

*THE SECOND BOOK IN THE TWIN PLANETS SERIES*

# The Three Minds



Lamont Downs



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*This is a work of fiction. All persons and events mentioned herein are entirely fictitious, and any resemblance to any real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

*THE TWIN PLANETS SERIES:*  
*Mikiria*  
*The Three Minds*  
*Senaria*

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## Acknowledgements

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Hilaire Beloc quote (“Whatever happens we have got”) from *The Modern Traveller, VI* (1898).

*Project A-ko* quote (“You can be anything you want to—”) from *Follow Your Dream: Words and music by Joey Carbone and Richie Zito*. © 1985 Sixty Ninth Street Music (BMI).

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*You can be anything you want to —  
If you know who you are*

—Project A-ko



## INTRODUCTION



“Some people to see you, Ms. D’Arcangelo,” the student assistant announced cautiously. That distinguished personage, aristocrat of the campus records office—and possessor of an *MBA*, lest there be any lingering doubt of her exalted status—sighed. A severe cadaverous woman in her early fifties, graying hair set sternly into a towering permanent only dynamite could have disarranged, she did not suffer her duties as Head Supervisor of Enrollment Processing at California University/Fontana to be interrupted lightly. Regrettably, however, she knew that in reality she had no choice, and regally bade her unexpected visitors to enter.

To her surprise she recognized one of them, a young woman in her early twenties with a cheery face, a slender but athletic build, and an outrageous mane of deep crimson-red hair. “Kiri, isn’t it?” she said with slightly more warmth. She recalled her as a reasonably good worker, although the girl had resigned rather unexpectedly early in the spring semester, pleading class pressures. “My dear, you’ve colored your hair since I saw you last, haven’t you?”

“Actually, Ms. D’Arcangelo,” Kiri replied sweetly, “this is my natural color.” Taking in the garish hue, a far deeper and more saturated red than any human head ever bore (and with violet highlights, yet!), the Head Supervisor reflected that young people today truly had become a worthless and insolent breed.

“Now what can I do for you?” she proceeded briskly.

“These are my friends, Wi— uh, Walt,” Kiri said, indicating a young man about the same age as herself, with longish straight black hair and a friendly, open countenance, “Randy, and Sen,” nodding in turn at her other two companions, a boy and girl apparently in their late teens.

The girl, tall and well-built and topped off by a mop of golden hair, grinned pleasantly. “Howdy,” she said, unleashing a pungent Texas accent. Ms. D’Arcangelo shuddered inwardly. The boy, his shaggy black hair partially gathered up in a long, bushy ponytail, nodded in greeting.

“You probably remember a friend of mine, Wilbur Barton,” Kiri continued. Ms. D’Arcangelo sniffed, her disapproval evident.

“I certainly remember that he took a few weeks’ leave and never came back,” she said acidly. “He eventually submitted his resignation via electronic mail,” and her studied pronunciation of the latter two

words left no doubt of her utter contempt for such irregular practices. “When we sent a reply it returned with an invalid address. I hope you are not here to collect his final paycheck; you will have to contact Payroll about that.”

Kiri gave her a disarming smile. “No, he just asked me to retrieve a few personal belongings from his file cabinet. He had to leave the country unexpectedly. Something to do with family matters, I think. I have a letter from him here,” she added, producing an envelope.

Ms. D’Arcangelo took it reluctantly, extracting the letter and reading it in silence for a few moments. “Well, I suppose it’s all right,” she decided. “I assume I may retain this in case there’s any problem in the future? We do not normally hand out ex-employees’ effects to just anyone, you understand.”

Without further ado the older woman led the way to a set of overhead cabinets, unlocking one and extracting a small paper sack. “Thanks so much, ma’am,” drawled the blond girl as Walt opened the bag and pulled out several compact discs, the labels all in Japanese characters.

“What are those?” asked the Head Supervisor, curiosity momentarily winning out over dignity. “No one here could read them.”

“Soundtracks to Japanese cartoons,” he answered with a perfectly straight face. Ms. D’Arcangelo mentally recoiled in distaste, having read all about *those* in one of the many ultra-conservative newsletters which routinely found their way to her mailbox.

“He never did seem to have very mature tastes,” she sniffed. “No professionalism at all. Bright, though; he might have actually amounted to something if he had gone back to school and earned a practical degree.” There was a momentary interruption as Sen unexpectedly broke out in a choking fit and had to turn away.

“Yes, ma’am, I wouldn’t doubt it,” Walt agreed as Kiri solicitously pounded the violently coughing girl on the back, perhaps just a bit harder than the circumstances required. The four hastily took their leave, the girl’s face still scarlet. A few minutes later they were heading out of town in a small Mishima sport utility vehicle after picking up a fifth party at a campus coffee house.

“That went well,” Kiri chuckled as she steered the vehicle towards one of the foothill ranges, while the blond girl finally broke into uncontrollable howls of laughter. “And how many years did you work for her, Will?” Kiri was addressing me, who you saw earlier introduced as “Walt.”

“I think it was about eight,” I answered with a stage shiver. We

were all speaking in a language that you would doubtless find incomprehensible.

“I almost died when she made that remark about you never amounting to anything,” managed the blond girl, whose name was actually Senaria, between gasps. “I didn’t know whether to laugh or slug her.”

“Choking was a wise choice,” I noted dryly.

“Sen, please,” Kiri sighed. “We aren’t going to do any of that on this trip.” She turned to the boy. “Could you follow any of the conversation back there, Rann?” He shook his head, obviously baffled at the proceedings.

“Sorry, my English is still way too sketchy. Just a few words here and there.” He continued to expend most of his energy sneaking frequent admiring looks at the blond girl as Kiri briefly translated the exchange for him. When she reached the part that had triggered the unexpected fit, he looked shocked, then puzzled, as the rest of us again collapsed into hilarity. Our new passenger, an older man apparently in his late fifties, observed us with an expression best described as sardonic amusement, tempered by several obviously affectionate glances at Kiri.

I suppose we really should introduce ourselves. The crimson-haired young woman does indeed go by the name of Kiri. And me? My name’s Wilorian, not Walt, although I was Wilbur Barton for thirty of my forty-six years. If you want my full title it’s Nendor Wilorian, Emperor of Deshtiris. (You can call me Will, though.) Oh, and Kiri is actually Romikor Mikiria, Empress of Deshtiris, and not incidentally my wife. In addition to her marvelous mane of crimson hair, she also possesses a pair of incredible emerald-green eyes, at least twice the size of your own but today hidden by a pair of pale blue contact lenses and the simple trick of keeping her eyes half-closed. Like myself Kiri is forty-six, but we both appear to be much younger. You see, we age a bit more slowly than you Earth folks. Likewise, Rann is actually twenty and Senaria twenty-two.

Our last-minute passenger’s name might be more familiar to you. Alan Brinkman really is as old as he looks, being a legitimate citizen of Earth and incidentally one of the most brilliant physicists alive. The rest of us are Aliens From Outer Space, of course, just in case you haven’t figured that out yet.

No, I’m not going to start at the beginning. I told that story once

already.\* Let's just say that Deshtiris, a planet about thirty-five light-years from Earth, now has a new set of rulers (the above-mentioned Emperor and Empress), and leave it at that. Instead, I'll pick up where I left off last time.

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\* In *Mikiria*.—*Ed.*

# Part I: Restorations





Our story resumes about five months earlier on a Deshtiran battleship (one of the space-going kind). The planet had just been freed from thirty years of totalitarian dictatorship under a regime known as the Brizali. Now their energy transmitters were gone, blown to smithereens, their officers under arrest, their hi-tech weapons useless, and the hideous Liquidators (genetically engineered assassination creatures) dead. Needing a popularly acceptable leader to rally the public, the new military rulers of Deshtiris had asked me to become Emperor. This was not due to any remarkable talents, by the way; my parents had been Emperor and Empress at the time of the Brizal takeover and had lost their lives in the uprising. That gave me “royal blood,” whatever that means.

I had been, to be quite honest about it, aghast. I couldn't even keep the computer files straight in the records office where I had previously worked at California University/Fontana, much to Ms. D'Arcangelo's evident distress. I was convinced that Kiri would make a much better leader. In addition to a remarkable mind, inherited from her brilliant if misguided father Romikor Tenako, she also possessed a generous oversupply of sheer audacity, bordering on lunacy at times, which had carried her (and me) through some hair-raising situations on more than one occasion.

Besides, everyone on the planet (even, I suspect, most of the ex-Brizali) seemed to recognize and love those giant emerald eyes and the unruly mane of crimson hair, the unintended results of genetic alterations Tenako had inflicted upon her before her birth. As a child, before the uprising that had forced her and me to flee to a neighboring planet called Qozernon, she had probably been the closest thing to a celebrity that Deshtiris had, not just for her remarkable looks but for her utterly unspoiled nature as well. Thirty years of determined struggle to restore her home planet to freedom had added a noticeable edge to her personality, but underneath I still knew and loved her as the adventurous, outrageous, and deadly honest young woman that had plucked me out of a meaningless life on Earth and returned me to my

own world.

That was only fair of her, by the way, as she was the one who had erased my memories—admittedly with my consent—and planted me there in the first place thirty years ago. It had happened less than a week after the two of us, all of sixteen years old at the time, had escaped the Brizal uprising. We were staying with the former Qozerman ambassador's family when Brizal assassins made a painful but unsuccessful attempt on my life. Kiri and I had agreed that I had to be hidden somewhere where I couldn't easily be found, and Earth seemed a likely place.

So it was that I woke up a few days later with no memories and no language skills. Once I had learned English I was informed that my parents had been killed in a terrible auto accident which I had barely survived. Being of an admittedly gullible disposition, I had accepted this story for the next thirty years, until Kiri had made her remarkable reappearance masquerading as a student assistant in the same records office where I worked under the formidable Ms. D'Arcangelo.

Using a shared interest in Japanese animation as bait, she had struck up an acquaintance which quickly turned my life upside down. After getting me back into shape and teaching me swordsmanship and the Deshtiran language (all without my suspecting that anything out of the ordinary was going on), she had yanked me off the planet just ahead of yet another pack of Brizal assassins. Along the way I had fallen hopelessly in love.

Which is half the reason the ship's captain had married us in a brief ceremony just two days after the above-mentioned meeting with the Deshtiran military leadership. The other half was of course that as my wife she automatically became Empress, which is where she belonged in the first place. She had indignantly insisted that she would not be married in a wheelchair, however, and it took all of those two additional days of recuperation for her to regain her feet, if a bit unsteadily.

I should point out that this feat astonished the ship's doctors more than anyone else, considering that she had been run completely through the chest (and heart) just four days previously with a sword wielded by my late little sister, one Zyanita by name. The spare heart provided by her father, along with a number of other illegal genetic enhancements, had rendered this mishap considerably less traumatic than might otherwise have been the case.

During those black hours in the tunnels under Tar Deshta, at that time still the Brizal capital of Deshtiris, I had found her seemingly

lifeless body face down in a vast pool of blood (yes, her own). Less than an hour later I watched her fight a battle of minds with her father Tenako which ended with his death, the fall of the Brizali regime, and our own hurried escape from Tar Deshta just ahead of a massive fireball. We had intercepted the Deshtiran battle fleet barely in time to avert a catastrophic clash with the approaching Qozernan defense forces.

As for the aforementioned Zyanita, she had in the meantime met a singularly hideous fate at the hands of the Brizali, and our little group had quietly agreed to leave her treacherous deeds forever buried with her. Even Kiri, who normally was a stickler for the truth, reluctantly agreed that unless someone else dug up the facts we were under no obligation to haul them out ourselves.

Although we had hoped for a very small ceremony, we ended up with an audience consisting of Gelhinda (wife of the former Qozernan ambassador and Kiri's adopted mother for the past thirty years), Senaria (Gelhinda's daughter), and seven of the top military leaders of Deshtiris. I suspect that the latter may have just wanted to make sure I wasn't going to pull a fast one; after all, it was this ceremony that officially qualified Kiri to become Empress. In any event the captain, Kiri, and I all said the right things at the right times and I presently ended up with the most remarkable mate in the known universe.

It had been agreed that our appointments as Emperor and Empress of Deshtiris would officially take effect at the moment of the marriage. As a result we would leave the room two of the most powerful human beings alive. On my own mind, though, was much more the miracle of beholding the strikingly beautiful woman at my side, and who I had come so close to losing.

Later there would of course be an official "coronation," complete with all the usual pomp and ceremony. At the moment, however, the former royal palace was a ruin in a deserted, crumbling city, and it seemed best to wait until things were cleaned up a bit before attempting to put on a show. The Brizali had emptied entire cities in the rush to staff their huge industrial centers, and Deshti, the ancient capital, had been an immense ghost town for decades.

The ceremony concluded, we prepared to escort Kiri back to the infirmary, for although she was now able to walk with some assistance the medicos insisted on keeping her under observation for another week or so. While she regarded it as an infernal nuisance, I could well understand why it was necessary. After all, it had been less than a week since they had mended the damage done to her left heart. Remarkably

there was only the thin, rapidly healing scar from Zyanita's blade left to show for it all; the surgeons had been able to accomplish all of their repair work through the original wound.

"I wonder what happened to Rann?" Senaria observed in some surprise. "I thought he'd want to be here." Rann was a young Brizal guard who had assisted us in our flight from Tar Deshta and had accompanied us ever since. He was a forthright, good-looking, rather sober youth with a conspicuous tendency to follow Senaria wherever she went. That in itself was not a particularly odd trait; she was an exceptionally attractive girl who besides her mop of golden hair sported the build of an athlete. Her real name was Senara, but at her insistence even her own mother called her Senaria.

We soon found out what had happened to Rann: he was under arrest.

It seems that he had gone to the canteen on his own to get a bite to eat, and upon presenting his ID was promptly thrown into the brig. In the past he had always accompanied us, and no one would have thought to challenge a member of Princess Mikiria's party. For that reason I think we had pretty much forgotten about his affiliation in all the excitement. But after all he was a card-carrying member of the Brizal organization, and at the moment that was a distinctly bad thing.

"This is asinine," Senaria fumed. "He's told me his entire life story at least five times over the past few days, and there's just nothing in there to warrant arresting him. Except maybe if he bores somebody to death."

"Sen," I said in some surprise, "didn't you know he'd be arrested when they found out he was a Brizal?" She shook her head in dismay.

"If he hasn't done anything," Kiri reassured her, "we'll be able to straighten this out."

We found him sitting despondently in his cell when we reached the brig. I was glad to see that at least they hadn't thrown him in with the other prisoners, as the Brizal leadership had included some of the worst thugs on Deshtiris. His face brightened at once when he recognized us. Senaria and I gave him our most encouraging looks, but the somber expression on Kiri's face rather dampened his enthusiasm. We had obtained permission to speak privately (after all, we were now all-powerful or something vaguely like it), and Kiri made no bones about the nature of her concern.

"Rann," she said softly, "I have to confess that in all the excitement of the past few days I had completely forgotten about your being one of the Brizali. You're going to have to undergo a hearing,

and if you haven't committed any crimes there'll be no problem." She stopped, and fixed him with those penetrating green eyes. "However, you have to be totally honest with us. You need to tell us exactly what you've done since you joined the Brizali."

For the next half-hour the unhappy youth told us in detail of his life for the past year, periodically tugging nervously at his long black ponytail as he dredged up a seemingly endless store of minutiae. To our increasing relief, it proved to be a dreary recitation of night watches, supply details, and other routine support duties. Senaria hadn't been kidding; the boy could easily kill with boredom if he so chose. Kiri finally asked him point-blank if he'd ever killed or tortured anyone, under orders or not. The horrified look on his face told me all I needed. Kiri's relief was evident as well.

We soon had him released under our responsibility. There was no telling how long it would be before the Brizal records were sufficiently well-cataloged to start the hearing process (there had been over a million Brizali), but at least the boy wouldn't languish in a cell in the interim.

Although much of the fleet had already returned to Deshtiris, a sizable component had remained in space due to the tense situation with Qozernon. After all, we had sabotaged the Brizal power transmitters just hours before the Deshtiran and Qozernan fleets would have met, doubtless with exceptionally sanguinary results. Now cautious negotiations were in progress between the two planets to ensure a smooth de-escalation of the situation, and the ship we were on was the command ship for the fleet. We could have just taken Kiri's own little craft, the *Futaba*, back to Deshtiris, but it lacked the medical facilities that were considered to be essential for at least the next few days.

However, the *Futaba*, currently docked with the command ship, did have one feature that made it very attractive at this time. Though the ship itself (shaped like a transparent crystal bullet) was only about the size of a large motor home, it included a "gateway" that led to its remarkable living quarters. These consisted of one very long corridor, about the length of a football field, with rooms branching off to either side, including several bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room or lounge (for lack of a better word), which was well stocked with paintings and some exquisite antique furniture, a movie theater, and a number of other rooms I hadn't ever gotten around to exploring. Interestingly enough, these living quarters were located in what I think you would call an "alternate universe." In any event they never actually went

anywhere, but were nonetheless always accessible from the *Futaba*, making them the most convenient house trailer in the universe—you never had to find a place to park it.

And so it was that our little group shortly gathered in the *Futaba*'s dining room to celebrate the wedding and Rann's release.

"I thought those doctors would never let you go," Senaria grumbled to Kiri. "Personally, I don't think it has anything to do with your health; I'll bet they're just hoping to gather enough material for an article in the next issue of *Deshtiran Medicine*." I grinned. Senaria could always be counted on to be Kiri's strongest defender.

"It reminds me of the days when they were trying to figure out just what Tenako had done to me," Kiri agreed, her green eyes flashing indignantly. "I thought they'd never run out of tests to try. And it's a miracle I didn't run out of blood back then; I think every med student on Deshtiris wanted a sample for their personal collection."

"Well, I suppose it could be worse," I observed dryly. "At least they're so eager to work on you that they don't leave you sitting around waiting for hours the way doctors do in the States."

"Rann, there's something I don't understand," Gelhinda said. "We're all relieved to find that you weren't dragged into some of the Brizali's more unsavory deeds, but why did you join them at all? It was never mandatory." Several of us had wondered the same thing, but hadn't seen fit to raise the issue. Gelhinda, being a former ambassador's wife, had a knack for asking the hard questions when the occasion arose.

"It was pretty stupid," he said shamefacedly. "Both my parents were called up to work in one of the Brizali's factory cities. They put my father to work building trucks. My mother ended up assigned to the plant clinic. I thought maybe if I joined the Brizali I could eventually reach a position where I could do something for them. I found out it wasn't anything like that; I was just one more gear in the machine."

Kiri nodded. "Even the top Brizali didn't know what was really happening. I don't know how much of Tenako's plans, or his role, we should make public. There's always the danger that someone else will try it again." What she was referring to was his attempt to recreate the Virrin's "planar field," a vast interstellar force field set up between three planets, with the center point capable of reducing any matter to pure energy. The Virrin had lost control of theirs, and as a result forfeited their interstellar empire in one immense flash. Tenako hadn't known this, but Kiri had; she'd once spent fifteen months in space overtaking the Virrin transmissions from thousands of years ago and

deciphering them.

The advanced civilizations on the Twin Planets\* in fact owed their existence to the Virrin, an alien race which thousands of years ago had taken two barren, lifeless planets and seeded them with most of the life forms existing on Earth at that time. If not for the fact that the humans “borrowed” from Earth were in effect slaves, both planets could have been considered paradises.

Then without warning the Virrin had departed, incidentally freeing the hundreds of thousands of men and women left behind. For millennia nothing had been known about the reason for their departure, until Kiri’s trip had uncovered the disaster that had befallen them. In the interim the two planets had realized the capability of interstellar travel, and had developed vast and rich civilizations without despoiling their worlds as was happening on Earth. Until the advent of the Brizali, that is.

At this point Kiri changed the subject slightly. “Gelhi,” she said slyly, “I’ve been asked to pass this message along to you,” and handed her an envelope. Curious, Gelhinda opened it, then sat back open-mouthed. I grinned, having been let in on the secret in advance.

“Ambassador?” she gasped. “Me?”

“Well,” I said, “you don’t have to accept the appointment, of course...”

Senaria was only now beginning to figure out what was going on. “Mom? Ambassador to what?” At that Kiri and I both broke out laughing.

“To Deshtiris, of course,” said Kiri, when she could finally control herself. “Well, Gelhi?”

Speechless, the older woman could only nod. Senaria was still putting it all together. “You’re going to be ambassador to Deshtiris? Like Dad was?”

“That’s right, daughter, just like your father was,” said Gelhinda softly. She turned to Kiri and me. “All right, you two, how did you manage this?”

It had actually been my idea, I admitted, but there had been no great difficulty in bringing Kiri on board. As soon as the military leadership had notified the Qozernan government of our impending appointments, Kiri and I had requested that they appoint Gelhinda to the ambassadorship, pointing out that her experience as a former

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\* A nickname once frequently applied to Deshtiris and Qozernon, although somewhat fallen into disuse during the years of the Brizal regime.—*Ed.*

ambassador's wife was easily equaled by her own diplomatic skills. Not to mention personal friendship with the new rulers of Deshtiris, which in diplomacy is not considered to be at all a liability. Their affirmative response had arrived earlier this morning.

A related issue that I obviously didn't mention was that both Kiri and I had been concerned about how Gelhinda would live without Kiri's considerable contribution to the family income. The latter's unique genius in the field of computers had enabled her to earn tidy sums troubleshooting for large Qozernan corporations, providing a much needed supplement to Gelhinda's rather meager pension from her late husband's long diplomatic career.

Thus our little family would end up reunited, this time at the royal palace in Deshti, as we commenced the rebuilding of a planet.



With our appointments confirmed, and Gelhinda's as Qozernan ambassador to Deshtiris, the remaining peace negotiations were concluded quickly. Essentially they boiled down to the following key provisions:

1. Both sides would recall their fleets and pretend nothing had happened, a solution made infinitely easier by the fact that both fleets had been halted before colliding;
2. A good faith agreement was made to start fresh negotiations for a more equitable trade agreement between the two planets (Deshtiris had been gouging Qozernon unmercifully in its trade policies, a situation endured grudgingly by the latter in ill-advised hopes of appeasing the former); and
3. The Emperor and Empress of Deshtiris apologized officially, sincerely and profusely for the inconvenience and misunderstandings caused by their predecessors' indiscreet battle maneuvers, and besides, it was all Those Other People's fault.

A few hotheads in the Qozernan government pressed briefly for the collection of damages from Deshtiris to pay for the frantic arming of merchant ships, a sum which would certainly have run into the hundreds of millions of yled. Fortunately cooler heads prevailed, having learned something studying the fall of the Soviet Union and its aftermath, and ultimately no reparations were demanded.

Incidentally, arrival at this solution was aided immeasurably by the conclusion of an unofficial "gentlemen's agreement" between the two worlds which declared that Qozernan as well as Deshtiran corporations would be allowed to license the technology (developed by Kiri herself) which enabled the *Futaba* to travel at least six times faster than the battleships on either side, and over three times faster than any other ships currently available. This technology was donated by her without cost to the Deshtiran government, and in future years provided a substantial income to be applied towards the reconstruction of the planet's devastated infrastructure.

She didn't give away all her secrets, though. The *Futaba* would still be considerably faster than anything else in space (or hyperspace,

for that matter). It never hurts to keep a little something in reserve, we felt.

Also not licensed or otherwise made available was the physics behind the gateways used to access the *Futaba's* living quarters. "Imagine," she had said to me during a discussion on the ongoing negotiations, "what would have happened if the Brizali had been able to land a single ship on Qozernon and then just pour their soldiers through. We'd have had no time buffer at all, and today we'd be living under Krigghin Teyn." The charismatic Teyn had been the Brizali's nominal leader, although secretly taking orders from Tenako behind the scenes.

The technology behind the *Futaba's* shape-shifting abilities, on the other hand, had been common knowledge for decades. It's just that no one had thought to put it to the use Kiri had, primarily because of the complexity of the computer simulations involved, something in which she of course excelled. The amorphous diamond used for the hull was likewise well known. Her genius had been to combine them into a single incredibly versatile starship, demonstrating once again that true brilliance is not necessarily so much technological sophistication as common sense.

Negotiations concluded, and Kiri having recovered sufficiently to obtain permission to travel on her own, we quitted the command ship for the *Futaba* and set out for our new home, accompanied by Gelhinda, Senaria and Rann. Our destination was the ruined royal palace of Deshti, the ancient capital city of Deshtiris.

Earlier that week the military leadership had approached us to raise the issue of where we were going to live. There had been no hesitation on our part. We had both grown up in the royal palace and knew in our hearts how important it would be as a symbol for the Deshtiran people. Accordingly, as we detached the *Futaba* from the main fleet we steeled ourselves for the ordeal of taking up residence in a gigantic shell of a crumbling building, lacking utilities, amenities, or possibly even a roof that would hold out the rain. Secretly we anticipated spending many of our nights in the *Futaba's* living quarters until repairs could be made. A final decision on whether to actually restore Deshti as the planet's capital city would have to wait.

To our surprise, as we set down later that day in the enclosed central courtyard of the palace we were met by a considerable military honor guard, complete with a band. After securing the *Futaba* we followed our guides to the second floor of the residential wing, where we were delighted to find that at least part of the building had had

electricity and plumbing hastily restored and sufficient repairs made to keep out the elements. Regrettably air conditioning was not yet part of the package, but to us that was a minor inconvenience. Within a few hours we were settled into our new home, literally ready to take on the world.

As anyone who has worked as an administrator knows all too well, the most burdensome part of the job invariably consists of endless meetings, and we were not at all exempt; many decisions would have to be made that would affect the future of the planet for decades to come. Our first and possibly most important meeting, held the day after our return, was with the military leadership. Deshtiris was exceptionally fortunate that the Brizali had left the original military command in place, instead of putting in their own people. We quickly reached agreement on a number of key issues.

Thus we resolved that an elected civilian government would be created as soon as safely possible, which meant at least temporarily removing the remaining Brizali from the picture. It was decided that any member of the Brizal party who had committed crimes would be prosecuted without exception, and that all members of the party would be prohibited from holding office or voting until some future time to be determined.

We also designated the recovery of the planet's ecosystems and climate as our top priority, even if it meant impeding the re-establishment of a viable economy. The latter was in near ruins after thirty years of unrestricted armaments expenditures and the building of an invasion force four million strong. However, we knew that repairing a damaged economy was at most the work of years, while the acid rain and in particular the nascent greenhouse effect might take much longer to reverse, if indeed the greenhouse warming could be reversed at all.

To this end, the immediate resources of the planet would be devoted to redirecting the production of electricity (which for all of the Twin Planets' technological sophistication still remains the most easily produced and distributed form of transportable energy) from the many hydrocarbon-burning plants back to Deshtiris' fusion plants. There was no shortage of clean power; it was just that up until now it had been sucked up greedily by the energy "transformers" which radiated power for the Brizali's superweapons. It was the sabotage of one such station at Tar Deshta by us which had triggered the self-destruction of the others. These were also the stations which would have been the anchors of Tenako's "planar field" chimera, but this was something that we were keeping to ourselves for the time being.

Eliminating the noxious pollutants emitted by the power plants would eventually bring an end to the acid rain which was rapidly destroying the planet's forests and causing the crumbling of its physical infrastructure. It would also reverse (or so we hoped) the greenhouse effect which had been taking hold for at least the past decade or more, although it was anybody's guess how long this might actually take. Similarly, re-electrification of the railroads would provide a clean alternative to the internal-combustion motor vehicles extensively used for transportation by the Brizali.

Sadly, another result of this policy would be the eventual retirement of the many 1940's-era steam locomotives (of Earth design!) which the Brizali had built in order to reserve even more electricity for their weapons stations. I will never forget the magnificent sight of one of these engines overtaking our little party on our way to Tar Deshta, and which had unexpectedly provided us with a means of sneaking undetected into the heavily guarded city.

It was also at this meeting that Kiri made a proposal which we had discussed for long hours in advance, going over every possible argument and counter-argument we were likely to encounter. At the present time the Deshtiran military forces were virtually the only real power on the planet, and one that we couldn't afford to alienate right at the starting line.

To view our proposal in the proper perspective, it's important to understand just what the Deshtiran military was before the Brizal takeover. The original military institutions on Deshtiris (and Qozernon, for that matter) originated after the departure of the Virrin thousands of years ago, when the suddenly freed humans predictably began quarreling among themselves and soon split into a variety of nation-states similar to Earth's. The usual millennia of idiotic warfare naturally ensued, eventually leading to the unification of each planet under one leadership.

The development of space travel introduced a new element into the mix, as it took Qozernon somewhat longer to attain the technological level of its sister planet. As a result Qozernon was for a considerable time more of a colony of Deshtiris than an equal. However, the intricacies of interstellar warfare were at that time well beyond even the more powerful planet's capacities, and Qozernon was ultimately able to restore its independence.

Since that time the two planets had remained on cordial terms, and with no more enemies to fight (and a military force being an extremely expensive toy for a society to leave lying around unused) a more

practical role was needed. The result was that by the time of the Brizal takeover the military forces of both planets had evolved into something more like the National Guard. Enemies may become friends, but earthquakes, floods, and tornadoes still remain as malevolent as ever, and coping with the scale of such disasters continues to require the kind of organization and discipline which only a military institution can provide.

The Brizali, however, had vastly expanded Deshtiris' modest forces into an enormous Imperial Deshtiran Battle Fleet, comprising thousands of battleships and millions of troops. With the threat of war removed, the drain on the planet's already badly strained resources was now unsupportable.

Our proposal was simple: allow anyone who wanted to go home to do so. Those who chose to stay would have food and shelter (and of course their military pay), and in return would provide a vast labor force for the rebuilding of the planet's disintegrating infrastructure. With the ecosystem in ruins and an economy strained to the breaking point, there was no way that private enterprise would have been able to accomplish the necessary tasks in time.

Rather to our surprise the military leaders, most of whom had been career officers from before the Brizal takeover, were in agreement. Pledging their support, they suggested that the largest potential for trouble would come from some of the newer, younger officers heavily indoctrinated with Brizal propaganda about the glory and nobility of combat, &c. &c.

Finally, we faced the issue of what to do for a seat of government. Deshti and most of the other great established cities of Deshtiris were ghost towns, depopulated by the Brizali's labor policies. On the other hand the Brizali's industrial cities were snakepits of pollution, squalor, and even a certain amount of crime. We had made our decision.

Earlier that day Kiri, Senaria and I had taken a long walk around the vast palace grounds and into some of the surrounding city. Everywhere we saw decay and devastation. The stonework of the palace buildings was covered with the powdery products of chemical decomposition. Most metal fittings had corroded away. Wooden gates and doors had rotted, the trees were dead or near death from the decades of acid rain. And yet—

"This is still the royal palace," Kiri insisted stubbornly. "Even if we have to reconstruct it from scratch, this still symbolizes Deshtiris." She paused. "Or am I just being a hopeless romantic?" I heard uncertainty in her voice, something surprisingly out of character for

her, and suddenly realized just how shaken she was at what we saw around us.

“Look at it this way,” I said as we left the palace grounds and headed up one of the adjoining streets, the pavement now faded and cracked from age and lack of maintenance. Our footsteps echoed hollowly off the deserted buildings around us. “We have three choices. First, we could set up the capital in one of the Brizal cities.”

Senaria looked horrified. “Will! How could you even consider that?”

“Second,” I said, “we could build a brand new city with a new palace.” Both women were silent at that.

“Third,” I said, and paused meaningfully.

“I see,” said Kiri. “We really don’t have a choice, do we? We could spend a fortune building a new palace, and what would we have? A lot of ostentatious new buildings. On the other hand, even if rebuilding the old palace cost just as much, we’d salvage all the centuries of tradition and history associated with it.” Senaria enthusiastically nodded her agreement.

“But what if people see it as an extravagance?” Kiri fretted. “At a time like this can we really ask people to set aside precious resources to rebuild a fancy home for the Emperor and Empress? Is that the message we want to send? If there’s one thing to be said for the Brizali, it’s that they did their work in relatively Spartan surroundings. No fancy palaces, no dachas by the lakes.”

“Oh, hell, Kiri, this is ridiculous,” Senaria finally exploded. I had watched her building up steam through this whole discussion and was eagerly anticipating the results. “Do you really believe that’s all we think of our traditions?” I grinned inwardly as I noted that she’d apparently already started thinking of herself as Deshtiran. “Why, if you gave me a chance I’d rebuild that palace with my bare hands if I had to. In fact, I’d—” And suddenly she stopped in mid-sentence as the same thought occurred to all three of us.

“Why not,” murmured Kiri.

“It just might work,” I rejoined softly.

“Are you both thinking what I’m thinking?” asked Senaria hesitantly, her eyes lighting up. We nodded in unison.

And so it was that as I faced the expectant officers before me I knew what the answer had to be. “Deshti,” I said.

There was an immediate uproar. Putting up a hand to quell the clamor, I continued. “There are really two issues here. First, where will the capital be, and second, whether to try improve the Brizali’s

industrial towns or let people go home and rebuild their cities. For the second, I think we should let the people decide for themselves.”

“We want to have a planetwide referendum on whether people choose to go home or not,” Kiri explained. “Human beings can accomplish miracles when they really want to, and returning home is a basic need that could unleash the idealism that I think is still there in our people. It just hasn’t been tapped in a long time.”

“And the capital?” said one of the officers skeptically. “You make that sound like a separate issue.”

“It is,” I said. “And we want it to symbolize the freeing of the planet. We think the best way to do that is to announce that we’re not going to spend a yled of public money to restore the royal palace, but instead call for volunteers. If we don’t get a reasonable turnout we’ll reconsider the idea.” The looks we received were dubious, to put it mildly, but after all they had handed us the power and I suppose they felt that this was as good a way as any for them to find out if they’d made a serious blunder.

“We do need your help, though,” I added. “Would you be willing to commit to providing provisions, shelter and sanitary facilities for the volunteers? It would be a real fiasco for them to make their way here only to discover that we expect them to find their own food and pee in the streets.” This was easily agreed to; obviously it was a much smaller obligation than they’d expected.

“That was really magnificent,” Gelhinda said later that afternoon, as Kiri and I together heaved a huge sigh of relief. We had just finished our first planetwide broadcast as Emperor and Empress. Technically it had been simple: an ordinary telecom had been set up in our second floor living room and the signals relayed to a military communications vehicle outside, which was in turn patched into the planet’s comm network.

Not so simple was overcoming a certain amount of “microphone fright.” I was surprised to find that Kiri was quite a bit more jittery than I, and had fleeting visions of her coming unstrung in the middle of the broadcast. At one point she did freeze up momentarily, frantically nudging me with her foot under the coffee table, and I glibly slid in and finished her paragraph for her. By all reports, though, the sight of her crimson hair and emerald eyes left most watchers in awe at seeing the legendary Princess Mikiria (now their Empress) in their homes once again for the first time in so many years.

We were gathered in what had become our favorite meeting area since returning, the kitchenette (remarkably reminiscent of one of those

fifties kitchens with a curved dining table in a corner booth). There we could cluster together cozily and share our experiences of the day. With us, in addition to Gelhinda, were Senaria and Rann. I noticed that the boy looked unusually downcast.

“Anything wrong, Rann?” I asked, eliciting a hesitant nod in response.

“I was planning to tell you this evening, and now I feel really rotten after hearing your call for volunteers.”

“Tell us what?” asked Gelhinda.

“I’ve been trying to reach my parents ever since I got back, but I never get any answer. I decided that I really ought to go home and see if they’re okay. But now I feel like I’m deserting you all,” he concluded.

Gelhinda put down her drink. “Rann, I think that’s just what you should do,” she said firmly. “Didn’t you say they hadn’t seen or heard from you in a year now?”

“I was told that personal calls were forbidden for the first six months,” he explained sadly. “Then, when I tried after that to reach them I could never get through. Personal calls always got bottom priority under the Brizali, and our telecom service really started falling apart near the end.”

“The military buildup for the invasion probably generated so much traffic that anything else just fell to the bottom of the pile,” Kiri observed. “But you still can’t get through?”

“Face it, Kiri,” I pointed out, “at the moment everyone on Deshtiris is probably trying to reach someone else. Rann, I think you’re doing the right thing. Just keep in mind that you still have a hearing to come back to, and besides, ex-Brizali aren’t too popular right now, so you might want to watch your step.”

It had become Senaria’s turn to look thoroughly troubled during all this, and she finally waded in. “Rann, why don’t I go with you? That’s a long trip, especially with transportation so messed up.” I knew how much it cost her to make the offer; ever since she’d triggered the idea of a volunteer force she’d talked of virtually nothing else.

Fortunately Gelhinda’s common sense intervened. “Daughter,” she said, “I think Rann will want to work things out with his parents on his own. It’s going to be awkward enough as it is.” Rann shot her a grateful glance. I also suspected that the idea of having Senaria along to protect him wouldn’t have done his already battered ego a lot of good at the moment.

“I promise I’ll be back soon,” he said earnestly. “You’ve all been

so kind to me, and I really do want to help. I'm awfully glad you understand." In response Senaria gave him a gentle squeeze on the shoulder.

"I'll ride with you to the train station tomorrow," she assured him. "Just let us know how it goes." Although the tracks into Deshti had been torn up by the Brizali a decade ago, the military authorities had at least set up a highway shuttle service to the nearest functioning rail line, which was about ninety miles away.

"I wonder how the referendum will go," mused Gelhinda, deliberately turning the conversation in another direction.

"Can there really be much doubt?" I retorted. "I can't believe very many people would want to stay in those Brizal hellholes." Arranging a planetwide referendum for twenty-four hours hence might seem like a Herculean task, but since it was really an informal poll all people had to do was to connect with a certain computer via their telecom and enter their ID code. Actually, one could vote any time between now and the deadline next evening; the results would be announced on the news about five minutes after that.

"I'm a lot more worried about the palace," Kiri said uncertainly. We had simply asked for volunteers and donations of materials to arrive any time starting tomorrow morning. We didn't really expect much of a turnout at first, considering the transportation situation. The rail line into Deshti would be re-laid as soon as possible, but that was inevitably months away. "What if nobody comes? Face it, people are trying to rebuild their lives right now. Who's going to drop everything to find their way here?"

"If that happens, we'll let Senaria do it all," I suggested, finally bringing a smile to Rann's face and a laugh from everyone else. Senaria gave me a mock glare.

"As long as you don't make me rebuild the sewers," she growled. This was currently a sore spot; apparently in restoring plumbing to this wing of the palace someone had failed to make sure the drains actually drained somewhere and the result had been the Day of the Stench. Fortunately that trifling oversight had quickly been corrected.

That night Kiri was about as restless as I'd ever seen her. Apologizing several times for keeping me awake, she finally slid out of bed and threw on her robe in frustration. "Why don't you talk about it?" I suggested quietly.

She turned to me in the near darkness and for a moment her eyes flared green like a cat's as they caught the light. She hesitated briefly, then sat herself down on the side of the bed. "I guess I've never really

been in this kind of position before,” she contemplated miserably.

“And what kind of position is that?” I asked.

She thought about it for a few moments. “Well, take this afternoon. We called for volunteers to help rebuild this palace. We didn’t issue any orders, we didn’t send out troops to round people up. We stepped out in front, and now we have to look back and see if anyone’s actually going to follow us. What if nobody does? I’ve never commanded people before, and neither have you.” I hid a smile in the darkness at that, but decided to let it pass.

“I suppose this was actually a pretty good experiment, wasn’t it?” she continued savagely. “Because if nobody follows us on something as simple as this, will they support us when the going gets really tough? When we start closing down factories so they can be retooled to make something else, and meanwhile the workers have to live on public assistance? When we ask people to start shifting their entire lives around for the sake of a thirty-year-old memory?”

“I guess that’s what you call leadership,” I said calmly. “But it isn’t something we do, is it? It has to be something we are. And if we aren’t, there’s not a lot we can do about it anyways. So why don’t you try to get some sleep? Wearing a track in the floor just means more repair work for our volunteers.”

“I hate it when you get logical,” she grumbled. But she threw off her robe and crawled back into bed. Fifteen minutes later she was snoring loudly (something she rarely did), and I was the one wondering if I’d get any sleep that night.



I woke up to an insistent knocking at the door. Kiri, who in spite of her hair-trigger temperament was entirely capable of sleeping through an earthquake at times, was still dead to the world. Trying not to wake her, I slipped out of bed and threw on my robe. Opening the door with a finger to my lips, I found Senaria and Rann waiting impatiently. Senaria had an expression on her face that I could only interpret as awestruck, while Rann was wearing a grin that practically split his face from ear to ear.

“There’s something you two need to see,” Senaria gulped. I turned to find Kiri watching us curiously. “We’ll be along in a moment,” I said, closing the door.

“What’s going on?” she asked after performing a vast feline yawn. “Something wrong?”

“I don’t know,” I answered a bit nervously, “but I guess we’d better take a look.” We hastily dressed and a few minutes later were led to a balcony window by the now silent pair. It was already relatively light, although the sun had not yet risen over the distant plains to the east. As I looked out across the palace grounds, I understood the reason for Senaria’s and Rann’s strange behavior.

“I haven’t seen this many people in one place since *The Ten Commandments*,” Senaria whispered. It was apropos; the courtyard was a sea of humanity, chattering, wandering around curiously, and looking up expectantly at the palace. De Mille himself couldn’t have rustled up so many extras on such short notice. A distinct party atmosphere pervaded the air. Suddenly someone caught sight of us and a cheer started up, at first disorganized and then after a few seconds coalescing into an enthusiastic eruption. Kiri and I waved back for a few minutes as Senaria and Rann discreetly stepped out of view.

“I think your volunteers are here,” I said softly to Kiri as the first rays of sunlight broke over the horizon.

It took us the better part of the day to get the immense crowds organized into work teams. The unfortunate officer responsible for feeding and housing the mob (and providing sanitary facilities) looked

stricken at first, but in true military tradition performed a magnificent job of scaring up the necessary supplies and getting mess lines going. He also sent in an emergency message to headquarters requesting I don't know how many more shelters than originally planned. A deal was a deal, and somehow everything showed up, everybody got fed, and by the end of the day a forest of shelters had sprouted all over the grounds and things were quieting down.

Later that afternoon Senaria and Rann stopped by to tell me they were on their way to catch the shuttle to the railroad station. Wishing Rann good luck, I watched them worm their way through the crowds and disappear into the no longer quite so deserted streets. Senaria cheerily reappeared a few hours later, informing me that Rann's train had been only a half-hour late. "Those steam locomotives are just so cool," she enthused. "We haven't had anything like that on Qozernon in centuries. Are you really going to phase them out?"

"Afraid so," I confirmed sadly. "But it'll be a while yet."

As I watched her sprint on in to dinner, apparently without a care in the world, I felt a bit uneasy. She had accompanied us to Tar Deshta at her own insistence, and had shown no lack of courage through the ordeal. She, like myself, had suffered a dreadful loss; she had taken the place in the expedition of a man she had loved, a man ruthlessly murdered by Brizal assassins the night before we were to leave. Unlike mine, however, her loss had been terribly permanent.

Since then she had mostly seemed her usual self: energetic, profane, and cheerful to a fault. But to me there was something disturbingly false about her manner, and more than once I had seen her staring into space, her ice blue eyes frighteningly blank, when she thought no one was looking.

That same night the results of the planetwide referendum were announced. As we had expected, the vast majority of the populace had voted to return to their homes as soon as possible. Although that would undoubtedly make the job of reconstruction more complicated, it would also provide the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel for a people whose endurance had been sorely tested for the past thirty years.

I remember how we fell asleep that night to the sounds of Deshtiran folk songs (many of them delightfully ribald) ringing softly through the vast palace grounds.

The next day work on restoring the palace started in earnest. The once-beautiful complex was now barely a shell of its former glory, having been stripped of its furnishings long ago by Brizal looting squads and the interiors badly vandalized. The biggest loss was

unquestionably the magnificent stained-glass skylight that had once covered the great meeting hall. It was now only a broken-out skeleton of corroded metal framework, with a few scattered bits of brilliant color remaining. We had no idea what we were going to do about it, and had resolutely decided to put it out of mind for the time being. Meanwhile, there was an intimidating amount of work to be done.

By midmorning crews of volunteers were hard at work in the sweltering heat tearing out dead trees, clearing decades of accumulated debris from the many rooms of the palace, scrubbing acid-rain-induced corrosion from the elaborately carved stonework—well, that’s only a fraction of what faced us. Nonetheless it was satisfying work, and besides we found ourselves enjoying the sun, hazy as it was. It was all I could do to restrain Kiri from hauling away stumps and buckets of trash, and I had to insist that she ease into the work gradually.

“So,” I said jovially to her at dinner that evening, “that went pretty well, don’t you think? Then what are you looking so glum about?” Earlier that afternoon she had apparently been having the time of her life. Now her eyes were distant and clouded. She seemed to be debating whether to say anything at all.

She finally made up her mind. “There’s something I have to do, Will, and I really can’t put it off any longer. I’m going back to Tar Deshta tomorrow.” I dropped my fork, spilling a gob of stewed tomatoes across my plate. Gelhinda looked shocked, and Senaria actually stopped chewing for a moment.

“What?” I said dumbly after a few seconds’ pause. Tar Deshta had vanished behind us in a massive fireball as we had fled the planet, Kiri barely conscious at the time. I had certainly never expected to return to that ill-fated site.

“I need to do this, Will,” she continued earnestly. “I have to know just what I did. There are thousands of Deshtiran families that lost someone there. Not all of the Brizali were monsters, you know; most of them were only doing their jobs. I can’t just look the other way and say it was all for the best. That’s the easy way out.”

I considered for a moment. “Kiri, you know you did the right thing. Do you really want to do this?” Senaria sat wide-eyed, taking it all in; I think she realized that this was no ordinary discussion.

Kiri thought long and hard as she formulated her words, staring sightlessly at her plate. “Should a pilot that drops a load of bombs on a civilian city be able to simply push a button from thirty thousand feet and fly away? Shouldn’t they at least have to see the consequences of their acts? Maybe some of your Earth wars would have been less

frightful if they had. It's one thing to follow orders, or to do something you know is right, but if you have to at least face the results of your decision to go ahead and push that button you're forced to really weigh both sides."

