, other than her head, no other body hair. Immediately below both armpits, long seams shimmering with moisture ran like vertical seams to her pelvis and looked like huge, lipless mouths that could open at any time. The stomach bulged palely and

was covered all over with a network of thin veins, something moving inside. Both shins had fine, vertical wrinkles from the ankles up to the knees. Six toes without nails formed a broad, steady foot.

“Do you find me just as repulsive as I do you?” Ghinn asked, noticing Elena’s scrutinizing eyes.

A raspy laugh that ended in a cough escaped the Eurasian astronaut. “I wouldn’t marry you, Ghinn,” she wheezed. Ghinn stared at Elena. After a while, she pushed her knees and straightened her back further up the wall. “You are a brave woman, Elena Kho. I do not know anyone like you. Are all women from Earth like you?”

Elena thought about that. Then she said, “I wish.” The nausea continued to recede. “Do you know what happened?” she asked.

“Stun cocktail,” the Split woman snarled as quickly as if she had expected the question. “Contains anesthetic substances for each species.”

Now Elena understood why she and Ghinn were so bad off. Chemicals that stun a Split, for example, had to provoke devastating reactions in a human, and the other way around. It was just amazing that no one just died right away.

Ghinn seemed to guess her thoughts. “You can still die from it a up to a week later,” she explained with a look that Elena could only categorize as smug. The Split woman was surely lying to scare her!

Behind the double bulkhead, metallic, echoing footsteps rang out. Something moved behind the observation port, then the wings of the bulkhead slid open. An Argon entered who had very long, black hair that was gathered into a thin braid at his back by several dark bands. Despite the predominating cold, thick beads of sweat stood on his forehead. His gaze was glassy and stiff. In his hand he held a blaster with a blast muzzle that gleamed cruelly. Behind him, a Split entered the room, clean-shaven, small, compact, dirty white leggings, black magnetic boots, and the same type of blaster in his hand as his crony.

“Look wha’ we ha’ here,” said the Argon with a strangely lumbering accent. He giggled hoarsely. Drops of spit flew. “This is the Earther, Earth Goner.”

“Who?” the Split growled in an equally curious cadence. “Well, these Earther—”

“What do you want with her? She is fat, ugly, and her hair is black like clotted ghok blood.” With unsteady steps, the Split came closer to Ghinn t’Whht, who tensed up involuntarily. “This one here I know from somewhere.”

“Wha’ I wan’ wi’ er, wha d’you thin’!” the Argon raged indignantly after some delay. A pungent chemical smell emanated from him. Elena was sure that both the long-haired Argon and the greasy Split had taken some kind of intoxicant. The movements of the two pirates looked choppy and erratic. Were there intoxicants that affected both species? She didn’t know, but it didn’t really matter.

“Who are you, what do you want?” she cried.

“Shu’ your face!” the Argon smirked and stepped so close to Elena that she could have grabbed his blaster. His chemical-laden breath wafted into her face. She tensed up inside.

“Do you need the lizard lump?” the Split asked. His metal soles crunched on the dirt as he swayed past Ghinn. He raised his blaster.

The Argon’s gaze passed over Elena’s shoulder. “Wha’s tha’, a Teladi? No, kill ’im.”

Elena used this brief moment of distraction. Ghinn flashed a look from the corner of her eye as though in confirmation. Ignoring pain and nausea with all her might, Elena ripped her foot up and kicked the weapon out of the hands of the completely blindsided Argon. Her usually fast reflexes were terribly restricted, but the drug-induced delay in perception caused the long-haired man to react much more slowly than her. Elena hit the man in the temple with her good hand; he immediately folded without a sound. His body plopped on the deck like a wet sack. A sharp sizzle sounded. As Elena turned to find the source of the noise, both Ghinn and the Split pirate lay on the floor. Ghinn, however, bared her teeth in a grin and raised the blaster she’d grabbed from the air. The Split was lying on the ground with a black hole in his chest and didn’t move again. Behind Ghinn, an equally thick hole glowed in the wall. Apparently, the man had missed the Split woman and was then overwhelmed by her.

“Duped by two naked women. Pitiful creatures!”

“Tsh?” Nopileos faintly questioned, who was regaining consciousness at that moment. Elena didn’t have time to help her lizard friend or even to look over at him. A wave of dizziness rolled over her and buried itself deep inside her. She folded and fought in vain against the choking in her throat. Her overworked body punished her drastically for the heavy stress she had just given it. All senses vanished, only the feeling of endless nameless pain remained.

After an eternity, the torture eased a bit. Someone dragged her roughly across the floor by her arms. The cold yielded. When she could see clearly again, she was no longer in the filthy room, but on a halfway clean, rather warm corridor. She leaned her back against the wall, the door to the shed immediately next to her left arm. A pile of white and blue linen piled in front of her: her USC jumpsuit, pilot’s jacket, underwear, boots.

“Dress yourself,” she was barked at by Ghinn t’Whht. The pregnant woman had already slipped back into her robes.

Elena clumsily did what she was told. “How is Nopileos?”

“I live,” the saurian descendant’s voice hissed thinly, “But nothing more than that.”

Elena grinned weakly. “Then you’re doing better than me. Ghinn seems to have gotten the least of it.” She looked up at the Split woman, who made a gesture Elena didn’t understand.

“We are not alone on this ship,” Ghinn said. “I’ve looked around. The entire crew is intoxicated. In front is an environmental area with Boron breathing fluid.” What that meant, she left open.

“Uchan and Kalmanckalsaltt?” Elena inquired as the tongue of her space boots merged with the active material of the shoes.

“I do not know and it does not interest me,” Ghinn replied. “We have to get out of here before anyone notices what has happened.”

Elena shook her head and closed her eyes. After a short pause, she straightened herself up wearily. “Not without the others,” she said with determination.

In an almost human gesture, Ghinn shrugged her shoulders; presumably done to make it clear to Elena how little she made of the Earth woman’s decisions. “Do whatever is right for you, Elena Kho. But don’t do it without this.” She handed Elena one of the two captured blasters. Elena nodded her thanks and immediately switched the weapon to her left hand, as she couldn’t press the trigger with the broken index finger of the right one.

“Nopileos, you go with Ghinn,” she said.

The Teladi looked up at her indignantly. “Tshh! You can’t even stand on your own legs, Elena, how do you want to free Uchan and Kalmanckalsaltt?”

Elena looked at the Teladi irritated. “How many pirates are on the ship?” she turned to Ghinn.

Ghinn remained silent for a while and looked down the corridor, which turned left a couple meters further. “This here is a medium slave freighter,” she finally said. The word made Elena shudder: slaves! “Maybe ten or twelve, certainly not more,” Ghinn concluded. “But you’ll find out quickly. Good luck, Elena Kho.” She turned to go.

When the Split woman finally disappeared around the bend, a bulkhead crashed at the other end of the corridor and a loud hooting rang out from many throats. Hasty clapping from a multitude of metal heels approached rapidly. Elena glanced at Nopileos. “Maybe you’re both right.” She swallowed her dizziness and ran. Nopileos followed her as fast as his short legs allowed. “Elena, stop!” he hissed in despair.

The door on the left led into a sealed environmental area. Good possibility that Nola Hi was held there! But the Teladi dared not stand on his clawtips to look through the observation port, for the pirates roiled ten lengths behind him in the best case. Elena, white in the face and red-eyed, turned and came back. She fired a shot at the ceiling of the curve in the corridor, sparks sprayed around and pelted white-hot on the ground. A many-voiced outcry followed; someone called with a heavy tongue, “Wait!”

“Nola Hi’s in there,” Elena confirmed, following Nopileos’s gaze. “But without his environmental suit. It’s not going to be easy to get him”—a blazing energy beam entered the room for a fraction of a second and scorched the faces of the two fugitives—“out!” Elena completed her sentence with a scream. She grabbed the Teladi by the claw and dragged him behind her, occasionally firing shots over her shoulder. The hand dragging Nopileos ached painfully at the broken index finger, but she ignored the throb. A few steps ahead, the bulkhead at the end of the corridor hissed open. They stormed

through. A hangar? All the same for now; she could look around later. First, Elena wanted to destroy the electronics of the bulkhead, to make it difficult for the pirates to get through.

“Where are...?” Her eyes searched up and down both sides of the door, but found nothing.

Nopileos looked at her with a wide open mouth, then he understood. “Down there!” He pointed at the floor. In fact, the controls were at foot level! Elena fired at them and the mechanism melted under swaths of black smoke.

Only now did she look around, and looked directly into the huge blast muzzle of a the energy weapon of a barge that hovered over the deck! Elena dropped and rolled away. Not that it would have made a difference if the weapon had actually fired, but her reflexes were slowly returning. Nopileos hissed in alarm.

“Over here,” called an artificially amplified voice. The low passenger lock of the dinghy opened up, a laughably tiny gangway folded forward. Elena didn’t think long. She signaled to Nopileos to enter and immediately followed the Teladi.

Ghinn t’Whht looked at her with compressed lips as they stumbled into the tight and low cockpit. “You’re lucky,” the Split woman said dryly, “I was a hair away from firing when the bulkhead opened. Can anyone handle this?” With a contemptuous gesture, Ghinn pointed with to the forearm-length shafts which grew up out of the instrument panel instead of a flight yoke or a control stick. She had obviously managed to levitate the ship and activate the tiny weapon control console, but her knowledge of the alien instruments didn’t stretch further than that.

“Yes, me,” Nopileos hissed. Inanias had relieved him of the burden of steering pretty often, but at least he still knew how how steering shafts, accelerators, and force feedback interfaces felt, and how to use all these instruments. Reasonably and approximately, in any case. What really worried him was the fact that the pirate ship they were on was a Teladi design—and not an export model, as one could see from the Teladi-specific controls. The pirates, however, were composed of Argons and Split. Where was the original Teladi crew of the ship? His hearts misgave him and he preferred not to think about it for the moment.

Ghinn only ceded the pilot’s seat with a grumble. If Elena hadn’t been so miserable, she would have grinned as she huddled at the navigator’s station in the far right of the cockpit. Ghinn dropped down to the left and Nopileos sat in the middle. Teladian benches were low, hard, and terribly uncomfortable, but somehow the two women managed to squeeze into them.

Nopileos switched on the headlight; the nose of the ship swung around until the glaring cone of light illuminated the lock. Then the Teladi set off the laser. Once, and the gate hung in glowing shreds. Twice, and white-hot metal sprayed into empty space, together with the white permafrost of the escaping air. Normally a one-sided permeable forcefield would have prevented the atmosphere from escaping, but the burst of the ship’s cannons had burned up the corresponding generators along with the bulkhead.

“Careful!” Elena warned. “They’ll shoot at us. Best to let it drift along their side wall and go full throttle opposite their direction of flight past their stern.

Nopileos nodded. “That’s good.”

They had the opportunity to look at the slave ship from the outside for the first time. As already expected, it was a Teladi ship, strictly speaking a destroyer, from the class the Argonian military called a Phoenix. From up close, the gray, shapeless box showed its age—the ship hadn’t been captured yesterday! Makeshift repairs and a variety of modifications, mostly without apparent purpose, decorated the outer hull of the ship and made it seem scarred and rickety. A purple variation of the ancient Terraformer symbol taller than a Teladi covered the ship’s side, and the lines ran over the windows as well as the hull. Elena was reminded of #efaa in some way. “Sector Control,” an obviously broken maintenance robot had scrawled in Argono-Roman letters under the symbol. Why the pirates had opted for a parody version of the Terraformer fleet’s symbol eluded the bounds of Elena’s imagination.

“That’s not one of the ships the *Raindragon* has encountered,” Ghinn noted.

Elena shook her head. “No. I hope they’re not in the vicinity.”

Nopileos could only agree. Even so, the chance that they could escape the Phoenix was slim. The three hunter ships who had shot the *FL Raindragon* to space scrap would drop their chances of survival to zero. Nopileos showed his teeth and let his tongue run over his nose. He had an idea.

Under the attentive gaze of the two dissimilar women, the Teladi gently braked the barge until it was even with the engines of the larger ship. With his claws deep in the control shafts, he directed the small energy cannon at the dormant engines of the larger spaceship and let the destructive beam cross over the superstructure in small bursts. The ion engines’ expansion nozzles didn’t show any change at first because they were designed to withstand extreme loads and temperatures, but then some support structures vaporized with blazing flashes. Through the darkening cockpit window, the three fugitives watched as arm-thick feed lines burst and gas escaped under enormous pressure.

“Pay atten—” Elena managed to get out before the barge was struck by a gas jet and whirled away like a dead leaf. Although the forces were small and effortlessly absorbed by the compensators, Nopileos lost his orientation the moment the stars began to spin around the cockpit. *The shields*, ran through the Teladi’s mind. Surely the Phoenix’s automation had started up the energy shields the moment the engines had been fired. The bombardment had long since stopped, but if anyone in the destroyer’s control center was quick-witted enough to keep the shields activated, they would smash the tiny dinghy at any moment.

But nothing happened. The dinghy whirled diagonally behind the Phoenix in the blackness, accompanied by a flare from the slave freighter’s engines section that was now on fire.

“Green salamander!” Nopileos muttered, as he began to doubt the wisdom of his spontaneous actions. If the spacecraft were to explode, so would his three imprisoned comrades on board! After a while,

however, the rear-facing camera showed that the Phoenix, far behind them, was separating its engines which were tumbling through space. The onboard computer of the barge reported the simultaneous receipt of an automated distress signal. Nobody would hear it for along time, out here in the no-man's-land of this remote star system, which was christened Eighteen Billion by the Teladi. The name distracted Nopileos's thoughts and reminded him of a half-forgotten task that he would have to carry out sooner or later. Embarrassed, he tried not to look at the part of the data projection that displayed the sector name. Instead, he concentrated on controlling the barge.

Elena looked at the Teladi for a moment, then looked straight ahead. Nopileos seemed so attentive, so determined! She was glad that he was still alive. There wasn't another Teladi like him. And at some point, she thought to herself with a small smile on her lips, she would have to start thinking of her saurian friend as a "she," and alongside that, start using female pronouns.

The saurian descendant got the dinghy under control with the help of the onboard computer. "Why didn't they stop us?" he wondered.

"They threw a party out here in space, far from any lawfulness," Ghinn stated. "The creatures are devoid of any discipline. They do not even occupy the control room."

"Our luck, their misfortune," Nopileos hissed.

The Earth woman turned her head and briefly put her hand on the Teladi's shoulder. She smiled. "Double lucky for you. Soon you'll see Ianamus Zura."

CHAPTER 30

Childhood ends where innocence melts away.

Didan Navanje,

Taurus's Suns

Ion Battler sat on a wicker chair and crossed his legs under the leather-skin seat. The boy's head lay at an angle in his left hand, his elbow propped on the lab table. Ion's gaze moved dreamily through the large, blue-tinted pane of metal glass pane, behind which three figures leaned over a long, cylindrical object. In the background, two more people sat in front of a data terminal and scanned over the information available about the subject of the investigation. It was the heavy, black cylinder at the core of the Earth jumpdrive that had been removed from the jumpship *USC Getsu Fune*. Ion knew almost everyone who worked in the secure working area quite well: there was his half-sister Ninu, who lived more and more in the role of a guardian of truth—at least, it seemed so. Ion wasn't sure if he liked it or not. Ninu and Kyle Brennan, the man from Earth, were a couple: they should be together, not apart!" Ion had taken the always cheerful Brennan strictly to heart in the minute the Earthly space pilot came onboard the *AP Aladna Hill*. Ion suspected that his half-sister was expecting a child from Brennan. One more reason that they should stay together and not constantly pursue each other from light-jazuras away. The boy decided to speak about it with Ninu later.

Next to Ninu Gardna sat Dr. Ruuf Vondran, the elderly astrophysicist and singularity expert. Ion respected the ever cold-seeming scientist, but didn't like him very much. Of course, he made an effort not to let Dr. Vondran know that, but it probably wouldn't matter to him, anyway. Above the black cylinder—the jump unit—Asaneus floated in her translucent environmental suit. In addition to the male and female sexes, in very rare cases the Boron produced a third sex, called lar. Menelaus, the revered princess of the Born Queendom, was also one of them. The lars never used the one or two syllable, playful names that were otherwise so beloved by the Boron, but instead used sonorous titles of honor; they were constantly taking on the above average roles: studying philosophy and science, or occupying high government offices. They were referred to by female pronouns and humans couldn't distinguish them in the slightest from other Borons. Like all teenagers, Ion loved the Boron people, because they were amusing, yet studious and intelligent.

The boy's mouth twisted into a silent grin. The gaunt man, who had Asaneus hovering near his head, seemed distracted and moved uncertainly, as though he were about to knock over one of the expensive instruments and destroy it at any moment. But Dr. Zakk Folkna was actually one of the most capable space engineers in the Argon Federation. He held numerous patents on advanced propulsion systems,

including a reactionless space drive! Not many children could acquire a taste for Dr. Folkna, but Ion liked him with all his heart, because the scientist always knew something interesting to tell him from current research and was never condescending to him. Zakk took a step back and half-turned to exchange a few words with the beautiful Dr. Siobhan Inja Norman.

Ion had only seen Dr. Norman once up to now, namely upon her arrival, even though the long-lived astrophysicist had been in the temple for nearly two Wozuras. Of course, Ion didn't visit the materials lab everyday, but only occasionally in Ninu's company, when she was informed about the state of the research on behalf of the Supreme Guardian. Usually, it annoyed Ion that the scientists didn't want to let him into the secured area and he had to wait outside the blue window every time. Veithman Wolsh, the *AP Aladna Hill's* ship's engineer, never acted so fussy when it came to a stroll through the engine room of his ship! But since he could encounter Dr. Norman and admire her from afar, the boy didn't mind.

She looked really cool! Thin and tall and with long, blue hair that fell down her back in a ponytail. He tried to imagine what she was wearing under her gray lab coat and how her hair would look when she took the absurd hairnet that everyone had to wear here.

Ion was startled out of his daydreams when a sudden jolt went through the small group behind the blue metal glass pane. Dr. Vondran and Ninu jumped back hastily, and the remaining scientists took a giant step back almost as one, and looked at the black cylinder of the jump unit in surprise. Alarmed, the boy slid out of the wicker chair to step closer to the glass. Inside, words were being exchanged excitedly, but of course he couldn't hear what was being said from the outside. What happened in there?

Shock spread across their faces as thick, gray clouds of smoke billowed. Now Ion recognized that a faint halo had formed around the black cylinder. The appearance resembled a milky film or a very close-fitting energy screen. There, where the jump unit touched the workbench, the light dug its way through the rugged material, evaporating it and causing even more smoke. The strange energy field began to pulsate. And became more intense and continued to expand in small, jerky bursts. Eventually, the front end of the cylinder slid through the dissolving workbench. For a moment, the long and massive object hung between the work surface and the floor. Small trickles of molten metal rushed down its sides and began to bubble where they touched the field again.

Behind Ion, a siren howled loudly. The boy looked around anxiously: he had to go in, had to help his sister and Dr. Norman! He raced over to the terminal and demanded that the lock to the security room be opened, but the computer stubbornly ignored him. Ion had to watch helplessly as the rear end of the cylinder-shaped jump unit now slid through the glowing workbench and so much material went up in smoke that he could no longer even catch a glimpse of the trapped scientists.

The dense fog in the secured area cleared for a fraction of a sezura with a mighty implosion-like countermovement like a vortex, as if someone in the room had pulled the plug out of a drain. All the offshoots of the plumes of smoke moved at the same time, as if by command, streaming forward, coming back, whirling into the blackish gray patterns of a descending storm cloud. Small beads of

glowing material penetrated through the smoke, squirting on the metal glass pane with a loud *chang* and freezing into bizarre patterns. The computer had obviously switched off artificial gravity. Its next measure would certainly be to erect a strong energy field around the room. Maybe this had already happened!

Ninu! How was his sister supposed to be able to get out without being able to see, in the scorching heat, with dwindling air and, to make matters worse, without gravity? Ion looked around in panic, then with both hands he grabbed the chair he had sat and dreamed on only a mizura ago, drew it far back, and threw it against the pane: without any success. The chair bounced harmlessly off the metal glass without leaving so much as a scratch! The boy screamed in disappointment, raised the chair, and tried again. Again and again he struck the pane until a door slid open behind him and a woman in a gray coat as well as two uniformed security forces rushed into the antechamber of the materials laboratory.

“Bring the boy out!” one of the uniformed men shouted in command. The woman in the coat, a scientist whose name Ion didn’t remember, nodded briefly.

“Out!” she squealed, and grabbed Ion’s hand, but he pulled away from her grasp.

“No! Get Ninu out of there!” he screamed. Inside the secured area, clouds of smoke billowed weightlessly, backlit by occasional reflections of light.

“Come right now, damn it!” the woman cried, and snatched at Ion’s arms again. This time she caught him by the wrist. Reluctantly, he let himself be dragged out into the corridor.

“Please help my sister!” Ion cried with a heavy breath as the door closed.

“Wait here,” the woman ordered in place of an answer, then she stormed back into the laboratory. Ion barely had time to get his thoughts straight because now some scientists and Goner, startled by the alarm sirens, poured into the corridor. Excited questions flitted around in the corridor as a babble of voices arose. Several security guards arrived at the same time as the first scientists, and were busy blocking the throng of people from entering the lab.

Behind the wall came loud and threatening rumbles. Ion felt the deep rumble in his stomach and almost ran away in a buzz of panic. The ground trembled and swayed underfoot! Within a few moments the tremor increased to a full-blown quake. People cried out and fled from each other in horror. The boy was sick with fear, but he held out.

A few *sezuras* later, the quaking abruptly stopped. Ion immediately tried to open the door to the lab, but the mechanism didn’t respond. After another *mizura*, the sirens stopped and silence broke over him. He knelt in front of the lab door and slammed his fists against it. “Ninu! Ninu!” he sobbed. One of the uniformed men pulled him gently but firmly away from the door.

A little later, an emergency medical team arrived with biostatis equipment and hover-stretchers. Hurried words were exchanged with the security people, but Ion ignored them. After a seemingly endless amount of time, access to the laboratory was unblocked and the door opened. The boy had enough

presence of mind to let the emergency medics and the security people go first, but then he ran into the room before anyone could stop him.

The blue pane of metal glass had burst: a wide, jagged crack slanted diagonally across its entire width. In the security area behind it, the smoke still billowed, but it had already cleared considerably because no new smoke was pouring out. The workbench practically no longer existed; only a few, charred slag heaps suggested where it had been. All the equipment in the small chamber seemed to be destroyed, either shattered or licked with flame. Shrapnel made of metal, glass, and slag lay all around. There was no trace of the black cylinder the scientists had been studying: it had simply disappeared. But Ion hardly noticed the unbelievable amount of destruction in the security zone. In the antechamber, Ninu lay on the floor, her face like chalk, her breathing shallow. Dr. Norman knelt by her side. Her face was just as white and she looked drained and exhausted.

“Unconscious. Smoke inhalation,” she said, and glanced at Ion.

“Ninu!” Ion cried. He leaned over his half-sister, stroking her pale face, until one of the medics pulled him back and slipped an oxygen mask over the unconscious Goner. “Nothing’s going to happen to her, right? Nothing’s going to happen to her!” Ion cried, and it was less a question than a statement.

“She was lucky again,” the medic replied curtly. He turned to the blue-haired scientist and asked if if she was in a condition to leave without the help of a hover-stretcher.

“Oh Earth,” Ion whispered in nameless horror as his gaze fell on a charred figure being carried out of the security zone by uniformed men. The silhouette was that of Dr. Vondran. The old singularity expert hadn’t made it in time to get to the lock to the antechamber. A little while later, the scorched and busted membrane of the Boron was recovered. Lar Asaneus was also dead.

CHAPTER 31

I have a dream, that one tazura the colleagues of the Community of Planets and the egg-brothers and egg-sisters from Ianamus Zura will come to the muddy hills of our mutual planet in friendship, and sit down with each other—and for each other—and continuously rediscover the breathtaking beauty of the Aurora.

**Inalamas Samolodes Sumirasos VII,
Elected Administrator of Ianamus Zura**

Nopileos stared at Elena, frozen, for a speechless moment. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that Ghinn was also watching the Earth astronaut sharply, but why she did that, he didn't know, and at the moment he didn't care, either. The last words of the star warrior stirred up confusion in his head. *See Ianamus Zura!*

“Kho, we're taking this barge without delay to the empire of the... a Patriarch of the Split.

Now Nopileos also understood what Ghinn's expression was: unconcealed anger, clear lack of comprehension over Elena's decision. And long with that, a light also went on over his head. “Elena, you want to go there, but we really can't...” he stammered.

“To Ianamus Zura? Well, what course did you punch in, Nopileos?”

“The coordinates of the next stargate, as the computer recommended.”

“And that leads where?”

“Ianamus Zura!” Nopileos's eyes shined. “To Ianamus Zura!”

Elena nodded, smiling. Although there wasn't much legroom in this painfully cramped dinghy, she leaned back in the seat as far as she could and folded her arms behind her head.

“I do not want to go to this place!” Ghinn t'Whht insisted with a clearly imperious undertone. She sat stiffly in her far-too-narrow seat. “I demand that they bring me to Lho-Ingтар, or at least back to Nif-Nakh.”

“Ghinn, have you forgotten Nola Hi, Uchan, and Kalmanckalsalt? We need to organize help as soon as possible, if we're going to—”

“Send a messenger drone!” Without realizing it, the former Patriarch's wife constantly changed back and forth between the different forms of address.

“They don’t work in the New Sectors, because...” Nopileos dared to object. Ghinn threw him a gesture that he vaguely classified as “lost voice and coughing.” “It’ll work,” he spouted through his nostrils with closed lips, and remained silent.

“This pilot and his Paranid creature do not interest me,” Ghinn shouted loudly. She apparently didn’t feel the name of the Boron even worth mentioning. She stood halfway.

“Be careful!” Nopileos cried, startled, as she wobbled due to the cramped space and leaned precariously against him and the control shafts. The position monitoring system corrected the dinghy’s course deviation with quietly hissing control thrusters.

Elena didn’t know if she should just ignore Ghinn, or if it would make sense to tell the woman that she wouldn’t have found herself here on board if she and Uchan hadn’t thrown out the carefully prepared plan on Nif-Nakh. Technically speaking, Elena thought, they probably wouldn’t have even fallen into the hands of the slavers and by now would already be on their way back to the *Community of Planets* after a completed mission. Only rarely had she met such a self-centered person. So, by her behavior, Ghinn apparently considered this entire undertaking as being for her own private affairs.

“Ghinn, we’re going to Ianamus Zura. There will be Teladi traders there from the *Community* with services that can be bought. You’ll have the opportunity to be transported to any place you desire, and we’ll find someone to bring us back to the drifting pirate ship.” She found that to be a fair reasonable suggestion.

Ghinn suddenly screamed in rage and slammed her clenched hands on the seat back and console and everything within reach. A few warning lamps flared up and the forehead ridges of the reflexively cowering Teladi grew a shade paler.

“We are flying nonstop to Lho-Ingstar!” Ghinn screeched with a flushed face. The tall, gaunt woman had in the meantime straightened herself as far as the low cockpit of the barge would allow. Half-ducking, she reached over Nopileos, trying to grab Elena’s throat. The astronaut was faster. She effortlessly avoided the six, clawlike fingers without even having to get up. Elena was certain that she could immobilize the Split woman, who was severely hampered by her advanced state, at any time.

If anybody had looked through the cockpit window in those moments, they would have noticed the rapidly approaching jumpgate, but no one looked.

“Ghinn, listen to reason!”

“Listen to reason!” Nopileos also echoed as he ducked under the brawling of the two women. Elena jumped up and banged her head on the low ceiling with a dull sound.

“Never!” shrieked Ghinn, and that made Elena quickly lose her composure. The Earth astronaut wanted to grab Ghinn’s arms over Nopileos and tie them up—she looked around feverishly—with something, but it didn’t come to that any longer. With a long, drawn out cry of rage, the former Patriach’s wife

broke off. Ghin fell back in the seat. If it was even conceivable, her skin color changed to an even paler shade of ash gray within a fraction of a sezura.

“Ghinn? Is everything all right?”

Outside, the stargate’s ring grew ever larger.

“*Hai*,” Ghin snapped, and then remained silent. *Not for much longer*, she thought to herself, *I will not give birth to my child on a Teladi planet!* Something had stirred in her, demanding, pushing for freedom.

“We’re arriving at sector Ianamus Zura,” Nopileos said breathlessly. The tiny ship was swallowed by the swirling energy fields of the stargate.

On board the *FL Raindragon*, the Teladi had already flattened his muzzle against the cockpit glass as the ship hurried across the outskirts of this mystical sector. He hadn’t see much more of the planet that gave the solar system its name than a small, white dot. Now it was different: far ahead the home planet of all Teladi slowly grew.

No one could claim that the small barge was a paragon of speed and engine capacity, but her engines also worked unceasingly. Length by length, she crept toward the once-missing planet, the burn cutoff would be soon, and the reverse thrust would slow the barge down again relative to the position of the planet. Once-missing, Nopileos thought, who—like the two women—daydreamed his own thoughts. Ianamus Zura was only recently rediscovered. And it wasn’t just anybody who had found the planet, but Elena! Through computerized correlations between ancient star catalogs and the current maps, Elena had succeeded in finding the long-believed lost home planet, if only theoretically at that time, on the maps. At that time there had been no possibility to arrive there.

The Teladi was startled from his reflections as the onboard computer opened a rectangular video field above the center console. He excitedly nudged the astronaut on his right. “Sister!”

“Hm?” Elena blinked. She had actually managed to doze for a while. Her gaze shifted to Ghinn: the Split woman was awake, too, but she looked tense and weak. Then Elena’s gaze found the projection floating over the console.

Someone was staring at them through the video field, and into the cockpit. A someone who looked very odd: over a stocky body stretched an extensive texture of drab, red blotches, with randomly distributed patterns that looked like a false color image of a spotted argnu. Everything that wasn’t red was a dark green that flashed as though polished, and was obviously a thick body crust, a natural armor with quite massive scales which formed broad ridges along each edge. Two large, right eyes shown orange above a—Elena didn’t believe it at first—royal blue muzzle, which stood halfway open in an inclined position of interest. A light pink tongue occasionally passed over the nostrils and nearby, white nictitating membranes swept over the eyes. But what left both Nopileos and Elena speechless was the fact that it was obviously a Teladi! After a while, the colorful Teladi on the video field had obviously seen enough.

He inflated the scaly fin on top of his head, which was an unmistakable sign that he was delightfully amused.

“Tsh!” Nopileos said. Except for nails and eyes, everything was usually either green or else brown on his people. Sure, in varying shades, but always in these basic colors, even the scaly fin. The Teladi individual on the video field, however, shined in the brightest colors of the Teladi color spectrum. Nopileos didn’t know what to think or feel; he was as confused as ever. Before he could speak, Elena made an advance.

“*Hajime mashite Elena Kho desu,*” she said amiably. The Teladi’s muzzle almost fell out of the projection as he came closer to the camera. He hissed a few sentences and disappeared. Immediately after, a second, similarly colorful Teladi appeared in front of the imaging optics.

“What did he say?” Elena said as she looked at Nopileos.

Nopileos looked back with large eyes. “I’m not sure,” he stuttered. “That is a very old dialect, I think.” The realization that there was a dialect in the very own language of his people surprised him. Teladi already knew the most important words immediately after hatching. Sure, the larger part of the vocabulary came later, but ability and language as such were already inborn for each Teladi. For all intents and purposes, dialects weren’t possible!

The second saurian also began to hiss and at the same time did something with his claws outside of the imaging area. A warning signal flashed on the screen and Elena leaned over to read it. A coordinate sequence had been transmitted to the computer, but it seemed garbled. The onboard brain of the barge, which had an even lower Logic Level than Mark, the computer of Elena’s old ship the *USC Getsu Fune*, was unable to interpret the data correctly. Elena wanted to show it to Nopileos, but something strange had happened: The young Teladi’s tall, flat forehead ridges formed a slight bulge, a type of furrow. Just like the furrow in a human’s brow. Elena had never seen such a thing in a Teladi. She inquired anxiously about her saurian friend’s well-being.

“All the best, oh star warrior,” he replied with an absent expression on his face. “I think he said: lay down and eat up.”

“And that means as much as...?”

“I don’t know, Elena.” Nopileos hesitated. “But I know his name. His name is Liimitis Owumelohes Petulenas IX. I understood that much. It’s just the same as egg speak, only completely different.

Elena shook her head. “Sounds like a normal name for a Teladi to me.” Nopileos had to admit that she was right. “Well, yes. But have you seen him?”

Elena laughed softly. “I think he finds us just as strange as we find him.” She waved to the second Teladi. Nopileos started to say something, but he stopped when the saurian began to speak again. Elena flinched, because this time the colorful Teladi displayed an aggressiveness that reminded her of a snake pit full of vipers. That sounded more like contemporary Teladian!

“We should pay tribute to the beauty of the universe or turn back,” Nopileos translated. “Strange accent, but I halfway understand him now. Just the meaning...” The Teladi snorted indignantly. “Elena, what does that mean?”

The astronaut was just as much at a loss as her saurian friend. She shrugged. “Ghinn, any idea?” Since her fit of rage some time ago, the Split woman had behaved in silence.

