

THE FIRST BOOK IN THE TWIN PLANETS SERIES

Mikiria



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.

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Project A-Ko quote (“When you start believing”) from *Dance Away*: Words and music by Joey Carbone and Richie Zito. © 1985 Sixty Ninth Street Music (BMI).

George Monro Grant quote (“We looked out and saw a sea of green”) from *Manitoba and the great North-west* by John Macoun. © 1882 World Publishing Co., Guelph, Ont.

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Introduction

Message 20 of 110

Date: Tue, 13 April 1999 14:26:40 -0800 (PST)
From: willorian@rp.gov.dt
To: jamison@syscomp.calufont.edu
Subject: Long time no see
Attachments:
 mikiira.doc (540 KB), "Attached Word file"

Dear Dan,

A few years ago you spent quite a bit of your time trying to help me track down the mystery of who my parents were. Well, I finally solved it, with help from some new friends of mine. I thought you might like to see what we discovered (see the attached file).

Pass it along if you want; no one will believe it anyway, and it might make for a modestly entertaining read. Hope everything is going well at California University/Fontana.

All the best,
Will Barton
E.D.

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Part I: Cubicle 49



Vren. Bri. Doh. Gred.

Did you ever get a tune into your head that just wouldn't go away? One that you didn't even recognize, or have any idea where you first heard it, but there it was anyway? Day after day? Well, this wasn't exactly a tune, but rather four nonsense words that had been randomly popping into my head every few days for several months now, and they were just as irritating. Wondering absently what they could mean, I wearily tossed my briefcase (containing my lunch rather than papers of any importance) onto my chair and turned on the PC. Another day in Cubicle 49, I thought, another day of my life down the drain.

A cartoon image of a woman with spiky cyan hair appeared on the screen as the operating system loaded. Good morning, Ryoko, I thought to myself, and automatically checked my phone for messages. Pleased to find none waiting, I picked up a mug from my desk and walked over to the drinking fountain to fill it with water, returning just as the image disappeared from the screen to be replaced by a network login box. A university records office had to be one of the least exciting places on Earth, I thought to myself, and being located in Fontana, California didn't help much.

"Was that Ryoko?" said a cheery voice behind me. "Cool!" I turned to see one of the student assistants grinning at me, a slender but athletic young woman a few inches shorter than me with an improbable mane of sandy-colored hair topping off a lively, distinctly mischievous face. "I'm Kiri," she announced brightly. "Ryoko's one of my favorite characters from *Tenchi Muyo*. You into anime too?" (Just in case you've been living in a cave for the past decade, I suppose I should explain that "anime" is what used to be known as "Japanimation," a genre with a devoted worldwide following, especially among science fiction enthusiasts).

"I am when I can afford it," I replied, rather bemused. Student assistants didn't usually deign to talk to staff except when they had to. Generation gap and all that, I supposed. "Expensive stuff, though. My

name's Wilbur, by the way."

"I know," she said. "Wilbur Barton. It's in the staff directory. Can I call you Will? Wilbur always reminds me of—who was that horse again—"

"Mr. Ed," I said helpfully. "Actually, Wilbur was his owner, but I knew who you meant."

She looked at the screen again, now with its corporate-dull login window waiting. "*Tenchi's* my favorite series. Have you ever seen the whole thing?"

"No, not really," I answered, wondering when I could get to work. Not that I particularly wanted to; it was a dull, routine paper-pushing job that any trained monkey could do, but it did pay the bills. "I've only seen the first two episodes."

She only hesitated for a moment. "Why don't you come over to my place and watch it with me? I've just gotten the new DVD reissue of all thirteen episodes." I suddenly felt oddly disoriented, as if I'd wandered into a play without realizing it. Seeing my surprise, she added rapidly, "I'm not from this town, and I really don't know many people here. And most of these students seem to think animation is just for kids." Clearly sensing weakness like any efficient predator, she threw in the clincher. "And I'll make dinner. Deal?"

By this time I was really beginning to wonder what I was getting myself into, but as she started scribbling her address on the back of a five-part carbon form I decided what the hell, what could I lose? She tied up the transaction with a brisk "Five-thirty, then?" and as I nodded dumbly she was already disappearing back into the student work area down the hall.

I slowly sat down, staring at her nearly illegible handwriting, trying to reassure myself that I hadn't just hallucinated the whole thing. "Wilbur," said one of the other clerks, seeing that I was now free, "Ms. D'Arcangelo wants to see you." I shuddered involuntarily, my train of thought now irretrievably derailed.

Ms. D'Arcangelo, my immediate supervisor, was a very tall, very thin woman in her early fifties, with the imposing title of Head Supervisor of Enrollment Processing. Perched above a set of bleak facial features that she liked to consider aristocratic was an immense beehive of greying hair, firmly set into place (evidently by chemical means) and with a distinct bluish tinge. Rumor had it that she had a first name. However, it also held that the last person who had discovered it had vanished without warning. (Of course, we could have just looked it up, but that would have spoiled the fun).

“Now Wilbur,” she had begun, staring at me over her pince-nez in what was no doubt intended to be a kindly manner, “about your work statistics last month...” The clock moved very slowly that day.

Her name is Kiri, I found myself thinking more than once. She looked me up in the staff directory. She says she’ll make dinner. This is no way for a forty-six-year-old middle-aged adult to act, I reprimanded myself, but I still found her popping into my thoughts at the most inopportune times, such as during Ms. D’Arcangelo’s investigation into why my performance output had dropped an immense two percentage points from last month’s.

Five o’clock arrived at last. I had barely enough time to get home, change, and head out again.

I was expecting a typical student apartment building, but the address she had provided turned out to be a modest ranch-style house in a quiet residential neighborhood. A small but expensive Mishima sports utility vehicle was parked out front. Half-anticipating a hoax, I rang the bell, but it was indeed the whirlwind calling herself Kiri who answered the bell and invited me in.

“I’m sorry if I railroaded you a bit today,” she said as she closed the door behind us, “but I didn’t want to get you into trouble with your boss. I thought keeping things brief would be a good idea.”

“Thanks,” I said dryly. “It was interesting.”

“Look,” she said, all too accurately reading my nervousness, “if you’re expecting me to attack you or something, don’t worry. Or get your hopes up, either,” she added wickedly. “I really meant what I said. I’m looking forward to watching anime with someone intelligent for a change. But first,” she announced gaily, “dinner!”

Dinner turned out to be a simple but very tasty rice dish with some stir fried vegetables on the side. We ate at a small kitchen table with no formalities. “So tell me about yourself,” she said between mouthfuls.

“Well,” I started out hesitantly, “I can’t really say I lead much of an interesting life. I basically type data into a terminal for most of the day, and spend what’s left fixing what went wrong once it went in.”

“So how’d you end up there?” she asked, as I seized the moment to wolf down a few forkfuls myself.

I thought about it. How *had* I ended up there, anyway? “I guess I found that what I really wanted to do wasn’t considered worth doing anymore, and I have to pay the bills somehow.”

“And what was that?” she wanted to know. She had a distinctly uncomfortable talent for quickly getting to the heart of things, I thought to myself.

I explained that back in the early seventies I'd gotten my degree in aerospace engineering, in hopes of hooking up with NASA. That was when the country still seemed to be riding an endless wave of prosperity and could afford to indulge itself in living out its dreams. As it happened, I got out of school and started looking for work at about the same time that people quit tuning their TV sets to the launches. In the intervening years I'd worked here and there in the aerospace industry, and found that more and more I was working for a system that valued something much different than I did. The clincher was a well-publicized disaster and the ugly revelations afterwards. The sleazy compromises that had led to the multiple-fatality fireworks display were all too familiar to me on a daily basis. I decided to get out.

"At least in a records office I don't have to make life and death decisions on the basis of someone's career priorities," I finished. "Besides, one advantage of working a low-paying job is that I can be myself. I don't have to worry as much about what other people think."

She, on the other hand, was skillfully reticent about herself, as I quickly discovered. Although I did manage to determine that she was single and lived alone, I realized later that was about the sum of it.

After dinner I offered to help with the dishes, but was firmly turned down. "Look around a bit, why don't you?" she suggested, and with that authorization I proceeded to wander around aimlessly. Although the place definitely had a "lived-in" look, it had none of the college student atmosphere I remembered all too well from my own school days. Scanning through the two bookshelves along one wall (the first thing I look at when visiting a strange house), I found a mix of science fiction, advanced physics textbooks, and a number of travel guidebooks. Lying on a table were several books of astrophysics conference papers from the university library, and a photocopied class handout with PHY934 at the top.

"You're in Brinkman's seminar?" I asked in astonishment. Alan Brinkman was one of the most renowned theoretical physicists in the world, and a prime catch for California University/Fontana. Gaining admission to his classes was infamously difficult. "Yup," Kiri called back from the kitchen. "He's a really neat guy. Did you know he used to play in a rock band when he worked at Lawrence Livermore?" I shook my head. There was definitely more to this girl than met the eye.

"How old are you, anyway?" I blurted out. I was rather astonished that she would be doing post-graduate work in physics; I had assumed that she was an undergraduate student.

"Oh, older than I look," came back the answer. "Ahem," she added

with mock indignation. "Don't you know better than to ask a woman her age?" I felt my face redden and was grateful that she was still crashing around the kitchen, although there was nothing in her tone of voice to indicate that she was offended. Needless to say, she never answered the question.

Dishes cleared away, she opened a cabinet, revealing a combo DVD/laserdisc player and the largest flat-screen TV I had ever seen. Below was a huge assortment of laserdiscs, most sporting Japanese characters on their spines, along with a few DVDs. "Where on earth did you all get this?" I marveled. "It must have cost a fortune."

"Nah," she replied airily. "I've got connections. This is nothing. Wait 'til you see the picture," and I eagerly settled onto the sofa for the promised entertainment as Kiri plopped down next to me and wielded the remote.

A popular format for anime is a series of half-hour episodes with one continuous story line, and *Tenchi Muyo* was no exception. By the end of the fourth episode we were singing the end title song together, and it was obvious to me that she really did enjoy it as much as I. At the end of episode five, when the demon/space-pirate/genetically-engineered-superbeing Ryoko swore impassioned vengeance on the arch-villain Kagato, I put my arm around her shoulders without thinking, and then pulled it back with an embarrassed apology. "Hey, it's okay. We're friends, right?" she protested. "Put it back," and as I did so she leaned against me contentedly. We were both sorry when the seventh and final episode of the first series ended and I reluctantly suggested that I really ought to be getting home.

"Let's do this again soon," she said to my delight, and there was apparently nothing insincere in her tone. Not having a life in any event I hastily agreed, and as I turned to go she planted a quick kiss on my cheek. "Until then," she said softly. I was hardly aware of driving home, as all I had in my head was Kiri.

Sanity returned somewhat as I unlocked my apartment door and re-entered familiar surroundings, with all of their associations. A lifetime of going nowhere was pretty much summed up in the piles of books, videos and a few pictures scattered around. There was a framed pair of black and white photographs of my parents, of whom I had no real memories at all. There was also a color print of Jeannette, whom I had lived with for a few years, until she decided that a successful career person was her ideal mate. I found myself wondering what Kiri really wanted, and on that rather sour note fell asleep.

The next day I expected to find that the world had reverted back to

its usual tedious state, but to my surprise found a note waiting on my desk when I returned from lunch. "Have lots more anime," it said. "When next?" It was signed, "Kiri." A phone number was scribbled underneath. For the next hour I put off doing anything about it, then decided to hell with it and picked up the phone.

"When next" proved to be that same evening. Didn't she have a life, either, I wondered? I couldn't imagine that there weren't at least several potential suitors dogging her, but I wasn't about to argue the issue. I was there at five-thirty on the dot.

"So how old are you?" she asked over dinner. Hmmpf, I thought, recalling the previous evening's gaffe, but told her anyway. "You must have worked or something after high school," she calculated.

"Actually, no," I said. "I didn't go to the public schools. When I was fifteen, my parents and I were on a car trip, and there was some kind of accident. They were both killed, and although I survived I was left with no memories at all from before the day I woke up."

"You woke up in the hospital?" she asked.

"No, I was at home, being taken care of by a relative, my Aunt Dory. Apparently I had long since recovered physically, but hadn't been able to form memories properly. Then one day my brain just started working properly again. It's kind of like that trite expression about 'today being the first day of the rest of your life.' In my case it really was."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I really didn't mean to pry into anything painful." I explained that it wasn't at all, since I had no memory of my parents or my life before that morning. "You don't remember *anything* before that? Even now?" she exclaimed in evident disbelief.