I understood what she was saying. Earth-style war had become more and more a giant monolithic killing machine during the last century, one with a mind and will of its own, and subject to less and less control by either side. One of the factors contributing to this was the escalating mechanization that allowed the individuals involved to avoid the consequences of their actions.

"So why should I grant myself an exception?" she concluded. "I guess I need to see for myself if it was really worth it. All right, I know it doesn't make a lot of sense to you. But I have to do this."

"Then I'm going with you," Senaria informed her gravely.

"And I," I added. "We all pushed that button, you know." And I reached out and took her hand for several moments.

It was Gelhinda who provided the last word. "You know, Kiri," she said, "for thirty years I've treated you as my own daughter, and no mother could be prouder of both her daughters than I am. But I don't think I've ever felt as honored to be your friend as I am right now." Kiri blushed, murmuring an embarrassed acknowledgment. But the stewed tomatoes definitely lost much of their taste for the remainder of the meal.

The next morning the three of us set out in the *Futaba* after clearing the visit with the military authorities. Other than searching the area for survivors, they advised us, nothing had been done to the site in any way. There were armed guards posted at intervals along the lone highway into the city, but otherwise it was utterly devoid of life, as we soon saw.

We were about two miles from the former Brizal administrative center, cruising along a few dozen feet above the ground, when we began to see the remains of wrecked Brizal motor vehicles along the road, apparently caught in the blast. At first they were relatively undamaged (and we suspected the occupants might well have walked away), but as we drew closer we saw more and more burned out shells of trucks and automobiles. After a certain point the vehicles were not so much shells as twisted blobs, as were the remains of the few buildings we encountered.

And bodies. On rereading the above paragraph I realize now just how much I tried to block them out of my mind. Human bodies can stand up to even less blast and heat than trucks and buildings. For a

long time as we approached the city center the horrors just got worse and worse. I felt terribly for Kiri, who said nothing but gripped my hand ever more tightly, involuntarily digging in her fingernails until I thought my palm would bleed.

Then—nothing. It was as if the landscape had been scoured clean. Eventually even the remains of the road vanished, and we were looking down upon a featureless, blackened expanse. Ahead was the mountainside, on a shelf of which had been located the transformer station which would have been the cornerstone of Tenako's dream. Where the station (and most of the city) had been was instead a vast hemispherical cavity carved out of the mountain as if by a gargantuan malevolent ice cream scoop, its surfaces polished mirror-smooth.

None of us spoke as Kiri slowly piloted the *Futaba* over the vanished city. I had seen pictures of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but pictures remain pictures and one can always close the book. I realized this was one book that would remain open for us for a very, very long time.

I glanced at her. She was staring intently at the sights below, her face an expressionless mask. Abruptly she noticed how hard she was squeezing my hand and released it with a murmured apology. Then to my surprise I realized we were settling slowly to the ground. A few minutes later we stepped out onto the glassy surface at a fairly level spot. The blast, while of an awesome magnitude, had not been a "nuclear event" and there was no residual radiation to be concerned about.

"This is roughly where we hid the *Futaba*," said Kiri softly, referring to a former deserted alley in the city's industrial area. Now there was nothing but a featureless expanse of glassy rock in all directions. Where a busy administrative city center had been, we heard nothing but the wind as it whistled lightly around us. Kiri sat down on the smooth surface, facing away from us, and remained hunched over for a long time. Neither Senaria nor I disturbed her, nor did either of us feel much like conversation. I noticed that Senaria was very pale herself, and she stood for a long time looking at the mountainside where the transformer had been.

Finally we all wordlessly re-embarked and headed home. This time I did the flying as the two stared silently at the landscape below. Only once did Kiri speak during the entire return trip. "Things must never be allowed to go this far again," she said in a soft voice, but with a core of steel. "No matter what it takes."

That evening, with Rann gone and Gelhinda occupied with a state

dinner, it was just two of us at supper. Kiri ate very little, barely picking at her food. “Look, Kiri,” I finally blurted out, “I realize we’ve been over this ground before, but you did what you had to do. Don’t keep beating up on yourself.”

“I know, Will,” was her answer, “and you know as well as I that if I had to do it again I would. But that doesn’t mean I’ll ever be able to just dismiss it. ‘Been there, done that.’ I’ll always wish there had been another way.” I think for the first time since returning she finally became aware of her surroundings. “By the way, where’s Senaria?” she said in surprise. “It’s not like her to miss a meal.”

“Why don’t I go check on her,” I suggested. “She also looked pretty upset this afternoon. Are you going to be okay?”

She gave me a strained smile. “At least I’m eating, aren’t I?”

I found Senaria’s door partly open and her room unoccupied. Feeling a bit concerned, I was heading back to the kitchen when, passing an open balcony to the inside courtyard, I happened to glance out and spotted a splash of blue high in one of the few surviving trees. Suppressing a smile, I made my way downstairs.

I looked up from the base of the tree and saw her sitting on a branch about thirty feet directly overhead. “Mind if I come up?” I called. I saw a startled white face staring down at me. “It’s me, Emperor what’s-his-name.”

“Sure,” I heard her say. A few minutes later I was sitting on the branch beside her.

“Aren’t you a little old for tree climbing?” she said, trying to muster a grin.

“Aren’t you?” I shot back. “Hey, what’s with you? You know what they say about cats: call the vet if they won’t eat for more than twenty-four hours. In your case it’s probably closer to six.” She threw a half-hearted punch at me in response, but even in the deepening twilight I could see that her face was as drained of color as I remembered it from the afternoon.

“Today must have been pretty rough for you, Sen,” I said quietly.

“Nah,” she lied. “How’s Kiri doing?”

“Don’t change the subject,” I chided her. “Kiri’s going to be fine. But what about you?”

For a while she sat on the branch, idly picking at twigs. “Come on,” I said. “Don’t take it out on the poor tree. It’s been through enough already. Now talk to me.” For an instant she glared at me with her customary fire, then it faded. I was rather shocked at the defeated look I saw in her eyes. Although she was capable of bullying the claws off a

wolverine if she felt like it, I had long since discovered that behind her rambunctious exterior was one of the sweetest, kindest people I knew. She finally answered in a voice colored in multiple shades of pain.

“When I saw that mountainside again,” she said hesitantly, “it all came pouring back. Kiri just—lying there, and then Zyanita.” She shivered involuntarily. “I’ve never seen anything so horrible.”

Zyanita had fallen victim to one of the hideous Liquidators, literally melting into a pool of orange-yellow liquid before our horrified eyes. She had barely had time to scream. “I didn’t think you cared much for Zyanita,” I said.

“She was a psychotic bitch,” snarled Senaria unexpectedly. “She was a traitor and a coward who stabbed Kiri in the back. It’s not her fault Kiri’s still alive today. I know she was your sister, Will, but it’s the truth, and I’m not sorry I said it.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “She turned into something much different from the little girl I remember. I can’t really say I miss her, but I do feel sorry for her.” I stopped. “So where’s this going, Sen? I know you’re not mourning her.”

She looked up at me, the anger in her eyes fading, replaced by a haunted look. “Will, I didn’t see Lev die. Maybe it would have been better if I had, instead of just hearing about it secondhand. I didn’t even get to say goodbye. This afternoon, when I remembered what happened to Zyanita, I saw Lev, too, in my mind. And now I keep seeing him. Screaming, melting...” She clenched her fists. “I want to cry, Will, I want to cry more than anything else in the world, and I can’t. I just keep seeing it. Over and over and over.”

I put an arm around her shoulders and held her tightly for a few minutes. “I wondered when this was finally going to hit you, Sen,” I said softly. “I’ve been watching you bottle it up ever since we escaped from Tar Deshta. You have to give yourself time. I know you can get through it. And if you need to talk to someone, talk to me. Or Kiri. Or anyone you want to. Just don’t try to hide from it, okay?”

We sat there silently for a while longer, watching the lights coming on in the palace. “How about coming on down to the kitchen and at least keeping us company for a little while?” I suggested. “Kiri was worried about you too, you know.”

“Maybe I’ll have a cinnamon roll,” she muttered reluctantly.



I arrived for breakfast the next day to find Kiri and Gelhinda already partly engulfed in the morning meal. One custom we had retained, which might seem odd to you considering that we were now rulers living in a palace full of retainers and support staff, was that the four of us (counting Senaria) continued to take turns making our own breakfasts. It was one of the little ways in which we sought to retain our perspective and preserve the family atmosphere that I had so grown to love during my brief stay on Qozernon. Today Gelhinda had put together a mouth-watering meal of fruit dumplings and fried potatoes. She and Kiri seemed to be deep in earnest conversation when Kiri looked up at my approach.

“Good morning, O Exalted Emperor,” Kiri intoned solemnly. “May we serve you with dainties and tit-bits?” I grinned; she appeared to have pretty much returned to her old self.

“And how is Her Majesty this morning?” I responded in kind as I sat down at the table. “You slipped out a bit early. What are you two up to?” I noticed that Gelhinda had an odd expression on her face. “And where’s Senaria today? How’s she doing?” My voice trailed off as I saw the two women looking past me.

“G’morning, everyone,” came Senaria’s hesitant voice from behind me. I turned to greet her and gaped in astonishment. My first impression was that she was wearing a mask, then I realized that it was a dark band of some kind of pigment or paint. It extended across her face from just in front of the ears and across her ice blue eyes, which stood out startlingly against the deep green, almost black color.

I was about to say something when I felt the warning touch of Kiri’s knee against mine. Catching my eye, she gave me an almost imperceptible shake of the head. “Good morning, Sen,” I said casually. “Your mother’s done herself proud this morning.” Nodding, she sat down self-consciously and began piling up her plate, and after a slow start we were all chattering along once again almost as though nothing had happened.

Later that morning Kiri explained. “It’s a very old Qozerman

custom,” she said as we prepared for another day of appointments and meetings, “predating contact between the two planets, and not much observed these days. One mourned the loss of a loved one by painting the band you saw across the eyes. It used to be done with an indelible pigment extracted from certain leaves; nowadays, of course, you use synthetics instead. As the outer layer of skin gradually wears away and is replaced the band fades, which symbolizes the fading of one’s grief and resumption of normal life. Senaria told me last night that her mother had done this years ago when her husband died, and asked if I would help her with it this morning.”

“Maybe it’s what she needs,” I agreed. “At least she can’t hide from it now as long as there are mirrors around.” And we turned our attention to the day’s agenda.

Lest you gain the impression by this time that Kiri and I were single-handedly planning, supervising, and carrying out the rebuilding of Deshtiris with our own four hands, I should explain that during all this the military engineers had been working around the clock drawing up detailed plans, project time lines, and all the other paraphernalia of huge industrial projects. While we were kept informed of the overall outlines of what was being done, for the most part we were occupied with the renovation of the royal palace and the reconstruction of its bureaucracy, which although a dirty word to the average citizen is nonetheless essential to any large organization.

Visible evidence of this was soon apparent in the way that no sooner was another wing of the palace cleaned up, electrified, and plumbed than crowds of serious-looking men and women of all ages arrived to stake a claim. Within hours, it seemed, the formerly empty rooms would become hives of activity, filled with desks, telecoms, and human beings energetically planning some new corner of the planet’s recovery. I was reminded of nothing quite so much as the descriptions I’d read of the opening months of Roosevelt’s New Deal, and I suppose that in a way this was the ultimate new deal on a planetary scale.

One of the first additions to our growing palace staff was Holan, the communications officer who had facilitated our last-minute efforts to stop the two belligerent fleets from colliding in a bloody holocaust. About our own age, he had in fact been one of our palace playmates during those long-gone happier days before the advent of the Brizali. Now an efficient, highly capable officer, he proved to be an excellent choice for liaison with the Deshtiran military command and was always welcome at our informal family get-togethers when the work of the day was finally over.

Within a week the number of motor vehicles on the streets had increased significantly. Fortunately, among these were a large number of trucks carrying rails and other materials for the rebuilding of the city's formerly magnificent subway system, and we were assured that within a month the most important lines would again be running. A routine drive out to one of the suburbs also took us over the abandoned roadbed of the main rail line into Deshti: what had been a blank expanse of dirt and a few rotting ties a few weeks earlier now showed serious signs of reconstruction, with bundles of fresh ties and hardware scattered at regular intervals along the right of way, and work on the re-grading already commenced.

A search that we had set underway very early on was for an individual by the name of Elikan Valkar. Valkar had been the majordomo of the palace for some forty-five years at the time of the Brizali uprising, and was said to know every last square inch of the place, as well as every scrap of associated history, better than anyone else alive. Our worry, though, was whether someone of his position had been able to survive thirty years of Brizal rule.

To our delight, about ten days after our return he was found and while not entirely well (he had indeed been ill-used by the Brizali) he was definitely alive. Unlike virtually everyone else on the planet he had no telecom, apparently preferring to live in solitude out in the countryside. Rather than send a squad to summon him to the palace, an act that would have been rife with evil resonances for anyone who had lived under the Brizali, Kiri and I made the pilgrimage to his home.

Along the way I had asked Kiri if the data she'd input into the *Futaba* before our near-fatal adventure was still loaded, particularly the simulation data for the Brizal vehicle we had used. Somewhat mystified, she responded that it was; she hadn't purged any files in quite a while. Satisfied, I ignored her curious inquiries as to why I needed to know. I chuckled inwardly as we landed the ever-useful *Futaba* on his front yard just over a stunning polychromatic flower bed.

Any concerns I might have had about his health were set at ease when he came storming out onto his front porch, vigorously cursing these crazy lunatics trying to ruin an old man's flowers. His ire was quickly quenched when he recognized first me and then Kiri (an unusual sequence, which didn't happen often). I had to grin when I saw him, for as a child growing up in the palace I had caused him more unintentional anguish with my practical jokes than I had any right to; in fact, his was the first really familiar face I had encountered since returning to Deshtiris.

“Hello, Valkar,” I said as we stepped off the *Futaba*’s exit ramp. “Take it easy; we’re parked at least a foot above your precious garden.” For a Deshtiran he looked considerably older than the norm, which was understandable, as unfounded speculation placed his age at well over a hundred and ninety. Bald as an egg, he would have passed for seventy on Earth, but he was certainly spry (and voluble) for his age.

We quickly got down to the point of our visit, asking him if he’d be willing to return to Deshti as palace major-domo. To our surprise he demurred, protesting that he couldn’t leave his garden behind, to which he had virtually devoted his life since his release some years ago from Brizal confinement.

Ruthlessly I decided that more severe tactics were in order. Turning to the ship, I shouted “*Futaba*: freeze Y coordinate!” Then the clincher, “*Futaba* transform: truck!” Valkar’s eyes nearly popped from their sockets as the *Futaba* neatly repoured itself into the shape of a Brizal utility truck. Because of the first command, the truck remained hovering about a foot above the cowering blossoms.

“Now,” I said triumphantly, turning back to face Valkar, “as I see it, you have two choices. You can agree to our terms, or I can drop a three-ton motor vehicle onto your petunias.” Kiri gurgled unintelligibly; if she had ever doubted that I had indeed regained my memories of our childhood I imagine that this decisively clinched the issue.

“You wouldn’t dare,” gasped Valkar.

“No,” I agreed amiably, “I wouldn’t. But I can arrange to have a military earthmover scoop up your garden in one piece and transplant it intact onto the palace grounds if you’d like. Now, how about it?” At that he broke into a cackle of laughter, until tears were running down his face.

“Prince Wilorian, you always were a little hellion,” he wheezed.

“That’s Emperor Wilorian,” I corrected him.

“Very well,” he amended, “*Emperor* Wilorian, you always were a little hellion.” Kiri finally collapsed completely, pounding the ground with her fists as she choked out peals of laughter.

“You know as well as I that I can’t possibly refuse an Imperial request,” Valkar finally acquiesced, though with mock reluctance. “Is she all right?” he added, gesturing towards Kiri.

“She’s fine,” I reassured him. “She gets these little spells now and then. It seems to have something to do with me.”

We left after making arrangements to send a truck and moving crew around the next day to pick up him and his garden. We offered to

bring the house as well, but he snorted in response that it was a decaying hovel that had been all he could manage at the time; he was only too glad to be rid of it.

Within a few days of his return he'd settled back into the job as though he'd never left, bullying Kiri and me unmercifully as he set about restoring what he considered the proper decorum for the planet's center of leadership. Of course we bullied him just as ruthlessly in turn, and the result was that he rapidly became a part of our close little family. He proved to be a superb administrator, and tolerated no sloppiness in palace staff work. Very quickly the place began to display the little touches that cumulatively had given it such an atmosphere of splendor in the past.

I have to confess that he was right on the mark about my being a mischief maker. Once, a few weeks later, he came dashing into our breakfast nook babbling something incoherent about a giant raven hovering over his newest freshly planted garden. Putting on the necessary alarmed faces, we all dashed outside. It was, of course, the *Futaba*; at my instigation Kiri had spent several hours the previous day entering the necessary data, right down to the texture of the feathers. Except that this "bird" was thirty feet long and weighed several tons...

It was the day after Valkar arrived that Senaria approached Kiri and me wearing an uncharacteristically anxious expression and asked to speak to us privately. Although our days were quite crowded with meetings (not to mention our increasing hours in the sun with the volunteer crews) we arranged a rendezvous for a half-hour hence. As the two of us hurried off to our next conclave we spied her across the courtyard speaking to someone that appeared to be Rann, but even from a distance I could see that something was wrong. "Was that Rann?" Kiri demanded as we raced down the hallway. "Something about him didn't look quite right."

"I guess so," I answered. "I didn't even know he was back."

When we met with Senaria later that afternoon the mystery was cleared up. Rann was indeed back, and with a black eye and swollen jaw, she explained in dismay. "And he won't tell me what happened. He just showed up at the main gate and told the guard he needed to see me. When I got there I found him limping and his face half-purple. All he would say was that his father wouldn't talk to him and he had nowhere else to go."

"Well, he is our responsibility because of the terms of his release," I said. "I think that gives us enough justification to ask what happened. Senaria, would you bring him here? Let's clear this up as soon as we

can.” Kiri nodded agreement, and Senaria darted down the hall, returning a few minutes later. With her was a limping, battered young man that was a far cry from the buoyant youth that had departed a few days ago. He looked back at the two of us in what appeared to be embarrassment as I motioned for him to sit down.

“Welcome back, Rann,” I said gently. “Before we ask you what happened, do you need any medical attention? You’ve looked better, you know.”

He swallowed as Senaria interrupted, “I already took care of that. Nothing’s broken, just a lot of bruises and some sprains.” The boy appeared to be on the verge of tears.

“My mom’s gone,” he said finally, “and my dad doesn’t want anything to do with me. I guess you’re—” He turned away for a few minutes, wiping his eyes. “You’re all I’ve got,” he blurted out.

We eventually managed to pry the dismal story from him. When he had returned to the shabby workers’ apartment his parents had been assigned in one of the Brizali’s industrial towns, his father had first stared at him in disbelief, then in a rage had inflicted the ugly bruises we saw before us. Rann had made no effort to resist, being too stunned to even consider defending himself. “My father has never hit me before, not once, not for as long as I can remember,” he stammered, clearly still in shock. Before throwing him back out into the street his father had shouted something about his mother’s fate being on his head.

When he had recovered enough self-control to ask a neighbor what had happened, he had discovered what his father had been too enraged to tell him: that six months earlier a squad of Brizal secret police had arrived in the middle of the night, given his mother a half-hour to gather a few belongings and some clothing, and taken her away. There had been no word of any kind from her since.

A few minutes after hearing that bit of news, the military police had appeared and promptly arrested him as an ex-Brizal, nor had they been any too gentle with him (which was where the limp originated). Ignoring the youth’s feeble protests, they had thrown him into a cell where he had remained for the next two days, until someone finally got around to calling up his computer record and discovered to their consternation that he had already been released into the custody of the Emperor and Empress of Deshtiris. Muttering a few insincere apologies, they had turned him into the street from where he had managed to find his way back to Deshti.

“My mother’s gone,” Rann repeated in disbelief, staring at the floor. “Nobody knows where or why. She’s been gone for six months

and I never heard about it. My father must be frantic. I know how much they love each other. We were always a close family. And now it's all fallen apart."

"Rann, you know you can stay with us," I reassured him. "There's plenty for you to do here. I'll ask Holan to assign someone to make inquiries about your mother, and I'm sure we can find out what happened to her. She may be fine, sitting somewhere in a refugee camp trying to get home."

"Rann, give your father some time," Kiri added earnestly. "All he knows is that you joined the Brizali. He doesn't know what you did or didn't do for them, and he's probably afraid to find out. And he doesn't know what you did at—Tar Deshta. Eventually he'll come around. It's just too soon. Now why don't you try get some sleep? You really do look terrible." He looked at her with evident gratitude, then stood up and bowed awkwardly.

"I guess you're right," he said. "I don't know what to say. I can't believe you're the Emperor and Empress and you're still able to worry about someone like me."

Senaria whispered something in his ear, and he reddened slightly through the bruises. "Thanks," he said, turning back to us. "Thanks so much."

The two of us watched somberly as Senaria took him in tow and steered him down the corridor towards his room. "I wonder how many times that story's going to be repeated over the next few months," I said grimly.

"This planet has a lot of healing to do," agreed Kiri.



I recall that early on the question of formal dress arose. Our role, after all, was partly ceremonial, and considering the morale problems being faced by the populace it was not at all a minor one. It would hardly do for us to preside over palace events in T-shirts and jeans. Unfortunately, the existing royal wardrobe was not only sadly deteriorated (what little had been salvaged from the looting thirty years ago), but also impossibly heavy. We would have passed out from heat stroke within minutes had we attempted to wear the thick robes from those calmer (and cooler) days.

The palace managers, with Valkar at the head of the pack, insisted that we had to have something appropriate for our office and that something would have to be done. We finally agreed, but only after Kiri specified that the costs would come out of her own pocket, for she refused to spend public funds on what she considered a personal extravagance.

And so it was that Valkar summoned the best clothing designer left on Deshtiris to create outfits both appropriate to the office and suitable for the climate. Thrilled to be practicing his art once again (he had spent the past seven years unhappily working in a Brizal locomotive assembly plant), he had consumed an hour taking detailed measurements of us both, and then we heard nothing more from him for the time being.

Three weeks elapsed. Work on the palace was proceeding apace. Although some of the initial enthusiasm had worn off, most of our volunteers remained hard at work, and we with them. Word of the project had spread, thanks not only to word of mouth but also to the reviving Deshtiran news media, and I was gradually becoming aware that the endeavor had caught the imagination of the planet.

To our astonishment gifts began to pour in, ranging from craftsy items of the worst sort (but proudly placed on display nonetheless), to priceless artifacts that had been salvaged from the palace in the darkest days of the Brizal uprising and successfully hidden away for three decades. From one of the small towns in the far north, famous for its

fine lumber and hand-crafted woodworking, came a magnificent set of majestic wooden doors for the main entrance. The existing centuries-old ones had been rotted by the corrosive atmosphere into scraps of fungus-ridden wood barely held together by the disintegrating remains of the original metal bands, and had been regretfully hauled away.

The best was yet to come.

I was helping a crew scrub clean the intricate decorative stonework that festooned the front of the main building when a well-dressed party of six pulled up in one of the newly operating public vehicles and started looking around. Since I was closer than any of the palace officials I nonchalantly approached them and asked innocently if I could assist them with anything.

Their leader, a middle-aged woman obviously used to dealing with more important people than common laborers, looked me over dubiously and explained that they were hoping to arrange an appointment with whoever was in charge of the palace restoration. Just about then a vivid explosion of profanity in an all-too-familiar voice reached my ears.

“That would be her,” I said.

Looking around, I spotted Kiri sitting on her rear end a few dozen feet away, part of a group busily planting new trees to replace the many dead ones we had lost, holding a rope that had apparently been prematurely released. For a few seconds she rained language upon the unfortunate perpetrator that would have brought tears of joy to a longshoreman’s eyes, then regained her feet and, after giving him a big grin, motioned to try again. I also noticed one of the news cameramen that had become a regular fixture during the project, and caught his eye. I was gratified to see him begin discreetly preparing his equipment.

“Kiri,” I shouted over the customary din, “some people here to see us,” and she reluctantly dropped the rope and set off in our direction. Due to the sweltering heat she was wearing only gloves, work cap, boots and cutoffs, like most of the other volunteers of both sexes, and was so covered with dust and sweat that her normally crimson hair appeared dark brown where it straggled out from under her cap. Secretly watching our guests’ expressions out of the corner of my eye I was not disappointed, as they glanced at one another in evident consternation. I suspected they were about to make their excuses and go looking for someone respectable when she joined us and turned her giant emerald-green eyes full on them for the first time.

“Empress,” the middle-aged woman gasped.

“That’s me,” she acknowledged with an innocent grin, and turned

to me. “And this is Emperor Wilorian. He’s always forgetting to introduce himself. Now what can we do for you?” The weeks of work in the sun had done wonders for her; there was little sign remaining of her near-fatal ordeal except for a thin scar directly over her heart.

Apparently someone on the palace staff had finally noticed the arrival of visitors, because at about this time our major-domo came puffing up, looking thoroughly official (and very hot) in his formal uniform. “Your Majesties,” Valkar panted, “nobody informed me that we would be having visitors.”

The spokeswoman, finally convinced that she really was in the company of the planetary leadership, however disreputable they might appear, apologetically explained that at the spaceport she had been advised that communications were temporarily down for several hours for an upgrade installation. “We’ve been sent by the Qozernan government to inform you of a modest gift towards your restoration project,” she added, finally managing to rerail herself somewhat.

“That’s great,” I said. “Valkar, why don’t you take our guests inside and make them comfortable, and we’ll get cleaned up and join them shortly.” Making our apologies to the rest of our work teams, we headed inside for much-needed showers. I covertly glanced over at the cameraman, who was still in place, and received the Deshtiran equivalent of a thumbs-up from him.

Later that afternoon, sitting comfortably in one of the few rooms in the palace so far blessed with air-conditioning, our guests revealed their mission. The spokeswoman proudly reached into her briefcase and pulled out a large, heavy book and laid it on the table before us. For some reason it looked oddly familiar. They’re giving us a book? I thought skeptically. Then she carefully opened the book, which was quite an old one, to a spot where a brilliant color photograph spread itself across two pages, and I suddenly remembered where I had seen that volume before. It was one Kiri had shown me on our first trip from Earth, and the 3D photo before us was of the original stained-glass skylight of the royal palace.

“The government of Qozernon has authorized me to inform you that the Qozernan people, in gratitude for your efforts, have voted to fund the reconstruction of this ceiling, regardless of cost. In addition, any facilities or skilled workers you might need are to be placed at your disposal.” Her voice softened for a moment. “I believe I might have some idea of what this means to the two of you,” she said. “You both grew up here, didn’t you?”

Kiri nodded; her eyes were glistening. I could tell she didn’t trust

herself to speak. It was one of the few occasions when I've ever seen her at a loss for words. "I can speak for both of us when I say that this is an extraordinary gift," I said. "Please convey our heartfelt thanks." Kiri nodded again silently. It was truly a day to remember.

In more ways than one, for when later that evening Kiri and I were watching the evening news we were suddenly presented with a brief report on the palace restoration project. As a voice-over happily provided details of the marvelous Qozernan gesture, we were treated to clips of our initial encounter with the Qozernan representatives, grime and all. Kiri looked appalled. "This is a disaster," she muttered, pink with embarrassment. It might be routine here for people to discard shirts in the stifling heat and humidity, she remonstrated, but the Empress of Deshtiris did not customarily appear topless on the evening news. "We're going to be crucified for this," she concluded with an apprehensive sigh.

"I don't think so," I said with a grin, as Senaria burst into the room.

"Did you see—" she began, and then realized we were watching the same news program she'd been. "Kiri, you were great!" she continued gleefully. "Right in there planting trees with all the other volunteers. People are going to talk about that for months!" Sure enough, that scene eventually became one of the most popular images on Deshtiris. Once, several years later, I even found it on a poster in a novelty store. If anything, it only increased Kiri's already huge popularity on the planet (and Qozernon as well, I heard later).



As living symbols of government, we frequently found ourselves faced with the task of presiding over this or that ceremonial occasion. One that we quite enjoyed was the official opening of the first consumer factory in twenty-five years to be devoted to fliers, as Deshtirans call the small flying vehicles commonly used for short-range transportation on both planets. The Brizali had long since converted such industries to the manufacture of war materiel, reserving all existing fliers for official use. Since the little machines are nearly indestructible if treated properly, they had found the existing inventory more than adequate for their needs.

Now, however, it was an urgent priority that the internal-combustion vehicles that the Brizali had been manufacturing instead for the past quarter-century be retired as quickly as possible. Thus this particular event was important indeed, and received wide coverage in the Deshtiran news media. Kiri and I, with Gelhinda at our side representing the Qozernan government, proudly cut the usual ribbon as the plant officially went online. Then Gelhinda presented Kiri with a huge oversized cheque for the purchase price of one of the vehicles as I announced that the plant would also earn Deshtiris a satisfying amount of foreign currency, something the planet desperately needed. After a few more speeches, the festivities drew to a close.

Well, almost. Formalities out of the way, Senaria quickly made her way through the crowd to where we stood and collared Gelhinda. “Mom? You bought a flier? That’s great!” Gelhinda’s vehicles were still garaged at the little house out on the Qozernan prairie, virtually unusable on Deshtiris because of the incompatible roadways.\*

“Actually, daughter, Deshti has excellent transportation now,”

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\* Qozernan fliers use optical markings on the roadways to guide the vehicles; the Deshtiran ones rely on electronics as a result of years of road deterioration from the noisome rubber-tired internal combustion vehicles. The Deshtiran plants would be manufacturing both kinds in order to generate an export market.—*Ed.*

Gelhinda said. "I really don't need a flier." Senaria's face fell. I noticed that the mourning band across her eyes had at last almost completely faded into invisibility. "But you do," Gelhinda continued with a slight smile.

The disappointment on the girl's face was almost instantly replaced by incredulity. "Are you serious?" she breathed.

"Consider it a little thank-you for what you did," Gelhinda said. "Mothers can be grateful, too, you know. And I'm also grateful that you came back alive. Of course," she added, "you know it'll be a week or two before it comes off the line."

"A whole week??!!" Senaria howled in dismay.

Hardly a morning went by without meeting with Holan, our military liaison officer, to set up the various conferences and briefings the day would require. One afternoon, however, he arrived with a worried expression on his usually imperturbable features.

"I'm sorry to take up your time with this," he began. Kiri hooted at that.

"Since when?" she snickered. "Your interminable meetings take the place of sleep for us, remember?" I had to grin. This was hardly the first time the hapless Holan had been the target of one of her good-natured outbursts; she hated dreary meetings as much as I.

This time he looked uncomfortable, though. "This is a little different," he protested. "Normally this kind of thing would never get to your level, but Intelligence thought you should know about it."

"All right, Holan," I said wearily, "let's get to the point. What's this all about?"

Apparently there was an ex-Brizal administrative official who was insisting that he had to see the Emperor and Empress personally, claiming that he had information of an extremely sensitive nature. Naturally he hadn't been taken seriously at first, but a background check revealed that although he'd been at a relatively low administrative level he'd possessed a virtually unrestricted security clearance. When other aspects of his story consistently checked out, it was finally decided to present the situation to us.

"Of course we'll see him," I said, glancing at Kiri and getting an acquiescent nod. "What harm can it do? If nothing else he may prove to be an entertaining crank."

And so the next morning a very ordinary-looking middle-aged man, still in prison garb and looking rather apprehensive, was ushered into our little office. I closed the door behind us and offered him a seat. "Your Majesties," he said awkwardly, sitting down only after some

hesitation.

“Tokar, suppose you tell us what this is about,” I said. I rather expected some kind of crackpot tirade about the Virrin returning or a holy plague coming to punish us for our sins. The truth proved to be somewhat different.

“Have you ever heard of the Watchdog Organization?” he began timidly. We both shook our heads.

“Some kind of Brizal resistance operation?” I suggested, remembering Hitler’s much-hyped Werewolf organization supposedly created to terrorize the occupying Allied troops after Germany’s fall. (It had proven to be a myth.)

“This goes back long before the Brizali,” he said. “It’s probably the best-kept secret on both Deshtiris and Qozernon. Normally you both would have been briefed on it when you assumed power, but—”

I nodded. There had been no government to pass the torch; we had virtually started from scratch.

It seemed that about eighty years ago, when it first became apparent to the rulers of the Twin Planets that the inhabitants of Earth would soon crack the secrets of nuclear power, a momentous decision had been made. Before then it had been strict policy to leave Earth alone, at least officially; unofficially it had served as a kind of vast amusement park for centuries. Now, however, Earth would face a test unprecedented in its history: whether it could, with the keys to nuclear destruction ready at hand, learn its lessons quickly enough to survive.

To this end the Watchdog Organization had been created in an atmosphere of the utmost secrecy. A tiny group of volunteers agreed to end their lives on their home planets (in fact, their deaths were faked in the best spy thriller tradition) and start anew on Earth. There they slowly worked their way up into the highest levels of Earth’s major political, business and intellectual establishments, loyally serving their newly adopted countries, waiting only for those moments when a frenzy of paranoia or war fever might trigger a cataclysm. Then they started pressing buttons, acting as voices of conciliation, and using the vast resources behind them if necessary to pass information from one side to another, until tempers cooled and the crisis had passed.

A few had faced denunciation as traitors for their counsel and been hounded from their positions in public life. At least three had been executed as spies in various nations, bidding farewell to the loved ones they had found in their new lives and going to their deaths without ever revealing who they really were or what they had been working for. If the existence of such an organization had ever become known on Earth,

the inevitable political paranoia that would have been unleashed could have had catastrophic results.

“I understand that you yourself lived on Earth for thirty years, Emperor Wilorian,” he said at one point. “I can tell you that on at least three occasions you were saved from a nuclear holocaust by the actions of these Watchdogs.”

Kiri looked dubious. “You’ll have to admit that this is a pretty melodramatic tale. And just how would we get in touch with this organization? No doubt through yourself?” That thought had occurred to me as well, that this might be a desperate attempt by an imaginative prisoner to gain his freedom. His response rather confirmed our fears.

“I was only a low-level clerk in the organization,” he said. “The director and an assistant director held all the real secrets. Everything was kept in his safe; the staff that sifted the information were only given code names to work with.”

“And where is this office?” Kiri demanded. “How do we find this director and staff?”

“The office was located in Tar Deshta,” he said in a dull voice. “I was away that weekend.” For several seconds you could have cut the silence with a knife.

“Well,” I finally said. “I see.” Kiri sank noticeably into her chair.

“Look,” he burst out, “this isn’t a fairy tale. You can send me back to prison; I don’t care. I know you’re not going to turn the organization over to an ex-Brizal. But contact the Qozernan president. Search the ruins of Tar Deshta for the safe before someone else finds it. You’ll confirm that I’m telling the truth. I’ve got nothing personally to gain here.”

“There are no ruins of Tar Deshta,” Kiri said tonelessly. “None at all.” Tokar looked stunned, staring at her in disbelief. “None at all,” she said again, half to herself.

“I heard rumors,” he stammered, “but—”

“So why are you telling us about this?” I interrupted skeptically. “Out of the goodness of your heart?”

“Because,” he said reluctantly, “there’s a problem.”

“A problem,” I echoed.

“Deshtiris and Qozernon used to coordinate their Watchdog activities. Even after the Brizali took over, the Watchdog leaders met regularly. Then, after about five years, Teyn unexpectedly put a stop to it. ‘Security,’ he said. He claimed he was afraid that somehow secrets might be passed on to the Qozernans via the Watchdogs. As a result, over time we lost track of who their people were and they lost track of

ours. Now there are two sets of Watchdogs on Earth, and we don't know anything about what theirs have been up to for the past twenty-five years."

"That shouldn't be a problem," Kiri observed. "All we'd need to do is contact the Qozernan government."

"But that's not really the problem," Tokar continued. "When Teyn clamped down the lid, he tried to summon some of the Watchdogs home. The Brizal secret police had through some arcane process decided that they might be disloyal. A number of them bolted instead. They stopped communicating with us, and the remaining Watchdogs on Earth found that they had literally vanished. Presumably they created new identities and started over. Some may have started working with the Qozernans. So even if the remaining Watchdogs come back into the fold now, there are still going to be some unaccounted for." He paused. "That's all I can tell you."

Kiri and I huddled for a few minutes, speaking in whispers. Finally we turned back to our visitor. "Tokar, we'll contact the Qozernans as you suggest. After that, depending on the reception we encounter, we may want to speak with you again. Until then, we'll reserve judgment on your story."

"That's all I ask," he said gratefully. Summoning the guards who had escorted him here, we sent him back to his confinement. Kiri had already called up Valkar's office on the telecom. "Valkar," she said, "would you please arrange for Ambassador Gelhinda to see us as soon as possible?"

"Couldn't it wait until suppertime?" I asked curiously. Once the business of the day was over, the Amkors (along with Rann and sometimes other guests as well) were our routine supper companions.

"Until we know whether this is actually a hoax or not," she answered, "I think we ought to keep this as quiet as we can. If he's telling the truth, then he's not exaggerating about the possible repercussions."

That same afternoon an excited Senaria announced that the designer of our imperial outfits was back, and had assistants with lots of boxes accompanying him. We arranged to meet in one of the small suites in the back of the palace, where he eagerly unpacked his handiwork, assuring us all the while that we would be the talk of Deshtiris. This, as it turned out, was a mild understatement.

He proudly held up each outfit in turn. I saw a lot of brilliant colors, admittedly very pleasing to the eye, intermingled with metallic glints of gold, silver, and green. I also saw a lot of open air, and had a

hard time visualizing just how these components were supposed to fit onto (much less cover) human bodies. I was, in a word, skeptical, remembering all too well the debacle over Nixon's "palace guard" uniforms. However, we did at least owe the guy a fair trial, I reflected, so we undressed and put on the garments following his careful instructions. Kiri turned to the mirror and promptly erupted.

"You've got to be kidding," she roared at the petrified fellow. I suspect that visions of an involuntary return to the locomotive plant flashed before his eyes at that moment. "I look like one of Manabe's manga\* princesses, for god's sake." I gulped. She did indeed. "Well?" she demanded, turning to face me.

It took me a few moments to get my vocal cords to work properly. "Actually, you look pretty good to me," I finally managed. To describe her outfit as a somewhat skimpy two-piece bathing suit would be akin to addressing a puma as "kitty." Her slender frame was barely covered in all the necessary places with scraps of brilliantly hued cloth, the whole held together with various decorative strings and metal loops. There was also a matching pair of the usual high boots, similarly embellished. I have to say that the results were breathtaking, or at least the sight left me pretty breathless.

Observing my reaction with wry amusement, she looked me over in turn. My outfit was only slightly more conservative, with a sleeveless shirt terminating well above the midriff and a pair of very short trousers (and of course another set of decorative boots). There were also arm and wrist bands of beautifully wrought gold-colored metal inlaid with silver trceries. The main emphasis this time was on color, which was again stunning. It was just as well, for although I was in relatively good shape (thanks to Kiri's clandestine training efforts back on Earth), I could hardly have gotten away with an outfit like hers.

"You don't look too bad yourself," she finally conceded. "I have to admit, it is comfortable." Considering that the temperature in the palace was usually somewhere in the mid-nineties on a typical afternoon, I wasn't about to argue. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the designer heave a sigh of relief as he nervously wiped a large sweat drop from the side of his head.

Let it seem that we were likely to be chased out of Deshti by the

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\* *Manga*: a Japanese graphic novel. Manabe Johji is a popular manga artist best known for his outer space adventures, usually featuring attractive and *very* scantily clad heroines.—*Ed.*

local decency league, it should also be kept in mind that as a general rule most inhabitants of the Twin Planets wear as little as possible in any case, as fitness is valued and one rarely sees out-of-shape Qozernans or Deshtirans. In addition, the climate on Deshtiris could be quite miserable at times, thanks to the escalating greenhouse effect. Typical garb here consists of a sleeveless T-shirt and a short pair of pants very similar to cutoff jeans, plus the ubiquitous boots (which are soft and extremely comfortable, and allow considerable air circulation through the otherwise leather-like material). So it wasn't quite as though we were the First Family proposing to show up on the White House lawn in our underwear. Still, I thought, it would take some getting used to.

Calling our attention to more unopened boxes, our clothier next unpacked a pair of gorgeously decorated sword belts and scabbards, with the usual loop over one shoulder. As we put them on I noted with satisfaction that they helped somewhat to alleviate the "Day at Venice Beach" look of the outfits, and rather to our own embarrassment we quickly caught ourselves admiring the results in the room's only mirror.

"Now, what will you be using for swords?" he asked, obviously regaining his self-assurance by the moment.

"Thanks to Senaria, we both still have our own," Kiri answered, "and I can't think of a more appropriate pair for something like this." Recalling the mirror-like perfection of the blades, with just a trace of iridescence, and the hilts so finely inlaid with intricate designs in various metals as to be as smooth to the touch as glass, I agreed. They were a matched pair dating from our youth, and the ones we had taken with us on our near-disastrous expedition to Tar Deshta. Senaria had scooped them off the floor during our frantic flight from the impending fireball.

"Senaria will be green with envy," I remarked.

"Senaria would fall right out of this outfit," Kiri snorted. "But at least it'll give us incentive not to get fat." We changed back into our everyday clothes while reassuring the fellow of our satisfaction, and after listening for several more minutes to his ecstatic rhapsodizing over his own handiwork we arranged to have the agreed-upon sum (plus a bit extra) transferred from Kiri's account and sent him on his way with our compliments.

No sooner had he left than Gelhinda appeared, looking a bit worried at the sudden summons. "Anything wrong?" she asked curiously.

"Not exactly," I said, "but we'd better go somewhere private for

this.” And so a few minutes later we were back in our office as Kiri and I repeated what Tokar had told us.

Rather to our surprise Gelhinda nodded knowingly. “I heard occasional hints about it. Not from my husband; he was the soul of discretion where state secrets were concerned. But some of the other officials weren’t always quite so careful. I take it you want to meet with someone from the Qozernan side?”

That was one of the things I loved about Gelhinda; you didn’t have to spell things out for her to the last comma. We left the matter in her hands, and thought no more about it for the time being.



There was one last piece of unfinished business to be concluded, and that was the legendary skylight. For weeks we had heard nothing more from the Qozernan organization handling the matter, and I have to admit that we had started to worry a bit. The skeletal remains of the old skylight had been carefully removed and preserved, and the vast opening temporarily covered with a gigantic sheet of clear plastic. But it would hardly suit the scale of the event we were planning, and we were greatly relieved when Gelhinda finally informed us that the new skylight would arrive on the planet the next day.

The following morning (word having gotten around quickly), a huge crowd had gathered on the palace grounds by the time a large Qozernan transport ship began ponderously settling over the main hall. We saw a cargo hatch slowly open, and then, suspended from several heavy cables, something was carefully lowered over the now open roof that I can only describe as a large translucent blob of an indeterminate substance.

Senaria was a little more blunt. “What the hell is that? It looks like a giant gob of snot!” she roared as Rann turned pink with embarrassment.

“I wasn’t going to say that,” I said. I can’t say I felt much more appreciative at that moment, either. Kiri had an odd look on her face that I couldn’t quite read.

And then, just as the object (for lack of a better word) had reached a position about twenty feet above the roof it suddenly began to twist and elongate itself in the most astonishing way. For a moment I could have sworn I was watching the *Futaba* in the midst of one of its transformations. “It’s amorphous diamond,” breathed Kiri, finally putting her thoughts into words. Soon it had transformed into something that left us all gasping for breath.

Try to imagine, if you can, a sheet of glass reshaped into a giant multi-pointed crystal of innumerable facets. Now add to that every color of the rainbow, as well as some that I swear no human eye had ever seen before, all this sending shafts and slivers and knives of light

in every direction as the sun hit it, and you may begin to form a feeble idea of what was being carefully guided into place and secured by an army of workers stationed around its circumference. We hurried into the great hall, brushing aside the safety officer's feeble protests, and found ourselves beneath a panorama of pattern and color that I simply can't describe.

I will never forget the sight of Kiri staring upward, her face transfigured, tears running freely down her cheeks. I knew that it wasn't only a beautiful work of art she was seeing. It was the realization of a life's dream.

Later, when we had somewhat recovered our composure, we invited the artist to share lunch with us. The poor fellow, a young man in his forties like Kiri and me, was initially utterly tongue-tied at being in the presence of—well, you get the picture by now.

"Do you have any idea what that much amorphous diamond must have cost?" Kiri marveled, trying unsuccessfully to put him at ease. "It took me a year's earnings just to buy enough to build the *Futaba*," she added in awe.

"Yeah, and you don't want to know what I thought it looked—Ow!" began Senaria. The unexpected exclamation was punctuated by a mouthful of peas forcefully expelled onto her plate (judging from the momentary glare she shot at Kiri, I assumed it was her foot that had kicked her under the table). It took only moments before we were all reduced to helpless laughter. Even Rann's usually sober composure suffered a severe crack.

The ice broken, our guest enthusiastically explained that the new skylight did indeed utilize the same amorphous diamond composition as the *Futaba*'s hull, unique in its ability to maintain whatever shape and color was needed based on the microconfiguration of a subatomic field. Kiri had used these properties to enable the *Futaba* to take on the appearance of any vehicle she chose; the skylight's designer had instead exploited them to create an incredible work of art composed of a breathtaking range of shapes and colors. "It was a bit difficult convincing the managing authorities to buy into the idea," Gellinda added, "but when he pointed out that it would be a kind of symbolic reference to what Kiri did with the *Futaba*, they decided to go along with it."

"Well," said Kiri quite sincerely, "you've created a masterpiece. Saying thanks doesn't begin to express our feelings." And she leaned across the little table and kissed the astonished artist.

Incidentally, if you're picturing some kind of pale plastic imitation

of a real stained glass window, let me assure you that the depth and purity of color attainable by amorphous diamond leaves ordinary stained glass in the dust. Best of all, the image was practically alive, subtly changing colors and patterns to adapt to the changing light as the day drew on, so that it never looked quite the same from one hour to the next. I have never tired of standing beneath it, bathed in the most intense colors I have ever experienced.

I once expressed concern about what would happen if the control circuits which maintained and configured the gigantic structure ever failed. "It would simply solidify into that shape permanently," Kiri explained in some amusement. "If you're afraid of it falling apart and collapsing onto helpless victims below, I can assure you it would take nothing less than a nuclear blast to crack it."