“Someone’s been crossing Teladi creatures with Boron creatures,” the Patriarch’s wife sneered.

Nopileos looked at Ghinn with an open muzzle, then pulled his claws out of the control shafts and turned his palms up, fingers spread. “They wish to come aboard,” he announced, ignoring Ghinn’s comment. “They will decide after that whether we get clearance to land.”

Elena shook her head. “Did you tell him how little space we have in here?”

Nopileos wagged his stubby ears: no. Elena didn’t ask further. That probably meant they wouldn’t let them land if they didn’t cooperate. Maybe it would give Ghinn dumb ideas if they said it out loud. “Good,” she therefore said. “It’s going to be tight, but if they don’t send more than one or two people at the same time, it’ll work out somehow.

“Here they come!”

The silhouette of a ship peeled off from the planet directly ahead, which had grown to the size of a soccer ball in the meantime. The craft was about one and a half times the size of a typical destroyer. Its shape corresponded with that of a teardrop that was carefully flattened underneath, with broad, laterally arranged superstructures, and a few spiky antennae or sensors sticking out. Two powerful, rounded engine cases sprang out of the back end of the teardrop, breaking its symmetry. Along its sides nestled several rows of irregularly shaped windows or portholes, which were obviously raised and protruded slightly beyond the hull of the ship. The vehicle looked like it was grown biologically, but according to the barge’s long-range sensors, it was not. Not at all organic, however, was the color scheme of the spacecraft: dazzling, glaring yellow formed the basic color of the ship’s hull, flat, serpentine lines of clear blue, green, and red ran along, becoming narrower, tapering backwards from the wide fore of the teardrop where they entwined with one another artistically.

When Nopileos saw the magnificent space ship, something clicked inside him. Immediately the flowing sculptures in the displays of the Teladi shopkeepers in the trading station High Finance sprang into his mind. The artwork had fascinated him in unexplainable ways from the first moment, and he noted the name of the artist which was engraved on the foot of the sculpture in Old Teladian hieroglyphics: Ianusis Gonareos Ianusis VIII. The ship was not really similar to the sculpture, but the philosophy which had been the inspiration for the lines corresponded with the sculpture to a very high degree. Anyone could see that!

After some time, the colorful spaceship moved alongside the barge and a universal docking tunnel made its way to the outer hull of the ship. Only around half a length of the tunnel’s contact area was

smaller than the flank of the barge, so the mechanism felt around on the hull with a scraping sound until it found a suitable position and finally locked itself in place with dry clack.

Nopileos opened the bulkhead, secured the controls and onboard computer against unauthorized use, and then peeled himself from his seat. He threw Elena a help-seeking look. The astronaut rose from her bucket seat with some effort and followed the Teladi, ducking over.

They came in pairs. "Profit!" Elena greeted the saurians, but before she could say anything further, she was forced to look the colorful Teladi up and down with her mouth wide open. The blue muzzle of the one Teladi seemed familiar: yes, right! That was the one with the red argnu patches and the rainbow-colored head fin! His torso was unclothed, but he wore a wide legging that left his clawed feet bare. It was dyed in pale Teladi green and had a row of beige letters that ran from top to bottom. The claws, usually glossy black, each shined in a different screaming, gaudy color.

"They're all painted up!" Elena exclaimed.

"Shhhh!" Nopileos motioned for her to stay silent and offered the two newcomers a sincere welcome that was adequately answered. "They want to have a little look around," Nopileos translated.

"Make it clear to them that we are fleeing from pirates and need help," Elena ordered. They acknowledged this. By now the two garish Teladi had stepped closer. While Nopileos tried, hissing and growling, to explain the situation, they looked around carefully, touched, sniffed at, and pointed slender, colored devices at various parts of the interior equipment.

"And?" Elena pushed, as the Teladi with the royal blue muzzle gave a growl.

"If I understood that correctly," said Nopileos, who was terribly upset, "They would like to see the cockpit and the cargo hold."

"Cargo hold?" Elena wondered. Of course she hadn't had time to familiarize herself with the barge before escaping from the slave ship, but she couldn't believe that the small dinghy had a cargo hold. Nopileos translated, and the two Teladi answered that they could search the entire "aesthetic construct" alone.

"With 'aesthetic construct' they don't mean our knobby little ship, do they?"

"Yes, yes," Nopileos countered, following Elena's lead and squeezing against the wall in the narrow tween deck while the two Teladi curiously examined all accessible parts of the barge. "But did you see, oh sister? Did you? Tsh!"

"What?"

"They are, they are..." Nopileos's forehead ridges were completely pale.

"*Males!*" Nopileos blurted out.

CHAPTER 32

Einstein may have been a famous Argon from the founding of the Community. But I only reluctantly allow myself to be compared with him—I'm obviously prettier than him!

Dr. Siobhan Inja Norman,

ArgoNet::ScienceView, 8/504 Edition

Even though Ruuf Vondran's death wasn't meaningless to Siobhan, it struck a far lesser chord with her than the other collaborators on the project and the senior staff of the Goner. While some secretly resented the lack of compassion, Noah Gaffelt and his spokesperson, Lynda North, went with the tacit assumption that as a long-lived person, she had a different attitude toward life and death anyway. That was only partially true, because Iar Asaneus's death had struck very close to Siobhan, even though she had only met the Boron two wozuras before.

Four tazuras after the disaster, Siobhan was appointed as successor to Dr. Vondran by the Argon government and on the recommendations of Senator Gunnar and Dr. Folkna, and with it, as leader of Project Providence. Colonel Ban Danna seemed to be the only one who wasn't satisfied with this decision; Siobhan would have wagered that Danna preferred to see Dr. Folkna as successor. But the Colonel remained silent, and when Siobhan began to make sensational achievements a few tazuras after her appointment, his hostility crumbled and lost some of its sharpness.

The investigation of the accident left no doubt that the jump unit had been activated by outside influence. With the help of the sector military surveillance's log files, encrypted signals were found at precisely the time of the accident, on frequencies that were usually only used by the Xenon. A team of cryptologists at the Polytechnic Institute on Desolum IV succeeded in deciphering these signals. They unequivocally provided jump coordinates, series of parameters, as well as long, complicated command sequences that encoded formulas from singularity physics—all the same as the jump unit needed to operate, but so far had not been adequately researched and understood with the required precision.

Two weeks after the accident in the security lab, Siobhan, Dr. Folkna, Colonel Danna on behalf of Senator Gunnar, and Ninu Gardna the assistant to Noah Gaffelt met for a briefing that the Colonel called a council of war. Ban Danna still didn't feel one hundred percent comfortable in the presence of the blue-haired scientist. He still didn't like her very well, but knew himself well enough to slowly begin to guess why. In any case, he knew by now that she was no double agent. Immediately after the accident, he had heavily assumed that she was responsible for the sudden activation of the jump unit. When the log files came in with the radio-transmitted command sequences of the Xenon and proved

that this wasn't the case, he congratulated himself on keeping his mouth shut at the right moment at least once.

"My congratulations on your success," Danna said without looking directly at Siobhan. The Argon realized how much the intelligence agent had to pull himself together to look at least halfway peaceful. Inwardly she had to laugh. Danna nodded at Ninu Gardna and continued. "Miss Gardna, any chance that the Supreme Guardian might still attend the meeting?"

Ninu shook her head. "He and Lynda North are currently in Port Thornton."

"That's where I'm from, damn it," Danna muttered. "When I wanted to go, a squad of maintenance robots were just swapping out the locking wings of the docking tunnel. Four stazuras before launch clearance, can you imagine that? I was outraged! All right." Danna cleared his throat and for the first time looked directly into Siobhan's eyes. "Get going, Dr. Norman. We all know the basics, so you can keep it short."

Siobhan nodded. "All right. Basically, our results are double-edged. Encouraging, because we know pretty exactly how to activate the jump unit. The NQG invariance isn't solved, but we can put the jump unit into operation."

Ninu Garnda, whose light-blonde hair fell in a tied braid over her chest on a coarse-knit sweater, seemed confused. "That's pretty nice, but the jump unit went up in smoke. Right?"

"There's a reproduction, Ninu!" Zakk Folkna reported. "Of course we subjected the original unit to a nanoscan before we took it apart."

The Goner was taken aback. "I didn't know that!"

"Yes, and Colonel Danna was kind enough to organize a suitable test ship for us to install the jump unit in the next tazuras."

"You're welcome, but no reason to throw yourself around my neck." Danna dampened the scientists' cheer. "Dr. Norman, you spoke of concerning results."

"Right. You see, the jump unit was built by scientists from"—she hesitated—"Earth. By those who had a damaged Xenon jumpship as a model. And now the unit reacted to the radio sequences of the Xenon..."

"We're still researching their exact contents," Danna interjected.

"That's how it is. But what can we conclude from that?" Siobhan looked around. Before anyone could say anything, she continued speaking. "The engineers apparently rebuilt the radio control without knowing!"

"Then our jump unit has it, too," Ninu said, perceptively. "Or doesn't it?"

Zakk Folkna nodded. “Possibly, which is why we’ve integrated a jammer as a precaution, blocking the Xenon frequencies.”

“That works?” Danna asked skeptically.

“We think so. But ultimately, only test flights can settle that.”

“When do you begin that, Dr. Folkna? Dr. Norman?”

“As soon as the new jump unit is installed in the *AP Providence*—the test ship. In two or three tazuras.”

Danna nodded in satisfaction and pressed a few switches embedded in the black conference table in front of him. “Good. The sooner the better. I called this meeting a council of war, and not without reason. Look here.”

A holosphere flared up, in which a giant, black cylinder rolled slowly over a background peppered with stars. “I received this from the Defense Senator on his return journey from Hewa. There, a few weeks ago, the forty-sixth special session of the ICSCS took place.

“What is that? It looks Xenon,” Ninu wanted to know. Neither Siobhan nor Zakk Folkna knew Xenon ships or installations from their own experience, but the Goner had encountered the black ships several times on her travels on the *AP Aladna Hill*.

Ban Danna stood up and stood so close to the holosphere that his head protruded into the offshoots of a projected nebula. “This is a Xenon CPU ship. We do not know where it is, but the Paranid do know. And we have information about it that the Three-eyes do not.”

“From the book of truth, in which Noah Gaffelt imparted a lot of insight to us.”—Danna nodded to Ninu—“It turns out that there were originally thirty-two CPU ships in this area of the universe, and the Paranid take it for granted that only one unit still exists. Their coalition with the Split has disintegrated—so they’ve formed an independent fleet that’s already underway to eliminate this last CPU ship.”

There was a long pause while both the scientists and Ninu looked at the intelligence agent with questioning expressions.

“But they’d be doing us a big favor! Argon Prime isn’t involved in this campaign?” Ninu asked after a while.

“No. Personally, I’m sorry about that, too. But the Ministry of Defense believes that the risk is too high because there could actually be more CPU ships.”

“Who cares?” Zakk Flkna asked. “Where is the problem?”

“That’s what I’m telling you, Doctor. The problem is that the Xenon might not only be able to influence the jump unit, but also have access to as many of our computer systems and other technical equipment as they like. So many that we can only protect a fraction with jammers. We don’t want to provoke them until that’s more clear.”

“Nonsense. Who says that?” the lanky scientist seemed downright outraged.

“That’s in the preliminary report that Dr. Norman submitted to the government and me.”

The *AP Providence* stood out as a fast-as-an-arrow, slender wedge against the star-wrought background of the universe. The unmanned test ship was accompanied by a swarm of small camera drones that would track it until the jump unit was activated, caching not only images, but also transmitted data. More slowly, almost sluggishly, followed the huge shadow of the *Argon One*, the flagship of the Argon Federation. Normally the capital ship defended the Federation’s internal sectors against unwanted intruders, but in times of relative peace it was occasionally assigned to other tasks. While it was clear that peace would not last much longer, the High Command of the Armed Forces had nevertheless agreed to deploy the flagship as a mobile command center for the jump tests. Even Brennan’s unsuccessful jump attempts with the X-Shuttle had emanated from the *Argon One*; that alone showed how much importance was attached to the success of the project.

“One mizura until we reach the entry point,” the science station’s computer announced, followed afterward by a similar message from the *Argon One*’s bridge computer.

Siobhan constantly tracked the vital values from the jump unit on a monitor field while a military pilot monitored the *AP Providence*’s autopilot on a remote control console. Major Jahn Seldon was the pilot’s name, and he, like his senior commander Ditta Borman, had been permanently assigned to Siobhan and Project Providence. To the right of Siobhan was Colonel Ban Danna, who commanded the *Argon One* whenever civil interests or military intelligence affairs were involved. “If I can help you, Dr. Norman,” he said jovially, “then let me know.”

“Thank you very much. You can actually do me a huge favor, Colonel.”

“Namely?”

“Just make yourself invisible,” Siobhan snapped. Her stress made her even more biting than she already was, and her willingness to talk declined significantly. Danna looked dumbfounded at first, then laughed softly and retreated to the console of Major Seldon’s, who grinned at him silently and shrugged.

“Eighteen seconds to reach the entrance point. Jump unit properly activated.”

Siobhan touched a sensor on the console. Several small video fields opened, on which appeared images from the exterior cameras of the unmanned vessel. The constellations flew along both sides of the test ship in long, white stripes, while the positions of the stars remained relatively immobile in front of and behind the ship. Siobhan didn’t bother looking for faint red and blue shifts in the front and rear camera images because the ship was only traveling at five percent of the speed of light. Human eyes couldn’t resolve such minute nuances of color, but the computer was very well capable. She glanced sideways at

Zakk Folkna, staring at a half-dozen flickering data fields in concentration. Zakk had presumably completely missed the episode with Danna.

According to the displays, the jump unit had started up as expected. Externally, nothing could be discerned yet, but Siobhan knew that within the *AP Providence*, threads of distorted spatial geometry like dry, massless fingers now percolated through the walls of artificial metal as though they were nothing but massless ghosts. How badly Siobhan wanted to be aboard the test ship right now! This time, everything would work, she was sure of it. Lar Asaneus wouldn't have died for nothing. And Ruuf, she added hesitantly in her head.

“One sezura to reach the entrance point.”

Fine, blue discharges began to prance around the *AP Providence*. A white ring of pulsing energy emerged in front of the bow of the small ship.

“Test ship has reached the entrance point. All values are nominal.”

Silently, a bright flash twitched. Siobhan blinked as the video field first turned black for a fraction of a sezura, then switched to the view of the camera drones. A fibrillating cloud of ionized interstellar gas shot towards the cameras and faded almost immediately.

The *AP Providence* was gone!

Siobhan checked the controls with trembling fingers. It worked, the experiment was a success! Then she turned to Danna and Seldon in anticipation of a shout of joy. But the two men looked at her as if they had seen a ghost. With long faces they wanted the camera transmissions of the position in space where the test ship had been just sezuras ago.

“I'm going crazy,” the Colonel piped up after a few sezuras. “I've been a part of twelve X-shuttle jump tests, twelve jumps spread over twenty-one tazuras. Twelve failures.” The color slowly returned to his face, and he stepped over to Siobhan and extended his hand. “You have deeply impressed me.”

In the first moment, Siobhan felt the impulse to ignore the offered hand. But she intuitively felt that Danna's words were sincere, and stood up to look the intelligence agent in the eyes while she shook his hand. “This wouldn't be possible without your help, Colonel,” she said with a wink.

“Oh, you mean because I can make myself invisible upon request,” Danna laughed, “like the jump unit!” For the first time since he knew Siobhan, he felt a certain sympathy for her. He stepped aside as Zakk Folkna hugged Siobhan and clapped her across the shoulders.

“I knew it, I knew it!” the scientist repeated over and over, and it sounded a bit like sobbing, or a heartfelt prayer.

“Okay, Zakk. Back to your place, now. The *AP Providence* will return in a few moments. Major Seldon, to the remote flight controls. Hop to it!” Major Seldon hopped.

Only then did Siobhan realize that the gravidar wasn't indicating what it should. The test ship had been programmed for a jump of only one light-mizura; a distance well within the limits of this solar system. It should have appeared on the gravidar! "Zakk, something's wrong. The ship isn't on the gravidar." Anger rose in her—she was no pilot! Seldon should have noticed the ship's absence on the gravidar immediately after the jump!

"Lost? Did it explode?" Zakk gasped in horror. "Perhaps in the energy flash when it reached the entry point?"

"No, no debris on the gravidar, nothing," Seldon answered. "The ship must have jumped!"

"Bridge!" Danna called. The first officer answered. "Commander, I need a deep space scan across the entire sector. Immediately! Our test ship disappeared, it—"

"One moment, Colonel," the first officer interrupted. "We have activity at the jumpgate. There it... yes! Unbelievable. There it is!"

"I demand a proper report!"

"Thank you, Commander. Dr. Norman—we somewhat overshot the finish line, no? How was that, only a light-mizura for the first test?"

Siobhan leaned back and ran a hand through her hair. "The telemetry data looked perfect. Not one iota of difference from the targeted values. We have to wait until we see what the jump unit recorded during the jump."

"Hmm, signal propagation delay is thirty-three mizuras in one direction. That means the earliest we'll know in sixty-six mizura. Bit if you need to take the unit apart, Doctor..."

"Yes, of course—then it will take a bit longer."

"About half a tazura to the rendezvous. Unless you let the ship jump again."

"Not in any event, Colonel. Not before I know what happened." But she already had a specific assumption.

CHAPTER 33

Every Teladi is born with a genetically-acquired vocabulary of about a hundred words, the so-called “eggspeak.” Most of these words deal with verbs, adjectives, and interjections which are rarely needed by a full-grown Teladi. The adult language must therefore be learned by every Teladi in the traditional way.

Dr. S. Petra,

Essay on the Lexical Field Analysis of Teladian Verbs

She couldn't get enough of the sight or hear enough of the sounds. Even though she had only understood a few words, she still very quickly understood how elegant and expressive the language of the two Customs and Immigration officials really was. If there was a true, an original form of Teladian, it was this, and not the one that was spoken in the *Community*! Everything in her resonated as if her body had received—for the first time in her life—a dose of a mineral or vitamin that blew a veil away from her eyes and ears that she had never realized was there before. Petulenas and his colleague Odisobos spoke to her in pure Old Teladian, and she understood every word, as if it had been predetermined by her genes from the very beginning.

“So, egg-sister Isemados Sibasomos Nopileos IV, we are very pleased to have made your acquaintance,” Petulenas said directly. He came back from the cockpit and looked at an image on the display of his device, a picture he had just taken of Ghinn. “Only the fewest egg-sisters in your planetary community find themselves in such impressive company. A hateful creature and an Argon woman.” Nopileos's scaly fin straightened in amusement. Hateful creature! That was certainly the best term she'd ever heard for the Split. And that was especially true for Ghinn t'Whitt! She caught a glimpse of the star warrior.

“What are they saying?” Elena wanted to know.

“They are happy,” Nopileos said absently. Turning to Petulenas, “Surely there are many Teladi from the *Community* already on Ianamus Zura, colleague Petulenas, right? Right?”

“Hmshhh.” Petulenas hung the recording device into a scale hook at his side and picked up an input tablet on which he touched some sensors. “Well, so many are coming, so many leave again. So, egg-sister Nopileos, you have a landing clearance. Thank you very much.”

Nopileos made a hissing sound. She looked at Elena for help, but the star warrior had of course not understood a word of what she was saying.

“So, egg-sister Nopileos,” Petulenas turned to her again before following his colleague Odisobos through the docking tunnel, “concerning your pirate problem, please contact the Aesthetic Supervision. They have already been informed. Your personal visa is unlimited, your companions’ visa is for the solstice.” Nopileos managed to express her thanks before the bulkhead hissed shut.

“Tell us!”

“We are allowed to land. Oh, Elena, they really are...”

“Males?” Elena suggested with a grin as Nopileos faltered.

“Tshh! Yes, that too! But they are also very mysterious.”

Elena had to grin even wider. “Anything else would be boring, right?” With these words, she slapped Nopileos lightly on the shoulder and pressed past her to return to the cockpit, where Ghinn was waiting as though petrified.

When about an inzura later, Ianamus Zura filled the narrow window of the dinghy from left to right, Nopileos couldn’t stop marveling. She was deeply moved in her heart of hearts. She had certainly gone unusually far in her life for a Teladi who had just achieved maturity. She had already seen many magnificent planets, and also the glittering veils of the Halmnan Aurora, mysterious and beautiful. She had seen dark-red suns that gleamed at her from the furthest reaches of eons like pieces of coal midway through a winter’s night; spiral nebula in such great numbers and as white as ice crystals on the window of the Breeding Complex on Platinum Ball.

But this planet, on which the barge had just landed, was more beautiful than all of that. So much more beautiful that it hurt her soul. Already from a height of a hundred and fifty thousand lengths, where the atmosphere just stood out as a thin, pale blue hint against the black of the universe, she could recognize its unique and special colors with her naked eye: a warm, muddy brown that stretched over almost the entire northern hemisphere. Nopileos had never seen a map of the birth planet of her species, didn’t understand what she was seeing with her mind. But her subconscious spoke to her heart, and she recognized it all at once: swamp! Just as other planets were covered in large part by deep oceans, Ianamus Zura was covered by vast, wonderful swamps. It was the memory of their kind, unexperienced, yet unforgotten across all generations.

“Are you on the localizer beam?” Elena’s voice broke through.

Nopileos checked the controls as if they were incidental and switched the computer to ground control. “*Hai.*” Signs of intelligent life could not be made out from orbit on many settled planets. Here it was different. Coastal marches ran for tens and hundreds of thousands of lengths in gently curved lines, which were obviously not of natural origin, but had to have been shaped over many hundreds of jazuras. The large dry regions blazed golden yellow in parts, in ocher tones in others. There, down below, the terminator moved slowly under the landing ship, separating day from night, and a twinkling metropolis lit up, point of light by point of light, their night lights.

Not much later, the first buildings grew towards the height of the sinking barge. Curved, living structure, gently and suddenly rising, narrow or wide. Here, too, without a doubt, the connection to the artist's sculpture already manifested itself in the lines of the Customs spaceships. Art, technology, landscape, and architecture, everything flowed together here on Ianamus Zura in beauty, producing the lost dream of her kind. Here she was at home...she felt it, as the landing pads of the dinghy touched down with a soft jerk.

Night on the landing field was flushed with a gentle light. She wanted out; the air on board was so stale and artificial. She wanted to breathe the planet right now! Without a word, she pulled herself out of the pilot's chair and left the two women behind her. The star warrior shouted something to her, but Nopileos paid it no mind. The lock hissed, it couldn't move fast enough. Finally, the tiny gangway swung out, and even before the stairs touched the loamy floor of the landing field, Nopileos jumped the last half-length, spread her arms in the warm air, and took a deep breath.

An unobtrusive aurora wafted in long plumes over the night sky, silent from noises, but loud in its harmony. Nopileos stood there, out of time, lost to the world, and breathed! Why had she just been choking for all these jazuras? On the artificial air, on the narrow confines of the Breeding Complex on Platinum Ball, on the ignorance of all her people?

Elena stepped along side her later. "Beautiful," the Earth woman whispered.

"Yes," Nopileos breathed, more softly than Elena had ever heard her speak before. Deep silence prevailed for a long, long while. From somewhere, a breeze bore a spicy, swamp odor. Nopileos's hearts pumped in slow, deep triplets. Eventually, she felt Elena take her claw in her hand and squeeze gently.

"You arrived at your destination, Nopileos," the Earth woman said softly. "This is your home. I can see it in your face."

Nopileos looked up at her. "Oh, Elena, if only you knew what's going on inside me. Every Teladi, *every* Teladi longs for this place, for so long, and every thought..." Her voice failed and she had to moisten her nostrils with her tongue. "Every thought in which a Teladi yearned for this unknown place was worth thinking. Every single one! Oh, Elena!"

They turned as a sound swept over from the barge. Ghinn t'Whht came down the gangway clumsily and with a guarded expression. Her laced sandals crunched softly on the loam. The Split woman folded her arms over her chest and lifted her chin, stubbornly looking in another direction when she noticed Nopileos and Elena looking over at her. Elena shook her head and turned back to Nopileos. "Stay here, Nopileos. You shouldn't leave here again."

"Yes," she answered pensively. No, she shouldn't leave here again, never again. But...

"Elena star warrior, oh my friend! Look, there are people who are counting on us, on you and also on me! You've all put your life on the line to save me. Ianamus Zura waited for so many decazuras, a

couple more wozuras won't make a difference." These words came anything but easy for her, but it did good to say them.

"Nopileos..." Elena sat down on the floor cross-legged, as she occasionally did when she wanted to talk to her seriously and at equal height. Nopileos knelt down and the two so unlike friends looked each other in the eye: yellow, glistening, saurian, ringed eyes looked into deep, dark almond eyes. How much could she tell Nopileos without hurting her? Could she mention the conference with the CEO and Bala Gi? Would the CEO have organized a rescue mission if the Ancient Ones' records hadn't slumbered on board the *Nyana's Fortune*? If not, Elena would have never found out that Nopileos was still alive.

"You are so quiet, oh sister!"

"Nopileos, little lizard, stay here on Ianamus Zura. I know you wouldn't hesitate to come along. But you don't have to face this danger: the success or failure of the mission doesn't depend on you..."

"But that's not at all what it's about," Nopileos hissed before Elena had finished speaking. "Don't you know what I promised you?"

Elena nodded. "Yes, of course."

Nopileos remained silent for a few sezuras and looked to the side. Somewhere over there in the night swung the elegant curves of a tall building. Through the soft veils of mist, she could recognize another ship a hundred lengths away, stretching its bow into the sky. "I keep my promises, Elena. Please!"

Something strange, something uniquely singular happened: the spacefarer from Earth rose to her knees and embraced the saurian woman with both arms. On several occasions she had felt the impulse to do this, but had always held back until now because Teladi didn't hug each other. Nopileos hissed in surprise—she had never been hugged before! But she knew this human gesture and so she put her scale-covered arms around Elena's shoulders as well.

"My friend," was the only thing Elena said, and she squeezed Nopileos. The Teladi murmured something incomprehensible, then both broke up and straightened. "We have to go to the Aesthetic Supervision, right? Whatever that might be."

"Exactly," Nopileos confirmed. Elena took a few steps towards Ghinn, who pretended as though she hadn't seen the strange scene. But immediately after that it became apparent that she had followed the events of the last mizuras."

"Please—she doesn't embrace me, too," the Split woman said in her throaty voice.

Elena couldn't resist a grin. "I only embrace creatures who also have a soul: Teladi, Boron, Xenon," she joked. Ghinn made a kind of croak. If Elena hadn't known better, she would have thought it was an expression of humor—but Split never laughed.

Ghinn made a gesture that was unreadable in the night. “Our ways part here,” she said. “You wanted to use me to reach your goal. I, however, used you to accomplish mine. There is no more to say.” With these words, Ghinn bid Elena and Nopileos a hip-height gesture and slowly walked away into the darkness.

Nopileos stared after her. “What’s her plan?”

Elena hesitated. “She’ll probably look for the second-best Teladi who will bring her back to the *Community*, I think.”

“Tsh. It’s not very smart to walk through the middle of a landing field at night,” Nopileos remarked. “She simply walked out onto the field instead of sticking to the path.

Elena was astonished. “Where do you see a path here?”

Instead of answering, Nopileos tromped alternately with both clawed feet two, three times on the loamy ground. No, she wasn’t wrong. It was a completely new feeling; she had never before felt anything like it. She’d spent most of her life in buildings and space stations, and her claws might be untrained despite the many wozuras on Nif-Nakh. But she felt it clearly and entirely without doubt. Her instincts didn’t deceive her. There was only one explanation.

“Do you feel it? Here!” She took a few steps forward and stomped her claws one more time. “And here!” More stomping. “Tsh!”

Elena watched the spectacle with growing amazement. To her, the whole thing looked like a ritual, or no—like a indigenous dance. “What are you doing there?”

Nopileos hissed, came to her, and nudged her in the side. The Teladi carefully directed Elena to the places where she had just gotten her strange notions and gestured for her to stamp her feet. “And?”

Elena, who didn’t have the slightest idea what Nopileos was getting at, did it, shrugged her shoulders, and asked, “Nopi, what’s this supposed to mean?”

“Now again, there.”

Elena let her saurian friend steer her to another spot. “Stomp?”

“Yes! Please, Elena!”

The astronaut obeyed. “Will you explain it to me now?”

“The path, there’s a path here, you can’t see it but you can feel it!” Elation resonated in Nopileos’s voice.

Elena was skeptical. “You’re sure? And you can somehow, well, feel it?” Then again, she thought the saurians might have a special tactile sense in their clawed feet that enabled them to recognize subtle differences in soil texture. It was certainly no coincidence that they preferred door switches and other operational controls at foot level.

“But yes, oh sister. Come with me, I’ll guide you!” With these words, Nopileos grabbed the Earth woman’s hand and pulled it behind her.

CHAPTER 34

Stardust. Ice crystals of silver, raindrops of gold.

Stardust. Diamonds that glint just like bright suns so old.

Stardust. Thousands of worlds in the visage of space.

Stardust. The day and the night will forever unite.

“The Stardust Symphony”

Four tazuras until the *Argon One* had to return to her home sector. If everything went according to plan, this time frame would be sufficient for another six to eight tests.

The next two test jumps followed the exact same scheme as the first one. Each time the *AP Providence* vanished from the gravidar at the appointed time, but never appeared at the intended point, but instead always between the dimensional anchors of a nearby jumpgate. Siobhan fostered the assumption that the jump unit really worked very well in principle, but that the instructions fed to it could not be adjusted with sufficient precision using the available resources. Instead of the ship reappearing at the previously calculated point, it was literally attracted to the singularity inside a jumpgate and spit out through the gate itself. The data in the test ship’s onboard computer fully supported her assumption.

“You have to imagine it like this, Colonel,” Siobhan said. She had left the science station and was on the giant bridge of the *Argon One* to await the arrival of the *AP Providence* after the last test jump—and meanwhile, to talk with Danna. Busy activity prevailed all everywhere on the command deck, officers executed formal and militarily rigid routines and procedures, and everyone met Danna with great respect. “The dimensional anchors—that is, the outriggers—of a jumpgate form a tunnel that theoretically extends infinitely. Theoretically a jumpgate can therefore be connected with any other one, anywhere in the universe. There’s just one limitation: the further the destination jumpgate, the more precisely it must be adjusted. The accuracy reaches to infinity. That is the real difficulty.”

“But the gateless jumpdrive is based on a different principle?”

“Yes and no. The jump unit tries to create the gate and tunnel at the same time, and indeed, virtually. Because that will require enormous energy, both can only be maintained for a picosezura. The ship must be through in this timeframe, otherwise it will cause a catastrophe.

Ban Danna remembered the reports Kyle Brennan had made about the jump with the Earth X shuttle. The shuttle itself had indeed arrived in the *Community of Planets*—with an enormous gravitational wave and a beacon of Cherenkov radiation-but at least reasonably intact. The jump unit of the X

shuttle, however, had been severed during the jump or immediately before and apparently remained back in sector Earth. Not much later, the jump unit from Elena Kho's *USC Getsu Fune* failed: instead of an emergency jump back to Earth, the ship had come out in the middle of Argon Prime's atmosphere and crashed. "You know the records about Captain Brennan and the X shuttle?" Danna asked. Siobhan nodded vigorously.

"Yes, of course. Brennan's ship had inadvertently aligned itself with the dimensional anchors of a distant gate because the jump unit was too imprecisely adjusted. Exactly that also happened here.

Danna looked at the large, tactical 2D projection that went right through the middle of the bridge and schematically depicted a considerable portion of the inner Argon sectors. A series of widely distributed, shining white dots signaled the positions of the Argon capital ships in Federation territory. The data were fairly accurate, even though the greatest part of the displayed information didn't stem from direct observation or gravidar sounding, but instead was updated to the latest status every few mizuras via messenger drone from the fleet command. Danna involuntarily thought of Elena, who was probably already far away from these inner sectors—far beyond the messenger drones' guidance systems. Unreachable.

"Colonel? Are you trying to make yourself invisible again? Or me, by not listening?"

"Excuse me, Doctor. So adjustment is the problem. Brennan's ship had to struggle with it just as ours does now. When will you have that under control?"

Siobhan shorted derisively. "Not before the NQG invariance is solved, and that will take jazuras. But I've already said that. The best we can do so far is strictly and exclusively direct the jumpship at distant jumpgates. That way we'll cheat the odds."

"At the price of freedom of choice," said Danna. A small, thoughtful pause arose.

Siobhan, who considered Danna's objection to be purely rhetorical, and her own conclusion inevitable, was already thinking several steps ahead. "The Goner and the Teladi have their fingers in Project Providence, right, Colonel?" Danna nodded, and Siobhan continued. "Well, they'll receive the license for jump technology as contractually stipulated. A partial jump drive. If we get the gateless jump technology under control in a couple jazuras, the lizards will look pretty stupid. I mean, even stupider than they already do."

"And only Argon Prime will possess the technology. Not bad, doctor!" Danna's eyes flashed approvingly. Sometimes he liked her pragmatic style. "But," he raised the concern, "that doesn't really help our current problem with jumping."

"I see it differently. It solves it: the problem is removed through argumentation!" Siobhan indicated with a wink.