"No, I really don't. I had to be taught to speak English again, and I didn't remember anyone or anything. My aunt took care of me and arranged for private tutors until I could catch up in school, and basically acted as my family for as far back as I can remember."

"I do have one weird memory from my childhood. I know it sounds strange to call it that," I added, "considering that I was at least sixteen at the time, but for me that was childhood. Anyway, I remember poking around in Aunt Dory's things in the way a small child will do before he knows better, and finding a really strange picture. I suppose my memory of it has become distorted over the years, but it was as if it were three-dimensional or something, like looking through a window at a scene, and it was a picture of a group of people in odd clothes posing in front of a big beautiful building. Aunt Dory was in there somewhere. I especially remember one of the other people, because she was a teen-

aged girl with bright red hair and great big green eyes. It must have been some kind of costume party, I guess. There were also several other children and an adult couple. I don't know why, but I remember feeling so—sad looking at them.”

“Wow,” said Kiri with a definite catch in her throat, obviously moved. “That must have really made an impression on you, to remember all those details.”

“I asked my aunt about the picture, and she pooh-poohed me, saying I must have dreamed it. I looked for it later and it was gone. Maybe I did dream it; it seems so unreal, and yet the memory still gives me a queer feeling whenever it pops into mind.” She had been watching me intently during this entire recitation. Her pale blue eyes struck me as oddly expressionless, somehow out of place in the otherwise lively face.

“That’s creepy, all right,” she finally acknowledged after a thoughtful pause. “Maybe it was some kind of artifact left over from the accident.” I shrugged.

“Maybe. Anyway, even though I forgot about it for a long time, when Aunt Dory died I actually looked for that picture when I sorted her things, but it never did turn up, so you may be right.” And then we went on to lose ourselves in another two hours of anime, *Iria* this time, and before I knew it the evening was gone.

The next day at work the subject of my parents came back to me as I tried to concentrate on entering an endless stack of input forms. A little over a year ago I had finally decided to track down all the information I could find on my parents, assuming that it would be a relatively straightforward piece of research. The online archives of the local newspapers seemed a logical place to start, and sure enough I found a few brief articles, including one remarkably short news item that simply mentioned an auto accident on Interstate 15 and listed me as a survivor. There were no details at all, such as employers, addresses, or anything else to use as a further lead.

I then tried contacting the state police, only to be told that records for that time period had been damaged by a computer malfunction and were unavailable. An inquiry with the Social Security Administration yielded a standard form giving lifetime contributions and other bookkeeping data.

At this point I turned to a former college buddy of mine, a dedicated hacker type who enjoyed boasting of his ability to ferret out virtually anything stored on computers. I provided him with what I had located. Six weeks later he informed me, quite chagrined, that he had

gone as far as he could. It turned out that he had found himself within a dizzying maze of dead ends, nonexistent files, and circular references. Employers invariably turned out to be no longer in business (sorry, no forwarding address); addresses given had been built over with skyscrapers or otherwise bulldozed long ago.

“Your parents weren’t CIA by any chance, were they?” he asked suspiciously. “Because otherwise I’d have to say that their lives must have been so screwed up by computers that they would have been lucky to have gotten their electric bills on time.” I could only shrug and thank him for his efforts. “S’allright,” he said. “Actually, it was the most interesting challenge I’ve had in a couple years.” As he was leaving, he said once more, “You sure they weren’t CIA?”

The final touch came a few weeks later. I’d driven over to Redlands to see someone at the university there, and took along one of the newspaper articles I’d printed out from the online archives. While I was there I stopped by the local library to see if their hard-copy files might provide me with any other clues.

In place of the article I had found online, the copy in the library, which was yellow with age, featured an article about the rutabaga crop in Santa Ana. A check of the other articles I’d retrieved yielded similar results. I even drove to several other nearby towns and checked their copies on file, to the same effect. As far as I could tell, the articles I had found online had never actually appeared in any printed newspaper.



Within a wickedly short time Kiri had made herself a major part of my life. Our evening dates quickly attained daily status, and little by little I found my life undergoing major changes.

It started with the innocent suggestion that we jog around the block before dinner, something I weakly resisted with a lame excuse about being too old for that kind of thing, and of course it soon grew into regular running and, before long, weekend hiking. Much to my surprise, I discovered that instead of hosting myriad aches and sprains I was feeling better than I had in years and finding my head considerably clearer as well.

Before long I realized that she was a confirmed vegetarian, after noticing that our meals never included meat of any kind. “Is this a religious thing?” I asked curiously. She hadn’t ever indicated that she held any kind of religious beliefs, and it somehow seemed slightly out of character for her.

“How do you know that animals aren’t sentient beings?” she had asked.

I pondered the question. “How do you know that vegetables aren’t?” I answered after a bit.

She shook her head sadly. “Vegetables don’t have nervous systems,” she said, giving me a pitying look.

“And sea slugs do,” I shot back.

She sighed. “Okay, let’s start over here. Would you eat a pet cat? One that reacts to you, apparently has a mind of its own, and obviously has dreams?” I shook my head. “So a cat could be conscious, and moving way down the line a sea slug probably never is. Where do you draw the line?”

“Ummmm,” I said. I never was good at arguments that ended with my having to arbitrarily draw a line somewhere; I imagine I’d make a lousy health plan administrator.

“Well, I’d just as soon not,” she concluded patiently. I had to admit, though, that avoiding meat was a lot less difficult when she was doing the cooking, for she seemed to have an endless supply of recipes

for dishes I hadn't ever encountered before, almost all of them delicious (although I still draw the line at broccoli and its accomplices).

One thing we didn't do was go to the movies together. She had (a bit timidly, I thought) asked if it was something I wanted to do, and I shook my head. It had been ages since I'd seen a movie I liked. Nevertheless, just for the fun of it, we decided to look over the listings in the daily paper.

"How about this?" I suggested. "It features two drug addicts, one of whom gives the other a teenage runaway to show his friendship."

"Gives the other a runaway?" Kiri said, obviously puzzled.

"For sex," I explained.

"Next," Kiri said emphatically.

"All right," I continued, "here's one that features a sweet young woman. Sort of like you."

"And—?" She eyed me suspiciously.

"Well, she does keep the remains of her doorman in garbage bags," I clarified. "Is that a problem?" Deftly dodging the cushion she sent flying at my head, I grinned. "All right, how about these?" The remaining listings featured a sadistic high school football coach, various graphic murders, and of course a few rapes thrown in for good measure.

Did I mention the incest and pedophilia? Okay, then, I won't mention the incest and pedophilia. Needless to say, we didn't go to the movies that night (or later).

We didn't find television to be much of an alternative, either. After all, the most popular network "comedy" series at the time featured profoundly unpleasant people doing spiteful and insensitive things to each other. Although Kiri had access to a wide selection of cable channels as well, this seemed to consist for the most part of documentaries on murders, prostitution and child abuse; talk shows in which the participants routinely attempted to physically maim one another; and advertisements for psychic hotlines.

"I just sometimes have this feeling that I'm from some other planet and got left here by mistake," I finally burst out in exasperation, as we opted instead for another evening of dipping into Kiri's extensive anime collection. "I just don't understand the society I'm living in, or how people can enjoy the things they enjoy." I stopped unexpectedly, a bit taken aback to find Kiri staring at me with a startled expression on her face. "Did I say something wrong?" I said hesitantly.

She laughed, a bit nervously. "Just what you said. You're not going to get weird on me, are you? I mean, next thing I know you're

going to tell me you were abducted by aliens as a teenager and used for breeding or something.”

Feeling rather stupid, I shook my head. “It’s just a way of trying to put my feelings into words. Flying saucers and Area 51 really aren’t my thing. It’s only a figure of speech. Really.”

“Sorry,” she apologized. “I didn’t mean it to sound quite like that. You just took me by surprise, that’s all.”

“I used to love the movies,” I mused, “especially the ones from the thirties and forties. I remember...”

“You remember...?” Kiri prompted, after waiting a decent interval.

“Well, I don’t want to bore you with more personal stuff,” I said. “It seems like I wind up telling you part of my life story every time we get together.”

“It’s okay,” she insisted. “Your life’s not nearly as dull as you make it out to be.” Reluctantly I continued.

“Well, way back when I was little—I mean, the first year or two that I can remember—when I was sixteen or so—I had another aunt who used to come to visit. I don’t know what her real name was, but I called her Aunt Mickey. She was an older woman, or at least the memory I have is of someone in their sixties or so, with grey hair. But she seemed to like me, even though I was just learning to talk all over again, and we used to sit for hours together watching old black and white movies from the thirties and forties. She’d give me a running commentary on what was going on, and I realize now it was a major factor in my learning to talk again so quickly.”

I suddenly found it hard to go on. “Then I noticed that she hadn’t visited in a while. I asked Aunt Dory when she was coming around next, and she was strangely evasive. Finally one day she just came out and told me, ‘Wilbur, she won’t be coming back. I’m sorry.’ I guess she never did say that she’d died, but that must have been what happened. In any event, Aunt Dory asked me to not bring up the subject again, and I never did.”

“Your Aunt Mickey meant a lot to you, didn’t she?” Kiri observed softly. I nodded. To my annoyance, I found it unexpectedly difficult to speak. Kiri waited patiently, although at that moment I would have far preferred that she take off on some unrelated tangent, any tangent. “Tell me how you feel,” she finally said instead. Thanks a lot, I thought in dismay.

“I just remember feeling so empty then,” I managed. “You know, I think the times I spent with her were among the few times in my life when I haven’t felt—lonely.”

“I have an idea,” I added desperately, now thoroughly appalled at how far things had deteriorated, “why don’t we just start tonight’s movie now?” Kiri gave me a quick squeeze on the shoulder and mercifully set to work turning on the equipment as I used the respite to pull myself together. Great, I thought ruefully, she must really think I’m a space case. But somehow I felt closer than ever to her after that.

“Tell me about your Aunt Dary,” she said unexpectedly as she was inserting the disc into the player.

“Dory,” I corrected her, grateful for the change of subject. “Well, she was a very elderly woman, even when I was a child, and seemed to be preoccupied by cares of her own. I got the impression that she’d experienced some kind of tragedy in her life that she’d never gotten over. She was also a remarkably secretive woman; she always refused to talk about herself or her past. When she died and I went through her things, I didn’t find a single photograph, letter, or anything else to give me even a clue as to her life before she took on raising me. I guess in her own way she cared about me. She was never cruel or selfish in any way, I’d have to say. But she wasn’t really what you’d call a warm personality.”

“She sounds rather cold, in fact,” Kiri observed.

I thought for a moment. “No, that’s too harsh. Not cold. Just—maybe overwhelmed.”

“Overwhelmed? Why?”

“I think part of it was the strain of taking care of me. I don’t know what the circumstances were that led to her taking responsibility for me, and she never complained in the least about the fact that she was essentially raising a child from scratch at her advanced age.” At least I didn’t go through the diaper stage, I thought to myself. “I did find that once I went off to college she started to do a lot of traveling, sometimes for months at a time, and when I went home to visit her between trips she always seemed glad to see me. I think she finally relaxed a little once she knew that I wasn’t dependent on her any more.”

I don’t even remember what we watched that evening; it was something on DVD I’d rented from a video shop that actually had a small selection of anime in addition to the usual Hollywood dreck. But all through the film I found myself thinking about anything but what was on the screen.

I knew that I’d always felt lonely. I’d had friends, of course, and even lived with Jeanette for a few years, but somehow I’d nevertheless always felt alone, separate, never quite “fitting in.” Aunt Dory had lived in a world of her own, conscientiously taking care of my needs

but not providing much in the way of companionship. That was when it finally hit me that the evenings I had been spending with Kiri had probably been the happiest hours of my life. And that I was in love with her.

I was halfway home that evening when I remembered that I had left the evening's rental DVD still sitting on her dining room table. With a muttered curse I turned the car around. Hoping she hadn't already gone to bed, I pulled into her driveway and headed up the walkway to her door.

Her living room blinds were partly open, and I was about to press the doorbell button when I glanced through the narrow opening and saw her sitting hunched over on her couch, her head in her hands, shaking. After a moment's puzzlement I realized that she was crying.

For a few seconds I debated ringing the bell and asking what was wrong, but something I couldn't quite define held me back. I finally left the DVD to accrue another day's rental and slipped away as quietly as I could.



The sun overhead was bright and warm. The broad lawn stretched in all directions as far as I could see, broken only by immense trees scattered here and there, and in the distance there was some kind of large complex of buildings.

I was playing a game with the red-haired girl, who like me was about ten years old. She turned to me and I saw a pair of huge green eyes happily observing me, but for some reason the rest of the face was Kiri's. It was my turn to catch her, but I couldn't quite touch her, as she slipped away each time I came near. I felt unbelievably happy.