As the day of the coronation approached, the formerly dead city began taking on a life I found hard to credit. Once again crowds were filling the stairwells to and from the nearby subway stations; an increasing number of the noiseless fliers I had first encountered on Qozernon were filling the streets, neatly avoiding collisions in their almost ghostly way. Shop fronts were reopening; the sidewalks were coming to life. And, with the big day nearly at hand, the number of visitors from elsewhere on Deshtiris (not to mention Qozernon) began to take on frightening proportions.

"Where are they staying?" I asked Kiri apprehensively. She pointed towards the city center several miles away, where the huge skyscrapers frequently touched the clouds.

"Accommodations are pretty primitive, but with the lifts working again you can put an awful lot of people in those things. And everyone's being a very good sport about it. Of course the military is taking care of feeding everyone, since there isn't even remotely enough restaurant capacity."

She wasn't kidding. By the time coronation day dawned, somewhere over a million visitors were crowding the city. Since even the huge main hall of the palace couldn't hold more than twenty thousand or so, there were one heck of a lot of people picnicking on the many spacious lawns of the palace grounds that morning.

The great hall itself, once so desolate, was now gaudy with banners and streamers everywhere. A sea of chairs covered the vast floor, already filling up rapidly, and at one end a raised stage had been set up, even more brilliantly decorated if that were possible. And overhead, of course, casting a continually shifting landscape of color over the visitors, was the reborn skylight. Suddenly our flamboyant new outfits

no longer seemed quite so out of place.

Pomp was the order of the day, and a great show was made of the arrival of each featured guest on stage. The best bands of the Deshtiran military forces had been joined together into one large aggregation, and provided carefully chosen music for each entrance. The band was not all that different from those of my own experience on Earth, basically consisting of instruments blown into and pounded on; the music, of course, was much different than the Western European-based flavor that I had grown up with on Earth.

Until, that is, it was time to make our way to our own assigned places, and I suddenly realized I was hearing something very familiar-sounding indeed, and not at all Deshtiran. “Walton’s *Orb and Sceptre*,” Kiri whispered into my ear as we readied ourselves for the long walk down the central aisle. “Valkar somehow managed to have someone scrounge up a set of parts on Earth and get the piece arranged in time for the musicians to learn.”

I looked at her in amazement. “Did you know that was one of the pieces they played when I graduated from college?”

“Did you know I was there watching you?” she shot back, her eyes shimmering.

I couldn’t help but grin broadly in delight; it was a brilliant, resplendent piece that reminded me in more ways than one of the kaleidoscopic marvel overhead, and the musicians had done a remarkable job learning the unfamiliar scales and runs. I wondered if Willie Walton could ever in his wildest dreams have imagined that someday it would be his composition echoing through the great hall of Deshti thirty-five light-years from Earth.

I felt a momentary flash of panic, picturing the entire assemblage breaking out laughing as we entered through the great wooden doors. But when we stepped into the rear of the hall the response was much different, for all twenty thousand people silently rose to their feet and turned to face us. As we slowly walked down the aisle I saw men and women of all ages, including small children and some of the oldest Deshtirans I had ever seen, some with tears running unashamedly down their cheeks, watching us intently. I thought about the vast history of this planet, extending through almost six thousand years of written records, and suddenly felt very small indeed as we made our way onto the stage and took our seats.

“Coronation” is really a misleading word here. There is no crown placed on the head by a robed cardinal. In fact, our newly commissioned costumes were probably as close to robes of office as

Deshtiris ever gets. The actual ceremony consists of just two events: a person of the Emperor's and Empress's own choosing declares them to be Emperor and Empress of Deshtiris, and the major civil and military figures affirm their loyalty to the new leaders. Since the real relationship between the Deshtiran people and their rulers is based on trust rather than technicalities, this is all more a formality for public show than a legal ceremony in any sense. In fact, there were no legal papers, no documents of any kind ever signed handing us our authority. That's just the way it's done here.

Kiri and I had had a number of discussions as to who should be our "appointer." We sadly ruled out Gelhinda, as she was after all not Deshtiran. We quickly settled on Valkar, whose years of loyalty and service to two generations of the royal family, as well as his ceaseless fidelity during the intervening three decades, made him the inevitable choice. Except that he nearly had a stroke when we told him, and it took us a while, and the administration of several stiff drinks, to reassure him that this was not just another of our bizarre practical jokes on his much-abused personage. (I must regretfully admit that at times he did indeed suffer much at our hands, although we tried to make it up to him whenever possible.)

And so it was that the climactic moment of the day's events was also the simplest. The two of us knelt before him, and in a cracked voice (though not at all from age) he repeated the ancient formula, "Nendor Wilorian, be you now Emperor of Deshtiris. Romikor Mikiria, be you now Empress of Deshtiris. It is so." There was no other sound in the huge crowded hall. This was not a moment for cheers or applause. I know that I could not have spoken at that moment had I wanted to.

There followed a number of announcements by major personages. The head of the Deshtiran military formally announced the end of military rule, and reaffirmed its subjugation to the new civil government, shortly to meet for the first time. "Our ultimate loyalty is to our Emperor and Empress," he finished. "May they serve as our consciences and our voices of righteousness should our people ever again go astray." Similar statements by the leader of the newly-elected civilian government and the three high judges of the royal court followed. And then it was my turn.

This was the moment I had been dreading, of course, and I furtively glanced at the podium, making sure that my speech was there where I had arranged for it to be placed in advance. Years of unsuccessful clarinet lessons had taught me the hard way that if memory is going to fail anywhere, it's during a performance. However,

I was also looking forward to it, as it was going to provide me with an opportunity to say something I'd long wanted to.

We'd known well in advance that a speech would be necessary. Kiri had adamantly insisted that I do it, as the thought practically terrified her. Her earlier moment of microphone fright hadn't encouraged her any, either, although since then she'd done a quite creditable job on numerous occasions. I reluctantly agreed, but secretly decided I wasn't going to let her off that easily.

I cleared my throat hesitantly and blinked in the light. The crowd was hushed now. I began very quietly, a trick I'd learned long ago from one of my English teachers in college. "I'm an engineer, not an orator," I began, garnering a few chuckles, "so I'm going to keep this as simple as I can." I looked down at the front rows, meeting expectant gazes with my own. I took a deep breath.

"I'm sure you all know by now that I spent the last three decades on Earth, unaware of my identity, of my heritage, or even of my real name. Any small part I've played in the dramatic events of these past few months was pretty incidental. I'm not accepting the duties of Emperor because I think I've earned them, nor do I seriously believe that I can do a better job than any one of you. I'm accepting this trust as a gesture of profound respect for you, for Deshtiris, and for the memory of my parents, your former Emperor and Empress, who lost their own lives in a valiant attempt to preserve what they believed in." By now the hall was silent, and I took advantage of it to pause dramatically.

"However," I continued, "there is one here before you who has spent the past thirty years of her life in a relentless struggle for you, her people. On many occasions she took terrible risks to challenge the forces keeping you in chains. Her rage at what had happened to you never flagged, nor did her determination. Just five short months ago she very nearly lost her life in this battle, and yet today she is alive and with us and *you are free*." Several shouts went up from around the huge hall and I held up my hand and waited for utter silence. When I finally resumed, you could have heard the proverbial pin drop. "There is a profound debt of gratitude due from all of us which can never truly be repaid. It can, however, be acknowledged, and I ask you to do so now. My fellow Deshtirans, let us now honor Romikor Mikiria," and I paused for a brief moment as a rumble began to grow from the thousands before me, "Empress of Deshtiris!"

The rumble detonated into a roar as I took Kiri's hand and raised her to her feet beside me, her face by now bright red with embarrassment. I momentarily wondered if I'd made a terrible mistake,

as the cataract swelled to such proportions that I feared the newly-restored skylight overhead would shatter and come raining down upon us (it held). After a few seconds the amorphous din began to acquire shape and rhythm, until finally I could clearly hear a single massive voice shouting in unison, “Mi-ki-ri-a! Mi-ki-ri-a! Mi-ki-ri-a!” And then, before the assembled thousands, I took her in my arms and kissed her, thereby risking permanent hearing loss as the already deafening cheers shot right off the scale.

I suddenly became aware that the chant had changed slightly, and then realized that I was now hearing “Wi-lo-ri-an! Wi-lo-ri-an!” It was my turn to blush, I suppose, and I did a creditable job of it, too. We both thought the cheering would go on forever; sitting back down didn’t help, and we finally gave up and relaxed until at last everyone had pretty much shouted themselves hoarse. (I heard later that those two chants were heard in the streets of every city in Deshtiris that night, and some of Qozernon’s as well, as the crowds watching the telecom monitors set up on every street corner joined in enthusiastically. I guess that unless you’ve lived under a tyranny like the Brizal one you really can’t fully appreciate what it meant; at least I couldn’t.)

After that the rest of the ceremony was somewhat of an anticlimax. There were lots of speeches, and a number of gorgeous and stunning gifts from various cities and groups around the planet (both for us and for the palace). Finally everyone began filing out for the innumerable receptions set up all over the immense grounds, and we steeled ourselves for several hours of glad-handing and chit-chat before we could at last drag ourselves to bed.



Things were finally starting to get back on track, and it really looked as though the place could survive without us for a few weeks. I had suggested a vacation to Kiri, and the belated discovery that I had inadvertently left several CDs in my cubicle file cabinet back in Fontana, California suggested a possible destination for our sojourn. At first Kiri had been reluctant, but when I pointed out that she hadn't had a vacation since she'd died she finally agreed. Our plans were soon expanded to include Senaria and Rann, although Gelhinda sorrowfully declined due to several important diplomatic meetings. We eventually reached the point where only Valkar had any remaining objections.

"But your Majesties," he had wailed in dismay, "you surely can't go all the way to Earth without at least a bodyguard. Those people are savages. They give firearms to children. At least think of me. If something happened to you the people would hang me from the nearest lamppost."

"Look," Kiri finally burst out in exasperation, "in the past fifteen years the only people that have seriously tried to harm me have been my own father and my sister-in-law, and they're both dead. Unless you count Will, here, there isn't anyone left who's sufficiently closely related to me to want to kill me. So what the hell do I need a bodyguard for?!" The unfortunate fellow was, however, not to be denied, although after several months back in our service he had justifiably learned to be wary of her temper.

"Very well," she had finally acquiesced. "But only on condition that I shall choose the bodyguards."

"Your wish is my command," said the ancient major domo gratefully, prostrating himself (I hate it when they do that) while falling directly into the trap.

"Then," announced Kiri imperiously, "I hereby appoint Parkor Rann and Amkor Senaria as my royal bodyguard—assuming, of course, that they are willing." Judging from the beams of astonished delight she received from the two, it was quite evident that they were.

Valkar's earlier dismay was nothing compared to his expression

now. “But they’re only *children*, your majesty,” he protested weakly, then a moment later winced as he found Senaria’s sword point at his throat.

“Senaria, that will do,” I snapped, although even I had to admire how neatly she had accomplished the move. (In fairness to her, I should mention that it was a practice blade, with a rounded point and no sharp edges, and Valkar knew it perfectly well.)

“I am not a child,” she hissed as she reluctantly put away her weapon.

“I second the Empress’ decision,” I added in my most authoritative voice. “A deal’s a deal, right, Valkar?”

“Yes, Your Majesties,” he agreed reluctantly and hastily made his exit, shooting an annoyed glare at Senaria as he did so. After informing her that she would write him a sincere letter of apology within the hour or the deal was off, we dismissed her and Rann as well.

“Jeez, that ‘Majesties’ stuff gets tiresome after a while,” I groaned once they were gone.

Kiri laughed. “Well, you told me that you wanted useful employment when I first took you away from Earth. It’s not as though you aren’t doing anything worthwhile.” I nodded, this time a bit more seriously. The rebuilding of Deshtiris had proven to be a far more daunting task than even we had feared. The forced re-industrialization of the planet into a massive war machine had left an entire generation utterly untrained in the technological skills now sorely needed.

Between the military, the Brizali’s prison camps, and the Deshtiran refugee community on Qozernon, we had finally managed to come up with a cadre of technocrats with the necessary skills to begin steering the planet back onto the track from which it had so disastrously derailed thirty years ago. Kiri and I had agreed that our role was twofold: first, to give the people a ray of hope during the second major wrench they had experienced during the past half century, and second, to keep a rein on the technocrats and ensure that at least a semblance of humanity was retained during the process.

I had to admit that Deshtiris possessed the most good-natured populace I had ever seen. We had feared the outbreak of rioting, mass lynching of ex-Brizali, and a general bloodbath of revenge-taking, but so far the peace had held (with a few scattered lapses). I had to place much of the credit for that on the love Deshtiris held for its new Empress, for her crimson-red hair and enormous emerald-green eyes were probably the two best-loved wonders of the planet and had been since her childhood. Nor did I feel the least jealousy over her immense

popularity, for after all she was my wife and how many people get to marry a space goddess anyway?

And so it was that we left on our first real vacation since my arrival on Qozernon six months ago. And how fitting that our destination would be Earth. At least no one there would be calling me “Your Majesty,” I contemplated with considerable satisfaction. We took the *Futaba*, of course, due to its exceptionally handy ability to transform itself into an RV, a truck, or whatever else was convenient at the time. We had landed the following night at a secluded country house high in the foothills above Fontana, California.

“So this is another of your ‘safe houses?’ ” I asked as we set down on the darkened lawn. The phrase seemed especially ironic considering that the last time we had stopped at one we had nearly been killed by Brizal Liquidators. “You know, I never did ask you just where you came up with the money for all these places.”

“I stole it,” was her astonishing, and typical, answer.

“Say again?” I choked, not sure I had heard correctly.

“From a major bank,” she added helpfully.

“Kiri!?”

“Don’t be such a prude,” she snorted. “I hacked into several banks, and when I found one with lots of organized crime connections (not to mention a record of funding third world dictators), I set up my own account and made some withdrawals. I also sent them anonymous email tipping them off about several real computer criminals who were robbing them blind, so if they bothered to follow up they’ll have recovered far more than I used.” She named the bank, and I gasped.

I reflected on her skill at sidestepping what for most people would constitute serious ethical dilemmas, and shook my head. “You know what you remind me of?” I exclaimed. “A pirate.”

Senaria giggled. “He’s right, Kiri, that’s perfect. If there were ever a pirate worthy of the name, it’s you.” Rann gave her a shocked look; after five months of living with us he still hadn’t quite reconciled his idealized image of the legendary Princess Mikiria with the distinctly scandalous (and much more interesting) flesh-and-blood Kiri.

She sighed. “I guess it’s official, then. Shall I paint a Jolly Roger on the side of the *Futaba*?”

Like her other mountain home, which had unfortunately been vaporized during our hasty flight from the Liquidators, this one was relatively isolated, located well up in the foothills overlooking the so-called Inland Empire. From a nearby bluff one could look down into the endless sea of lights known as the Los Angeles Basin. More

accurately, one could look down into the ever-present smog; fortunately we were high enough to be pretty much out of it.

This locale had been my habitat for most of the past thirty years, but I felt no sense of homecoming. My home, my friends, and my life were on Deshtiris now and I knew it.

The next morning we headed down the narrow dirt road to “civilization” in one of the small sport utility vehicles which Kiri preferred when visiting Earth, while I marveled that her remarkable ability to acquire real estate apparently extended to motor vehicles as well. Our destination was my old office at California University/Fontana, there to seek out my former supervisor, the unsuspecting Ms. D’Arcangelo. Before long we had traversed most of Fontana via the row of palm trees and flowering plums that extended down the center of the town’s main street, and were parked in one of the visitors’ spaces at the university. As we strolled through the quiet campus (it was, after all, near the end of the summer session), a male voice unexpectedly called out Kiri’s name from across one of the grassy quadrangles.

For a moment I was startled, then remembered that she’d also spent quite a bit of time on this part of the planet. In fact, she’d attended classes here on more than one occasion, while keeping a discreet eye on me. The older man that was waving and striding briskly towards us was one of the university’s most celebrated (and unlikely) finds, the world-famous theoretical physicist Alan Brinkman.

I saw Kiri’s face break into a glowing smile as she abandoned us to meet him halfway in his advance with a big hug. A moment later the two had rejoined us as she introduced her former teacher (and lover, many years ago). “Alan, this is my husband Wilorian.”

“It’s a great privilege to meet you, Dr. Brinkman,” I assured him, greeting him with a warm handshake.

For a moment he looked disconcerted, then Kiri added wickedly, “You might have encountered him in another incarnation if you ever had any class rosters mangled by the records office.”

At that he returned my handshake with much more enthusiasm. “You’re the fellow Kiri said she was watching over all those years.”

“Alan, things have changed since I saw you last,” she said more seriously. “We’ve now got Deshtiris to clean up, and let me tell you it’s a job that scares the crap out of me.”

“You mean that those Brizzly people you told me about aren’t—” he began, being promptly interrupted by Senaria.

“Yer lookin’ at the new Emperor and Empress of Deshtiris,” she

drawled proudly. At that he was finally rendered speechless, probably as much by her Texas accent (picked up from years of watching pirated *Dallas* reruns on Qozernan television) as by the information imparted, and I took the opportunity to invite him to join us after we ran our little errand.

And so it was that after our victorious skirmish with Ms. D'Arcangelo we picked him up at the student-run coffee shop on our way off campus, and it proved to be a very lucky thing that we had.



“Now tell me about this ‘Empress’ business,” Brinkman said as we drove through downtown Fontana looking for a decent place to eat. “And I thought you didn’t want to be seen in public with your real hair color. What’s next? No contacts?”

She laughed as we pulled into a parking space in front of a small restaurant that she’d grown fond of during previous visits. “The hair’s pretty innocuous these days,” she observed, “but somehow I don’t think Earth is ready yet for my eyes.”

It was a pleasant little place, apparently one of the original businesses located on what used to be Route 66, but extensively remodeled. We found ourselves a booth near the back, with no one sitting nearby, and as we waited for our orders Kiri briefly filled in our guest on some of the events that we’d recently lived through. When she finished he appeared suitably impressed. “Emperor and Empress,” he marveled, shaking his head.

I should explain that Brinkman was the one and only “native” Kiri had confided in during her frequent visits to Earth over the past thirty years. In fact, she’d taken his famous advanced physics seminar several times (once every few years), though she’d had to be a bit more circumspect after letting herself get carried away with an indiscreet teacher-student romance which had nearly gotten him sacked. He’d even been up in the *Futaba*, a privilege no other Earth-born human had experienced.

“Personally, I don’t understand why you two have to share power with a civilian government,” growled Senaria, who in the meantime had been quietly translating for Rann. I felt a bit sorry for him, as most of our conversation was now taking place in English, a language he didn’t know much of yet. “Isn’t there some Earth saying about the best ruler being a benevolent despot?” she went on. “I mean, look what happened last time.” I noticed with some interest that even though she was speaking English, her Texas accent almost disappeared when she wasn’t thinking about it.

Brinkman laughed. “Tom Edison. Unfortunately, that’s only part of the quote.” He was about to continue when Kiri interrupted him.

“‘The best government in the world is that of a benevolent despot of great mental capacity,’” she said, and paused dramatically for a moment before continuing. “‘Of which Emperor Wilhelm of Germany is a type.’ Date of quote, 1911,” she finished with a chuckle.

“Ouch,” admitted Senaria reluctantly. Brinkman shook his head.

“You know, Kiri, you always did scare me a bit. That memory of yours is frightening at times.” The waitress set down our orders in front of us, Brinkman having a burger and the rest of us vegetable dishes of various sorts. Neither Deshtirans nor Qozernans eat meat, considering all animals to be sentient beings not to be harvested as food. Even the omnipresent high boots worn by virtually all inhabitants of the Twin Planets are made of a synthetic leather substitute, which in any case has properties far superior to real leather.

“I’ve got a tantalizing tidbit for you now,” Brinkman resumed between bites. “I was speaking to a colleague who’s doing some research on the side for GGGTech—you know, the big defense contractor—and he mentioned a classified project you might find interesting. Something about ‘laser rifles,’” he added, watching her expression closely. Anyone who knew her less well than I might have missed the momentary gleam that flashed across her eyes. Brinkman didn’t.

“Laser rifles,” she said casually. “Sounds about as practical as the atomic locomotive the Army tried to develop after the Second World War. So what’s so special about that?”

The physicist paused. “That’s what I thought at first. But there’s one odd thing about this particular project. Most lasers are at their top efficiency in the red wavelengths; in fact the other colors are pretty much reserved for feeble things like CD players and the like. But these are supposed to use green lasers.” Kiri turned distinctly pale. For a moment all conversation ceased, even Senaria and Rann picking up the sudden change in atmosphere.

“Why don’t you come up to the house with us this evening,” she said at last, her voice a masterpiece of synthetic equanimity. “I think we should talk about this somewhere less public. Is that okay with you, Will?” I nodded agreement. The rest of our meal was accompanied by small talk amidst a distinctly uneasy atmosphere, as Brinkman did his best to strike up a conversation with Senaria, to Rann’s evident discomfiture.

For several hours that evening we sat outside on the bluff in front of the house, enjoying the cool clean air all the more after the dry, smoggy heat below. We were at least two miles from the nearest paved

road, and the lights of the Los Angeles Basin twinkled bleakly far below like distant stars seen through water. Rann had dispiritedly wandered off to bed after repeated attempts to make conversation with Senaria had been met with monosyllables, and she was now perched on a rock a few yards to one side, moodily staring into the valley through half-closed eyes.

“So what’s this all about, Kiri?” Brinkman was saying. “I thought it was your planet’s policy not to interfere with Earth at all.”

“Let’s get real here,” she retorted. “You’re mixing us up with *Star Trek*®. We don’t have a ‘prime directive,’ if that’s what you’re thinking. But we do generally stay out of Earth’s affairs, if only because we’d probably make things worse if we started actively messing around here.” For obvious reasons she didn’t mention the Watchdogs.

“Well,” I said, “someone is apparently passing along this technology. The question is, why?”

“And why to the U.S. Government in particular?” added Kiri. For a while we argued the various possibilities, but the end result was we all eventually agreed that without more information we were just spinning our wheels. Before long Senaria and then Brinkman had drifted back to the house.

“It’s quite a view, isn’t it?” I said to a remarkably subdued Kiri. For a long time she didn’t answer but just sat hunched there on the ground, arms wrapped around bent knees.

“All those millions of people down there,” she finally murmured. “They live out their lives with so many threats hanging over their heads, but they just keep going. I wonder whether it would make any difference if they knew.”

“If they knew?” I said skeptically. “About what? The laser rifles? They’ve lived knowing they could vanish in a flash of nuclear hell all these years, and it hasn’t really made any difference. People are like that, I suppose.”

“This is different,” she said thoughtfully. “There’s something—someone—behind this. I wish I had an idea what they were thinking. There has to be a reason for handing over advanced technology like that. It just doesn’t make sense unless someone has a plan. And that scares the hell out of me.” She put her head down, closed eyes pressed tightly against her knees, and sat there silently as if trying to shut out the world. I put an arm around her shoulders and held her for a while before we headed back.

Inside I found Brinkman sullenly watching television. “That

Senaria's certainly an antisocial creature, isn't she?" he grumbled. I soon extracted the sorry story: it seems he had followed the girl back to the house only to have her make apologies and head straight for bed. Smothering a grin, I decided she had the right idea and decided to turn in myself.

The house was silent as I finished in the bathroom. Everyone had gone to bed except for Kiri, who was still sitting in the living room rereading one of the reports Brinkman had brought along. I decided to take one last look at the view and quietly stepped out onto the balcony of our second floor bedroom. Beneath me I saw the eerie outline of the living room window painted in light on the front lawn, Kiri's silhouette in the center. The city lights still twinkled far below, and once my eye caught an odd glimmer in a place where I didn't remember seeing a clear view into the valley.

For a few seconds I wondered if it were a vehicle on one of the distant mountain roads, and then I saw it again and realized it was on the lawn a few feet from where the surrounding brush began. A moment later it moved slightly closer to the house and for just an instant was caught in a stray beam from the light over the garage door.

It was the barrel of a rifle, and it was pointed directly at the living room window.

## Part III: Insurrections





I saw the rifle, I saw a vague blur where the owner would be, and I saw Kiri's silhouette on the grass. And then several things happened virtually simultaneously, seemingly of their own volition.

"Kiri!!!" I heard myself scream. "Hit the floor! Now!"

The rifle barrel suddenly tilted, now pointing directly at me. Without willing it, without even thinking, I threw out my arm in the direction of the nearly invisible assailant. I saw a bright flash at the barrel of the gun, and at almost the same moment a blinding bolt of energy flew from my hand at the dark blur on the grass.

An instant later a massive gout of yellow-orange flame exploded outward in all directions from the same location. There was a deafening bang, followed a moment later by receding echoes from the surrounding mountains mixed with a faint tinkle of shattering glass somewhere behind me. Then silence, broken only by a faint sizzling sound from the lawn.

But that lasted only for a few seconds, as the house erupted in a chaos of banging doors and shouts. I clattered down the stairs, nearly running into Senaria emerging blearily from her first floor bedroom wearing only a pair of shorts. Kiri was just picking herself off the floor (thank god! I thought to myself), and a moment later Rann and Brinkman appeared at the top of the stairs.

Kiri wasted no time assessing the situation. Opening a wall panel, she uncovered a small screen that provided a view of the front lawn, and as she manipulated the controls a number of dim yellow squares appeared where I had seen the assailant. I recognized the screen as being the same type used at the other mountain house where we had narrowly escaped an ambush by Brizal assassination creatures.

"A Liquidator?" I asked, fearing the answer even as I spoke.

"No," she answered briefly, "those would show up as red. This was human. Looks like you scattered it all over the landscape, too." She scanned the surrounding area in all directions, with negative results. "That was the only one," she said, turning to us.

"What happened to the alarm?" Senaria demanded, now wide-

awake. “Why didn’t we get a warning?”

Kiri looked sheepish. “I never turned it on. I didn’t think there was any need to. Sen, please go put something on,” she added, noticing Rann and Brinkman averting their eyes (with reluctance, I’m sure) from the half-clothed young woman.

“Will, was that one of your energy bolts?” Kiri asked, looking at me in perplexity, and then her eyes widened. “And—what the hell is this? You’re bleeding all over your pajamas.” I looked down at my shoulder and saw a red stain seeping down the right front of my pajama tops. Only then did I become aware of a searing pain in the vicinity of my right collarbone.

“Let me see that,” she demanded, ripping apart the fabric at the shoulder. “Only a graze,” she sighed in relief. “Sen, bring your medical kit too,” she shouted. I remembered the tinkling of broken glass behind me, and felt my knees go just a bit wobbly. Churchill may have found it “exhilarating to be shot at without result,” but it wasn’t my idea of a good time. A few moments later Senaria reappeared, this time sporting a T-shirt and with a small case in one hand.

“He was aiming at you through the window,” I said to Kiri. “With a rifle.” I gritted my teeth as Senaria wiped down the wound with an antiseptic cloth and covered it with an adhesive patch, inducing a substantial stinging that left my eyes watering for several minutes.

“I’m really sorry, Will,” she said softly into my ear, and I noticed that she looked very pale beneath her habitual tan. Her six months studying medicine had come in handy more than once, I decided, even if she hadn’t quite gotten some of the basics down.

“You know,” I babbled on, “I didn’t even have time to do the incantation thing, or—hey, I’m not wearing the pendant either.” I had given it back to Kiri as a safety precaution, or so we thought. “Does that mean I could do this at any time?”

Kiri shook her head. “I really don’t know. Let’s hope you don’t get mad at some innocent dolt and blow him up unexpectedly. All right, everyone,” she announced in a loud voice, “let’s see what’s out there.” I shivered involuntarily as we stepped out of the house, electric torches in hand.

It didn’t take long to find what was left of our assailant. “Oh, gross,” grumbled Senaria, surveying the carnage. My bolt had hit him squarely in the rib cage, exploding it. Brinkman made a gagging noise and turned away, and Rann also looked a bit green (although it may have been the torchlight).

The lower part of the body, from about the waist down, was still

more or less in one piece, and Kiri quickly searched it unsuccessfully for a wallet or other identification. “Dammit,” she said, wiping her hands on the grass. “Who the hell was this?”

“Um, Will...” I heard Senaria say, and something in her voice made my skin crawl. “Over here.” Watching carefully where we stepped, we relocated to where she had caught something in the beam of her torch. It was the head, which had rolled about fifteen feet from the rest of the body, and the face was still relatively intact, now bearing a permanently surprised expression.

“You knew him?” Kiri asked, obviously puzzled.

“We both did,” I said, my stomach knotting up as the ineradicable memory of an underground passageway and a lifeless body face down in a pool of blood rose up once again before me. “I don’t think I’d forget that face. This was the leader of Krigghin Teyn’s bodyguard.” The charismatic Teyn had been presumed dead at Tar Deshta along with Tenako. His bodyguard had been notorious for encompassing some of the worst thugs on the planet.

“This is not good,” Senaria said softly.

Brinkman coughed discreetly. “I know I’m just a guest here, but I’m afraid I don’t quite follow what’s going on.”

“If this guy survived Tar Deshta,” Kiri answered, “then it’s very likely that Teyn did too.”

“If so,” I said, “he’s almost certainly behind this. And that means he’s likely to try again. Kiri, I don’t think we ought to hang around here for long. There’s no telling what they might do next.”

Kiri nodded. “I’m more worried about what might be going on back home in our absence. ‘While the cat’s away...’” she finished, and the cliché seemed all the more appropriate as her eyes caught the porch light just right and shone bright green for a brief instant.

“Er, excuse me,” said Brinkman nervously, “but shouldn’t we be calling the police about now? After all, I believe that you have the remains of a dead body on your front lawn.”

Kiri gave a humorless bark of a laugh. “Oh, yeah, I’d love to see their faces when we explain that Will here blew him up with his fingers.” Brinkman looked distressed. “It’s okay, Alan. Look, this guy isn’t even from Earth, and neither are we. The local police wouldn’t know what to do with this, and I don’t relish the thought of our group, including not incidentally the Emperor and Empress of Deshtiris, being locked up in the Fontana police station for questioning. We’ll have to take care of this in our own way.”

“Now,” she continued, “everyone move over to the porch. I’m

going out back to bring up the *Futaba*.” We did as she instructed, Brinkman muttering something about condoning a felony, and a few moments later the *Futaba* rose from behind the house where it had been parked and stopped about forty feet above the debris on the lawn. An opening appeared in the side, but instead of the usual ramp we saw a transparent level plank, about four feet long, extrude itself from under the doorway. A moment later Kiri stepped out holding something that looked ominously like a crude bazooka, with one end resting on her shoulder. Rann gasped in recognition.

“Alan, you wanted to know more about the laser rifles,” she said, her voice clearly audible through the night air. “Here’s your chance to see what they can do. I’ve set it on a broad spread instead of the usual tight beam.” She aimed it down at the ghastly mess, and an instant later we were temporarily blinded by a brilliant green burst from the weapon, followed by a huge white fireball on the lawn. A blast of heat struck us, as though we had stood too closely to a raging bonfire. A thunderous noise, somewhere between a bang and a whoosh, echoed from the mountainsides as we blinked away afterimages for the next several minutes.

Of the body on the lawn, or for that matter of several hundred square feet of the lawn itself, there was no trace. Instead there was a smoking circular crater perhaps a foot deep at the center and at least thirty feet in diameter, every trace of organic matter having been burned away. “Jesus,” Brinkman whispered. “And this is the demon toy that’s being given to our planet?”

“More like a Pandora’s box,” I said quietly. “How’d you like to see kids doing drive-by shootings with those things?”

A few minutes later Kiri rejoined us, having parked the *Futaba*. “Well,” she said to Brinkman, “think the police will find anything?”

“They may cite you for having an illegal barbecue,” he said, still evidently shaken, “but I think I’d be more worried about who else is out there.”

“Alan,” she said more seriously, “I’m really sorry to have dragged you into this. It obviously wasn’t on the agenda for this trip. On the bright side, I’m sure it was only me that he was after. If he’d wanted to kill all of us he could have easily done it with a few sticks of dynamite. You might want to be a bit careful from now on, though, especially since you’re privy to that scuttlebutt about the lasers.”

“It’s okay,” he said dryly. “Don’t forget I was the one who approached you. But I do have to admit it’s been an interesting evening.”

We debated leaving that very night, but Kiri pointed out that with the alarm on we'd receive plenty of advance warning if anyone else showed up, and that we might be in more danger of an ambush taking the narrow mountain road in the dark. I offered to drive Brinkman back the next morning to UFont, as the inmates refer to it, while the rest of the gang packed up our belongings.

Brinkman cleared his throat. "I know that I'm probably not supposed to ask this; in fact I presume that I'm not supposed to even know that you exist. But, uh, I don't really have a lot to do here right now, and I wonder if—" He paused a moment in embarrassment. Kiri looked at him expectantly.

"You want to come along, is that what you're trying to say, Alan?" I had to grin; she definitely hadn't lost her ability to simulate a first-rate mind-reader when she wanted to.

"Actually, yes," he admitted. "You know there's not much to keep me here; you're the only decent student I've had in years. The children I get these days put more work into computing what they think their grade should be than doing the equations we're supposed to be exploring. Besides, I've spent my whole life looking at the universe from what amounts to the bottom of a well. I wouldn't mind a better view." Kiri nodded and turned to me inquiringly.

"If you're asking if I mind," I said, somewhat nonplused, "it's fine with me. Are you sure there isn't some interstellar law against it?" She again emitted that bark of a laugh I'd heard from her earlier.

"We make the laws, remember?" she retorted. More soberly, she added, "Actually, no, it generally isn't done, but there's no concrete rule against it. A few visitors have even brought back mates from Earth. Besides, if he did decide to tell the world about his adventures, he'd end up lumped into the same category as the Roswell crowd, right, Alan?" He reddened slightly; after all, for years he had carried on a personal crusade against the irrational craze for alien conspiracy theories. But then he'd met the real thing, so I suppose one can hardly blame him.

"Don't you have classes or something to teach, though?" I asked. By this time I was starting to feel a little sorry for California University/Fontana. Once Deshtiris was through with it there'd be no one left working there at this rate.

"Not really," he assured me. "I'm on sabbatical until the end of the winter semester, so I don't have to be back until January. Someone will give me a ride home then, I trust?" he added hesitantly, prompting general mirth. It was decided that I would take him into town the

following morning to settle up his affairs, and we'd leave as soon as the two of us returned.

Eventually we all managed to clean ourselves up and find our way back to bed, after Kiri reset the alarm to warn us if anyone so much as sneezed in the direction of the house. Closing the bedroom door behind us, I started in surprise as Kiri threw her arms around me and held me tightly. I could feel her body shaking. I thought she was crying, but when she turned her face up to me her eyes were dry.

"Will, what is happening here?" she whispered. "I really thought it was all over. Why now? Why us?"

"We'll deal with it," I said calmly. "If we can't, no one can." That night I held her and gently stroked her soft crimson mane for what seemed forever until she finally fell into a deep sleep. I wish I could say as much for myself, waking up the next morning with a nagging headache and the vague memory of hideous dreams. It wasn't the first time, I thought ruefully.



On the way down the mountain the next morning Brinkman raised the issue of what he called my “lightning bolts.” I explained that when Kiri’s father had genetically manipulated her during the first few weeks of her mother’s pregnancy he had done likewise to me, implanting every cell in my body with a kind of submicroscopic battery.

I had first become vaguely aware of it several months before I met Kiri when four nonsense words—*vren*, *bri*, *do*, *gred*—started popping into my head at random intervals. Later, we discovered under rather dramatic circumstances that if I spoke those four words while holding a pendant that Tenako had created (and that had ultimately ended up in Kiri’s possession), it somehow activated the ability to throw what for lack of a better phrase could be described as bolts of electrical energy.

“And apparently you no longer need to say the words or hold the pendant in order to do this?” Brinkman asked incredulously.

“Apparently not,” I answered.

He digested that for a few minutes. “Remind me not to ever piss you off in traffic,” he finally muttered.

Somewhat to my surprise he shifted the conversation to Senaria, and I soon confirmed that he had not been oblivious to her undeniable charms. I knew he had a formidable reputation for pursuing the opposite sex but I wasn’t particularly disturbed; she was quite capable of taking care of herself and certainly didn’t need a chaperone to protect her.

“Are she and that Rann fellow a pair?” he asked, once he knew that I wasn’t going to play the protective father.

“Not as far as I know,” I answered. “I think they’re just good friends. At least they don’t sleep together, unless they’ve been keeping it a closely guarded secret, and that’s not Sen’s style.” I could practically see the wheels turning in his head, and suspected that we might be in for a bit of entertainment in the near future.

It was midday before the two of us arrived back at the house, there to be informed that the *Futaba* was all packed and ready to go. A few

minutes later we were rising into the air, Brinkman admiring the huge crater in the front yard as the scenery receded below us. Since there were only four seats in the *Futaba*, Senaria graciously volunteered to go prepare dinner in the attached living quarters, and I sat with Rann in the rear two seats while Kiri explained to Brinkman why we weren't concerned about being picked up on Earth's radar. (The ship's walls were transparent to microwaves, and the metal portions of the ship were small enough that they were unlikely to be identified as anything other than static).

"This is just so incredible," said the awestruck Rann. Although he'd had some experience with space travel, most of it had been in the huge Deshtiran battleships from which one generally didn't get much of a view. The *Futaba*, on the other hand, with its utterly transparent crystal walls, would have been a tour director's dream. Kiri's antics didn't detract from the show either; while we didn't buzz the surface of the moon as we had on my first trip off Earth, that omission was more than rectified with close runs by both Jupiter and Saturn.

"This time they're not so far out of the way," she called back to us as she perpetrated a near-miss of Ganymede, Rann's eyes nearly popping out of their sockets. A moment later the universe had turned inside out as we dropped into hyperspace, with black stars dotting a blinding white universe, then things returned to normal except that the stars could now be seen slowly shifting against one another.

Eventually the four of us reluctantly headed back to the living quarters for dinner. Senaria had done herself proud concocting a tasty meal, and Brinkman and Rann competed enthusiastically in singing her praises (in spite of the absence of burgers). I had to smile; flattery was hardly the way to her heart, but they were both clearly oblivious to that minor fact. Before long she managed to slip away, but not without wolfing down a healthy portion herself. Food was no trivial matter for her, I knew. For a while I talked to Rann about his experiences with the Brizali, until he finally excused himself.

I left Kiri and Brinkman animatedly discussing some fine point of advanced quantum chromodynamics, and decided to go watch the stars for a bit. As I stepped through the gateway into the *Futaba*, the uneasy sensation of stepping out onto a narrow plank into the vast open universe was even more disconcerting than usual, since most of the lights had been doused. Up at the front, barely silhouetted against the surrounding stars, I made out Senaria's shaggy mop. "Mind if join you?" I said quietly, though easily audible across the length of the small craft. For a moment she hesitated, then her reluctant "Okay"

came back in a considerably more subdued tone than usual.

I slid into the seat next to her and saw that she was staring out at the stars. Even the console indicators had been dimmed, but though her face was just visible in the starlight I could still see the faintly shining streaks on her cheeks. “Hi,” I said gently. “Want to tell Uncle Will about it?”

At that she had to grin a little in spite of herself. “Uncle Will?” she half-snorted. “More like Big Brother, wouldn’t you say?”

“So tell Big Brother about it,” I said encouragingly. “Big Brother loves you. What’s wrong?”

For a while she seemed to be unsuccessfully trying to put her thoughts into words. Several times she started to say something, then thought better of it and choked it off. “Damn,” she finally exploded in frustration. “I can’t believe how mixed up I am. What a mess.” I saw a fresh streak glistening on one cheek, which she surreptitiously tried to wipe away without my noticing. Diplomatically I looked away for a moment; when I turned back it was gone.

“You know how excited I was about being part of your bodyguard,” she said at last. “I thought, what could happen now; Deshtiris is free, everyone’s safe; it sounded like such a lark. And then I screwed up and Kiri was almost killed. I was fast asleep, and didn’t even know what had happened. Too busy contemplating my own navel. Hell of a bodyguard,” she finished bitterly. I looked at her in surprise.

“It was hardly your fault,” I said. “Even Kiri didn’t bother to turn on the alarm. What would you have done? Stood guard all night at the window?” I suddenly understood that this was a side trip, not the real issue. I think she realized that I knew, because she abruptly turned and eyed me apprehensively. “It’s all right, Sen,” I said. “I know how you feel about her. Don’t ever worry that I’m going to resent it somehow. I just wish things were easier for you, that’s all.” Changing the subject slightly, I added, “I take it Rann’s not really your cup of tea.”

She giggled slightly. “Rann’s a sweet kid. He’s utterly loyal, desperately straight-laced, even for a Deshtiran, rather cute, and has a very nice body. He’s also capable of being incredibly tedious. I just wish he hadn’t chosen me for his first crush; I really don’t want to hurt his feelings.” I had to smile; after the devastating critique she had just provided of the hapless youth, her prime concern was for his feelings? I suspected that I wouldn’t want to be around if she ever did intentionally take aim at someone’s ego, especially if they had it coming.

I tousled her hair for a moment and stood up. “Feel any better now?” I asked. She nodded morosely.

“Yeah. Thanks, Will,” she said, adding an unconvincing smile, and I headed back to the living quarters, feeling a bit relieved to have four walls, a ceiling and a floor around me. I had no illusions about Senaria; underneath the buoyant persona she presented to the world I knew that she was one very troubled young woman, and that there weren’t going to be any easy answers for her.



I hardly need add that our premature return to Deshtiris created a sensation among those in the know. Foremost among them were Valkar (for in spite of the obvious fact that we were providing him with a legitimate excuse to say “I told you so,” we certainly weren’t going to keep him in the dark), Holan, and Gelhinda. We had of course contacted them well before our arrival and filled them in on events. Military intelligence was brought in via Holan, and we spent several hours with them regurgitating everything we could possibly remember about the encounter. We also provided them with copies of the relevant records from Kiri’s alarm system (although by the time it had been turned on there hadn’t really been much left to record).

The rest of the palace staff, as well as the news media, were simply told that we had returned early due to some unexpected difficulties. The last thing we wanted was for a rumor to start spreading that Krigghin Teyn was alive, well, and causing mayhem. There were still some thirty thousand Brizali unaccounted for, and although many of them had undoubtedly perished at Tar Deshta there were no doubt others who had gone underground or assumed false identities, and we didn’t care to give them any unnecessary ideas.

Gelhinda had some news of her own: a representative of the Qozernan Watchdog organization would be arriving in a few days. Her visit was carefully camouflaged as a continuation of the intricate trade negotiations still ongoing after all these months. (I’d give you her name, but then I’d have to kill you.)

We also had our unexpected guest to provide for. On the trip back we had warned him that both Kiri and I were often tied up for most of the day with all of the administrivia incident to being All-Powerful Rulers. There was also the language barrier, for although quite a few Qozernans speak excellent English (partly due to the considerable amount of pirated Earth television available on that planet), the years of Brizal rule had virtually eliminated the language requirements in the Deshtiran school systems. Rather to our surprise, Senaria volunteered to take on the task of teaching him the Deshtiran language, something

Brinkman objected to not at all.

“He’s a lot of fun to talk to,” she told us enthusiastically later that afternoon, “and it gives me a chance to practice my English. I was hoping to do that on this trip and things didn’t quite work out that way.” Soon the sight of the two of them sitting together under a tree laughing and talking became a regular fixture on the palace grounds. I also thought I detected the first signs of a real turn for the better in Senaria’s psyche, as the cheerfulness no longer seemed so forced, the good moods no longer skating quite so treacherously on the surface.

Before long she was taking him around the surrounding countryside in her new flier. At first Rann accompanied them on many of these outings, but I got the definite impression that he was feeling a bit unwanted (although I doubt that Senaria would have ever intentionally made him so), and eventually he was discreetly finding other things to do and looking thoroughly glum about it.

I could see why Senaria found the older man to be entertaining company. He had a razor-sharp mind (he was, in fact, the only person I’d ever seen best Kiri in a battle of puns), and a knack for seeing the absurdity in situations that we take for granted. The result was an endless series of entertaining observations on everything around him. In short, he simply didn’t “act his age.” This proved to be not altogether a good thing, as events would shortly demonstrate.

“You know, Alan,” Kiri said not long after his arrival, “we can’t turn the clock back for you like we did for Will, because his aging was basically a fraud to start with, but we can at least slow the process down. With a few treatments and plenty of exercise you could easily live to a hundred and ten, you know.” Not surprisingly he enthusiastically agreed, and for several days made regular visits to the temporary palace clinic run by military staff. (This had actually been set up as a result of Kiri’s original injury, and since we had no doctors of our own we had asked that they remain for the time being.)

It was on our third day back that Valkar discreetly advised us that we had a morning appointment with the “Qozernan trade negotiator.” Rather to our surprise, the middle-aged woman that was presently ushered into our office looked around in evident disapproval. “Please forgive me,” she apologized, “but I really have to insist on the strictest security. What steps have you taken against possible bugging of this office?” We were caught unawares by the question, and had to admit that it really hadn’t occurred to us. For a moment an impasse loomed, as we tried to think of any room in the palace that could be considered “secure,” then Kiri’s face brightened.

“Why don’t we use the *Futaba*?” she suggested. “Its living quarters are probably the most secure spot in the universe. In fact, they’re not even in this universe,” she added gaily. I knew what she meant, but our guest was obviously nonplused. Kiri explained on our way out to the courtyard. “Even if someone did manage to bug them, there’s no way they could get the information into our time-space continuum without modifying the *Futaba* itself. And there are only four people alive that have access to it.”

Whether this technobabble would have normally convinced our rather dour visitor I don’t know, but it would have been hard for anyone to resist when Kiri called out “*Futaba*: portal” and the glistening tube of clear crystal obligingly formed an entrance complete with accompanying ramp. After briefly giving the Qozernan a tour of the control console, she led us through the rear doorway to the attached living quarters. As we strode through the opening, resembling an ordinary metal door, it was hard to imagine that we were literally stepping from one universe to another. Soon we were settled in comfortable antique chairs in the main lounge as Kiri poured cold drinks for the three of us.