"Nice euphemism for rationalizing something away," Danna grinned. "We still need more data before we build the unit at scale. A few hundred—more like thousand—test jumps someday even manned."

Siobhan twitched her shoulders. “That already begins with the next jump. Only Major Seldon and me.”

Danna looked at the scientist in surprise. “You don’t think that’s too dangerous?”

“Dangerous? No.” Siobhan stepped up to the tremendous, round window and gazed spellbound at a small white dot far out in space, coming closer under a blazing deceleration burn; it was, as she knew, the *AP Providence*, returning from their last unmanned test flight. “It’s no more dangerous than a completely normal gate transit, except that the probability of coming out at the intended target point is insignificantly higher with a gate.” She estimated that there was a fifteen percent probability that the partial jump drive would not reach the targeted gate, but instead another. And that wasn’t exactly a broken leg!

Shortly after completing the preliminary assessment of the data brought by the test ship as well as the jump unit through the unmanned jump, Siobhan and Major Seldon boarded the converted diplomatic ship. Normally this would have been the prerogative and duty of Commander Borman, but she was currently at the Goner temple, engaged in another important task, and was therefore not on board the *Argon One*.

The interior of the *AP Providence* was very spacious and exceptionally luxurious. The pilots chairs in the cockpit were not just simple, foam-covered hard plastic shells, as usual on military vessels, but had a dark blue, ventilated fabric cover that one might have expected in the control center of a private yacht. Equally noble were the walls of the cockpit, which were covered with a fabric of the same hue, one which every few finger widths, the rust-red emblem of the Argon Federation repeated itself. The rounded indicators and displays were matte purple, eye friendly, and glare free; the unobtrusive, gender-neutral voice of the particularly intelligent onboard computer spoke with extreme courtesy.

Siobhan had of course seen the interior of the ship many times before and was no longer distracted by the lush accouterments. “Was a diplomatic ship before, right?” Major Seldon asked casually. The pilot had just checked the integrity of the outer hull with his own eyes and now dropped into the pilot’s chair. The seat whirred forward automatically on the smoothly running, recessed rails.

Siobhan looked at the current energy flow diagram of the jump unit. “I guess so.”

“Hm. Have you programmed the Delta Gate of Herron’s Nebula as the target? And are we going to arrive there?”

“With a probability of seventy-five percent, Major.”

“Very good. Then we can get going. Are you ready?” The major looked around; when Siobhan nodded, he tapped on a sensor field. The converters ran with a hum, and the tiny moment in which their stomachs twisted informed the Argons that the inertial compensators and the Podkletnov units had been activated. The retaining clips released, the ship was transported without digression to the *Argon One*’s launch tunnel. Moments later, the *AP Providence* was received by space, cold as ever, and the conventional drive ignited to establish a safe distance from the capital ship. Siobhan didn’t really believe the necessity existed, but she wanted to be completely certain.

“Countdown is running. Four mizuras to reach the entry point,” the computer said. “Dr. Norman, Major Seldon, please confirm the operating parameters of the jump unit.” Unbidden, data fields immediately opened above the consoles. At almost the same time, Siobhan and Seldon wiped the projections away again: from the time they entered the cockpit, they had done nothing but check the jumpdrive!

“Yes. Confirm,” Siobhan replied.

“Confirmation,” Seldon also said. He raised his thumb and smiled at Siobhan.

“Four mizuras until we reach the entry point,” the computer said after a while. The *Argon One* had already fallen far behind. There were no stations and absolutely no space traffic within a radius of one hundredth of a light-sezura, according to gravidar.

“Two mizuras until we reach the entry point. Dr. Norman, Dr. Seldon, please issue approval for the jump unit.” This time no unexpected video fields sprang up. Siobhan and Seldon confirmed, and tense silence dominated again.

“Eighteen sezuras until we reach the entry point. Jump unit nominally activated.”

The generator in the belly of the ship rumbled, raising its frequency to a murmur, finally whistling an intense, almost inaudible sound that bubbled through the ship as a physically tangible vibration. A bright, swirling ring of blue energy formed just in front of the cockpit, causing the metal glass panes to darken. Siobhan’s stomach grew slightly queasy as threads of distorted space geometry seized her body—but of course she expected that.

“Ship has reached the entry point. All values nominal.”

As the blueish whirls slowly faded and the gravidar returned to normal again, the computer said “Arrived at sector Herron’s Nebula.”

“See, Major? The probability calculations are our friend.” Siobhan used some virtual switches to send a messenger drone back to *Argon One* by conventional means. The onboard computer loaded the relevant data into the memory of the tiny spacecraft and sent it on its way. The drone disappeared with rapid acceleration through the jumpgate in which the *AP Providence* had just materialized.

“Just as I wanted,” Seldon laughed. “Deepest congratulations, Doctor!” He checked a few indicators. “Nine mizuras until the converters are recharged. Should I go out and look at the ship from the outside?”

Siobhan clicked her tongue. “What for? Are there any instructions to take the ship apart after every jump and then solder it back together?”

“No,” Seldon answered, who was amused by Siobhan’s occasional bursts of sarcasm. “I just wanted to see if my spacesuit is still airtight.”

“Very nice, Major. I’d prefer it if you helped me with the system check of the jump unit.”

Eight mizuras later, Siobhan and the major had checked the jump unit as thoroughly as possible within the limited time and onboard resources. Everything looked very good; in fact, the adjustment settings for the jump unit had changed a bit, but the onboard computer had managed to correct this on its own, so that Siobhan hadn't needed to intervene.

Major Seldon initiated the jump sequence at Siobhan's signal. Again, the computer began its obligatory countdown, the generator rumbled in the bowels of the small ship, establishing the jump field.

"Ship has reached the entry point," the computer announced again. It said nothing about nominal values this time. "Destination error. Arrived at sector Black Hole Sun."

"What—" Seldon managed to get out before the blue energy storm of the jump field was replaced by a red firestorm that caught the ship and whirled it away like a dry leaf in a hurricane. Siobhan screamed as the hoop of a jumpgate passed threateningly close to the cockpit window. The computer sounded the collision alarm and raised the shields.

Plunging backwards, the *AP Providence* fell toward one of the outriggers of the gate. Reaction control thrusters flared on both sides of the cockpit, but their pale glow was almost completely drowned out by the inferno outside. Major Seldon clung desperately to the control rods, but despite the relatively low slight mass of the ship, he was unable to avert the looming impact.

The ship crashed with an ear-splitting noise into the right outrigger of the jump gate. A jolt went through Siobhan, as for a moment the inertial compensators halted because the acceleration absorbers couldn't absorb the maximum inertial forces. The scientist felt picked up by a titan's fist, but before the next jolt could throw her through the window like a ragdoll, the compensators resumed operation. Artificial gravity made her fall abruptly back into the chair, where she hit her tailbone painfully on the armrest.

Something outside scraped against the *AP Providence*'s outer hull with a bloodcurdling screech, rocking it to its foundations. Only when the metal glass of the cockpit screen momentarily became slightly more transparent did Siobhan realize that the ship had been brought to a relative standstill by the impact. The still-burning firestorm pressed it against the outrigger and slowly slid it to the outer edge of the jumpgate's hoop. White-hot sparks sprayed as the dimensional anchor plowed through the test ship's shields with brute force.

"A nova!" Siobhan screamed. "Major, we have to get down from the anchor!" Perhaps the shields would withstand the onslaught of the supernova for a while, if the ship adjusted to the shock front instead of resisting it. But the shield generators would fail in a couple of mizuras at most, if the outrigger continued to pass right through the shields!

Seldon realized this, too. He lit the *AP Providence*'s main engine and pushed it to full throttle. The hoop of the gate jumped up and slid sideways against the ship. Tongues of flame surged up and the shield generators' capacity gauge dropped to sixty-two, then immediately to fourteen percent. Siobhan felt that she was screaming.

Then the ship slid excruciatingly beyond the flat edge of the dimensional anchor, tipping and falling headfirst into infinity, propelled by a gigantic, flaming tidal wave like a piece of cosmic flotsam. The tumbling jumpgate was far behind and moments later was devoured in a sea of flames.

The generators' capacity slowly climbed back up; endlessly tough, but reassuringly steady. Seldon cut off the main engine and left it to the onboard computer to stabilize the ship with the help of the gyroscope and control thrusters as it spun and tumbled around all axes.

"*Chikisho*," he gasped. "Crap! Where did we come out? What the hell is that?"

The image presented by the rear camera was frightening: a blazing corona of glowing red fled from the swirling, white canker in its center, which had once been a sun. Immeasurable streams of ultra-hot gas were thrown out into space, consuming everything that stood in their way.

"That," Siobhan whispered, shaken, "is the remains of Black Hole Sun."

All color drained from Major Seldon's face. For sezuras he struggled for words, until he finally slammed his fists helplessly on the console. A few warning lights came on and were immediately reset by the onboard computer. "What are the converters doing?" Seldon asked in a hoarse voice. "How long before we can jump?"

"Bad news or good news first?"

Seldon looked at the Argon without comprehension, eventually shaking his head. "Bad."

"Fourteen stazuras to the jump. Our—"

"How much?" Seldon interrupted. "Fourteen stazuras?"

"Yes, our shields are drawing almost all generated energy. The good news is, they'll hold."

Mizuras passed while Seldon prepared a camera drone with a petrified expression. Just a while ago he had wanted to inspect the ship from the outside with a space suit. That almost seemed to him not simply a few moments back, but already part of a distant, unreal past. "Explain it to me," he said, as the drone was spit into space from the ejection tube. He was under no false notions as to how long the unprotected miniature spaceship would survive outside. "Here we have one of the New Sectors, classified as harmless on the military maps. Black Hole Sun is—how old? Nine hundred million jazuras? A G2 main sequence star. That can't simply go nova. Explain that to me!"

"You'd better tell me what you see on the gravidar," Siobhan replied, without responding to the pilot's question. Although instrument's display was almost completely covered by a white, flowing veil that constantly changed its shape, some blips stood out conspicuously from the chaos.

Seldon stared at the gravidar for some sezuras. "I'll be damned! Those can only be—"

“Be the jumpgates,” Siobhan completed the sentence for the major. “Exactly. Here’s a planet”—she tapped a shapeless accumulation of pixels that were in the midst of disintegrating—“here’s a jump gate, there another one. Got it?”

With flying hands, Seldon called a map of the star system from the onboard computer’s databanks, which he had projected over the gravidar to scale. Green lines marked the solar orbit of the jumpgates as recorded on the map, red the actual ones. “Impossible!” he snorted. It was unmistakable that the blips on the gravidar still followed their paths. “I’ll happy believe that these things survived the nova without active shields. But what keeps them in their orbit?”

“Black Hole Sun only had one planet. A gas giant, right? Yes, here.” Siobhan called up the information from the computer. “No settlements or any noteworthy installations, right?”

Seldon shook his head. “I don’t think so. We haven’t had access to this system for very long.”

“Don’t you find that odd, Major? A G2 star will go nova, even though it would remain in the main sequence for at least four billion jazuras. Strangely enough, there are no habitats in the sector. And, as luck would have it, it happens at exactly the same point in time where...” She winced as she suddenly became aware of a connection that she hadn’t thought of before. Her eyes grew wide and a knot formed in her throat. “Of course, the Xenon!”

Seldon stared at her as though she were a ghost. “No, that’s impossible!”

“Impossible, yes?” Siobhan yelled excitedly and jumped up. A part of her registered objectively how irrationally she was reacting, and that her anger was not real but based on insecurity and fear. She immediately lowered her voice. “What is this here? Impossible?” She pointed at the supernova and burning space. “Am I dreaming some of that out there? Don’t you know Kertsmanckbal’s Third Axiom, Major?”

Seldon shook his head silently.

Siobhan snorted and leaned on the console with her right hand. Her entire body still ached from the fall on the armrest. “It states that the limits of the possible always remain proportional to those of the imaginable.” She hesitated. “I’m sorry, Major. I didn’t mean that to be about you.”

“I know. The thought gives me a considerable amount of fright, too. Listen, Doctor—are you all right? You’ve been shoved around pretty good.”

Siobhan sighed. “Everything’s good again. A couple bruises will go well on my skin. Matches the hair.”

In the following stazuras, Siobhan started the rest of the camera drones in succession, to collect residual data from the supernova. After the last drone burned up, the scientist repeatedly checked the programming of the jump unit. Seldon, in turn, used the first two stazuras to analyze the image recordings of the *AP Providence*’s outer hull. There were some deep furrows on the port side and a few bumps in others, due to the collision; but on the whole, much less had happened to the test ship than the assortment of noises during the contact had suggested.

As the supernova lost heat more quickly from the gas it ejected far out into the star system than originally expected, the shield generators conserved large amounts of energy that flowed into the converters instead. Far fewer than ten stazuras after the disastrous jump, the jump unit was operational again. This time, the probabilistic calculation was on the test ship's side: after the blue whirls subsided, the onboard computer announced the arrival in the familiar territory of the Argon Federation, where Ban Danna and the crew of the *Argon One* were already anxiously awaiting the return of Siobhan and Seldon.

CHAPTER 35

Left-hand birth, right-hand birth—who cares?

The main thing is a birth!

Gharland t'Hzzt,

Doctor

Ghinn was boiling with rage, and she was ready to kill. Not that she had ever had a major inhibition to it before. But she slowly became aware of the hopelessness of her situation. In her stomach, the little warrior moved restlessly, he would soon want out, and he didn't care if he saw the light of this world or that of another. The Split woman knew perfectly well that she could no longer make it back to the *Community* in time under any circumstances, but she tried to suppress any such thought before it started. The alternatives were so frightening that she didn't want to think about them. She had now wandered more or less aimlessly for over two stazuras already. At first she had found herself in the middle of a vast landing field under the eerie ghost of the nocturnal aurora. The spacecraft stood thickly here, many dozens of them, but not lined up in an orderly fashion as one would expect from a spaceport on a civilized planet, but criss-cross as if there were no landing beam directing the descending ships. It looked a little like a tent city of a Split Prince who was on a crusade in the dim and distant past. There was nevertheless a tiny spark of order: as irregularly as the vehicles were distributed, they always kept a safety perimeter of about a hundred or so lengths from one another.

Ghinn was confident that within the stazura she had spent on the field, she had seen the greater part, if not all, of the many ships resting here. She had tirelessly wandered from one vehicle to the next with growing fatigue and ever-increasing anger, on the lookout for a familiar shape, or legible lettering. But in vain. Not a single craft remotely matched a type of ship that would have been used in the *Community*. They all belonged here, at Ianamus Zura. There were no known Teladi ships. Where were they, all the pilgrims, who paid a visit to their so painfully missed home planet? Wherever they might be, they were not here in any case!

Later she found the edge of perimeter of the spaceport, dragged through the surreal outskirts, and reached a city that was bathed in the orange light of floating street lights. In the approaching twilight, everything seemed even more depressing to Ghinn. Her eyes missed simple, solid shapes, something you could latch onto: some rough-hewn stone blocks, for example, or a corroded gate of palatan, or at least a single animal carcass somewhere on the edge of the wide boulevard. There was nothing like that here. The buildings stood sky-high like frozen waves of metal glass. Everything was squeaky clean. Nauseating, gentle lines tickled her eyes, made her wish she was in possession of an antimatter

explosive device. The colors in the area tumbled together in the most disgusting pastel shades, one could hardly tell the difference between one another, and then one wished they had not looked so closely. Even street lamps that now faded didn't change anything.

Ghinn extended the gesture for "eternal anguish and eradication" against a small building in the form of a yalfur tuft. There were no normal Teladi here, there weren't any on all of Ianamus Zura! Indeed, the boulevards and paths in the sprawling city began to teem with life. Round, egg-shaped, elliptical, and other shapes shot around at several levels. But the Teladi who moved back and forth between buildings lacked the impression of sober crabbiness that was typical for their relatives beyond the jumpgate. They moved light-footed and relaxed; the waddling step that was expected of their kind had almost mutated into prancing for them. Perhaps the worst part was that they all wore colorful clothes in the most abominable colors imaginable. Even worse, they preferred clothing which other than them would make people imagine a jester. Or a Boron, if they dressed. Overall, it reminded her more of the disgusting Boron creatures from Kingdom End than a metropolis of saurian shopkeepers.

The saurians looked curiously at Ghinn over their blue, red, green, pink colored muzzles as she cut through a small gathering. The rising hisses and growls of the Teladi upset the Split woman, and she would have preferred to break the neck of any of them just to vent her irritation. But she was far too exhausted, so she just gruffly pressed by some of the creatures. Two Teladi stumbled, one fell to the ground with a growl. The remaining members of the group respectfully yielded to Ghinn. But when a particularly courageous specimen came too close to her, Ghinn, in a sudden fit of rage, grabbed the blindsided saurian's throat with both hands and shouted "The creature will speak with me!

Immediately!" the Teladi's breath rattled in his throat, his forehead ridges, greenish under white streaks of makeup, suddenly paled. His friends reacted with with fear. In fact they now hissed more loudly and seemingly desperately, but they didn't come to the aid of their unfortunate species member. Some of them pranced away, a bit faster than one would have expected them to be capable of.

"You will speak so that I understand it," Ghinn demanded. Everything went black for a moment; a knot tightened in her head. Swaying, she let go of the Teladi with one hand and ran it over her face, then the dizzy spell passed again. "I need passage to the *Community of Planets*. I will let the creature live if it helps me," she said in a much calmer voice. The Teladi only stared at her hard. His rattling stopped as Ghinn held him by the shoulders and no longer by the neck. The gathering of saurians had since scattered. The Teladi didn't seem to care if one of them was harassed or attacked and possibly injured. *Cowardly creatures*, the Split woman thought weakly. In this regard, the inhabitants of Ianamus Zura didn't distinguish themselves from the saurians that she knew. Only a single Teladi with a brown-speckled muzzle and bright yellow leggings was still waiting for the outcome of the confrontation.

"The creature will speak with me," Ghinn demanded again. As she shook the lizard a, barrage of incomprehensible hissing and growling sounds came out of the Teladi. Of course. No one here spoke the trading language of the *Community of Planets*. Ghinn let go of the Teladi, who rushed off at once, turning twice more to look back in fear before through the entrance of a half-melted, tall high-rise building. This planet had been cut off from the rest of the universe for hundreds of jazuras, and it was

only possible to arrive here again for a few mazuras. It was no wonder that the population understood nothing more than their backwards growling!

“What does it want?” Ghinn snapped at the Teladi with the yellow leggings who was still eyeing her from what he felt to be a safe distance. She formed a complicated gesture of hatred with both hands, which was not really effective on the Teladi or anyone else it was meant for, and then she looked around. Over there, between two buildings that looked like molten ammonites at least a hundred lengths tall, the green top of a large plant, possibly a tree, swayed. Trimmed bushes obscured its trunk, even green grass seemed to be there, even though she couldn’t guess how much ground it covered from this angle. If there was nothing more she could do other than reveal her ignorance, return to Kho, and have Nopileos as probably the only interpreter on the planet, then she wanted to at least rest for a couple of mizuras. Here, in the middle of the morning bustle of the saurian city, that seemed impossible to her. She got moving.

Halfway to the supposed park, she was overcome with dizziness again. This time everything blurred before her eyes for sezuras, and she staggered forward without knowing in which direction she was headed. Her entire body began to revolt, arms and legs failing at their duties, but she forced one foot in front of the other with an iron will. Her heart pumped more blood into her veins, which intensified her dizziness. Then entire right side of her body ached, and suddenly felt bloated and terribly sensitive. Even the light touch of her clothes hurt like hell.

It would happen. Now. Here.

For a quick moment, she could see clearly again. She had almost reached the two Ammonite high-rises and stumbled onwards. A sudden crunch from within shot right through her. It started on her right side and spread from above her hips, through her abdomen and chest, then also rose up her throat with increasing pressure. She gasped for air. With her left hand, she felt what she already knew: from her hips down, her dress had been soaked with liquid, which now ran down her legs. A long bulge slowly rose, began a hands breadth below the armpit, and stretched to her hip; the surrounding tissue hardened like a severe cramp, a leathery crust was forming.

A right-hand birth, oh Thuruk, a right-hand birth!

Her legs gave way, she slumped down. Beneath the sensitive skin of her knees and shins, she felt something cool, yielding. She blinked: grass. Ghinn remained in that position for while, trying to regain control of her body. She knew only too well what had happened to her: the *tirchrt* had formed: the birth canal which would open on either the left or the right side of her body. It was an extremely unpleasant though not usually very painful process which was always accompanied by the partial loss of control over one’s own body. It wouldn’t be more than a stazura until the birth.

As Ghinn directed her gaze back ahead, she looked at the yellow leggings and alternating white and black painted claws. The Teladi from earlier had evidently followed her into the park. He looked at her open-muzzled, with a glow in his eyes that either mean he understood her behavior of some mizuras

ago, or he was expressing sympathy. Ghinn wanted neither of the two. She tried to sit up, but didn't succeed. "Go away," she wheezed. "Just get away, creature!" The very last thing she needed right now was a spectator. Here, far from home, on the lawn of a public park, in a city full of crazy Teladi, she would give birth. Like an animal, like a slave.

The Teladi knelt down and looked into her face. He hissed something, but Ghinn didn't understand. "Go away," she repeated feebly. A gesture of defense stopped as it began, because she had to quickly put her hand back on the ground so as not to completely lose her balance. The Teladi stood up and disappeared. Ghinn didn't still possess the strength to follow him with her gaze. She slumped down and rolled on her back without a glance or even the slightest interest in everything that was going on around her. The *tiuchrt* widened and more thick liquid ran out, but she barely felt it.

The sky was blue, but not as dark and unfathomable as Nif-Nakh's, but nevertheless beautiful anyway. Paper lanterns in various colors surrounded her, or were they the colorful drop-shaped aircraft of the Teladi?

Ghinn closed her eyes. Everything became silent.

CHAPTER 36

What I really like about Dr. Norman is that she's so intelligent and so pretty! I'm glad she's a long-life, because that means she'll be as beautiful as she is today when I grow up! And then we'll draw up a marriage contract together!

Ion Battler,

ArgoNet :: AstroTalk 29/547

It proved impossible to keep the explosion of Black Hole Sun a secret from the *Community of Planets*. At first the news spread like wildfire throughout the Argon Federation, then reached the fringe territories with the speed of messenger drones at full throttle, and then spilled over to the planets of the Split, Teladi, and Boron. The assumption that the Xenon were responsible for the supernova was widely publicized by nearly all media and news networks as a proven fact before it could be scientifically ascertained. A decree of the Pontifex Maximus Paranidia, in which the message was—in connection with the nova—the first signal of victory in the war against the machines, did nothing to reassure the populace. While Split, Paranids, and even Borons kept a stoic calm, mass movements began in the Argon and Teladi sectors. Some more densely populated worlds enacted emergency regulations that prohibited the use of spacecraft without government approval, but not everyone abided by them. The military was activated. In the center of the *Community*, chaotic turmoil bubbled up and threatened to carry away the fringes.

Siobhan had been back on Argon Prime for one or two tazuras to oversee the repair of the *AP Providence*. She was astonished to find the main planet of the Argon Federation as calm as if it were the eye of a storm. But perhaps the relative serenity of the planet's population was also related to the unmistakable military presence that was concentrated here, unlike any other Argon world.

Originally, the damage to the test spaceship was to be repaired in the dry dock of the Gonor temple, but once there, they could tell that they weren't capable of repairing the extensive damage to the outer hull of the ship. By contrast, the planetside military shipyard in the Argonia City Spaceport was well equipped for such cases. While a swathe of repair robots were kept busy with the ship's hull, Siobhan and Zakk Folkna busied themselves with a thorough analysis of the jump drive.

The next morning, when Ninu Gardna arrived from the temple, her half-brother was with her, but he was of course not allowed to attend the conference. Like Commander Ditta Borman and Major Jahn Seldon, the boy stayed at the shipyard, where he curiously presented questions to the technicians and computers. It hadn't escaped Siobhan that Ion was crazy about her and never let her out of his sight, so she was glad not to have to endure the boy longer than was absolutely necessary. With a last greeting in

the direction of Borman and Seldon, she followed Ninu, who was already on the hover platform, which took off shortly thereafter.

The conference room was not actually a room, but a full-blown hall. When Siobhan entered, she felt a brief impulse to turn and disappear, never to be seen again; the past forty jazuras, during which she had kept out of everything that was even remotely related to public affairs, was too deep in her bones. She resisted the reflex.

Colonel Danna approached her and assigned her a seat in the front row of the hall, there, where the speakers sat. “Just a few words about the operation and status of the partial jump drive,” he said. “And for the laypersons, if you know what I mean. But wait first for what lar Ptorenea has to say. And don’t get frightened.”

“That bad?”

“Worse.”

Externally, lar Ptorenea was indistinguishable from other Boron. Even though Siobhan knew that there were nuances in eye shape, number of feelers, and skin color which a practiced person could recognize, in any case that didn’t account for the milk-cloudy environmental membrane. When the Boron began with her small girl’s voice, those present immediately realized that the situation must be very serious, because lar Ptorenea spoke in pretty colorful but extremely brief sentences.

“The Queendom of Boron has arrived at the realization and has found out that the Xenon is in fact responsible for the tragic end of Black Hole Sun.” Now a soft whisper went through the rows of Argon, for the statements of a lar were beyond any doubt. “We taste, know, and affirm,” the Boron continued, “that the Machines posses and have a gateless jump drive which can carry a singularity of critical mass into the eternal heart of every sun, instantly and always.”

Siobhan stared at the Boron as though petrified, while a tumult broke out around her. A few from the audience left the room, but most of them simply jumped from their seats and shouted over each other. Siobhan felt her fingers begin to imperceptibly tremble. She had known it, had seen it coming, the whole time!

“A moment, please! Order!” Brend Sobert, the adjutant of Nan Gunnar called into the hall. “Let’s let lar Ptorenea speak!”

“Down! Sit! Enough!” Siobhan heard Ban Danna call softly, but she wasn’t in the mood for jokes. Danna made a vague hand motion in her direction that she didn’t understand the meaning of at first. But when she saw the worry lines on the intelligence agent’s face that were in contrast with his previous words, she realized that the far worse part was yet to come.

Gradually, the audience calmed down. Lar Ptorenea, who had patiently waited for the turmoil to abate, finally spoke further. “The Machines act and operate out of pure self-defense and for the purpose of their continued existence; we do not believe that they want to destroy the *Community of Planets*.

According to the opinion and belief of the Three-eye geometricists, there is only one remaining CPU ship. But the Queendom, however, knows and has knowledge of a second. It is located in the beautiful and unexplored territory beyond Menelaus's Paradise. There it awaits the arrival and rendezvous of its counterpart."

"So there are two CPU ships?" One in the Boron sanctuary the other on its way there?" someone shouted. Siobhan couldn't see who had asked this question.

"Yes—and yes!" the Boron clicked.

"Where is the problem? The Paranids will destroy them both. The Argon Federation should help them!" another voice shouted. Shouts of approval were heard.

"No, not!" lar Ptorenea cried. Her environmental suit hopped up and down in fright. "They would destroy all the suns and habitable locations in the *Community!* Black Hole Sun was a warning, was it not?"

Once again, a tangle of voices broke out and Brend Sobert had to call for order.

"An expedition under the leadership of the very revered scientific ethicist Nola Hi and the hairy and aesthetic star warrior Ele Na Kho is on its way to shut down the world portal in Menelaus's Paradise to protect the Xenon inside the refuge.

Siobhan noticed Senator Gunnar's expression change; his jaw dropped.

"That's fine, too!" remarked a graying Argon sitting in the third row. "End of story! Isn't it?" Another murmur of approval, this time somewhat softer.

"Nola Hi and the star warrior know nothing about the second CPU chip. The two Xenons must never be separated by deactivating the Delta Gate. They would feel and consider it to be an attack!"

"Then just whistle for Hi and Kho to come back."

Lar Ptorenea was silent.

"Why don't you bring Nola Hi and Elena Kho back?" the man again demanded to know.

"*Hai*, why not?" many other voices now asked, but lar Ptorenea remained silent. Through the environmental membrane, a nervous movement of her tentacles and feelers became apparent.

At last, Ban Danna stepped forward. "Because the New Sectors are not yet part of the messenger drone guidance system. We can't recall this, this... unspeakably nonsensical expedition just like that. Unless..."

Renewed voices clamored. Siobhan knew what would come next.

"Unless," Danna repeated in a loud voice, "with a second expedition in a ship that was equipped with a partial jump drive. Only thus do we have a very slight chance of reaching Elena Kho and Nola Hi in

time. And we have no time for intricate planning. The expedition must start as quickly as possible, ideally early tomorrow morning.

Siobhan rose and turned around. The rows of the audience were now almost completely seated again, but the Argons were in a state of great excitement. Here and there she heard the words “Project Providence.” She stepped forward, next to Iar Ptorenea, Danna, and Sobert. She needed less than a mizura to explain the workings and status of Project Providence in a way that even the most technically unsavvy instantly understood.

“My name is Dr. Siobhan Inja Norman, director of Project Providence,” she said in a soft, husky voice. For some reason, the general discussion fell silent immediately and everyone listened to her. “The partial jump drive is not yet sufficiently tested, but it is ready for use. Immediate use. Thank you.” Lightheaded, she sat down in her seat and only peripherally noticed that many Argons applauded her with praise that lasted longer than her short speech. The Prime Minister and Defense Senator took over the rest of the speech.

It wasn’t until late at night that Siobhan, along with Nina, who wanted to pick up Ion, returned to the shipyard. The entire area was bathed in bright, glaring floodlights, because the shipyard never stood still. As the two women—after the obligatory security checks—entered the big hangar where the *AP Providence* was located, Commander Borman and Major Seldon were leaving.

“Briefing with the boss, personally,” Borman said while passing.

“Have fun,” Siobhan muttered sarcastically.

In the laboratory, Zakk Folkna was already waiting for her. The scientist was still visibly upset that he had not been invited to the meeting.

“Don’t worry about it,” Siobhan replied. “I would’ve rather not been there.” Folkna shook his head unreasonably.

“See you tomorrow, Dr. Norman!” a young voice called from the other end of the adjoining assembly hall. Siobhan saw the boy waving through the observation window of the lab. Ninu Gardna also nodded to her as she crossed to the hall. Siobhan raised a reluctant hand and acknowledged them back. The feeling that she’d made a mistake immediately crept over her. The boy would now most probably adore her even more than he already did. She sighed in torment.

“Listen, Zakk. I’m off for a stazura. I need some air to breathe. My head’s buzzing.” And that was the pure truth.

“Good,” Folkna said shortly.

Siobhan waited until the hover platform with Ninu and Ion were out of sight before she signed out with the yard watch. She refrained from ordering a flight vehicle as well, but snuck by almost furtively on foot to the only place in Argonia that she would miss if the planet ceased to exist: the Garden of Eternal Weather.

Stretching out on her back, she let herself fall into the sky. The grass tickled her bare ankles. A balmy breeze rose from somewhere, bringing with it a pleasant, mossy smell, and the sonorous humming of Argonia. The sound of the city could only be heard at night. Large, subterranean facilities transformed the heat of the glowing planetary core into energy for the insatiable metropolis; during the day, on the other hand, a wide variety of activities covered the constant noise of the converter. She thought of the old book that Ruuf Vondran had given her three wozuras before his death, *The Hydra and the Hero*. Joan Mitchell, the hydra, had also been a long-life, and like her, Siobhan had faced almost unsolvable situations. The solution that Joan Mitchell had found at the time was historically certified: after Nathan R. Gunn's death, she had clandestinely slipped away from responsibility and never reappeared. Siobhan understood this decision of her soulmate only too well. She herself had tried something like that, for more than forty jazuras, but she had failed. She had ultimately come to the conclusion that she didn't want to dodge responsibility. But she suddenly wasn't so sure about the matter. Because now, when everything was said and done, at the back of her head, right at the stem of her brain, doubt crept up like the first scouts of an army of ants. It thrust itself forward into its consciousness and grew in breadth as they gorged themselves on her soul. Of course, the universe didn't revolve around her, Siobhan. There was this real, actual danger that Sonra and all the other stars of the *Community* would burst like cosmic soap bubbles. Just like Black Hole Sun.

If she listened deep down in her heart and was completely honest with herself, she didn't really care. Not really, anyway: naturally she hoped somewhere inside her that the menace could be averted. But some of the little scouts of the advance ant party whispered to her, and they said, *Why you? Why are you making it your job to save the world? There are already plenty saviors of the world! Elena Kho is a savior. The Pontifex Maximus Paranidia as well. The Patriarch of Rhonkar. Kyle-William Brennan. Even Ninu Gardna. Even—and especially—Ion Battler! Don't save the world, but perish with it, or else sink into oblivion.*

"Just leave me alone," Siobhan whispered, when the distant, muted voices penetrated her ears. But she thought of Deirdre and her gloom faded into a diffuse feeling in her throat. Time could heal all wounds, and if there was one thing that both she and Deirdre had in abundance, that was it—time.

After a few more mizuras, as she watched the myriad points of light that rushed through the night sky of the capital, she stood up and craned her head back one last time. She imagined a small, white star vanishing in the sky, then another. Many. Shaking her head, she finally made her way back to the spaceport. It didn't matter. The cosmos reckoned as little with individual suns as the human body did with individual cells.