Then she turned away from me for a moment, and when she turned around her hair was grey, the face was wrinkled with age, and the eyes were ordinary brown eyes. "Aunt Mickey?" I said in surprise, although somehow the face was still Kiri's. She smiled at me sadly, and then I realized that everything around us, the lawn, the trees, the sun, the distant buildings, was turning grey and fading away. "Aunt Mickey?" I cried out again as she began to recede into the distance. "Aunt Mickey!" I screamed again as she faded into the formless grey all around me. "No! Please come back! Don't leave me here!" And then I was floating in a shapeless grey nothing as terror and sadness overwhelmed me.

The grey void became drab walls with a few bookcases containing books and videotapes. It took me a few moments to realize I was back in my own apartment, as I tried to calm my pounding heart. I found my face and pillow wet with tears, and a sense of overwhelming loss filling my soul.

I'm not a believer in dream interpretations. As far as I'm concerned, dreams are the brain's way of filing and sorting all of the vast jumble of information recently acquired and not yet put into proper context. The emotional upset of the preceding evening had left my subconscious working overtime to make sense of it all, with the results that I had experienced. Or so I assured myself.

Nonetheless, for the rest of the day my surroundings seemed somehow unreal, as the sadness still shadowing my consciousness

seemed to color everything in drab shades of grey. Only when I received a call from Kiri asking what I wanted for supper did the overcast seem to lift a bit, and within a few days I had almost forgotten about it.

Several evenings later the word “exercise” attained a whole new dimension. We were rehashing the entertainment of the evening, a series called *El-Hazard*, which the animator had described in an interview as being partly in the tradition of Edgar Rice Burroughs. This led into a discussion of Burroughs’ classic Mars novels, and somehow the conversation eventually found its way to the ever-present swordplay which that author had so effectively made an integral part of his writing.

“I remember,” I burred enthusiastically, “how much in college I would have loved to have tried wielding one of those broadswords he always wrote about. But our school didn’t even offer fencing.” Kiri lifted her eyebrows, and without a word disappeared into the garage. A moment later she returned with two long cloth-wrapped objects. Pulling off the covers she unveiled to my incredulous gaze two shining swords and handed one to me hilt first.

“Go ahead, dummy, take it,” she snorted, running a finger along one edge. Gingerly I accepted it. It was about two and a half feet long, and on examining it more closely I saw that the edges were no sharper than a letter opener and the tip well rounded. “Apart from putting an eye out,” she reassured me, “I don’t think you could do much more than inflict bruises with these. They are well balanced, though,” and after waving it around in the air a few times I agreed.

“Please,” she said, stifling a laugh, “it’s not a paint roller. Here, watch.” And she showed me a basic move and told me to copy it. I couldn’t believe how comfortable the blade felt in my hand, somehow, in spite of its obvious lack of lethality. I think it was at that point that I decided I had finally managed to outgrow adulthood, and good riddance to it.

“Let’s go somewhere where we won’t smash up the furniture,” she giggled, and led me to the garage. I understood now why she left her vehicle parked out front: her garage had been stripped of its contents and set up as a kind of exercise room, windows covered, with a few wooden platforms of various heights scattered around. Seeing how much fun she was having, and how little concerned about appearance, I began to shed my own inhibitions and quickly found myself trying out one move after another under her evidently skilled tutelage.

When we finally finished, I realized to my astonishment that over

two hours had slipped away. She ended up by ordering me to take a good swing at her, and after a weak protest and a resulting lecture I complied vigorously. A moment later my sword was flying across the room with a resounding clatter and my palm stung from the blow. “Just to make sure you don’t lose your perspective,” she gibed.

The next morning I expected to wake up with more aching muscles than I had reaped years ago when I had attempted water skiing for the first and only time, but instead found myself fresh and limber. What is happening to me, I wondered? And do I care? Somehow I was finding the dreary days at work passing by in a flash, a merry face full of glittering surprises always before me.

As if swordplay wasn’t enough, Kiri came up with yet another crazy idea a few days later. It was a measure of her spell over me that it only seemed half-crazy at the time. She started teaching me an imaginary language.

It all started after supper with a series of wisecracks about the way a character could be transported to a different country/planet/universe and still manage to learn the language within a time that would have been the envy of a trained linguist. This routine became a standard feature of most Burroughs novels and even he couldn’t prevent it from eventually passing its “use before” date. Other writers tried other devices, such as alien gadgets* that would instantly teach the wearer the language. Finally, of course, the Roddenberry *Star Trek* television series simply dispensed with the whole rancid mess by inventing something called the “Universal Translator.”

“I remember creating a special alphabet,” I was saying, “so I could write my class notes and make them unintelligible to anyone else. All the letters were formed from straight lines so it ended up looking a lot like the OCR characters they use on checks. Wonder if I should have patented it?”

“Hah,” she snorted, her eyes lighting up. “I’ve gone you one better.” (One-upmanship was definitely one of her well-developed skills.) “I once created an actual language and taught it to several of my friends. We used to use it whenever someone was around that we wanted to annoy. I still remember it after all these years.” How many years was that? I thought idly. I suddenly realized I still didn’t actually know her age.

The upshot was that I learned that evening to count to ten in “Deshtiran,” as she called it, along with a few simple verbs and the

* Or, in Manabe Johji’s *Outlanders*, a kiss.—Ed.

standard pronouns. It was surprisingly easy, and a bit fun, especially after she taught me some colorful curses as well, and then we spent another hour wildly clashing swords. I had progressed to the point where we were dashing on and off the platforms scattered around the room like Errol Flynn on one of Warner Brothers' fake pirate ships, pursuing each other like demons and occasionally even inflicting real bruises with the rounded ends of our blades (at which point the curses came in very handy). It was all great fun and I found myself hoping it might never end as I headed home once again.

And that night before going to bed I happened to actually look in the mirror at myself for the first time in several weeks and realized that the face looking back at me was the face I used to see twenty years ago when I still believed in my life. What is happening to me? I wondered again. And is it real?

Vren. Bri. Doh. Gred.

I found myself sitting bolt upright in bed with the strange words still echoing in my mind, this time spoken repeatedly by an unfamiliar male voice. I couldn't remember any images at all, just the words seemingly coming from all around me. My life is getting weirder and weirder, I thought to myself. I looked at my alarm clock in disgust, saw with considerable relief that it was only a little past one, and happily rolled over and was soon once again sound asleep.



For several weeks things finally seemed to be settling into something resembling a routine. True to the lunatic nature of our relationship, we were starting to do all our conversing in Deshtiran, as Kiri continued to tutor me in her homemade “language.” Oddly, I found it exceptionally easy to learn, and reasonably consistent (unlike English), and I sometimes found myself using words I didn’t even remember learning, so that what could have been an irritating obsession instead wound up becoming yet another entertaining game. Once or twice I caught myself accidentally answering my phone at work in the strange tongue, to my considerable embarrassment. Although I had been in a few relationships previously, I knew by now that this one was very, very different.

Countless times I considered telling her how I felt, but somehow just couldn’t get up the courage to do it. After so many years of self-sufficiency, it came as a bit of a shock for me to realize that I could no longer picture a life without her, and yet I had absolutely no idea what a declaration of love might do to our friendship. To my chagrin, I found myself feeling like a teenager trying to puzzle out his first crush, and as equally at a loss in which direction to jump.

Things abruptly took an awkward turn one evening as I prepared to take my leave after a particularly exhilarating bout of swordplay. Our goodnight kisses had been gradually progressing from that original peck on the cheek to something rather more tantalizing, and this night I threw caution to the winds and, putting my arms around her, gave her a full-fledged kiss directly on the mouth. For a few moments we were locked together, then she unexpectedly shook herself free and stared at me with those odd blue eyes, her face flushed.

“I’m sorry, Will,” she said at last, as I wondered if I had overstepped some kind of bounds. “If we keep that up there’s no way I’ll stop, and I’m just not ready for this.” Puzzled, I started to speak but she cut me off. “Look, don’t misunderstand me, Will, it’s not that I’m a believer in celibacy or anything, and I’m certainly no virgin. I just—” She reached for words for a moment. “I don’t know if it’s you I love or

not. I don't want to do something that's going to hurt you." I was stunned. She looked pretty miserable herself.

"Kiri," I stammered in dismay. I had to stop to gather my courage and took a deep breath before I managed to blurt it all out. "I guess I should have said this a long time ago, but—I'm in love with you."

She started to say something, then slowly sat down. There was another long pause as I tried to put into words the dread I suddenly felt. "I didn't know there was someone else." I steeled myself for the disclosure I was sure was coming.

She just sat there and stared silently at the floor for a long time. When at last she raised her eyes to mine I could see she was on the verge of tears. "If there is," she said almost inaudibly, "he hasn't existed for a long time." I tried to make sense of it all, but nothing emerged from the sudden fog that my brain had become.

"I'm so sorry, Will," she burst out unexpectedly. "I know this doesn't make any sense to you, but please trust me. I just need some time to sort this out. I do—care for you very much," she added with uncharacteristic clumsiness. "Just bear with me for a little while. Okay?" I nodded glumly, still feeling that my world had been turned inside out. It was obvious that she was thoroughly upset as well. We bid each other goodnight, both of us uncomfortably formal, and I headed for home filled with a lover's unease.

The next day was torture. Twice I wound up hopelessly botching a stack of data input forms and having to redo them (inputting fifteen sheets before I realized that I was one record off from where I should have been the entire time), receiving in the process a severe lecture in "focusing" from a clearly annoyed Ms. D'Arcangelo. Then my PC crashed unexpectedly and I spent an hour trying to resolve the problem, only to finally discover that it resulted from a new network "enhancement" that proved to be incompatible with our terminal software. During it all I was trying to figure out what on earth Kiri had meant the night before. By the end of the day I was ready to crawl into the nearest file cabinet and curl up in a fetal position.

Finally, just as I was shutting down my printer and PC, the phone rang. It was Kiri. "We getting together tonight?" she wanted to know. "I think we need to talk."

Dinner that evening began on a predictably uncomfortable note. We were both obviously ill-at-ease, and I found myself staring at my plate, dreading the gut-wrenching discussion to come.

"I have to ask you something tonight, Will," she finally said. "And I want your absolutely honest answer. Agreed?"

I looked at her and nodded slowly. Here it comes, I thought, and braced myself.

“Will, what if I asked you to leave your job, your apartment, and your friends, and come with me to an unknown destination?”

It was the kind of off-the-wall course change that was completely in character for her, and of course it took me totally by surprise. “Are you serious?” I choked. She looked at me intently with those pale blue eyes and nodded slowly.

I silently digested the idea for a few minutes. “I guess it would depend on a couple of things,” I said finally. “I’d have to be able to get work, of course. Other than that, as long as you were there, I think I’d go anywhere you wanted. There’s really not a lot to keep me in Fontana, that’s for sure.”

“What about—last night?” she asked hesitantly.

I didn’t have to ponder that much, because it was about all I had been thinking of for most of the day. “Your friendship is the most important thing in the world to me,” I said. “If it were something more, that would be—well, great, but I can wait for you to work that out for yourself. And if I wait forever, then so be it.”

To her credit, she took this rather overripe affirmation at face value. In fact, she got up from her chair and, putting her arms around me from behind, gave me a ferocious hug. “I can promise you that I’ll always be there for you as a friend,” she said earnestly into my ear. “And who knows what else the future might hold?”

“I won’t live off you,” I interjected, gently shaking her off, “and you know jobs aren’t easy to get these days.” She barked out an odd laugh. “Oh, I can guarantee that you’d have useful work to do.”

The next evening Kiri brought up the subject again, and suggested that we start making the necessary arrangements. “You really mean it, don’t you,” I marveled; it was more of a statement than a question.

“You’re not having second thoughts, are you?” she shot back. I shook my head.

“I thought maybe it was all a crazy dream when I woke up this morning,” I said, “but I’m still game if you are. So, where are we going?”

“I want it to be a surprise,” was the remarkable (if predictable) answer, and if it had come from anyone but her I probably would indeed have had second thoughts. After what I’d experienced during the past few months, though, it seemed as if pulling up stakes and heading off to parts unknown was now just another adventure. I guess that’s what you call perspective...

And so it was that we ended up a few days later back at my apartment, loading up Kiri's diminutive SUV with what little stuff I wanted to keep (mostly videos, books, and clothes). She suggested that we simply leave the rest behind, rather than going through the hassle of a yard sale. "Besides," she said, "if you wind up getting cold feet before your lease expires at the end of the month, you can just move back in."