“I realize you’ve both probably heard this until you’re thoroughly sick of it,” our guest began, “but that was an incredible feat you pulled off. We really thought our number was up when Teyn launched that fleet. We couldn’t believe our ears when the news came through that the Deshtiran fleet was asking to negotiate. And then when we found out it was you, and we heard about the risks you had taken...”

“We did what we had to,” I said. “All of us.”

“And how is Senaria holding up?” she asked unexpectedly. Seeing our surprise, she added, “Our organization worked very closely with Lev’s. He spoke of her rather often, always with a great deal of affection. In fact, I personally suspect that he was on the verge of proposing to her when—” She let the thought trail off. “It must have been terrible for her,” she finished.

“It was,” Kiri said simply. “But she’s a tough kid. She’ll get through it all right.”

“Well,” our guest resumed, her manner suddenly brisk, “I assume you’ve had little or no information about the Watchdogs from the Brizali.” I told her about the clerk. “I’m glad to hear that they at least kept something going on their end,” she grumbled. “We’ve heard almost nothing about their activities for years. That’s extremely disturbing news about the ones they lost track of. I think we can account for most of them; quite a few came over to us when they

realized they were being recalled to imprisonment or worse. Let's see what you've got," she added, pulling up a list of names on her portable computer.

"I'm afraid we don't have any names," I said ruefully. "All of the records were apparently destroyed with Tar Deshta. The clerk only had access to code names."

At that she looked quite a bit more concerned. "Then we really have no idea how many are unaccounted for. All we have are the ones who came to us."

"Obviously that worries you a lot," Kiri said. "Why?"

"There are three possibilities for each missing Watchdog," she answered, ticking them off methodically. "They could be dead—people do die in traffic accidents, muggings, that sort of thing. They could have just decided to abandon their roles and try live out normal lives on Earth, since they couldn't go home again. Or they could have gone renegade."

I looked at her in surprise. "Renegade? What exactly would a renegade Watchdog do?"

"Anything it wants to," she responded ominously.

Ignoring the startled looks directed at her, she went on. "They have access to Qozerman and Deshtiran technology, which on Earth means the possibility of virtually unlimited wealth and power. Witness Kiri's little bank transactions, for example." Kiri turned beet red as our visitor chuckled. "We make a point of tracking the activities of Twin Planets visitors to Earth. After all, you were a private citizen back then, and we had to make sure you weren't up to any mischief. As far as we were concerned, you put the money to good use so we didn't see any reason to make an issue of it."

"I had no idea," Kiri mumbled.

"Of course," our visitor added, twisting the knife ever so gently, "that little thermonuclear device you set off in San Bernardino County was a bit more difficult to hush up. You nearly caused an international incident, you know."

"I think you should hear about an odd experience we had on Earth a few days ago," I said (hastily changing the subject in the process), and told her about the assassination attempt. "We assumed the Brizali were behind it, especially with Teyn's ex-bodyguard involved. But what you're telling us opens up some other disturbing possibilities."

She nodded grimly. "The green lasers you describe are exactly the kind of thing we've feared from a possible renegade. He—or she, or they—could be working on their own, or they could be in cahoots with

Brizal fugitives. It's even possible the Brizali are working with them not realizing they're ex-Watchdogs. It gets really messy at this point, and I'd like to suggest that clearing this up be a high priority for both our organizations."

"Except that at the moment we have no organization," I said. "Most of ours was apparently vaporized at Tar Deshta, and what's left is made up of low-level clerks. It seems as if we'll be starting from scratch." For a good hour we discussed the mechanics of reconstruction, including the extremely tight security essential to its functioning.

"There's one other thing you ought to know about," she said as she rose to leave. "This may or may not have anything to do with Watchdogs or the Brizali, but our people have reported some extremely disturbing developments in the United States. Have you ever heard of John Lucie?" We both shook our heads; the name wasn't even faintly familiar.

"He's exactly the kind of troublemaker that the Watchdogs were created to keep an eye on. He holds a high position with one of the largest U.S. defense contractors, and during the past eight years or so he's been methodically putting together an unholy coalition of disaffected military officers—you know, the kind that think civilians aren't capable of governing themselves, and want to see military discipline imposed everywhere—along with firearm worshippers, extreme right-wing religious cults, and race fanatics of all varieties. Somehow it's escaped the attention of the media and the federal investigative agencies, and we suspect that's no accident. We're not quite sure what they're working towards, but we have a strong suspicion that the agency doing the so-called 'research' on the green lasers is under their umbrella. Whatever's going on, it's starting to move pretty fast. And with two million pounds of plutonium stockpiled on Earth by our latest estimate, things could get really ugly."

After she left, we both sat lost in thought for several minutes. "A renegade Watchdog," I finally mused aloud.

"Yes, that's exactly right," Kiri affirmed. "A renegade Watchdog. And, when you factor in the technology that Tenako had at his fingertips, one with very large and very sharp teeth."



On our way back into the palace, we saw Senaria and Brinkman in their favorite spot, lounging under one of the beautiful old trees in the central courtyard (in fact the very same tree I had found her sitting in several months earlier). Her face was bisected by a huge grin as she listened to him recount a long and apparently very funny story.

“I feel a bit sorry for Rann,” I said sympathetically. “He used to spend all his time with her. I wonder what he’s doing instead these days?” The tragic answer came a few minutes later as we passed the upstairs living room and found him lying on the floor, eyes glazed, half-watching a television documentary on the sex lives of sea cucumbers.

“Rann,” Kiri said, eyeing him sympathetically, “I really need to revive some of my swordsmanship skills. Feel like doing some training?” For several seconds the flabbergasted youth was speechless, and Kiri had to grab him by the ponytail and lift him to his feet before he snapped out of it. “Come on, humor an old woman,” she giped, taking his hand and dragging him from the room.

Just minutes later there was a general rush to the windows overlooking the inner courtyard as a metallic clatter disturbed the usual tranquility of the palace. Joining the stampede, I looked down to see Kiri and Rann happily clashing practice swords on one of the open patches of turf. One might have expected a chorus of complaints from the various offices to descend upon the communications desk, but in fact virtually all of the viewers were delighted with the spectacle, as were Senaria and Brinkman, still under their tree.

We were also treated to a brief but entertaining side show when several of the greener military guards assigned to the palace, unfamiliar with Rann’s identity, dashed in with real swords drawn to protect their Empress from an apparent assassination attempt. It took several minutes of raised voices and frantic gesticulation, nicely seasoned with some of Kiri’s spicier profanity, to straighten things out, after which the guards joined the rest of the enraptured audience while submitting to a few good-natured catcalls from the gallery.

Later I asked Kiri how it had gone. “Well,” she said ruefully, “he actually has a lot of potential, if I can just convince him that the whole point is for him to hit me with the practice blade. I suspect it’s going to be a bit difficult to accustom him to the idea of attacking his beloved Empress, no matter how make-believe it is.” Presumably she succeeded to her satisfaction, because the afternoon bouts became a regular part of the palace entertainment—at least when our onerous schedule of meetings and conferences didn’t render it impossible. On more than one occasion Kiri came dashing in after a meeting had already begun, dripping with sweat and smelling like a goat (or so I’ve been told; I’ve never had the dubious honor of sniffing one of the noisome ruminants).

That evening at dinner Brinkman was in fine form, even attempting to crack a few jokes in newly learned Deshtiran (although he then had to explain them in English before we got them). Rann was also looking a lot less glum, especially after receiving several compliments from Senaria on his form that afternoon. His self-confidence was sufficiently restored for him to ask her out to a movie in downtown Deshti that evening, and to his delight she accepted. (Centuries of high-tech video haven’t dulled the impact of seeing a drama played out on a larger than life screen, even though the technology is much different.) Soon they had drifted away, shortly followed by Gelhinda, leaving just the three of us.

“So how are you and Senaria getting along?” Kiri casually inquired. “She seems to have taken a real shine to you. I must say, I wasn’t quite expecting that.”

“Well,” the physicist answered innocently, “I am impressed at her teaching skills. She didn’t strike me as the intellectual type when I first met her, but she has a real knack for organizing her ideas.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Kiri said. I snickered, remembering our conversation on the drive to Fontana.

“So what’s that supposed to mean?” he protested after a pause, his face reddening.

“Now Alan,” she said dryly, “I’ve known you for a good twenty years, and it just isn’t your style to court a pretty young woman without hoping to get her into the sack sooner or later. Don’t tell me you’ve embraced celibacy; the very thought would kill you in a week.”

“Let me guess,” he scoffed. “You’re going to ask me to keep my lecherous mitts off Senaria because she’s too pure and innocent to be ruined by a dirty old man like myself.”

Kiri guffawed at that. “Senaria’s neither pure nor innocent, and she’s a lot shrewder than you give her credit for. I’d be the last person

to presume to tell her how to manage her sex life. I imagine by now she's got you pretty well figured out on her own."

Brinkman looked startled and a bit deflated. "And just what's *that* supposed to mean?" he retorted defensively.

"I mean that she probably already knows you're arrogant, self-centered and incapable of relating to your sex partners as adults," she said good-naturedly as I gaped in astonishment. "Look, Alan," she continued, "we've been friends for a long time and you know I've always told you the truth. I'm not out to be deliberately brutal, but you also shouldn't ask me something if you don't want an honest answer."

By now he was thoroughly angry. "I always thought you liked me," he snapped.

"Of course I do," she said. "You have a wonderful mind to bounce ideas against, you have a delightful sense of humor, and you're very good in bed. Or at least you were a quarter of a century ago," she added, seeing the startled look I shot in her direction. "But I don't think I could live with you, at least not if you treated me the way you seem to treat your conquests. I've seen the bimbos you've picked up on campus over the years, and they all shared the same distinguishing traits: cute, stacked, submissive, and stupid. I think the only exception was that wonderful woman you were married to for a little while; what was her name? Carolyn?"

"I don't want to talk about her," he muttered.

"Well," Kiri went on patiently, "Senaria may meet the first two of your criteria, but she's definitely not stupid, even if she doesn't speak quantum thermodynamics. And as for submissive, well, god help you if you act on that particular misapprehension."

"I think I ought to go to bed." He rose to his feet and stalked out as I mentally heaved a sigh of relief.

"Whew," I said once he was out of earshot. "Think he'll ever speak to you again?"

Kiri chuckled. "Oh, we've always fought like that over the years. He's a bit like a child that hates to be corrected, but forgets about it by the next day. Unfortunately he never seems to learn from it, either," she added sadly. "I think eventually one of two things is going to happen to him: he's going to find a real reason to change, or he's going to die a very lonely man. I truly feel sorry for him sometimes."

The next few days were hectic ones, as Kiri and I became caught up in preparations for the opening of the first planetary legislative session in thirty years. Although the rebuilding of the palace had been the center of our own lives for the past few months, the refurbishing of

the old legislative capitol building, which unlike the palace was located near the center of the city, had been proceeding simultaneously (at taxpayer expense, I might add). The election campaigns had been relatively free of recriminations, though there were certainly plenty of different viewpoints put before the public to be sorted through.

At least the public had a decent chance of doing so intelligently in this case, as Deshtiran election law (restored more or less in its entirety to its pre-Brizali form) requires the passing of a voter competency exam in order to exercise the right to vote. In addition to demonstrating the ability to read and write, the prospective voter must also show at least a passing acquaintance with the current candidates and issues.

I remember that some months later Kiri and I had quite a discussion on the subject. Naturally, my liberal sentiments were outraged at the very idea of a voter competency test. "Why?" Kiri asked. And then she waited, her eyes boring into me, something that always left me a bit flustered.

"Well, because it discriminates, of course."

"Against whom?" she wanted to know. I thought about that. Deshtiris doesn't really have ethnic minorities in the Earth sense, due to several thousand years of crossbreeding. In addition, centuries of mass communication and easy travel have made it possible for the best elements of every culture to become familiar and available to everyone.

"The economically disadvantaged," I finally announced triumphantly.

"Meaning exactly what?" she demanded. "In your adopted country huge blocs of people are denied good jobs because of trivial genetically-based characteristics, such as skin color or facial configuration. Then they're forced to live in areas where cheap housing is available. Next, the funding for their schools is based on the substandard income level for that area. Finally, it's been made politically and legally impossible for teachers to impose discipline in their classrooms. But our schools are all funded equally; we have stricter discipline in our schools than even Japan has; and so anyone who wants a high quality education can get one. Try again," she jeered.

By now I was starting to feel like bait on a hook. "All right," I ventured gingerly, "how about the intellectually challenged?" She guffawed at that one; political correctness was definitely not part of her creed.

"Let me put it this way," she snorted. "How would you like a brain surgeon operating on you who didn't have the intellectual equipment to pass his or her medical exams?"

“But that’s a life and death issue.” Even as I said it I knew I was toast.

“A brain surgeon only kills one person at a time,” she said patiently, “at least if they stay out of politics. How many people can an incompetent voter kill? Not to mention how many lives can one ruin? The recent history of this planet is proof of that, I think. Whether it’s because a voter is just not very smart, or is too lazy to study the issues, is really irrelevant, don’t you think?”

“That’s an awfully elitist attitude,” I protested.

“Elitist?” she exploded. “Of course it’s elitist. Any time you exclude someone in some way you’re being elitist. And your point is?”

Well, that’s when I gave up. I had to admit that even though her logic was impeccable, the idea still bothered me. But that’s the way it is here (and on Qozernon as well), and I don’t plan to start a crusade to change it.

Getting back to the Deshtiran Assembly, as it’s called, we could count on some two hundred legislators and their support staff converging on the city within the next week. Considering that in most cases they were the most influential and respected citizens of their provinces, it could be assumed that they would be expecting, if not demanding, something resembling decent accommodations and services when they arrived, and the city was still being reconstructed practically from scratch.

Fortunately a lot of the groundwork had already been laid, thanks to the recent coronation. Many of the skyscrapers which had been virtual shells at that time were now actively functional, although probably still primitive by Earth corporate luxury standards. We soon found ourselves signing (or refusing) endless priority override requests for this or that communications hookup, data equipment, or, less often, decorative furnishings. We also spent a great deal of time greeting the newcomers as they arrived, and found them to present an interesting spectrum, ranging from humble ex-factory workers obviously awed at their new surroundings to arrogant executive types used to getting whatever they wanted (and who had probably been quite comfortable working with the Brizali).

The opening day of the Assembly found Kiri and me once again donning our skimpy but ornate ceremonial garb, and this time we felt considerably less self-conscious as we strolled through the newly-refurbished legislative chambers. Although the building was air-conditioned, in Deshti that usually meant a temperature somewhere in the upper eighties, since to the city’s inhabitants that was considered a

deliciously cool setting. Most of the legislators from our latitude or lower were accustomed to this and dressed accordingly in shorts and sleeveless shirts. There were a few unfortunate souls, however (mostly from the higher latitudes) that were obviously overdressed and overheated, and I took a certain malicious delight in estimating how long it would take before necessity overtook propriety. At least one showed up later that same session having crudely scissored off his shirt sleeves and pant legs; I wondered what his constituents would have thought had they seen him then.

I won't go into the details of the formal ceremonies, which were both standard and tedious, as most such events seem to be. However, this time it was Kiri's turn to make the speech, like it or not, and in spite of her dire predictions she did a magnificent job. In any case, she probably could have recited the *Futaba's* operating manual and no one would have minded.

I had managed to slip offstage during some of the preliminary speeches so as to observe hers from the balcony, and wasn't disappointed. How can I describe the cumulative impact of that slender, not particularly tall figure with the deep red hair and brilliant green eyes visible even from my remote location? Her rich voice, still slightly hoarse after all these months from her ordeal at Tar Deshta, seemed almost to merge with the glints of intense color that from time to time scintillated from the scattered bits of cloth and metal adorning her slim frame.

Her speech was both an appeal and a warning: an appeal to not allow the political process to become irreparably corrupted by the power of money as it had just before the Brizal takeover, and a warning that whatever it cost her she would never allow it to happen again. In other times, with other legislators, I suppose it could have been seen as an affront, or a challenge, but today she received only a roar of affirmation as she finished, and an ovation that lasted for much longer than the time it took me to regain my assigned place. When she sat down she was trembling with suppressed excitement. "Could be addictive, couldn't it?" I whispered into her ear, and was rewarded with a glare and a distinct blush.

Afterwards we met Gelhinda, Senaria, Rann and Brinkman in the foyer. "Kiri, that took a lot of courage to say," said an obviously moved Gelhinda.

"Well, you know me," Kiri answered lightly. "I'd just as soon we all know where we stand. After all, diplomacy doesn't have to mean lying through my teeth."

“I’m not sure I shouldn’t be insulted by that,” retorted Gelhinda with a smile.

“Well, Kiri,” Brinkman broke in, “I don’t know who your clothing designer is, but he certainly knows how to showcase a great figure,” and it was obvious that he was having a hard time keeping his eyes off the body in question. Senaria gave a theatrical sigh, rolling her eyes.

“Speaking of knowing where you stand,” jibed Kiri to general laughter.

“So who’s coming to the banquet afterwards?” I asked, receiving an affirmative response from Gelhinda.

“I think we’re all speeched out,” said Brinkman.

“We’re going to check out Deshti’s night life,” chimed in Senaria.

“I didn’t know Deshti had a night life,” I said in sincere surprise.

“You don’t get out much, do you?” Kiri snorted.

“Look who’s talking,” Senaria shot back. “You two are usually in bed before nine most nights. Talk about boring.”

“If you think that, I’d say you’re the one who doesn’t get out much,” Kiri leered, bringing more laughter from everyone except a puzzled Rann, whose face finally turned pink when he caught on.

“What about you, Rann?” I asked, turning to the embarrassed youth.

“Me?” he gulped. “What?” inciting fresh laughter.

“Are you going to the banquet?” I clarified.

“Oh, no,” he stammered apologetically, “I think I’ll just turn in early,” promptly making himself the target of several ribald comments.

“Leave him alone,” said Gelhinda, “He’s coming to the banquet with me, aren’t you, Rann? You don’t want to leave me without a date for the evening, do you?” The upshot was that eventually Brinkman and Senaria departed for their pub crawl, or whatever, and the rest of us made arrangements to return to the palace to change in time to meet our visitors, for the banquet was being held in the great meeting hall of the palace.

An interesting difference between the Deshtiran and Terran sociology of fame is that on Earth during all this we would probably have been crushed to death by well-wishers and autograph-seekers, but here we were left relatively alone, with the obviously entranced crowd nonetheless maintaining a discreet distance. As I’ve said before, privacy is one of the most cherished possessions on Deshtiris, even in public. Only when Kiri issued a loud invitation for the onlookers to please come introduce themselves did they gingerly begin to approach us, and before long it was something like being in the middle of an

exceptionally well-behaved stampede.

We finally found our way to the subway entrance for the ride back to the palace, for we made a point of using public transportation to keep the walls down between us and the rest of the populace as much as possible. I deliberately sat next to Rann and tried to engage him in conversation, as he was visibly more downcast than usual. Small talk was all I could get out of him, however, and I ended up leaving well enough alone.

The banquet itself went smoothly, which is to say no one keeled over from food poisoning or a heart attack from overeating. Gelhinda had a great time showing off the attractive young stud at her side, although Rann himself seemed to be off in outer space somewhere for a good part of the evening, and I had a pretty good idea where. Apart from that, it was about as exciting as most banquets are. Needless to say, Kiri and I were in bed before nine that evening, and needless to say——



By the time Kiri and I made it down to breakfast the next morning, Senaria, Rann and Gelhinda had already arrived. “Help yourself,” bubbled Senaria, gesturing at the counter. I gasped at the array of sliced fruit and assorted juices, pancakes, and grain-based delicacies native to Deshtiris.

“This is really great, Sen,” Rann mumbled appreciatively through a mouthful of potato pancakes.

“Looks wonderful,” I agreed. “So what’s the occasion?”

“I just felt like putting together something extra nice,” she explained as she finished carving up a cantaloupe, apparently in rhythm to something she was humming, then sat down with us as Kiri and Gelhinda exchanged knowing looks.

About then Brinkman strayed in with a casual “Morning, everyone,” helping himself to some juice and making himself comfortable. We all looked at him expectantly. “That was quite a ceremony yesterday,” he said, sipping his drink. “How was the banquet last night? Not too many speeches, I hope. That new majority leader could put a hummingbird to sleep.”

“Sen made the breakfast,” Rann said nervously, sensing imminent danger. “What do you think?”

“Oh, is it your turn today?” Brinkman asked indifferently, only half-turning to her. “Who eats this kind of stuff for breakfast, anyway? Don’t suppose you’ve got any bacon and eggs? But I imagine that’s not really ‘PC’ here. So,” he rattled on, turning to Kiri, “when’d you people get back? You must have turned in early last night.” I could tell Kiri was starting to boil, but she had just opened her mouth when she was interrupted.

“Excuse me,” Senaria said softly, standing up. Her face was an expressionless mask, and her tone a perfect match. “I’ll clean up everything a little later.” She silently walked out, as for several seconds everyone sat frozen.

“What was that all about?” I said finally, only to have Kiri mutter something about my being a hopeless dunderhead. Rann got up from his chair and ran after her, and a moment later we heard Sen’s voice

echo down the hall as she roared something I couldn't quite make out. A few moments later Rann returned, looking abashed.

"She told me to, er, go away," he muttered, apparently as mystified as I.

"Looks like someone's got a bad case of the 'morning afters'," Brinkman snorted, only to be met with a stony silence. Several times during the rest of the meal he unsuccessfully tried to strike up conversation, and finally noticed that something was wrong. "Oh, I guess I was a bit of a boor that time," he admitted magnanimously. "Well, I'd better go apologize." We all heaved a sigh of relief as he left, and conversation eventually returned to normal. He never did return to the breakfast table.

That the incident wasn't quite over was apparent later that morning, when Senaria hesitantly approached me during one of my rare moments alone. "Will," she said, "I think I've probably gone as far as I can with Alan's language lessons. After all, I'm not all that good in English, and he's a very fast learner. Do you think you could ask someone else to take it from here?"

"Sure," I said. "There're probably dozens of linguists who'd jump at the chance to work with a real Earth specimen."

She giggled uncomfortably. "That's a good description; he's a real specimen, all right."

"I thought he was going to apologize to you," I said cautiously. She gave me a wry grin, but there was no humor in it.

"I think he intended to, but by the time his male pride got through with him his 'apology' turned into something else. No harm done."

"And are you all right?" I asked her point blank. "That wasn't like you this morning."

"Oh, sure," she chirped, trying to sound casual. "I just wasn't feeling well all of a sudden. I guess I stayed out too late last night and it caught up with me. No problem. I hope I didn't worry anyone."

I shrugged my shoulders; I definitely wasn't buying it. "All right, I'll tell Alan I'll have another teacher for him as soon as I can. And thanks for all the time you spent on him."

"Glad to help out," she said, her voice trailing off absently. All that furor over a breakfast buffet, I mused. She stood up to go, but hesitated for a moment, then looked away for several seconds. "He said I should learn the difference between 'pillow talk' and reality," she muttered, and when she turned back her face was visibly dark with anger.

"I guess I should have said something earlier," I ventured, remembering my conversation with him on the way down the

mountain.

“I don’t need a chaperone,” she snapped sharply, her fists clenching by her sides. There was an awkward pause. “Sorry,” she finally mumbled. “Only— Is something funny?”

In spite of the situation I couldn’t help but smile. “Kiri said the same thing,” I admitted. “I should have known better.” The girl nodded sheepishly.

“She told me all about him years ago. I thought I saw something else there, though. Wishful thinking, I guess.” After she left I called the main desk and asked to have Brinkman sent to my office.

“You’re assigning me to someone else?” he complained when I broke the news to him. “Just because of that thing at breakfast?”

“Actually, Alan,” I said patiently, “Sen requested this herself. She says you’ve learned about as much as you can from her, and thinks you ought to try someone else now.”

“Maybe she has a point there,” he grumbled. “Not a bad idea. All right, let me know who I’m supposed to see.”

After that, I noticed that although Senaria was polite when she encountered him she made no effort to strike up, or carry on for that matter, any kind of conversation. He might have been a total stranger as far as she was concerned. This of course redounded to the benefit of Rann, who again had his beloved Senaria back to haunt.

That the realignment was official was made obvious the following morning when she asked Kiri for permission to teach Rann to fly the *Futaba*. Kiri of course granted it without a second thought; I knew she rated the young woman’s flying skills second only to her own. “Just remember that Deshtiris isn’t enemy territory any more,” Kiri reminded her. “There are things like flight and traffic regulations to keep in mind.” Soon Rann found his days well occupied, between flying in the morning and his afternoon bouts with Kiri.

Speaking of Rann, it was two days later that his hearing date finally came up. That it had taken nearly six months since the fall of the Brizali was not surprising; the job of collecting and collating the mass of documentation, virtually all of it electronic, had been immense. The destruction of Tar Deshta hadn’t helped, either; although copies of most records were still available on other systems they weren’t nearly as well organized.

The hearing room was in downtown Deshti, in one of the restored courthouses. Besides Kiri, Rann and myself, only Senaria and Gelhinda were in attendance. There were no reporters; after all, this was one of over a million such hearings being held all over the planet, and Rann

was just another Brizal as far as the press was concerned. Somewhat cramped, with a small raised platform for the hearing officer, the chamber was relatively Spartan, with decorations limited to a Deshtiran emblem on one wall (flags are not much used on the Twin Planets) and on the rear wall the same photograph of the royal family that as a youth I'd once found in my guardian's possessions on Earth. The memory of the young girl with the red hair and giant green eyes had fascinated me for years afterward.

I imagine the hearing officer had seen that photograph staring back at him hundreds of times by now, but I don't think he had ever expected to see the Real McCoy standing directly underneath. Kiri, uncharacteristically, was apologetic. "We're only here as character witnesses for the defendant," she said humbly. "I don't expect you to give our testimony any more weight than any other citizen's." Yeah, right, I thought as the officer gulped and began the session.

To his credit, he conducted the proceedings according to strict form (even cutting me off at one point when I spoke out of turn). First the available record was read, and to our relief it contained no unexpected revelations of wrongdoing. Rann had indeed been a raw recruit, assigned to the most basic of chores, and at no time entrusted with any of the dirtier work of the Brizali.

It fell to me to describe our flight from Tar Deshta, as Kiri had been unconscious for most of it, and so I told how we had found Rann assigned to guard the *Futaba* against our anticipated return. A few moments' delay would have resulted in our vaporization with the rest of the city. Instead, recognizing the legendary Princess Mikiria, he had laid his sword at our feet and aided us in our escape. Literally seconds later we had been flashing away from the planet just ahead of the final fireball.

Kiri followed up by detailing Rann's loyal service since that time, stunning the official with the revelation that among other things he was now half of the royal bodyguard. After that there was little to be done. Giving the lad a mild reprimand for joining the Brizali in the first place, knowing of the atrocities laid at their feet, he cleared him of all charges and ordered the record expunged. Rann walked out a free citizen.

I sometimes wondered what the reaction would have been had the planet's inhabitants realized that an ex-Brizal was not only one of the royal bodyguards, but was regularly matching blades with the Empress herself as well as flying her legendary ship. The Deshtiran news establishment, unlike Earth's, had repeatedly shown its respect for the privacy of its new rulers, for centuries of experience with electronic

media had demonstrated all too well that no one can govern effectively while living in a fish bowl. The general rule of thumb was that actions affecting the public were well-publicized; our private lives were left strictly alone unless we chose otherwise, as in the case of the palace restoration project.

That evening at dinner Brinkman seemed to be making a half-hearted attempt to mend fences with Senaria, rather to Rann's discomfiture. Senaria, to her credit, was bending over backwards to be civil (something obvious to Kiri and me, though probably not to Brinkman). The détente ended abruptly when the unlucky physicist began a rambling monologue comparing Earth women to the Qozernan product. I think he was making a misguided attempt to flatter the girl, but it was such a bizarre performance that I couldn't really be sure. For far too long Kiri and I alternated between embarrassment and an overwhelming desire to break out howling with laughter, while Senaria's expression gradually morphed into one of utter incredulity.

"Now take makeup, for example," he wound up with a flourish. "You really ought to consider trying some cosmetics. The right lipstick could complement your hair color." At that a hushed silence fell over the table, as I tried urgently to imagine myself somewhere else, anywhere else.

Cosmetics aren't at all unknown on Qozernon or Deshtiris. It's just that they're considered to be approximately in the same category of respectability as sex toys, something possibly to be experimented with behind closed doors when utter boredom has set in, but not generally mentioned in public. Cautiously I glanced around. Senaria had turned bright red (I did have to give Brinkman credit for actually making her blush, something not at all easy to do), and Kiri was hiding her face behind a napkin, wiping something invisible off her nose. Rann looked shocked. "Did I—?" began Brinkman hesitantly, at last noticing that something was amiss.

"Excuse me for a moment," mumbled Kiri, frantically trying to keep a straight face as she fled the room. I tried to look concerned, and said something about making sure she was all right as I hastily followed her. I caught up with her in the bathroom, where she was wheezing uncontrollably as she desperately tried to get her breath back. "Oh god," she gasped, "I can't believe that he— that he actually—" and then words failed her as she quietly slid into hysterical laughter, dragging me along with her.

We finally managed to make our way back to the table, to find a much-chastened Brinkman carefully assaulting his food. Senaria and

Rann were stifling grins as they did likewise. Brinkman finally nudged me in the ribs and whispered, "Look, will you explain to me later what it was that I said?" I nodded, altogether unwilling to trust speech at this point. Eventually things returned to normal, but I could tell from the mocking glances that Senaria shot in the physicist's direction from time to time that he had definitely not regained any ground with this particular campaign.



“Not again,” I groaned to myself as I reread the report on the screen before me. This was the third Earth firearm to turn up during a routine search of the remaining missing Brizali’s quarters. That might seem trivial, but firearms are regarded with extreme contempt by both Deshtirans and Qozernans; the very idea of weapons capable of injuring or killing from a distance is considered detestable. The development of laser-based firearms by the Brizali had been one of their final breaches of acceptable behavior, and even they had done so only near the end, during preparations for the invasion of Qozernon. They had also distributed such weapons only to those guarding extremely sensitive installations, and only after careful training.

But even they hadn’t brought in explosive-based firearms from Earth, at least as far as we knew, and these were definitely “guns” of Earth manufacture. I shook my head. Kiri’s not going to like this, I thought grimly as I moved on to the next report.

It was shortly before noon that I decided to take a much-needed break, and looked out from the balcony to see Rann and Senaria heading towards the *Futaba* for the daily flying lesson. They were just about to enter the ship when Brinkman appeared from somewhere below me and approached them with a hearty greeting. I couldn’t quite hear the conversation, but I got the definite impression that he was trying to invite himself along.

It had been several days since the infamous “cosmetics” incident, and while Brinkman had made several more attempts to patch things up with Senaria she had continued to treat him with glacial civility. Therefore, it was rather to my surprise that I saw her gesture for him to follow them aboard. She also turned away from the older man for a moment and gave Rann a distinct wink. As she climbed in ahead of the two I noticed that she strapped herself into the pilot’s seat instead of the co-pilot’s. A moment later they had lifted off gracefully as she gently turned the nose skyward.

There was nothing remotely gentle about what followed. For several seconds they shot straight up, until they were practically out of

sight. Then they were diving directly towards the ground, pulling out at the last moment into a giant 360-degree loop. That was milder than any of the acrobatics to follow, as the *Futaba* dove, swooped, and at one point came barreling through the palace complex and on towards the city center several miles away, rotating around its long axis as it did so. By now a considerable crowd had gathered, faces turned skywards.

I suddenly felt a hand gripping mine, and turned to see Kiri watching, her face white. “Who the hell is piloting that?” she managed in a strangled whisper.

“Sen,” I answered. “She has Rann and Alan with her.”

“Alan?” she repeated, clearly appalled. I nodded. “So that’s it,” she muttered, anger now mingled with the fear in her voice. For several more minutes we watched as the *Futaba* threaded its way through the skyscrapers, at one point literally spiraling up the outside of one of the tallest until it disappeared into the clouds. For almost a minute there was no sign of it, and I think neither Kiri nor I exhaled during the interval.

Then a tiny dot appeared almost directly above us, nearly invisible against the scattered clouds, and a moment later the *Futaba* had pulled out of a steep dive, missed one of the palace towers by a dozen feet, looped back, and slowed to a halt perhaps a hundred feet directly above the courtyard. Slowly it settled back to its usual place, coming to a gentle stop as though nothing untoward had occurred. Soon the usual doorway and ramp appeared, and after a long pause we saw Brinkman come staggering out, looking—well, let’s just say his digestive system obviously hadn’t taken well to the ride.

Rann disembarked a few seconds later, also looking slightly green but clearly not as badly affected as the unfortunate physicist. Finally came Senaria, with a thoroughly satisfied look on her face. Closing the portal behind her, she disappeared into the palace as I watched, to reappear shortly with a bucket and a mop, re-entering the ship with the same triumphant smirk. I suddenly realized Kiri was gone, and wasn’t surprised to see her emerge below me, also headed for the *Futaba*.

I was anticipating major fireworks, but to my surprise she ignored Senaria entirely, instead sitting down at the console and busily performing some operation for several seconds. Only as she left did she turn to the now apprehensive girl. I distinctly heard her say, “We’ll discuss this later, of course,” as she stalked back into the palace.

It was several minutes after that when Senaria, the jaunty spring in her step now quite absent, stepped down the ramp with the bucket and mop and closed the portal behind her. Something seemed to occur to

her, as if she'd left something inside, and she turned around. "*Futaba* portal," I heard her say. There was no response from the ship. She momentarily froze, then unsuccessfully tried the command again. For a long time she stood there staring at the ship, then suddenly aimed a frustrated kick at the glistening crystal hull, with predictable results. It was a white-faced and dejected Senaria who picked up the mop and bucket again and slowly limped back to the palace.

Later that afternoon I was walking down the hallway that led past her room when I heard raised voices inside, one of them Kiri's. "What were you thinking of?" I heard her bark. "I'd expect something idiotic like this from a teen-ager, but I've respected you and treated you as an adult. I just can't believe you'd do something this stupid." I didn't quite make out Senaria's reply, as I kept on walking, but whatever she said was in a low, expressionless voice.

Meanwhile, I had my own share of the fallout to deal with, as an apologetic official from the city's traffic police stopped by and explained that she'd been asked to look into the affair. Kiri's ship was of course quite well known, and naturally they weren't about to give the Empress of Deshtiris a traffic ticket, but it had been a pretty public show and I didn't even want to think about how many regulations Senaria had probably managed to violate. I apologized profusely, assuring her that it was all a misunderstanding and offering to pay the appropriate fines, but she wouldn't hear of it. I think she just wanted reassurances that it wasn't going to be a regular event in the future, and those I could quite sincerely provide.

Ironically, since Senaria hadn't been driving a vehicle in the accepted sense of the term, her conduct didn't result in the suspension of her driver's license. Upon such technicalities does the operation of the law founder. At the time that seemed fortuitous.

Neither woman appeared for dinner that evening, nor did Brinkman. Gelhinda was there, however, and looked pretty well wrung out herself. "None of us are quite as adult as we'd like to consider ourselves," she commented at one point. "I don't know exactly what set Senaria off, although I think I have a good idea. I just hope Kiri hasn't gone too far with her."

"She was furious," I agreed.

"She was terrified," Gelhinda corrected me. "I don't think it was just fear of what Senaria might have done to herself or her passengers, either. For her to try something this stupid and risky she must be in real agony inside. And she won't talk to me about it. Says it's something she has to work out herself."

“Well,” I said dubiously, “I hope this afternoon’s exhibition isn’t a sample of how she plans to go about it.”

When I finally saw Kiri later in the evening I didn’t ask about her encounter with Senaria that afternoon, and she made no move to bring up the subject. In fact, she didn’t bring up much of anything, being almost totally withdrawn into her shell. I’d seen her like this before, and knew better than to attempt to pry her out. All in all, it was a day I hoped would soon be forgotten.

I wasn’t really surprised the next morning when Rann asked if he could talk to me alone for a few minutes. “I’m really sorry about what happened yesterday,” he began.

“What did you have to do with it?” I asked skeptically. Rann was one of those saintly beings who invariably try to take the blame for their fellow humans’ shortcomings, but I seriously doubted that any of yesterday’s fiasco had been at his instigation.

He looked sheepish. “Well,” he admitted, “when Alan asked if he could come along, Sen winked at me and I figured she was going to give him a bit of a ride. But I never dreamed she’d do something crazy like that. It’s like she just lost control and turned into someone else. For a few minutes I really thought she was going to deliberately fly us into a building or something.” He stopped and chewed nervously on the tip of his bushy black ponytail. “She changes, somehow. I thought I knew her, but lately her mind just seems to be someplace else a lot of the time. Sometimes she treats me like a friend, and other times like she’s uncomfortable just being around me. And I really care an awful lot about her.” His almond-brown eyes looked perilously close to overflowing as he looked away in embarrassment.

I took a deep breath. “You know what she went through at Tar Deshta, don’t you, Rann. And before?”

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “She’s never talked about it, but Gelhinda told me. I guess it doesn’t just go away, does it?”

“It does, after a fashion,” I said. “You don’t forget about it, but you learn to live with it.”

“I suppose every time she sees me I remind her of what happened,” he went on sadly. I nodded, a bit surprised at his perceptiveness.

“Some tragedies leave reminders for us everywhere we go. Some of them are in our heads and we can’t just look away. Instead we learn to see past them, if we’re fortunate enough and determined enough.”

“Do you love her, Rann?” I suddenly asked him point blank. It floored him totally, leaving him speechless. I just sat and waited patiently.

“Yeah, I guess I do,” he finally mumbled. “I’ve never really been in love with someone before, so I don’t know for sure.”

“Have you told her that?” I pressed him. He thought about it for a while.

“No, I suppose I haven’t. But she has to know by now.”

“Sometimes a person wants to hear it, Rann,” I said. “If you aren’t willing to say something, they think you don’t really care that much. It’s kind of a dumb test, I know, but people are like that.” Seeing his face brighten, I added, “You have to be prepared for her to tell you the truth about how she feels, and it might not be what you want to hear.” I remembered her all-too-candid comments on our way back from Fontana. “That’s the price you pay for bringing it out into the open. If you can’t deal with that, then you might be better off to leave things alone.”

I think he looked more confused than ever when he finally left, but that’s how life is. If you think you understand it, then you’re definitely heading for a fall. At least, that’s the Will Barton theory on the subject.

Things unexpectedly came to a climax in the living room later that evening after supper. Brinkman and I were sitting in the easy chairs, me reading the newspaper and Brinkman watching a noisy television program (although of course he still understood only a fraction of the Deshtiran dialogue). Rann and Senaria were sitting together on the couch, having a quiet conversation on the other side of the room. Rann seemed unusually ill at ease.

Abruptly the dialogue on the telecom hit a silent spot at exactly the wrong moment, just as Rann was saying to Senaria in a tone no doubt intended to be inaudible to us, “So, er, would you like to stay with me tonight, then?” Out of the corner of my eye I saw Brinkman’s jaw hit the floor. His Deshtiran might be underdeveloped, but this kind of conversation was second nature to him in any language.

Senaria didn’t seem fazed at all, just a little saddened. “I’m sorry Rann, but I really don’t think that’s a good idea. This just isn’t the right time.” The telecom, choosing that moment to return to obstreperous life, drowned out the rest.

This was not quite the bald-faced proposition it might have been considered on Earth (at least in “polite society,” if such a thing exists). Qozernans are much more relaxed about these matters, and such an invitation between unattached persons is recognized as the compliment it implies. Of course, the requestor is expected to accept the answer in good grace, whatever it might be, and one does not generally press the issue. Deshtiris, which used to share this particular perspective, has

grown considerably more puritanical after thirty years of totalitarian oppression, and I could guess the nerve it had taken for Rann to risk making the offer. Admittedly it hadn't been quite what I'd had in mind when he'd spoken with me earlier, but then I suppose the direct approach does have its advantages.

Brinkman, however, seemed to be developing a real knack for cultural snafus, especially where Senaria was involved, and when I saw him open his mouth I instinctively flinched. "Well, Rann," he said jovially in primitive but regrettably intelligible Deshtiran, and no doubt intending it as a joke, "maybe next time you should try getting her plastered first."

Both Rann and Senaria turned to stare at him, Rann's face quickly turning a humiliated crimson. At that point I just wanted to dive into the nearest foxhole. Senaria did have a previous (and somewhat deserved) reputation for being considerably less than discriminating when heavily tanked, but on the Twin Planets getting someone drunk to obtain consent is viewed as little better than rape. Besides, these days it was pretty unusual for her to actually drink much.

For just a moment I thought I saw hurt reflected in her ice blue eyes, almost instantly replaced by quiet fury. When she finally spoke, it was in English, and overlaid with her best Texas accent. "*Mistah* Brinkman," she drawled frostily while staring him right in the eye, "ah may not be an astrophysics genius, but ah can assure you that mah medical trainin' is sufficient for me to ahdentify an asshole when ah see one." And with those words she seized an astonished Rann and gave him a sensational (and thoroughly cinematic) kiss, then grabbed him by the hand and dragged him out of the room without so much as a backwards glance.

I surveyed the ruined, burned-out hulk that had been Brinkman, and sighed. Normally Senaria was the sweetest person alive, I reflected, but when she did resolve to demolish an adversary she was capable of bringing a truly awesome level of firepower to bear. "I guess you ticked her off a bit," I remarked sympathetically. It was several seconds before he spoke.

"What a woman," was all he finally said. He's got it bad, I thought ruefully.

I stayed up very late that night reading. It was well into the wee hours of the morning before I finally padded down the silent hallway to our own quarters. Along the way I passed Senaria's room and found her door open; from the light coming in through the doorway I could easily see that her bed hadn't been slept in. I hope she knows what she's

doing, I mused. Shrugging my shoulders, I continued on to my own room.



The next morning I found Kiri already at breakfast by the time I arrived. There was no sign of any of the others as I blearily sipped my morning tea. We had just begun to exchange the usual morning small talk when the mail clerk stopped by with the morning's delivery.

The royal palace, like any other large organization, runs all incoming mail past a small army of functionaries; if Kiri and I had directly received all the mail addressed to us we would have daily been buried under a small mountain of envelopes and parcels (not to mention gigabytes of email). Most mail was sorted and redirected in time for the afternoon's distribution; the morning's crop was usually relatively sparse, consisting of in-house memos and personal notes. So I wasn't particularly surprised to find an envelope hand-addressed to Kiri and myself, but when I recognized Senaria's handwriting I called Kiri's attention to it as I tore it open in my customary barbaric manner (to her endless frustration, Kiri has never been able to train me to use a letter opener).

It took only a few moments' reading to realize that all was not well. Kiri read the note over my shoulder, then tore it out of my hand and scrutinized it again, shaking her head.

*Dear Kiri and Will,*

*I'm really sorry to leave you a note like this, but I just can't face everything right now. I need some time to myself and am going away for a while. Don't worry, I'll be fine. My locator is on so you can keep track of me if you get worried. I really appreciate everything you've done for me and I'm sorry to leave your bodyguard like this, but I'm finding myself doing really stupid things and need some time to think.*

*Love you both,  
Senaria*

For a long time Kiri sat silently staring at the paper. Finally she spoke. "Will, did something happen that I don't know about? What brought this on?" I told her about the "incident" the previous evening, although it certainly didn't seem to warrant a reaction like this. "Sen's a lot more complex than she seems," Kiri said thoughtfully. "I wish she'd just talk about what bothers her once in a while."

"What's a locator?" I asked.

"It's a gadget that all off-road fliers have," she answered absently. "It lets you track the vehicle wherever it goes via the planet's satellite system. Sort of like a reverse GPS system. Of course, you have to turn it on. At least she's not trying to disappear," she added dejectedly.

I heard a thundering of approaching hooves in the hallway, and a moment later Rann burst into the room. In his hand was a twin of the envelope we had just opened. "Has anyone seen Sen this morning?" he demanded. "I got this note—"

"So did we, Rann," I said. "It looks like she's decided to take an unscheduled vacation." I suspect that up until this moment he had been hoping it was a hoax of some kind, because now his countenance dropped into the most utterly mournful expression I think I've ever seen on a human face. "Sorry, Rann," I said consolingly. "I'm sure she'll be all right. She even said she'd leave her locator on."

"That's great," he exclaimed in relief. "I can follow her."

"Oh, no you can't," I said firmly. "Not unless she asks you to." His face fell again, but he didn't argue with me. It would have been a grievous invasion of privacy had he done so, and he knew it.

"Did she explain to you why she was leaving?" asked Kiri. The

result was totally unexpected, as Rann flushed a deep red.

“Maybe it’s none of our business,” I said discreetly to Kiri, drawing a furious glare, but fair was fair, after all.

“It’s okay, Rann,” she said grudgingly after a moment, remembering my account of the previous evening’s doings. “I’m sorry. I had no business asking.” Rann nodded in embarrassment, but didn’t volunteer any more information, nor did we ask to read his letter from Senaria, although what with it being waved in our faces all this time it was tantalizing, to say the least.

The next actor to appear onstage was of course Gelhinda, also clutching an envelope of her own. I cringed inwardly, half-expecting a barrage of motherly panic, especially after the near-disaster of two days previous, but to my surprise she seemed relatively unperturbed by the whole thing. “Kiri, you know it’s not the first time she’s done this,” she said calmly, “or you, for that matter.” She turned to me. “Every now and then she gets herself tangled up in some situation and ends up having to go off by herself for a while to sort it all out. She’ll be fine.”

“Her locator is on,” I contributed helpfully.

“So does anyone know just what set her off this time?” she asked. With an apologetic glance at Rann, I again covered the previous evening’s events (it had after all been a public performance). “Oh, That Man,” she growled. “I just don’t understand how he comes up with some of the things he says. Lipstick, even! But I suppose he is an Earthman, after all.”

I cleared my throat diplomatically. “Oh, of course I don’t include you, Will,” she backpedaled amiably. “But—”

Kiri interrupted her. “Alan’s really not usually like this,” she said defensively. “I’m not sure just what’s gotten into him lately. He’s been acting like a five year old trying to show off in front of—”

Just then That Man arrived with a jaunty greeting and sat down at the table with us. A moment later he became aware of four pairs of angry eyes converging on him. For a few moments he sat, nonplused. “What!?” he finally exclaimed. There was a momentary clamor as four voices spoke at once. We all looked at each other, and by tacit agreement left the floor to Kiri.