It was early in the morning and Sonra still hung low in the sky. The star sent out the first warm rays of the tazura, but when Siobhan stepped into the hangar she felt chilly. She had hardly slept the night before, and had already been back on the grounds of the shipyard for over a stazura, trying to wring an extra percent of reliability from the jump unit. She blinked and shaded her eyes with the palm of her

hand as a golden dot, plummeting between the clouds, caught her eye. The shipyard bordered civilian airfield D of the Argonia City spaceport, which even at this hour was dominated by active operation. There was no difference between day and night in space, and ships wanted to land at any time. The golden dot quickly turned out to be a Teladi model of spacecraft, which carefully touched down only sezas later. Siobhan squinted her eyes and caught a glimpse of the lettering on the flank of the ship: *AP Blue Arrow*.

“Good morning, Dr. Norman.”

Siobhan winced and jerked around. Noah Gaffelt, Ninu Gardna, and Ion Battler had stepped behind her without her noticing it. Siobhan bit off a short remark and greeted the newcomers.

Gaffelt came straight to the point. “Dr. Norman, Miss Gardna will be accompanying the ship to the *AP Providence*. She is friendly with Major Kho. That might make little difference, but perhaps it will.”

Siobhan nodded slowly. The Supreme Guardian immediately noticed the sour expression that began to appear on her face. “That’s all right, isn’t it?” he asked for confirmation, but it sounded more like a statement than a question.

“If you wish, Gaffelt-san.”

The Supreme Guardian was constantly surrounded by an almost sacred aura that made Siobhan uncomfortable and feel constricted. Even when Noah Gaffelt tried to be friendly and informal, his words always conveyed a touch of finality that seemed to be accepted by everyone without question. Discussions were often silenced by Gaffelt’s voice—sometimes just when he simply approached. And despite that, Siobhan often noticed an irritated, almost resigned flash in the guardian’s eyes when something like that happened. Since then, she had realized what that meant: the Goner might vehemently proclaim not to be a cult in the actual sense of the word—but in reality they were one, if only under unusual circumstances. The Supreme Guardian was shown the utmost reverence and through that was elevated to the place of cult leader whether he wanted it or not. This behavior must have manifested itself in Gaffelt over the decazuras, as if mirroring the accumulated wishes of the supporters of this supposed knowledge community. Gaffelt had presumably not even noticed this creeping change in his own self image. For quite some time, Siobhan had no longer taken the tale of the supposed “purely secular” leadership seriously. Ninu Gardna’s participation in the expedition was in any case not worth the breath it would take. The important thing was that nobody demanded that she take the boy along! “Ion isn’t coming,” spilled out, without her being able to stop the words.

“Yes!” Ion whined before the other two could respond. Anyone could see that he was very serious about it.

“Of course he isn’t coming, Dr. Norman, said the Supreme Guardian. “I’ll take him back with me to the temple.” Ion pressed his lips together, but remained silent.

A little later, Commander Borman and Major Seldon arrived at the site. This time, Ditta Borman would take command of the *AP Providence*. She was still a bit annoyed that Seldon had been present on the previous test flights, but she didn't let that show.

"Well, ready to make some history today?" Borman joked in the cockpit where they went through the last system checks before the countdown together with Seldon.

"I'm begging you—not before lunch!" Seldon grinned. He had already known Ditta Borman for jazuras and jazuras, and he was very happy that he finally had an advantage over her for once.

"Could even make it until then," Borman answered in a restrained voice as she checked a data indicator. "But maybe breakfast was our last meal."

"Look—they're opening the room!" Seldon gestured out the cockpit window. Far above the *AP Providence*, a gap formed between the two halves of the enormous hangar roof, and *Sonra* appeared in all its radiant splendor.

"Commander Borman, Major?" Siobhan entered the spacious cockpit. "We're all set. So far as I can tell, the ship and jump unit are in perfect condition. What do you think?"

"Almost like new," Borman replied. "All systems fall well within tolerance. Jahn, did you look at the ship from outside?"

Major Seldon confirmed. "Of course. If I hadn't been there myself, I'd never believe that just a week ago it'd been almost melted to slag by a supernova."

When Ninu Gardna arrived, the crew was complete. The Goner kept unusually quiet; her already fair skin seemed a shade paler than usual. She was terrified, that you could see in her eyes—but not about herself, as it soon turned out. "What if *Sonra* goes nova while we're underway?" she asked gloomily.

Siobhan had no answer to that. "Isn't Ion coming to say goodbye?" she replied instead.

"No. He's—I think he's mad at me. And I don't even know why. Maybe I'll never see him again." She hesitated. "Or Kyle, either."

In contrast to Ninu, Siobhan didn't feel the slightest fear; on the contrary, she was completely calm inside. She certainly didn't want to die, but the thought of death didn't bother her. But her fate was tied to Deirdre's; she had to live so that Deidre could live, wherever her daughter was now. Catastrophe must be prevented! Siobhan escorted Ninu to the the small cabin where the Goner was to spend the flight owing to lack of space in the cockpit. "I have a daughter," she said offhand, not knowing why she told Ninu. "I want to at least see her again on my hundredth birthday."

Ninu made a surprised face. That the beautiful but always cold and unapproachable Siobhan Norman could have a family wouldn't have occurred to her in her wildest dreams. "And when will that be?"

"Oh, soon—in twelve jazuras."

“Soon!” A tiny smile struggled on Ninu’s worried face. “By then I’ll have gray hair and Julian will be a grown man.”

Now it was Siobhan’s turn to be surprised. “Julian?”

“I’m expecting a child, Siobhan. A boy.”

Siobhan shook her head and laughed. “You can’t even see anything—and you’ve already picked out a name?”

“Kyle and I talked about it a while ago—I mean, purely hypothetically. He doesn’t know about his luck yet. And see it—well, it’s really a bit too early for that.”

Something strange happened to Siobhan: for a brief moment she was overrun with a wave of sympathy for this pretty, young woman in front of her; at first she couldn’t categorize this feeling, because she hadn’t felt it that strongly for anybody in a long time. She almost wrapped her arms around Ninu and squeezed her, but as quickly as the emotions came, they faded away again. “Under these circumstances, nothing can go awry. When we get back, Ion and your Kyle will be awaiting you. Wait and see!” Actually, that was meant ironically, but a remnant of that wave of sympathy probably still stuck to her voice, because Ninu smiled. The last thing Siobhan saw of the Goner before the cabin door closed, was an expression of fresh confidence. And maybe even a spark of hope.

A quazura after the launch from Argon Prime, the *AP Providence* was already in the flight corridor that space control had reserved exclusively for them, which led them far away from all bustling orbits and trajectories. The *Argon One*—not under the command of Colonel Danna this time—escorted the test ship out into the interior of the system for several million lengths, then signaled their departure, performed an engine shutdown, and began a lengthy turning maneuver that would place it back into its parking orbit above Argon Prime. When the onboard computer began the mandatory countdown, Major Seldon, who sat as the cockpit next to Commander Borman as his copilot, turned to the two scientists watching their consoles further back. “Seventy-five percent, Doctor,” he said. “Isn’t that right?”

“Seventy-six,” Siobhan answered. “I insist on it!”

Seldon turned back to his instrument. “Your word in... whatever,” he murmured in a neutral voice. The onboard computer interrupted him and counted the last mizura until the jump, while in the bowels of the ship, the converter started. Zakk Folkna gave Siobhan an uncertain sideways glance as the offshoots of the distorted spacetime reached for him. Outside the cockpit that swirling jump tunnel formed which to Siobhan—even though she could fully describe it mathematically—still appeared like an unreal, magical trick of the universe.

“Ship has reached the entrance point,” the computer informed. Then it said: “Target error. Unknown sector.”

CHAPTER 37

If the past were a place that one could reach, and if it were possible to deliver a single sentence to our ancestors, I would know exactly what I would say to them.: “Don’t give up, because there’s hope!”

*I would almost like to believe that this is really possible. Because our forefathers have never given up—
never!*

That’s the only reason we’re here today.

HindreK Sills,

Chairman of the Senate of the Argon Federation

The computer used for the purpose of translation was, as was proudly asserted, a gift from the Teladi Company which had been presented by the representatives of the CEO just a few wozuras ago. It was quite obviously the onboard computer of a large starship in days gone by, going by the fact that some of the phrasing it utilized suggested a certain remorse for its fate. The word that Nopileos had translated into the trading language as Aesthetic Supervisor was simply translated by the computer as police, and Grand Aesthete came out as Conductor. Elena nursed the suspicion that it was in fact the ministry of the interior and the police chief, but she was quickly getting used to the words chosen by the translation computer.

Idranenujos Andepibikas Cokadrareos I was the formal name of the Conductor, but he hurried to offer Elena and Nopileos his informal form of address as well, perhaps, he said while smiling benignly, with the addition of his title. But of course only if they so wished. Conductor Cokadrareos was a decidedly friendly Teladi. His muzzle was always ajar, leaving the impression of a smile, but of course Teladi never laughed, but instead inflated their scaly fin when they felt amused. The Conductor’s face paint was a simple ocher, with a few very small, discreet flames in light brown that extended from both sides of his stubby muzzle, over the bridge of his nose, and darted around his eyes to finally merge beneath the crimson, scaly fin. His clothes were just as simple: over a small body of claw-length, floral-patterned, artificial fur, he wore something that resembled a batik shirt. His leggings were a type of kilt or skirt in pale Teladi green, a color that was amazingly popular with the Teladi on—and off—Ianamus Zura. Starting at the collar, pale hieroglyphs spiraled around the kilt, all the way down to the hem. Nopileos, who had also learned to read ancient Teladi hieroglyphs in the noble breeding complex on Company Pride, was silent after he saw the twenty or so words of the writing system. Her forehead ridges darkened, but after a few sezuras she caught herself again. Everyone seemed to deal quite openly and matter-of-factly with things that were not even mentioned in whispers in the Teladi Company

because they had simply been forgotten there over time! In addition, there was probably no uniform or dress code in the society of the planetary saurians from Ianamus Zura.

“Oh no,” the computer said evenly, translating the Conductor’s sentences nearly simultaneously, “we do not know of any thinking machines that seek asylum in a distant refuge. And we also do not know how to deactivate a stargate. The Ancient Ones, however, we know through their Presence Cloud.”

Nopileos looked at Elena almost doubtfully. They had been speaking with no one but the Conductor for almost two stazuras, but the conversation went in circles. At the beginning everything had looked promising. They had been channeled from the plain Aesthete to the Aesthetic Supervisor, to the Conductor. But from that moment on, the negotiations had faltered. Conductor Cokadrareos in fact recognized Elena as an important, high-ranking representative of a people with whom they wanted to build diplomatic relations as soon as possible. That there was a machine species in the *Community of Planets* that was facing genocide, however, did not make sense to him. That Elena needed help, was likewise clear to him. That she needed military or police support to find and overcome the pirates in her damaged ship and then continue on to Menelaus’s Paradise where she planned to shut down a stargate, however, was completely incomprehensible to him.

“We know nothing about privateers,” the Conductor explained again after Elena and Nopileos didn’t reply. The astronaut rested her chin on her hand and peered out the window at the shimmering front of a skyscraper whose shape reminded her of an unevenly melted ball of soft-serve ice cream.

“The universe is so wonderful, that it only has room for joy. And there is a lot of joy!”

Ghinn was right, Nopileos thought. *They are a bit like Boron on two legs*. But just as the Boron Queendom long ago had to face the hostile universe after a long, painful learning process, Ianamus Zura would eventually have to give itself over to reality.

“Oh colleague Conductor,” Nopileos said in trading language, “it really is of extraordinary importance that we permit the CPU ship to travel through to the refuge and disable the jumpgate.” The computer lagged in translation for only half a sezura.

“Well, but I understand that!” the Conductor answered helpfully. “You are welcome to return to your planetary community with our diplomatic delegation!”

The Conductor had said these sentences, with slight variations, for about the fourth or fifth time now. He never altered his friendly gaze at Nopileos and Elena. Of course, there was a series of other important information that had come out of the earlier conversation. But every time it came to the core of their concern, communication failed.

Into the resulting silence, the notes of a strangely intricate melody fell: the Conductor was receiving a call. Cokadrareos spoke in quiet hisses with a video field that, surprisingly remained opaque from behind, so that Elena and Nopileos couldn’t see who he was talking to. “Dear friends,” he said after the field was deactivated, “I think you should come with me.”

Elena and Nopileos looked at each other questioningly, but rose to follow Conductor Cokadrareos.

“I will not speak with her.”

For a moment, Elena started in fright.; she also heard Nopileos inhale sharply beside her. Ghinn t’Whht lay, wrapped in thick, sky-blue bandages, on two makeshift benches of Teladi construction. Along her entire right side was a large, dark spot and an unnatural curve. Some of the saurians scurried around the Split woman, but they were obviously only watching. Only then did Elena notice the small bundle wrapped in silver, shimmering cloth which lay to Ghinn’s left and moved at regular intervals. Now Elena understood. “Ghinn, I... congratulations!”

“I will not speak with her,” Ghinn repeated and looked away.

“She has, she is, has, laid?” Nopileos stammered. She stared with eyes like saucers at the bald, pale-yellow head of the infant who was peering out of the silver bundle.

Before anyone could say anything else, Conductor Cokadrareos, who had watched the exchange of words silently, made a frightening noise that that sounded like a mixture of screeching and growling. All turned to the Aesthete. “Please excuse me,” Nopileos translated what the Conductor hissed with a chalk-white forehead ridge. Cokadrareos quickly rolled up a flexible radiophone and stowed it in a nondescript lining in his kilt. “Terrible, terribly important message,” the Conductor mumbled and left the room quickly. As he was leaving, he jostled another Teladi who wanted to come in.

Elena looked questioningly at Nopileos. “What was all that?”

Nopileos turned her palms upwards. “Tshhh—if only I knew!”

The saurian who had just entered tilted his head and winked at Nopileos and Elena. He wore skintight ,yellow leggings and no face paint, but claws on his feet were painted in alternating white and black. “She’s like this all the time. But that is completely normal. After all, she is a hate-creature,” he said in Old Teladi and pointed at Ghinn t’Whht and her child.

“Are you a doctor?” Nopileos asked. Eleana looked confusedly between the two Teladi, because she could of course not understand their conversation. Cokadrareos’s melodramatic departure was forgotten.

“Um, no. I’m a painter.”

“What is he saying, Nopileos?” Elena butted in.

“He says he’s a painter,” Nopileos answered truthfully. The astronaut made a bewildered face.

“Your friend, what does he mean, please?” the artist wanted to know,

Nopileos hissed. “Tshhhhhh! She! My friend is a she! And one after the other! So, this is not a hospital, but a private art exhibition?”

“Why, no!” the artist’s scaly fin stirred. “Of course not. I found the hate-creature and brought her in. She was in a terrible situation, so alone out there. My name, by the way, is Gonareos Ianusis Jolandalas IV, member of the Artists Guild.

Because Conductor Cokadrareos had excused himself until further notice, Jolandalas spontaneously proposed to show Ianamus Zura to Nopileos and Elena in the meantime. Elena considered herself out of alternatives, since all the other authorities kindly but definitely pointed to the Conductor and didn’t want to have a conversation with her on their own initiatives. She agreed after slight hesitation. Jolandalas owned a small hovercraft in the shape of a flattened flagellum; Elena had to bring her head in and make herself narrow, but she was already used to that from the many stazuras in the Teladi barge. The artist finally stopped the flying vehicle on a vast marshland, home to exotic plants, flowers, and animals.

“We love beauty above all else,” Jolandalas said, performing a sweeping, outward motion with his claw that seemed to encompass the land, the horizon, and the sun. Nopileos simultaneously translated for Elena. “Beauty is harmony and contrast, color and dreariness. Function must yield to form if necessary, but the dark solstices are over,” he continued. “The glory of the universe speaks even in its slightest pieces. Science and art merge into one.”

“That sound religious,” Elena remarked. In fact, Ianamus Zura was a delightful planet. Its tranquil landscapes, delightful contrasts, and vast, clean cities soothed the eyes and were capable of granting peace to even a human being’s soul, if only for a moment.

“We know the concept of religion,” Jolandalas replied after Nopileos had finished translating. “But it’s been an empty word to us for a long time.” The artist paused, nudged Nopileos playfully, and started the hovercraft again. “The Teladi in the planetary community, however,” he continued “know one religion: it’s called credits.”

Nopileos protested half-heartedly. What Jolandalas said had more than a grain of truth. It considered it appropriate at the moment to try to reassure him that she wasn’t chasing money, unlike every other Teladi in the *Community*, but on the contrary, was even planning to set up a non-profit organization! So she just wiggled her ears.

In the late hours of the first quarter-tazura, the artist dropped the hovercraft near the barge at Elena’s request. The astronaut felt a nagging hunger, and she also wanted to make sure that Ghinn was provided with food: she mentally scolded herself for not thinking about the Split woman and her newborn baby. Of course there was nothing on this planet that humans or Split could safely consume. But in the pirate dinghy that both peoples had used, there were some supplies of concentrated nutrient rations for both Split and humans! Elena decided to strictly divide up the rations. She asked Nopileos to have a conversation with the Aesthetic Supervisor, but the call bore no result. The Conductor was still unavailable, but he let them know that he would be at their disposal on the next tazura.

“I could cry,” she confessed to Nopileos. “They don’t seem to understand how important our mission is and that the lives of our crew are at stake!”

“Do not cry, star warrior! Didn’t you once say you never cry?”

Elena conjured a faint smile on her face and put her hand on Nopileos’s arm. She thought of her experience aboard the Terraformer. “Don’t worry. Soft skin, hard core. Promise!” Nopileos gave a sign of approval. Elena pointed to the artist, who remained in his hovercar a few lengths away. “Hey, I think Jolandalas is waiting for you. Just go. I’ll bring Ghinn the nutrient bars—I don’t need an interpreter for that.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Just be here early tomorrow morning, you hear?”

“*Hai*, sister! And profit!” With these words, Nopileos ran over to the hovercar and shortly thereafter, with a tiny murmur of displaced air, the vehicle rose into the dusky evening. Elena gazed after them for a moment, then went into the barge and gathered up the nutrient rations.

CHAPTER 38

The Ancient ones aren't wise, they are arrogant!

Thi t'Ggt,

First Warrior of Family Honh

“Damn it all!” Major Seldon was upset, close to furious. “I’m slowly getting angry! That wasn’t seventy-six percent for us to come out at our destination, it was seventy-six against!”

A few astronomical units away, three dazzlingly bright discs of suns stood in the night of space and outshined all the other stars with their glow.

“We’re through,” Commander Borman stated. “But that’s not Menelaus’s Paradise. In fact, that isn’t any of the systems in the *Community of Planets*.” He didn’t even need to use the computer to verify that statement; there was only one star system in the *Community of Planets* with three suns, and this one here wasn’t it.

“What? Are you sure?” It had naturally been clear to Siobhan from the beginning that the jump unit could also calibrate itself with completely unknown jump gates. But the chances of reaching nearby gates should be far greater than that of materializing in distant locations. The crux was, of course, that not all supposedly adjacent sectors in the *Community* were actually true neighbors.--many were hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of light-jazuras distant from one another, even though their stargates connected them directly together. If the *AP Providence* materialized in a star system that was far from the known sectors on a cosmic scale, the likelihood of returning with a return jump would decrease significantly!

Ditta Borman made an unladylike grunt. “Damn sure.”

“Good. Take it easy—the jump field generators will be recharged in less than ten mizuras. Then we’ll try it again. Zakk, you check the coordinates.” Siobhan unbuckled herself and pushed the seat back. Maybe she could optimize the settings of the jump unit for the local conditions. Until she found that out, she didn’t want to alarm the crew with her conjectures about the reduced probability of return.

“I’ll take a look at the pulse generator,” she said, and stepped to the center console for a quick glance before she went into the cargo hold. The jumpgate through which the *AP Providence* had just come was not visible, for it was currently sinking behind the stern of the ship in to the sea of stars. The rear cameras, however, showed nothing unusual: a perfectly normal jumpgate of the well known, ancient style.

“Here!” Ditta Borman suddenly exclaimed. Her hands flew and some smaller video fields flared up. Data scrolled past on them. “We’re receiving radio signals. Not natural sources!”

Disbelieving, Siobhan looked as countless charts and patterns flitted across the datafield. They made no sense, didn’t correspond with any schemes she was familiar with. “Can we do something with it?”

“Computer?” the pilot barked.

“No, commander. I am working on it. Do you require details?” Borman said yes and the computer rattled off the list of known facts about the incoming radio signals.

“Inconceivable,” murmured Siobhan. “I wish we had the opportunity...” she had to remember that her time was more than limited. With a jerk, she pushed away from the flight console, waved to Zakk, and left the cockpit through the dividing bulkhead. She stopped in the mid deck to hurriedly brief Ninu Gardna in her cabin about the events.

“But we’ll get away from here in time?” the Goner wanted to know with eyes wide from terror.

Siobhan nodded. “Of course we’ll get away. Don’t worry.”

The cargo hold was—for the relatively small dimensions of the ship—quite lushly appointed. Originally converted into a diplomatic lounge, the previous luxurious furnishings had been removed down to the bare metal to accommodate the jump unit and additional generators. Later, Siobhan was sure of it, these two instruments could be miniaturized to a volume of less than a cubic length. But she preferred to leave that to the engineers. She simply provided the theory and if she was being serious, she had already stuck her fingers far too deep into the hardware of the systems, anyway.

Siobhan opened a tool cabinet and took out a passive tester. There were only a few moving parts in the jump unit, but those that existed had to be adjusted with incredible accuracy. She doubted that she would be able to align anything, but she had to make sure. With practiced movements, she unlocked the front panel of the diving unit. The device had the shape of a double mushroom, each end with a beveled head at the top and bottom. It was one and a half lengths in diameter and two lengths high. Siobhan ran her fingers over the metal; it was still lukewarm from use. The unlocked plate loosened with a clatter as she pulled on it. She leaned the rectangular piece of covering against the unit and directed her attention on the newly exposed guts.

There was an audible crash. Did the cover plate fall over? No, it was still standing! Strange. Siobhan shook her head and got to work.

The values supplied by the meter were exactly the same as the desired values. Siobhan unplugged the device again and grabbed the front panel to replace it when there was another sound that didn’t belong here. Siobhan looked around in the bright, artificial light. Between the jump unit and the wall of the hold were several lengths of bare metal floor, and they were completely empty, with nothing there. With suspicious eyes, Siobhan picked it up the front panel and replaced it; the latches snapped. Eight

more measuring points were waiting. She opened the locking mechanisms of the next plate. Again, something that had nothing to do with the jump unit clacked, only this time very softly.

Someone was watching her, she could feel it. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up. "Hello?" she called. "Zakk?" Her voice made a tinny echo. No answer. There were three closets that had been retained as instrument and tool cabinets when the interior of the former lounge had been removed. They stood out clearly from the bare metal as they still wore their original, dark blue covers with the red Federation symbols. Only one of them was actually used. The other two were empty. Treading softly, Siobhan approached the second cupboard and opened it with a jerk: actually empty! She was beginning to think that she was only imagining things, there weren't any sounds here and no one was watching her! She tore open the door of the third closet.

And froze. Two dark eyes stared at her from below. Someone was huddled up in the closet. It was Ion Battler.

"I don't want to hear a thing," Siobhan snorted. Inwardly, she was completely calm; no matter why the child was here, she would have to come to terms with it somehow.

"But, Dr. Norman..."

She raised her forefinger. "Nothing," she repeated. "Is that nothing?"

"No, no," the boy stammered, as he peeled himself out of the closet.

"Ninu is waiting in the second cabin on the right. Down the hall, left around the corner. Off you go." She pointed to the open bulkhead.

"Ninu is here!"

"Of course. You already knew that."

"But..."

"And off! Chop!" Siobhan repeated emphatically. The boy obeyed and disappeared from view.

"Good thing I'm not upset," the Argon said through gritted teeth and continued her measurements on the jump unit. It didn't really surprise her that the boy had managed to smuggle himself on board. In the past two tazuras he had crept around the shipyard almost unrestricted, and no one had paid much attention to him. Also, Ion making his sister think that he was mad at her and therefore hadn't appeared at the sendoff had been pure calculation! As little as Siobhan wanted to do with the boy, she couldn't help but acknowledge his above-average intelligence. In the context of a teenager, she reigned in her thoughts. Of course, Ion hadn't acted very smart, since after all it wasn't entirely safe to stay in here during operation. The amounts of energy that were released were enormous. At this close distance to the converters, the distorted space-time effects could cause all sorts of harmful effects on organisms. For example, polarizing fields could form, which could made the membranes of human cells more

permeable, or even worse, damage the genetic material. Ion would have to undergo an intensive medical examination after his return.

After her measurements left no abnormal findings to evaluate, she went back to Ninu's cabin. Ion Battler, sat in one of the armchairs with a drained face. Ninu had obviously *really* read him the riot act. The Goner began to apologize for her half-brother, but Siobhan waved it aside. "We'll place him before the Tribunal of the United Court of Justice when we got back," she threatened jokingly. "Before the Eleventh Chamber, like in the days of Kyo t'Nnt!" Ion looked up at her in horror. "We'll jump in a few mizuras," Siobhan said, and left the cabin.

In the cockpit, Zakk Folkna greeted them with the pleasant news information that the jump drive was working flawlessly from his perspective and did not need to be readjusted. "But look out the window," he concluded.

Siobhan stepped over to the center console and propped herself up with one hand between two controls panels on the ceiling where it taped toward the bow. What she saw initially confused her. A throng of gigantic spaceships at a great distance? No, something was wrong with the dimensions! None of the swirling ships seemed larger than a four-person glider. Were these spacecraft in the immediate vicinity?

"Just came out of nowhere a few mizuras ago."

"From where, please?" Siobhan asked.

Borman shrugged his shoulders. "From nowhere. They came from no specific direction. They were just there. They can jump."

"How can you be so calm?"

Borman shrugged again, but said nothing.

Siobhan instructed the computer to document everything as precisely as possible. They had unexpectedly come across a new, space-traveling lifeform, and later on they would have to return—but the mission came first. "Maneuver us carefully away from them," Siobhan instructed Borman. "we want to try the jump sequence again. Computer." She provided the onboard computer with all necessary information.

As the *AP Providence* finally set into the alien mini spaceships followed her like a flock of migratory birds. Something flashed.

"They're shooting at us!" Seldon seemed more surprised than scared. "But with toothpicks. That doesn't even have the energy level of a comm laser."

"Continue," Siobhan ordered. "If we can ignore it, we'll ignore it."

In front of the cockpit window and the external camera it flashed more and more frequently. After a short time, the defense shield started automatically.

“Oops,” said Command Borman. “That was automatic. The frequency of the shots is increasing rapidly and the shield is being hit from all sides at the same time. Jahn, I don’t think these are weapons. They’re data lasers.”

Seldon made an indecisive face. “Well, I don’t know. It seems to me that bombarding someone with data from all sides is a bit ineffective as a form of communication.”

Siobhan, now back in front of her console, frowned. The time until the field generators were recharged had already more than doubled and was continuing to increase. Siobhan was uncomfortably reminded with the disaster in sector Black Hole Sun. “We have to shake these things, otherwise the jump drive won’t activate before doomsday.”

“I’m already trying,” Borman called.

Mizuras passed; all at once, the large swarm of small spacecrafts stopped their bombardment. Without a pause, a siren activated. “Collision alarm,” the computer shouted, flashing it on all displays. “Evasive maneuvers!”

Through the cockpit window, the crew looked at something like a jagged, black wall that restricted the view of the stars. On all sides of this massive wall, huge mechanical claws like the legs of a spider or the tentacles of an octopus opened, ready to ensnare the *AP Providence*. According to the display, the obstacle was barely a hundred lengths away. Borman strained at the control rods without any success.

“Collision in two sezuras.”

Borman tugged at the controls as though she had nothing more to lose. Screaming engines drowned out the shrill collision alarm, the crew ducked low in their seats in anticipation of the impact. Only a few feet in front of the *AP Providence*’s bow, a massive, insect-like body of black steel crystal arose. “It... isn’t coming closer!” Borman shouted in surprise. “It’s holding its distance!”

“Then rotate the *Providence* around them with the gyroscopes,” Zakk Folkna recommended with a shout to overcome all the noise.

“I tried. They’re not functioning anymore.”

“According to the operational data,” Folkna screamed, who hastily pulled up the live data on his terminal, “they’re working perfectly.”

“But they’re showing almost no reaction,” the pilot asserted. “I know, that’s impossible.” A gyroscope, in principle, consisted of nothing but rotating masses of momentum. It served to support the attitude control system of smaller spacecraft—it was unimaginable that the underlying, basic physics didn’t work!

“Damn it, computer, turn off the alarm, I’m going crazy!” Seldon demanded. The onboard computer obeyed, and as the shrill tone fell silent, the panic of the cockpit crew subsided, at least partly if not completely.

The two pilots checked one data panel after the other. The facts were clear: the *AP Providence* stumbled through space in free fall, the gyroscopes spun wildly without effect. An unknown insect ship the size of a carrier had gathered just lengths in front of the bow and matched its movements to the few lumbering maneuvers the test ship could carry out. The generators continuously pumped energy into the shields and inertial compensators, the jump unit would only be fully operational again in a quazura. Dozens of small spaceships swarmed behind the *AP Providence* and poked them with laser bolts that came ever more often without actually weakening the shields.

Siobhan and Zakk Folkna left their seats at almost the same time; Folkna was trembling more and more. Siobhan stepped behind the pilots and looked up at the jagged side of the alien ship, which merged with the dark of space overhead. Innumerable bulges, indentations, and other structures divided the large spacecraft's outer hull into different sections. The most impressive and threatening, however, were the long, curved tentacles whose insides shimmered purple.

"It's big," Major Seldon commented dryly.

"And has tentacles," Commander Borman added no less dryly.

"What are we going to do?" Zakk asked with grinding molars. The situation was much more severe than the scientist wanted the others to know.

Siobhan answered. "We wait until the jump unit is green and try our luck."

"They are influencing our gyroscopes. They'll really manipulate the jump drive," Borman countered. "We should let our weapons speak."

"Weapons? What weapons, Ditta?" Seldon cried. "Maybe the asteroid laser? No, thank you!"

Ditta Bormon pursed her lips. "Right. I forgot."

"Major, maybe we should talk to them first, before we shoot at them," Siobhan gave pause. After all, up to now they hadn't done any harm. Anyway, not really. Opening fire on a newly discovered alien species—even with an asteroid laser—couldn't be any kind of solution. She cleared her throat. "I do not believe they can manipulate the behavior of the jump unit. The gyroscopes simply don't work because we're in a highly polarized tractor beam."

CHAPTER 39

By no means am I averse to an old-fashioned romance! If the man makes himself at home on board a very old-fashioned battleship for that reason!

Melissa Banks,

ArgoNet ::CelebView, 46/545 Edition

The two Teladi drifted backward on the Water of Wishes, the claws of their feet intertwined in a most chaste manner so that they were not pulled away from each other by the current. They looked up at the dark evening sky, just as Nopileos once did on Nif-Nakh. But the wafting veil of the Ianmus Zura's aurora was more beautiful than anything on the jungle planet. As she listened to Jolandalas's words, a small voice in the back of her head thought *Hatrak!* and her hearts became heavy. But she was soon listening to the artist's voice again, who drew an exciting picture of life and creativity on Ianamus Zura with words that had never been heard before but were well understood.

Never in his about twenty-sun-long life had Jolandalas left the planet. Nopileos was somewhat shocked, because the artist had to really be the only person she knew who had never stepped foot on a spaceship before. For Jolandalas, however, it seemed to be the most natural thing in the world. He didn't immediately notice that Nopileos was no longer following his words with her full concentration. "...and so the transparency of the soul is a color beyond the eyes—Nopileos?"

"Tsh?"

"Are you listening to any of this?"

"You've never been in space, Jolandalas?"

"No. Never."

While the waves quietly babbled on the nearby shore and the wind just audibly caught in the reeds, the two lizards drifted in silence for a while. Jolandalas seemed to forget what he had wanted to do.

"Is that bad?" the artist inquired, when the silence became too oppressive.

Nopileos was searching for the right words. "No. But it's hard to understand. All the beauty of the universe, should I have that advantage over you, out of all Teladi?"

"All the beautify of Ianamus Zura, do I have that advantage over you?" Jolandalas countered. He was slightly offended by Nopileos's words, even though he knew that she was right in a certain sense.

“I want to found a non-profit organization on Ianamus Zura,” Nopileos blurted out, who felt that any answers to the artist’s last comment would push him in a direction he wouldn’t enjoy. Jolandalas suddenly unhooked his claws and dived elegantly under Nopileos. On the other side he broke through the surface again, intentionally spraying drops of water. Under the light of the stars and the aurora, Nopileos could see that the artist’s scaly fin had fully risen.

“A *what?*” Jolandalas exclaimed cheerily. “Salamander pie!”

“An organization that doesn’t generate any profit,” Nopileos said, offended.

“But—to do what?”