Similarly, I hadn't resigned from my job but had instead put in a request for six weeks' leave. I'm one of those people who keeps accumulating "use it or lose it" time anyway, though not out of any great love for my job. As far as they knew I'd be back in six weeks. "You can always write them later and let them know you're not returning," she explained. "Think of it as a safety net." It made sense to me; it would provide plenty of time for those second thoughts.

It had been with considerable satisfaction that I had quietly packed my personal belongings into my briefcase and locked my file cabinet for what I expected would be the last time, discreetly leaving the key on my desk under a stack of redundant memos from the university administration. (As it happened, I also inadvertently left half a dozen of my prized anime soundtrack CDs in the file cabinet, something I didn't discover until much later.)

At her own place she did pretty much the same, only packing things she really needed to keep. "I have a friend in town who will take care of selling the place later. This isn't the only house I own; in fact we'll be stopping at another one on the way out." I knew she was well provided with money, and hadn't ever really asked where it came from; I just assumed she was well off, though she never spoke of her family to me. Within a day we were packed up and ready to head out.

It was a typical Los Angeles Basin grey, overcast morning when we backed out of her driveway and headed north. I had left my own car in her driveway, with the understanding that we could make arrangements for it later. Before long we had pulled onto Interstate 15 and were aimed at the Mojave Desert, the soundtrack to *Project A-ko* pumping through the car speakers. I was desperately trying to impress myself with the gravity of what I was doing, leaving a steady job and familiar surroundings behind, but somehow every time I glanced at the intent figure sitting behind the wheel next to me the familiar lyrics just kept lifting me up in a way I hadn't ever experienced before.

*When you start believing
You can do anything
Let the magic fill you*

Take you above the highest star

“We’re not going to Las Vegas, are we?” I asked a bit nervously as we passed one of the green and white freeway mileage signs. “Ugh,” she replied with an exaggerated shudder. “No, I guarantee you, not there.” Soon we were on our way up Cajon Pass, and I cautiously ventured to again ask, “So, where are we going?”

“We’ll stop first at my house in the mountains, so we can switch to a bigger vehicle,” she said. “And then?” I asked. “And then,” she said. I waited a while.

“Well?” I said finally. “Well, what?” she responded with a perfectly straight face, but I could see an ironic mirth lurking behind her usually expressionless blue eyes, as though she were enjoying some kind of private joke. I was beginning to realize that there was a much different and distinctly inscrutable woman beneath the fun-loving, outrageous girl that had dragged me from my inexorably decaying orbit.

Finally she relented somewhat. “I promise that this evening I’ll fill you in on everything, and I mean *everything*. Deal?” (She proved to be as good as her word on that one, though as it happens not quite in the way she planned.)

I decided that was the best offer I’d get, and let the subject drop. Along the way we talked about anything and everything else. Soon we were passing the cement plants in Victorville, followed a half-hour later by the immense rail yards in Barstow. “We’re making good time,” she commented.

“We ought to be,” I remarked sourly. “I don’t think we’ve been down to the speed limit for at least the past hour.”

She laughed. “This is pretty conservative driving for me. I don’t want to risk getting another speeding ticket today, of all days.” I wasn’t quite sure I understood just how consistently exceeding the limit by twenty miles per hour was going to serve that end, but decided to let it stand, especially as we were still routinely being passed by everything from pickups to BMWs in their rush to discard cash in Las Vegas.

We had been on the road for several hours, driving further and further into the desert, when we pulled off the Interstate onto a paved side road and continued north for another forty-five minutes or so, finally turning again onto a nearly invisible dirt track towards some rugged rocky hills. The path led into a narrow canyon, winding and climbing gently and eventually opening onto a small flat clearing, perhaps an acre in size. At the far end, nestled against sheer rock cliffs, was a good-sized two-story house.

As we pulled up to the dwelling in the gathering dusk, Kiri pressed a button on the dashboard and a large garage door opened for us, revealing a conventional-looking motor home, which we pulled alongside. Neatly stenciled on its side was the word "*Futaba*."

"You're kidding," I observed skeptically, remembering all too vividly the streak of dirt we'd just finished bouncing over. "We're really going to leave here in that?"

"You have no idea," Kiri murmured, closing the door behind us and shutting off the engine. "Let's transfer our stuff and then get something to eat. Let me do the packing, okay?" We thus divided the labor, with me obediently lugging stuff from her vehicle and depositing it at the side door of the RV, while she moved it to somewhere in the back.

It took us only a few minutes, what with everything being already neatly boxed, and it was just growing dark outside as she slammed shut the vehicle's door and led me into the house. On the way I noticed something glinting on the concrete floor and stooped to pick it up. It was a tiny rounded gold object with a hole in the center. Absently stuffing it into a pocket of my jeans, I promptly forgot about it.

Kiri threw together some sandwiches as I wandered around, rather surprised at the lack of furnishings present. But there wasn't much time to wonder, as a cheery "Supper's ready!" sounded from the kitchen and we sat down anticipating a leisurely, if skimpy, meal.

And then the doorbell rang.



“That’s odd,” Kiri said, a quizzical look on her face. Something about her expression made me distinctly uneasy. She got up from the table and instead of answering the door pressed a switch on the wall. A small panel slid back, revealing a television screen and some high-tech controls that looked oddly out of place in the fifties-style house. She did something with the controls and the screen lit up with a crisp outside view of the house and front door, displayed in full color as if in broad daylight.

Standing before the door was a uniformed policeman with a notably unpleasant face; in the background were several other figures clustered around a patrol car, its blue lights flashing. “Uh, Kiri?” I said in alarm. “Just how many speeding tickets have you accumulated, anyway?”

“Not that many,” she snapped as she entered a command into a keypad. Red flashing rectangles appeared around each of the uniformed figures except for the officer at the door; his was yellow.

“Omigod,” she said, and something in her voice made my hair stand on end. She pressed another button and closed the panel as the doorbell rang again, more insistently this time. “We’ve got to go.”

“What!?” I exclaimed in dismay. “Kiri, those are police. You can’t be serious.” Urgently grabbing my wrist, she pulled me upstairs to a darkened room facing the driveway, and fumbling in a drawer pulled out a pair of binoculars.

“Use these,” she said, pointing through the window at the shadowy figures below by the patrol car. I took the binoculars and saw nothing. “Here,” she said, pressing a button on the side. Suddenly I was looking out at the driveway in what appeared to be full daylight; there was a small red square in the center of the field. Cool, I thought.

“Center one of the figures in the red square,” she continued, “then press this button,” guiding one of my fingers to a small projection. I somehow sensed she was making a supreme effort to keep her voice steady. “Then zoom with this ring.” I did as she said and then I felt my own blood run cold.

What I saw was no human face. Under the police cap was a

nightmare with a ragged gap where a nose should be, two tiny wide-set eyes, and a *third eye* in the center of the forehead. There seemed to be a dim orange glow coming from the extra eye. I suddenly felt as though I had stepped out of *Leave it to Beaver* into a sci-fi horror flick.

Something else looked wrong as well, but it took me a moment to place it. “Why are their uniforms damp?” I said finally. “In fact, they’re soaking wet.”

“That’s what’s left of the previous owners,” was the horrifying response, and now her voice shook noticeably. “Come on, we have to leave *now!*”

I was no longer inclined to argue. We dashed down the steps to the garage, and as Kiri flipped on the light she shouted “*Futaba* transform: starship!” The RV’s metal exterior suddenly liquefied and ran like water before my eyes, reforming into an object resembling a giant glass bullet lying on its side, with a steel rear panel and a narrow metallic floor running along the length of the tube. There were four seats near the front and various unfamiliar shapes of metal and glass between the floor and the rounded bottom of the thing. “What the hell?” I gasped.

A moment later the house shook from a loud explosion. “*Futaba*: portal,” said Kiri urgently, and a round opening formed near the front as a ramp extruded itself from the opening to the floor. “Hurry!” she gasped, dragging me up the ramp, “the stasis barrier I set up is only going to hold for a few minutes longer.” Another blast rocked the house. More or less in shock, I allowed myself to be shoved into one of the two front seats as Kiri buckled some kind of harness around me and then did likewise to herself.

“Hang on,” she shouted, and this time I swear I detected a definite note of glee in her voice. And then, the strange craft still horizontal, we lifted *straight up*, right through the upper floor and roof over the garage as if they were made of cardboard, with shattered studs and drywall cascading off the transparent walls of the craft with a deafening clatter. As we cleared the ruins of the garage Kiri manipulated the controls in front of her and we abruptly lurched forward toward the cliffs on the other side of the clearing.

There was a brilliant green flash as something hit the vehicle and for a moment sky, mountains and clearing spun around us crazily, followed by jagged rocks looming directly ahead. An instant later I was shoved deep into the seat, gasping for breath, as the nose rose sharply and we shot almost vertically into the sky. Then the ground was receding from us at an incredible rate.

After a few seconds I got up the courage to turn my head slightly.

The effect of the glass walls on all sides was dizzying, like flying unaided. I felt queasy for a moment, then instantly forgot about it as several bright green streaks flashed alongside us, apparently missing by only a few feet. “Alright you sons of bitches,” she snapped in her best Hollywood style, “we’re clear now and you’re toast. Close your eyes,” she said sharply to me, and as I involuntarily complied a brilliant flash echoed and reechoed inside my skull. Reopening them, I looked around wildly, or tried to. It was difficult to move against the acceleration.

“Down there,” she said, pointing, and I managed to turn my head far enough to look back several miles at a huge and growing fireball where the house had been a moment before. She laughed gleefully. “I’d love to see how FRMAC* explains this one.”

I digested that for a few moments as the acceleration eased slightly.

“Kiri!? That was a *nuke*!?!?”

“Oh, just a little one. Maybe 1 kiloton. Very clean,” she added. “Don’t worry, I scanned the area when I saw who was visiting us. No innocent bystanders. Honest.” She seemed embarrassed. I shook my head in disbelief as we climbed in silence for a few more minutes. At the moment I was too stunned to try sort out the million questions that were crowding at me from all directions.

Perhaps five minutes total had elapsed when Kiri touched a symbol on her panel and the acceleration eased off to a moderate climb. Looking down through the glass (or was it crystal?) I could see the lights of distant cities appearing across the landscape. The horizon was beginning to acquire a distinct curvature. In spite of myself, I felt unbelievably exhilarated.

“You really aren’t from around here, are you?” I said finally. She shook her head, intent on the controls before her. “So, is this a kidnapping, or what?” I added, a bit hesitantly. Then, apparently satisfied with something, she turned to me and said very seriously, “You told me you were willing to leave this place for good. Last chance. Did you really mean it?”

The force pressing me into the chair eased further, then stopped. I could no longer even tell if we were moving. The thin blue edge of the atmosphere was clearly visible along the now pronouncedly curved horizon. I guessed we were several hundred miles up.

“I’m really sorry,” she added apologetically. “I had planned to explain things before we ever left the ground. I had no idea this was

* Federal Radiological Monitoring and Assessment Center.—*Ed.*

going to happen. Believe me, I wouldn't have ever intentionally put you in danger like that without your okay." With the last statement her voice shook slightly.

For the first time it really hit me. I was Leaving, with a Capital L. Leaving Cubicle 49, leaving a life with no evident options, apparently leaving the whole damn planet for a future I knew absolutely nothing about. I thought it over for a few more seconds, and then I thought of the firecracker sitting beside me. This woman was undeniably loony, I realized, and I loved her for it. I looked at her and silently nodded. Relief lit up her face and she grinned in anticipation.

"Are you sure you don't want to know anything more before you make up your mind?" she said mischievously.

"I'll go anywhere you go," I said without further hesitation, adding with some asperity, "But I most certainly *do* expect some explanations!"

"You're on, then. We're clear of the atmosphere. Get ready for the ride of your life." She punched a fat orange button on her panel. "Here we go," and for just an instant I felt a slight lurch, then caught my breath as the faintly curved landscape below dropped away into a greenish-blue globe and within a few seconds shrank into the star-studded cosmos at a breathtaking rate. "Say hi to Mister Moon," she added gleefully, and I started involuntarily as I glanced forward and saw a twice-normal size moon, seemingly dead ahead, expanding *very* fast. Within seconds it grew to fill our entire field of view as we veered just enough at the last instant to skim the nearly airless surface by a few miles, then it too was receding into the distance. I had never ridden a cosmic roller-coaster before, and I suspect I must have turned a bit green.

"Sorry I can't give you a tour of the outer planets as well," she said, eyeing my dangling jaw, "but unfortunately they're aligned in all the wrong places and it would take us several hundred million miles out of our way. Hope you don't mind?" I just shook my head and continued to gape. Turning back to her panel, she pressed another button, blue this time, and for a moment the universe around us transformed into a brilliant white nothingness studded with black stars, growing in luminosity until I had to shut my eyes. When I opened them again (and shook off the afterimages) space had returned to normal—except that I could see the stars slowly moving against each other.