“Alan,” she said coldly, “Sen has flown the coop. Apparently it had something to do with you.” He looked at her in astonishment, silently pointing an inquiring finger at his chest, and receiving an answering nod from all four of us.

“What did I do?” he finally asked helplessly.

“Oh, Alan,” was all Kiri said, shaking her head in disgust. And we

left it at that.

Later that morning she passed along instructions to the communications office to have someone monitor Senaria's vehicle and provide us with a report if anything unusual happened. And then we went back to our daily routines. We all felt the gap she had left behind, and as the news spread through the palace staff many faces were seen that were noticeably less cheerful than usual.

Brinkman, I should add, was stunned, acting for all the world like a jilted lover. Things weren't made any easier for him by his inability to understand just what he had done wrong. Actually, I hadn't quite figured out myself why so much friction had developed between the two, and finally put it down to that meaningless catchall phrase, "personality conflict."

Things suddenly acquired a much different cast three days later, when a clerk from the communications office asked to see us, to report nervously that Senaria's "blip" had vanished. "Vanished?" said Kiri in surprise. "Could something just be obstructing the signal?"

The clerk explained that since the signal was picked up by satellite, she would pretty much have had to go underground for that to happen. "Of course," he added, "she could have just switched off the locator for some reason." Kiri thanked him and asked him to keep trying, and dismissed him.

After he'd left, she paced nervously for several minutes. "I'm going to try contact her," she said finally. "She did say she'd leave the locator on, and now we can't pick it up. That's a reasonable excuse to call, I think." But repeated attempts to reach her via telecom failed as well.

By late that afternoon I was growing worried, and Kiri frantic. Even Gelhinda was showing signs of genuine concern. Finally we called in Holan and explained the situation to him. The locator had been last picked up somewhere on the southern continent, and the nearest city large enough to support a military base was about eight hundred miles away. Holan shook his head. "It will be dark by the time they get there," he said apologetically, "and that district is solid forest. I don't know how much luck they'll have before morning. But I'll send out the orders."

Kiri acquiesced gratefully. "She's probably just exploring and inadvertently turned off her locator. But we are getting worried." Promising to let us know as soon as he had any information, Holan saluted smartly and departed.

We didn't get a lot of useful work done for the rest of the

afternoon, though we tried. I don't remember ever seeing Kiri quite that tense, even after the assassination attempt; she was like a tightly wound spring and I did my best to position myself between her and the unfortunate officials whose duties brought them in our direction.

That night I suddenly awoke with the echo of her voice lingering in my ears. Sitting up, I saw her lying next to me, still asleep, tossing and turning restlessly and mumbling unintelligibly to herself. Trying not to wake her, I gently stroked her deep crimson mane, almost black in the dim light, until she finally slipped back into a deep sleep. I wondered what she had said that had awakened me; I could still hear her voice in my mind but not the words themselves. I fidgeted nervously myself for a little while, then gradually began to slide back into slumber.

Just before I fell asleep I unexpectedly heard her voice again clearly, this time in my head as my memory arbitrarily chose that moment to replay the almost lost thread. *I'm sorry, Sen*, she had said. *Please forgive me. It's not your fault.* Putting an arm over her, I held her tightly as I slowly drifted off into an unsettled sleep.



“Highness, Lieutenant Holan is here to report on the search,” Valkar announced hesitantly. We had waited all morning to hear something, refraining with difficulty from barraging his office with inquiries. I nodded, feeling my stomach knotting up, and a moment later the young liaison officer was standing before us. I noticed that his face was pale, and that although most Deshtirans are well acclimated to the heat, even allowing for the near-runaway greenhouse effect, drops of sweat stood out on his forehead. “Well?” said Kiri finally, her own voice tight.

“Highness, we’ve located the wreckage of Senaria’s flier.” I saw Kiri start noticeably, and the knot in my stomach suddenly assumed significant proportions. “It was in one of the unexplored forest areas of the southern continent. We found the major part of her flier lodged in a tree several hundred feet above the ground. There were a few scattered pieces down on the forest floor. Apparently the motor exploded.” He hesitated for a moment. Kiri and I were too stunned to say anything. “We also found a considerable amount of fresh blood on the forest floor. Tests confirm that it matches Senaria’s. She may have been thrown from the craft when it exploded. We found no trace of—” and he hesitated for a moment, “a body.”

Kiri swallowed. “Have you determined what happened yet?” she asked softly.

Holan shook his head. He too seemed to be close to tears. Senaria had been very popular with the palace community, and not just because of her undeniable good looks. “We’re working on analyzing the wreckage now.”

For a long time Kiri said nothing, her face a papery white. “Continue searching the area,” she said finally in a dull voice. Holan looked even more uncomfortable, if that was possible.

“Empress—” he began, and stopped as though unsure how to proceed.

“Yes?” she prompted him gently.

“I think you should know that we did encounter a number of wild

dogs in the vicinity. Although they wouldn't attack a living human being, if she had been killed by the fall..." I shuddered.

"You have your orders, Holan," I said quickly. "Thank you for your efforts. Report back to us as soon as you have anything further." He saluted and made a hasty departure.

I turned to Kiri. Her face might have been composed of stone at that moment. "She's not dead until they find a body," she whispered, half to herself.

I took it upon myself to relay the information to a stunned palace staff, as well as to Gelhinda, Rann and Brinkman. Gelhinda took the news with her usual composure, although she was obviously shocked, as was Rann. Brinkman, on the other hand, rather fell to pieces. For a few moments I seriously feared he was going to suffer a heart attack, he turned so pale. "My god," he said finally. "This is because of me, isn't it? What have I caused?"

I shook my head. "She left of her own free will, Alan. It's not your fault." But inside I knew that there was more here than just annoyance over an ill-considered comment. I again wished I knew what she'd said in her letter to Rann.

Speaking of Rann, he asked if he could join the search, and of course we gave him our blessing. By taking the *Futaba* he could be at the base in the southern continent within minutes, and Kiri hadn't hesitated in giving her okay. Shortly thereafter the *Futaba* was disappearing into the hazy sky. "Bloody fool didn't even take a toothbrush," Kiri muttered as she transmitted a personal request to the base's commander to allow Rann to participate.

The next day the news got much worse. Although no body had yet been found, bloody fragments of Senaria's clothing had been located and identified scattered over the immediately surrounding area. Stubbornly Kiri asked that the search be continued for one more day. When nothing further was found during that time, we sadly agreed that it was pointless to continue. "If by some miracle she is alive," I argued unconvincingly, "she'll turn up. If she was hurt and crawled away on her own there would have been a trail for us to follow. If she is alive, she walked away. And that means she's okay." It was a pretty slim reed to base our hopes on, but it was all we had.

When Gelhinda arrived for lunch that noon, there was a dark green band freshly painted across her face. Even through the pigment we could see that her eyelids were puffy and her eyes red. There was no sign of Brinkman, for which I was grateful, and it wound up being a very quiet meal. Afterwards, Kiri and I returned to our room, where she

produced a small bottle.

“Have you got a steady enough hand to paint me without making a mess?” she asked softly, and I responded with a somber nod. When we finally emerged for the afternoon’s meetings, more than one eye went suddenly moist at the sight of the telltale bands on both our faces, for by now there was probably no one left in the palace unaware of their meaning, or of the import of our decision to wear them.

That evening we sat for several hours with Gelhinda, sometimes talking, sometimes just sitting in silence. “Her father died unexpectedly when she was only ten,” she said at one point. “She just couldn’t comprehend why he didn’t come back, and part of her withdrew into a shell somewhere. Over time she came to understand what had happened, but by that time there was a permanent fear of being abandoned that was hard-wired in and that no amount of introspection could erase. Ever since then she was an unusually independent child. I always had the feeling that any control I had over her was tenuous, and I did everything I could to make sure that when she did break away once and for all she’d have what she needed to manage her life on her own.”

“And then with Lev’s murder it all came true again for her in a particularly horrible way. I knew it was terribly hard on her, but it wasn’t something she was willing to talk about.” It had come true before that, I thought to myself, remembering Kiri’s fifteen months in space, but I knew this wasn’t the time to mention it. Eventually we made a discreet departure and left her to her grief.

The next day I was dumbfounded to discover that apparently most of the palace staff had acquired the dark mourning bands across their eyes. It was like being surrounded by despondent raccoons. I think that not until then had any of us realized just how much affection Senaria had engendered among those who knew her. The biggest surprise came that evening when Brinkman finally reappeared, sporting a band of his own. It seemed so out of character for the brittle, cynical physicist that I must have just stared for several seconds. He didn’t seem to notice, being somewhere in a world of his own.

The following morning I looked out from my balcony and saw him sitting under the same tree where he had spent so much time with Senaria, staring vacantly into space. I’m not quite sure why, but a few minutes later I sat down next to him. I suppose something told me that this wasn’t the time to ostracize him over a petty inconsiderateness.

“Hello, Will,” he said absently as I stretched out my legs on the grass. “How’s the business of empire doing?”

“It continues,” I answered. “Endlessly. As it should, I suppose.”

For a while he was silent, again staring blankly at something apparently situated in another dimension. “So what’s on your mind?” he said at last.

“You are,” I said. “I think you need to talk to someone.”

“Yes,” he agreed, “I suppose so. You know, Will, Kiri was right the other night.”

“She’s always right, and she never lies,” I said. It was pretty close to the truth, too. “About what?”

“About me. About how completely wrapped up in myself I am. About how I treat people that want to be close to me.” He said it calmly, methodically, as though reciting a law of physics.

“Slow down,” I said. “That’s quite an indictment. Are you sure that you don’t want to plea bargain some of those charges?” I saw the old cynical half-smile flit across his features for just a moment, quickly replaced by the distant stare again.

“Kiri asked what happened with Carolyn,” he began, and stopped.

“Carolyn?” I prompted after a decent pause.

“Carolyn was my wife, many years ago. It was a few years after Kiri and I—well. Carolyn was special. She was considerate, she was intelligent, and she saw right through me. And in spite of that, she loved me. But I didn’t think I needed to change. I was brilliant,” and he spoke the word in a way that gave it a particularly bitter edge, “I was successful, and I felt the world could damn well take me as I was. I called that ‘being true to myself.’ She finally told me that while she could put up with the little insensitivities, and the rudenesses, and the self-centeredness, ultimately she couldn’t take the fact that I seriously believed they were virtues.”

“After she left, I gradually realized that I had really loved her, and that she was gone, and that it was my fault. But rather than do something about it, and try win her back, I decided that if changing my perfect self was what it took then I was too good for ‘love.’ And that’s who I’ve been for all the years since. She was the only woman I’ve ever really cared for in all that time. But now—” The vacant stare returned. I wondered what he was seeing.

“But now?” I asked. He just shook his head, and I couldn’t get much of anything out of him after that. Eventually I returned to my office, leaving him to his visions.

That afternoon Rann returned with the *Futaba*, looking as though he hadn’t slept for days, which was probably the case. Too heartsick to even take a much-needed shower, he had simply gone to his room

without comment and collapsed onto his bed in exhaustion, not to reappear until the next morning.

Later that evening I found Brinkman in the living room, sightlessly watching the telecom. Although a program was in progress, the sound was off. He didn't seem to care, and looked up absently as I entered.

"What have I done, Will?" he said brokenly. "I should never have come. Why didn't I just leave well enough alone?" I sighed. It was rather obvious that he had been deep into Gelhinda's liquor cabinet.

"This wasn't your fault," I answered patiently. "You're drunk, Alan. Why don't you go to bed? You'll think more clearly in the morning."

He went on as if he hadn't heard me. "Why didn't I just tell her," he muttered sadly. "I don't understand myself any more. I should never have come," he said again.

"Tell her what?" I asked. For several seconds he seemed on the verge of saying something.

"Nothing," he finally mumbled. I persuaded him to lurch his way back to his room and heaved a sigh of relief as he closed his door behind him.

The next morning at breakfast he was indeed sober, and a lot more clear-headed. "Kiri, Will," he began, "I know this is a real imposition, but I think I ought to go back to Earth. You don't have to take me yourselves; if there's some kind of shuttle or cargo ship I'll be glad to ride whatever's available. But I know now that I don't belong here."

"Alan, are you sure?" asked Kiri. "You know we're not blaming you for this. A few cultural gaffes are hardly the cause of what happened."

"That's very generous of you," he said. "But I know differently, and my being here isn't making things easier for any of us. I think it would be best if I went home."

"It's your decision, Alan," I said, "and if it's what you want we'll arrange it. Let me find out what's happening in the next few days." The conversation turned to other topics, but he was obviously very much preoccupied, and left shortly after picking at a skimpy helping of cereal.

It was just as well, as not long after he'd left Rann finally reappeared, looking scrubbed and rested but still utterly dejected. We didn't ask him about the search, nor did he volunteer any information. When he got up to leave, he whispered something in Kiri's ear, and she excused herself and followed him from the room. I saw why a little later, when Rann appeared bearing a freshly painted mourning band.

That afternoon I idly watched the two of them, both stripped to the waist beneath the blazing sun, practicing their customary afternoon swordplay in the courtyard. The regular audience had gradually dwindled over the weeks, although I reflected that they were missing the real show, for Rann had begun to display a remarkable talent. As both Senaria and I had discovered, Kiri was a master at adapting the level of her play to the abilities of her opponent, gradually notching up the difficulty as appropriate. Her own genetically enhanced agility and strength rendered her not only a near-unbeatable opponent against a real enemy, but also a superb trainer to a sufficiently gifted student. Rann was certainly proving to be such a student.

The thought of Senaria once again reminded me of the aching void she had left behind. Watching Kiri throw herself into her swordplay with Rann, I wondered if she were also subconsciously trying to fill a gaping hole left in her own life. More than I had previously realized, we had all loved the seemingly unsinkable young woman for her ability to elevate our spirits, even at those times when we knew her own were so low. And I knew Kiri's feelings for her had gone even deeper, although she had always managed to discreetly avoid speaking of them.

My thoughts were interrupted by an unexpected grunt from below, as Kiri staggered backwards and sat down heavily, rubbing a newly inflicted bruise on her side. For a moment Rann looked utterly aghast as Kiri stared up at him in sincere surprise, and then he fell horror-stricken to his knees begging forgiveness.

For just an instant I was worried, then I saw Kiri's face break out into a delighted grin. "Rann," she said firmly, interrupting his stammered apologies, "that was wonderful! You actually hit me! That's the first time in ages that anyone's gotten in a solid blow." And she leaned forward and gave the near-prostrate boy an enthusiastic hug, to his utter stupefaction, and dragged him back to his feet.

"But Empress," he stammered, "I've hurt you. I can't believe I did that." At that Kiri lost patience with him and grabbed him by the ear, giving him a good shake.

"It's a bruise, you booby," she roared. "That's the idea, isn't it? Now do it again! More bruises!" I decided at that point to leave him to his fate, and turned away from the window, my own feelings an odd amalgam of melancholy and pride.

At dinner Rann looked more self-confident than I could previously remember seeing him. I think it had finally sunk in that he had actually bested (if only for a moment) the legendary Mikiria, and while he was far too modest to puff up like a peacock he nonetheless looked not at all

the worse for the ego boost. Kiri herself looked rather pleased; after all, good teachers take as much pride in the accomplishments of their students as in their own, and she was certainly among the best. Only Brinkman still looked downcast, although he did his best to hide it and not cast a damper on everyone.

It was I who suggested that perhaps we could all use a vacation, and that since Brinkman had wanted to return home we might make a second attempt at Earth. “That’s assuming you still want to go, Alan,” I added. He nodded wordlessly.

“Maybe not Earth,” Kiri said a bit hesitantly. “But we could certainly drop Alan off there. Maybe do some touring along the way—Pluto, Saturn, that sort of thing. It might give you some interesting data to play with when you get back,” she added enticingly to the physicist. The thought definitely seemed to raise his spirits a bit, and soon he and Kiri were deep in a discussion of what kind of sensors he’d have at his disposal on the *Futaba*, computer data storage formats, and so forth, until finally a numbed Rann and I excused ourselves and fled to the living room.



A few days later, having caught up with the most pressing of our business, we set out once again in the *Futaba*. Promising Valkar that we would really, truly stay out of trouble this time, we deflected his entreaties for us to take along a more substantial bodyguard and assured him that Rann was quite capable as a protector. Soon we were watching the dull grey sphere that was Deshtiris recede behind us, and shortly afterwards had gone to hyperspeed. Somehow the spectacle seemed commonplace and uninteresting, doubtless a reflection of our own still-benumbed sensibilities at the time.

“How do you plan to explain your war paint to your colleagues?” asked Kiri as we lazed around the *Futaba*’s living quarters killing time.

“I’ll tell them I was kidnapped by aliens and forced to do this,” Brinkman snickered. “Besides, I’ve done stranger things in my day.”

“Yeah,” Kiri agreed, “I remember the year you sported an orange Mohawk for a semester.”

“The hardest part was growing it back,” observed Brinkman wryly as I frantically blinked away the mental picture that had popped into mind.

“Well, Halloween’s coming up,” Kiri suggested, “so you could use that as an excuse, I suppose.”

At last we dropped out of hyperspace and set course for Pluto, where Brinkman spent several relatively happy hours taking various readings and shooting photographs from every imaginable angle and distance as Kiri obligingly navigated the *Futaba* according to his instructions. Eventually he seemed satisfied, and we were soon repeating the process with Neptune, when the telecom screen lit up bearing Holan’s grim visage.

“What is it, Holan?” asked Kiri nervously. There was something in his face that made me uneasy as well.

“Your Majesties, I think you had better take a look at a few of the Earth television channels before you land. Something is happening.”

“What do you mean, ‘something?’” I asked, looking over Kiri’s shoulder.

“There appears to have been an armed uprising in the United States of America. But with all due respect to Your Majesties, I think you should see for yourselves.”

“Thank you, Holan,” Kiri said as she broke the connection. “Well,” she inquired, looking at the rest of us, “shall we?” and motioned towards the living quarters.

Astonished at Holan’s message, we turned on the telecom in the *Futaba*’s living room. There were still several U.S. news channels on the air, but many stations had already been shut down. Visibly stunned announcers spoke of shock troops armed with seemingly unbeatable weapons storming vital command centers and capturing many of the nation’s military leaders within minutes of the start of the coup. Apparently the President’s communications had been cut off, although rebel leaders were claiming he had already been captured.

“Bluff,” Kiri snorted. “If they had him they’d exhibit him; it would destroy what morale is left. But it does look like he’s isolated from his officers.” Abruptly the broadcast was interrupted by a completely different transmission, apparently cut into the news feeds without warning. I felt my stomach knot up as the Brizal emblem, a red triangle within a white circle with a yellow star in the center, unexpectedly filled the screen. It was something I’d never expected to see again in my lifetime. I heard Kiri whisper an ancient Anglo-Saxon expletive.

“Stand by for an important message,” intoned a voice-over after several seconds’ pause. There was another wait, this time of a minute or more, before the voice returned. “A message to the people of the United States of America,” it announced, and the Brizal logo was replaced by a face I’d never seen before. It was the face of a rather heavy-set man in his late forties, with slicked-back black hair, dark, deep-set eyes, and what looked like a perpetual five-o’clock shadow. It was a strong, rather intimidating face. For some reason he reminded me of the kind of predatory lawyer that ends up in politics, who starts out accumulating money but eventually realizes that power is the only really satisfying reward.

“My name is John Lucie,” he said. “I and my compatriots have taken action to save this great nation from the chaos, crime and scandal that have been eating away at it from within for the past decade. If you are a law-abiding, patriotic citizen, you have nothing to fear from us. Stay indoors for your own safety until further notice. That is all for now.”

The screen returned to the Brizal logo, and remained that way in silence. Kiri and I sat stunned. Finally I got up the courage to flip

channels. Although most of the U.S. ones had apparently been pre-empted, there were still one or two that had not yet been shut down. One was carrying CNN, which was airing footage of a recent fire at a barracks outside of Washington, D.C. There was no mistaking the green laser blasts that were systematically leveling the defenders' fortifications.

"This is unbelievable," I said finally. "And who the hell is John Lucie?" Kiri impatiently reminded me of the information the Qozernan Watchdog representative had passed along to us.

"This has to be connected somehow to Teyn," she said, her face deathly pale. "The Brizal emblem settles that. But do the ringleaders, including this Lucie, know what they're dealing with? And what is Teyn trying to accomplish?"

"Tenako said that once Qozernon was pacified Earth would be next," I suggested. "Maybe these are plans made before Tar Deshta, that they're carrying out because they haven't heard anything since."

Kiri shook her head. "I can't believe that if Teyn's people were here as recently as last month they didn't contact them. I wonder if, with Tenako dead, Teyn has decided to try conquer Earth for his own purposes. After all, with the Soviet Union out of the picture, an unscrupulous leader with all the resources of the United States behind him would have almost unlimited power if he were willing to be ruthless enough. And Teyn is certainly ruthless."

"That Lucie character looked pretty ruthless himself," Brinkman interjected with a shiver.

"They were able to cut into satellite communications," she said, thinking aloud. "That almost certainly means they have control of the computer networks that operate them. That's probably also how they cut off the President's communications from his troops. But if they can do it, so can I," she finished defiantly. Excusing herself, she informed us that she would be in her computer room for the next hour or so. Rann also suggested that perhaps he ought to stay up front in the *Futaba* and keep an eye on the displays.

Meanwhile we sat watching the broadcasts. There was no further news from the American networks; apparently they had now been completely disconnected from the communications net. However, there was still plenty of news from the overseas services, who retained contact with their reporters on the spot. It was evident that the rebels were rolling over all opposition without difficulty, and I wondered aloud why it was taking them as long as it was to complete their conquest.

“It’s probably a matter of scale,” Brinkman observed in his usual analytical manner. “It doesn’t matter how powerful your weapons are, if you only have a limited number of troops. In effect they need to occupy the country, and I suspect that their actual numbers are relatively small.”

“‘An unholy coalition of disaffected military officers, along with firearm worshippers, extreme right-wing religious cults, and race fanatics of all varieties,’ ” I mused aloud.

“What’s that?” asked Brinkman curiously.

“Some intelligence we received earlier,” I responded hastily. “We’ve been hearing rumblings about something like this for a while, but I never thought it could actually happen. And I wasn’t expecting the Brizali to be involved.” We were interrupted by a cough from the doorway, where Rann stood waiting.

“Holan says there’s an important message for you,” he informed us. “It’s from Deshtiran military headquarters.” Disentangling a reluctant Kiri from her computers, we made our way to the front of the *Futaba*, to find the officer’s image again waiting for us on the telecom.

“Your Majesties,” he said, “I’ve been asked to get this message to you as quickly as possible.”

“Is this more bad news, Holan?” I said heavily. “We’ve had a lot of that lately.”

“I’m afraid so,” he apologized.

It seemed that the Deshtiran tracking systems had discovered a small vessel about to enter the planet’s atmosphere. It had ignored warning hails, and when a patrol was sent to intercept it they had narrowly escaped incineration by an unexpected nuclear explosion. “The good news is that apparently the ship’s fusion-based self-destruct device malfunctioned; otherwise there’d be nothing left of the contents or of our patrol ship,” Holan said. I grimaced. “The bad news is that they found fragments of firearms of Earth manufacture in the debris. Apparently a lot of firearms,” he added, “although we have no way of ascertaining definite quantities.”

“Thank you, Holan,” I said. “Let us know if anything further develops on this.” He saluted and the screen went blank.

Kiri sat frozen in shock. I knew what she was thinking; I was facing it myself. The only way to defend Deshtiris against an influx of twentieth-century Earth weapons would be to fight fire with fire. I recoiled angrily, remembering how on Earth firearms had turned schools and offices into battlefields and slaughterhouses. There had to be another way, I raged to myself. And then I had an idea.

“Kiri,” I said softly. She looked up at me. There was a darkness in her eyes that rather frightened me. “Kiri, you said you had access to Earth’s Internet traffic. Would you show me what I have to do to access the Web?”

“The Web? At a time like this?” she said coldly, repressed anger in her voice.

“Trust me on this,” I said. “Or at least humor me.”

Summoning an apologetic smile, she led me back into the *Futaba*’s living quarters, to her room filled with computer equipment. After showing me the necessary commands to make the connection, she watched as I called up one of the ubiquitous search engines and then silently left me to my frivolous diversion. I found that response time was quite good, considering that we were many millions of miles from Earth. Although there was about a two and a half second delay in each direction, the time required for the satellite signals we were intercepting to reach the hidden hyperspace relay on the moon, the remaining distance was through hyperspace and the added delay infinitesimal. All in all, it was no worse than surfing the Web via a telephone connection with a fast modem.

And I found what I was looking for. Remarkably, it was in a page sponsored by the National Rifle Association. I made the necessary printouts and stashed them with my other belongings until I could present my idea.



“No, that won’t work either,” Kiri muttered. “They have the green lasers. Our ships would be helpless against even a small force.”

We had been going over our available options again, for what seemed like the thousandth time. For the past two days we had sat motionless in space, somewhere near the orbit of Neptune, endlessly rehashing every possible idea, including sending the Deshtiran battle fleet. During this time we had been in continual contact with Deshtiris, including the military command and the nascent Watchdog organization. It all boiled down to the fact that from the rebels’ viewpoint, as Hilaire Beloc once phrased it,

*Whatever happens we have got  
The Maxim Gun, and they have not.*

No matter how we looked at it, we were outgunned. And although we knew that there had to be at least two\* transformer stations somewhere, from which their weapons would be drawing their terrifying power, they had somehow managed to hide them quite effectively.

It wasn’t that we couldn’t detect the field that they emitted. The problem was that to our instruments the field seemed to blanket the entire North American continent, making pinpointing the location of the source impossible.

“This is new,” muttered Kiri. “The stations on Deshtiris didn’t do this. Whoever is behind this knows the technology almost as well as Tenako did. Which means we have more than just Teyn to deal with.” We were interrupted yet again by Rann advising us of yet another telecom message. Wearily we dragged ourselves once more to the front of the *Futaba*.

A palace communications officer appeared on the viewscreen. “Empress, we received a very strange message addressed to you at the Palace. We don’t understand it, but it looked important enough to

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\* Because of the curvature of the Earth.—*Ed.*

forward to you.” Kiri nodded impatiently as I wondered what kind of intergalactic junk mail would be coming in at a time like this.

A moment later the message appeared onscreen. Unlike most Deshtiran communications, it was plain text, rather than a voice or video communication. I read over the Deshtiran characters several times, trying to fathom their meaning.

Imperative you eliminate planar substation  
Cletus, Virginia. Insurrection nonviable  
without. No civilian populace. Coordinates  
N 37° 4' 23.8", W 82° 16' 3.3".  
T

I saw Kiri’s face go dead white as she reached the end of the message. “Who is ‘T’?” I asked curiously.

“A ghost,” she responded, her voice shaking. She sat staring at the screen for several long minutes. I finally heard her whisper to herself, “How many times will I have to—?”

Suddenly she shook off her lethargy, as her fingers began flying over the console before her. Turning away from the display for a moment, she half commanded, half implored me, “Will, I want you and the others to leave me alone for a bit. I’ve got to do some calculating and I don’t dare make any blunders.” I took the hint, as did Brinkman and Rann, and we retreated to the living quarters to follow the news.

For another hour we watched the less and less meaningful reports coming over the airwaves. There was no longer any hard news at all coming from the United States, and the remaining foreign correspondents stationed there had apparently had their communications cut off. At this point it was all rumor and speculation.

We were about to switch the telecom off in disgust when Kiri’s voice sounded around us over the intercom. “If you guys want to see a show, come on forward.” Something about the way she said it touched a chord of memory, and I remembered our very first flight from Earth so long ago. It was the same gleeful tone of voice she had used just before setting off a fusion bomb and blowing a gang of Brizal assassins (and one of her houses) to kingdom come. I suddenly felt a great wave of sympathy for whoever stood in her way this time.

We stepped through the gateway into the *Futaba*, the transparent walls around us virtually invisible, and I found myself almost instantly overcome by dizziness. Kiri was navigating the craft in great loops,

apparently in pursuit of something, the stars whirling crazily around us. I wanted to hold on to a railing, anything, to slow the vertiginous spinning; unfortunately there were only the smooth transparent walls. Oddly, there was no actual sensation of movement in the *Futaba*, only the visual cues around us, but I was far too interested in what she was doing to simply close my eyes.

Her target soon became apparent as we closed in on what appeared to be a large irregularly shaped rock floating in space. As we came closer, I realized that it was a good thirty feet or more in extent in its shortest dimension. "*Futaba*: claws," she commanded (I assumed that was a newly programmed instruction; I certainly hadn't heard her use it before), and three remarkable objects extruded themselves from the ship's front and moved to grapple with the surface of the rock. They looked for all the world like giant versions of the remote-control claws used to pick up prizes in the classic carnival game.

The rock secured (actually a tiny asteroid, I now realized), Kiri rotated the ship around, slowly turning the object with it, until we were nearly pointing at the distant sun, from this distance only a pearl-like imitation of its Earthly splendor. "This is where we find out if my calculations are accurate," Kiri announced with utter self-confidence, as I heard the normally almost inaudible hum of the *Futaba*'s engines rise in pitch and grow noticeably louder.

"Where are we taking this—rock?" Brinkman asked, his curiosity finally getting the better of him.

"Special delivery to Cletus, Virginia," she answered buoyantly.

"You little hooligan," I murmured under my breath in admiration. Brinkman choked.

"Do you know what the impact of an object this size will do?" he finally gasped. Kiri grinned.

"An estimated mass of four thousand metric tons, traveling sixteen miles per second, should release the equivalent of several Hiroshima bombs. With no contamination." Her voice changed to a perfect imitation of a popular CNN newscaster. "'Today a large meteorite landed in a remote locality in western Virginia, well away from any inhabited areas. Although the fireball was visible from thirty miles away, no civilian casualties were reported.' Ought to make the ten-o'clock news." Although her voice was cheerful, there was a glint of razor-edged steel in it. "I sent them a warning twenty minutes ago. Whether they choose to evacuate or not is their own funeral. Here comes Earth," she added, as the planet began rapidly expanding in front of us.

She checked some readouts on her console, and grinned. “*Futaba* will automatically release the rock at just the right time, at the right speed. *If* I didn’t goof somewhere. Let’s hope it doesn’t land on Washington, D.C.” A moment later the rock was suddenly pulling away from us as the clamps released and vanished back into the smooth substance of the ship’s hull, and we watched mesmerized as the huge object plummeted down towards the Eastern Seaboard. Soon we saw a glowing red dot, which quickly brightened to a brilliant white as atmospheric friction heated it to incandescence, followed successively by a bright pinpoint flash and what from here looked like a tiny round yellow ball.

Brinkman nudged me and pointed off towards the western U.S. Another small fireball had made its appearance somewhere in the southwest deserts. I wondered how many others there were. I felt suddenly cold as I remembered our terrifying flight from Tar Deshta. At least this time the circumstances were a little less desperate.

Kiri had been manipulating her console again, and a familiar face appeared on the screen before us. With a shock I recognized the chief executive of the United States. “This is the President. Who is this?” he demanded, gazing at the green-eyed, crimson-haired creature addressing him. Exhaustion was apparent in his features and his eyes were noticeably bloodshot, yet he managed nevertheless to sound defiant.

“Mr. President,” said Kiri in the most respectful tone she could muster, “you’ll find that communications with your forces have been restored. The insurrection can now easily be put down. Their advanced weaponry is no longer functioning. Please reinitialize your communications systems.”

We saw the President look to one side, and heard another voice excitedly babbling something as his expression changed to one of surprise and relief. He turned back to us. “Communications are confirmed. But what’re you saying about their weaponry? Our people can’t stand up to it.” He broke off again as another report was fed to him. This time when he turned back to the screen his expression was one of astonishment. “We’re starting to get reports that confirm what you’re saying. But what do you have to do with this? Just who the hell are you?” I couldn’t blame him; he’d obviously had a bad day.

“Friends,” she said softly, then broke into a grin. “You don’t want to know more than that, Mr. President. It’s in your hands now. Good luck,” and she laughed in delight as she broke the connection.

“You just love being inscrutable, don’t you?” I chided her, but I

was feeling pretty giddy as well. Even Brinkman was chuckling.

“What did you do?” asked a mystified Rann. Kiri did her best to explain.

“I found that Lucie had encrypted access to the key government routers handling military data communications, so that not only was the President cut off from his military command, but the command itself was cut off from all of the officers in the field. It was child’s play to restore it while re-encrypting access so that Lucie can’t undo it. He may be a good strategist, but he’s an amateur when it comes to computers,” she added with a snort.

“And without the transformer stations their laser weapons don’t work either,” I added.

“The best is yet to come,” she chortled. “I’ve cut off Lucie’s own access to the Net and moved all his files to a new location, so he can’t even find them.”

“What files are you talking about?” Brinkman asked, puzzled. She chuckled again.

“The ones showing how the entire operation was funded out of U.S. taxpayer money. They’ve been diverting funds from hundreds of legitimate military accounts, using dummy budget lines to pay for this whole operation. In twenty-four hours copies of those files will be automatically mailed out by a MILNET computer to the White House, the Inspector General’s office, and several appropriate senators. I also extracted some key parts dealing with the funding of certain prominent ‘hate radio’ personalities, detailing how they’ve been receiving money under the table from Lucie for the past eight years, and had them mailed to a select batch of newspapers, newsmagazines, and investigative television programs. Within a few days there should be quite a media circus in progress.”

Brinkman shook his head in awe. “‘Hooligan’ doesn’t begin to express it.”

“Will, we need to talk,” Kiri said a little later as we sat in the *Futaba*’s living room sipping hot tea. Brinkman and Rann were absent, perched in the front of the *Futaba* admiring the view.

“I know,” I said, “the smuggled guns.” I hadn’t forgotten about the potential disaster facing the Twin Planets. In fact, if the revolt was indeed led by remnants of the Brizali, it was entirely possible that the defeated forces might end up being evacuated to Deshtiris, where their combat training and Earth firearms would make them an extremely dangerous threat.

“So,” I said. “Any ideas?”

“I don’t want to fight fire with fire,” she said slowly. “But it may be the only way. We can’t just let Teyn and his people undo everything we’ve done in the last few months.” She stopped and drew a deep breath. “I’m thinking of using the Watchdogs to act as arms buyers for us. At least that way we could meet them with their own weapons.”

“You know what a disaster that would be for the Twin Planets,” I said dubiously. “Once firearms are plentiful and people are used to having them, our worlds would turn into the same ugly battlefields Earth has become. Is it worth it? Are there really no alternatives?”

“There may be not be,” she answered sadly. “We can’t fight rifles with swords. I wish I knew of another way.”

“I may know of one,” I said. She looked at me skeptically. “You once said that the Liquidator technology was still stored and accessible,” I began. A shocked expression flooded over her features.

“Will! You can’t possibly be thinking of—”

“No, of course not,” I cut her off. “Besides, we don’t have the facilities to create Liquidators even if we wanted to.” I paused for a moment. “One of the best minds of three planets is on this ship with us.”

“Alan?” she said in surprise.

I nodded. “I think he should hear the rest of this.”

A few minutes later Brinkman had joined us. He listened with interest to the basic theory of the Liquidators’ deadly power, which was a combination of certain frequencies of light combined with near-ultrasonic sound waves, together capable of liquefying organic matter. “Alan,” I said, “assuming that you had the data on this technology, could it possibly be adapted to affect only one inorganic compound?”

“Obviously without seeing the data it’s hard to say,” he mused, “but there’s no real inherent difference between organic and inorganic compounds. It used to be believed that organic ones could only be created by living tissue, but Wöhler disproved that when he synthesized urea from standard laboratory reagents. Nowadays we normally only call things organic if they include carbon atoms, which is a pretty arbitrary distinction. So, to answer your question, yes, I should think so.”

“Such as,” I persisted, “a compound like lead styphnate?”

He thought about that for a moment, and then burst out laughing. “Not bad! You’re not as dumb as I thought you were, Will,” and having lived with his utter lack of tact for several weeks now I took it in the spirit in which it was intended and accepted the compliment. “It just might work.”

“Alan,” I said, “I know Deshtiris is a painful place for you right now. But we need you. Would you be willing to come back with us and work on this?” To my surprise he didn’t hesitate, and there was a resolute look on his face, not at all like the sardonic Brinkman I’d seen until now.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, I’ll do it. It’s the least I can do. When do I start?”

“Godammit, what the hell is lead styphnate?!” roared Kiri, who during this exchange had worn an expression of increasing mystification. She was unquestionably one of the computer geniuses of the century. Chemistry, on the other hand, was not one of her strong points.

I told her. For several seconds she was literally speechless, something that didn’t happen often.

“Will,” she finally said, and there was sincere admiration in her voice, “you may have just rescued Deshtiris from the jaws of Hell itself.”

“Let’s see if Alan can make it work,” I retorted. “But it’s worth a try.”



We finally dragged ourselves to bed; we had, after all, been up almost around the clock. By the time we began congregating again for the “morning” meal we were only a few hours from Deshtiris. Naturally, one of the first things we did was to bring up the television news from Earth.

Most stations had by now reached the instant replay stage, endlessly recycling the same information again and again. For a change this was useful, as it enabled us to catch up on events. The big news, of course, was the sudden collapse of the rebellion after the mysterious failure of their advanced weaponry. Many of the insurrectionists had been rounded up, although a sizable percentage were unaccounted for, including Lucie.

“Damn,” Kiri growled. “I don’t like the thought of him still being at large. I might have known he’d slip out of the net.”

“He’s probably the most-wanted man on the planet now,” I reassured her. “Where can he hide?”

“Where, indeed?” she said moodily as we dug into a hearty breakfast, our eyes glued to the telecom screen.

Because of the crisis, the remarkable near-catastrophe of a huge meteorite impact in western Virginia had almost escaped notice for the time being, although there were a few whimsical interviews with assorted crackpots who claimed that friendly aliens from outer space had obviously intervened for reasons of their own. Most of the reputable scientists interviewed had pooh-poohed any connection between the devastating impact, which had apparently occurred in an uninhabited part of the state, and the almost simultaneous failure of the rebel weaponry. One savant confidently assured listeners that it could well have been “ionized plasma” in the wake of the celestial intruder that had knocked out the lasers’ control systems.

A second fireball had been reported in a desolate region of southern Arizona, and the general assumption was that it had resulted from another meteor strike. Oddly, there were no astronomical confirmations of a visible streak before the impact, although several eyewitnesses came forward and eagerly asserted that they had

witnessed the descending object.

By this time we were laughing so hard that we almost missed the brief mention of a mysterious communications blackout that had taken place on Earth about six hours before our arrival on Deshtiris. During that time all radio-based systems, including microwave transmissions, satellite communications, and radar, had simply ceased functioning. About a half-hour later everything had begun working again as though nothing had happened. Coming in the wake of such extraordinary events, it received relatively minor coverage, and we too took little notice of it as we spiraled down through the murky Deshtiran atmosphere towards Deshti and home.

Needless to say, when we arrived the Earth revolt was in the midst of seven-day-wonder status, and it was all we heard about for some time. Kiri modestly declined to let us describe her part in the ultimate fiasco (to Rann's extreme disappointment), insisting that it could all be told someday when things calmed down a bit. She and I also made the necessary arrangements to assign Brinkman the laboratory facilities and assistants he needed to pursue his project. And then we settled back into the usual palace routine of meetings, correspondence, and paperwork.

It was five days after we landed that our own communications blackout occurred. Our first intimation of trouble was when our telecom screens went blank in the middle of a videoconference. After a few minutes of exasperated fiddling Kiri called the communications desk, only to find that while internal networks were working there were no outside links at all. Initially we assumed an equipment malfunction, but I could see that Kiri was more than a little aggravated. Finally she exploded, raging at the inability of the technicians to locate the problem.

"I'm going to check on this myself," she snapped, and promptly stormed off to the communications center. About an hour later she returned, with an unsettled look on her face.

"We've been deliberately locked out of our own comm systems," she said grimly. "It's a virus using a form of data encryption that could take weeks to crack."

"Lucie?" I suggested, suddenly feeling queasy.

"Not judging from what I saw on Earth," she said, but this time there was no sneer in her voice. "Whoever did this is good. Really, really good. I don't know of anyone on three planets that could have done this. At least, not now."

"Well, is there an alternative to all this high-tech stuff? Do you still

have any radios, for example?"

She shook her head, then her expression brightened. "But I think we could improvise some pretty quickly. It's relatively simple technology." In a few minutes she was all energy as she hurled instructions through the still-working palace communications system.

Within an hour or so we had a number of high-powered radios cobbled together and an antenna strung from one of the palace's highest towers. Now the difficulty was to get the others distributed to the right people. At that point Rann stepped in. "I can fly the *Futaba*, remember? Why don't I deliver them?" And so a few minutes later he was on his way to visit the main military bases on Deshtiris. Within another fifteen minutes we were receiving the first frantic calls over our makeshift equipment.

Ironically, it was at just about the time we established communications with the last of the major bases when suddenly, without warning, the regular grid began working normally again as if nothing had ever happened. Our first thought was that we might have had a revolt of our own in the interim, but a quick check with the other commands revealed nothing out of the ordinary except for the blackout itself. Throwing up her hands, Kiri headed for her own equipment this time, only to return with an utterly baffled look on her face.

"Apparently the virus had a built-in time limit. It's now gone without a trace and everything's working perfectly. Even our tracking satellite links are back. It's just a good thing we didn't have any ships trying to land at the time."

"Could it have left some kind of time bomb behind?" I asked.

"There's no trace of anything suspicious, anywhere. It's completely gone, and nothing's been damaged. That's what scares me. A lot."

I shook my head in utter perplexity. "Weird," I mused. "The whole planet loses communications for six hours. Then everything's back on as if nothing happened."

"Six hours," Kiri echoed. "A complete tracking blackout, just like on Earth a few days ago, except this time six hours. Why not six minutes, or six seconds, or six days, for that matter." She paled. "Six days," she repeated. "The Earth revolt collapsed six days ago."

I suddenly felt cold. "How long does it take a battleship to get from Earth to Deshtiris?" I asked, but I already knew the answer.

She nodded. "And for six hours we had no way of tracking incoming vessels."

"I don't suppose we could have tracked them further out?" I

suggested dubiously.

“No. Not while they’re in hyperspace. Only another military vessel in hyperspace could do that.” A quick check with Holan revealed that there were none at present in space.

“So,” I said, “just maybe an unknown number of vessels with an unknown number of troops landed on Deshtiris sometime in the last six hours at an unknown location.”

“That’s a lot of unknowns,” Kiri sighed hopelessly.

In the meantime Brinkman had been practically working around the clock on modifying the Liquidator technology. For the first time since I’d known him he seemed to have found a mission in life, as he buried himself in the records left by Tenako and began experimenting with various combinations and frequencies of sound and light. Actually, I should say he had assistants experimenting for him, as he made no bones about being all thumbs in a laboratory. His own time was spent carrying out to the last decimal point endless complex mathematical formulae that would have baffled most humans, regardless of their planet of origin, then passing along suggested settings to the lab assistants for trial.

On at least one occasion the results melted a hole through the solid stone wall of the building; fortunately no one had been standing on the other side (to this day the building in question bears a neat circular concrete patch about four feet in diameter). I should add that Kiri and I were both jubilant about this near disaster, as it demonstrated conclusively that he was at least on the right track.

“It’s partly a question of data processing,” he explained at one point. “The Liquidators had to modify an extremely wide range of organic compounds to do their dirty work, and only an organic computer could handle the necessary parallel computations with sufficient speed. Hence the need for genetic engineering. But to affect just one substance is easily within our reach.”

And then one day he barged into our office without asking, sending Valkar into paroxysms of indignation. “It’s done,” he declared. “It works, and it’s ready.”

“How soon can you build a prototype?” I inquired eagerly. He held up a small box with what looked like a glorified light bulb on top.

At that moment we were interrupted by Valkar, who hurriedly ushered in another unexpected visitor. This time it was Holan, announcing that he had important information about Senaria’s disappearance. “Empress,” he blurted out without even being addressed, a remarkable lapse for the normally protocol-conscious

Deshtiran. “We have determined the cause of the explosion of Senaria’s flier.”

In one hand he held up a twisted piece of metal, which bore a mirror-like streak ending in a small hole; in the other was a small shapeless piece of lead. He gestured with the smaller fragment. “We have identified this as the remains of a high-powered rifle bullet,” he said. As Kiri half-rose to her feet in astonishment, he continued, “It is apparently of Earth origin. It entered the magnetic bottle and caused a runaway plasma reaction.”

For a few moments stunned silence reigned. I looked at Kiri, now standing erect, her stance suggestive of an avenging angel. The implacable expression on her face boded ill for whoever was behind this, I knew. Even Holan stepped back involuntarily.

“Thank you, Holan,” she said at last. “You and your staff have done exceptional work, and you have our gratitude. Now I need you to do something else.” Holan looked at her expectantly.

“Contact the military commanders for the southern continent. We have some new orders to issue.”



## Part III: Resurrections





Yo! Senaria here. Will thought it might make more sense if I did the narrating from now on, since I was pretty directly involved in the events you're about to read of. Actually I was up to my hips in them, so I guess I don't have a lot of choice. Well, here goes.

I know I fled the palace in a bit of a hurry. At least I left some notes behind, but I realize it was pretty sudden. I just had to get out of there, I suppose.

For a while after the Tar Deshta thing I must have been running on adrenaline or something. All the excitement of rebuilding the palace, getting people back home, and even trying to fix the mess Kiri's father had made of the weather, had helped me bury some things in the back of my mind, where I thought they'd stay. But then we returned to Tar Deshta, and it all came back.

I adore Will. He's a sweet, considerate person, and he's probably the perfect match for her. There's no way I'd ever try to interfere with the two of them. But I realize now that even when I was in love with Lev, I knew deep down inside that I'd never get over her. At first I was thrilled to be her bodyguard, but it gradually turned into a torment. I don't care what they say; unrequited love is a miserable, inadequate substitute for a lover.