“Tsh! I…” Nopileos broke off, confused. *Yes—to do what? Egg salad!* She made herself sink under the water. The ground was hardly three lengths deep, she dived down grabbed a claw of sand, and paddled back up. “I’ll think about that later!” she called loudly. Yes, she hadn’t thought about what her organization would deal with, but she would still do it! With a well-placed throw, she hurled the wet sand in her claws at the stomach armor of the artist. Jolandalas hissed in mock indignation and instantly transformed himself into a hurricane of whirling arms and legs that rushed towards Nopileos like a water spout. Nopileos and Jolandalas tussled with each other like hatchlings, hunting each other through the Water of Wishes, pelting themselves with small pebbles, seven-footed crabs, and muddy claws.

“You are afraid of the beauty of the universe!” Nopileos teased and immediately vanished underwater.

“And you’re running away from your own courage!” Jolandalas countered.

“At the moment, I’m swimming!”

“You call that swimming?”

“Yes, what do you call it? Hopping?”

“Paddling! I call it paddling. You Teladi in your planetary community have forgotten how to appreciate the element!”

“Tshhhh!” Nopileos took a run-up and shot almost vertically out of the water, half turned in the air and loudly splashed back down on the surface of like a porpoise. “For that we have gained a new element!”

“That we certainly never lost,” Jolandalas replied.

“So?” Nopileos looked appraisingly at the artist from a distance of a few lengths. A small brook of water ran dry between her eyelashes and pearly down the right side of her muzzle.

“Look, Nopileos, we Teladi live two hundred and fifty suns or more. I’ve only just seen twenty suns. How old are you? Your eyes are yellow, your scales in the third triad. Eleven? Twelve?”

“*Hai*,” Nopileos admitted. Then remembering that Jolandalas wasn’t proficient in trading language, she repeated the word in Old Teladi.

“There’s a time for everything and a place for everything. The two of us, you and I, have the fortune of being in the right place at the right time.” With these words, the artist headed for the shore, from which they’d ended up quite far in during their romp. Nopileos followed him after a few sezuras.

“I want to tell you something, Nopileos.” Jolandalas strode up the slope, softly splashing, until he reached the small promontory where his hovercraft stood. One or two hundred lengths away, another hovering vehicle landed on a small island, its exterior lights glimmering against the horizon: the Water of Wishes was also a popular night destination. “If you would like to help your friend, then tell her not to explain the logic and urgency of the mission to the Conductor. Instead, she should summarize the beauty and perfection of her plan in an aesthetic and ethical sense. If only she is convincing enough, hearts, minds, and help will fly to her.”

Nopileos had to think about that first. She ran her tongue over her nostrils and for long moments stared over at the tiny island where the other hovercraft had landed. The lights had faded to a hull glow, and as she listened attentively to the wind, incomprehensible words that were muffled by the wind seemed to waft over. “Now you Zurans are just as I’ve always wanted all Teladi back home in the *Community of Planets* to be, and yet you puzzle me deeply.”

Jolandalas sniffed. “Will you show me your planetary community? Loud Teladi, all women! I might like that.”

“Profit,” Nopileos said with a pinch of sarcasm in her voice. Jolandalas looked at her questioningly. “I think I’m beginning to understand what the immigration officer said before he gave us the landing permit.”

“What did he say?”

“He said as many Teladi came from the *Community* were also leaving again. I understand that now because I understand my people. In a certain way.”

“And would you like to leave Ianamus Zura again, oh Nopileos?”

She took her time with the answer; there was too much to explain, even though she now knew which path she must walk. Nothing was easy, there were no simple answers. But she didn’t want to make it any harder than it already was. “No,” she said finally. Jolandalas gave a barely audible hiss.

CHAPTER 40

There is a simple reason why the builders of these artifacts just didn't set up any jumpgates in our solar system:

The stars are not meant for us.

René Farnham,

Star Tales: Memoirs

“Siobhan, may I take a look at the radio signals we’re receiving?” Out of impulse, she had allowed the boy to address her by her first name; why, she didn’t exactly know, herself. Presumably because she didn’t value it anyway if someone called her by her title and last name, because both should only belong to her distant past.

She nodded. “If it can’t be avoided, Ion. Major Seldon, is there anything new?”

The pilot hadn’t checked the incessantly incoming radio signals since the appearance of the large ship. He did now and made a startled face. In the meantime, the onboard computer had managed to decrypt some of the signals. “Several of the transmitters are sending imaging data. We need a large video field, computer.”

A projection that stretched over the entire length of the console between pilot and copilot opened up.

“Kha'ak!” Ion Battler cried out, “they’re Kha'ak!”

There was no recognizable bottom or top, no back or front. Like a swarm of bees, countless ugly creatures teamed over and around each other. Their barely half-length, stocky bodies carried brown armor and dark green, shimmering, slightly transparent wings. To move, they braced themselves with their wings and used bulky stubs at the back of their stocky bodies. Each of the creatures had two curved gripping arms, which terminated in thin, multi-fingered claws. Some of the creatures had five, eight, or even ten fingers, others only two or three. Without a neck, the oval head grew out of the trunk, and the large, multi-faceted, compound eyes all looked dull and threatening. The short, curved beak that sprung from the head instead of a mouth was strongly reminiscent of that of a tropical bird.

“They’re what?” Ditta Borman whispered, shaken. These creatures were uglier and more menacing than anything she had ever seen, including the centennial kaspandara she had once encountered deep in the ocean of a Boron-settled planet.

“Kha'ak,” the boy repeated patiently. “They eat from the inside through the guts and jump from one to the next, becoming bigger and bigger from the flesh of their victims, and sometimes their eyes or fingers grow out of their backs!”

“Who told you such a thing?” the pilot asked with a disgusted expression, without averting her gaze from the swarming mass of pseudo-insects which repelled her, but simultaneously fascinated her.

Siobhan, who had decided to ignore the boy’s story, confirmed with the computer that there were no decipherable audio signals. There were probably several subchannels, but just as before, the onboard computer was finding this a hard nut to crack.

“The children of the Split are told that by their parents if they don’t behave. If you aren’t good, you get a Kha'ak and they eat your guts!”

“Educationally invaluable as always,” Borman said ironically. “Typical Split.”

“*Yadmanthrat*,” murmured Jahn Seldon.

“Direct hit! That means direct hit!” Ion triumphed.

Seldon nodded. “Very good.”

“Why direct hit?” Siobhan wanted to know, surprised.

“The Y word of the Split. Everything is always *yadmanthrat*,” the pilot answered. “And the beasts there are really, *yadmanthrat* unsightly.”

Siobhan shook her head imperceptibly and focused back to the data from the onboard computer. As if it mattered how handsome or ugly someone found the Kha'ak—the newly discovered species, she corrected herself in her head.

It slowly began to emerge that the radio sources all transmitted approximately the same thing: jumbled, remote, insectoid creatures performing silent, inexplicable tail dances and similar rituals, but otherwise carrying no tools or pursuing any other identifiable tasks. Gradually, it managed to ascertain the positions of the transmitters. Most of them were not in the big ship that fell through space in front of the *AP Providence*, but in other places of this star system with its three suns.

“Maybe these aren’t the builders of the alien ships,” Zakk Folkna speculated after an inzura of waiting. “Maybe they just keep beaming us a picture of their, their... main food source. And that’s just Kha'ak. For us it’s argnus.”

“Thank you, Zakk,” Siobhan replied sarcastically. “That’s exactly what it’ll be.”

“Just a starting point,” the engineer muttered meekly.

Ditta Borman suddenly snorted loudly. “Very good, really very good!” she gasped. Her laughter was contagious, so the whole crew soon joined in. “I don’t want to know what they’ll choose as their side dish,” the pilot chuckled.

“Split children!” Ion cried.

“Goner boys!” Ninu countered and winked.

“Ha, ha,” Ion said. “Blond poison!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ninu wondered.

“Just calm down, please,” Major Seldon called, whose face had been serious for several sezuras. A couple gasped laughs later, and there was silence again—apart from the working noise of the converter.

“What’s going on?”

“Something landed on the hull,” Seldon claimed. He called up information with flying hands.

“Through the shield?” Bormon doubted. “You must be wrong, Jahn.”

“The shields are down! When the shelling stopped, the automatic systems shut them down.” The pilot instructed the onboard computer to reactivate the defense shield immediately.

“The field effect generators are unfortunately damaged,” the computer replied with genuine regret in his evenly modulated voice. “One severe exception...” He continued, but the rest was lost in the swirl of voices.

Siobhan remembered the additional hull cameras that were mounted after the regretful experience with the supernova and the camera drones. In a few words, she instructed the computer to look for any irregularities on the hull. One was found almost immediately. Then a second. A third. More of them.

A total of nineteen Kha'aks perched on *AP Providence*'s hull. That proved that the insectoids' video transmissions actually showed the crews of the foreign ships. But what wasn't clear was what they were doing there. The computer denied the question of whether they were trying to weld themselves into the ship. But they were doing something there!

“They live in vacuum! Look!” Ion was the first to notice the obvious: the insect-like birds apparently didn't wear any protective gear! How they got onto the ship's hull and how they clung to it so as not to drift off due to weightlessness, remained in question. The light flickered; from somewhere came the whining sound of a generator shutting down.

“The jump unit? Siobhan hastily flung herself into the seat of her science station. “Still charging,” she said with relief. But how long before this generator would also fail? She made a decision. “Commander Borman. Computer, activate the jump unit and align it to the default coordinates.”

Ditta Borman nodded as if she had already thought it out herself. Zakk Folkna didn't object.

“Dr. Norman, I must advise that the jump unit is not yet ready. The ship will not reach the destination coordinates,” the computer warned in its neutral voice.

Siobhan nodded grimly. “That's clear to me. Execute my order anyway.”

The computer was silent for a moment, which Siobhan used to chase Ion and Ninu back into their cabin. She saw the unmistakable fear in the Goner's pale face. After the onboard computer had obtained authorization from the scientists and the pilots, it started the countdown at minus four mizuras, but Siobhan interrupted it. "Minus zero. Activate the jump unit immediately," she demanded. The computer obeyed.

Empty space. Scattered stars, separated from one another by endless emptiness, scattered sparsely over the lonely darkness. Far away, a glittering spiral nebula, as beautiful as life itself. A milky way.

"Where... where are we?" Commander Borman stuttered uncertainly.

"A sun on the edge of nothingness," Siobhan whispered devoutly. "A very old sun!"

The ancient star glimmered darkly in the center of this lost island of life. How long did it take it to break away from the galaxy it once belonged to? This time around, the partial jump drive had carried the *AP Providence* far, far further than any ship ever had. "Look, the jumpgate!" The pilot put the picture of the image from the rear-facing cameras on the console.

It was old, very old. Not just hundreds of millions of jazuras had gnawed at it, but thousands: a billion jazuras or more! The gate was damaged, covered with small and medium craters, as if it hadn't been maintained and cared for since time out of thought. It had a different shape than the jump gates known in the *Community of Planets*: the outriggers broad and flat, the arch not round but slightly elliptical. And it tumbled. Without exception, all known jumpgates aligned their passage axes on the ecliptic of the star system in which they were located. Not this one. It tumbled sluggishly around several axes like a bracelet that was made to spin on black marble. Something must have brought it an angular momentum that could not be compensated. Maybe, Siobhan thought, the gate's maintenance machines had been down for some time. "A forgotten jumpgate," she realized breathlessly. When that sun left the galaxy, it was given up and no longer maintained."

"Must've been a damned long time ago," Seldon managed with a husky voice. He had long since instructed the computer to record precisely everything.

"The Kha'ak?" Folkna interjected. He cleared his throat.

"What? A moment." Seldon checked the controls.

"They're gone. All nineteen. The shield generators work again."

"We are too far away," Zakk Folkna spoke these sentences with such serenity that at first nobody paid any attention to him. It was only after a mizura that Siobhan asked, as if in a trance, what he implied by that.

"The only gate we can detect with our jump unit is that one there. All others are too far for our instruments."

Seldon and Borman looked at him like two ghosts. They heard and understood his words. Alone, they wished that they didn't understand him, that he had never said those words.

"We cannot leave here," Siobhan finally stated. Deep silence. After a while, she cleared her throat. "We cannot use the jump unit because we cannot target, right. But perhaps there's still another way! We came out of this jumpgate, which means it still works in this direction. But we don't know where it leads, if it is still connected to a remote site. Maybe it leads further out into the void, maybe to the other end of the universe, or perhaps back to the galaxy that this sun belonged to long ago. With some luck, it's the same as ours."

"Or into the nothingness of hyperspace," Zakk Folkna whispered almost inaudibly. The engineer knew the theories developed by Siobhan almost as well as she did.

Siobhan thought of Ninu and Ion, who were not yet aware of recent events. She activated the intercom and called the two Gonor into the cockpit.

"We have to try it, and right now," said the boy. His eyes were wide with worry. "The *Community of Planets* is counting on us, we have to leave no stone unturned."

Ninu nodded. "Ion's right. Time is short. We have to try it, no matter the cost!" But fear was written on her face.

A few minutes later, the *AP Providence* took off and headed for the center of the ancient, tumbling jumpgate. The ship disappeared in a blue-violet ray storm. The lost star system on the edge of the empty wasteland between the galaxies was again undisturbed from its eons-old, forlorn death paralysis.

CHAPTER 41

Elena Kho is the only human I appreciate and respect. I have seen her blood, and she mine; we are friend-foes. And so I will gladly see her die one day!

Ghinn t'Whht

In the end it was a lot more trouble to get the nutrient bars out of the dingy than Elena had anticipated, because the city was a long march on foot from the landing field. For a short time she considered trying her own hand at the dinghy's Teladi flight controls, but she quickly abandoned that idea. Her hands barely fit into the control shafts, they were so big in comparison to the saurians', and if one did not know exactly what the fingers were feeling inside the shafts, it would be more dangerous than useful to work the controls randomly.

Elena waited in the barge until well past midnight, and tried to snooze a little, which she managed to do poorly rather than properly. Early in the full morning, she marched towards the city and reached it after two stazuras. The hospital was quickly located. The Split woman surprised Elena by thanking her handsomely for the effort. "I would not have done that for you, t'Kho," Ghinn added.

Elena gave a tired shrug of her shoulders. "That's why I have friends, and you do not," she replied, and left without another word. She was exhausted and depressed. As she slowly traversed the city, searching for the Aesthetic Supervisor's office, her thoughts returned to Kyle Brennan, whom she was worried about. She wouldn't be able to find out about his well-being for quite a long time. But what, she wondered all at once, would she report to her superiors on earth, assuming they ever made it back to the blue planet? But Earth was so far away, farther away than the stars, and that sometimes scared her. Maybe neither she nor Brennan would ever be able to return to the blue planet. *I hope you're doing well, Kyle!*

When a diffuse, glowing shadow fell on her, she looked up. A whirring half-black, half-white glider hissed over her head and noisily sat on the floor a few steps in front of her. Before she recognized the glider as Jolandalas's, the cockpit opened and Nopileos jumped out.

"Sister!" she cried. "Where do you want to go?"

Elena looked around. While lost in thought, she had already walked a long way past the office of the Aesthetic Supervisor. She pointed over her shoulders with her index finger. "Actually, there."

"The Conductor would be happy to meet with us again," Nopileos said. Jolandalas also got out of the glider. Sezuras later, the cockpit closed and the vehicle floated off, unmanned. Jolandalas didn't even glance after it.

“You talked with him?”

“We went to the barge, but you weren’t there,” Nopileos explained.

She nodded. “Yes. Right.”

“Oh, Elena, I now know what we can do to make the Conductor understand our request and lend us support!” Hurriedly, Nopileos gushed out what she had learned from Nopileos.

Elena’s gaze became more and more skeptical the longer she listened. “A highly technical society built around pure aesthetics? That sounds a bit far-fetched to me.”

“No, Elena, because the beauty of the universe is motivation, not an obstacle.” Nopileos’s tone was so enthusiastic that the astronaut had to smile.

“You talked a lot with him, hm?” Nopileos quickly glanced sideways at Jolandalas, who was watching the course of the discussion.

“Yes, and I have already seen much of Ianamus Zura with open eyes,” she added. “It’s true, Elena!”

“Let’s suppose it’s true. Then what would we say to the Conductor?”

“Tell him it’s the starting point. The grandeur of the emergence of new consciousness.”

“Using the example of Eve 2092, you mean? The Xenon?”

“Tsh! Right! And the miraculous plan of the Boron to give protection to a new species. Just like you told me onboard the *Raindragon*.”

“Just like I told you?”

“Maybe a tiny bit more elegant, sister, just a little bit!” Nopileos’s scaly fin rose. At the time, Elena had in fact used words that were quite sober, and in no way exuberant. The main thing was that she understood what was important. And she obviously did. Nopileos now knew Elena well enough to know when she was joking.

“And that’s what Jolandalas said?” Elena was still not fully convinced.

“But of course!” Nopileos squeaked.

Elena shook her head. It sounded pretty strange. It didn’t seem sensible not to describe an urgent matter in a concise and sensible way, but instead give it an aesthetic dimension. But if that was what was required, then she shouldn’t leave it untried. “Okay,” she decided. “But where did I leave my dictionary: *Boron for Beginners*?”

Conductor Cokadrareos again greeted them with a friendly greeting, if this time more seriously. Today, the head of the Aesthetic Supervisor didn’t wear a kilt, but a gray suit. Beneath his open jacket, his bare scale armor looked out. “I’m extremely sorry that we had to interrupt our meeting so abruptly yesterday. Something unheard of happened. I... it is my duty... shhh!” The conductor visibly struggled

for words, then he continued: “The rays of the young stars flatter the cradle of life, but this gift is a voluntary one. Any sun would like to give so much more, blinking out from behind the multitude of its egg-sisters, and it lasts only for the slightest moment in the maelstrom of the galaxy. Suddenly shimmering as the brightest star, as a blazing torch in the midst of the wan cosmos, already there to see from afar, crying “here I am” with glittering rays of light.”

The Conductor paused. Suddenly he looked very, very sad. “I’m in mourning,” he hissed softly. “A messenger yesterday brought the government of Ianamus Zura the news that a sun that long has lived in our night sky, has ended its life cycle in the territory of the *Community of Planets* as a supernova.”

Elena opened her mouth in shock to say something, but immediately closed it again because she couldn’t find any words. A horrible deafness spread violently through her. Nopileos also shuffled around on their sitting bench. “Which—which one?” the astronaut finally managed to stammer. “Which Sun and who is, how many... was it, was it inhabited?”

The leader of the Aesthetic Supervisor apologetically raised the palms of his hands upward. “Unfortunately, oh my friends, much is still unknown to me. But the star bore the name Black Hole Sun.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Elena whispered. A sun, an entire star system, so many lives! “Was there no warning? Sunspots, flares, coronal expansion?”

The Conductor raised his upturned claws, as if to reaffirm that he had no further information. “You would certainly like to return to your planetary community, right, Ms. Kho?”

Elena pressed her fists against her eyes and took a few deep breaths. She felt miserable. “No,” she finally whispered. “Please, dear Conductor, I don’t wish to make excessive demands on your patience, but I need an hour’s break to collect myself.” At this juncture she was definitely unable to talk about the aesthetics of her mission. “A quazura’s break,” the astronaut corrected.

“But of course,” the Conductor said. “Okay, then, in one quazura!”

After the agreed upon break, Elena had gathered herself again, for the most part. Nopileos had assured her that Black Hole Sun hadn’t had any planets inside its habitable zone, and numbered among the newly developments along the edge of the *Community*. Even so, there were presumably some just recently built industrial complexes that burned up in the firestorm of the nova, and maybe survey ships and prospectors who routinely passed the star system as they made their way through the sectors.

“Nopileos.” Elena sat on the floor with bent knees in the antechamber, her Teladi friend knelt on the sitting bench. “I’m...” She hesitated, but then decided to explain her line of thought out loud and continued: “...I’m not known to get my priorities mixed up, but right now I’m confused. Emotionally out of touch, so to speak. Look, our task is, is... unrelated to this event. We won’t help anyone if we give up now, right? Isn’t that how it is?”

“Sister, neither Paranids nor Split will let themselves be talked out of their plans. If we don’t do what needs to be done, the disaster will only get bigger.”

Elena nodded slowly. Another frightening thought came to her mind. “What if the jumpgates have been destroyed? If I’m not mistaken, the way to Menelaus’s Paradise is through this system.”

“I don’t know, Elena. The gates are pretty far out there. If they’re gone, we have a problem. All of us!”

“We have to try it.”

“*Hai*, Elena-san, star warrior, we have to!”

“If the Conductor will help us at all, that is. Let’s find out.” Elena got up and was just about to press the buzzer on the bottom of the door when she remembered something else. “Nopileos, in case we do get a spacecraft: you don’t really have to come with me on this trip.”

“Tshhhh!” Nopileos’s hiss was drawn out and sounded outraged. “But, colleague and sister! We’ve already talked about that.”

“I just thought, because of Jolandalas...”

“Because what? Jolandalas is a saurian like you and me!”

The astronaut laughed. “Well, I’m not a saurian, anyway! Nopileos, consider it, this could be dangerous.” With these words, she pressed the buzzer. A moment later, the door to Conductor Cokadrareos’s office opened.

Three stazuras and many questions from the Conductor later, the discussion continued at the highest level of government. The hastily summoned administrator Inalamas Samolodes Sumirasos VII was received by the Conductor with a flood of poetic words. Nopileos reported to a stunned Elena the many comparatives and superlatives the aesthete used to portray the story of #efaa and the Xenon. Elena never would have expected that the beautifully spiritual packaging she had used to try and make the mission palatable for the Conductor would so quickly lead to the opening of the floodgates.

Elena was also really surprised by the fact that the administrator knew the name of scientific ethicist Nola Hi. The Teladi on Ianamus Zura were obviously extremely devoted to the Boron, and Nola Hi—at least in governmental circles—was well known as the adviser to the royal houses of the Boron. The Conductor and adviser were all the more eager to provide support for Elena’s task. No matter what the Boron undertook, it was usually of high moral and aesthetic value.

“Oh yes, the pirates are already known to us as evil,” the administrator admitted. The saurian wore a Teladi-green jumpsuit and dark blue face paint with red appliqués. “Even if the thought of the life of a privateer cannot be denied to have a certain grandeur.”

“It could be denied,” Nopileos grumbled, remembering the raid on the *FL Raindragon* only too well.

“Oh yes, yes, certainly,” the administrator hastened to agree. “This is also one of the issues that will be discussed at a diplomatic level with the planetary community, and since our stargates changed their destinations and we have been in contact with the *Community of Planets*, we have already been visited by many unaesthetic subjects. Infested, one might say.”

Elena nodded. “I can certainly believe it.”

“You must understand that we do not approve of the use of weapons, so our starships are not equipped with them,” the administrator said.

Hopefully your ships at least have shields, the astronaut thought. But one way or another, there was nothing else for her to do but accept the government’s offer anyway. If other pirates had already discovered and perhaps even recovered the drifting slave ship, then the journey had already failed anyway. “We will get along without weapons, administrator,” Elena assured.

Nopileos nodded in agreement—a gesture that Teladi didn’t actually know.

“The only question is how soon can we start?” Every mizura can be crucial.”

The red eyes of the administrator starred triumphantly at Elena. “But dear Ms. Kho, the quick government ship *Archipelago of Swamp Orchids* is being made ready for takeoff at this very moment.”

“Wonderful,” Elena slipped before the administrator had even finished. She almost jumped up right away, but she controlled herself that far.

“Oh yes, that it is! The *Archipelago of Swamp Orchids* is quite eager to flex its strong muscles and finally set out on a grand journey! It’s been lying dormant in its berth for ninety-three suns now!

Later, on the way to the hospital in Jolandalas’s hovercraft, Elena propped herself against the glass dome of the cockpit with her elbow and placed her hand on the back of her neck. The nocturnal aurora flickered over her, but it hadn’t occurred to her to admire the beauty of the spectacle of nature. “Ninety-three jazuras,” she muttered again. She thought of her own ship, the USC Getsu Fune, which had been similarly advanced in years. Hopefully, the *Archipelago* was in as good a condition as the old USC ship from Earth before it was shot down over Argon Prime.

The two Teladi were strangely silent. For Elena, who had experienced them deep in non-stop conversation from the moment they first met, the unfamiliar peace was all the more noticeable. A few words in Old Teladi occasionally flew back and forth between the saurians, but it remained at a few isolated comments. A strange tension predominated between the two that Elena couldn’t quite explain. On the other hand, where should their thoughts lead? There were pirates and a supernova in front of her, the fleet formations of the Paranid and the Split, the Xenon CPU #efaa, and last but not least, a jumpgate to disable that had to be reckoned with. All this in an unarmed, ninety-three-jazura-old spaceship that probably looked like a colorful amoeba. Was it not understandable that their minds wandered if the opportunity arose?

Jolandalas gently landed the glider in front of the hospital and they got out.

“Well, when do we leave?” Ghinn t’Whht asked, as if everything she had previously said was no longer valid. The Patriarch’s wife raised herself on her elbows and looked at Elena adventurously.

This made Elena’s eyes widen. “You want to go in the other direction, back to the *Community of Planets*, did you forget? We’re flying further out instead.”

“I’m doing superb, the little warrior here too.” She cradled the baby. The swellings on both sides of her body had subsided, and Ghinn seemed almost as agile and ascetic as when Elena first met her on Nif-Nakh.

“No, Ghinn, you stay here on Ianamus Zura. Under no means am I taking a woman with an infant along.”

The Split woman’s eyes formed into slits and her hands twitched. A tantrum seemed to be brewing, but she still controlled herself. “We don’t get along with this vile planet. I would prefer to accompany you. I’m not afraid of the danger, as you well know.”

The corner of Elena’s mouth twitched. “We’ll pick you up on the way back, promise.”

“No, by Thuruk’s stinking, shaggy beard!” Ghinn exploded. Her face darkened and she wanted to form a gesture. But she was still holding her child in her arms, which was now stirring and screaming. “The creature will take me, I demand it!”

“Won’t do it,” Nopileos hissed cheerfully. Ghinn tried to get up, but she collapsed again. She was not quite as fit as she looked.

Ignoring the clamor from the Split woman, Elena and Nopileos made their way to the barge—a final time to pick up Elena’s nutrient bars and from there transfer the position of the drifting pirate ship to the onboard computer of the *Archipelago*. The small Teladi dinghy would certainly linger here for quite for many jazuras from now. Perhaps for ninety-three jazuras, but possibly forever. Elena didn’t look back.

The *Archipelago of Swamp Orchids* was a large, impressive ship, even by Elena’s standards. With its shape that reminded of a bulging clam and the restrained, muddy and beige shades, it seemed, although organic and unfamiliar, also serious and somehow sovereign. The heavy engines accelerated at full throttle to reach the coordinates Elena had transmitted from the launch with the shortest possible delay, because nothing was as tight now as time. Each sezura might mean life and death for Uchan t’Sctt, Kalmanckalsaltt, and Nola Hi, and the same held true for #efaa. Elena tried not to think that she was crossing this section of space for the third time in a few tazuras.

Communication with the crew of the *Archipelago* was problematic. Nopileos constantly had to translate back and forth, since neither the onboard computer nor the crew of the ship had mastered the trading language. It turned out to be particularly difficult to translate the target coordinates into the non-standard notation of Ianamus Zura. It took a solid quazura, but finally the navigations commander of

the ship, Eladadys Ujarofolys Ebosirireos II, ran dry of the beautifully spiritual words and looked at Elena and Nopileos almost despairingly.

Nopileos, too, was more than unnerved; yes, she was an educated Teladi and understood almost all technical terminology. However, transferring these into Old Teladi was mostly impossible, and lengthy descriptions and explanations with constant questioning of Elena were the result. But ultimately, it was possible to determine the course with the help of the onboard computer. Nevertheless, a small numerical uncertainty could not be ruled out.

The control center of the *Archipelago* was so spacious that even Elena felt comfortable in it. Certainly, the bright-plastic colors of the interior which made the control panels look like children's toys took some getting used to, but all in all, the astronaut hadn't seen such a pleasing ship interior, strictly speaking since they had left the cramped but cozy *AP Nikkonofune* behind.

Elena, Nopileos, and Ebosirireos were glued to the current flight information and the tracking device, on which they expected the appearance of the sought-after spacecraft at any moment. The computer didn't display the data, as was usual on board *Community* ships, on virtual projection screens that appeared and disappeared as needed, but used a series of oval monitors that provided such brilliant images one could easily mistake them for windows. But outer space remained empty. Ianamus Zura was now just a tiny point separated from the *Archipelago* by light-jazuras and jumpgates. According to the calculated values, the ship should have already reached the region where the slave ship should be positioned two inzuras ago.

"Maybe the gravidar isn't working okay, either," Nopileos guessed. Elena shook her head and thought of the ninety-three jazuras that the ship had under her belt. "Maybe you're right, maybe it didn't recalibrate after the gate transit. Ask Sobisirius."

"Ebosirireos," Nopileos corrected, but she immediately tried to translate the question as precisely as possible for navigations commander.

He snorted snootily before the question was finished. "Marginal sharpness and optimal points have not shifted, the *Archipelago of Swamp Orchids* constantly and carefully checks that," Nopileos translated back.

"Elena, what are marginal sharpness and optimal points?"

The astronaut eyed the motley saurians from Ianamus Zura, who were again staring straight ahead through the windows as if they were completely alone onboard. "That means it wasn't recalibrated at all," Elena stated furiously. Apparently it wasn't the ship that was rusted so much as her crew! "Can you tell the pig-headed commander anything aesthetic to change his mind?"

"What in yellow salamander pies should I tell him aesthetically about how to operate his gravidar?" Nopileos cursed, palms upturned. Her forehead ridges became darker.

Elena made a helpless face and shrugged. “Poetic justice, hatchlings in the fog, I don’t know, tell him anything.”

Nopileos mumbled something incomprehensible, leaned back, and thought hard. After a few sezuras, she remembered something. What was more aesthetic than the truth in its ultimate, purest ramifications? What if she backed Ebosirireos into a rhetorical corner he couldn’t get out of? Could she, who was only moderately adept with Old Teladi, even succeed? Well, she would soon find out! Nopileos leaned forward again and tried to engage the navigations commander in a conversation as inconspicuously as possible. Although initially very snippy, Ebosirireos still took the bait after a short time.

While the Teladi hissed and hissed with each other, Elena tried not to show her impatience, although the Teladi of Ianamus Zura would presumably not be able to interpret her body language. Eventually, ten mizuras later (Ebosirireos had just then committed himself enthusiastically to the elegance of truthfulness and immediately realized that he would contradict himself if he didn’t comply with Elena’s request), the navigations commander gripped a control on the console and moved two virtual sliders into new positions. With no transition, a gleaming white blip appeared on the gravidar screen and vanished as quickly as the knobs moved farther. Elena gave a small cry of surprise; the navigations commander also growled out and pulled the sliders back as far as it took until the bright blip reappeared.

“Egg salad, I’m proud of myself!” Nopileos declared in stilted trading language. The Teladi expletive sounded quite strange in that context.

Elena grinned as Nopileos’s scaly fin lifted in the face of Ebosirireos’s slightly contrite expression. “A true haggling lizard! You could sell sawdust to a lumber mill!”

“Tsh?”

“Oh, not that important. Translate the data for me?” Elena straightened up. The navigations commander looked up at her irritably for a moment, then returned to the screens. The Earth astronaut propped herself against a side brace and leaned forward to look out: nothing. With naked eyes, it was rare to see anything in outer space unless it was of planetary proportions or was already extremely close; otherwise there were only stars. After a mizura, when she brushed her hair out of her face and tried to sink back on the sitting bench, she saw Ebosirireos excitedly gesticulating and pointing with his right index claw at columns of yellow hieroglyphics on a display.

“The mass is too low,” Nopileos translated. “He says that’s not the ship you’re looking for.”

“We have to look at it anyway.”

The navigations commander shook his ears. Did that mean agreement or abjection?

“That would be futile,” Nopileos translated. “It is not the ship you are looking for.”

Anger rose up in Elena. “Who knows if this marsh flower gravidar is even showing the right values? It’s already made a mistake!” she snapped at Nopileos.

She looked visibly frightened at Elena’s tone. “But sister, I’m merely translating!”

“Yes, I know. Please excuse me, Nopileos. What did he say?”

“In the name of truthfulness, the *Archipelago of Swamp Orchids* is adjusting its course to the located object.”

“Very good decision,” Elena murmured soothingly. Shortly thereafter, it flashed diffusely on the right side of the large cockpit window as the reaction control thrusters altered the ship’s course. Slowly, stars and distant galaxy clusters wandered through the field of view. The large, oval central screen, half inclined into the consoles on the right of the navigations commander, showed only a single blip whose noisy, false-color image suggested that it didn’t shine in the spectrum of visible light. That had to be the target object. After an inzura of tense silence, during which the blip on the screen slowly became flat, dark-blue luminous phenomena suddenly appeared on both sides of the *Archipelago*, giving reverse thrust in space. Still, nothing was visible to the naked eye. Elena was more than worried. When at last the strong floodlights unexpectedly lit up, she blinked in surprise. Barely a hundred meters ahead, an apparently tiny vehicle obliquely about its longitudinal axis. The central screen switched to normal view. Elena expelled an audible breath.

Sector Control, someone had scrawled in rickety Argono-Roman letters on the side of the dinghy, which looked like an egg just like the barge on which Elena, Ghinn, and Nopileos had reached Ianamus Zura.