Kiri slumped back in her seat. She suddenly looked very tired, I realized. "All right, Will, now we have quite a few reasonably uneventful hours ahead of us. I suppose it's time I explained a few

things.”

“I would be grateful,” I answered dryly, eyeing the shifting stars in awe. “But first, is there, er, a bathroom in here?”

Kiri pointed to the door in the metallic rear wall of the craft and showed me how to unstrap myself from the seat, and I stumbled back on distinctly wobbly legs. Between the nearly invisible walls on all sides and the narrow floor panel it felt like walking around on top of a skyscraper construction site. I was about to pull open the handle when it hit me. “Kiri!? What are you trying to do to me? There’s *space* out there!” Sighing, she unstrapped herself and, stalking past me, flung open the door.

Instead of being sucked into the deadly vacuum of space I found myself staring down the longest corridor I had ever seen, with openings and doors on both sides, the whole softly illuminated with some kind of indirect lighting. It had to be the length of a football field or more. “Third door on the left,” called Kiri, who had returned to her seat, as I gingerly stepped through the doorway. Along the way I saw a comfortable lounge or living room and what appeared to be a kitchen of sorts through other open doorways.

I found my way back to the cockpit (as it apparently was) and threw myself wearily down on my seat. I didn’t even try to ask about the luxury hotel we seemed to be carrying along with us. Kiri was watching me intently with an odd expression on her face. “All right,” I said finally. “I thought I knew you. Apparently I’m just a babe in the woods.” I paused again, wondering where to start. “Who are you?” I said at last.

She got up from her seat and stared out at the stars for several minutes as I sat silently waiting. When she turned to face me, her face was streaked with tears. “Come on,” she said in a flat voice, “the ship will run itself for a while.” She strode back through the doorway into the long hall and motioned toward the lounge I had seen earlier. “Wait for me there. When I get back I promise you’ll get the answers you deserve.” She disappeared into one of the other doorways, closing the door behind her.

I settled myself uneasily on an otherwise comfortable sofa and waited for what seemed like hours, although it was actually more like ten minutes. To my surprise, I found myself speculating more on why she was so visibly upset than on how I had somehow managed to end up on a spaceship apparently exceeding light speed. I finally stood up and had begun pacing about, admiring the remarkable paintings and antique furniture scattered around the room, when she reappeared.

For a moment I was speechless. Her hair, slightly wet, was the same unruly mane as always, but the color! It was now a strong saturated red (and I mean a true deep crimson, not the straw-orange usually meant when one says “red hair”), with noticeable violet highlights. “Why did you—” I began in surprise and then faltered, as she reached into an eye with each hand and pulled something out. A moment later I was looking into the largest, most startling pair of eyes I had ever seen. Not only were they at least twice the size of ordinary human eyes, but the irises were a brilliant emerald green and reminded me of a cat’s more than anything else, an effect not lessened by black pupils which were noticeably elongated vertically.

“This is the real me, Will,” she said softly. There was a slight quaver in her voice. For several seconds I just stared in amazement, trying unsuccessfully to speak, and then saw her eyes begin to brim over.

“I don’t care who or what you are; you’re still the woman I love,” I half-whispered, finally understanding. I took her in my arms and held her tightly, her face buried in my shoulder, and felt her shaking. “It’s okay, Kiri,” I reassured her. “I told you, I’ll go anywhere you do.”

“Sorry,” she mumbled sheepishly after a few moments, tilting her face up at me. “I suppose I must seem like a bit of a freak to you.”

“I think you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” I answered, and I meant it, too. It was as though her volatile personality, so unpredictable and full of life, finally had the right face matched up with it. We sat down together on the sofa and she impulsively stretched out on her back with her head on my lap, her feet draped over the other end, as we had done so many times watching television together the past few months.

She was looking up at me with half-open eyes as I stroked her astonishing mane when I suddenly realized why they had always seemed so odd to me. “Do you have any idea how hard it is remembering to keep your eyes partly closed all the time?” she murmured with a wry smile, as if reading my thoughts. I thought of the pale-blue, almost expressionless eyes that had seemed so out of place, and marveled at my blindness. Oh, Kiri! Never a dull moment! Nor would there ever be...

For several minutes neither of us made any effort to continue. I know I was welcoming the brief respite from the barrage of surprises I had just experienced, and I suspected Kiri needed some time to pull herself together also. Finally, at last, she broke the spell.

“Well?” she asked. “Are you ready for this?”

But first I had to ask the question that had been increasingly in the forefront of my mind ever since our unexpected flight into space. “Just tell me one thing, Kiri, before you start,” I said. “Out of six billion people on Planet Earth, why choose me? Was it an accident? Or something else?”

She closed her eyes for a few moments. I had an uneasy feeling that I was about to get another “surprise.” Finally she spoke, her eyes still closed.

“Because, Will Barton, thirty years ago it was I who left you there.”



I was still reeling from that simple statement when something in my mind finally clicked into place and I felt a chill go down my spine. “You’re the girl in the picture,” I whispered.

With a fluid motion she rolled herself off the sofa and me and walked over to a magnificent old oak desk in one corner. She rummaged in a drawer for a moment and pulled out a flat sheet which she handed to me as she sat down alongside. I found myself staring again at the half-remembered relic from my youth. It was a true 3D photograph; held in my hands was a window into another world long gone. I shivered involuntarily at the resonances I felt.

“Ooh,” said Kiri approvingly. “Goosebumps.”

There, third from the left in the front row, was a crimson-haired girl with giant green eyes who was unmistakably Kiri, though possibly a half-dozen years younger. Next to her was a boy of about fourteen with straight, solid black hair and a cheerful, open face. Several other children were on either side. In the back row were the adults I remembered, apparently in their thirties, and a much older woman who I recognized as Aunt Dory. They were all posed on the steps of an impossibly ornate building of rather exotic design. Kiri pointed to the adults.

“Those were your parents,” she said softly. She pointed to the boy next to her. “And that was their son, Prince Wilorian. That boy is you, Will.” I started to say something, but she gently placed a finger on my lips. “I think we need to start at the beginning.”

“My real name is Romikor Mikiria; Romikor is my family name. Our home world is called Deshtiris, which is a planet of the star Exor, about thirty-five light-years from Earth. You know it by another name, of course. Your parents were the Emperor and Empress of Deshtiris; that’s the royal palace you see in the background of the picture. Your aunt, whose real name was Darita, was one of their oldest and most loyal retainers.”

“My own father was Romikor Tenako. At that time he was court physician to the royal family as well as a renowned researcher in his

own right. He and his wife were on close terms with your parents, as were most of the palace household. It was all one happy family,” she added bitterly.

“Then something terrible happened and things began to come apart. My parents had a daughter, who they adored. One day she was killed in an accident, the kind of very stupid and unnecessary accident that children are usually killed in, and it did something to my father. People told me later that he became secretive, disappearing into his research facilities for long periods of time. He broke off most social contacts, and even avoided your parents, his closest friends for so many years. My mother was worried, then terrified, but could do nothing.”

“And then I was born, and it became evident that he had genetically modified me during the first few weeks of the pregnancy. Apparently in a misguided attempt to protect me from the kind of random accident that cost him his first daughter, he had ‘improved’ my survivability by giving me various physical enhancements, such as increased agility and strength. The eyes and hair were unanticipated side effects.”

“All of this was a serious violation of our science statutes, and your father—the Emperor—had no alternative but to remove him from his post and let the courts handle the case. He wound up imprisoned for a brief term, and my mother, who was already in a state of emotional shock, committed suicide over the disgrace. That was forty-six years ago.”

I stared at her. “Forty-six—” I choked. “How—” To her credit, she ignored me and continued.

“Your parents took me in and raised me as if I were their own, and the two of us grew up together for the next sixteen years. My father was released at the end of his sentence but instead of returning to me he disappeared without a trace. What has been heard of him since are only rumors, and of a dark and terrifying kind.”

She paused for a few moments, and I said nothing. I realized that she had needed to tell me this as much as I had wanted to hear it. Finally she continued.

“Before I come to the part of this story that is hardest for me to tell, I have to fill you in on some of our own history. You probably wonder how inhabitants of another planet thirty-five light-years from Earth can be identical to humans. The answer is simple: they are humans, and they came from Earth, but not of their own free will.”

“There is another star system, also thirty-five light-years from the Exor system, called Bashti. Circling it is the planet Qozernon. Like

Deshtiris, it has a climate and atmosphere very similar to Earth's; in fact, Deshtiris and Qozernon are sometimes referred to as the Twin Planets in spite of the vast distance between them. Thousands of years ago, both of these systems were ruled by an alien race called the Virrin. Apparently the Virrin chose to 'borrow' a large number of humans from Earth at that time and settled both planets with them. They were treated well, but nonetheless were slaves."

"Then one day the Virrin simply left. They shut down their equipment, destroyed their technology and records, boarded their ships and departed. One hundred and twenty-three years later a supernova was seen in the southwestern quadrant of the evening sky. Supposedly no one knows what happened, but the Virrin have never returned. Now free, humans have prospered on both planets, eventually rediscovering the technology for interstellar space travel and trading peacefully with each other for centuries. All of this was developed by humans on their own; no usable trace of Virrin technology has ever been found."

"Now that's out of the way, so let's continue. Sixteen years after you and I were born, everything suddenly went very wrong. A movement seemed to spring up out of nowhere, calling itself the Brizal party, led by a previously unknown man by the name of Krigghin Teyn. It specialized in recruiting people who by their own choice had no future: school dropouts, malcontents who couldn't hold down steady jobs, and the like. But somehow it also had tremendous financial resources, and it grew far faster than anyone expected until it was too late."

"One day our lives were routine, sun-soaked, filled with love. The next day your parents were dead and I fled Deshtiris with you and the retainer Darita just ahead of a Brizal mob. I had been building a ship as a hobby, an early predecessor of this one, and fortunately it worked when it had to and we managed to escape to the Bashti system, to Qozernon. We had been there for about a week with the Qozernan ambassador's family when one night Brizal assassins came within inches of killing you. We both realized that they would never rest as long as a potential heir to the throne still lived."

"We talked about it for several days and nights, and we both finally concluded that there was only one solution. You had to be hidden until there was hope of restoring things to their former state. Our worlds have always kept a close watch on Earth, which we regard as a kind of parent planet, and we had the idea of hiding you there as an ordinary Earthling. But to do that it was necessary to disguise you so well that the Brizali would have no way to find you." She stopped

again, and I saw that her eyes were glistening.

“Using medical technology originally developed for treating mental disorders, I suppressed—or removed—your memories, so that you couldn’t accidentally give yourself away. I can’t tell you how hard that was for me, Will, and only because you insisted that it was the only possible way could I compel myself to operate the device.” She stopped again for several seconds before she forced herself to continue. “I loved you, and I had to *erase* you,” she finally said in a strangled voice. “*I deleted you like a goddam computer file.*” At that point her self control gave way and she put her head in her hands, sobbing uncontrollably. I could only put my arm around her and hold her, feeling utterly helpless, until the storm passed.

“Do you understand now?” she said finally, looking up at me. “I don’t know if it’s you I love or the person I knew thirty years ago. That person is gone, and I’m so afraid that I’m just using you as a substitute for someone who no longer exists.”

I ran a hand through her hair. “I don’t care who you love, Kiri. I love you, and I’ll wait as long as I have to for you to decide what you want.” She sniffled and wiped her eyes.

“Will my memories ever return?” I asked gingerly, receiving a helpless shrug in return.

“I don’t know. Our technology isn’t advanced enough yet for that. We can suppress memories, but getting them back is still beyond us. Maybe they will, maybe they won’t.” She stared at the floor.

“There was no other way, Kiri,” I said quietly. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know that,” she answered sadly. “It still hurts like hell, though.” For a while she was silent.

“Once on Earth,” she finally continued, “I set you and Darita up in a house of your own and provided her with plenty of cash. Later, when you were old enough to start poking around, I hacked up the necessary computer records so that you’d appear to have a past but wouldn’t learn too much about it.” I smiled ruefully as I thought of the ingenious labyrinth she had devised for anyone trying to investigate too far.

“Darita already knew English, so after staying with her for a few months to make arrangements I headed back to Qozernon. Since then I’ve returned every few years to make sure you were doing okay. Do you remember a student who took a semester of math with you in your junior year, by the way? Blonde hair, brown eyes, looked sort of like me? Attended a few concerts with you?” I nodded, recalling her vaguely. It was a long time ago. “Well, you’re talking to her right

now,” she said with a wan smile. For about the tenth time that day my jaw must have hit the floor with a thud.