On top of that, add in months of Rann following me around like a puppy, and then when Alan—well, I won't go into that. But that last barb of his—I just snapped. I woke up the next morning with Rann next to me—sweet, simple Rann!—and felt like I'd committed rape. I don't even really understand why I did it; that's what makes me so mad. I just had to throw something in Alan's face, and that was it. "That" being the blameless Rann (not that he didn't enjoy it, I suppose).

I slipped out that morning before he woke up and went back to my room and gathered up a few things. I knew I could always have my mother send me the rest later. For now I simply wanted to disappear for a while. I scribbled off some notes and dropped them into the slots in the mail room and just flew away. I suppose it only added insult to injury that I used the flier bought for me as a present.

Ever since I was little I'd enjoyed heading out to some relatively isolated destination, setting up a shelter, and relishing the solitude and maybe exploring a little as well. As I grew older, of course, my targets grew more and more remote and my absences longer, until disappearing for several weeks at a time became the norm. It had been a long while since I'd had the free time to do this, and now seemed like as good a time as any. Not to mention that I had a whole new planet to play in.

Although it's about the same size as Earth, Deshtiris has somewhat smaller oceans. As a result, there's almost twice as much land area here as on Earth, and even after thousands of years there are still unexplored areas remaining. Naturally it's all been mapped via satellite, but when millions of square miles show up as solid forest that doesn't really mean very much. Besides, one of the things the Brizali let slide into disrepair were the hundreds of weather satellites circling the planet, until they were barely capable of a simple visual image, much less the sophisticated remote imaging that used to be the standard.

It was to one of these unexplored areas in the southern hemisphere that I decided to set my course, maybe hoping for a bit of adventure to boot.

As I passed over a forest badly discolored by acid rain, I wondered just how long it would take to recover. I knew that the greenhouse effect which had already started its runaway spiral might require decades to bring under control, even with the advanced technology available. I hoped that at least once the burning of hydrocarbons ceased (and the acid rain with it), the natural resiliency of life would enable the forests to recover.

Will has already given you a brief description of the road vehicles commonly used on Qozernon.\* The craft I was using was similar, but just as your sport utility vehicles are designed with travel in more rugged environments in mind, so it was with this one. Basically a small semi-enclosed platform, with two comfortable seats in the front behind the controls and some open room behind, it also sported a specially designed windscreen that made it possible to travel at speeds of up to two hundred miles per hour without the riders suffering unduly within the craft. A gyroscopic autostabilizing feature allowed the occupants to walk around without capsizing the vehicle like a canoe.

Unlike a Qozernan road vehicle, which requires an optically coded

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\* In *Mikiria*.—*Ed.*

roadway, this type of flier can be used away from marked highways. Considering that for the past few decades the Brizal government had extensively paved over their roads for use by primitive internal combustion vehicles (conserving fission and fusion power for the transformers Tenako had been so obsessed with), this is an invaluable feature. Generally speaking, the higher one goes the faster one can go, as the on-board collision avoidance circuitry can sense possible conflicts from greater distances. I soon rose to an altitude of over three thousand feet and opened the throttle wide.

Deshti is located on one of the three northern continents about twenty-one hundred miles north of the equator, or roughly the latitude of Fontana, California (between the climate and the pollution I imagine Will must have felt right at home when he first arrived). I flew without much of a plan, other than heading south. Occasionally I landed in a deserted canyon or forest for a quick pit stop. I had no specific destination and no timetable, and took most of the day to cover the first fifteen hundred miles. As the sun began to approach the mountains, I decided to make camp for the night, as things were soon going to get a lot more uncomfortable for a day or two.

For at least an hour I had seen no sign of human settlement, which suited me just fine. Nonetheless I made a large circular sweep over my chosen landing area for a diameter of about twenty miles or so. I wanted solitude on this trip and I was determined to get it. Below was a pleasant looking pine forest, located in the foothills of an imposing mountain range to the west which I was skirting, and there were periodic clearings which looked inviting.

One advantage I had over your own explorers was not having to worry about wild animals. Almost entirely populated by plants and animals from Earth, both Deshtiris and Qozernon are relative paradises for humans, and humans have always taken care to respect and preserve them so. Although the Virrin transplanted virtually every species available, they also genetically modified the more lethal ones by instilling an instinctual indifference to humans. This could result in some unexpected surprises, such as the time Mom and I took Will (before he regained his memory) to one of the less populated parts of Qozernon and at one point found ourselves in the middle of a pride of lions. I thought poor Will was going to just pee his pants, he was so terrified.

If you're wondering why the Virrin would bring dangerous animals to another planet and then modify them to be relatively harmless, the answer is that they're only harmless to humans. The

Virrin did a remarkable job of replicating the Earth's complex ecosystems of that time, which thousands of years ago were still relatively untainted by human interference. To have transplanted an ecosystem while omitting the predators would have thrown the entire system badly out of balance (as has happened on Earth), so they were retained, but with appropriate safeguards for the human population.

The real enigmas, though, and the ones our ecologists have scratched their heads over for centuries, are the ecosystems found all over the Twin Planets which never existed on Earth. The most widely accepted theory holds that the Virrin used our planets as laboratories, developing incredibly complex systems by combining life forms that on Earth would never be found together except possibly in zoos, and making them work together so smoothly that they're still stable thousands of years later.

There were plenty of natural hazards to be wary of, such as weather, poisonous plants, and the like. But at least I had no worries about being attacked by vicious beasts. It was of course easy to forget about the one dangerous animal the Virrin hadn't modified.

So it was without any fears for my safety that I set down in a clearing for the evening and debated setting up the shelter. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, the temperature was still in the upper nineties, and a quick check of the nearest weather satellite predicted more of the same, so I ended up just spreading some pads over a patch of bare soil. By the time it was dark I had eaten a light meal of reconstituted vegetables. I undressed and stretched out on a sleeping pad under the darkening dome of the sky and watched the stars appear, my mind at first almost a blank after the long day.

For a while I kept my thoughts on safe subjects, such as the relative scarcity of stars in the Deshtiran sky compared to Qozernan's. I knew that eventually all the dust and other crud in the air would settle out and leave the sky crystal clear once again, long before the carbon dioxide levels had dropped enough to reverse the greenhouse effect. Deshtiris did have something that Qozernon lacked, however, and they soon rose over the horizon almost in unison: her two small moons, sometimes called the Twin Sisters (Qozernon also has a moon, but it's so diminutive and its orbit so far from the planet that without a telescope it simply appears as a bright star, moving almost imperceptibly among the others).

I watched as the Big Sister slowly made her way across the sky, soon chased by the Little Sister. What's she running from? I wondered. Who am I running from? Rann? Alan? I knew better than that. I'm

running away from myself, I thought harshly.

I remembered the time Kiri ran away. From me.

For a long time I had begun to realize that my feelings toward her were more than just the hero worship that I and everyone else had thought them to be. But I hadn't said anything, knowing how strongly she still felt about her lost love and childhood companion Wilorian (little did I dream he'd drop in from the sky one day). It wasn't that I felt any shame about it; in matters of the heart gender is considered to be pretty much irrelevant on both Qozernon and Deshtiris, although there's still the messy matter of physical preferences to deal with.

Love, though, is something terribly hard to bottle up. It gets to a point where it starts to eat away at the container if it's not released, and you begin to think that nothing worse could possibly happen to you no matter what you say or do. And so one evening, while we were on a sight-seeing trip to the same plains overlook that so impressed Will, I told her how I felt. That is, I told her that I loved her.

I also told her that if she were so inclined I wanted to have a physical relationship with her, but that I'd understand if she didn't. I remember that she put her arms around me and cried. "Sen," she had said, "you know you're one of the few people that I love with all my heart. I wish I could make you happy. You're the kindest, most unselfish person I've ever known. But I think you already know that I'm just not physically attracted to women. I wish for both our sakes that I were, but that's just the way I'm made. I'm sorry, Sen."

I could accept that. I was admittedly disappointed, but just clearing the air was the important thing for me. Knowing that she knew how I felt about her was enough. For the next two days we shared a bond between us that I hadn't ever known with anyone. Several times I caught her with a furtive sadness in her eyes, and wondered why, but somehow it just got lost in the exhilaration I was feeling.

And then she was gone. Without warning. When I woke up that morning, the *Futaba* was no longer parked in its usual spot above the lawn. A few hours later we received a hyperspace message from her, text only, not even a telecom message. She said she had something important to do and would be gone for a while; she didn't know how long. I sent her a frantic message back, asking if it was because of me; if I'd done something wrong; if I'd hurt or offended her somehow. Her return message sent me into a panic that I'll never forget.

*I'm sorry, Sen. Please forgive me. It's not your fault.*

I remember chewing on that for hours, reviewing every word over and over, and getting nowhere. I was terrified that she was never

coming back, although she swore she would be; she just didn't know when. After that her messages got fewer and further apart as she slipped out of hyperspace communication range, until we heard nothing more for *ten months*. I did things during those ten months that I would rather forget; among other things, that was when I acquired the reputation of sleeping with anyone and anything if I'd had enough to drink. (I suppose it was only fitting that it was Alan who managed to resurrect that particular tradition. And then he had the nerve to throw it in my face in front of Rann.)

When she did finally return, Kiri wouldn't say where she'd been or what she'd been doing. She'd always been rather close-mouthed, but I reasonably thought that this should be different, and although we've once more grown close since then, I've never again experienced the magic of those two days. Even at Tar Deshta, when she finally revealed just how important her trip had been for the future of—well, everything, I guess—I've still never been able to quite forgive her for choosing that moment of all times to run away.

And now, I realized, I had done the same thing. And on that sour note I finally drifted off to sleep.



Shortly after sunrise the next morning I was slicing the air at top speed, heading due south. I'd left as early as possible, first making sure to refill my water bottles from a nearby stream, because ahead loomed the equator and the most inhospitable regions on Deshtiris. I also checked an indicator on my flier's panel, which showed that the vehicle was continually sending out a location signal. I didn't seriously expect that Will or Kiri would send someone after me; it would have been a serious breach of privacy to have done so and I wasn't a fugitive. But if something did happen they would at least know where to look.

Below I saw the landscape grow more and more barren as I approached the equator. There were vast desert areas that appeared to have been covered by scrub vegetation at one time, now utterly lifeless from lack of water. Even at the altitude I was at the heat was pretty intense, and I drew the windscreen overhead so I wouldn't wind up seared by the sun. Soon I ended up shedding all but my cutoffs and boots and guzzling as much water as I dared.

The windscreen, by the way, is made of the same shape-shifting diamond as the *Futaba's* hull, and can extrude itself to whatever is the optimum shape (calculated on the fly) for the speed and altitude being traveled. It also has the ability to screen out the harmful components of Exor's\* rays if desired, making travel a lot easier on the eyes as well as the skin. Today I appreciated the technology behind it immeasurably.

Will has already told you about the boots here: made of a porous leather-like synthetic material, they let your feet breathe while still providing protection and support. When Kiri and I visited Earth a few years ago I couldn't resist buying a pair of *Dallas*-style cowboy boots. After an hour or so of wearing them my feet were so miserably hot and sweaty that I relegated them to my bookshelf as a souvenir and haven't worn them since. How Earth's residents can stand the footwear they inflict on themselves remains an impenetrable mystery to me.

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\* Exor is Deshtiris' sun.—*Ed.*

Just when I thought things couldn't get any more disagreeable, the land below disappeared behind me as I began the eight-hundred mile crossing of the Sea of Doom. So-called because it straddles the equator almost exactly and constituted an indescribable ordeal for the mariners who originally crossed it in sailboats, it lived up to its name all too well. Instead of the hot, dry blazing heat of the desert I was now bathed in a hot, muggy atmosphere so humid I couldn't tell where the air left off and my sweat began. Rather than soak the flier's seat, I laid out a blanket in the back of the flier and stretched out for the duration, the vehicle set on automatic. I was profoundly grateful when the alarm I had previously set sounded, and sure enough off in the distance I could see the thin edge of an approaching shoreline. Soon I was crossing more hot, dry desert, which seemed almost balmy compared to the sweltering horror I had just left.

It was late afternoon before the fierce heat finally began to abate somewhat and I again began to see vegetation of sorts below. I knew, however, that in another hour I'd be entering a region of considerably higher elevation, and so I enjoyed a fabulous pink, gold and green sunset (caused to a great extent by all the particulate junk in the air) as I took advantage of every bit of usable daylight that I could. It was with no little relief that I finally located a reasonable place to land again just as it was growing dangerously dark, for traveling off marked roadways at night in a flier is for the foolhardy, not the faint-hearted. I had seen no sign of lights in any direction before I descended, so I landed without further ado and made my second night's camp.

This time I was so exhausted by the day's ordeal that I was asleep almost as soon as I hit the sleeping pad. Unlike the previous night, I slept soundly this time the entire night through, waking only when nature made an insistent call an hour or so before dawn. By that time it was almost cool, and I pulled a light covering over me as I gratefully settled back in for a few hours of dozing, somnolently enjoying the daybreak sounds of the awakening forest.

As I slowly began gathering my wits about me, I realized that I was finally beginning to enjoy my self-designated vacation. Deshti seemed very far away as I watched a brilliantly plumaged red and yellow bird busily upholstering its nest. They'll get along just fine without me for a little while, I thought, and I felt a little thrill of excitement. Today I would be arriving at my destination.

In the morning I flew over one of the few populated areas intersecting my route. It wasn't a giant metropolis like Deshti, but it was a good-sized city of several hundred thousand inhabitants from the

looks of it. Several rail lines headed off in various directions, and for at least a hundred miles or more in each direction the land was broken into neatly-defined farms and, here and there, small crossroads villages.

It was early afternoon when I finally left the populated areas behind and reached my objective, a region of solid forest extending for several million square miles. There had of course been expeditions into this area, but due to its sheer size they had barely scratched the surface of this magnificent wilderness. Hoping for some excitement I steered the little flier towards one of the largest untouched areas.

For several more hours I continued, looking for something worth investigating. Below me stretched a green canopy of forest in all directions as far as the eye could see. Several times I crossed a broad, brilliantly blue river, with huge trees growing almost to its banks, making it seem as though it were flowing through a green-walled canyon several hundred feet deep. In the distance the foothills of a mountain range were visible through the slight haze. I also noted with satisfaction that there was little or no sign of damage from acid rain; apparently this area was far enough from the polluted weather patterns to be relatively unaffected. Here and there a small break showed through the otherwise endless green, and it was while I was passing over one such clearing that I saw several figures, apparently human.

Curious, I reduced my speed and looped around for a better look, descending to just a few dozen feet above treetop level. A moment later I passed over the border of the clearing, which due to the great height of the trees was still well over two hundred feet below. I saw a pair of figures, carrying what looked like swords, looking up at me. Then one of the two raised what I had taken for a sword, placing the hilt against his shoulder and pointing the "blade" directly at me.

The Twin Planets may be relatively civilized compared to yours, but I'd still seen enough Earth television to recognize a rifle, especially after our experience back in Fontana. Suddenly fighting a knot in my stomach I tilted the flier upwards just as I saw a flash at the barrel of the rifle. That I was too late was clear a moment later as I felt an impact at the rear of the little craft.

My memory of what happened next is rather hazy. Apparently the motor exploded, hurling me from the flier, as I vaguely recall spinning through space and seeing the treetops approaching with dizzying speed. Instinctively I tried to shield my head with my arms. For a moment there was a pandemonium of whipping leaves and branches, and then my head must have struck something because I remembered nothing more.





For a long time I felt as if I were lightly floating on a soft feather bed. Only gradually did I begin to feel a world of pain, first in the form of a splitting headache, soon enhanced with aches that seemed to originate in every cubic inch of my body. Then I became aware of a foul taste in my mouth and a sensation of choking. Opening my eyes with an effort and seeing only a fuzzy brownish darkness, I experienced a moment of panic before I realized that I was lying face down on the forest floor. I spent the next few minutes spitting out dead leaves.

Awareness of where I was and what had happened finally began to surface. It felt as if every bone in my body was broken, and it was with considerable trepidation that I cautiously tried wiggling a finger. Meeting with a reasonable degree of success, I carefully ran tests on a few other parts, and, finding them all apparently somewhat intact, attempted to sit up.

That proved to be a mistake. I was not at all prepared for the deluge of pain this innocent endeavor triggered, and to my dismay I only succeeded in rolling over. I finally managed to prop myself up on both elbows, the better to survey the damage. From this position I saw my sword, buried almost to the hilt in the soft forest soil, a few feet from where my head had been. Other debris from my flier was scattered around the general vicinity.

The effort brought on a wave of dizziness, and I realized why when I saw the broad pool of half-congealed blood on the leaves where my right thigh had lain a moment ago. The bleeding from the ugly gash responsible appeared to have slowed somewhat, but I knew I would have to get medical help soon or I would be in serious trouble. The rest of my body was covered with a broad assortment of smaller cuts, abrasions, and bruises. So that's what they call "breaking a fall," I thought ruefully; it felt like I'd broken everything else instead. I painfully eased myself back onto the leaves and closed my eyes for just a moment.

When I opened them again, the forest canopy above me had changed oddly. It was brown now, and divided by a series of regular

parallel ridges. I stared at it for some time before I realized that I was looking at a wooden plank ceiling. I must have passed out, I thought, and tried to sit up again.

“Please don’t move,” said a quiet female voice. “You need to rest for a while.” A face appeared above me, a sad-faced woman of about Kiri’s age, and dressed in the customary blue T-shirt of a medical doctor.

“Where am I?” I asked, more out of convention than anything else, as I lay back down. I felt the pain of strained and bruised muscles ease a bit as I relaxed again. “How did I get here? I was just lying in the forest a moment ago—”

“That was three days ago,” she said in some amusement. “You’ve been asleep ever since. You know, it takes a lot out of you to repair that many cuts and bruises. You’re lucky you didn’t break your back or your neck.” I turned my head slightly and saw an IV attached to one arm. “You also lost a lot of blood,” she went on matter-of-factly. “You put a gash in your right leg that would have bled you to death if we hadn’t found you in time.”

“And you are—?” I asked.

“My name is Veldra,” she said. “I’m the head doctor here.”

“And where is ‘here?’ ” I asked, returning to my original line of inquiry, this time with sincere interest.

“Don’t worry, it’ll all be explained to you, Senara,” she said evasively. “The Boss said he wanted to see you once you were feeling better.”

“Actually, I’m usually called Senaria,” I said in surprise. “How did you know my name? And who is The Boss?”

The look on her face told me I wasn’t going to get anywhere this time either. “You’ll meet him soon enough,” she said, a bit sadly I thought. “And as for your identity, we found your ID in the wreckage when we picked you up.”

It was about then that I became conscious of the collar around my neck. It was loose enough that I hadn’t noticed it before. “What’s this?” I asked, fingering it nervously, but with a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach I knew the answer even before Veldra replied.

“It’s a restraint collar,” she said apologetically, confirming my worst fears. “Don’t try to leave the infirmary. Do you know how they work?” I nodded grimly. “I’m sorry,” she added. “I’m just the doctor here. I hate them as much as you,” and I suddenly realized to my horror that she also wore one, almost hidden by her shirt.

A restraint collar is made of the same amorphous diamond as the

*Futaba*, and like the *Futaba* can change its shape and size by manipulating the subatomic field that gives it its remarkable strength. Sealed inside the crystal is a small receiver which keeps track of the location of the wearer. If you stray outside the permissible area defined in its current programming, it begins to shrink. Stray too far, and you choke to death. Originally introduced as a “humane” form of house arrest, they have since been banned on both Qozernon and Deshtiris, especially after a widely publicized incident in which a prisoner fell from a boat during a routine transport and was swept away. His head—well, it was never found.

So now I knew. I was a prisoner. But of whom?

That question was answered a few hours later. I was half dozing when I heard another voice ask Veldra for a report on my condition. Curious, I opened my eyes. What I saw was a hard-faced man in the too-familiar uniform of the Brizal secret police. It can’t get worse than this, I thought to myself. It can’t possibly get worse. Boy, was I ever wrong.

In any case, it was several days before I could move around unassisted with the use of a crutch. Until then even making my way to the toilet required the assistance of Veldra or one of the assistant physicians (I think you call them “nurses” on Earth, but here they’re treated with the esteem they deserve and given the more respectful title accordingly). She hadn’t been joking; I was practically covered from head to toe with the adhesive air-permeable bandages commonly used on the Twin Planets, which biodegrade and fall off after a set amount of time. The sole exception was the gash on my thigh, which was more solidly bandaged for the time being.

Once I could move a little on my own I was given some standard issue clothing: sleeveless shirt, shorts, underclothing and boots. “What happened to my own?” I demanded.

“Let me put it this way, Senaria,” Veldra explained patiently. “Your clothing took most of the brunt of your fall through that tree.” I winced, realizing that as shredded as I was my clothes must have been in tatters by the time I hit the ground.

During this time I was able to get to know her a little better. Like many of the other support staff she was indeed a prisoner. She explained that, as was typical under the Brizali, she’d been awakened in the middle of the night, given a few minutes to dress and throw together some essentials, and accompany her captors. They’d taken her here, and here she’d been ever since. Like Rann’s mother, I thought grimly. I wondered how many others had vanished without a trace,

leaving their families to live in the worst kind of uncertainty.

I soon realized that she was a very lonely woman, and missed her family terribly. I was amazed to learn that neither she nor any of the other prisoners were aware of what had happened over the past six months, and so I at least had the satisfaction of brightening her day with word of the planet's recent liberation. No one here had ordered me to keep anything to myself, so I freely filled her and the others in on recent events, assuring her that they couldn't very well keep us here forever. At least, I hoped not.

"We all wondered about the change that occurred," she mused, referring to that momentous day six months earlier. "Until then, things here had been very quiet, with just a relatively small research staff on hand and occasional visits by The Boss. Then suddenly we were deluged by several hundred Brizali of all ranks and departments, and most of them looked pretty shaken up. We were told only that there had been a re-evaluation of this compound's purpose and warned not to ask questions. So they were actually refugees, then," she finished with a certain amount of satisfaction. "Not that it does us any good at the moment, though."

It was about a week later that I was informed I would be departing the infirmary and given a room of my own. Before we left, a woman I hadn't seen previously, also wearing the insignia of the Brizal secret police, examined my collar. "This will be re-programmed to give you access anywhere within this building," she said coldly. "The prisoners' quarters are on the other side. Don't attempt to leave the building." As she spoke, she drew a stylus over a small handheld device that displayed a map of the complex, outlining one of the buildings. I was surprised to see that there were many more buildings in addition to the one I occupied. Finished, she then pressed a small button. "Follow me," she said and turned to leave without further ado.

"Senaria," Veldra called after me, "you need to return in two days for me to recheck that gash on your thigh." I nodded, appreciative of her reassuring smile and wondering what new adventure lay ahead as I limped from the room, a crutch under one arm.

This was my first opportunity to see what lay outside the area in which I had been confined, and I examined my surroundings with interest as we proceeded. There were several large wards similar to the one I'd been in. I also received glimpses of what appeared to be well-furnished medical labs and some advanced diagnostic equipment normally found only in larger hospitals. The equipment made an odd contrast to the construction of the building itself, which was quite

cheaply and flimsily built. I could kick a foot through any of the doors, I thought, and then remembered the collar.

In the center of the building was a large mess hall, which we passed through without stopping. It was apparently between mealtimes, as the room was nearly deserted except for a few people dressed in the light Brizal uniforms and a number of other, more casually dressed individuals. I saw one or two restraint collars among the latter. "This is where you'll take your meals," my guide said. "Mealtimes are announced over the room telecoms. Don't be late or you'll go hungry." In spite of the paucity of uniforms, it gave the definite impression of a military installation. The effect was not lessened by the barracks-style washrooms and showers we passed moments later.

A few more minutes took us to a side corridor lined with doors on either side. It resembled nothing quite so much as a cheaply built college dormitory. Opening one of the doors, she ushered me into a small room about twelve feet square, containing a bed, a dresser with a telecom sitting on top, a mirror, two chairs, and a small closet. "You'll find some clothes there that will fit you," she said, motioning towards the closet. "The telecom will only allow you to connect to the main switchboard, so don't plan on calling home. The set will activate automatically for various announcements coming through from time to time, and I suggest you pay attention to them unless you like unpleasant surprises. If you have any questions call the switchboard." With those words she left, closing the door behind her.

For a few minutes I surveyed the room that was apparently going to be my prison for the time being. Then, fighting off the urge to throw myself on the bed and wallow in self-pity for a while, I activated the telecom and contacted the main switchboard. "Is there anything to read around here?" I asked the bored operator that answered.

A little later I returned to my room, this time with a pile of ancient Brizal newsmagazines, a history of Deshtiris (something I wished now I'd learned a lot more about in school when I had the chance), and a few novels. Incidentally, several hundred years of computer use on the Twin Planets have demonstrated conclusively that there's still no random-access information retrieval device quite so satisfying or efficient as a book. Feeling a little less blue, I resolutely set to work to pass the endless hours.

That evening I answered the mess call and had no sooner loaded up my tray (with difficulty; it's not easy juggling a tray and a crutch at the same time) and taken a seat than I found myself surrounded by other prisoners. Apparently word of my arrival had created something of a

sensation, especially since Veldra had discreetly passed along news of the Brizal overthrow. Although I'd met a few of the medical staff during my stay in the infirmary, most of the faces were new to me. All, of course, wore the unobtrusive restraint collars.

"Are you really a friend of Princess Mikiria?" said an awestruck young man in his thirties, one of the maintenance staff. I nodded, my mouth full of soybean burger.

"Part of her bodyguard," explained Veldra.

"Actually," I said after a major swallow, "she'd lived with our family on Qozernon for the past thirty years." I explained how Kiri had stashed Will on Earth when they first fled Deshtiris and only retrieved him recently.

Of course, the next thing they wanted to hear about was our near-disastrous expedition to Tar Deshta. There had been rumors about some kind of terrible catastrophe that had befallen the Brizali, but very little had leaked into the compound. I gave a carefully worded description of what had happened; I didn't know just how much our captors wanted discussed, and besides Will and Kiri had cautioned me when we first returned to the palace not to mention Tenako or the Virrin's planar field. It nonetheless made for quite a dramatic story, especially the part about Kiri's sensational return from the dead.

I had just about reached the part where we escaped in the *Futaba* when there was a minor commotion at the other end of the mess hall and I saw several coarse-looking men come swaggering in. They were dressed oddly, wearing tan and green mottled shirts and trousers, and sported extremely short haircuts that made their ears look more like handles than integral parts of their anatomy. Their heads reminded me of nothing quite so much as eggs, topped off with a thin coating of mold. They appeared to be about Kiri's age, but I noted to my surprise that they were speaking English. "Earthmen," Veldra whispered in my ear, and then I realized they would be in their early twenties.

One of them pointed in my direction, and moments later they were loudly exchanging coarse jests and gesturing at me. My face reddening, I started to struggle to my feet when I felt Veldra's hand on my shoulder. "Senaria, your leg. You're in no shape for a dust-up," she said softly. I'm not sure if I would have taken her advice, as they were heading in our direction, but to my surprise a Brizal officer at an intervening table abruptly rose in their path. "Off limits," I heard her say sharply. One of the thugs started to argue loudly, only to be pulled back by his companions with some whispered comments.

"No more of your crap," the Brizal snapped. "Or have you

forgotten what happened to your trigger-happy friends?” At that they gave her sullen looks and quieted down noticeably. A few minutes later they had secured their meals and were sitting off by themselves. I noticed them directing ugly glances in our direction every once in a while.

“What are Earthmen doing here?” I asked in surprise when things had calmed down a little. I noticed the others seemed shaken by the near-confrontation; a definite chill had settled over the table.

“We’re not sure,” Veldra said. “They started showing up about five months ago.” After the Brizal overthrow, I noted with interest. What did the Brizal want with Earth? And did it have something to do with the attack in Fontana? “They’ve brought firearms with them, too,” added one of the others. “I don’t like the looks of it.”

“Their leader is worse,” Veldra said. “Someone named Jack Lucie. I don’t think I’ve ever seen any Brizal that gave me the creeps the way he does.”

“Is he here?” I asked. I suddenly realized that more might be happening on Earth than we had suspected.

Veldra shook her head. “We haven’t seen him for several weeks. And that’s just fine with me.” And on that note the conversation gradually shifted to other topics.

I managed to kill a day in this manner, locking away my real thoughts somewhere in the back of my mind. It was the evening of the second day, when I had returned to my room and unsuccessfully tried to bury myself in a novel, when they finally boiled out, overwhelming me like a searing flow of lava. I don’t think I’d ever felt so alone in my life, as I sank into an utterly bleak state of depression.

Up until yesterday I’d been continually surrounded by people: Veldra, the assistant physicians, the other patients. Now I saw only the four walls of the room around me, and it hit me with full force. I was in the hands of the Brizali, and they knew perfectly well who I was. I had no idea what kind of treatment to expect, but somehow I didn’t think it would be anything to look forward to.

Why were they here? Obviously this place had been established as a fallback position in case of disaster, a disaster which had indeed hit them square on. And I was one of the people they had to thank for it. They could have easily left me in the forest, I knew, and I would have bled to death within another few hours at most, long before any search parties located me. When my body was found, my death would have been safely written off to natural causes.

Instead they had brought me here, given me excellent medical care,

and a room of my own. Somehow I fitted into their plans. I guess the realization of that fact was what frightened me most.

If it was information they wanted, they'd get it sooner or later. They didn't have to resort to anything so crude as torture; there are plenty of chemically-based ways to trick the brain into spilling everything it knows, ways which have long since been outlawed on both planets, but which the Brizali would hardly fail to use. But I had no illusions about spilling secrets; I didn't really know any of any importance.

The word that kept floating to the surface was far more frightening: blackmail. My life against—what? What would Kiri agree to if my life were on the line? Under the present circumstances I would have liked to have thought nothing at all, but I knew her too well for that; Kiri's loyalty to her friends was unshakeable, and also her weakest spot.

Sightlessly I stared at the bare wall; at that moment I would have sold my soul to have turned the clock back two weeks and just started all over again. "Senaria, you stupid jerk," I whispered softly to myself.

It was about then that the telecom suddenly came to life. "Amkor Senara?" inquired the switchboard operator, looking around, then seeing me he nodded. "Please stay in your room. You are to have a visitor shortly. The Boss himself wants to ask you some questions." The screen went blank.

So I was finally going to meet The Boss. I was a bit surprised; I would have assumed that some lesser functionary would be assigned to routine questioning. Well, at least I'd finally discover just who was behind this whole strange operation, I thought dejectedly.

And then there was a knock at the door, and of course it was Krigghin Teyn who stepped into the room.



I don't know if you can really imagine the shock I felt. I suppose if I asked you to picture Adolf Hitler walking into your room six months after the fall of Berlin you might be able to grasp it. I just stood there staring idiotically.

He smiled slightly, the oily ingratiating smile I'd seen so many times in his televised speeches. I suddenly realized that he was alone in the room with me. I knew I could overpower him physically. If anyone deserved killing it was Teyn, I thought, rising to my feet, anger flooding through me as I remembered the attempt on Kiri's life in Fontana.

"Don't do it, Senaria," he said calmly, easily reading my expression. "Your collar, and that of every prisoner in this complex, has been adjusted to prevent you from getting within six feet of me. It would pinch your head off long before you could touch me. Be a good girl and spare my cleaning staff the mess." I sat down heavily on the bed, forcing back the emotions that had engulfed me for a moment. I wondered that he had called me Senaria, then realized that Veldra had doubtless been required to make reports on my condition and might have included my preferred name among the information.

For a long time he just stood there, his eyes silently boring into mine in a disquieting way. "What do you want with me?" I said finally.

"To ask you some questions," he answered easily. "Remember, it was you who dropped in on us."

"I was shot down," I snapped.

"Yes," he admitted. "We've had a recent infestation of idiots here. It's hard to believe people like that actually get ahead on Earth. They've been appropriately disciplined. In any case, you're here, and we can't very well let you go."

"And—?" I prompted, still feeling a lot more belligerent than common sense dictated.

"While I don't expect you to willingly provide us with useful information," he said, "you could nonetheless prove valuable." (I felt distinctly uneasy about that word "willingly.") "After all, you're a member of the Empress' bodyguard, her longtime friend, and daughter

of the Qozernan ambassador. I'm sure there's some leverage there; at least enough to warrant the cost of feeding and housing you for the time being. Besides, I'd like to hear the details of your little adventure in Tar Deshta. I'm well aware that the news media didn't tell the whole story there."

"First tell me why you tried to kill Ki—Empress Mikiria on Earth last month," I burst out, feeling control over my anger slipping away. "You sent a slimy, filthy, gun-toting assassin in the middle of the night. Why should I talk to someone like you?"

He was actually caught off guard by that, I realized as I felt the blood pounding in my temples. "What assassin?" he finally said levelly. "I did nothing of the sort. What are you talking about?"

At that I totally lost it. "You lying sack of shit!" I practically screamed. "It was the head of your goddam bodyguard that we identified. Will blew him to bits with one of his bolts," I added with considerable satisfaction, then kicked myself as I realized I had just let something slip that I shouldn't have. Teyn didn't seem to catch it. To my surprise, he backed away slightly. "What?" I taunted him furiously, still totally out of control. "Afraid of me?" Even as I said it I realized what an incredibly idiotic remark it was, and I felt my face redden. Time to calm down, Senaria, I signaled urgently to myself.

"Afraid?" he echoed, his calm utterly unruffled. "No, I wouldn't say so. I just don't want you to accidentally kill yourself." I involuntarily put a hand to my throat, suddenly feeling very shaky, as he made himself comfortable in one of the chairs. "Now why don't you take a few deep breaths and tell me about this attack?"

"It was the head of your bodyguard," I said at last, feeling a little less combustible. "He tried to shoot her with an Earth rifle through a window. If you didn't send him, then who did?" The look of surprise on his face seemed genuine, I thought.

"My bodyguard?" he said. "I sent them to Earth to—" and then he stopped and his expression hardened. For a moment I wondered if I'd gone too far. My big mouth has gotten me into trouble on more than a few occasions. "Tell me about this," he said icily. "I knew nothing about it."

I snorted, but somehow I felt he was telling the truth. I briefly told him of the attempt at Fontana, this time trying to back-pedal over my previous slip by simply saying that Will had killed the rifleman just in time. It was no use. "And Wilorian blew him apart," he mused to himself as I cursed mentally. "So it actually worked." He seemed rather pleased about it for some reason.

“Let’s get back to you,” he said. “Your dropping in may prove to be even more fortunate than I thought. A shame about your new flier, though.”

I felt a distinct sensation of shock at just how much everyone here seemed to know about me. “Look,” I said desperately, “you can’t keep me here forever. I had my locator on. Everyone knows where I went down, and they’re not going to quit searching until they find me.” If it wasn’t true it ought to be, I told myself.

“I’m afraid I have disappointing news,” he answered ironically. “You see, they’ve already come and gone. The search is over.” I regarded him in obvious dismay. “We took the liberty of distributing the bloody shreds of what was left of your clothing around the general vicinity, and also made sure a few of the local wild dogs were seen roaming about. And, of course, we picked you up from one of our fliers, so there weren’t any footprints to detect. I’m afraid they’re probably even now mourning your unfortunate destiny as canine cuisine. Crude, I know,” he added, “but we didn’t have a lot of time to improvise. One of the barbarian Earthmen that shot you down wanted to leave one of your arms lying around for extra authenticity, by the way.” I could have sworn that for just an instant a suppressed grin flitted across his features.

He stopped for a moment. As understanding finally sank in of just what I had done to everyone back home I felt sick to my stomach. I’m so sorry, I thought bitterly. What a hell I must have put them all through, especially my mother and Kiri. For a moment I felt my eyes blurring up, and furiously fought off the unexpected urge to cry in front of Krigghin Teyn.

“Now,” he went on, and to my surprise he seemed hesitant, “I want you to tell me more about—my daughter.”

For a moment I was nonplused. As far as I knew Teyn had never married and had no children. And what would I possibly know about his daughter? His next words answered my unspoken question, and started a chain reaction that was to eventually lead to circumstances I couldn’t have imagined.

“You see, Senaria,” he said quietly, “I may look to you like Krigghin Teyn, but I’m not Teyn. My name is Romikor Tenako.” He let this sink in for a few moments.

I’m in the presence of a madman, I thought wildly. He’s insane. He shook his head. “No, I’m not crazy, Senaria. It will all make sense in a few minutes. And then perhaps you’ll understand better why I’ve chosen to question you myself.”

“Krigghin Teyn was assassinated a decade ago. I had known something like this could happen at any time, and made appropriate preparations. One of the Virrin devices we had reconstructed was a recorder, for storing the complete neural engrams of a human brain in a computer file. This file contained a detailed snapshot of a person’s memories, beliefs, phobias, dreams—literally of their mind at the time it was taken. Eventually we learned how to reload it into a living human being as well without harming them. They simply became the person downloaded into them. Their original mind was still present, but permanently submerged. Since then we’ve even perfected the technique of adding someone’s memories to another person without them becoming dominant.”

“The body you see in front of you was cloned from Teyn’s genetic material a good twenty years ago. It was kept in stasis and artificially aged to keep pace with the real Teyn. A similar clone was made of myself—Tenako. At the same time, I began requiring Teyn and several other of my top people to submit to having their personalities stored on a regular basis, as did I likewise. The process, while mildly unpleasant, is harmless and provides a unique form of insurance against mishaps such as the one that befell Teyn.”

“When Teyn was assassinated, we immediately activated his clone and downloaded his engrams to it. The result was a virtually identical copy of the man. There was no danger of his giving himself away, because it actually was him, as he had been just days before the assassination. The remaining slight gap was easily explained away to his associates as a memory lapse resulting from a fall.”

“When the clone was created, a number of instructions were implanted in it as well. One of them was that if something happened to myself—Tenako, remember—it would see that my engrams were downloaded to my clone as soon as possible. Unfortunately, that clone was stored in one of the buildings in Tar Deshta, which your little party so effectively vaporized. Therefore Teyn’s clone came here, where the files were also accessible, and downloaded my most recent file into itself, replacing Teyn’s personality. So here I am, Senaria. A rather fascinating story, is it not?”

I was frankly too stunned to speak. During this tale my first assumption had been that I was hearing the ramblings of a lunatic. But I was beginning to realize that with Tenako’s access to Virrin technology it was indeed possible. Cloning, of course, had been a practicality for centuries, although illegal for the past century and a half.

“Why?” I finally managed. “To live forever?”

He smiled again, and to my shock I recognized the same sad smile Tenako had given us at Tar Deshta. “Of course not,” he said patiently. “The original Tenako’s consciousness died at Tar Deshta, just as Teyn’s did when he was assassinated. The intention was that my work would go on, of course.”

“Your work...” I began, trailing off as his words sank in. I felt a chill go up my spine, as if a long-past nightmare had recurred out of the blue. “You’re still trying to set up the planar field,” I whispered, eliciting an astonished stare.

“How could you know about that?” His voice was suddenly urgent, and I felt an undertone of threat. “Nothing of it was mentioned in the news accounts. I assumed you thought you had simply destroyed the energy source for our weapons. How did you find out about the planar field?”

For a moment I was unsure of myself. So far I had managed to let him talk, and hadn’t really said much of anything myself, except for the blunder over Will’s bolts. I felt his eyes boring into me. “Kiri told you in the control room at Tar Deshta what she found out. Don’t you remember?” I said, then I realized how stupid the statement was. Tenako looked nonplused. “No,” I said in some confusion, “that Tenako is dead. You don’t have those memories.”

“Tell me,” he said, a hard edge beginning to creep into his voice. I made my decision and took a deep breath. It was better that he knew. At least there was a small chance that the truth might sway him, if only slightly.

“Kiri—that’s your daughter Mikiria—spent fifteen months in space overtaking the last Virrin transmissions and decoding them,” I began, remembering again the personal anguish those months had cost me. It took me a second to continue. “She found they had done the same thing. Only when something big wandered into their field they discovered that they couldn’t shut it off, and it turned them into the biggest supernova ever. She said she had to stop you, and she did.” I shuddered at the memory.

“Don’t you understand?” I pleaded. “It might not happen today, or tomorrow, or next century. But you can’t do this. Sooner or later it will destroy all of us.”

He remained staring at me, his expression unchanged, for some time. “Very interesting,” was all he finally said. I wondered if I’d made any impression at all.

“Why did you tell me?” I said. “About yourself, I mean.” The change of topic seemed to startle him.

"I'm not really sure," he responded, his voice oddly uncertain. "I remember being Teyn, and of course he's still there to some extent. I can't imagine Teyn taking the time to talk to you at all. But when I found that you were my daughter's friend..." He trailed off again. Suddenly he stood up.

"We'll continue this at another time," he said brusquely, his mood again shifting abruptly. "I suggest you keep one thing in mind at all times. My staff here is loyal, and devoted to me. They understand perfectly that although I look like Krigghin Teyn I am really Tenako. The Earthers that you'll be encountering, however, do not, and to them you will always refer to me as Teyn or The Boss. Be sure you clearly understand that for you a single slip will be fatal. I cannot endanger this project over one prisoner." And without further words he departed, closing the door behind him.

It was a long time before I picked up the novel I'd been reading. When I did, the words ran aimlessly across the pages. Was that really Romikor Tenako? I wondered. Or was it someone else? Endlessly I replayed the conversation in my mind, trying to make sense of it. Only one thing seemed clear in my mind, and that was that the nightmare we thought we'd ended six months ago was only beginning.



The next morning I found my way back to the infirmary to have my leg checked over. Walking was becoming much easier, and I caught myself putting most of my weight on the leg instead of the crutch. The majority of the other bruises and sprains were also starting to fade, and it felt good to be able to move without continually feeling as if a tendon or two were about to pop loose.

Veldra confirmed my unofficial diagnosis. “Looks like you’re going to get out of all this pretty well unscathed,” she said admiringly as she peeled off several dozen biodegraded bandages. “You’re one tough cookie, all right. I didn’t want to tell you before just what a close call you had.” I told her about finding my sword a few feet from my head, and she whistled. “You do lead a charmed life, don’t you?”

I snorted skeptically. “I’m here, aren’t I? How lucky can I be?”

A cloud passed over her face. “That was a bad break for you, I know. I think I’ve given up hope of ever getting home to my family. I suppose they’ve written me off for dead by now.” Underneath the cheerful exterior I sensed something closer to despair than depression.

“How long have you been here?” I asked sympathetically.

“Nearly a year, I guess. It seems so much longer, though.”

“Look,” I said. “These people don’t run Deshtiris now. Sooner or later Kiri—the Empire is going to find us. Although they do a good job of covering their tracks,” I added ruefully. I told her about the torn clothing they’d left behind, and the dogs.

“So you met The Boss, huh?” she responded. “What did old Tenako want with you?” I looked at her in surprise.

“Then you know about him?” I asked. “I assumed only his staff knew.”

“Tenako treats all of us the same,” she answered. “Prisoner or Brizal, at least he doesn’t discriminate. We’re all ‘just staff’ to him. Except for the Earthers, who he tolerates but detests. Teyn would’ve been a lot different; I hear he was a real bastard. For all his obsessions, Tenako tries to be decent most of the time.”

“Decent and ruthless,” I corrected her. “What happened to the two

thugs that shot me down?" I added, remembering something Tenako had said about them being disciplined.

"They were shot with their own rifles and thrown to the dogs," she answered with a shudder. "He made sure it was well publicized. Wants to keep the other visitors in line, I guess." Served them right, I told myself, but it was a chilling warning nonetheless. Getting in Tenako's way was clearly a straightforward way to get killed. At least he didn't have Liquidators now.

Promising to stop back within the next day or two, I headed back to my room, wondering when I would see Tenako again. I realized then that I was viewing him as a challenge. There was something in him that seemed to present an opening, although I couldn't quite define what. Whatever it was, I vowed to find it and use it in any way I could to get myself and the other prisoners out of here.

"A few Deshtiran battleships would put a quick end to this whole farce," I growled to myself. "If they could just find us."

Tenako was back the following day. Rather to my surprise, he looked me up and down, remarking, "Looks like you're making a clean recovery. A lot fewer bandages this time, I see."

"Yeah," I muttered, "looks that way. So what do you want today?"

"We have some unfinished business," he began, ignoring the unpleasant tone. "I believe you were going to tell me what really happened at Tar Deshta last time, when we were distracted by your little misadventure in—what was it, Fontana? I'd like to know just what really occurred." He looked at me expectantly.

I paused, remembering again with a shiver a blood-covered Kiri, propped up against a cabinet, laboriously tapping code into a console in front of her while distracting Tenako with her tale, until she hit one final key and shut down the entire feedback system. The effort had nearly finished her, and Tenako, in a fury, had tried to kill her. It was then that Will had unexpectedly blown him to bits with an energy bolt. We had made a final headlong dash to the *Futaba*, barely escaping with our lives.

My first inclination two days ago had been to tell him as little as possible, of course. But I'd given the matter a lot of thought in the meantime, and finally realized that the only slight chance I had of deflecting him from his mad course was to tell him the truth. At least I didn't see how it could do any harm. So I told him. Everything.

"How can you even consider trying to revive your crazy plans?" I finished in astonishment. "You have no resources left. You can't seriously be planning to retake Deshtiris from this small base."

He nodded. "Quite right. That's why we've decided to turn our attentions to Earth instead. Originally it was to wait until Qozernon was secured, but events now dictate otherwise."

"Earth," I said in disbelief. "A planet that doesn't even have space travel."

"No," he agreed. "However, it has a huge industrial base, and leaders even more ruthless about exploiting it than I was, in spite of certain environmental damage. And as for technology, it's a simple trade. We give them what they want, and they use it. For our purposes, of course, although most of them don't know that yet."

It suddenly hit me. "The green lasers Alan was talking about," I said, my heart sinking.

"Actually," he went on, "that's just to facilitate the takeover. There are already two transformer stations about to go into operation in North America, and several others under construction in various underdeveloped nations. And once the takeover is complete, we'll use Earth's industrial infrastructure to build the ships to take over the Twin Planets. Deshtiris is still reeling from the economic shock of reconstruction, and Qozernon never has had the heart to support a large military."

"Didn't you hear anything I told you?" I exploded in fear and frustration. "Do you really want to be the man that wipes out the human race?" I felt terror rising in me as I realized just how practical his plans were. "What is this to you, a religion? We're talking about *everything* here!" I knew I was becoming incoherent in my excitement and stopped, to find myself shaking uncontrollably.