Slowly and silently, the jagged surface of the dinghy rotated under the lens of the approaching drone, while the *Archipelago* was still busily minutely adjusting its course. More than just open space and possibly old age had marred the small ship: traces of flames, the crumpled outer hull in some places, and some deep dents suggested that something else, something bad had happened. As the bow of the barge became visible, Elena’s breath caught and the forehead ridges of the two Teladi became paler. The metal glass pane, designed for the toughest material stress, had burst. It hadn’t cracked completely, but an almost square opening, perhaps fifty centimeters across, had fine, white branches in all directions. Something had hit the pane with great force and pierced through.

“Oh god,” Elena whispered. Whoever sat there couldn’t have survived that impact, even in a spacesuit. “Can the drone fit through the opening? Quick!” she urged. Nopileos didn’t need to translate because the Teladi who was piloting the reconnaissance device was already trying to maneuver it through the jagged opening of the metal window. The constant gyrating motion of the dinghy made this undertaking extremely difficult. Exactly the many miniaturized reaction control thrusters which gave the drone its high maneuverability also made it enormously difficult to match the precession of the impact opening. Again and again, a not one hundred percent regulated thrust pushed the drone to the side, made it slip

off, and the Teladi hissed and tried again. Elena followed the tedious procedure with increasing unrest. Finally, after the seventh attempt, Ebosirireos stopped the attempt.

“He wants to take the ship into the hangar, Nopileos explained. Elena nodded grimly.

An inzura later, the large hangar lock closed under the barge. They had previously evacuated the air from the hangar and hung the *Archipelago*'s dinghies in their transport alcoves. Carefully, the artificial gravity was now increased, until the still-spinning ship finally touched down with a grinding noise and came to a standstill. Now the gravity was switched off once more so that the camera drone could approach the dinghy again.

“Do you see that?” Elena pointed to the screen as the bow of the barge got bigger again. “Around the cockpit window. What is that?”

“Hm! That doesn't belong there!”

Before Elena could recognize further details, the drone plunged into the cockpit, this time without difficulty. Two Argons hung strangely wrenched in the seats that were too small. One wore a long, black hair braid which fell forward over his shoulder and fanned wide over his chest. Elena clenched her teeth hard and forced her eyes to remain open. That was one of the slave drivers, she had recognized the man immediately. He was dead, and so was his accomplice. The camera drone continued to advance into the tiny ship, but found nothing else of interest. Relieved, Elena registered that her fears about Nola Hi, Kalmanckalsaltt, and Uchan being on the barge hadn't materialized.

When measurements confirmed that there was no dangerous radiation, Ebosirireos pumped breathable air into the hangar, then Elena and Nopileos made their way to the spacious hall. When the bulkhead opened, the two Teladi stopped at the sight of the heavily damaged ship and began to hiss. Elena, however, didn't stop with her first overview, but immediately rounded the crumpled bow to inspect something she had only briefly noticed when the camera drone had entered the dingy. And in fact: above and below, as well as on both sides of the cockpit window, the material of the ship's hull was silver-colored at four opposite points. From the discoloration on the right side, a less than thigh-thick cylinder protruded about twenty centimeters and tapered to a sharp-angled, fractured edge. It looked as though powerful forces had broken a red-hot iron bar, which had then cooled down again. Elena stepped closer to the ship's hull and gently ran her hand over the wall. Here, in fact, great forces seemed to have worked: where the butt of the cylinder emerged from the ship, the material of the hull bulged outward.

She called Nopileos. “Look at this and tell me what you think about it,” she said, and left the Teladi so she could look at the barge's engines. An assumption was rising in her. While she stood with her chin between her thumb and forefinger, and her elbow supported by her right hand, brooding in front of the pitch-black and completely burned out expansion nozzles, Nopileos and Ebosirireos approached with lightly clicking claws.

“The college navigations commander believes that there are welds at the front.” Ebosirireos hissed something as if to affirm Nopileos’s words. “Oh, and very amateurish,” Nopileos added. “The engine is there, right?” She asked, looking at the machines in disbelief.

Elena nodded. “*Hai*. If it didn’t sound so crazy, I’d assume...” She hesitated. “It sounds unlikely, but I’d say they tried to accelerate the Phoenix with the barge.”

“Tsh! That works! That must have done the job!”

“Yeah, but very arduous.”

“Do you remember, oh sister? I destroyed the engines of the slave ship when we fled!”

“And if they had been less sloppy, their plan might even have worked in the end.” Elena turned to go.

“Come on, Nopileos, back to the control center. I think I know how to find the slave ship now.”

With knowledge of the exact vector and exact mass of the dinghy, as well as the approximate estimate for the Teladi Phoenix, the navigations commander managed to determine a search area in space, in which the slave ship was finally located after half a tazura. It floated through the void just as lifelessly as the dinghy, but spun slowly and sedately around its longitudinal axis and not its transverse axis. Elena instantly knew what she had to do: ferry across to the slave ship, board it, and search for her missing crew members—alone, without Nopileos!

When she finally entered the ship, she was received by absolute darkness. Something clicked softly, like an expiring time bomb or an egg timer. Elena looked around in alarm, but couldn’t recognize anything. The corridors of the slave ship were in vacuum, so the sound came through the floor of the ship and her boots of her spacesuit and to her ears. She had no idea what had happened aboard this ship in the last three tazuras. She just really hoped that Uchan and the two others were still alive and here in this shipwreck.

“Nopi?” Elena spoke consciously loud into the helmet mic to dispel the irrational feeling that someone was watching her. Nopileos hissed questioningly.

“I just wanted to make sure you were still there, Nopileos,” the astronaut said. It was meant to sound humorous, but the Teladi felt how tense and nervous her Earth friend was.

“Is everything all right, oh star warrior?”

Elena confirmed. “Yes. I’m in the hangar. The door has been broken open with a laser. If I remember correctly, it must be just to the right...” She broke off with a gasp. Nopileos inquired anxiously, and Elena immediately calmed her down. “Moment... I think I have... there, wait!”

Elena remembered quite well the passage through which she and Nopileos had escaped only a few Tazuras ago in the opposite direction. A few meters from the hangar, they had found access to an isolated environmental area. In fact, there was the bulkhead with the observation port! Elena stepped

closer and pressed the elastic lens of her membrane helmet to the peephole. Light? In fact, really just dim light, yes, but it wasn't dark! Dimly she saw...

A scraping noise, then something splashed against the bulkhead so hard that she could hear it in her spacesuit. A big, flat eye like an octopus's stared at her through the circle of the window. Her first impulse was to retreat, but then she understood. Nola Hi!

The Boron's eye seemed flat only at close quarters. In actuality it bulged out strongly. A diffuse cloud hovered around the head of the scientific ethicist, wafting wildly with his secondary tentacles.

"I found Nola Hi," Elena informed Nopileos clinically. "He seems okay, I just have no idea how to get him out of here." How did they get him in here? Elena struggled to imagine that. The environmental area was filled with Boron respiratory fluid, all right, but it didn't have a lock gate. So how was Nola Hi placed in there without his environmental suit?

"Elena! At ground level."

"I know, Teladi door openers." She knelt down and searched for the frame with the light of her helmet lamp. She soon found the controls, but she didn't dare touch any of the switches. "I'm afraid I have to go to the control center."

"Do you know where the control center is in a Phoenix, sister?"

"Unfortunately, no. You?"

"No."

"Then... Nopileos, sometimes you make me speechless."

The Teladi apologized. Her voice sounded tinny over the helmet radio.

At that time, the pirates were coming from the other direction of the corridor. Elena signaled to Nola Hi as best she could to be patient, and slowly groped her way forward, through half-opened intermediate bulkheads and others that leaped into service when she pressed the foot switch. So there was still life in this ship, it still worked, even if there was no atmosphere in the corridors. She considered this a positive sign.

Finally, she reached a large room that was decorated with consoles and wall panels, that was somewhat reminiscent of the *Archipelago's* control room. Most instruments were dark, but many fluoresced in magenta or bluish yellow. While she was still wondering which displays she wanted to look at first, it crackled in the helmet radio, and a little girl's voice cried, "Ele Na, aesthetic, courageous, hairy star warrior! If you hear and perceive this frequency, then answer me and let me know!"

Elena gasped. "Nola Hi?"

The Boron cheered at a pitch that made Elena's eardrums want to crack. "Ele Na, benevolent and brave, most beautiful of the beautiful Argons from Earth, the Blue Planet, Companion of Brennan-san and Companion of Isemados Sibasomos Nopileos IV, the heroic saurian, the Teladi, the—"

"I'm glad, too, Nola Hi, but can we cut this short?" the astronaut interrupted the scientific ethicist's flood of words.

He paused. "Of course, Ele Na!"

"Where are Uchan and Kalmanckalsaltt? Are you talking through your environmental suit?"

"No, negative. But there is a communicator here. The Paranid is in the control room," Nola Hi answered unusually briefly.

"He's not here." Elena stepped to the consoles and shined her helmet light on the Teladi-labeled controls. "Nopileos, can you read this?"

There was silence for a moment. "Don't wobble so much, Elena," came over the radio. "I think it means..."

Whatever Nopileos thought, it would stay her secret for the time being. With a loud crash, bright, artificial light crashed through the control center and lit up the last corner. Elena spun around, a thin, tall silhouette rising above the brightly lit central bulkhead. Without thinking twice, the astronaut flung herself around. She found cove behind a console. Carefully, she squinted over the device and her eyes slowly adjusted to the lighting conditions. The figure, now slowly entering the control room, wore a combat space suit with a helmet that was reminiscent of a fishbowl.

"Kalmanckalsaltt!" Elena straightened up with movements that were as slow as possible and tried to avoid any rush. Maybe Kalmanckalsaltt hadn't recognized her yet, but on the other hand, he would have certainly taken the Paranid fighting position if that were the case. But the Three-eye moved as though completely relaxed. The radio crackled.

"Elena Kho. Along the walkway to the next to WJASL, the Boron's environmental suit is in a storage room. Bring it. Breathable air will fill the main corridors before long.

"Where is Uchan?"

"In the hangar. Go now. We'll meet each other in your shuttlecraft."

Elena thought through a series of questions, but she deferred them til later. It wasn't until she had sprinted a few meters down the now-lit main corridor that she remembered she should have at least inquired what exactly Kalmanckalsaltt meant by "walkway next to WJASL." The question was unnecessary, however, as she discovered an information sign that was in Argono-Roman characters with the sought-after letter combination—whatever that meant. A short time later, she found the storage room the Paranid had mentioned and pulled out the Boron environmental suit. The material felt soft, like living rubber. Strangely enough, there was neither a helmet or a life support system! Elena

straightened up and hurried down the walkway until she finally encountered several half-open security bulkheads in the way, which was closed off by the fused hangar door. In the meantime, a thin, white mist fluttered around, a loudly growing hiss revealed that Kalmanckalsaltt had apparently been successful.

“Ele Na?” Nola Hi had spied her through the observation window.

“I’m here. How do I get the environmental suit in to you?”

“I believe, assume, I am certain and sure, that the force field will turn on and be activated again. Open the door and don’t be afraid, brave and beautiful Ele Na from the distant Earth. Reach my swan-membrane in!”

Of course! Now Elena understood why the room had no lock gate. A semipermeable force field ensured that the breathing fluid could not escape. She found the opener and slicked the wide switch up with her boot. The door immediately opened, and the liquid swirled in front of her, shimmering from floor to ceiling, as it had in the conference room on the Teladi trading station where she first met Nola Hi and Bala Gi for the first time. Cautiously, she pushed the limp environmental suit through the vertical water surface. There was a noticeable resistance as the bundle overcame the surface tension, but then it sank in the environmental space without even a drop of liquid being spilled. Any moment now, Elena expected the Boron to complain about missing parts of his suit, but her concern was unfounded. After a few seconds, the scientific ethicist broke through the water surface, wrapped in the familiar, milky, protective skin. Not a moment too soon, because Kalmanckalsaltt now also stalked with long strides that became louder.

“You have a shuttlecraft, right, Elena Kho.” It was a statement and not a question.

Elena nodded. “Of course.”

“Good.” Without further comment, the more than two-meter-tall Three-eye leaned forward and heaved his body through the melted opening of the hangar door. “Where is the craft, Elena Kho?”

Elena explained to the Paranid in brief words how she, Nopileos, and Ghinn had shot a way through the hangar’s main lock a few tazuras ago. “The boat’s boarding tunnel is directly at that opening,” she concluded.

“Uchan t’Sct will join us in three mizuras.”

“You know where he is?”

“Yes. We have freed him.”

“Are there still any other survivors on board?”

“Ask Uchan t’Sct that.”

“He practices... retaliation?”

The Paranid remained silent and stepped into the entrance tunnel ducked over, followed by Nola Hi.

“Excuse me.” Elena turned and strode across the hangar with large steps. Even before she could step out of the smelted door onto the walkway, the Split came towards her. His face could not be recognized properly through the helmet of the spacesuit, but Elena thought she detected cruel flash in his eyes. Apparently, Uchan had overheard the previous helmet radio traffic.

“I would have gladly avenged the attack on the *Raindragon*, but there are no damnable creatures located on this ship!”

Elena saved her comments about Uchan’s desire for revenge. “Come,” she said instead, pointing at the entrance tunnel of the dinghy on the opposite side of the hangar with one hand. “There is a great task ahead of us, and much has happened within the last tazuras. Black Hole Sun no longer exists, but I’ll tell you about it on the way to the *Archipelago of Swamp Orchids*.”

“I do not agree with you leaving the honorable Ghinn t’Whht on the Teladi world,” Uchan t’Sect said. The Split stood with crossed arms at the side of Elena’s position in front of the console of the *Archipelago*. His Paranid partner Kalmanckalsaltt had planted himself in the rear part of the spacious control center and silently watched the approaching jumpgate.

“So? I thought you had fallen out with Ghinn,” Elena replied, listening to Uchan’s grunts with only half an ear. In a short time, the *Archipelago* would reach the star system of the Black Hole Sun supernova—if one could even speak of a star system at all. A scout drone had confirmed that the counterpart of the local stargate still worked. Whether it was also possible to cross the system unscathed, however, would soon be proven.

“You humans have no idea about us Split, t’Kho,” Uchan stated. “Ghinn t’Whht and I are friend-foes.”

“Your hatred makes some strange effects, Uchan, you know that?”

“It is precisely our hatred that distinguishes us from you—and that makes us superior.” For a long time, Uchan had been thinking about those words of his former master, Cho t’Nnt, that he had once given him to remember on board the *Bone Scout*. When the astronaut didn’t answer, the Split moved closer to her. “We will pick up Ghinn t’Whht from Ianamus Zura on our way back.”

Elena wanted to answer that he could go to hell. Heaven knew they had other problems at the moment, but she held herself back. Instead, she sarcastically snapped, “Ask Ebosirireos where this ship is returning, and you will be enlightened.” Uchan laughed croaking. Elena had already discovered with astonishment that Split, contrary to all stereotypes, laughed very occasionally.

“You are a remarkable woman, t’Kho. I like you. It’s just a pity that you are so small and ugly.”

“Aren’t all human women?” Elena asked rhetorically.

Uchan snorted and stepped back again. “That is probably true.”

In the meantime, the stargate ahead had grown to considerable size, and only a few sezuras later, the ancient hoop filled the entire field of view, then the blue discharges danced around the Zuran ship, tearing it out of the fabric of space and time, to travel within a fraction of a sezura across an interstellar abyss that spanned dozens, perhaps hundreds of light-jazuras.

CHAPTER 42

You can't say that the developers of the Terraformers didn't deal with the question of machine consciousness. Could the machines become self aware or not? And if they could, would that be good or bad—or all the same? Eighty long years passed until the response to this question.

Then Earth knew the answer:

**Nathan R. Gunne,
from an email to Joan “Hydra” Mitchell**

“We’re still alive!” Ninu stated, stunned. It sounded as if she hadn’t expected in the slightest to come out in one piece after the gate transit.

“Computer, sector identification,” Ditta Borman demanded as the ship’s brain had not automatically announced it this time upon reaching the target point.

“Unknown sector.”

Siobhan opened a video field and sent it to the main console. “Take a look at this.”

The image showed a section of the optical remote positioning system, zoomed in so far that the edges were wobbling. Nevertheless, the pilots immediately recognized what it was. “The Halmnan Aurora!” Seldon shouted. “We’re home!”

“Not quite—that’s the Aurora, as it looked about five hundred jazuras ago. Or in other words...”

“We’re five hundred light-jazuras away from the *Community!*” Ion interrupted. “That’s much nearer than before!”

“Very true, closed enough that the jump unit can home in on our destination gate in Menelaus’s Paradise.”

Siobhan deleted the video field and activated the jump sequence. Now that the shields weren’t strained, the converters should be operational in nine mizuras. She leaned back and stared at the mission console’s data. Not even five stazuras had passed since the launch of the *AP Providence* from Argon Prime, but it seemed to her as though it had been five tazuras. She was still confident in her calculations, firmly believing that the next jump would bring the spaceship to Menelaus’s Paradise. The probability spoke to it. Simply had to speak to it!

“Countdown is running. Four mizuras until arrival at the entry point,” the computer said nine mizuras later, asking for clearance. Siobhan and Borman confirmed the operating parameters of the jump unit. The ship picked up speed and accelerated rapidly.

“Ten sezuras until arrival at the entry point. Jump unit properly activated.”

As the energy vortex swirled flamboyantly around the ship, Major Seldon turned once more to Siobhan. “Seventy six percent, huh?”

“One hundred!” Siobhan said with certainty before the *AP Providence* fell headlong into the jump tunnel.”

“Ship has reached the entry point. All values nominal,” the computer announced an immeasurably brief moment later. “Reached sector Menelaus’s Paradise,” it added after the gravidar recalibrated. Many stars on the navigation console suddenly had names, formed constellations, and became known sectors. Unrestrained cheering broke out in the cockpit, but the joy was short-lived.

The sector was teeming with spaceships. “The Paranid beat us to it,” Commander Borman yelled over the murmur of voices. “They’re here, the whole damn fleet!”

The view from the cockpit alone gave an idea of how many warships the Paranid had sent: a seemingly endless chain of white dots with fiery tales spread over the entire sky, and each of these points represented a ship. The nearest of the warships was only a tenth of a light-sezura away, the one at the farthest distance already an entire light-sezura. On the gravidar, you could clearly see that the Paranid fleet was moving toward the Delta jumpgate. The first battleships would reach it in less than one inzura, and they began to change formation as they prepared for the upcoming transit. Every three ships joined together to form a long triangle, a deadly spearhead on its way to its victim.

“They’re forming combat formations,” Seldon realized. In the meantime, it had become almost completely still in the cockpit, only the machines hummed far below in the belly of the ship. “There’s an alien craft in the vicinity of the Delta Gate that can’t be categorized by the computer, and it looks like the Paranids are attacking him.”

“Alien ship? Some of the Kha’ak?” Zakk Folkna asked anxiously, but Seldon shook his head.

“Definitely not. The mass signature looks nothing like anything I’ve ever encountered.”

“That must be Nola Hi and Elena Kho,” Siobhan said. No matter what kind of ship it was, that the spacecraft paused right there at exactly this point in time was a sure sign that it could only be the Boron expedition to the Delta Gate! “The jump gate is still active, in both directions—the jump unit can detect its singularity.”

“That’s not the only thing that can be detected here. Namely, the Paranid definitely detected us,” Ditta Borman shouted in alarm. She pointed at the gravidar. The three Paranid craft that were closest to the *AP Providence* turned around at the moment and gave a deceleration thrust.

A video field sprang up. The face of a Three-eye appeared. “This is Lord Captain Ulmanckessolnn speaking. This star system is restricted territory of the Godrealm of the Paranid. It is demanded that You remove Your unholy ship immediately.”

Ditta Borman tensed up. She didn’t have to consult with Siobhan to know what the answer to this outrageous claim was. “This star system is her majesty’s territory of the Boron Queendom. We have permission to cross it. Which cannot be said for you.”

Lord Captain Ulmanckessolnn puffed himself up with the menacing gestures of the Paranid. “The realm of the unholy queens of Boron has forfeited Its right to this star system through Its geometrical incapacitation. This is Your last chance, unholy Two-eye, realize it, because you will meet with the punishment of Xaar otherwise!” The video field went out.

“Defense shields up,” Borman demanded laconically. The optical sensors could now resolve details of the three approaching Paranid ships, whose weapon turrets were pointed at the *AP Providence*.

“No, no shields, the energy is too valuable. We’re waiting for the Paranids to open fire, and if they do we’ll jump from here directly to the Delta Gate. Siobhan was more aware than ever before of the imminent threat of the gate shutdown. There were far too many unknowns in this calculation, but they nevertheless had to go for broke. There was no other way out.

“I understand. Well, then this is from now on a combat mission, and I’m taking over command. All civilians leave the cockpit immediately. You, too, Dr. Folkna. Dr. Norman, not you. What is the charging status of the converter?”

“Three quarters; two mizuras and seventeen sezuras.”

Siobhan nodded grimly to the pilot. Commander Borman seemed like a different person. So far she had done her job with a simple, professional coolness. Now something else had appeared. Siobhan realized, bewildered, that it was nothing other than lust for battle. She wouldn’t have expected that.

“Not so we misunderstand each other, Doctor,” Borman said, after the bulkhead closed behind the three civilians. “I consider Dr. Folkna to be phenomenally competent. But if it should come to a space battle, I’d like to know he’s not in my vicinity.”

“We cannot afford a fight, Commander, please keep that in mind.”

“But of course. Don’t worry,” the pilot replied, smiling.

Siobhan pressed her lips together, but said nothing. This answer could have also come from her; she knew exactly what Borman was thinking at that moment.

The Alpha Gate sinking into space behind the ship flashed. On the gravidar, a blip with a massive mass signature and fuzzy, blurred contours appeared. Several smaller dots followed in quick succession.

“What—what is that? Borman, what is that?”

“If it wasn’t so fast, I’d say that it’s a carrier, maybe the Paranid command ship, but its velocity is way too high! Look at that! It can just...”

“Yes-yes, you’re right! It’s the CPU ship along with an escort!” Siobhan pressed her lips together. Four more mizuras until the converters were ready for use. “Time grows short. What are the Paranids doing, Commander?”

“The rear formations are breaking up, individual ships are veering off. The front formations are holding their course to the Delta Gate.” Borman snorted. “One of the Paranid ships are keeping us in their sights—these beasts can’t be distracted by anything in the world!”

“Time is growing short,” Siobhan repeated. “Very short.”

CHAPTER 43

In principle, the Three-eyes are more dangerous than the Xenon. The only thing that keeps them from flattening the Community is the delusional compulsion at all times and above anything else to keep face—as ugly as that might also be.

Colonel Ban Danna

The hot phase of star explosions usually only took a few stazuras, or at worst, some tazuras. A star begins to expand and throws the greater portion of its substance into space until it is only a shadow of its former self. After such a cosmic catastrophe, a pulsar can be found in the center of the nova, a neutron star that turns on its rotational axis with shocking speed. Not so here. Black Hole Sun still existed, but the star shined only weakly and erratically. Nola Hi suspected that the final collapse could be expected within a few hundred or thousand jazuras, as a repeated nova, which would finally devastate this sector of space. All in all, this was the most unusual supernova that anyone had ever heard of.

“If it weren’t completely impossible,” Elena murmured, “I would assume that someone had intentionally tried to destroy the star.”

Nopileos looked at her with wide eyes.

Three tazuras later on ship’s time, the *Archipelago of Swamp Orchids* had already reached the star system called Menelaus’s Paradise thanks to the ship’s powerful engines. There had been no further incidents so far, possibly due to the fact that spacecraft traffic gradually faded as the ship advanced into the still largely unexplored New Sectors.

Nola Hi hovered next to Elena, Nopileos, and Ebosirireos, who watched in captivation the gravidar, flight control system, and the surrounding space through the cockpit window. Uchan had withdrawn into the background next to his partner Kalmanckalsaltt to avoid tantrums in the presence of Nola Hi as much as possible. The two-eyed Paranid reminded Elena more than ever of an oversized insect. He still stood in the same pose in exactly the same place he had retreated to at the beginning of the voyage three tazuras ago, whether still or again eluded her knowledge. Every time she retired to her cabin to sleep, Kalmanckalsaltt still stood there. When she returned to the control center after several stazuras, he had apparently not moved a finger’s breadth. Some species of insects on Earth could remain motionless for days, months, often even years. The fact that this was the case for even intelligent life forms like the Paranid seemed to Elena particularly alien, even a little downright scary.

On the Gravidar, the journey's destination appeared as a distant, weak point: the Delta jumpgate, which led further into the sectors declared a Xenon refuge, and was to be deactivated on behalf of the Queendom of Boron's government. Nola Hi had tried to introduce Elena to the details of the Ancient Ones' jump technology, with dubious success. During the tazuras the scientific ethicist had spent aboard the abandoned slave ship, he had been able to study at length the concepts that had been retrieved from the *Nyana's Fortune's* onboard computer. At first he was surprised when Elena could no longer follow him after a certain point. Then he realized: the star warrior had great difficulty understanding how he could study the material without actually having the information of the Ancient Ones at hand. And yet it was so simple: the memory prints that had mixed with the breathing fluid in his swan-skin stated almost every aspect of the information he had already sought out. Every Boron spent his life in a veritable lake of his own and foreign memories. Even the slightest traces of RNA were detected and interpreted by the sensitive lamellar receptors. Not for nothing was it said that every Boron knew everything at any time, even when other members of his species had acquired it.

“What no one could take, snatch, and steal away from me is my tasteful, factual memories and thoughts. But my implements, tools, and instruments remain aboard the unlucky, poor, beautiful ship *FL Raindragon* and are lost forever.”

Elena didn't know what had happened to the *FL Raindragon* after she was boarded. If the ship hadn't been blown up, then it might still exist. But that didn't help them here and now, of course. “Surely there are tools aboard the *Archipelago*, too. Maybe they're enough for our purpose?”

Nola Hi wrinkled her trunk in doubt, causing the elasticated skin of the environmental suit to draw back a few centimeters. “That is definitely possible and can be, aesthetic Ele Na, but we will have to inflict far more violence on the sublime and majestic world portal, the gate of the universe, than would be the case and would be necessary with my instruments and tools.”

Elena shrugged. “I'm afraid we can't change that anymore.”

“No, negative,” the Boron piped dejectedly.

“Chin up, Nola Hi. If you can actually shut down the gate, that will rescue Eve 2092 from the coalition fleet,” Elena said. The towering CPU ship of the Terraformers had long since reached the refuge—long before the Paranids, of whom there was no trace far and wide! “In addition,” she continued, “at the same time we'll be saving the *Community of Planets* from further assaults by the Xenon. That's still worth it, right?”

“Yes—and yes!” answered the scientific ethicist, already a little more confidently. Her secondary tentacles shimmered vaguely behind the milky material of the suit. “The presence cloud will polarize our feelers in many colors!”

Elena was left with no time to think about this enigmatic remark from the Boron, because an alarm signal brayed out. The *Archipelago* had advanced somewhat more than a stazura into the star system and would reach the Delta Gate in a quazura, without coming within even an astronomical unit of any

of the system's twelve planets. The Alpha Gate that lay behind them through which the Teladi clam ship had entered, flashed blue. Another starship materialized. As the visual enhancement zoomed deeper and deeper into the dark night of the universe, the energies flickered again, then again, and many more times. It was only after the gravidar had announced a total of two hundred and forty-three new blips in this previously uninhabited star system that the jumpgate singularity's bluish energy storms subsided.

Elena was pale in the fae. "We should hurry. That is the strike force of the coalition."

Sezuras later, the first resolutions of detail confirmed her conclusion. Row by row, Split and Paranid craft fell into the system, slower than the *Archipelago* with its powerful engines; nevertheless, the fleet would reach the Delta Gate in no more than three stazuras.

"And then, good night," Elena muttered. "Nopileos—ask Ebosirireos if he can tease out anything more from this machine."

The navigations commander didn't seem to know how to assess the threat of the coalition fleet, so it took incredibly long for Nopileos to convince him to continue increasing acceleration and initiate the reverse burn later.

Another twenty-six mizuras later, the breaking engines finally reached their blue tongues of flame out to the outriggers of the the rapidly approaching Delta Gate. The instruments that Nola Hi had borrowed from the hangar master of the *Archipelago* seemed adequate, if not perfect. The Boron was confident that it could manipulate the gate's machinery accordingly. Elena, wrapped in an old, uncomfortable Split spacesuit taken from the damaged barge, nodded reassuringly to the scientific ethicist at her side. Nola Hi clamped flapping tentacles beyond the controls of the dinghy, with which she would translate the movement of the ship with the gate in a few moments. At first, Nola Hi wanted to transfer control of the ship to Elena, too deeply sat the memory of the incident on Port Thornton in his limbs. But Elena insisted that the Boron control the flight, because only he knew the exact angle needed to approach the gate without triggering the jump mechanism.

"I could, am capable, it would be imaginable that... you're not afraid and worried to fly with me, Elena?"

Elena shook her head and smiled. "Why, no."

"Then you are less afraid of my flying skills and flying abilities than I, myself."

The astronaut put her hand on the protective-suit-reinforced tentacle of the of the excited Boron. "I'm much more worried about what the coalition fleet will do if the jumpgate doesn't work anymore." At the same time she realized that these words would hardly help to calm the fluttering scientist, but Nola Hi reacted more calmly than feared. When a signal announced the launch clearance, he activated the power to the ship and carefully lowered it above the opening lock.

“There is and exists a flowing word of wisdom and calm in the equatorial streams of Nishala,” Nola Hi piped. Suddenly the Boron seemed like a different person: his feelers and tentacles no longer shuddered, his voice sounded almost normal. Elena only understood with a delay from where Nola Hi obtained this expression.

“And what would that be?”

“It says and is,” the scientific ethicist sang as the boat left the hangar and gained momentum, “We don’t know what paradise is like, but probably it’s blue-magenta, flecked with pink. But even if it’s green and red-checked we should make the most of it.”

Elena chuckled softly to herself. Outside, the jumpgate came closer and grew in height. “That we will.”

For a few sezuras, silence prevailed, allowing the astronaut a new moments of reflection as she gazed at the hoop of the stargate, whose side-on view grew more and more wide above the colorful dashboard. Only once before had she seen a jumpgate from such a slight distance, but it had been the ancient, damaged Earth from before the Transformer War. This here, however, the relic of a mysterious species that seemed to be from time immemorial, known only as the Ancient Ones, seemed so much more colossal and mighty than the Earth gate that it almost automatically attracted all attention and paralyzed her thoughts in awe. How old could it be? A thousand, a hundred thousand, a million years, jazuras, or older? No one could say with final certainty. Some scientists in the community estimated that some of the gates were “merely” a few thousand jazuras old, while others had existed for eons. But the tremendous monuments that testified to the good will and technical finesse of their architects, resisted any excessively minute analysis of their composition. Passively, but no less effectively, they maintained their positions, withstood anything but the most violent destructive attempts, and always remained timeless, new, and inspiring confidence.

The two outriggers of the gate pointed “down”—why Nola Hi had decided on this position, Elena didn’t know, but she was sure that there was a good reason. As the Boron, whose secondary tentacles swarmed frantically again, noticeably hesitated Elena got up and stepped into the airlock. A few sezuras later, Nola Hi followed her with a small container that appeared so abysmally black in the darkness of space, as if it wanted suck in all the light and stars. Elena turned at the threshold of the double airlock that was open on both sides. “Where?”

“The world portal has a supervisory authority that is inaccessible through our lowly instruments,” the scientific ethicist answered with unusual curtness as Elena checked the maneuvering equipment of her spacesuit. Under no circumstances did she want to drift off into empty space without hope of rescue, out here past any possibility of recovery. “There are seventeen places where the machinery could be brought to a halt, but at the cost of irreparable damage, the Boron continued.

Elena squinted past the mighty outrigger that loomed just a few meters “below” her like a pillar of heaven against the faint light of the distant sun. In a few moments, when she left the artificial gravity field of the dinghy, her sense of “above” and “below” would radically change. She tried to memorize

lines and profiles of the enormous technical architecture. From experience this would mitigate the disorientation when changing to zero gravity.

“So I have come to the conclusion and realization,” Nola Hi concluded his explanations, “Not to turn off the world portal in its entirety and magnitude, but simply to interrupt one of its two dimensional anchors.”

“One of these outriggers?”

“Yes—and yes!”

“And where?” she deliberately didn’t ask for the ‘how.’

“There is a position, a location, and a place, that is not marked and labeled, Ele Na.”

“And we can find this? Generations of researchers have scanned stargates for something like this.”

“They didn’t know what I now know, tall, aesthetic, hairy star warrior Ele Na. Trust me. Stay close to me and protect me.” With these words, the Boron scientist floated out into space.

“*Chikisho*,” Elena cursed. “I’d rather protect a birdcage full of grasshoppers!” She mentally prepared herself for the feeling of perpetual falling and pushed off.