“By the way,” she added, “Darita told me about you finding the picture. I chewed her out for it, of course, since she wasn’t supposed to have *anything* incriminating with her on Earth, but I realized then just how hard it must have been for her to be marooned on a strange world like that. I took the picture for safekeeping, but in return brought her back to Qozernon several times while you were away at summer camp and the like.”

“Once you graduated from high school, I started taking her back to Qozernon for weeks at a time, in fact. That was when you thought she was ‘traveling.’ I even offered to let her ‘die’ on Earth so that she could come back and stay with us permanently, but she insisted on returning periodically, just so that she could continue to see you once in a while. When she did finally die, it was on Earth, as you know yourself. She had told me previously that she preferred it that way. She was a very brave woman, Will. You owe her more than you can ever imagine.” We were both silent for a few minutes.

“Wait a minute,” I suddenly exclaimed. “Darita already knew *English*?”

“I told you that we’ve regarded Earth as a kind of parent planet for a long time,” she explained. “In fact, it’s not that unusual for some of us to drop in for a visit now and then. Your literature, arts, and to a lesser extent sciences are often very interesting. I can’t tell you how much entertainment value they sometimes have as well,” she added with a wry snicker.

“Like Brinkman’s super physics class?” I suggested. To my astonishment, she blushed beet red.

“Actually, he and I go back a long way,” she confessed after a moment’s embarrassed hesitation. “In fact, I almost got him fired the first time I took his graduate seminar. Did you ever hear how he once got into trouble for, uh, well, sleeping with one of his students?”

I thought about it for a moment. “I think there was something back in the late seventies I heard about once.” Those were innocent times, I reflected; these days he had a reputation for unashamedly chasing anything female. Then I did a double-take. “That was *you*?”

She looked sheepish. “I was young and impulsive then” (“then” seemed a singularly inappropriate word, I thought to myself), “and in those days he was rather a dashing young rake. We hit it off really well. We got careless and were seen out together more than we should have, and word got around that we were sleeping together. I have a feeling he

did some bragging, too. Anyway, he nearly got canned and we had to cool it, but since then I've gone back and signed up for his seminar again about every six or seven years, and no one's ever caught on. All I had to do was use a different name and make sure my hair was a new color each time," she finished derisively.

"Are you— still—" I said stupidly. She glared at me in return.

"Don't be a jerk. All we exchange any more are equations. He knows who I am and enjoys working with someone who isn't just trying to build a lucrative career doing DoD research work. I've even taken him up in the *Futaba*. Remember his famous submeson hyperstring breakthrough? Guess where that came from?"

"You don't mean Brinkman's theories actually came from you?" I asked skeptically.

"Well, I think it was more like a two way street," was her perfectly serious answer. "I've helped him get past some roadblocks, and in turn he's provided some real insights that our own theoreticians hadn't resolved. He has quite a remarkable mind, really. At least twice he's agreed to suppress a major discovery after I showed him what the results had been on our own world. He developed some equations once that made my hair stand on end. I realized on looking them over that if anyone ever tried to verify them experimentally they'd open a space-time rift that would swallow up half your solar system. He was very glad I caught that one."

"I take it you passed the course," I said dryly.



I raised another question that had been nagging at me during the whole tale. “Who were those creatures that appeared at your house this evening?” I asked. “The one at the front door looked human, but the others—” and I shivered. “What would they have done with us?”

“They’d have turned us into twin puddles of tangerine syrup,” she answered. Somehow the flippancy rendered it even more horrifying. “The one at the front door was a Brizal squad commander of particularly evil reputation. The others were creatures that have begun appearing on Deshtiris only within the past fifteen years. One rumor has it that they are creations of my father, Tenako. The eye in the forehead has the power to emit a certain wavelength of light. On either side of the eye are small organs which apparently emit ultrasonic sound waves. In some way we don’t understand, the combination of the two instantly liquefies organic matter. They can reduce a living, breathing human being to a pool of yellow-orange slime in a second or two.”

She shuddered involuntarily. “We call them Liquidators; you can consider it a bit of black humor. Usually they aren’t seen outside of Deshtiris, although a few have been discovered on Qozernon, probably on some kind of assassination mission, and killed.”

“What I don’t understand,” she said almost to herself, “is how they knew how to find me. Only a few people on Qozernon knew where I was.” A sudden look of worry appeared on her face, and she jumped up and strode back through the doorway to the cockpit. A few touches on the controls brought up a screen that seemed suspended in midair in front of her, and moments later a face appeared on the screen. It was the face of a middle-aged woman, and one which I found myself instinctively liking without quite knowing why.

“Gelhi,” demanded Kiri (she pronounced it “jelly,” by the way), “is everything all right back there? We got off Earth just ahead of a pack of Liquidators.”

Gelhi (I found out later that her real name was Gelhinda) looked suitably alarmed. “We’re all fine here. Senara’s here with me and I was just on the telecom with Zee. Are you all right? And is *he* with you?”

From the way she said it, I guessed she must be referring to me. Kiri reassured her and gave a brief summary of our hasty departure, and promised we'd be there for supper the next evening before she broke the connection. Obviously relieved, she returned to the living quarters with me in tow. On the way she stopped in the kitchen area and poured a pair of mild drinks from a well-furnished bar.

"By the way," I said as we sat back down, "would you please explain where this flying hotel came from? I know this wasn't attached to the *Futaba* when we took off."

"Actually," she said, "this," and she gestured vaguely at the walls around us, "never goes anywhere. It exists in a separate space/time continuum parallel to ours, accessible via an artificially generated defect in—," then, seeing my utterly blank look, she stopped. "Oh, hell," she said in a resigned tone. "Let's just say it's located in subspace. There's really no such thing as subspace, but the term will do just fine. Consider it a technobabble placebo if you want. Anyway, the door from the *Futaba* isn't an opening, it's a gateway. No matter where the ship is, walking through that gateway will put you into the living quarters. That way I don't have to worry about finding room to park it when I land."

"I don't think you noticed," she went on, "but when we were unloading our stuff from the SUV to the *Futaba*, I was actually carrying it through the back and into these living quarters. Our stuff is safely stashed in one of these rooms, so we didn't really lose anything except our sandwiches. Next question?" she finished grandly.

I shook my head and gulped the rest of my drink. "I think I've probably had about all I can handle for one day."

I hesitated for a moment. "I still can't believe that you're the green-eyed girl I've wondered about all those years," I said finally. "I feel as if I've been watching the pieces of my life fall together for the past hour. It's like an incredible dream." I suddenly remembered the one I'd had a few weeks ago, and felt a chill go down my spine again.

"More than you even now realize, Will," Kiri said slowly. She rummaged again in the drawer that had produced the eerie photograph and pulled out another, an ordinary black and white print, the kind that you paste into a photo album. She handed it to me. "Remember her?" she asked, a bit sadly.

For several seconds I stared uncomprehendingly at the picture. "It's Aunt Mickey," I heard myself say even as the truth sank in. When I finally dared look up it was my turn to be unashamedly crying. "You," I finally managed, fighting vocal cords that seemed to have

ceased taking orders from my brain. “It was you...”

“It was me, Will,” she said very quietly. “Please forgive me. She was so important to you, and I didn’t understand. It’s so hard to know, sometimes.” I remembered again that night when I saw Kiri through her living room window, crying.

“It’s okay,” I said finally. “She’s one of my happiest memories, you know. Besides, it looks like she’s back,” and I managed to summon up a feeble grin.

The black and white photograph still in my hand set off another train of associations, jolting me out of my emotional wallow. I again took up the 3D photograph from my youth from a nearby table and stared closely at it, suddenly mystified. “Kiri, if these are my parents,” I asked, pointing at the couple in question, “then just whose pictures have I had on my dresser for the past thirty years? These people don’t look anything like them.” The photographs had been there for as long as I could remember. Kiri’s face turned a distinct shade of pink, and I experienced a sudden sinking feeling.

“Ummm, well, I was really hoping you weren’t going to ask that,” she said reluctantly. Seeing that I wasn’t going to let her off the hook, she finally admitted the awful truth. “I picked them out of a dumpster.”

“A dumpster,” I said.

“Behind a photographer’s studio,” she said.

“A photographer’s studio,” I said.

“As to who they were,” she finished, “your guess is as good as mine.”

“You’re kidding,” I said. “You are. Aren’t you?”

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Kiri ventured, deftly changing the subject while doing her best to sound casual, but warily watching my reaction. “Before I left you on Earth I treated you with a special drug that altered your metabolism, so that you’d appear to age at the same speed as other humans. You know, skin losing elasticity, failure to process fats properly, hair greying, that sort of thing. The difference is that in your case it’s totally reversible. I’ve been slowly giving you a little of the antidote over time, so if you’ve noticed you’re feeling better lately that’s part of the reason why. Of course, getting you off your lazy ass and making you exercise didn’t hurt either,” she added rather snidely.

I suppose I should have been annoyed at being used as a laboratory rat without my consent, but then how many middle-aged men are going to complain on being told they’ve been secretly drenched in the Fountain of Youth? “If you like, I can give you the necessary dose to finish the process this evening while you sleep,” she added cautiously.

“What the hell,” I said after a few femtoseconds of considered meditation, “let’s go for the whole enchilada,” and so she gave me a small vial of clear tasteless liquid to drink and advised me to get to sleep as soon as I could, as the process could be a bit uncomfortable during waking hours.

I quickly felt myself becoming drowsy and was soon settled into one of the several bedrooms scattered along the immense living quarters of the ship. As Kiri finished tucking me in like a little child I remember asking, “If Deshtirans and Qozernans are humans from Earth, why do they—I mean we—” (this would take some getting used to, I thought vaguely) “—live so much longer?”

“Something the Virrin did to us that we still don’t understand,” she answered, and gave me a prolonged goodnight kiss. “See you in the morning.”

“A dumpster,” I mumbled to myself as I drifted off. “A photographer’s dumpster. Why not? I’m not surprised. Should I be surprised? No, of course not...”

That night I didn’t wake up once, but I did have a strange dream about dozens of glowing cats’ eyes surrounding me in the dark. Oddly, there was nothing frightening about the dream. Somehow they were the friendliest green eyes I had ever seen, and I felt safe with them around. Once it seemed that a bright light lit them all up, and I saw that they really were cats, and that they all had crimson-red fur with violet highlights.

The next morning I looked into a mirror and found a young man in his mid twenties with a cheery, open face staring back at me. Only the grey streak in the middle of my forehead remained. So this is Prince Wilorian, I thought to myself.

I found a set of clothes laid out for me on the dresser. In addition to some ordinary socks and underwear, they consisted of a fairly conventional set of light blue trousers, not quite like blue jeans but pretty similar, a black sleeveless shirt with some decorative green trim, and a pair of soft colorful leather-like boots that came halfway up my calves. The fit proved to be perfect, even the boots. What the heck, I decided, if I’m going to be a character out of a bad science fiction novel I might as well dress like one. Lost heir to the throne of Planet Deshtiris? Somebody needs to do some serious rewriting, I thought skeptically.

I found my way to the entrance to the living quarters, or gateway as Kiri had described it, and opened the door. In spite of my experiences yesterday I still recoiled at the feeling of stepping onto a

narrow plank jutting out into the vastness of space, an effect not eased by the continuous gentle movement of the stars. After taking a moment to fight off an attack of incipient dizziness, I inhaled deeply and headed gingerly to the front. A wild shock of deep red hair was visible over the back of one of the front seats, and as I called out a cheery good morning Kiri turned to face me with a tired grin.

Try as I might I couldn't help but be startled once again by the pair of oversized emerald eyes that greeted me, but for once I was apparently the bigger surprise, as she gasped and rose to her feet, then slowly looked me over from head to toe. "My god, Will," she said finally and then stopped, unable to continue.

"I think you need a hug," I said, and gave her a good squashing until she started giggling uncontrollably.

"Sorry," she finally gasped, "I guess we've both been getting a lot of shocks lately. Hey, you look pretty good in that outfit," she added. "Don't worry about your hair; it'll grow in black again over time."

"Actually, I'll sort of miss the grey streak," I said.

She was silent for a few moments. "You know, you really are the spitting image of Prince Wilorian."

"I am Prince Wilorian, even if I don't remember it, right?" I countered. "It'll take me some getting used to too, you know. It's like seeing myself twenty years ago, and that's a bit creepy."

I took a close look at her eyes and saw that the whites were noticeably bloodshot. "Kiri," I demanded, "did you sleep at all last night?"