"That is very interesting. I wonder how much is true?" he reflected calmly.

"It's all true," I insisted angrily. "There's no conceivable reason for me to lie to you about any of this. Can't you understand that?"

He seemed momentarily lost in thought. "I do need to know what you really think, and what you really know. There are issues here that I should investigate more closely." He suddenly made up his mind about something, and stood up and strode over to the telecom. "Send a medic to Amkor Senaria's quarters for an engram prep," I heard him say, after which he broke the connection.

"What's that?" I asked nervously. "Is something wrong?" I received no answer; he seemed to have withdrawn into a world of his own. Just minutes later there was a knock at the door and one of the medics from the clinic entered, a cold-faced fellow (not one of the prisoners) that I'd previously cataloged as having no feelings at all for

his patients. At a nod from Tenako he stepped alongside me. I suddenly heard the soft hiss of an injection, and felt a tell-tale tingle in my shoulder. "What the hell are you doing?" I demanded angrily, shoving him away. A moment later I began to feel strangely disconnected, as though my mind were no longer in control of my body.

"This will be much less unpleasant if you cooperate," said Tenako. "It's a mild tranquilizer. The alternative is to put you in restraints."

I was feeling quite woozy now, although it didn't seem to affect my ability to stand. "What are you going to do?" I heard myself ask in a distinctly slurred voice.

"Come with me," he said, and to my horror my body did as he instructed without hesitation, although my mind was silently shouting *Stop!* at the top of its lungs.

He led the two of us down several diverging corridors, finally stopping at a room with a plain wooden door. Inside I saw a bank of computer equipment against the far wall, and an ordinary wooden chair in the middle of the room. "Sit there, please," he said, and obediently I did so, all the while struggling futilely against the spell that seemed to have taken over my body.

"There is only one way for me to really know what you saw and heard, and how much of it you believe yourself, and that is for me to upload your neural engrams to a file and download them to my own brain. Then there will be no uncertainty involved. As I explained earlier, I can now do this without your personality overriding mine." I recoiled in horror and tried to speak, but by this time it was impossible to get even my voice to obey my will. "Filename Amkor Senaria," I heard him say, and from somewhere a voice answered "Ready."

He looked at me. "I'm afraid you may find this somewhat unpleasant. Be assured that you will not be harmed. Upload now," he added, and for just an instant I felt an odd prickling sensation on my scalp.

And then my mind seemed to race out of control as I literally saw my life unroll before my eyes. Layer after layer of memory was peeled away and held up for review, as if I were both reliving events and watching them from outside myself. Long-forgotten experiences, childhood fears, nightmares. I saw the public Senaria everyone knew, and the private one with my most hidden and intimate feelings and experiences. There was the agonizing pain of the day I broke my arm climbing one of my mother's ancient trees, and the ecstasy the first time I made love.

On it went, relentlessly, endlessly. I once again relived the day I

hesitantly told Kiri I was in love with her, and then the night Will and I found her dead in a pool of her own blood, and felt all of the gut-wrenching emotions of both. It was like having my mind stripped naked, and it went on for a lifetime, and through it all I faintly heard my own voice sobbing “Stop it...Stop it...Stop it...”

I woke up in a bed in the infirmary. I couldn't remember how it had ended, only that I finally seemed to be emerging out of a deep calming oblivion. I tried to sit up, and to my relief found that my body was again obeying my commands. Only a splitting headache remained as a souvenir of what I'd experienced. I found Tenako and Veldra standing nearby watching me intently, the former with an odd expression on his face. “How are you feeling?” he asked.

“How do you think I feel,” I mumbled, finding my voice still unsteady. I tried to muster a glare but somehow I doubt that it was very impressive. At a gesture from Tenako Veldra performed several tests on me, mostly of the how-many-fingers-am-I-holding-up variety, finally concluding, “She should be fine. I don't see any signs of permanent damage.”

“I'm glad to hear you're all right,” he said to me, and it almost seemed as if there were real concern in his voice. I decided my imagination was still a bit overheated after what I'd been through. “The download also proceeded without problems,” he added. “It's proving very interesting. When you're feeling better, we'll talk,” and he turned on his heel and left without further ado.

I wondered how much he'd seen, and then it hit me like a kick in the stomach that he'd seen all of it; it was part of his own mind and memories now. You goddam bastard, I raged inwardly. Rape is relatively uncommon on the Twin Planets, but I couldn't help thinking that what I'd experienced was in reality just a technologically sophisticated variation on an age-old depredation.

“I know I told you to come back in three days,” Veldra said, trying to make a weak joke to cheer me up, “but you didn't have to go through all this just to get your leg checked.”



I didn't go to breakfast the next morning, although by then the only lingering effects were a mild headache and an odd, disconnected feeling at times, as though my body belonged to someone else. Finally, about lunchtime, I decided that staying in my room pouting wasn't helping matters, especially if it meant going hungry. Besides, I didn't feel like being home if Tenako showed up; not that I could really hide from him in the small compound. I made my way to the mess hall and found a seat at an empty table. I tried to convince myself that I was annoyed when Veldra arrived shortly afterwards and asked if she could join me, but of course I wasn't.

For a while our conversation remained on safe topics, but inevitably found its way to the previous day's ordeal.

"I hope you don't mind my asking," Veldra was saying, "but did Tenako explain why he put you through that yesterday? He's subjected some of his key personnel to it, but never a mere prisoner. I thought the point was to preserve their knowledge and skills in case something happened to one of them."

"Not this time," I snarled, savagely biting through a large carrot. "He wanted to find out if what I'd been telling him was true."

Veldra looked puzzled. "I don't understand. I've always been told that you can't just read those files."

"He said he was going to download them into himself," I said. "Find out what I really knew, really thought. I guess he can do that without wiping out his own personality. Sort of a mind meld from hell," I added bitterly.

It took a moment for it to sink in, for the expression on her face to change from perplexity to horror. "He did that?" she finally whispered. "Everything?"

"Everything," I spat out. "Everything I ever did, thought. Everything I am. The son of a bitch." I heard my voice shake, and felt her hand on mine.

"I can't imagine what it must have been like," she said finally. "I'm sorry. Let me know if I can do anything."

I shrugged helplessly. “What’s done is done,” I said, a little more calmly. “Maybe at least now he’ll believe me.” I tried to concentrate on my food for a few minutes, and then realized I was swallowing everything untasted.

“Listen, Senaria,” she said, tactfully changing the subject, “you must be going crazy from lack of exercise. We do have a gymnasium of sorts in this building, and if you’re careful your leg could probably benefit from a workout.”

My ears perked up at that. Pacing around my room wasn’t very effective, and I could well imagine growing downright fat if I continued eating like this and reading all day. “Sure,” I said. She gave me directions and promised to meet me there in an hour.

It proved to be quite an elaborate gym, in fact, with exercise equipment, a running track, and a pool. More alluringly, it also had a small sword training area, with the usual platforms scattered about for leaping around on. Seeing the gleam in my eye, Veldra firmly put her foot down. “Maybe in another week,” she said.

I noticed that several of the combatants eagerly slashing away at each other wore restraint collars. “We’re allowed swords?” I observed in astonishment.

Veldra gave me a wry grin. “Sure,” she said. “They’re only practice blades, so unless you want to try poke a Brizal in the eye you’re not going to hurt anyone with one. Besides,” and she tapped the restraint collar around her own neck meaningfully.

Even so, I decided that as soon as my tyrant of a physician gave the go-ahead I’d be there in a flash.

Later, back in my room, I reflected on what she’d said at lunch. So this was the first time Tenako had used the device this way. I wondered if this meant I might have actually reached him a little. Then I realized I was imagining myself turning Romikor Tenako from the error of his ways: Tenako, the creator of the Brizali, and the man who in other circumstances had felt no compunction about killing his own daughter, and I suddenly felt overwhelmed by the utter futility of it all. Out of habit I turned to the telecom, only to be greeted with the usual warning screen advising me that all outside communications had been disabled. I found myself wishing I could entomb myself in an evening of mindless entertainment. They could at least have subscribed to *Dallas*, I reflected in disgust.

I saw no sign of Tenako that day, and as I lay in bed that night I realized I was actually curious about his reactions to what he might have learned from me. I’ve already been here way too long, I thought

as I drifted off to sleep.

The following morning Veldra intercepted me as I was heading for a table in the mess hall and led me to an empty one. She seemed almost furtive as she leaned over and asked me if I'd seen any sign of "The Boss" the previous day. I shook my head. "Why? What's the big deal?"

She explained that since checking on me after the "download," as she called it, he'd apparently confined himself to his room, canceling all meetings and refusing all calls. One or two people who claimed to have seen him momentarily in the corridor had described his appearance as haggard and strained, as though he hadn't slept. "Whatever he got from you seems to have given him a bad case of indigestion," she finished.

"Serves him right," I snapped viciously. "Maybe he found out what goes on in normal people's heads for a change." I paused, and thought a moment. "Come to think of it, that could be pretty unsettling," I added sheepishly. "I can't say I'm too crazy about the idea of anyone seeing all my thoughts."

"None of us lets more than a tiny sliver of our real thoughts loose on the world around us," Veldra agreed. "I'm not sure civilization could survive if we suddenly acquired the ability to read each others' minds."

"Well, maybe Tenako won't survive it, anyway," I speculated. "One can always hope." Looking a bit taken aback at this particular glimpse into my own psyche, Veldra retreated to other, safer subjects as we finished our meals.

I spent the better part of the day hobbling about aimlessly, trying to restore some flexibility to my still stiff limbs. I desisted only when the pain started to mutate into a somewhat less benign form and I realized I was in danger of doing more harm than good if I continued. I headed back to my room for a change of clothes, looking forward to a hot shower, only to find Tenako silently seated in one of my chairs.

"How long have you been here?" I said in some surprise. I knew that if he'd wanted to he could have had me hunted down and brought here at any time he chose; it wasn't as though I had a lot of territory to roam around in.

"Maybe a half hour," he said, looking up wearily. "Don't worry about it."

I was rather shocked at his appearance; his eyes were red from lack of sleep and there were telltale dark patches under them. "If you need to change, let me know and I'll come back," he said. "I may need to question you for a while this time."

"I'm fine," I said, stashing the crutch in the closet and gingerly lowering myself into a chair.

"Still painful, I suppose," he observed.

"Well, yeah," I retorted. "When was the last time you fell through a tree?"

"I've been spared that experience," he said dryly. "At least literally." What did that mean? I wondered.

"So what do you want this time?" I said, feeling a little less hostile. "Did you find what you wanted? Do you still think I was lying to you?" The reaction was not at all what I expected, as he distinctly paled and looked away.

"No," he answered slowly, "I don't think you were lying. In fact, you're probably the most honest person I've ever encountered. Of course you have your own agenda, and your own plans, but you've told me the absolute truth in everything you've said. Or at least what you believe to be the absolute truth. I'll have to investigate what Mikiria said about the planar field, of course. Just because you believe her doesn't mean that she was also telling the truth." He stopped, and there was an awkward pause.

"So what exactly do you need to ask me?" I said finally. "You now know everything I know. What is there that I can tell you that you don't already know?" I felt my voice rising. "You've seen my thoughts, my memories, my innermost feelings, you've seen every detail of my sex life that I can remember myself, you've—"

"Stop," he burst out in a strangled voice. "Please." The second word was almost unintelligible. His face was white. "Stop," he said again, this time almost inaudibly. "I never expected—I didn't expect—"

"You didn't expect what?" I snapped. "That you'd be seeing into someone's soul? That you'd be committing something worse than rape? Just what did you expect?"

"I don't have to listen to this, you know," he said, his own voice barely under control.

"No, you don't," I said a bit more calmly, putting on the brakes as hard as I could. Alienating him permanently wouldn't do anyone any good, I realized. "But you are. Why?"

I have to say his answer rather astonished me. "Because I didn't expect to see myself," he said. "I know why I'm doing what I'm doing, and I know it's the right thing to do. But to see myself the way you see me, and in my own mind, was admittedly a shock. Do you really consider me a monster, Senaria?" I stared at him.

“Yes, I do,” I said softly. He had my mind in his; there was no point in sugared words here. “You enslaved a planet for a crazy dream, one that’s closer to a nightmare. And you’d do absolutely anything to accomplish it. You think you’re above ordinary morality. What am I supposed to think?”

His next words were another surprise. “I really tried to kill my own daughter, didn’t I?” There was wonderment in his voice. “The daughter I wanted to protect more than anything else in the world. And I would have killed her if I could, even knowing who she was. She was in my way, and I would have killed her.”

I wondered if he was seeing the same memory I was at that moment, of him picking up a sword and advancing on the helpless figure sagging against a bloody equipment cabinet. “So what am I supposed to think?” I asked again.

He stood up. There was an odd defiance in his voice, as though he were fighting the foreign feelings in his own head. “Don’t think that this changes anything, Senaria. I’ll look into Mikiria’s claims about the planar field. But I have no intention of letting this distract me more than it already has.” Seeing the look on my face, he added, “I’m sorry about what I put you through. I’d like to make it up to you somehow. I really had no idea.”

Seizing the opportunity, though without much hope, I retorted, “You could send me home.”

“Maybe something a little more realistic.” An almost imperceptible smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Let me know,” he added as he slipped out.

Rather unexpectedly he was back again the next day; I had wondered whether he would see any further need to question me after yesterday’s experience. But a bigger surprise was to come.

“You must be terribly tired of this little room,” he said. “Why don’t we go somewhere else?” Silently I tapped the collar around my neck. “Yes, I think it’s reasonable for you to have a little more freedom of movement,” he agreed, and from a pocket pulled out a small handheld device that I immediately recognized as a twin of the one used to program my collar. He spent a few moments entering in some new information, then transferred it.

“You now have nearly complete freedom of the compound,” he said matter-of-factly. He named a few areas into which I was still forbidden to enter; one of them, not surprisingly, was the battleship hangar. “Anything with this logo,” and he had the device display a symbol on its tiny screen, “is still off limits. And of course you can’t

leave the compound. Otherwise there are no restrictions. Any questions?" Reeling from this unexpected largess, I could only gasp, "Why?"

"Why not?" he shrugged. "You still can't escape, and of course we could subdue you at any time if necessary. If you cause trouble you'll only harm yourself. So it hardly seems necessary to keep you caged." I have to admit I was astonished, but I wasn't about to argue. Motioning for me to follow, he led me out of the building and across a courtyard. Looking up, I was startled to see not sky above, but a massive roof a good hundred feet above us, studded with light-producing panels.

"You won't see the sky here," he explained. "On top of that roof are several dozen feet of soil, and an actual forest. Anyone flying overhead would see only unbroken green. We didn't do this," he added, seeing my evident awe. "This is several thousand years old. For all we know, it may have originated with the Virrin. But it's very useful for camouflage." Waving an arm around, he continued. "This complex covers several square miles. There are hangars, barracks, even some fabricating plants. We discovered these ruins about sixteen years ago, and thought they might come in handy in case of setbacks. As they did," he added ironically.

"So how do the ships get in and out?" I asked innocently. He laughed.

"Subtlety isn't exactly one of your strong points, is it? Not that it matters. When you flew in, did you see the river below? With the tall trees along the banks? And an occasional stream coming in from under the trees?" I nodded; although the memory was a bit hazy, it did sound familiar. "Well, one of those apparent tributaries is actually a passageway into the battleship hangar here. It's just wide enough for a single ship at a time."

The light from overhead felt remarkably like sunlight, something very welcome after being cooped up for several weeks. I realized that under our feet was real grass. "Make yourself comfortable," he suggested, stretching out on his back on the cool turf.

"Senaria, you remind me so much of my first daughter," he reflected. "She had golden hair very much like yours." First daughter? I wondered. Then I remembered that it was the death of Tenako's first child that had sent him off on the bizarre path he'd followed since. "You know, your beloved Kiri's hair would probably have been the same color if Tenako hadn't—I hadn't—" He stopped in confusion as I wondered at the odd slip.

"It's all right," I said reassuringly. "I understand." I thought how

ironic it was; there was a time when that knowledge would have filled me with irrational satisfaction. Now it all seemed so far away. So long ago.

For a while I just enjoyed the deceptive sensation of being free under the sun. I knew it was a sham, but for the moment I surrendered to the fantasy that I was home again in the palace, that in a little while I would be going in for a shower and then supper with my mother, Kiri, Will and Rann. Even Alan seemed a little less odious for a few moments.

I was snapped back to reality by Tenako's voice. "You know, it's a very odd experience to see oneself blown to bits. It's like being a—what's it called on Earth?—a 'ghost.' And you were glad to see it happen." He said it quite matter-of-factly, as though he were reading a report.

"I hope you don't think I'd apologize for that," I snapped, suddenly feeling strangely on the defensive and angry about it. "I was."

"You really believe that what Mikiria told you about the Virrin is true. You sincerely believe that she wouldn't lie, and that it's true. And if it is—" He suddenly stopped, and to my utter astonishment I realized that he was blinking away tears. "I risked my career, my very freedom, in a misguided effort to protect her. Now I've gone so far down this path that I would have killed her. And your memories are telling me it was all madness."

Was this really Tenako, I wondered, the cold, calculating machine that had created the Brizali? I felt a momentary thrill of hope as I knew that I was actually, finally reaching him, something I hadn't thought possible. I realized I was also seeing his life unravel before my eyes, and I think I felt sorrier for him at that instant than I've ever felt for anyone in my life.

"You know it's not too late to turn this around," I said cautiously. To my dismay he abruptly rose to his feet and looked down at me mockingly.

"On the other hand," he said coldly, "this may all be an artifact of the neural download. I'm being influenced by your emotional responses, and find myself reacting irrationally." For a moment I was shocked at the transformation, then realized that somehow the original Tenako personality had regained total control. Clearly this would be harder than I thought.

"I have several experiments in progress which will test Mikiria's theory about the field being irreversible," he added. "Until I have concrete data, my plans will continue as before. Don't press your luck,"

he added ominously as he strode off towards the main complex.



I didn't see him again for several days. Making use of my new-found freedom, I explored the compound as thoroughly as I dared. One afternoon I wandered into what proved to be a laboratory of some sort, and was shocked to discover a caged cat pacing miserably back and forth.

Caging animals is nearly unheard of on the Twin Planets. Respected as sentient beings, one does not normally eat, experiment on, or confine animals. Angrily I asked one of the attendants why it was here.

"Who are you?" was his annoyed response. Noting my collar, he added, "Prisoners aren't allowed in the research area. Who gave you authorization to be here?"

I tapped the collar. "Obviously if I didn't have authorization I'd be dead right now, wouldn't I?" I snapped back. "Now what about the cat?"

His response was to call for a Brizal guard and have me forcibly ejected. I was spitting mad, but at least retained enough wit not to punch out the guard, which would probably have resulted in the instant revocation of the relative freedom I'd just attained. Seething, I stormed back to my room and punched my unfortunate pillow to a shapeless pulp.

Then I had an idea. Activating the telecom, I asked the astonished operator if The Boss was available. "He doesn't take calls from prisoners," he answered, clearly annoyed.

"Fine," I said, "then leave him a message. Tell him Senaria called."

It was maybe fifteen minutes later that I heard a knock at the door and Tenako appeared. Not bad, I thought; I'd given him a half hour. "What is it?" he asked in some concern.

Adopting my best wheedling tone (something I didn't get to use very often), I asked, "You said you'd be willing to do something to make up for that unpleasant experience I had the other day. Did you really mean it?"

"What did you have in mind this time?" he asked, curiosity clearly

getting the better of him.

I told him. I also told him who I wanted to take care of it. He looked surprised, and puzzled, but agreed. "You are indeed an interesting person, Senaria," he said as he left. "This isn't what I expected at all."

A half-hour later a thoroughly chastened lab attendant, the same one that had so rudely tossed me out of his preserve, appeared at my door. In one hand was a small cage; in the other a sack containing a litter box, a bag of cat litter, and an assortment of food tins. "Boss's orders," he grudgingly acknowledged as he set them down on the floor of my room.

"Thank you so much," I said, giving him my very sweetest smile as he left muttering irritably to himself.

Once he was out of the room, I gingerly opened the cage. Although animals on the Twin Planets normally won't injure a human, fright or pain can bring out unexpected responses. To my relief the animal cautiously stepped out of the cage, sniffing at everything in sight and otherwise acting like cats everywhere. I suddenly realized that I had better get the litter box ready, in case that was one of his urgent priorities.

"Now what am I going to call you?" I said, getting a better look. The animal was generally of a yellow color (with a slight tendency towards orange), and a bit larger than a domestic cat, with black stripes on its head and chest gradually changing to spots further back. On the forehead was a small splash of pure white.\*

"Tora," I decided.

It took a while, but I gradually gained Tora's confidence with plenty of coaxing and, of course, food. One of the first things I did was to hide away the cage in the closet after giving it a thorough cleaning. I was afraid he would feel just as much a prisoner as before in the small room, but apparently it was enough of an improvement over the filthy cage he'd been in that he promptly settled himself into a certain corner, which from then on became his and his alone, and began acting as lord and master of the establishment.

The next morning I headed over to the gymnasium, as I'd started

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\* As far as I can determine, Senaria's cat appears to be a variety of *Geoffroy's cat*. However, the white marking and orange-yellow color would be rather unusual for this species, so it may have been the result of cross-breeding at some time in the intervening millennia.—*Ed.*

doing on a regular basis. On a sudden impulse I stopped by the infirmary and asked Veldra to check over my leg. As she did so, she regarded me suspiciously. “This is several days ahead of schedule. Just what are you plotting, Senaria?”

“Well,” I admitted, “I was really hoping I could start doing some sword training again.”

For a few minutes she was silent as she checked over the angry red scar and began re-bandaging it. “All right,” she said finally, giving me a severe look. “But try to be careful. Just because you no longer need the crutch doesn’t mean you’re ready to start jumping up and down on those platforms yet.” Blurting out a hasty promise, I did a passable imitation of a frightened deer as I darted from the room, garnering a muttered imprecation from Veldra and some astonished looks from the assistant physicians that I nearly ran down on the way.

The next day something unexpected happened: the telecom suddenly came alive, seemingly of its own volition, sending Tora diving for his corner. I was in the process of sifting his litter box, now an essential part of my morning ritual, so it took me a moment to comprehend why something about the announcer on the screen seemed so strange, and then I realized that he was speaking in English, reporting on a military coup in the United States of America.

So it had started, I thought, feeling slightly sick. This had to be Tenako’s big Earth gamble. The United States was by far the most powerful nation on the planet, especially since the collapse of the counterbalancing Soviet Empire. Previous American governments had found themselves more constrained by world opinion and economic pressures than they would have liked, but the result had been a relatively cautious and small scale exercise of the vast power available to them. I knew that a government led by a Brizal puppet would feel no such restraints.

I stepped out into the hallway, where I found several people milling around anxiously. “What’s going on?” said one of the other prisoners, a young man who worked in one of the chemical facilities. “My telecom—”

I explained briefly what I’d seen. “I’m not sure why we’re suddenly getting access, though,” I added.

“The Boss’s orders,” chimed in another. “I called the communications desk and the desk officer said the order came straight from him.”

“You understand English?” one of them observed in surprise. For a moment I was taken aback, then I remembered that for decades

Deshtiran education had lacked the language requirements that were standard on Qozernon, nor had the Brizali permitted Earth broadcasts onto their comm net.

“Yeah,” I said. And so for the next few days I became the impromptu interpreter for the broadcasts that left us all transfixed in fascinated horror.

Instead of crowding everyone into my small room (and terrifying Tora in the process) we congregated in the mess hall, where a large telecom screen at one end normally served as a conduit for general announcements. There we remained for most of the day, taking our meals as they came. Rather to my surprise a number of the uniformed Brizali ended up joining us and made no effort to interfere. I suspected they knew as little English as my fellow captives and welcomed the opportunity to find out what was going on.

I won't go into great detail on the events on Earth, since Will's already done that in his part of the narrative. We did find that access to all Earth channels had been provided, although as the day wore on coverage became spottier, until by that evening the only remaining news was coming from stations outside the U.S. as all the American stations vanished from the airwaves.

Eventually everyone, myself included, drifted off to our own rooms. For a while I amused myself surfing through the remaining stations from all over Earth, finally settling on a loony Japanese animated series featuring a super-powered android with the brain of a cat.\* I was brought back to reality when I answered a knock at the door and found Tenako standing there.

For a moment I glared at him, then backed away, rather caught off guard by the strange look in his eyes. “May I come in?” he said softly. I nodded warily. “You might want to switch back to one of the U.S. channels,” he said as he seated himself in one of the chairs. I did as he suggested, to find an obviously impromptu announcer advising everyone to stand by for an important message, after which the telecom went dead except for the Brizal emblem.

I turned back to find Tora cautiously sniffing his leg as he absently stroked the animal's soft fur. “What's this about, Tenako?” I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me.

He sighed. “You're about to see one of the two worst mistakes I've

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\* Probably *Bannou Bunka Neko Musume*, also known as *All-Purpose Cultural Cat-Girl Nuku Nuku*.—Ed.

ever made,” he said.

“And they were—?” I prompted him, now thoroughly puzzled.

“The first was what I did to my daughter Mikiria,” he began, to my considerable surprise.

“And the second?” I said finally.

At that moment the screen came alive again, as a face appeared onscreen. Tenako made a feeble gesture at it. He looked tired, I realized, very tired, as I encountered Jack Lucie for the first time.

When the speech had concluded, I turned to him. He was sitting back, his eyes closed, Tora on his lap. “One of our Watchdogs discovered Lucie about nine years ago,” he began in a near monotone. “He seemed the answer to our prayers. He had connections, power, and considerable wealth. And he wanted more, and was willing to work with us to get it. Over the years we’ve provided him with technology and shown him how to manipulate Earth’s relatively crude computer systems in order to divert funds to his operations.”

“The results were successful beyond our wildest dreams. Under the very eyes of the government, and, more importantly, the media, he assembled a powerful force ready to move on cue. Today was the long-agreed upon date, and you’ve been watching the results.” He stopped.

“You must be thrilled,” I said sarcastically. His answer stunned me.

“Jack Lucie may be the most dangerous man in the universe,” he said at last. “He’s utterly ruthless and more brutal than I had ever imagined. And I’ve put almost unlimited power into his hands.”

“You didn’t discover this today,” I said in a low voice.

“No,” he admitted, rising wearily to his feet to depart. “But I always kept the main goal in mind. He was a tool, nothing more. And now the tool is the real menace,” he concluded, as he quietly closed the door behind him. Suddenly Tenako seemed the lesser evil, I realized as I tried unsuccessfully to sleep, the telecom still muttering quietly in the background.

I almost missed breakfast the next day, having finally fallen into a deep sleep sometime in the wee hours of the morning. When I got there, the room was nearly deserted (and the breakfast selections down to some greasy potato pancakes and toast). I soon understood why, as I saw that the flow of news had slowed to a trickle, with all communications from the United States completely cut off by the insurrectionists. Listening to the usual patter of uninformed speculation which seems to be the self-imposed duty of television news organizations under such circumstances, I disgustedly finished my

breakfast in silence and treated myself to a couple hours of working out in the gym.

When I had finished showering and returned to my room I found Tenako patiently waiting there, sitting in a chair with Tora again on his lap. "Waiting long?" I asked.

"Gives me time to think," he answered with a half-smile. "Out there I have dozens of people continually pestering me for decisions. Besides, I like your cat."

"His name is Tora," I said. "Looks like he likes you too." Tora was performing his usual routine of grumbling continuously as Tenako petted him, while settling in more comfortably all the time.

"I hear that you're the resident interpreter around here," Tenako said dryly. "So what's he saying?"

" 'Stop it some more,' " I translated.

I noticed that he looked even wearier than yesterday. "I guess everything is going according to plan," I said, a bit sarcastically. "Looks like a total news blackout's in effect now." He nodded. I wondered why he was here, as for a while neither of us said anything.

"Watchdogs," I blurted out suddenly, as something occurred to me. "Yesterday you said something about one of your Watchdogs discovering Lucie. What's a Watchdog?" He briefly gave me a description of the Watchdog organization, and I soon realized that he was sharing one of the best-kept secrets of the Twin Planets. I had never even heard rumors of them, in spite of my parents' extensive diplomatic contacts.

"We lost track of some of our best ones when Teyn succumbed to paranoia and tried to recall them," he added casually. "For all we know they could still be there as renegades. That was a long time ago, though." Again silence reigned.

"You're worried about the success of the revolt, aren't you?" I said finally. "I mean, you're worried it's going to succeed. The whole thing's gone out of control, hasn't it?" He said nothing. "What happens next?" I pressed. "Lucie devotes all of Earth's resources to building a war fleet. It isn't just Qozernon that's defenseless, or even Deshtiris. You're also helpless. You gave him the technology, and now he has the resources, not you. You didn't count on that, did you?" His silence was all too eloquent.

"If that's really true, then why don't you do something?" I demanded. "You set this whole thing in motion; isn't there something you can do to stop it?"

I was totally unprepared for the results. His face seemed to cloud

over for a moment, then reddened with fury as he rose to his feet. Tora dove under the bed with a hiss. “You goddam bitch,” he screamed. “I know what you’re trying to do. Tenako might be fool enough to fall for your ruses, but I’m not.” I backed away in sudden terror. “I should kill you now,” he said in a lower tone. He pulled something out of his pocket, and to my horror I recognized the controller for my restraint collar. “We should have left you for the dogs to eat,” he added viciously and pointed the controller at me, his arm outstretched like the barrel of a rifle.

I suddenly understood what was happening. “Tenako, it’s Teyn doing this,” I pleaded frantically. “You’ve got to fight him.” He stood there as if frozen, a finger poised over one of the buttons. “I know this isn’t you. Please.” For what seemed an eternity he remained there, expression unchanged, not moving a muscle, as I stared into his eyes, looking for some shred of humanity behind the cold glint.

“Please,” I whispered.

I have no idea how long we remained like that, my life hanging by a thread. It might have been seconds, or hours for all I know. Then at last the malignant gleam in his eyes seemed to fade, and he very slowly lowered the controller, his arm still rigidly straight, until all at once the tension seemed to drain from his body and he mechanically returned the device to his pocket. There were beads of sweat standing out on his forehead. For a moment his jaws worked convulsively, and then he abruptly turned and walked out without saying a word.

My knees gave way and I sat down heavily on the bed. Only now did I feel my heart pounding in my chest like a trip-hammer. Not until this moment had I realized just what a tightrope I’d been walking. Tora gingerly ventured from under the bed and looked at me quizzically, then jumped up beside me, rubbing his head against my hand. As I absently scratched behind his ears, I found myself wondering just who I was trying to connect with. Teyn? Tenako? Or a copy of my own soul?



The next day was relatively quiet. Occasionally a new rumor would surface on the television news, make the rounds, and then sink without a trace. After an hour or two of this journalistic travesty I disgustedly shut off the telecom and spent a few hours in the gymnasium, then whiled away the remainder of the day reading outside on the grass. Interestingly, the overhead light sources (which also long predated the Brizali) followed the outdoor diurnal cycle exactly, probably for psychological reasons. As “dusk” fell and it became too dim to read, I continued reading in my room. It was well after midnight before I realized what time it was and decided to hit the sack. For a change I was asleep almost as soon as my head hit the pillow.

I was awakened in the early hours of the morning by a quiet knock at the door. “Senaria?” I heard a woman’s voice say softly. “It’s Veldra. Can I come in?” Blearily I climbed out of bed and opened the door a crack. “What?” I mumbled, seeing that it was indeed her and letting her in.

“Something’s happening on Earth,” she said as I threw on a shirt and some shorts. “I saw someone that looked like the American President, but since none of us know English very well we don’t know what’s going on. Sorry to wake you,” she added apologetically. I activated the telecom, to find a Japanese station rerunning one of the Gojira movies for the umpteenth time. I switched to a U.S. channel. It was indeed the President speaking.

“—and work with me to recover from this terrible tragedy which has come so close to overwhelming our nation and our way of life,” he was intoning. “By the grace of God and the loyalty of our armed forces, we will restore democratic rule in the United States of America.” A moment later his face had been replaced by the inevitable commentators, once again back on the airwaves. It was soon apparent that somehow the government had managed to regain control of the situation and had the rebels on the defensive, although just how this had happened didn’t seem to be quite clear to anyone including the participants.

I finished dressing and followed Veldra down to the mess hall. Even though it was only a little after five, there were already a number of fascinated spectators watching the viewscreen. A muted cheer went up as I entered. "Never fear, your translator's here," I announced with a mock bow (it's bad doggerel in Deshtiran too, by the way). After that I was too busy interpreting to do much clowning around.

For the next fourteen hours straight we watched as the Lucie rebellion fell apart and finally ended with a particularly pathetic whimper. I don't even remember eating during that time, although I suppose I did (still being Senaria, after all). It was one of the most fascinating shows I've ever seen, with drama, adventure, and even a touch of mystery here and there. Especially interesting were the reports about an "apparently unrelated incident" of a large meteorite impacting somewhere in Virginia just before the rebellion began to collapse. I had my own suspicions about that, but didn't mention them to the others. It did seem like an awfully unlikely coincidence, however.

Between lack of sleep and the emotional strain of the long day, I was feeling thoroughly stretched out by the time I stumbled back to my room, only to find Tenako waiting for me, Tora as usual on his lap. The telecom was still droning away. For an instant I felt my stomach tense up as the memory of his previous visit flashed by.

"Something wrong?" he inquired, seeing my expression.

"Well," I said cautiously, "you did try to kill me the last time I saw you. I think I have a right to be a little nervous."

"I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am about that," he said softly. "I didn't even bring the controller this time, just in case."

"Do you remember what happened?" I asked. "It looked to me as though Teyn's personality somehow took over for a few minutes."

"I remember," he said. "It was as if I were just shoved aside and watching helplessly as someone else controlled my body. It was terrifying, Senaria, and I don't quite understand it, but I do know one thing. It will never happen again." There was grim determination in his voice as he spoke the last phrase. He paused for a moment. "There was something else," he said.

"Something else?" I asked uneasily. "What?"

"It doesn't make much sense, but when I felt Teyn's personality assert itself, I also felt—Tenako's. As if I were looking at it from outside, like Teyn's. But if that's true, then—well, never mind. I don't even remember it all that well. It was more like a feeling, or an impression. Forget I said it."

"What did you think of the news today?" he continued in a more

normal tone, changing the subject. I looked at the telecom, where the announcer was reporting on some kind of communications blackout earlier that evening. Apparently things were settling down if more mundane news could finally start making its way onto the airwaves. "Have you solved the puzzle yet?" I looked at him blankly. "I have to say, I didn't expect her to use an asteroid, though. That was a stroke of genius."

"Are we in the same universe?" I asked, rather bewildered. He smiled, a very tired, sad smile.

"Yes we are," he answered. "Finally."

By now I must have looked utterly befuddled. "Don't worry," he added, "I'll explain it to you someday. If you don't figure it out yourself first."

"Look, Teyn—Tenako—oh hell, what am I supposed to call you?" I burst out in frustration. I was tired, I was a little giddy, and though I didn't realize it I was approaching the limit of my emotional tether. "You'll understand if I decline to address you as 'The Boss,'" I added.

"I don't really care what you call me," he replied calmly. "Names are not particularly important to me."

"I know," I said, "I'll call you 'T.T.' For Teyn/Tenako. How's that?" and I giggled. I think that's when I finally understood how close I was to a total breakdown.

"T.T.," he said to himself, rather bemused at the idea. "All right, suit yourself." And from then on he was "T.T."

After he left, I found myself seriously doubting my own sanity. Am I really in control of what I'm doing anymore? I wondered. I knew there was a recognized pattern of captives eventually sympathizing with their captors; I think on Earth it's known as the Stockholm Syndrome. Was that what was happening to me? Or was there something more?

Just the same, I called him "T.T." from then on. To hell with self-analysis.

For a few days things returned more or less to normal, except that to our surprise access to Earth television remained available. Whether this was intentional or an oversight wasn't quite clear, but nobody was complaining, even though apart from myself only a few of the older Brizali knew any of the Earth languages.

I saw no sign of Tenako during this time, and began to feel a bit uneasy. I was also feeling something else, though I did my best to pretend it wasn't there. I used the opportunity to concentrate on getting back into shape, spending at least several hours a day in the

gymnasium.

Although it was used by both prisoners and Brizali, they didn't as a general rule pay much attention to one another. However, as my leg healed I had taken increasing advantage of my recovering agility and on several occasions had attracted a bit of an audience among the uniformed officers.

"Pretty good for a little girl," commented one this particular morning, a stocky fellow with a distinctly arrogant sneer.

"Are you really?" I answered, trying to regain my breath after a particularly strenuous bout. I heard an appreciative chorus of low laughs from his companions. His face darkening, he glared at those around him. Judging from the snickers, I gathered that he wasn't particularly feared by his fellows.

"How about asking her for a match, Kizuko?" one of them suggested.

For a moment I was horribly tempted to use the familiar Earth riposte, but restrained myself with an effort. "I'm game if he is," I said instead.

"Fight a child?" he snorted. In a moment he was being heckled and goaded unmercifully by his companions, and sheepishly stepped into the little arena after pulling a practice sword off the rack.

"I promise not to hurt you," he said solicitously.

"Nor I you," I answered, meeting his first thrust with a quick parry. "Too much," I added with a jeer, as I jabbed him in the gut, eliciting a wounded grunt (and a bout of applause from the audience). Even the rounded ends of the practice blades can inflict painful bruises, and that one would have hurt.

For a while we continued along these lines, he trying to get in at least a minor hit, and me poking him pretty much at will in assorted parts of his anatomy. I saw his face darkening with anger, however, and was going to suggest that we call a halt when he lost his temper entirely and lunged at me with a vicious thrust that could have done serious internal damage had it connected.

It didn't, though, as I jumped backwards upon a platform behind me (feeling a sudden sharp twinge in my right leg in the process) and with a quick twist sent his blade flying into the little group gathered around the periphery. "Give me that," he shouted hoarsely to the fellow who had caught it in midair.

"Cool down, Kiz," the man retorted, tossing the blade to someone further back. "She beat you fair and square." For a moment he looked as if he was going to charge me like a bull, and then a broad grin spread

across his bovine features.

“You’re as good as they said you was, kid,” he said in a friendlier tone. “Where the hell d’you ever learn to fight like that, anyways?”

“I had a good teacher,” I panted. It took me a few seconds to get my breath back.

“Who?” someone else asked. “Anyone we’ve heard of?”

“Her name,” I finally said very slowly, “is Mikiria.” And I put my blade back on the rack and slowly walked out without even a backward glance, ignoring the sudden hush behind me. Once out in the corridor, I looked down at the bandage on my leg, to see a spreading red stain seeping through the fabric. “Damn,” I muttered as I limped towards the infirmary. “Veldra’s going to kill me for this.”



It was on the morning of the sixth day after the collapse of the Earth revolt that I heard the familiar knock at my door, and found Tenako once again standing there. “Senaria,” he said, “there’s going to be a meeting of my top staff in twenty minutes. I think you should be there.” I was frankly shocked at his appearance: he seemed to have aged years in those six days, and there were again bags under his bloodshot eyes from lack of sleep.

“T.T.,” I said, “are you all right?”

He smiled slightly at the ludicrous nickname. “I’ll let you judge that after you hear what I have to say. Do you know where the main meeting hall is?” I nodded. It was one of the few brick buildings in the complex, and apparently far older than the newer flimsily built structures. “You’ll need this,” he said, pulling a small plastic pass from his shirt pocket and handing it to me. Before I could say anything he’d vanished down the corridor.

When I arrived at the meeting hall I was immediately turned away by a Brizal guard, who curtly informed me that it was open to top staff only. The plastic pass worked wonders, however, and I was soon inside the ancient building, which basically consisted of a single very large room.

It had apparently been designed for several thousand people, and the hundred or so attendees present looked oddly lost in the huge space. At one end there was a raised wooden platform, perhaps four feet above floor level, that served as a stage. Except for portable chairs for those present and a giant telecom screen on the wall behind us the room was bare, lacking even windows. Light came from the same glowing panels as outside, mounted on the ceiling.

I found a seat at the end of an aisle, receiving several dirty looks from nearby Brizali, at least until I waved my pass at them. A moment later there was a hush as Tenako emerged from a doorway at the rear of the stage. To my surprise he walked to the front and sat himself down in the midst of the small gathering, his legs dangling over the side of the platform. For several minutes he just sat there like that, shoulders

hunched, not even looking at us. What has happened? I wondered. Nor was I the only one, as I heard a growing undercurrent of whispers all around me.

They ceased instantly as he looked up. We were all close enough to easily hear him without a sound system of any kind.

“You have been my friends for many years,” he began slowly. “I found each and every one of you, and trained you, and told you what we were working towards. All of you have put aside your own lives for a very long time to support a dream. Many of you had to put aside your principles as well. You’ve all seen the Brizal organization do things that violated your sense of decency. Krigghin Teyn did many things that I wouldn’t have wanted done. But I’ve also done things, ruthless things, always justifying them to myself with our ultimate dream: inexhaustible energy for the human race.”

“Some of you may be wondering why a prisoner is at this meeting,” he went on, gesturing at me. I heard a momentary murmur of discontent, stilled almost instantly as he glanced around the group. “Her name is Senaria. You probably already know that she was a member of Empress Mikiria’s bodyguard. You may not know that she was also part of the small group that sabotaged Tar Deshta and the other stations.” I expected some kind of reaction; what I got to my surprise was dead silence. “She has told me of something that until today was known only to perhaps five or six people on the planet.”

He told them of Kiri’s flight, and her discovery of the fate of the Virrin. That at last triggered a minor uproar, as at least a dozen people all tried to speak at once. Finally Tenako motioned to one of them. “This is one person’s story,” the fellow protested, “and hardly a disinterested witness. Do you really expect us to believe the tale of this—this child here?”

Tenako angrily cut him off. “Do you take me for a doddering fool? Don’t you think it sounded like science fiction to me as well?” By now the room was silent again. “Of course I didn’t take it on faith. Let me tell you what I did. First, I downloaded her neural engrams into my own mind.” There was a distinct rustling at that. “I now regret doing that. It was a terrible thing to do to someone. But I can tell you that Senaria, at least, sincerely believes the Empress’ story. I’m also aware, however, that it really proves nothing in the end.” He paused for several seconds before resuming. His voice now sounded very tired and defeated.

“For the past six days I’ve been running the most detailed simulation we’ve ever done of the mathematics behind the planar field

theory. To do so required not only most of our computing resources, but that of many of the other computing centers on this planet. Of course the operators didn't know that," he added wryly. He took a deep breath and looked around slowly at the faces before him.

"The simulation confirms that the field is self-sustaining once initiated," he said at last. "It cannot be shut down." The previous disturbance was nothing compared to the furor that now erupted. One of the more persistent interrogators, an older woman close to Tenako's age (though not of Teyn's clone) finally made herself heard.

"So what are you saying? That we're going to abandon this because of a computer simulation? That's hardly the last word, you know."

Tenako nodded sadly. "Of course. Simulations are only as good as the humans that set them up. However, this one also produced two other very interesting predictions. First, the field, once the vertices are shut down, becomes free-floating. It is no longer fixed between the three planetary poles. Second, the field is invisible, with one exception. The center point, or active point at which the matter-energy transformation occurs, is visible as a dim point source of light, similar to a small white dwarf. This point source has a very distinctive spectrum, due to the way the field interacts with the quantum fluctuations of the vacuum of space." By now you could have heard a pin drop.

"Two days ago I programmed one of the extraplanetary telescope platforms orbiting Deshtiris to examine the segment of sky where the Virrin supernova is supposed to have appeared thousands of years ago, searching for a small light source with this unique spectrum. This morning I received a transmission from the telescope confirming the location of such a source." Tenako slowly looked around the room, and to my shock there were tears running down his face.

"The Empress is right," he said at last. "The planar field would be a massive threat to the continued existence of life in this segment of the galaxy. I have thrown away your lives, and devastated a planet, to repeat the same deadly mistake the Virrin made thousands of years ago. I can only say to you that I'm sorry, but I realize that cannot even begin to repair the damage I've done."

"We've followed you with our eyes open, Boss," said the older woman that had spoken previously. I suddenly realized just how much respect and affection these people had invested in the simple title. "We're with you in whatever you decide to do."

There was an unexpected interruption as one of the guards at the

door frantically signaled to Tenako. "Excuse me for a moment," he said softly as he left us to converse with the guard. When he came back his face was drained of color. "Somehow the communications blackout virus has been released," he said. "I can only assume that Lucie and an unknown number of his followers escaped Earth when their revolt collapsed. If I'm correct, they will be landing here within the next six hours."

"My friends," he concluded, and now his voice shook, "we've run out of time. The Americans are coming."

Afterwards Tenako explained to me what had apparently happened. As part of the original contingency plans, he had created a virus which would disable all networking and tracking software planetwide for a period of six hours. He had ultimately decided not to release it, relying on Imperial ships to detect and intercept the incoming battleships, but someone else in the compound had done so without consulting him. The Brizal who had been entrusted with this task was now mysteriously missing, in spite of Tenako's furious demands that he be located at once.

I was outside when the battleships arrived. I heard a growing clamor from the direction of the hangars, and shortly afterwards a seemingly endless column of dirty, unshaven young men was advancing through the compound. All wore the same fatigue-green uniforms and all had automatic weapons slung over their shoulders. Many also had side-arms, but somehow they all seemed to share the same hard, cold faces and arrogant swagger. Most wore no insignia except for the round Brizal patch, aside from a few older men in regular American officers' uniforms from the various services. At the head of the procession was a burly, black-haired man in a dark business suit, now soggy with perspiration. After the days of news broadcasts he was impossible not to recognize; and in spite of the incongruity he frankly terrified me, his dark eyes blazing with rage and hatred. There was no mistaking Jack Lucie.

Almost immediately a furor erupted when one of the few English-speaking Brizal guards protested that his men were to have left their weapons on the ships. Unleashing a torrent of obscenities in response, Lucie informed him in no uncertain terms that if the Brizali wanted his men's weapons they would have to take them. Armed only with swords, they reluctantly backed down.