While Nola Hi, thanks to his environmental suit, was able to move evenly and elegantly in free fall, the use of the maneuvering system was much more difficult for Elena. Her breath came in heavy pants against the much too close visor of the space helmet, where it didn’t condense into a fine mist, but into tiny, clear drops that were immediately reabsorbed by the life support system and recycled. Elena paused and turned her head left against the resistance of the neck collar. The approaching coalition fleet was still there, already recognizable to the naked eye as a cloud of white dots. The ships glittered in the cold sunlight like a swarm of silver mosquitoes, and a multi-tongued, transparent, blue tail of fire ran ahead of them.

Ran *ahead* of them! The fleet was already decelerating so that the individual ships could cross through the jumpgate one after another in small groups, as was consistent with standard procedure with large groups. That meant, Elena realized with icy horror, that the first combat ships would be at their location in less than a stazura.

“Nola—” she started.

“Hairy one, I am already working in a way that is as fast as I am capable,” the Boron interrupted sharply. The scientific ethicist was hovering steadily ahead. He hardly conveyed the impression of particular haste, and certainly did not seem to be taking measurement and examinations. Elena pressed her lips together and said nothing. Despite the lack of gravity, her brain insisted that the inside of the outrigger on which she followed the Boron toward the hoop was “down,” paradoxically contradicting her sense of balance. The center of the jump gate was thus “ahead.” The shadows of the

two lonely figures, generated by the dinghy's floodlights, stretched out to meet the sea of distant stars that stared unblinkingly through the gate.

After some time, Nola Hi paused. "Here—and here," he piped. Elena lowered her magnetic boots onto the outrigger and halted her movement with a short maneuvering thrust.

"Here?" she echoed in disbelief. They were somewhere around the foremost third of the outrigger, and the material at their feet looked just the same as it did in the area behind them: large, dark gray plates alternated with medium and light gray; but there was no visible jointing or other features. Also, the material didn't appear to have been struck by any micrometeorites over the eons, as it was completely smooth, almost brand new.

"*Hai*, here," the scientific ethicist emphasized in his very un-Boron style. He dropped the box of tools on the outrigger—amazingly it stayed there straight away—and took out a device whose function didn't reveal itself to Elena from a mere glance. If the Boron planned to open the outrigger's floor panels, then he was first going to have to figure out how to do it. The several square-meter-long sheets of gray, seemingly featureless material in any case had no joints, restraints, or even bolts. That was of course not surprising. For a long time, on Earth, it had also been preferable to use composite material grown through nanotechnology and monolithic construction for anything that wasn't intended to be opened after production. But within the *Community of Planets*, this technology, like all nanoscience, was still in its infancy.

"Wait here, in at this spot, and do not follow me, Ele Na." The scientific ethicist floated forward centimeter by centimeter until he crossed the dividing line to the next, brighter plate, then stopped again, emitting a frenzied stream of bubbling clicks.

"Everything okay?" Elena made sure. The Boron assured her that it was, and returned to stow the unidentifiable device in the box."

"These planetbound saurians and lizards, Teladi from Ianamus Zura, are shrewd, clever, and prudent toolmakers," he cheeped as he took out another, no less puzzling object from the box. "They surpass their sisters in the *Community of Planets* in almost all matters, it appears and seems to me."

Elena shrugged her shoulders and said nothing. In the meantime, the mosquito swarms of the coalition fleet had come a good deal closer. She could clearly see the group was beginning to form a long line, and on that imaginary vector the individual ships lined up neatly like pearls on a string in groups of three. Surely the operations commanders of the coalition fleet had already located the *Archipelago of Swamp Orchids* in their holding position, perhaps even the dinghy stopped in front of the gate. Clearly no one had expected difficulties. Why would they? Nobody, whether Paranid or Split, could count on the fact that a jumpgate was to be deactivated! If anything, they might expect military resistance to the provocative violation of Boron territory at best, Elena reflected, as more and more points of light found their places in the string of pearls and shut down their engines. But there was no such resistance.

Kingdom End had placed all its eggs in one basket with the success of this one endeavor: on the bringing down of the Delta Gate.

If they even managed to deactivate the gate in time! With growing uneasiness, Elena watched the Boron, who had returned to the other floor plate and apparently made adjustments to the new device. There was not a lot she could do. The involuntary inactivity made her nervous and antsy.

“This is Uchan t’Sect,” suddenly crashed through the silence of space in her helmet and into her thoughts. A small, transparent image of the Split appeared on the upper-left side of her visor. “The Three-eye’s fleet will reach the gate’s event horizon in an inzura.”

An inzura? Elena stared unseeing through the image of the Split for sezuras, until she suddenly managed the conversion into Earth time units. An inzura was about twenty-two minutes. So soon? She felt the blood drain from her face. “Understood,” she answered briskly. The Split made a gesture with both hands, and as his image faded, she caught a glimpse of Nopileos, who at that moment stepped behind Uchan and looked over the Split’s shoulder.

Clacking sounds directed Elena’s attention back to the scientific ethicist. A dull glow penetrated evenly across the entire floorboard Nola Hi was studying. As Elena became aware of the menacing, low-pitched buzzing transmitted to her by the ground contact of her boots, a deep, black, rectangular patch spread open in the floor panel. It was covered by a dull glow; it started in the middle and soon reached the edges of the plate. A large, four-by-four meter opening in the shape of a square opened up near the feet of the extremely astonished astronaut. Even as Elena made a surprised sound, Nola Hi placed a bright, glowing point of light in the space above him. The light was enough to reveal the innards of the outrigger. As Elena stepped closer to the opening, the deep drone suddenly died. The sudden silence brought with it a much more threatening feeling than the sound before.

“That—that’s it?” she asked.

“In their great, unsurpassed wisdom, they bring to a standstill what can not stand still, subjectify what is objective, generate colors that have never been seen by a being’s eyes.”

“I... with that?” She looked down at the simple, tightly wound coils that wrapped around a multitude of parallel rods or tubes similar to those of a particle accelerator. Every few centimeters around the edges of the coils, spherical and square components repeated at regular intervals, and dull shining probes entered the well-regulated order of the coils. Whether this structure ran unchanged from the far end of the dimensional anchor to the ring of the jumpgate itself could not be seen.

“To be honest, I don’t understand it. Bring to a standstill what cannot stand still, colors that no eye has seen? Nola?”

The scientific ethicist had long since descended into the opening and was examining the exposed machinery, taking painful care not to touch anything with her tentacles. “Oh dear, venerated, aesthetic star warrior Ele Na,” she cheeped, “that is certainly and is determinedly only due to inadequacy of my words, which break down in the face of the unfathomable. Please hand me the toolbox and give it to

me.” Elena responded to the request of the scientist, who immediately began to make incomprehensible gestures using strange tools. “I wish and will that you possessed tasters, to know the purple, to feel the equatorially warm uselessness of words in the presence of the wordless. The size and truthfulness of...”—so it went on for a while. Evidently the Boron had found his way back to his usual, chatty self. Elena wished he would shut up again, as a glance toward the coalition fleet told her that that all the many ships had completed their alignment maneuvers. Details emerged without difficulty: every three ships moved towards the jumpgate in the formation of a long drawn out isosceles triangle, eighty-one triplets on a string of pearls extending across the greater part of a light-sezura. What would happen, Elena thought, if the gate activated itself while they were still here? Because she didn’t quite believe that the Boron had switched off the machinery in time. There were just a few minutes remaining before the gate transit.

“Only Paranid ships, without exception!” she realized breathlessly after a few more moments. No coalition, only Three-eyes on their own! Had the new Patriarch withdrawn his involvement in the undertaking on short notice? Probably.

The ships rapidly grew larger, to enormous dimensions, and they came right up to them. Of course, they had to if they wanted to pass through the jumpgate! The sight was oppressive, and for the first time in a very long time, Elena felt genuine, instinctive animal fear of death. “Nola Hi!” she screamed. “Nola!”

The first triplet of Paranid warships thundered silently, filling the sky, plunging into the middle of Elena’s face, shattering them...

No! She lived! Only when the second, third, and fourth triplets fell through the center of the stargate just a few dozen meters above her head did Elena realize that she was still screaming. She fell silent. The thunder of the battleships existed only in her head, reached her hearing only through her optic nerves. The titanic, deadly spacecraft whose formations swept just above her filled her senses to the limit of perceptual capacity until the neural pathways leaked together.

But she lived! Panting, she turned and forced herself to raise her head.

The spacecraft fell through the stargate.

They simply fell through, no blue energy vortex, nothing!

It didn’t activate!

The stream of triple formations didn’t break, time after time groups of three ships crossed over the midpoint of the stargate as if it were nothing more than a giant, inanimate hoop in space that had no particular use for them.

“You... you did it! Nola Hi!” She couldn’t believe it, the Boron had actually managed to disable the gate!

“Yes—and yes!” Nola Hi clicked cheerfully. At that moment below the scientific ethicist, the floor panel grew shut, flaring up briefly and then reappearing in the same untouched gray that made it indistinguishable from the thousands of other floor slabs.

“Now hurry back to the dinghy,” Elena shouted. The first units of the Paranid fleet were fanning their formation after the futile gate passage and giving reverse thrust. They were fast, but by no means fast enough to be battle-ready and moving from their location with adequate speed. The *Archipelago* had certainly been spotted by the Paranids, Elena didn’t doubt it for a moment. The Three-eyes would have questions.

CHAPTER 44

Only those who possess three eyes can truly grasp the concept of Three-Dimensionality. Only those who truly grasp the concept of Three-Dimensionality are holy.

Paranid Bashra,

First and Second Axioms of Xaar

It simply stood there and looked at Ninu with its ice-cold, compound eyes. Actually, it didn't stand—it crawled. Its leathery wings, interspersed with dark, branching veins, pushed the body of the creature off the ground and supported it. The hind section ran out in a broad, bony extension which, together with the two bony ends that protruded from the folds of the wings, formed a kind of tripod. The body was divided into two stocky sections like an insect; from the middle waist, two thin arms grew out, multi-jointed and opening into three sharp, alien fingers, which clasped several metal objects. It was only half the size of a Teladi, and its face was more alien and frightening than even that of a Paranid: black-green eyes looked out from thousands of facets under a scaly, bulging skull with scattered spiky bristles. Only slightly below the eyes was the projection of a beak—which was enormous in proportion with the creature's body size—which put the impression of an insectoid into perspective.

For a few seuras, Ninu stood with her mouth open and her arms spread wide in the hallway to her cabin. *A Kha'ak? Here?* When the creature with rustling wings like a sick pteranodon crawled toward her, the Goner uttered a bloodcurdling scream, stumbled backward through the door frame, and hit the closer with great force. On the opposite side of the narrow corridor, the door to the men's quarters opened. Zakk and Ion stormed out.

“Ninu! What's wrong?”

“There's a Kha'ak... in my cabin!” the Goner stuttered and pointed at the door. Ion stepped forward and tried to press the opener, but she held him back. “Don't—I think it has a weapon! We have to call in Siobhan. Come with us.” She ran off; Zakk and the boy followed her with worried faces. Ninu's hands trembled with disgust and fear as she headed toward the control center. The sight of the Kha'ak had come as a great shock to her. However the creature had come aboard, it looked terribly dangerous and disgusting to her, like an abomination against nature. The central bulkhead hissed. Breathlessly she told Siobhan and the pilot what she had just seen, while Zakk, who was visibly uncomfortable under the pilot's disapproving glances, constantly looked back in the corridor.

“How should a Kha'ak get into the ship? We really have other worries now.” She pointed to the cockpit window, where the approaching starships were becoming visible to the naked eye. Weapons turrets showed menacingly against the black of space; they could open fire at any moment.

Siobhan only looked up for an instant and immediately returned to her console. If a Kha'ak actually made it into the ship, then the others had to take care of it. The next jump could not be a failure, not for anything in the world. Nothing else counted now.

“The emergency jump to the desolate sun blew them away, Ms. Gardna-san,” Seldon reinforced the skepticism of his superiors. “And in fact, everything. You must be mistaken.”

“Why don't you see for yourself Major? Would that help you?” Ninu snapped furiously. “I know what I saw!”

Seldon threw a glance over at Ditta Borman. She rolled her eyes so that only he could see it. “Well, Jahn, you look into the matter. Hurry up, the phantoms before us could let loose at any sezura. I need you at the controls.”

Seldon pushed himself up from the seat. “Very well then. Where exactly did you see this Kha'ak?”

Ninu described it to him. “You're not taking a weapon?” she asked after him.

Seldon slapped his hand on the opener of the central bulkhead when it didn't open quickly enough. “No guns on board.”

“Stay here, Ion,” Siobhan called as the boy moved to follow his half-sister and the major.

“But...”

“Be quiet and sit!” Siobhan yelled. This was the worst imaginable moment to start discussions with a child! Ion, who had never heard the scientist yell, was intimidated and obeyed.

The central bulkhead slammed shut.

Ninu followed the major with an uneasy feeling. The central corridor of the *AP Providence* led from the control room, past the entrances to maintenance rooms, the galley, a wet room, and the two passenger cabins; behind them it reached the cargo hold, which housed the experimental jump unit. The first thing Seldon noticed when the door opened was a stale, downright foul stench coming from the corridor. Even if the environmental recyclers were flagging or had completely failed, it couldn't smell so beastly out here. “What is that?” he asked, drawing a loop in the air with his forefinger.

“Imagination?” Ninu snapped back.

The major pressed his lips together and said nothing. Shortly thereafter, he reached the passenger cabins; the one on the left side was the one used by Ninu, Siobhan, and Ditta Borman. He wanted to press his hand on the opener, then he noticed something. Seldon dropped to his knees. “Here.” He pointed on the frame; his voice suddenly sounded serious and professional.

Ninu leaned forward. "I closed it when I came out here two mizuras ago!"

The door stood about half a finger open. And it wasn't allowed to happen, technically: either the mechanism closed the door completely or it opened it completely. Half open, or opened a crack wasn't designed for. That meant... A shiver went through the floor; in the belly of the ship, a sharp shriek worked its way up to dizzying heights. Ninu flinched, all the blood drained from her face.

"What...?"

"The jump unit." The noise of the running converters didn't bother Seldon half as much as the knowledge that the Paranids must have opened fire. "Damn it!"

He straightened up, quickly shoved his hand into the crack and rashly shoved the door open, though he was careful to keep his body behind cover. Finally, he peered into the room. A penetrating effluvium, half chemical, half foul, pushed into the hallway from the door, which was obviously damaged because it hadn't fought against its partially opened state. Ninu held her nose and turned away from the source of the stench. "All right, you were right, Gardna-san, and I was wrong. But it's pretty dead."

Ninu took a step forward and peered into her cabin. The Kha'ak lay slumped on the floor, the leathery wings spread out over his segmented body like a dirty shroud. The creature's skin threw up purulent bubbles in several places, the compound eyes were slowly dissolving, and hundreds of black globules ran down the beak of the Kha'ak like black tears. The multi-limbed arms entwined below the torso at the level of its "chest;" the four pointed fingers held the roots of the opposite wings in the throes of death. A queasy feeling rose in the Goner. "Major, that's a different one. There's still another on board."

Seldon clicked his tongue. "It's dead. Maybe it's not okay with O₂. I have to get back to the control center, I—"

"Are you listening to me? The one from earlier carried weapons and had less fingers!"

"Yes, damn it! I'm not deaf! Okay, then, you inform Commander Borman, I'll have a quick look around in the other rooms and at the jump unit. Very quick!" Ninu nodded and ran back to the central bulkhead as Seldon prepared to open the door of the diagonally opposite cabin.

Meanwhile, the high-pitched whirring of the partial jump drive bubbled through the hull with an angry, barely suppressed vehemence. It would only take a few sezuras, one mizura at max, until the ship entered the jump tunnel. Ninu got sick at the thought of what a Kha'ak could do in the engine room right now; even more unimaginable to her was what would happen to the *Community of Planets* if the Kha'ak destroyed the *AP Providence* and with it, possibly the only chance of survival for the many hundreds of billions of inhabitants.

The central bulkhead was a hand's breadth open. Fear and dismay pounded on Ninu's face like a fist; the Goner shrieked loudly and pulled desperately at the door, which resisted the onslaught and only sluggishly yielded. From within, strange sounds and cries rang out: an excited flutter and a wild torrent of sounds that sounded like the rattle and click of a rusty chain. Ninu heard the onboard computer ask

in its neutral voice for authorization for the jump unit. Instead of the expected answer, the noise increased to a veritable fray. Someone screamed, "There! They're firing!"

A heavy blow hit the ship and made it ring like a bell. Ninu was almost knocked off her feet, but she dropped to her knees. With both hands, she clung to the gap until the compensators were able to respond adequately. "Ion! Ion!" Desperately, she pulled at the door. Where was Seldon? Finally the door was open enough for her to push through. The image that presented itself was chaotic and grotesque at the same time: a Kha'ak lay across Siobhan's console, its wings spread to a considerable wingspan. It clawed at it hard with his five fingers, his scaly skin hanging from his body in blisters and shreds; its faceted eyes already looked smashed. Ion tore at the creature's shoulder while Siobhan worked on the appendage on its hind quarter with her boots. Ion was bleeding from a large wound on his upper arm, but he ignored it. The insect-bird made wild, clicking noises whose interpretation across species was immediately clear: he was mortally afraid and in terrible agony, and yet he didn't want yield one bit. It stank horribly. Another Kha'ak touched Ditta Borman with an apple-sized metal ball. Borman screamed and rubbed her hips. She kicked the Kha'ak, who was as damaged as his comrade and only moved itself forward sluggishly.

A flickering video field hovered over the instrument console, showing Lord Captain Ulmanckessolnn. "This was merely a warning shot," he said unctuously, but no one paid attention to him.

"Please give authorization, Dr. Norman, Dr. Folkna, and Command Borman," the onboard requested over the fracas. "Energy levels can only be sustained for one minute and twenty six sezuras."

"Cancel immediately" Borman shouted. "Shields up!"

"No! Don't cancel!" Siobhan exclaimed in a overriding voice. "we have to jump now! The singularity in the jumpgate is oscillating as if—" a leathery wing wiped across her face and made her stagger.

Borman set her foot on the Kha'ak's neck as it was about to push the stun ball back in her side. The creature's head bulge dropped, its beak crashed to the floor. Borman jerked her weight on the right foot. A nasty cracking resulted. The Kha'ak didn't move anymore, its wings sagged and spread wide in death. The body of the being was in an advanced state of dissolution, bubbles were still popping up and the compound eyes were increasingly dissolving.

"Computer, authorization granted!" That was Siobhan, who pulled on the tail end of the remaining Kha'ak that was still defending itself as before. Folkna quickly did the same as Ninu hurried over to Ion to pull him away from the insect-bird.

"No, leave me!" the boy cried. "I'll be okay!"

Commander Borman momentarily glanced in confusion at Jahn Seldon, who at that moment came though the half-open bulkhead, bleeding and with a slashed up jumpsuit. The status indicator on the projections showed that the energy level could only be maintained for twenty sezuras. "Authorized, Borman!" the pilot screamed as she realized that the gravidar was showing an interceptor missile fired

by the Paranids, which would strike at any moment. Instantly, the blue vortex swirled around the ship and devoured it. The Kha'ak let out a sharp moan.

There, where a ship had once been a fraction of a sezura before, a Paranid cruise missile hissed through empty space.

CHAPTER 45

Love—and be loved! Hate—and be hated!

Unknown author

Aboard the *Archipelago*, they were received by Navigations Commander Ebosirireos personally, of course accompanied by Nopileos. “The gravidar indicates a single ship that came in through the Alpha gate a few mizuras ago,” she translated.

“Which type?”

“We don’t know. There was no visual contact, the light is still underway. Low mass. Scout or something.”

“Scout?” Elena frowned. Maybe pirates, who else would have lost something out here, so far off the beaten track!

Kalmanckalsaltt stood in the control center as always, in the same place in which he was last seen. Uchan t’Sct came a bit towards Elena as she came in through the bulkhead with the two lizards and Nola Hi.

“Be gone,” the Split just said. Nola Hi floated wordlessly beneath the ceiling like a gas-filled balloon. “Look there, t’Kho, and have an answer ready.” On the central communication screen, the inscrutable facial features of a Paranid were revealed. Even though Elena barely noticed the creature’s nearly translucent pupil, she knew that the Three-eye was not looking directly into the camera field—a gesture intended to demonstrate how little importance he attached to his counterpart. Several sezuras passed as Elena slowly stepped in front of the screen, leaving her crew and the commander of the *Archipelago* behind her.

“So We are the Priest Count, First Class, Negotiator and Advocate of the Great Divine Council,” the Three-eye finally began with razor sharp accentuation, albeit with an intonation that hummed with cold. “Plenipotentiary and Beneficiary of the Bishop, Envoy of Pontifex Maximus Paranidia, Commander of the Holy Flotilla of Three, Prophet of Renewed Revelation in His Own and in the Rights of Bashra and Xaar, Reverend Somancklitansvt.”

“And be forewarned, unholy creatures,” added the Paranid while Elena was still looking for a reply. “Never take Our title in Your mouths without great need, for only our larval name is Yours to utter.”

“How can we help you, Somancklitansvt?”

“You have committed an act of blasphemy for which in good time you must answer with your life. But first you will reactivate the Dimensional Gate.” Although the Paranid’s around lips moved only minimally, the threat in the inflection of his snarling voice was as clear as that in his words.

“Your fleet is in Boron territory, Reverend Somancklitansvt. Your intrusion is undesirable and also unjustified.”

From the corner of her eye, Elena noticed that the Alpha Gate, still centered on the gravidar, flashed again. Something else had come through, and this time it was many times more massive than the scout.

“Cosmic laws of higher Dimensionality break those of the *Community of unholy Planets*, whose allegiance is the the final test imposed upon Us,” Somancklitansvt continued.

“Not quite, because—”

“And then who gives You the right to speak for the Boron Queendom, Argon female?”

Elena glanced over her shoulder to find the gaze of the Boron hovering beneath the ceiling. Nola Hi reluctantly lowered herself and joined Elena.

“I, Reverend Somancklitansvt, because I possess comprehensive powers, permissions, and rights of the Parliament as well as the Queen—as you well know and remember,” he chirped and watched the video of the Paranid, waiting.

Somancklitansvt’s three stalked eyes jerked out in parallel; Elena registered with surprise that he obviously knew the Boron.

“Envoy Nola Hi, Scientific Ethicist of the Boron Queendom! It has been long since We most recently met Each Other over the same premise and in the same adverse circumstance as Hewa.”

Somancklitansvt spread his long, bony arms as if to embrace the camera field and threw his arms up theatrically. “So take it as a show of Our esteem,” he intoned, “that We will allow You three stazuras, three mizuras, and three sezuras to erase the injustice of the will of Bashra that You have committed in Your ignorance.”

Somancklitansvt lowered his many-fingered gripping claws, spread out the long, thin fingers in front of his three eyes like bodily death and arched his back. “Otherwise, You will die immediately,” he whispered in a grave voice. The last word echoed for a few sezuras, then the connection cut out.

For a moment, silence prevailed in the control room, apart from Nopileos’s softly whispered translation for Ebosirireos. Elena, unable to resist the unreal feeling that Somancklitansvt’s threats had suddenly become irrelevant, contemplated. “What came through the Alpha jumpgate?” she wanted to know. Nopileos hurried to replay the question. The navigations commander turned his palms up.

“A carrier ship of the Pontifex,” Uchan answered. The Split seemed certain. His Paranid partner quickly agreed with him.

“Sister, the navigations commander suggests leaving the system. The engines of the *Archipelago of Swamp Orchids* are stronger than anything our colleague Paranids have to offer, and the shields will protect us until we’re out of range. Ebosirireos says.”

“Yeah, that would have been my suggestion, too. Uchan,” Elena said to the Split., “We’re not fleeing from the Paranids: it’s just the conclusion of our job here. Successful, mind you.”

“And yet is it an escape, t’Kho. But do not worry, falling in defense of honor for the Family is one thing. For money is another.”

Elena wanted to express her surprised at this—quite practical for a Split—expressed attitude. But an alarming whimper prevented her from doing so. Nola Hi, who had been keeping an eye on the gravidar, interrupted with a scream of horror. Excitedly, the Boron fluttered with his primary and secondary tentacles. “The scout—” he started, but didn’t get any further.

Several things happened at once. The first, smaller of the two blips faded and disappeared from gravidar. At the same time, energy whirls in the Delta jumpgate visibly rose through the cockpit window. *It should be disabled*, Elena thought, bewildered. Did they not disable it? What was happening?

A small craft materialized in the hoop of the supposedly deactivated gate; it was clearly an Argon model. For a while, nothing happened; suddenly the reaction thrusters of the small ship ignited, however not in meaningful sequence, but in a coincidental and chaotic way.

“What are they doing and trying there?”

Before Elena could respond to Nola Hi’s question, the order in which the small Argon spaceship ignited its thrusters changed; the performed correction sequences were clearly well-planned and had a stabilizing effect on the trajectory.

A buzzer signaled an incoming radio message which the computer diverted to the monitor.”This is Commander Borman from the *AP Providence*. Please come in, unknown spaceship.” A round-faced woman with short, blonde hair and piercing blue eyes looked down from the screen. She looked exhausted, literally drained.

Ebosirireos looked questioningly at Elena; she nodded. “This is Elena Kho aboard the *Archipelago of Swamp Orchids*,” she replied. The blonde Argon seemed less surprised than one might have expected.

“Major Kho, is the Boron next to you scientific ethicist Nola Hi?” she asked. Elena confirmed. “Nola Hi, Major Kho! In the name of and by full authority of the ICSCS, Argon Prime, and Kingdom End, I order you to reactivate the Delta Gate immediately. Do it—explanations will follow later.”

A thousand thoughts ran through Elena’s head like a wild storm. Reasons? Consequences? Deception? And—why

“Is it not active then? You just came through with your ship, Commander,” she hesitated.

“Borman. One moment, Major Kho.” The picture flickered. Another face looked, oversized and worried, out of the screen. Long, blonde hair, even, calm features.

“Tssssshhhh! Sister Gardna!” Nopileos hissed, full of surprise.

“Ninu?” Elena realized, stunned.

“Elena, listen. Next to me is Dr. Norman from Project Providence.” When Elena showed no sign of comprehension, Ninu added, “Project Providence—partial jump drive.”

“I... I understand.”

“This jumpgate is really disabled, you’ve shut down the dimensional anchors, however you did that. I...” The Goner suddenly looked fell silent and went pale. She looked over her shoulder heatedly, and seemed to waver, then caught herself and continued frantically. “I don’t understand much about it, but I’ve been told that the gate is no longer passable, except by means of our partial jump drive.”

“But why should we turn it back on to appease the Paranid?”

“No. Elena, there’s good reason to believe that in each sector of the community, a sun destroyer is waiting to be deployed. Black Hole Sun was just the beginning. Great Earth!” the Goner held her hand in horror. “You don’t know that yet!”

“Wait a sec...zura. We know about the supernova, Ninu, are you saying that the Terraformers, the Xenon...?” Elena struggled for words. A wave of nausea rose in her. She remembered the words of #efaa. The CPU ship should be long on the other side of the jumpgate, and therefore in safety; there was no reason for such drastic safety measures! Or had #efaa not yet reached the refuge? No, that couldn’t be, anything but that!

“Look at the gravidar,” Ninu whispered. “Do you see the big blip at minus 0.84 AU? It’s a Xenon CPU ship. At any sezura it could issue the command to wipe out all life in the *Community* if it doesn’t reach its counterpart on the other side. The gate must be be activated again—immediately!”

“Of course—at the time, #efaa had spoken about a second CPU ship! One that would exceed the edge of consciousness; it had to already be on the other side of the Delta Gate! And that meant that it was the CPU ship the Paranid had shown on Hewa, the one they had been zeroing in on from the beginning! #efaa, however, had completely escaped the attention of the Three-eye! Elena was almost certain it had happened this way. The Paranid fleet would annihilate this mind ship, no matter how high the losses would be; that was also why they tried to invade the refuge in attack formation! But #efaa’s sister ship would defend herself. And if it was true that the Xenon had singularity weapons that could destroy suns... “Nola, what do you think?”

“I feel great confusion and uncertainty, said the Boron, whose environmental suit made restless movements. “Still, in the wet of the continual equatorial currents, I still taste the presence of the wise and kind guardian Norma Gardna, whom I had the privilege and pleasure of knowing. And also her as

aesthetic as she is clever daughter Ninu I remember as a little one. I trust Ninu, Norma's daughter, and believe her."

"Ninu, I hope you know what will happen as soon as the gate is running again, because I sure don't!"

"Farewell, Elena!" the Goner cried with a cracking voice and eyes wide with dread. A bright flash of light flashed across through the picture, extinguishing Ninu's face, leaving behind a white, bright screen that glowed for a few moments and then turned off.

"They're under fire!" Nopileos cried. And so it was—one of the Paranid ships left its formation at that moment to intercept the *AP Providence*. His turrets flashed in a quick rhythm. "We have to help them! Elena!"

For the merest instant, Elena froze, uncertain what to do. But the moment passed. "No weapons on board," she cried. "Activate the gate! Nola Hi!" Then she ran in the direction of the hangar, followed closely by the Boron.

Nopileos stared after them, horrified.

CHAPTER 46

*There is no true ugliness.
There are merely ugly truths.*

Dr. Siobhan Inja Norman

When the gravidar was reestablished, the *AP Providence* was still in the Menelaus's Paradise system. Behind her shined the Delta jumpgate, beside the iron ring, a dinghy remained. Only a few thousand lengths away was the strangest spacecraft Siobhan had ever seen. It had strange, flowing shapes, and looked like an exuberantly colored clam.

Zakk stood up, leaned over to the scientist, careful not to touch the Kha'ak, and began to put his arm around her shoulders, but she fought him with a fierce movement. For a moment, he appeared to be surprised, but smoothly composed himself again. "Thank you, my girl, I just wanted to thank you," he mumbled.

Siobhan looked at him with a white face. "Don't thank me too soon. There, look—the Paranid fleet is coming straight at us. Will you still thank me now?"

"What's with the jumpgate?"

"Give me a mizura." She plunged into the data panels as though there had never been a fight in the cockpit and there wasn't a dying insect-bird lying on her work space.

"There are two more in the back," Seldon gasped, eyeing the Kha'ak's last twitches on Siobhan's console with disgust. "I don't know how they came in. But our breathing air finishes them off."

"They also finish off our breathing air," Ion added.

Ditta Borman let out a single, gasping laugh. "Open the windows and let some fresh air in." She immediately became serious again. "Gardna—take care of the boy. Jahn—how bad is your injury?"

Seldon waved it off. "Flesh wound. Not tragic,"

"Good. Are there any medical cryostasis chambers on board? We have to freeze you and the boy."

"We're not poisoned, Ditta."

"Hopefully those in Pathology will see it the same way when I countersign your death certificate."

Siobhan looked up from her data screens. "There are no cryogenic devices on board," she said. "And I do not think they would help us anymore. The singularity of the jumpgate is active..."

Ninu looked up hopefully. “Then it’s still active?”

“Active, all right,” Siobhan answered, “But no longer passable. The dimensional anchors were rendered useless. Without dimensional anchors, no jump tunnel. And without a jump tunnel, the gate is nothing more than a pile of space junk.”

There was silence for a while, while everyone was thinking their own desperate thoughts.

“We’re the same,” Seldon put in the first word. “Space junk, I mean.”

The weapons turrets of the first Paranid ship in the third wing were visibly pointed at the *AP Providence*. Within the next sezuras, they would come within range of the spacecraft. Faster, if the Paranid altered course even slightly.

“Call the clam ship, Commander.” Part of Siobhan wondered at the calm that suddenly ruled inside her. While Borman complied, Siobhan tried to keep an eye on both the Paranid and the jumpgate, as well as the CPU ship. The Xenon’s speed had increased and was given by the gravidar as nearly forty percent of the speed of light. “Crazy,” she whispered. Soon, the CPU ship would have traveled the entire stretch to the Delta Gate—it had also traveled insignificantly farther than the *AP Providence*, but without a jump drive! No spacecraft manufactured in the *Community* was capable of such acceleration!

Out of the corner of her eye, Siobhan noticed Ninu pushing forward and stepping in front of the camera. The woman on the video field gasped in surprise. “Ninu?” Siobhan heard Elena Kho cry, but her attention was diverted from the white dot on the gravidar, which she knew was the Paranid spacecraft whose turrets were aimed at the *AP Providence*; the battleship started a course change at that moment. Ditta Borman, too, had noticed it and gripped the steering rods.

Inertial compensators howled as the small ship turned and gave reverse thrust. Seldon activated the shields without receiving a direct order to do so. Borman nodded in agreement. “Hurry!” she cried.

Ninu shot her a glance over her shoulder, “I don’t understand much about it, but I’ve been told that the gate is no longer passable, except by means of our partial jump drive.”

Of course, the partial jump drive! Siobhan hastily checked the charging status of the converter. The result—even if not surprising—felt like a punch in the stomach: although the energy shields were not yet under load, they already drew so much energy that the jump drive wouldn’t be ready again for two stazuras. Not even a jump into the unknown would work!

As Borman brought the engines up to full throttle in no time, the compensators howled again. “Jahn—the asteroid laser!” the pilot called. Seldon looked at her in confusion. “Try to hit the turrets, the engines, something vulnerable!”

The Major knew as well as his superiors that the Paranid ships had shields and had activated them, of course. Nevertheless, he did as he was told. Tiny, invisible sparks flashed in the direction of the attacker, only to fizzle harmlessly.