Sheepishly she shook her head. "I tried," she admitted, "but ended up back here watching the stars. You can't begin to imagine—"

"Try me," I interrupted, "but first why don't you get some rest? How soon do you need to start piloting this thing again, anyway?"

"About six hours from now," she responded reluctantly, and so I quickly hustled her off to her own sleeping quarters and saw her safely tucked in despite her protests. "I'm really not that sleepy," she mumbled, and thirty seconds later she was dead to the universe.

I spent the next few hours wandering around the living quarters, poking into this and that room. In addition to four bedrooms and an equal number of bathrooms, there was the small kitchen, the lounge, a room full of what I took to be computer equipment, various storerooms, and what looked like (why not?) a small movie theater. There were many more rooms, but I quit exploring at that point. I got the definite impression that she was used to spending a lot of time here.

Shaking my head, I found my way back to the cockpit and ended

up following her example and watching the stars as they slowly slid by. Once the entire starfield shifted slightly and something large seemed to flash by, but so quickly that I had no way of telling what it might have been. A gas giant? Comet? Galaxy? “The *Futaba* automatically avoids large obstacles,” said a cheery voice behind me. “We could go right through an asteroid and never know it because we have negative mass when we’re traveling faster than light, but if we got too close to a major gravitational field it could still tear us and the ship apart.”

I looked up to find that a much refreshed Kiri had silently slipped in behind me. She slid into her seat and poked around the controls for a few minutes, then looked up in satisfaction. “Right on course,” she said. “Another three hours or so.”

I ran my fingers over the crystalline walls of the remarkable craft. “I was afraid that whatever they were shooting at us last night was going to crack this stuff,” I said. “What is it, anyway?”

She laughed. “We could hit a meteor head on at sub-light speed and it wouldn’t crack this. We’d be reduced to jelly by the sudden deceleration, but the walls would hold. It’s amorphous diamond, reinforced by a subatomic strong field, the same field that reforms the shape of the ship on command. State of the art, by the way,” she added proudly. “This ship is the only one of its kind.”

We continued in this vein as the hours passed, then a soft alarm sounded and a moment later the universe around us again turned inside out for a moment and deposited us back in conventional space, with stationary stars. “Almost there,” Kiri said with evident relief. “I once spent fifteen months in space alone. Never again,” she added vehemently. Ahead I saw an actual sun, for the first time since we’d left Earth. “Bashti,” she said.

Soon I felt a sensation of real motion again as the stars began rotating around us in unison, and before long a bluish-green globe was beginning to grow in our vision. Kiri took us in on a course that entered the upper atmosphere at a very shallow angle, and slowly we descended as we circled the planet. The only sign of our speed was a peculiar flickering glow around the front of the ship’s rounded nose. Shock waves, she explained. That part at least I understood. I suddenly realized that a degree in aerospace engineering probably wasn’t going to be worth an awful lot here.

Qozernon proved to look very much like Earth from space, and the impression was reinforced as we approached the surface. Mountains, deserts, mottled greenish areas of forests and fields, and of course lots of water were all in evidence. Eventually we were skimming a few

hundred feet over a rolling, treeless plain that reminded me of nothing quite so much as Nebraska. It was close to sunset, and the gentle hills were already half shrouded in dusk, the lit sides glowing a deep yellow-green in the reddening sunlight. Our speed slowed gracefully to a near crawl as the lights of a small group of buildings appeared in the distance, and moments later Kiri was gently settling the ship down on the front lawn of a sprawling two-story dwelling.

Three people were running out to greet us. One I recognized as the older woman Kiri had spoken to from the *Futaba*. The second was a tall golden-haired girl, apparently in her late teens; a third who I couldn't quite see in the failing light was following further back. As the *Futaba* created a doorway for us and extruded a ramp to the ground, Kiri adjusted a few last controls on the ship and the panels went dark. Our reception committee was already crowding up the ramp.

"Oh, Kiri, I'm so glad you're back safely," bubbled the woman whom Kiri had called Gelhi. "I was terribly worried when you told me what happened."

"I hope you put the precautions into effect that I asked you to," Kiri said as she stepped through the opening.

"I did," answered the woman, "but we haven't seen anyone strange in the area since—"

Just then I stepped through the doorway and everyone fell silent. Kiri made an extravagant flourish. "May I present Prince Wilorian of the House of Nendor," she announced grandly. From the looks of amazement on everyone's faces, it was obvious that she had just pulled off one of her little "surprises."

A very effective one, too, because the third person, who had quietly come up behind the others, stared at me as though she had seen a ghost, turned a deathly pale shade visible even in the dim light, and slid to the ground in a dead faint.

"Will," said Kiri ironically, "meet your little sister, the Princess Zyanita."

Part III: Qozernon



Eventually the unfortunate Zyanita was revived, apparently without lasting damage, and after profusely apologizing for her inappropriate behavior she allowed herself to be led off to bed. It was obvious that Kiri hadn't told everyone just who it was that she was bringing back, and allowing for the minor uproar that ensued it had to be said that it was a hugely successful surprise, and that a good time was had by all. Amkor Gelhinda, which I soon discovered was her full name, led us into the house to a well-furnished living room, and after providing a light supper plied us with various drinks of a potent sort. Although I usually detest parties, especially alcoholic ones, I had to admit that I quickly found myself liking these people a lot.

"This is my daughter Senara," announced Gelhinda, introducing me to the youngest member of the household.

"Please, mother, you know I prefer to be called Senaria," the girl protested haughtily, and as I took in the carefully tousled mop of hair I had to suppress a smile. There was clearly a bit of hero worship going on here, I thought to myself. "Senaria" turned out to be twenty-two and took full part in the festivities, growing rather "playful" with me as the evening wore on, much to Kiri's ill-concealed amusement.

I learned that Gelhinda was the widowed wife of the former Qozernan ambassador to Deshtiris, who had taken Kiri in when she (and apparently I) had originally fled from the Brizal takeover. Clearly a woman used to dealing diplomatically with many kinds of people, she was a charming host and a delightful conversationalist. As the evening wore on, her stories of some of the prominent personalities she had associated with acquired a distinctly scandalous edge, and some would no doubt have been mouth-watering morsels for a tabloid publication, had Qozernon had any.

Kiri regaled the group with the tale of how we met, and how she managed to get me back into shape, trained in swordsmanship, and even fluent in Deshtiran, all apparently without my suspecting a thing. I suppose I could have taken offense, but she did it in such a good-natured way that I was enjoying it as much as anyone else. "So you

didn't think *anything* was amiss?" asked Gelhinda in amazement. "Well, I did suspect that she was a dangerous lunatic, but that's about all," I responded to general merriment.

Things became somewhat quieter when all present demanded that Kiri tell about our close call leaving Earth. At mention of the Liquidators there was a momentary dead silence, broken only by Gelhinda draining her glass in a single gulp. The description of the green bolts shot at us on our way out revived conversation somewhat, as a general sense of indignation made itself felt.

"That's no better than firearms," snapped Senaria. "What barbarians!"

"I take it you don't use firearms, then," I said naïvely. The reaction was about the same as if I had loudly broken wind at a prayer meeting. It was gently explained to me that the use of weapons that killed at a distance was regarded as a shocking crime, akin to Earth attitudes towards poison gas in wartime. (I wisely decided not to mention Kiri's little booby trap.)

Gelhinda added, "Besides, we've seen just what a nightmare your indiscriminate use of firearms, or 'guns' as you call them, has created. Well, not yours personally, of course," she corrected herself. "But that anyone can kill anyone else they want without even getting near them—" She shuddered. I certainly wasn't about to disagree, and conversation quickly turned towards happier (and rowdier) topics.

"Are you really a prince?" asked a slightly smashed Senaria later in the evening, after crawling into my lap and wrapping her arms around my neck.

"Well, so I'm told," I answered, by this time myself sufficiently lubricated so as not to feel the embarrassment I probably should have. I added wickedly, "Of course, it's only on Kiri's word. For all I know the whole story could be a complete fabrication."

Senaria looked shocked. "Kiri would never lie about anything!" she protested indignantly, and threatened to choke me. I caught Kiri's eye, and she was clearly working very hard to keep from collapsing into hysterical laughter.

"I think you deserve a place all your own," I said, picking the girl up and depositing her bodily into a free armchair, where she remained pouting for the next few minutes after which she promptly fell asleep. "So have you ever told me a lie?" I asked Kiri mischievously.

"Only one that I can think of," she replied, rather to my surprise. "Allowing for all of my undoubted talents, I didn't really invent the Deshtiran language, you know." (More laughter.)

“And that’s the only one?” I said in disbelief.

“Actually, yes, at least as far as I know. I’d been racking my brains for days trying to figure out an innocent way to teach you your own tongue again, and had just about resigned myself to being your translator here on Qozernon for several months. Then you came up with that business about inventing an alphabet of your own, and it was just too good an opportunity to pass up. Sorry about that,” she finished unrepentantly.

I was to find out over time that it was true: she virtually never lied. On the other hand, if you didn’t ask her about something she didn’t think you needed to know, she was perfectly capable of quietly leaving you in the dark. The results could be rather startling at times, as I would discover on more than one occasion.

“So why are we all speaking Deshtiran, anyway?” I couldn’t resist asking. “Isn’t there a Qozernan language? After all, you were two separate planets for centuries.”

“There is,” Kiri observed, “but the only people who still use it are members of a religious cult that worships the Virrin as gods.” Gelhinda explained that for centuries Qozernon had been for all practical purposes a commercial colony of Deshtiris, which had been the first to develop interstellar travel, and Deshtiran had long since become the language of choice for everyday transactions.

Even Zyanita made an appearance later in the evening, apologizing again for her “rudeness” as she called it.

“It’s just that I had no idea,” she said softly. “I didn’t know you were even alive,” and it was evident that she was still a bit dazed. “How many years has it been, Wilorian? I just can’t believe it,” and that last phrase appeared in her conversation more than once for the rest of the evening. She was very different from the other women, with a somber manner and quiet voice. In appearance she was not unattractive, though lacking the vivacity of Kiri and the Amkors. In spite of her being several years younger than me, she looked considerably older and somewhat careworn. I thought I saw a kind of darkness lurking behind her sad brown eyes, which as it turned out was not far from the truth at all.



The next morning I was awakened by a horrendous pounding on my bedroom door, followed by Kiri's cheery bellow. "Breakfast in ten minutes," she announced. I looked around blearily at the fresh new set of unfamiliar surroundings, as memories of the previous evening's festivities slowly returned. Rather to my surprise I didn't have a detectable hangover, although I certainly felt foggier than usual. The room was a comfortable one, with plenty of light coming through ample windows, but without the familiar Earth antiques of the *Futaba's* living quarters.

Sadly, I had no memory of how I had gotten here from the living room. You're pathetic, I thought, and on your first night here, but as I recalled some of the other participants' behavior I didn't feel too guilty.

Someone (I assumed Kiri) had laid out another fresh set of clothes, and I found these to be less formal than those of the preceding day, being basically the equivalent of a light sleeveless T-shirt and cutoff jeans partly slit up the sides. (I was to discover that the planet's inhabitants take considerable pride in their bodies and don't as a general rule try to hide them much. I saw very few out-of-shape Qozernans.) I was especially beginning to like the boots, as the soft leather-like material apparently allowed air to circulate even while protecting my feet. Thus attired, I gingerly ventured out into the hallway in search of breakfast.

I found Kiri sitting at the kitchen table by herself, sipping tea. "I see you got through the night safely," she said with a grin. "Sen got you spooked a bit? You didn't actually have to lock your door, you know; she may get horny when she's plastered but she's really not a rapist." I thought about that. I did have to unlock the door on my way out, I remembered, and reddened.

"Wait a minute," I said indignantly after a moment's thought, "so you tried my door last night?"

"Trust me," she laughed, "I've lived here long enough that if I'd wanted in that ancient lock wouldn't have stopped me. I think she likes you," she added wickedly. I thought of Senaria's arms wrapped around my neck and had to agree. "I was half-expecting you two to head for a

bedroom the way things were going.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” I protested. “You know quite well that you’re the only one I’ll drag off to my cave, and only when you give the word. Besides, it’s bad enough getting tanked at a new host’s home the first night, but seducing her daughter—or vice-versa—would probably have gotten mama after me with a meat ax or broadsword or whatever the weapon of choice is around here.”

Kiri grinned again. “She would more likely have sent you two off with her blessings. You’re not on Earth anymore, you know; sex customs here are a bit different.”

“And you?” I said.

“I’d have twisted your head off,” she responded cheerfully. “I said sex customs were different here. Human nature isn’t.”