The troopers were led to the barracks, which although badly overcrowded were quickly made their exclusive preserve. Guards in fatigues were posted at every entrance and approach, automatic rifles

constantly in hand. It was clear that Lucie had no intention of submitting control of his men to his unwilling hosts.

Lunch the next day was a torture. The mess hall was filled with shouting, brawling creatures watching some kind of mob sports event from Earth. As a general rule these don't show up on Qozerman television due to lack of interest; between the team nature of most of these contests (tests of individual skill or one-on-one bouts are far more popular on the Twin Planets) and their blatantly commercial nature they're difficult to take seriously. Of course Deshtiran television has had no access to Earth television at all for the past thirty years.

This particular "sport" apparently involved randomly bouncing a rubber sphere about a foot in diameter around a polished floor, and occasionally launching it through an overhead funnel made of netting. Also apparently part of the rules were frequent interruptions for the purpose of hawking various products.

I heard continual curses from many of those present protesting the lack of beer, for Tenako had permitted no alcoholic beverages anywhere in the compound. I had the definite impression that many of the Earth visitors were borderline alcoholics, judging from their apparent inability to function coherently after several days on the wagon. I finished my meal as quickly as I could, ignoring the frequent stares and lewd remarks launched in my direction, and resolved to take future meals at odd hours.

By that afternoon I was spending most of my time alone in my room watching television. The atmosphere of the compound had been almost completely transformed for the worse. Everywhere one went one encountered swaggering, arrogant young males in fatigues. The unvarying extremely short haircuts only added to their thuggish appearance. Fortunately most of the Deshtirans, not knowing English, were spared the foul language and coarse comments of the newcomers; I know I heard plenty of words I didn't recognize. (I wish some of the people who have complained about my own vocabulary could have heard a sample.) They had also overrun the gymnasium, rendering it unusable as well.

My train of thought was interrupted by a heavy knock at the door. I knew it wasn't Tenako's. "Who is it?" I asked warily. The door opened and to my surprise Tora jumped into his corner, hissing. I felt much the same urge myself. Once again something about my visitor made my skin crawl.

"Well, well," he said, speaking in English. "You must be our celebrated captive. I think you've probably heard of me by now. The

name's John Lucie. You can call me Jack," he added as he softly closed the door behind him.

So this was Lucie up close, I thought to myself. He was a large man, still in Earth clothing: a white dress shirt, now wrinkled and stained with sweat, and dark suit pants. A pair of once-shiny black shoes showed below the cuffs. A kind of leather belt extended over one shoulder and under the other arm. Somehow the overall effect was more intimidating than anything else.

"What do you want?" I said, trying to sound menacing myself, but to my dismay the words came out with a quaver behind them.

"Just to be friends," he leered. "Good friends. Really good friends." He took a step closer. Involuntarily I put a hand to my restraint collar. "Don't worry," he reassured me, "I'm not programmed into your collar. You can get as close to me as you want," he added, pressing me backwards.

"Leave me alone," I said desperately, realizing I was being forced into a corner. In response he reached out and grabbed my forearm, pulling me towards him.

A blur of black and yellow fury shot past me and landed on his face, clinging and clawing and yowling hideously. Lucie shrieked in pain and surprise, then with a heavy blow knocked Tora across the small room. For a moment the little cat lay against the wall, stunned, and then dizzily scrambled to his feet and stood glaring at Lucie, hissing furiously, fur standing on end. To my horror Lucie reached under one arm and drew a handgun from a shoulder holster and aimed it squarely at the feline.

"No!" I screamed, and dove directly between him and Tora. At this point I no longer cared whether I lived or died, but I'd be damned if I'd let him kill the one companion I had in this horrible place. I heard a loud bang and froze, wondering where I'd feel the bullet, but nothing happened. I finally gathered the courage to look up, only to see Tenako standing in the doorway, the door flung wide, staring icily at Lucie.

"Get out," he said very softly. For a moment it looked as though Lucie was going to raise his weapon and shoot him instead, as they stood staring each other down. I noticed with satisfaction that the thug was bleeding from several deep scratches on his face, one of them just under his left eye. Tenako was white with fury. Abruptly with a black look Lucie re-holstered his weapon and stormed out. As he did so I heard Tenako say in the same almost inaudible voice, "Don't ever go near her again. Is that understood?" Making no reply, Lucie simply kept going.

“Are you all right?” Tenako said, turning to me. I nodded dumbly as I checked over Tora for injuries. Except for a slight nosebleed, which he kept dabbing irritably with a paw, he seemed okay. I took a tissue from a box by the bed and held it against his nose until the bleeding stopped, stroking him and reassuring him softly as Tenako watched in fascination.

“Let me know if he ever bothers you again,” he said in a strange tone. “If he does I’ll make sure it’s the last time.” I looked up at him, to see an expression on his face I hadn’t seen before.



“All right, so just how did you do this?” sighed Veldra as she unwrapped the bandage around my thigh. Only after Tenako had left had I become aware of renewed pain in my leg, and discovered fresh blood seeping through the bandage. Muttering a disgusted curse, I had pulled the crutch from the closet and made my way to the infirmary, where I was relieved to find Veldra on duty.

I told her what had happened, only to find myself on the business end of a furious lecture. “Are you out of your mind, Senaria? You risked getting shot for a *cat!*?”

“Yes,” I said defensively, “and I’d do it again. I’m not going to let some bastard like that kill the one thing that makes life worth living in this god-forsaken place,” and I suddenly realized that I was close to hysteria. I felt Veldra’s arm around my shoulders.

“Senaria,” she said softly, “you probably don’t realize this, but you’re one of the few things that makes our own lives worth living at the moment. A lot of us had pretty much given up hope by the time you arrived. It’s your spirit that’s keeping us going now.” She removed her arm and stared me in the face. “So don’t do anything stupid like that again, okay?”

Sheepishly I nodded. “But if Lucie ever makes a move towards Tora again I’ll kill him all the same,” I said with a bit less conviction.

When I returned to my room I found a guard standing in the hallway. Surprised, I asked him why he was there. “Boss’s orders,” he answered. “No one goes in or out of your room without your okay. Especially Lucie,” he added in an undertone, and I saw him stifling a grin. I had the distinct feeling that Lucie was none too popular with the native Brizali here.

“Thanks,” I said, entering my room to find Tora on his back fast asleep on the bed, all four feet in the air. “Stupid cat,” I muttered as he opened one eye, chirped at me, and promptly went back to sleep.

I wished I could have slept as soundly. Even with a guard on duty in the hall, I found myself jerking wide awake every time I heard a rustle or thump from outside. When I staggered out of bed and looked

in the mirror the next morning I had to wince at the bedraggled creature staring back at me.

I was just about to leave my room for an early lunch, hoping to avoid the noon deluge of storm troopers, when I heard raised voices outside, not far down the hall. One of the voices was Lucie's, and I paused, feeling again that knot in the pit of my stomach. I gently cracked the door to hear better; they were apparently standing just past the bend in the corridor. I was relieved to see the back of my ever-present guard, standing almost directly in front of me.

"Don't think I didn't know about your little trick with the communications blackout," he was snarling. "If I hadn't made my own arrangements we'd have walked right into an Imperial fleet. Was that one of your new girlfriend's ideas or your own?"

"Just leave her alone, Jack," Tenako's voice answered icily. "She's no concern of yours."

"The hell she isn't," Lucie exploded, his harsh voice rasping with rage. "I know perfectly well who she is; she's bosom buddies with the harpy that booted you out of power here and helped wreck the plans we worked on for so long. And I'm not supposed to give a damn? What the hell is the matter with you?" By now he was shouting. "You're letting that bitch distract you from our purpose here. Get a grip, Teyn, because if you don't I—"

"You'll what, Jack?" Tenako said so softly that I could barely hear him. "You'll get a grip? Is this a mutiny, Jack?" His voice remained perfectly level. There was a very long pause, and then I hastily closed my door as I heard the heavy sound of Lucie's approaching footsteps. They passed my door and stopped a few feet further down the hall, and then I clearly heard Lucie say in a quiet voice of his own, "You don't have your Liquidators any more, you know," as he continued on.

A few moments later, as I anticipated, I heard Tenako's familiar knock at the door. "I suppose you heard all that?" he said apologetically. "It looks like you've been caught in the middle once again."

"I'm getting used to it," I agreed. "But that's the least of my worries. Or yours. This thing is erupting right under our feet. What are you going to do?"

He sat down heavily. "What can I do? Isn't that the real question?" For the first time since I'd met him, he seemed to be paralyzed with indecision.

"You could surrender to the Empire," I suggested. I wondered if he'd try to kill me again, and realized that this time I didn't care. Time

was running out. "Tell me the truth," I went on. "The Brizali here are the ones that you hand-picked for the planar field project. How many of them have committed actual crimes?"

He seemed surprised at the question. "You mean, as in atrocities? Murders? That sort of thing? None, as far as I know. All of the blood is on my hands." He looked up at me. "You knew that from the start, Senaria. I've been as ruthless as any tyrant, all in the name of the Great Cause. But my people here are clean. It was Teyn's organization that fostered the killers, the sadists."

"Your people will go through the same hearing process as the other Brizali," I insisted. "If they haven't committed crimes, they'll be released. They might have to perform public services for a few months or even years. But nobody is being prosecuted for just belonging to the Brizali." He was looking at me intently now, but I couldn't tell if I was reaching him or not.

"Besides," I implored him, "you have over a hundred prisoners here. These are innocent people who never asked to join your cause. Some of them have families at home who don't know if they're alive or dead. They don't deserve to be caught in the crossfire."

"Crossfire?" he said softly.

"You know Lucie is going to attempt a takeover," I snapped impatiently. "He's figured out that you double-crossed him with the communications blackout, and he probably suspects you had something to do with the collapse of his revolt." I suddenly stopped, stunned, as it finally made sense to me. "You told Kiri where to drop that asteroid, didn't you?" I whispered. I didn't even want to risk letting the guard outside hear. "That was a transformer station, wasn't it?"

He slowly stood up, still saying nothing. "What is it you're waiting for?" I demanded. "You've made the hard decisions already. What's holding you back?"

"You are," he said softly. He was staring at me with a strange expression on his face, his lips half parted. "T.T.?" I managed to whisper, just before he took me in his arms and kissed me. To my shock I realized that I wasn't fighting him or the flood of emotions overwhelming my mind and body. Time simply stopped.

At last he pulled himself away, still staring at me with those intense eyes. "I'm sorry," he said hoarsely. "That was unforgivable of me. But I love you, Senaria." He spun abruptly on his heel and fled the room.

"I think I—" I heard myself whisper after him; I don't know if he heard me or not. I stood there shaking for a long time, wondering if I

really understood what had happened.

It was a while later that it finally hit me: I should have been choked to death by my restraint collar long before he ever physically touched me. I suddenly remembered him handing me the pass days earlier; I hadn't even noticed at the time.

So he had removed that restriction as well. He had to have done it when he reprogrammed my collar, I concluded. A mistake? Somehow I didn't think he was capable of making that kind of mistake. How long, then, had he—?

I don't even remember what I did for the rest of the day. I must have wandered around in a daze, because the next thing I can recall was that evening, when he again returned. He made no further apologies for what had happened that morning. Both of our minds were centered firmly on Jack Lucie.

"He's got to be stopped," he was saying. I was sitting on the bed as he traced circles around the room with his frantic pacing, sending Tora scuttling into the closet. "Whatever it takes. I should never have given him this kind of power. He doesn't know when to stop. Or why. Now it's only a matter of time before he takes over this compound. After that, I don't know what he might do."

"You asked me before what was keeping me from acting," he added bitterly. "It was simple, and utterly selfish. I couldn't bear the thought of not seeing you again. I've never known anything like this feeling. And I realize now that because I feel this way, I've endangered you and everyone else here. I've endangered this entire world—no, all three worlds."

He finally stopped pacing and sat down, staring pensively at the floor. "I remember something that happened to me when I was very young. I was following a path in a forest, alongside a little creek. The path started to climb, and I followed it. All I was thinking of was going forward. After a while the path nearly disappeared, and became so steep I had to climb by holding onto the exposed roots of trees. Then for some reason I stopped, and looked down, and realized I was on the edge of a cliff looking down at the creek a good hundred feet below." Like a cat climbing a tree, I thought, as Tora gingerly emerged from his hiding place.

"I looked back," he continued, "and there was no sign of a path behind me. It was just too steep to see the tiny handholds I had used to pull myself up. I remember for a moment feeling more frightened than I had ever been in my life. I somehow finally found the courage to start climbing back down, one handhold, one foothold at a time, until at long

last I felt level ground under my feet.” He looked up at me, desperation in his eyes. “But now I don’t know if there is any level ground left, Senaria.”

“Is this really Romikor Tenako I’m hearing?” I said. I was no longer worried about whether he could be turned around, or how. Now the only question was whether it was too late.

“I don’t understand that either,” he said in frustration. “Who am I? Am I Teyn? Tenako? Am I you? None of it makes any sense any more. I don’t know what’s coming from where. I don’t know whose feelings to follow; I don’t know if what I’m doing is right or not.” He stared helplessly at me. “All I know for certain is that I love you, Senaria. Everything else is so confused.” I think that’s when I finally understood what had happened to Krigghin Teyn’s clone.

“Maybe you’re just you,” I said softly.

It took a minute for it to sink in. “So,” he said at last, an unreadable expression on his face. He looked up at me. “So,” he said again. Somehow the word had acquired an unimagined richness of meaning. He stood up, still bearing the strange expression. It was as though he had had a revelation, I thought.

“I have some things to do,” he said suddenly. “As do you.” I looked at him in surprise.

“I want you to get all the prisoners together tomorrow morning at four. Have them meet in the mess hall. It should be deserted then. Can you do that?” I nodded. His eyes stared into mine, and they were no longer the eyes of Romikor Tenako. “I understand now, Senaria. I know who I am.”

Anything I might have said was quelled as he submerged me in an unexpectedly fierce kiss. “In case I don’t get a chance later,” he mumbled finally, letting me go. A moment later he was gone.



It was just after four when he slipped into the silent and darkened mess hall. “We’re all here,” I whispered in the gloom. It hadn’t been easy, either; most of the prisoners were convinced it was some kind of malicious trick. I’d desperately pleaded with several of them, pointing out that Lucie would unquestionably be taking over the compound within the next day or two and that it was the only chance we had. All had ultimately agreed that given a choice between the two, Tenako was at least the more civilized. I didn’t even try to tell them what had happened.

At my feet was the small wooden cage. Inside was Tora, slumbering peacefully. Reluctantly, at Veldra’s suggestion, I’d given him a mild sedative from the infirmary stores. At first I’d fought the idea, but I had to admit she was right; it wasn’t fair to risk everyone’s safety should Tora decide to start emitting feline yowls.

I jerked involuntarily as I felt a sudden slithering sensation around my neck and a moment later heard the soft clatter of a multitude of small hard objects hitting the floor. Any doubts my fellow prisoners might have had vanished when we looked down to see our restraint collars scattered over the floor, now retracted into open half-circles, reflecting weirdly in the faint light. We were indeed free.

“Listen closely, all of you,” we heard him say. Dimly I saw his eyes; I could have sworn they were glowing with the intensity of his voice. “In the battleship hangar there’s a small starship cruiser, the *Kenoki*. Senaria knows the way there, and she’ll know how to fly it. The Brizal guards have personal instructions from me to look the other way. You’ll have to move quickly. If Lucie’s men get wind of this all hell will break loose.” He looked at me. “Senaria, it’s up to you now. My place is here.”

“But aren’t you coming along?” I said in horror. He shook his head sadly. “No,” I insisted desperately. For the first time I suddenly felt certain that I wouldn’t ever see him again. “If you’re staying, then so am I.”

“Senaria, you’ve got to get these people home safely,” he said

firmly. “You know where the hangar is. Most of them haven’t been out of this building since they arrived. Besides, I’m responsible for all of this. It’s up to me to fix it. Now go.” And then the lights went up as I felt a horrible sensation of *déjà vu* flood over me.

“I don’t think so,” said Jack Lucie as he stepped out of one of the doorways. He was holding a small machine gun in one hand. In the other was a hideous object, a severed human head dangling by the hair. Behind him were several more of his troopers, all armed. I turned to see our retreat blocked by another contingent.

“So it’s as I thought, Teyn,” said Lucie with a sneer. To my astonishment he spoke in excellent Deshtiran. “Your communications officer told us about the little message you had him send this morning. After a little persuasion, of course.” He held up the head, then tossed it across the floor at us, where it made a ghastly contrast against the polished mess hall planking. “You’ve let the blonde bitch twist you around her little finger. You’re not going to throw away everything I’ve worked for that easily.”

“And what have you worked for, Jack?” asked Tenako. “Money? Power? That’s out of your reach now. Or is it just the pleasure of killing?”

“Yes to all,” snapped Lucie as his gun exploded with a deafening clatter. I saw Tenako hurled backwards by the impact of the bullets, then slide to the floor against the blood-spattered wall.

“No!” I screamed, frozen in disbelief, then my body finally responded to my commands and I ran to him, dropping to my knees and taking his shuddering body in my arms. I saw him trying to speak. “Senaria,” he gasped. “I—I—”

“I love you too, T.T.,” I heard myself answer, my eyes blurring with tears and shock. And then he died.

Someone roughly dragged me to my feet. I heard Lucie’s coarse voice, shouting, ordering his men to take us to the main meeting hall. I was only half-aware of being led along the corridors, amid a growing number of people. Several times I heard scattered bursts of machine gun fire from various directions. Only when we stopped did I finally begin to comprehend my surroundings.

We were in the meeting hall. Lucie’s men had lined us up against one wall on the raised platform that served as a stage, opposite the giant viewscreen. Numbly I looked out at the large hall, now filled with both Brizali and the Americans. Everywhere I saw the automatic weapons that seemed to be the hallmark of the Earth renegades. In a supreme gesture of contempt, they hadn’t even disarmed the Brizali, apparently

feeling (correctly, I suppose) that swords would be no match against bullets. The Brizali looked dazed; I doubt that they'd ever imagined they would find themselves in such a position. A few held machine guns themselves, and I realized they must have been in Lucie's pay all along.

Veldra stood next to me, and took my hand and squeezed it. "I'm sorry, Senaria," she whispered in my ear. "I didn't know." I nodded, still dazed.

A panic-stricken thought suddenly emerged through the fog. "Tora?" I whispered back urgently.

"We shoved his cage under one of the tables. I don't think they saw him." I nodded gratefully. I knew that Lucie wouldn't show him any mercy either if he discovered him.

There was a sudden hush as Lucie, still cradling his weapon, strode up onto the stage and glared out at the crowd. He wasted no words.

"Teyn is dead," he announced bluntly. Once again he spoke in Deshtiran, with no trace of an accent. "I'm in charge here. If anyone has a problem with that they can die now. Any takers?" He was met with a sullen silence.

"He tried to betray you to the Empire," he went on. "I caught him trying to escape with the prisoners," and he gestured at us. "He's the one who sabotaged our plans on Earth as well." I started, then realized it was an unintentional hit; he was probably just blaming everything he could on the dead, who couldn't answer back. "Now we're going to get this thing back on track. One of our prisoners is a favorite of your beloved Empress and Emperor," and he accompanied the sneer with a gesture at me, "and it's time we put her to work."

He motioned towards one of the technicians on the side, and a moment later the viewscreen lit up. I was startled to see the palace operator staring down at us with a bewildered look. It must have been a strange sight indeed on his end of the connection.

"I'm Jack Lucie," said the American. "I want an immediate link with Emperor Wilorian and Empress Mikiria. I have someone they've been looking for."

One of the troopers grabbed me roughly by the shoulder and dragged me over to Lucie's side. I could see by the operator's shocked expression that he recognized me. "One moment," he stammered, and the screen went blank. There was a delay of about thirty seconds, and then Kiri and Will were looking down at me.

"Sen!" gasped Kiri. To my surprise, a look of momentary relief spread over their faces, and then I saw the remains of the mourning

bands across their eyes. It suddenly hit home that they must have really presumed me dead all this time. Well, it looked to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, I observed grimly.

“What is this?” snapped Will. “Senaria, are you all right?” Lucie cut him off.

“Jack Lucie’s the name.” Kiri was staring at him intently. “We have firearms, we have ships, and we have troops. And we also have something here you lost. Want her back?” He grabbed me by the hair and forced me to my knees. For an instant I was tempted to cripple him where it would have hurt most, but I’d done enough to Kiri, I reflected bitterly. I didn’t want to make her watch me die.

“What do you want, Lucie?” demanded Will through gritted teeth. I think Kiri would have torn him apart with her bare hands at that moment if she could have. I’d never seen such a frightening expression on her face and I hope I never do again. If only she were here, I thought.

“First, you will release all Brizal prisoners,” Lucie gloated. “Second, you will both abdicate the throne of Deshtiris, after announcing that power has been transferred to me.”

Will looked stunned. “And if we don’t?”

“Your people will disintegrate into bloody shreds before our weapons. You have swords. We have machine guns and rifles. And, just to make sure you make your decision quickly, we have hostages, too.” He gave my hair another vicious yank, then shoved me to the floor. I remained there, making no effort to get back up as he strode over to the other hostages.

“You know the drill,” Lucie went on, a hideous light in his eyes. “A finger or two after the first few minutes, then perhaps an ear. Keep me waiting and we’ll see what else comes off.” I suddenly realized that Tenako had been right; it was the killing that Lucie lived for more than anything else. And now there was no one to restrain him.

“Don’t be a fool, Sotok,” Kiri said. Sotok? I wondered. Who is Sotok? “You know there’s no death penalty on Deshtiris. Surrender and you’ll be reprogrammed or exiled to the prison planet, but at least you’ll be alive. Kill a hostage and we’ll stop at nothing to track you down, and I promise you I won’t discipline the soldier who accidentally kills you in the line of duty. And if you harm a hair on Senaria’s head, I’ll be that soldier.”

She’s stalling, I suddenly realized. But why?

Lucie laughed, a brutal laugh. “We’ve got all the winning cards here. Do you think your troops and their little kitchen knives are going

to stand up against us? Perhaps you'd like me to demonstrate on one of these hostages?" and he raised his own weapon and aimed it directly at Veldra.

"Stop it, Sotok," Kiri said hastily, a little less imperiously. "All right, you've made your point. Let's talk."

Something began to surface through the terror. I realized that the walls behind Kiri looked strange, as if they were alive, continually in motion. And then I understood and my heart leaped.

"Sotok, how do I know Senaria's even still alive?" Kiri was saying. "For all we know those could be holograms standing there."

Lucie snickered, an ugly noise. "You don't. And I think you'd grant our demands anyway. But go ahead and ask her something that only she knows. No tricks," he added coldly, motioning across the stage for me to get back to my feet.

"Sen," Kiri said, her eyes seeking me out, and there was something in them that told me things weren't quite what they seemed. And then she asked a question that absolutely floored me for a moment. "Where are you standing?" was all she said, and suddenly I knew what she was going to do.

"Against the west wall," I replied without hesitation, and her face broke into an icy grin that portended ill times for Jack Lucie. Unexpectedly the screen went blank.

For a second Lucie was stunned, then he spat out an obscenity. "What the hell was that all about?" he snarled. There was a sudden edge of fear in his voice.

"Lucie," shouted a voice from the doorway. All eyes turned to see one of the troopers standing there, breathless, his features contorted. "Something's coming through the compound. It barely registers on our sensors." Lucie's face went deathly white as the truth finally sank in. "Kill her! Kill them all! Now!" he screamed, raising his weapon.

I closed my eyes. There was a deafening crash and I waited for the agony of the bullets tearing into my flesh, but it never came. I reopened my eyes and found that everyone had turned away from me. The entire rear wall of the building had collapsed inward in a chaos of shattered masonry as an incredible object emerged from the dust and debris to settle gently to the floor. It was a bullet-shaped cylinder about forty feet long, and as the dust poured off the sides I could see that it was transparent and that there were people inside. A ramp extruded itself from the front of the thing and a doorway formed above it, and moments later soldiers were pouring out and advancing towards the stunned onlookers, led by a slender young woman in Deshtiran battle

armor.

Even from that distance I could see the crimson hair flowing from under the helmet and caught the glint of brilliant emerald eyes. Emperor Nendor Wilorian followed her, holding high in the air a small torch shedding a brilliant yellow-orange glow in all directions, with Rann immediately behind, and after them came dozens after dozens of Deshtiran soldiery, swords gleaming in the dust-choked air. I heard Veldra exclaim something I couldn't make out. There was an odd sensation in my ears, like a dog whistle just barely too high-pitched to hear.

"Look out!" I screamed as loudly as I could. "They have firearms!" Kiri motioned towards the lamp Will was holding up over his head, and grinned. For an instant my stomach knotted up as I saw hundreds of automatic weapons trained on her, and then I realized that their wielders were shaking them in dismay. Not a single shot rang out. Belatedly the remains of the Brizal forces began drawing their swords, as the Americans milled around in evident panic.

"Sen! Catch!" called out Kiri, and with a remarkable javelin-style thrust she hurled a blade across the room to me, hilt first, over the heads of the intervening combatants. I caught it with a bound, feeling my spirits soar as I relished the sensation of the cool grip in my hand. I turned to see several of Lucie's Brizal turncoats advancing towards me, their own swords drawn.

"Now it's a fair fight," I growled loudly. It took them only a few moments to realize what I meant, as I wove a net of flashing steel before me, driving one back, running another through the arm, and watching the looks of growing dismay on their faces.

Meanwhile the soldiers just kept pouring out of the *Futaba*. I had assumed they'd been waiting in the ship's attached living quarters, but not even it could have held this many troops. There had to have been nearly a thousand by now, mercilessly advancing through the huge hall. Then I realized Kiri had left a gateway open back in Deshti and the soldiers were simply walking on through. A moment later I was brought back to my own situation with a thud.

"Back," snarled a cold voice. "This bitch is mine." The Brizali fell back and Lucie stepped forward, blade in hand. "I don't know how you did this, but I'll be damned if you're going to live to celebrate it." I snorted at the thought of an Earthling trying to wield a sword as he lunged. A moment later I realized that I was in very, very deep trouble.

He was good. In fact, it was all I could do to stay alive for the next few minutes as several times I barely deflected thrusts that would have

been instantly fatal. Belated understanding finally came. Sotok. “You’re a renegade Watchdog,” I gasped.

“Thought I was just another primitive Earther, did you? Serious mistake. Fatal mistake, for you,” he jeered, and I barely knocked aside a thrust that would have gutted me.

“Yes, I was a Watchdog,” he continued, as I desperately retreated through a doorway, across the courtyard, and into another building. At this point, all I could do was to try and stay out of the path of that lethal blade. “For fifteen years I watched people getting rich, enjoying anything they wanted, while I was supposed to be the virtuous, incorruptible secret watcher working valiantly behind the scenes to keep them from hurting themselves.” His blade slipped through my guard for a moment and I felt a searing pain in my left forearm. Glancing down, I saw blood beginning to flow from a long deep slash. “You know, Earth is a potential paradise for someone who knows how to exploit it. All it takes is the right attitude.”

A sudden quick twist of his blade sent my own flying over my shoulder. Desperately I threw myself to the ground, rolling as I hit, and grabbed up the blade and rolled back to my feet. There was a clang as his blade hit the floor mere inches from where I’d been moments before. I suddenly recognized where I was, and the beginnings of a desperate plan began to take form through the terror rapidly engulfing me.

Leaping backwards to avoid another vicious thrust, I threw my blade directly at his face, turning and running for my life as I did so. As I’d hoped, the move caught him off guard and he barely deflected the blade to one side, receiving a cut on the cheek in the process. It bought me just enough time to dash down the corridor and into a small room, slamming and locking the door behind me. An instant later I heard a crash as he threw himself against the thin wooden barrier. I knew that the door, as flimsily built as the rest of the buildings in the complex, wouldn’t hold for more than a few moments.

On the far side of the room was a bank of computer equipment, a blank white computer screen in the middle, and I dashed for it, kicking aside a chair along the way. Frantically I activated the device, hoping against hope that, like the other Virrin technology Tenako had adapted, this one also used the familiar standard Deshtiran graphical computer interface.

*What do you want to do today?* said an emotionless voice quite unexpectedly. Damn! I thought. A voice interface. Just great. “Show list,” I gasped, trying to get my panting sufficiently under control so

that the computer could understand me.

*Specify list*, said the voice. I swore softly under my breath. “Show list of available files,” I said as calmly as I could, and a moment later the blank white screen filled with a list of names and dates.

*Please select file*, said the voice.

I heard the door beginning to give way. “All of them,” I snapped, the blood pounding in my temples.

*That option is not recommended in this context*, said the voice. I hate computers! I screamed silently to myself. I hate them! I hate them! I hate them! “Do it anyways,” I managed through near gritted teeth, panic now surging through my body as a panel of the door crashed inward.

*Are you sure?* said the voice. “Yes!” I screamed, and suddenly the entire screen turned black with white lettering. *Ready*, said the voice as the door gave way with a splintering crunch and Lucie stepped into the room, sword in hand.

“Well, if it isn’t another room full of Teyn’s toys,” he sneered. “Guess I’m going to get them all bloody,” and he slowly advanced toward me, fingering the edge of his blade suggestively. “This time you’ve got nothing to throw and nowhere to hide.” Closer—closer—and then as he stepped onto the spot where the chair had been I shouted “Download now!”

For a moment I half expected the computer to announce another error message, and then Lucie looked surprised, his eyes widening. He remained that way for several seconds, his face becoming a frozen mask of horror as he tried unsuccessfully to say something, and then he began to scream, an eerie, horrifying wail that seemed to go on forever. I put my hands over my ears but I still heard it; I hear it now as I write this, and sometimes I hear it in my dreams.

At last he sank senseless to the floor in a crumpled heap, and my own knees gave way as three weeks of accumulated exhaustion, pain and horror finally overwhelmed me in a massive wave. I heard a commotion in the hallway but was too tired and sick at heart to even look up as someone burst into the room. I no longer cared if it were a Brizal or American, and was only vaguely aware of a voice shouting, “Here she is.” After some timeless interval I felt someone put their hands under my arms and gently lift me to my feet, and I found myself looking into Kiri’s face. “Senaria? Are you okay?” she said softly, and I pressed my face against her shoulder and put my arms around her and cried at last, crying for her, for Lev, for T.T., and for myself, until I couldn’t cry any longer.





I woke up the next morning in my own bed, and for the first time in an eternity saw the real sun coming through an open window. For a moment I tried to imagine that it had all been a very bad dream, that none of it had ever happened, and then I saw the bandages wrapping my left forearm. I shivered and rolled over, pulling the sheet over my head, and remained there for a few minutes longer as I forced myself to face the events of the preceding evening.

Most of what transpired after Kiri and Will found me in the engram room remained only an elusive blur. I remembered Kiri trying to get an intelligible story from me as to what had happened to the man on the floor, but giving up after finding that I was apparently no longer capable of framing a coherent sentence. There were a lot of people and a lot of milling around, and eventually I must have just shut myself down into some kind of autistic state, because the next thing I remembered was being led onto the *Futaba* and into the living quarters where I was given something to drink and told to lie down and go to sleep. I vaguely remembered waking up once to the reassuring feeling of someone gently stroking my hair, and I had drifted off again. And then I woke up here.

For a moment I was startled by a loud purr in my left ear, and as I hastily threw off the sheets a yellow and black object flew off the bed and stood glaring at me, fur erect. “Sorry, Tora. It’s okay. C’mere,” I said in a placating tone, and as he warily sprang back onto the bed and settled in next to me, I knew once and for all that not only had it not been a dream, but it really was over. There’s nothing like a cat waiting patiently to be fed to bring you back to reality, I thought gratefully.

I threw off the sheets again with a sigh and slid out of bed. A few minutes later Tora was happily eating and I was dressed and padding silently downstairs to the kitchen. There I found my mother sitting at the table sipping tea and staring vacantly out the window. “Mom,” I said, trying not to startle her, and as she put down her tea I put my arms around her shoulders and gave her my best hug. “Welcome home, child,” she said softly, and we held each other as only a mother and

daughter can.

A little later we were joined by Kiri and Will, and after more hugs all around it almost seemed for a while again as if it had all never happened. While I dug into the first decent breakfast I'd had in weeks, they filled me in on their side of events. "How did you manage to find me?" I mumbled through a mouthful of biscuits and gravy.

"Holan had a team painstakingly analyze every scrap of the wreckage from your flier," Kiri explained. "When we finally discovered that you'd been shot down with an Earth rifle, we knew that your disappearance wasn't an accident, and that you must have stumbled into something big. We were on our way to rendezvous with the Southern Hemisphere fleet and then take apart the area where you disappeared, tree by tree if we had to, when we received an anonymous transmission. It included detailed maps of the entire compound, as well as the location of the hidden entrance. If it hadn't been for that we'd never have gotten to you in time. It was signed 'T.T.,' " she added, looking at me inquiringly. I looked away, and she didn't press the issue.

"And their firearms?" I asked, changing the subject. Will described how Alan had adapted the Liquidator technology to affect only the compound lead styphnate. "Lead whatnate?" I said inane.

"It's the substance used as a detonator in the firing pin of standard Earth ammunition," he explained. "Without it firearms are about as useful as clubs."

"And Alan did that?" I said in amazement.

"Yes, and in record time," Kiri corroborated.

"You know, Sen," my mother added, "he was really broken up about your 'accident.' He's been acting a lot differently since then."

"I'll bet," I said, but with somewhat more sarcasm than I really felt.

For a few minutes I concentrated on my food, as the others took advantage of my silence to do likewise. "So what's going to happen to them all?" I said finally.

"The Brizali will go through the same hearing process as Rann and the others," Kiri said coldly. "At least they stood and fought for what they believed in. As for the Earthmen—" and this time I saw that she was stifling a grin.

Will filled in. "When they saw that their precious 'guns' no longer worked, they bolted for their ships like scared rabbits. Unfortunately they found a Deshtiran battleship bottling up the opening to the outside world. They could have rammed it and blown up the whole area, but

they didn't have the guts for that, especially the Brizal pilots that had thrown in their lot with them."

"So what did you do with them?" I persisted uneasily.

"We put them to bed and sent them home to their mommies," he replied cryptically.

"Actually, we gave them a choice," Kiri said grimly. "They could stand before a firing squad and be shot with their own damned firearms, or be drugged and sent back to Earth."

"But there's no death penalty on Deshtiris," I protested. Kiri's response was icy.

"They weren't Deshtiran citizens, and this was a military operation. Legally we could have done anything we chose with them. But I liked the other idea better," she added, her face breaking into an evil grin as Will continued.

"We loaded them aboard their battleships, put them to sleep for a few days, and sent them off under military escort to Earth." Kiri looked like she was going to explode.

"Okay," I said, taking a deep breath, "just *where* are you going to leave them?"

"Well," he said innocently, "there's a nice patch of open desert just outside a little town in New Mexico called—"

"Roswell," I finished for him. "You wouldn't. Would you really?"

Kiri nodded; by now tears were running down her face from her efforts to avoid breaking out howling. "Our ships should be able to land, dump them in the desert, and be back out of radar range within ten minutes," Will continued. "By the time the military arrives to investigate, all they'll find is a herd of snoozing paramilitary wannabees and renegade officers. Badly wanted for treason, I might add. Of course, if any UFO enthusiasts are in the vicinity, they'll get quite a show." I whistled. A Deshtiran battleship is about the size of a small ocean liner.

"It was Alan's idea," Kiri finally gasped. "He's been fighting the UFO crowd for so long that he decided to give their side some ammunition for a change."

Her expression grew more somber as Will produced a small voice recorder. "Sen, I know this is hard for you," he said, "but we really need to know just what happened there. We've got teams going over all the equipment and records, but with the principal players dead or worse there's a lot that I think only you can tell us." I involuntarily shuddered, and found myself twisting my fingers together. Kiri looked apologetic. "I thought that if we voice recorded this we could keep it informal,

rather than taking down a video statement.”

“Sure,” I said dubiously. “I suppose I didn’t make a lot of sense last night.”

Will grinned. “That’s an understatement if ever I heard one.”

“Well,” I went on, “a lot of it was pretty unbelievable. You might find it makes even less sense now, but fire away.”

“For starters,” Kiri said, “what happened to Teyn? We thought he was behind all this, but we found him shot to death.”

“It wasn’t Teyn,” I said softly. “It was Tenako.”

That brought wide eyes all around the table, let me tell you. Kiri looked thunderstruck. “Tenako? But—”

“I know. He died at Tar Deshta. But it was him. And it was Krigghin Teyn. And it was—someone else.”

For a few moments there was silence. I saw that Kiri had turned a deathly shade of white. “T,” she finally said softly. She sighed. “Maybe you should just start at the beginning.”

I agreed, and for the next hour and a half gave as good an account as I could remember of the events from the attack on my flier to the arrival of the *Futaba*. For some reason, though, I found myself glossing over Tenako’s death. I suppose I couldn’t really face it myself. “So it was Tenako, not Teyn, that sent us the information we needed to end the Earth revolt,” Kiri said, and told me about the message that had enabled her to put an end to Lucie’s plans so effectively.

When I started to describe my near-fatal duel with Lucie, she interrupted me for a moment. “We were able to identify him as Veladikor Sotok.”

“A missing Watchdog,” I added helpfully. Seeing their amazement, I explained. “Tenako told me about them, but even he had no idea he’d been working with a renegade Watchdog all along.”

“I don’t know what you did to him,” Kiri continued with a shudder, “but he won’t be leading any more coups. The doctors worked him over pretty thoroughly and couldn’t find a thing wrong with him, except that his mind appears to be utterly blank. No thoughts, no memories, no emotions, no motor skills, nothing. A pure vegetative state but with no physical damage whatsoever.”

I reluctantly described how I had lured him under the transducer and activated it at the last possible moment. “I called up the list of available engram files, and selected them all. It must have downloaded over thirty different sets of memories, beliefs, emotional responses...” I trailed off as I remembered again that scream. My mother took my hand in hers and squeezed reassuringly.

“And his mind couldn’t possibly hold them all,” Kiri finished for me, “so the successive downloads started overlaying each other, until the end result in his brain was just—random static.” Her own voice shook slightly as she completed the sentence. “I think that’s plenty for now,” she said after a long silence.

On the way back to my room I encountered Rann. “Hello, Rann,” I said awkwardly.

“Hi, Sen,” he answered with a forced smile. Just how much pain have I caused, I wondered. His next words were a surprise, though. “I wanted to thank you for what you did,” he continued. “Mom said you were what kept her going those last few weeks. She’d given up hope. You gave it back to her.”

“Your mom?” I said in bewilderment.

“You know, Veldra,” he answered, and surprise suddenly washed over his features. “You mean you didn’t know?”

I shook my head. “Veldra is your mother?” I repeated disbelievingly.

“You really didn’t know?” he asked again.

“I guess it never came up,” I answered, still a bit stunned. He put a hand on my shoulder and gave me a little squeeze, the way we had so often before.

“She made sure they brought your cat back with you. You were kind of out of it, I guess. Anyways, thanks,” he added quietly. I placed my hand over his.

“Rann, you’re an awfully good kid and I didn’t treat you very well. I’m really sorry. I wish I could make it up to you somehow, but I can’t.” I gently removed his hand from my shoulder. His eyes clouded over. “What’s this?” I said suddenly, noticing a sliver of white showing below the bottom of his short sleeveless shirt.

“What’s what?” he stammered, as I grabbed the bottom of his shirt and pulled it up a few inches, to reveal a bandage along his left side running from front to back.

“Did this happen last night?” I demanded.

“It’s nothing,” he protested, looking embarrassed.

“Nothing, my ass,” I snorted. “You don’t use a bandage like this for a scratch. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” he insisted. “It slid between the ribs and the muscle. It just hurts a bit, that’s all.” Another inch or so and he wouldn’t be standing here, I realized with a shock.

“I guess I owe you one,” I mumbled apologetically, mentally chalking up yet another casualty to my stupidity.

“Are you going to rejoin the bodyguard now that you’re back?” he asked hopefully. I shook my head. “I’m going to be staying for good,” he went on. “It looks like my parents will be, too. Kiri’s asked my mother if she’d be willing to develop and head a clinic for the palace, so they don’t have to keep relying on the military’s doctors. Besides, I think my parents are going to need me for a while, especially Mom. She went through a lot.”

“No kidding,” I agreed, noticing that he was finally referring to Kiri by her nickname instead of “Empress Mikiria.” “So has your father started speaking to you again?”

“Yeah,” he said, “thanks to Kiri. She gave him a bit of a talking to. I’m not sure how much of it was what she said and how much was because the Empress of Deshtiris was sitting in his living room chewing him up and spitting him out, but I’m no longer *persona non grata*, so it looks like things are okay between us again. They really need to get their lives back together.”

“Don’t we all,” I confirmed, half to myself, turning to go.

“Sen,” he said hesitantly. “What you wrote in your letter. That was really true, wasn’t it? I mean about you being in love with someone else?” I nodded. “Would you—” He stopped, evidently not sure that he had any right to ask what he was about to ask. “Would you tell me who?” he finally finished.

“No,” I said, trying not to sound harsh. “No. I’m sorry, Rann, I can’t do that. Especially now.”

Back in my room I found myself aimlessly poking around at the various souvenirs and possessions I’d accumulated over the years. My arm was starting to hurt again, and I finally just sat down on the bed, stroking Tora’s soft gold and black fur and enjoying the simple ability to send him into a frenzy of purring. Wallowing is not going to accomplish anything, I rebuked myself sternly. There was a knock at the door, and I answered it to find Kiri standing quietly in the hallway.

“It’s good to have you back, Sen,” she said as I cleared off one of the chairs, making a place for her. Tora promptly jumped into her lap. First Tenako and now her, I reflected. There’s a cat with good taste. “I hope you didn’t find this morning’s session too painful.”

I shook my head. “It’s all in the past now,” I said as casually as I could. But I think my eyes betrayed me, as I found myself angrily fighting off a sudden urge to cry again.

“So how’s the arm?” she said. “That was a nasty slash.”

“Nothing compared to what I did to my leg,” I told her, and showed her the bandage. It had been freshly redone sometime during

the previous night; I'd probably reopened the injury again during the fight with Lucie. "Never quarrel with a tree and gravity at the same time," I philosophized.

She looked impressed. "I guess you took your share of knocks," she conceded. "You know, it was a good thing for me that you came through all right. Otherwise I think I would have done some things I'd have regretted later." She said it lightly, but coming from her it was a remarkable admission. I remembered her telecom conversation with Lucie, and wondered just how far she might have gone. Then I realized it was also a glimpse into her feelings that I didn't get very often any more.

Kiri seemed to be carefully considering her next words, and said nothing for a little while, idly scratching Tora behind the ears. I wondered how much she'd guessed already.

"I still don't understand why Teyn—or Tenako—did what he did at the end," Kiri mused, finally breaking the silence. "Even allowing that he had your memories and thoughts, Tenako was a pretty stubborn man. Yet it was as though he changed into another person altogether. I think there's more here than meets the eye." She casually avoided looking at me as she said it, but I realized then that I had to tell her, that the truth was the only important thing left in this whole sad affair.

"I think," I began slowly, "that the clone created for Teyn had its own mind and personality, even though it was submerged by Teyn's download as soon as it was first awakened. In order for Tenako to have implanted those instructions, there had to have been something more there than just a blank slate. I think it—he—was like a child, growing up for ten years with someone else in total control of his body, and all he could do was to observe and try to make sense of what he was experiencing. When Tenako's engrams were added in, maybe it somehow weakened the grip of the imposed personalities enough so that his real self could start to think independently." I looked up to see Kiri's emerald eyes boring into me intently, her face an expressionless mask, as I forced myself to continue.

"Then, when my personality was added in as well, and was so utterly contradictory to everything already there, the combination of the three was fatally weakened and he could start taking control, even though Tenako and Teyn were fighting him all the way. He didn't always know what to do, any more than a child does, but he suddenly found himself doubting, and dreaming, and loving—" At that point I couldn't go any further, and just stopped. There was a long pause as I stared at the table, my vision blurring with tears which I made no effort

to wipe away. I felt Kiri's hand on mine.

"So that's it," she said very quietly. "I understand now, Sen. I'm really, really sorry." She squeezed my hand, and for a long time neither of us said anything. I finally felt that I had my voice back under control, and looked up.

"I think I ought to go home," I said unexpectedly. Seeing her blank look, I went on. "Back to Qozernon, I mean. Maybe try another job. I don't know. But I'm so tired of death, and horror, and blood. I never know from one day to the next whether someone I love is—" I stopped and found myself staring at the table again.

She finally spoke. "Sen, you've been living in the center of a volcano for far too long, and you've done better than anyone would ever have a right to demand of you. I envy you more than you can imagine, you know. You really can just walk away from it."

No, I can't, I thought to myself, but I said nothing.

"I hope you find what you're looking for," she added softly.

I looked up and stared for a moment into her vaguely cat-like eyes. "I did, once," I said, rising to my feet. "Goodbye, Kiri."



Later that evening as I was packing my things I heard another knock at the door. This time it was Alan. “I heard you were leaving,” he said hesitantly.

“Hello, Alan,” I acknowledged. “Yes, you heard right.”

“Do you really have to go?” he said, rather to my surprise. There was something in his eyes I couldn’t quite read.

“I think I do,” I answered after a moment. “I wanted to tell you,” I said by way of changing the subject, “that was a wonderful piece of work you did. If it hadn’t been for you there would have been an awful bloodbath back there.”

“Thank Will,” he said. “It was his idea. I just did the technical stuff.” I suppressed my surprise. This really was a different Alan than the one I’d been clashing with for so long. I realized then what it was that I saw in his eyes, and I knew I couldn’t face it at this of all times.

“Senaria,” he hesitated. “I—”

I cut him off as gently as I could. “Alan, I’ve got to finish my packing. I’m sure you understand. I’ll see you again someday. That’s a promise.” We made some more small talk for a few minutes, and then he left. As I watched his departing figure, I finally realized just what a lonely man he was.

I left for Qozernon the next afternoon on a regular passenger liner, accompanied only by Tora. Will offered to take me in the *Futaba*, but I told him I was looking forward to the three-day journey, and promised to send him the account you’re reading now as soon as I could bring myself to finish it. And, as you can see, I did.

## The End