Finally, the ray towers of the battleship shined. “Farewell, Elena!” Ninu was just able to scam before the first energy beam arrived. The *AP Providence* received a blow that severely reduced their shields; the very next hit completely shredded the weakened shields and penetrated to the hull. Everywhere in the ship, the security bulkheads slammed shut; red lights on the console spoke of pressure loss in all sections except the cabins and the cockpit. All holofields and displays flickered, then went out.

Siobhan found herself on the floor behind her console again. She scrambled to her feet. Only Borman and Seldon were still sitting in their chairs because they had been strapped in. Ninu, Zakk, and Ion, on the other hand, had been hurled into different corners of the cockpit. The dead body of the Kha'ak had also been swept away from Siobhan's science console.

“One hundred seventeen percent throttle!” Borman shouted. “Every moment it's pulling apart our engines, every—”

The holofields came flickering back. The rear-facing camera showed the big Paranid cruiser, now barely five thousand lengths away from them, and constantly gaining. Again the gun ports flickered. Ninu clung to the armchair in panic; Siobhan, on the other hand raised her hands and held her fingers out so that her palms hovered just above the console. *Deirdre!*

The impact came a microsecond later. It was devastating. The engines exploded in an apocalypse of white fire and tore the small ship apart in the middle. Immediately the compensators, power, and artificial gravity field failed. Siobhan felt herself being lifted up and hurled forward as if a giant had kicked her in the back. *I'm not afraid!* Hot pain ran through her as her hipbone struck the console that was buckling beneath her. Her scream died away unheard in the roaring crescendo of destruction. Any moment the explosive decompression would sweep her away. *Soon...* She looked up; over the dead console, the stars whirled wildly around. Debris and superstructures were reflected in the distant storm of beam weapons, the blazing blue-white of the engine section passed in front of the cockpit windows and drifted towards infinity.

No fear, no fear, no...

CHAPTER 47

At the end of your journey, in your final sezura, you'll get one last chance. The same whether you're a criminal or a saint: this is the definitive and irrevocable opportunity to do everything right, to give the "good" answers. It will not be an opportunity to spare your life, but to fulfill it. Always contemplate it, because your last sezura is already waiting for you.

Christiane Hatikvah,

Thoughts of One Misunderstood

"The world portal, it signals 'do not touch me,' Ele Na!"

The astronaut looked helplessly at the Boron. Over two stazuras were gone since Somancklitansvt had issued his ultimatum. Meanwhile, the two hundred thirty-four Paranid spaceships filled the cosmos: powerful, threatening shadows that matched their solar orbits with the jumpgate as far as the eye could see. About a dozen of the Paranids had set a course towards #efaa on a high-speed approach, where a cordon of Xenon fighters was slowly fanning out. A murderous fight seemed inescapable.

When she laid her head back, Elena could sense the clam-shaped silhouette of the *Archipelago*, which was frozen far, far, above her in an apparent standstill. But where was the *AP Providence*? She couldn't find the Argon jumpship anywhere. It had most likely used its jump drive to escape the Paranids.

Elena turned her eyes back to the Boron. "What does that mean?"

"Something is taking place and happening first. We must wait and be patient."

"We have..." *no time*, Elena wanted to say. A tiny glint of blue energy field that flared up in the corner of her eye made her pause. Was the gate working again? No, the normal operation of a jumpgate looked completely different. "What's that?" she whispered. Her heart was thumping as halfway across to the other side of the ring, she made out a compact, dark shape that emerged from the darkness. "Nola Hi!" she exclaimed, as the shadow began to move purposefully toward her and the scientific ethicist. The call bummed in their own helmet speakers.

"Yes, and yes. It is a Sohnen!"

"An envoy of the Ancient ones?"

"No, negative; a repair unit."

The approaching box was nothing more than precisely this: a gray, man-sized box with a rounded edges and a grainy surface that resembled the skin of a shark. The footprint corresponded exactly with the

dimensions of one of the floor plates of the stargate. With a queasy feeling, Elena and the Boron retreated farther and farther back. The repair unit lowered itself to the bottom plate. The jumpgate shook. Something flashed. Elena winced.

But the light didn't come from the Sohnen robot. The fight broke out over their heads! The rest of the spacecraft that had been hanging in the sky like frozen raindrops just seuras ago now began to move. A few sped up towards the Delta Gate, but the bulk formed an attack formation that was directed at the approaching Terraformer ship. Energy beams also pattered on the unsuspecting *Archipelago*. "Why are they doing that? The ultimatum hasn't expired yet!" But of course, the ultimatum had become completely meaningless, Elena realized.

"Soon—soon," the Boron chirped. It wasn't clear who or what he meant by that." Elena ignited the maneuvering device and started moving toward the dinghy. "Ele Na! Where are you going! Stay here, please—and please!" the Boron pleaded with his little girl's voice.

"We have to get back to the *Archipelago*!"

"We have to stay here, Ele Na! Stay here, star warrior!"

Intense, white engine exhaust flared from the clam-ship's engines. It finally reacted to the weapons fire from the Three-eyes and began to move. The helmet radio came into action and Nopileos's noisy voice sounded.

"We must veer away, Elena, Ebosirireos insists on it! They won't fire on you, you're too close to the gate. We're going to Ninu to—" a particularly violent energy salvo drowned out the Teladi's voice in energetic crackling. "—at any profit!" she ended.

The *Archipelago* spun around on her axis of rotation and picked up speed, but some of the Paranid spacecraft seemed to be waiting for this and tethered themselves to its her stern. With rapid acceleration, the *Archipelago* and its pursuers moved farther and farther away from the Delta Gate. Elena's gaze followed the ships for a moment—and her eyes widened. Out of the darkness of night, the titanic body of #efaa peeled out, accompanied by a great swarm of black mosquitoes riding on bright flames. The old Terraformer CPU was approaching at great speed. The Paranid fleet scattered like a swarm of chickens being shooed away.

"Nola—the gate, is it working again?" Elena threw a rushed look at the silhouette of the repair unit. Unchanged—no movement. The robot was sitting there like a fat insect. It didn't stir.

The Boron answered in the negative. Terrified, Elena had to watch as the battle over her head widened. Powerful energy storms jerked between the swarming Xenon fighters and the Paranid spacecraft. Silent explosions blazed up, debris whirled into infinity while the unaffected CPU ship fell further towards the gate.

"There you go, they finally have what they wanted," Elena murmured resignedly.

Too late, all of it too late!

A cruise missile escaped from the body of a Paranid spacecraft and hissed toward a seemingly empty point in space. Elena could almost hear the hiss of the projectile. Unexpectedly, almost playfully, the path of the cruise missile intersected with that of a black interceptor a fraction of a second before it reached the previously undisturbed point in the nothingness not far from the jumpgate. The fireball of the explosion blossomed glaringly, and Elena's visor suddenly darkened.

She hit the visor with her flat hand: *don't go dark now!* She could barely see anything, just the swirling sea of flames that trailed the stricken Xenon like a flaming torch. As if in a trance, she saw the shredding, burning body of the eccentrically rolling Xenon fighter collapse. Towards her. She just barely managed to call the name of the Boron, then the wreck sliced the event horizon of the gate. And disappeared in the bluish glow of the jump horizon.

Something exploded in Elena's head, making her groan and curl up. The gate activated even though it wasn't functional, even though the wreck had struck the wrong side of the event horizon, and hadn't first passed the dimension anchors!

"I have, I..."

"Ele Na! Ele..." For a moment, the visor cleared. A massive, black mass spun toward the gate, flanked by the flickering energy spears of the attacking Paranids. #efaa was way too big for the jumpgate—she would smash it. Any moment.

Now!

The dimensional anchors sent massive blue discharges around, searching, groping, caressing the surface of the passing giant ship frantically, but with no less intense caresses.

"Dannnnnaaaaa!" Elena cried in complete fear, calling the first and last name that came to mind here and now, at the end of her journey.

The blue light came, caught her head on, shattered her senses, powered through every molecule in her body, but the bright flare of failing nerves was no longer reaching her brain.

CHAPTER 48

I'll never forget you!

**Martinus Sandas,
Argon cultural historian,
Founder of the Goner Movement, died 217**

“We must veer away, Elena, Ebosirireos insists on it! They won’t fire on you, you’re too close to the gate!” Nopileos threw a heated glance at the navigations commander, whose forehead ridges—what was visible through the makeup—suddenly went paler. Two of the Paranid ships had just altered course and directed their weapons turrets at the *Archipelago of Swamp Orchids*. Beams lashed out, loud static sound ran through the speech connection “We’re going to Ninu—to rush to her aid!” Nopileos shrieked as the shields flared brightly outside. At the same moment, she realized that they wouldn’t rush to help anyone, that the navigations commander had just turned the spaceship on its gyro axis, gave reverse thrust, and started a wild escape. But there had to be a way! She couldn’t leave Elena and her colleague Ninu! “Elena, star warrior, where are you?” No answer. “We’ll return, do you hear? At any profit!”

“They do not really look like real Teladi, but they are as cowardly as real Teladi,” Uchan t’Sctt sneered, who had taken a position next to his Paranid partner with his arms crossed and passively watched the action; incomprehensibly, he seemed to like the situation.

Kalmanckalsaltt, who towered over Uchan by several heads, directed his three eyes at an angle to the ceiling. “The warriors of the Godrealm of the Paranid will soon end the fight,” he stated, “if the unholy mind ship finds its way to the refuge and Nola Hi once again succeeds in deactivating the jumpgate. Reverend Somancklitansvt will endeavor to limit the loss of face.”

“The Pontifex will order him back to Paranid Prime anyway,” Uchan said, grinning. Kalmanckalsaltt remained silent at that.

“We’re leaving them behind! We’re leaving them!” Nopileos heard Ebosirireos triumph. Of course, the navigations commander hadn’t understood a word of the previous exchange, but he probably wouldn’t have cared about it anyway. Because a quick glance at the gravidar and out the cockpit window confirmed his statement: the Paranid assault ships couldn’t oppose the powerful engines of the *Archipelago*! Even though the cruisers made an honest effort, they soon left them far behind and the groping fingers of their beam weapons faded appreciably. Nopileos wondered why they didn’t fire missiles at them; but the Three-eyes had probably realized that the clam ship of Ianamus Zura would

easily escape them through the power of their mighty engines. Eventually, after several mizuras, the ships gave up the chase and dropped back with blazing reverse thrusters.

When the giant, blurry blip of the CPU ship disappeared from the gravidar sezuras later because it crossed through the Delta Gate and into the retreat, the behavior of the Paranid fleet suddenly changed: almost simultaneously the energy weapons fell silent; a few Xenon fighters that no longer had the chance to cross to the refuge before the—clearly successful—shutdown of the gate passed away in atomic flashes, triggered by a final phalanx of missiles. Then the last weapons went silent. Debris from a half-dozen Paranid ships and twice as many Xenon whirled quietly into infinity, recognizable on the gravidar by tiny blips that soon disappeared. Only a few larger pieces of wreckage still drew thin, white flags on the oval screen.

“Tsh! What are they doing?” Nopileos hissed. Clearly visible, the long chain of triplet formations now burst open, regrouping themselves—for what purpose, could not yet be recognized. “Ebosirireos, stop! We want to turn back! We must help my friends!”

“For the epic elegance of truthfulness? Never!,” the navigations commander crowed. “I’m cured of that!”

“We have never been in danger, oh colleague!” Nopileos countered against his better knowledge, but the navigations commander could not be convinced. The Alpha Gate quickly grew larger and Nopileos’s thoughts spun. Just how was she supposed to convince Ebosirireos to turn back? They had to bring Elena and Nola back on board and make sure the *AP Providence* was safe—there was simply no other alternative! In a way, she had to agree with Uchan—such a headless flight response wasn’t fitting for any Teladi from Ianamus Zura!

Even before Nopileos could think of a new strategy, a thin, noisy voice came from the speakers and the central communications screen flared up.

“Hello? Elena Kho? Does anyone hear us?” The oval face of an Argon appeared, framed by a weightless mane of pale blue hair. Despite the disruption of the picture, tangible devastation could be found behind the Argon: shattered consoles, floating debris, and other indefinable fragments.

“Who... what...” Nopileos began with shock-pale forehead ridges, but was immediately interrupted again.

“This is Siobhan Norman from the *AP Providence*, what’s left of it, that is. Does anybody hear us? Please response! We require aid!”

“Elena Kho is... hello, this is Isemados... *AP Provi*... how is colleague Ninu Gardna?” the completely frightened Nopileos stuttered. She felt her hearts beat wildly. Why hadn’t the jumpship gone to safety? *Ninu!*

“Well finally!” came the answer. The blue-haired Argon wiped a few unruly strands from her face. “Teladi-san, you should rescue us before the Paranids snatch the profit from your mouth.”

“Profit? I don’t understand! What about Ninu Gardna?”

The Argon cast a quick glance over her shoulder. “Got a few scratches like all of us, but she’s breathing. Can you triangulate our position?”

“Triangulate? Of course, but... Tsh!”

“But today, yes?” the Argon interrupted again. “Why are you *tsss*-ing all the time? Hello?”

Now Kalmanckalsaltt stepped in front of the field. “Forgive the unholy and ignorant Teladi creature. We can help you.”

“No, no!” Ebosireos signaled, who understood what was going on even if he didn’t understand the words. Nopileos translated helplessly. Kalmanckalsaltt turned slowly on his hoofs to face the navigations commander and puffed himself up. He didn’t speak a single words, but none were necessary—the gesture alone was enough. “Sssh! The elegance of truthfulness. All right,” the intimidated Teladi snorted through his nostrils. The Paranid turned back toward the monitor.

Within a mizura, what had happened became clear: the *AP Providence* had literally broken apart under the fire of the Paranid ships; only the cockpit had withstood the strain, as its structural components consisted of nividium-reinforced diamondoid. At the moment of explosion, the onboard computer had disconnected the cockpit modules, whose environmental system was designed to preserve the life of the crew, if necessary, for several stazuras. Only a few craft had such a complex and costly security device—in a former ship of the diplomatic corps, however, this was a matter of course.

As the *Archipelago of Swamp Orchids* altered course to reach the calculated position of the cockpit module, the plans of the Paranid had begun to show.

“They’re retreating in an orderly fashion and only a guard of three are being left behind!” Nopileos realized in amazement. She wouldn’t have expected something like that.

“A black tazura for Three-Dimensionality,” Kalmanckalsaltt announced calmly. “Sometimes I consider myself lucky to only have two eyes.”

Momentarily speechless, and with pupils dilated in surprise, Nopileos stared at Kalmanckalsaltt. Didn’t Paranid basically speak in the majestic plural? Or did he not realize what he just said? But she didn’t get to think about it further because outside in space the separated cockpit slowly pared itself from the darkness.

As before with the damaged pirate ship, Ebosireos now also jockeyed the comparatively tiny cockpit module into the hangar. As the artificial gravity was carefully reactivated, the severely damaged module sank down slowly to the metal floor, where after a few gyroscopic movements, it came to rest. Nopileos with the claws on her feet tingling, to reestablish atmosphere in the hangar. She was tremendously unburdened that nothing had happened to Ninu, but what about Elena? The *Archipelago* was already on its way back to the Delta Gate, which was lined by Paranid spacecraft that formed a triangle.

The bulkhead at the rear end of the cockpit module opened creaking and with difficulty; a thin, white mist hissed from the opening and vanished immediately. Finally, the blue-haired Argon appeared in the doorway. She glanced around, waved to Nopileos, and jumped down the quarter of a length between the cockpit and hangar floor. After her came...

“Ninu! Tshhhhh!” Nopileos waddled to the Goner as fast as her legs could take her. “Is everything okay? Are you all right, sister?”

Ninu Gardna gasped, “Good Earth—Nopileos! Man, you’re alive! I’m fine, but where’s Elena?”

“I’m fine, too!” sounded a young voice. Ion Battler stumbled as he jumped out of the doorway and nearly collided with the Teladi.

“Young Guardian survives the explosion of his spaceship unharmed, but breaks all his bones leaving the wreck,” was the comment from the blue-haired Argon as two men and one woman climbed out of the cockpit module. Ion flashed an embarrassed grin and turned red.

“Then you are Siobhan Norman” Nopileos inquired. Behind her, Uchan, Kalmanckalsaltt, and Ebosirireos entered the hangar. While the navigations commander showed clear signs of nervousness, neither the Split nor the Paranid revealed any unusual emotions: Uchan’s lips were drawn low, while Kalmanckalsaltt looked aside in a gesture meant to demonstrate disregard.

“As much as I’ve ever been, anyway. Here we have Commander Borman, Major Seldon, Dr. Folkna—Ninu and Ion obviously already know you,” Siobhan answered. It all seemed like a bizarre dream: the strange ship, the two-eyed Paranid, the rouged-up Teladi—impossible to make sense of! “Not that I’m ungrateful,” she added, “but I’m looking forward to the bill!”

“Bill? What bill? We... tshh!” Suddenly, Nopileos knew what she had to answer—it stood in her mind with the same clarity as though someone had projected it across the sky in huge, glowing letters:

“We’re not charging! We’re a... a non-profit organization!” Now it was out.

Only seldom did Siobhan ever lose her voice—in general, a sarcastic remark came to her in any sort of tricky situation. Not so this time. The Teladi’s response amazed her so much that for sezuras she wasn’t capable of responding in any way at all.

Then she burst out in peals of laughter.

CHAPTER 49

I needed forty years to find out that I still love her! I can well imagine that this sounds pretty crazy for you out there. After all: other people are born, marry, have children, and die within that time frame! But I want to tell you something: on her hundredth birthday I will surprise her!

Deidre Norman,

ArgoNet::GenTalk, 5/544 Edition

There was a tiny sound that repeated about every two sezuras. It always remained the same: a click or clack so soft that it rose just above the threshold of perception. Together with a distant, whispering noise, it formed a strangely familiar settings for the otherwise almost perfect silence.

Elena let herself be carried away by this peaceful calm like a gull on a summer wind over the sea, without self-doubt, without fear, and without thought. Of the two individuals who live in each person's head—the narrator and the listener—only the listener was awake; the narrator was fast asleep. Time did not exist in Elena's world, she drifted timelessly on the waves of mere being. The voice that suddenly entered her universe of peace could not be her own.

“She's asleep!”

There was a presence. Someone. Still uncommented on by her inner narrator, she felt something in herself move, steering in a certain direction. Another perception now joined the tiny, rhythmic click: there was a dark red glow of light that spread pleasantly and warmly inside her. The accompaniment—the presence-- disappeared with a loud noise that brought her inner narrator almost instantly back to alertness, and thus back to life.

“Danna!” she murmured. *Did I say that? Was that my voice?*

With consciousness, physical sensation also returned. Her right index finger throbbed painfully; much worse, however, was the dull strain that radiated from her skull into her spine. *What happened? Where am I?*

Carefully she moved; she noticed that she lay on a comfortable, soft surface and was covered with a quilt. She blinked and raised her eyelids. The room she was in was tiny and narrow, and it lay in almost complete darkness. Only from the wall by her feet was there a slight shimmer, like from a video wall that had been switched to night lighting. “Light,” she mumbled. She had a terribly dry mouth. In addition, her stomach growled.

As the light slowly faded and her eyes gradually adjusted to the buzzing brightness, she was surprised to see where she was. She rose to her elbows and heaved her body up. There was no doubt about it: this was the small sleeping compartment between the cargo hold and cockpit of the *AP Nikkonofune*, and she lay in the top bunk of the bunk bed! But how was that possible? Had she simply dreamed all that? “Dreamed? But... dreamed what?” she whispered slowly as she cautiously swung out of the bunk and felt for the rungs of the ladder with her bare toes. Then the images came shooting at her, snapshots of everything that had happened: Hewa. The CEO. #efaa. Nif-Nakh. Pirates. Ianamus Zura. Menelaus’s Paradise.

The Delta Gate...

“Niji—I’m hungry,” she said into the room. Looking down, she saw a pair of lemon-yellow pajamas with the emblem of the Argon Federation on the sleeve. Someone had bandaged her index finger expertly. On Earth, one could have had the bone and tissue regrown together within a few hours, but here... Elena shrugged her shoulders. “Niji!” she repeated when the computer didn’t want to answer even after a few sezuras. Again, no reaction.

Elena opened the bulkhead and stepped into the narrow passageway to the cockpit, where she nearly stumbled over the training equipment that was folded out from the wall. She stooped and punched a switch that silently retracted the gym and let it sink into the wall.

The door to the cockpit stood open. First, Elena’s gaze went out into outer space through the panoramic window. Far off between the stars hovered a jumpgate, timeless and somehow comforting. “Oh god!” she exclaimed. Only now did she notice the two huge, black cylinders that were much closer than the jumpgate. They slowly rotated around their longitudinal axes and remained a few hundred lengths apart in the position of a mighty T.

“Ele Na!”

“Lin!”

Above the pilot’s seat, a creature floated in the pale environmental suit that smoothly turned around and swam toward her. She knew immediately that it was Nola Hi, but she only had eyes for the tall, wiry man who peeled away from the pilot’s seat so quickly that he nearly fell over. Elena lacked the words. Only when strong arms embraced her and she was clapped on her back with enthusiasm did she overcome her astonishment.

“Kyle? I’m still dreaming, right? What are you doing here?”

“That’s a pretty long story... and so incredible that you’ll probably call me crazy.” Brennan alternately held her on outstretched arms to look at her with gleaming eyes, then pulled her back toward her, patting her on the back again. Elena let this happen for a while, then she freed herself playfully from the embrace of her best friend and former supervisor.

“Then this isn’t the *AP Nikkonofune*.”

“No, it’s the *AP Telstar*, my rickety M4/Buster,” Brennan confirmed. “I just happened to be in the area —”

A stream of loud clicks interrupted the astronaut from Earth in the middle of his sentence. Nola Hi pushed forward, his secondary tentacles swarming excitedly behind the milky membrane of his suit. “The great, funny, hairy human and aesthetic son of Earth Brennan from the sector of the blue planet loves to joke, to spread facetious amusement, to open a humorous and suitable outlet for his insecurity and to prepare himself, respectively!” Nola Hi hovered so close to Elena that the faces of the two dissimilar beings were only a hand’s breadth apart and at the same height.

Brennan cleared his throat. “Granted, I found myself together with the *Telstar* on board an ancient Terraformer ship called #deff about two weeks ago. For all I know, it was no coincidence.”

“Slowly, slowly, Kyle. So #deff is the second CPU ship. And it held onto you?”

“In the beginning, I was terrified, you can believe me. But I learned a lot from it. You’ve got to be hungry, Lin?”

Even though her stomach demanded food loudly, she shook her head. A dull fear had taken over her. “Where is the *Archipelago of Swamp Orchids*? Where is Nopileos?”

“Oh Ele Na, brave and aesthetic star warrior, the funny, scaly cheapskate and lizard descendant Isemados Sibasomos Nopileos VI dwells on the other side of the world portal, in sector Menelaus’s Paradise, the outermost outpost of the Queendom.”

“When I collected you in the vicinity of the jumpgate, I thought you were both dead,” Brennan explained. “The space-time distortion during #efaa’s transit was gigantic and tugged you through the event horizon. It was really exceptionally risky to scramble around the gate at that point. Or should I say, tired of life?”

Without another word, Elena forced past Brennan and Nola Hi into the cockpit and dropped into the pilot’s seat. With a determined expression, she checked the gravidar and data displays over and over again for a mizura. Apart from three planets, two jumpgates, the two CPU ships, and the *AP Telstar* itself, the sector was completely empty. Eventually, she asked the onboard computer with consternation for the name of the sector and let herself—already knowing what the computer would not answer—sink back into the pilot’s chair.

“The name of this sector is Refuge One,” the onboard computer said.

After a while, she felt Kyle settle down in the copilot’s chair to her right, but she didn’t look over at him, instead she stared out at the two Terraformer ships and the useless jumpgate. Their mission was successful, apart from a tiny, little flaw. The Terraformers were now here in the retreat, and the Paranids were still over there, in the territory of the *Community of Planets*. The local jumpgate was no longer connected to the Delta Gate in Menelaus’s Paradise, otherwise the absence of the Paranid fleet

could not be explained. The Boron plan and worked out! But why was she here—and why Brennan? How could they get back to the territory of the *Community* now? Were they basically stranded? Again?

Why no! There was still the partial jump ship, the *AP Providence*! It could also use a deactivated jumpgate as its remote destination! It had to have escaped the shelling of the Paranids using the jump drive! “They’ll pick us up here, Kyle,” Elena said with renewed confidence, looking at Brennan from the side. “Soon. You’ll see!”

He nodded slowly. “Nola Hi told me about it. It’s probably just a matter of time.”

“Yes—and yes!” the Boron clicked enthusiastically.

Elena let herself sink more deeply into the pilot’s chair and set her bare feet on the edge of the console. The jumpgate was exactly between her two big toes. Everything would be explained. Soon she would see Nopileos again. She and Nola Hi—and the entire *Community*!—had been lucky again. No, it was more than luck—it bordered on a miracle! “I’m not quite certain how everything fits together,” she said, glancing back and forth between Brennan and the Boron.

“But I do know one thing: we’re not stranded this time. The cavalry is already on its way here to pick us up! Right?”

THE END

AFTERWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If you could make money by inventing quotations, I'd be sitting on a pile of gold by now!

JJJJ

Again and again, I hear the question of how such a novel actually comes into being. “Where do you get all the ideas?” I’m asked, and sometimes, “What are you smoking?” The latter is simple to clear up—I don’t smoke at all, I’m just always like this. The answer to the questions about the origin of ideas and the creation of a novel is not as easy to summon; you could just as well ask about the creation of an egg: “Oh, well, you just cackle a bit and suddenly it’s there!” Except that in the case of the present novel, the cackle lasted a good three years—of course, not continuously, I would like to add proactively...

Maybe we can get closer to the answer if we poke around in the dust of history.

In the beginning there was my first novel from the X-Universe, *Farnham’s Legend*, which accompanied the first 20,000 copies of the game X-Tension. Almost immediately after publication in the summer of 2000, I realized that I must have made a mistake: I had actually thought of the pithy Kyle-William Brennan and his beautiful colleague Elena Kho as the main characters in the story. Despite this, the extremely cheerful Teladi youth Nopileos quickly developed into everyone’s favorite! And Nopileos’s fate, of all people, remained in the dark: namely, *Farnham’s Legend* left the Teladi as he plummeted in his burning spaceship over Nif-Nakh! The range of scolding I got reached from the simple “Why did you do that to him?” to the indignant statement “Nopileos is dead!” all the way to the vague threat: “Woe betide you, if something bad happened to Nopileos...”

It was also no help to assure everyone that Nopileos was fine and not a hair on his head was out of place. (After all,--and ever kid knows that—Teladi have no hair at all!) Ergo, there had to be a sequel, because how else should I prove that Nopileos—naive as ever, cheeky, and bright-eyed and bushy-tailed—continues to be a nuisance in the universe?

There were enough ideas for one: as soon as I wrote the word “END” beneath *Farnham’s Legend*, I knew roughly what would happen to Nopileos and the others. So I sat down almost immediately and cackled. Slogged away. And suddenly it was there, the story of Nopileos, the Teladi—the story of a lizard on its way to the stars! But it’s also the story of the great and mysterious *Community of Planets* with all its scintillating, crazy, lovable, nerve-wracking, and sometimes also pretty malicious inhabitants: Argons, Borons, Paranids, Split, Xenon, Kha'ak—and of course the small, furry creature from the Andromeda Galaxy, who always says “It was especially metaphysical today!”

I would like to thank a whole slew of people, without whom this novel would certainly not exist—or at least not in this form:

Bernd Lehahn and the team from Egosoft, who with “X – Beyond the Frontier,” “X-Tension,” and now the brand-new “X2 – The Threat” have created the most interesting and complex space computer games until now; *Jürgen Goeldner*, *Michael Nürnberg*, and *Ole Mogensen*, without whom there would never have been a *Farnham’s Legend*—and therefore no *Nopileos*! I would like to heartily thank *Jo Löffler* and Panini for their continuous commitment, without which this novel wouldn’t have appeared, either. I have *Yannick Le Guern* to thank for many extraordinary, thought-provoking impulses, some of which have found their way into this book. *Sabine Filitz*, *Christopher Barilich*, and *Anne Blankenburg* were my irreplaceable and merciless, critical test readers, without whose attention to detail the novel would have been a different, less worthy of reading one. (I alone am to blame for any possible inconsistencies!) I thank the guys from my band *Dragonfyre* for their understanding and support during the long weeks of writing and editing; and—last, but not least—I wholeheartedly tank the entire *X-Community*, who are, with absolute certainty, the friendliest, most interesting—in short, the best—community there is in the entire Internet.

You’re the best, people!

Helge

Krefeld, November 2003

Auch im ArgoNet::

Nopileos	http://www.nopileos.de/
Helge Kautz	http://www.helge.de/
Egosoft	http://www.egosoft.de/
Panini	http://www.panini.de/

Yes—and yes!

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

You get in, and you get out. Nobody came to see the opening act!

As a public speaker, I've had to follow some really tough acts. It's part of the job. Your talk is going to be different from the previous one, so no comparison, right? But it's still a bit nerve-racking. But you take a deep breath and walk on stage anyway.

Writing is a little like that—you put your thoughts out into the world for people to judge. In comparison, editing is even more fun! You just read a great story, give lots of advice on how it could be better, maybe make a correction or two, but you're invisible. The author's voice is there, for better or worse, and your job is to stay out of its way. That's what I was hired for. But...

Translation is different.

For one thing, each and every single sentence is a dozen choices, none of them necessarily right or wrong. My job is to read the original story, decide how it *feels* in German, and then make up some English that feels the same way. Or as close as possible. So I have to write in a voice. The author's voice, ideally, but potentially, with a lot of my own voice.

Being a translator is like performing in a cover band, singing a song worth singing for a new audience.

I had some advantages. First, Egosoft was very helpful even while they were trying to get a new game out. Bernd Lehahn answered a bunch of questions about the project before I started. I got copies of the first two novels in German, as well as the games (but not X4, sorry, I'm waiting along with all of you). The first novel, *Farnham's Legend*, was of course quite skillfully translated into English with the help of many dedicated community members on Egosoft's forums. I got put in touch with Helge Kautz, who spent a lot of his own time reviewing my translations and offering feedback.

As an author, I know that when I go back and reread an old story, I get to read it as though someone else wrote it. Helge got to do the same thing, because he was reading my translation! As grateful as I was to have him around to ask questions, I was very nervous about what he would think of my translation. Was it good enough? Would he understand if I had to make radical changes?

It didn't last. He was happy to trust me to do what it took to make a pleasant read, and I was able to relax. Through emails and document comments, we talked about the book and made snarky comments and jokes about strange phrases and translation errors, and he didn't give me a hard time when he was catching my rough draft-style typos. Well, maybe twice, but with really funny comments. He was at all times an incredible collaborator to have, and he made an exciting job way more fun.

Actually, there is still one “error” in the book. I didn’t recognize an in-game trading item and made a complete guess to translate what it might be. I figured Helge would laugh and correct me. But he liked it and said to keep it in! So there it remains. And that’s your one easter egg! I learned other little secrets and stories about inspiration, but secrets they will *remain*. But as mistakes go, that one I’m proud of. So I’ll hide behind Helge there, but the blame will have to fall on me for any other changes that made it through.

This book was a fantastic introduction to the X-Universe! And having read it, I’m looking forward to reading the next. For all of you who had to wait until now to read it, I hope you enjoyed the ride!

Helge enthusiastically wanted me to have an afterword in the book, so I’ll thank a couple people and keep it short.

First of all, *Bernd Lehahn* and the tireless programmers at Egosoft who have built this universe over so many years. While the books and games don’t always match up perfectly, it’s just that kind of freedom that an open world game gives to each and every play to make the story their own. I promised Bernd I wouldn’t get horribly addicted to the games before I finished the translations, so now’s my chance. And thanks to *Helge Kautz*, who was one of the nicest and generous authors I’ve had the pleasure of working with. Thanks for all the jokes and laughs!

I’d like to thank my family for putting up with me at the beginning and at the end when I was in crunch time and sometimes a little more grouchy than usual. So thanks *Mom*, and thanks *John*, and thanks to all my friends who saw me a lot less often. Thanks to *Ryan* and *Ralph* for putting up with my collection of “interesting” German sentences and translations. And thanks to *Alexander*, whose first reaction to hearing the news was “How are you even qualified to do that? Your German is *terrible!*” Well that’s okay—you remind me of Ion Battler, except he’s smarter than you. *Ich habe dich trotzdem lieb, Knabe!* And last but not least, I would certainly like to thank *Simon Ellis*, who not only introduced me to Egosoft, but whose work on *Farnham’s Legend* and the *X-Encyclopedia* were invaluable in helping me make sure that readers and gamers will recognize who and what I’m talking about it when it comes to ships, governments, and so on.

And thanks to you, dear reader, for waiting so patiently for the chance to read it. The Egosoft forums are full of creative, amazing fans, and that makes any game more special. Do I realize how lucky I was to be a part of that through this book? *Ja—und ja!*

Nathan Haines

Lake Forest, November 2018

Also on the ArgoNet::

Nathan Haines

<https://www.nhaines.com/>