She sighed. “I envy you, you know. One of my ‘enhancements’ is a much higher tolerance for alcohol. I wouldn’t mind being able to dump my inhibitions once in a while the way all of you can. I’d probably kill myself with ethanol poisoning before I’d succeed in getting drunk.” I shuddered inwardly; somehow I didn’t think the universe could survive an uninhibited Kiri.

“Sen’s really a very sweet girl when she’s sober, which is almost all the time, so don’t go treating her like a vamp. I’d trust her with my life,” she added seriously. “She’s also much brighter than she might have seemed last night. She’s just—let’s say unfocused. All thrust and no vector. And watches way too much television.” I wondered silently if Qozernan TV was any better than the U.S. product. “You’ve probably noticed that she tries to ape me a bit. A few years ago she had a terrible crush on me, which took her a while to get over.”

“A crush?” I echoed.

“Well, a bit more,” Kiri answered thoughtfully. “She told me she was in love with me and wanted to sleep with me. I didn’t have a problem with her feeling that way, but I do prefer men, so she was really unhappy for a while. Now she’s got a new unrequited thing for an older man, a government agent Zee—that’s Zyanita—works with, so she’s been kind of unfortunate in her choices. I hope she comes up with someone practical one of these days,” she mused.

“Where is everybody, anyway?” I asked, unsuccessfully trying to digest all this.

“Oh, Gelhi and Sen went into town—a little village nearby called Nedro—to do some shopping, and Zee’s gone back to the capital. Want to go for a ride?”

“First I want some breakfast,” I said. “What’s to eat around here?”

A little later we stepped outdoors. The night before I had been a bit surprised at Kiri's decision to set down in the middle of the front lawn, envisioning severe damage to the landscaping, but in the morning sun I saw that the ship actually hovered several inches above the ground. Off to one side was a garage, but with no driveway. "Aren't we taking the *Futaba*?" I asked as we headed for the garage.

Kiri snorted. "A state of the art starship to take a scenic drive? Hardly."

The garage door opened at a voice command to reveal a small four-seater vehicle with an open top, also floating a few inches above the ground. It had no wheels. More to my surprise, the vehicle had no steering wheel. "Hasn't the fatality rate on your highways taught you anything?" she grinned. "Driving's a little too critical to be left to humans." Once we were seated, she keyed in a few commands and the vehicle gently glided toward a smooth, two-lane road that wound over the rolling terrain. As we reached the pavement the vehicle turned to point straight along the highway and a moment later was accelerating to somewhere around fifty miles per hour.

As we sped along Kiri explained that the highways on Qozernon aren't actually built to handle traffic but are simply place markers. The real highway as seen by the vehicle was a pair of regularly dashed yellow and green lines on either edge of the roadway. Optical sensors in the vehicle used the lines to determine speed and position. Other information was also coded into the length of the lines and gaps (somewhat like a barcode, if I understood it correctly), and once one entered a destination into the vehicle's computer it took over the job of steering, maintaining speed, etc. One could, however, choose the general speed desired, within reasonable limits.

"I would have thought that some kind of radio guided system would be more efficient," I commented. Somehow a pair of painted lines seemed awfully primitive.

"Actually, no," she explained. "Radio's too susceptible to interference. And these lines are infrared reflective, so they're just as easy for the car's optical sensors to see at night as in daylight." Collision avoidance was handled electronically, however, with a type of radar keeping track of oncoming traffic and mutually negotiating non-conflicting courses for the vehicles involved. If the electronics on a vehicle failed, it had the same effect as a flat tire would on Earth: the vehicle was disabled. "It beats having a renegade car on the road," she added.

"If too many vehicles come into range, everyone slows down so

that you don't wind up in a situation with too many variables for the built-in computers to manage. It doesn't happen very often, though." I thought about how Earth's road warriors would enjoy a system like this and had to suppress a snicker.

Once a much slower vehicle appeared in front of us, and our own simply rose an additional fifteen feet or so into the air and passed directly over it. I glanced down at the occupant and discovered that apparently there are some constants that can be relied upon everywhere in the universe. "He was wearing a hat," I marveled.

"Huh?" Kiri grunted uncomprehendingly.

"Thirty-five light-years from Earth and it even works here," I appended, not very helpfully. She just shook her head; there were times when she apparently concluded that she was better off not knowing what I was talking about.

We had been traveling for about ten minutes, and I had been so fascinated by the mechanics of our locomotion, that it only now occurred to me to ask where we were going. "I want to show you one of the glories of this planet," she answered, and of course wouldn't give me anything further. "Just wait and see. It'll be worth it, I promise." By now I was getting more or less used to her little ways and dropped the subject, somewhat to her surprise.

"So what else would you like to know?" Kiri said, adding grandly, "Ask and it shall be revealed."

"Sister," I said.

"Oh, Zyanita." Kiri knitted her brow for a moment. "That's another sad story. You've noticed by now that there are a lot of them. Yes, she's your younger sister by three years. When the palace fell, and we knew we had to get out, we went looking for her after finding your parents..." and she hesitated for a moment. "There was no sign of her, and very little time. I had to make a choice, and I did. For all I knew she had been killed as well. You were hysterical at leaving her behind, and I had to, er, render you unconscious to get us out of there in time." She reddened slightly. I instinctively rubbed my jaw, and tried to imagine her belting me one. I decided it was a thought better left undisturbed.

"About six years later Masakor Lev, the government agent I mentioned earlier, told me that a woman in a group of recent refugees was claiming to be the Princess Zyanita and asked me to confirm her identity. It was her, all right, and I was horrified when she unleashed a string of abuse at me for leaving her to the mercies of those animals. She said a number of things that still hurt after all these years, partly

because I'd said some of them about myself in many a dark moment. I had always wondered if I could have done more that day. Anyway, after a number of painful soul-scrapings the two of us managed to work things out well enough that she at least tolerates me now. But she carries a lot of baggage; spending six years hiding from the Brizali would do that to anyone, especially a thirteen-year-old girl."

"I hadn't warned her about bringing you back. I guess I probably should have," she continued. "It was obviously quite a shock for her. But your presence on Earth was a secret I hadn't ever told anyone except Gelhinda and her husband, and it's just as well considering that somehow the Brizali still tried to ambush us there." She seemed lost in thought for a few minutes as we continued along the highway. "They even knew where the *Futaba* was hidden. How?"

Returning to the original subject, she asked if I had noticed Zyanita's somewhat unusual manner of dress. I recalled she had been wearing long pants and a long-sleeved jacket reminiscent of a Mao jacket, topped off with a small-brimmed coffee-can-style cap. I had to admit I was reminded a bit of pictures I'd seen of Nazi SA men. "Of course you wouldn't know," she answered, "but that's a pretty unfair judgment. She dresses the way she does to hide the scars on her arms and legs from those six years under the Brizali. So I cut her a lot of slack."

By now we had climbed noticeably as we wound through the rolling hills. The road we were on did not appear to be a major thoroughfare, and carried very little traffic. I found out why when we rounded a summit to see the highway end abruptly in a small parking area. Just beyond, the ground dropped away into a vast bowl, bordered on the far horizon by a snow-capped mountain range. I could hardly take my eyes from the sight as Kiri parked the vehicle (there was only one other in the lot) and led me to the edge.

It was an ocean of color such as I had never seen, except possibly in the oil paintings of a few nineteenth-century American landscape artists. Even they couldn't have done it justice: as far as the eye could see, patches of every imaginable shade of color blended and merged into hues that one had forgotten the human eye was capable of distinguishing. "These are all from Earth," Kiri said softly. "By all accounts this is what your Great Plains looked like before being plowed into wheat fields a century ago."

"You can't be serious," I protested. "Surely there's never been anything like this on Earth."

"You should read your own explorers' accounts," she answered,

her eyes fixed on the magnificent sight. “ ‘We looked out and saw a sea of green, sprinkled with yellow, red, lilac and white,’ ” she quoted. “ ‘None of us had ever seen the prairie before and behold, the half had not been told us. As you cannot know what the ocean is without having seen it, neither in imagination can you picture the prairie.’ George Monro Grant on the Canadian Great Plains,” she finished. “Others have described your own West in much the same words.”

The occupants of the other vehicle, a couple with a young girl, suddenly appeared over the rim from below, having apparently taken one of the many hiking paths available. On seeing Kiri they momentarily stopped in surprise, then waved a timid greeting. “That’s Mikiria, isn’t it? Hello, Princess Mikiria,” the girl chirped eagerly. I was reminded of fans unexpectedly encountering a movie star. Kiri smiled back at them and gave them a friendly wave.

“Friends of yours?” I asked.

“Never saw them before,” she answered, “but I sometimes think everyone on this planet knows me. I seem to retain a popularity of sorts. Happens all the time.”

“I take it then that you don’t worry about disguising yourself here,” I ventured. She explained that since she was so easily recognized she did don her contacts and tone down her hair in situations where it could cause someone embarrassment—“or danger,” she added, without elaborating—but that she didn’t usually find it necessary.

One advantage of the optically guided vehicle we were using was that it could travel down an extremely steep slope and remain level, and so we spent several hours following a scenic drive off the edge of the overlook and down into the plain itself. The vast bowl had been formed several hundred thousand years ago by a large asteroid, well before the Virrin had arrived and brought life with them. Now it was maintained as a planetary park by the Qozernan government.

We spent an idyllic afternoon working our way through the spectacular sea of flora, stopping at one point to devour a picnic lunch Gelhinda had thoughtfully left for us. Having lived in the Los Angeles Basin for so many years, I think it was the absolute quiet that I found to be most miraculous of all. No jets or distant freeway roar eroded the tranquility of the scene. It was all too soon that we finally turned homeward.



When we arrived back at the house, another, larger vehicle was in the garage, and I could hear a television set somewhere on the other side of the house. “We’re home,” called out Kiri.

“Back here,” trumpeted Senaria’s voice from a room down the hall. We headed in that direction, and I suddenly realized that I was hearing *English* voices. As we got closer I confirmed with a sinking feeling that they were indeed English voices, and with hefty Texas accents to boot. Fearing the worst, I stepped through the door of the TV room to find Senaria sprawled out on the floor, munching chips, intently ingesting an episode of *Dallas*.

“I should have warned you,” Kiri said, trying to keep a straight face. “Earth TV is quite popular here. It’s considered ‘fashionably exotic.’” For a moment I couldn’t place what looked so odd about it, and then I collapsed in hysterical laughter as I realized that Deshtiran subtitles had been superimposed on the picture. (You really don’t want to know what a Texas accent looks like rendered in Deshtiran. Trust me on this one.)

“What!?” Senaria finally exclaimed in exasperation.

“Dinner in forty-five minutes,” said Kiri, still grinning, as we left her to the mercies of the U.S. television industry.

“How— How—” I wheezed, but couldn’t yet finish the question as we continued down the hall.

“About eighty years ago,” she explained, still chuckling herself, “when we found that Earth was starting to use enough radio to make it worthwhile, we planted a hyperspace repeater on your moon to relay broadcasts back to Qozernon and Deshtiris. Of course, we can only pick up what’s available from the side facing the moon, but with all your satellites that now pretty much covers everything, including most of your Internet traffic.”

“That’s a lot to choose from,” I finally managed. “I guess I just expected slightly higher criteria for selection.” *Fashionably exotic my ass*, I thought to myself; where there’re humans there’s always a market for junk.

“Don’t be such a snob,” Kiri admonished me. “Besides, it’s not my fault,” she added helplessly. “The new *Himiko-den*’s on later tonight if you want to see it. In raw Japanese, though; no subtitles.” With the promise of an eagerly awaited piece of anime in the works, I decided to leave well enough alone.

“Kiri, have you even looked at your email since you got back?” Gelhinda asked at dinner that evening. “I had a call today from one of your clients asking if you’d examined the proposal they sent you two weeks ago. They said the contract and specs should be in your in-box by now.”

“I’ll look at it tonight,” Kiri promised through a mouthful of cherry dumplings (at least I think they were; I never asked what I was eating for fear it would turn out to be boiled garden slugs or something equally ‘native’ and as long as it tasted good I simply didn’t want to know).

“Clients?” I said in surprise.

“I have to pay my share of the bills here too, you know,” she answered, deftly slipping in the sentence between bites. Gelhinda chuckled. “The fees you collect usually wind up keeping us in clover for months at a time. If we had to live on my pension we’d be eating potatoes every day.”

“So, what do you do?” I asked, my curiosity piqued.

“I fix things,” was the typically cryptic response, triggering an indignant rejoinder from Senaria.

“For your information,” she announced, “she troubleshoots computer problems for some of the biggest corporations on the planet. When their engineers can’t solve something, they turn to her, and she comes up with a solution, and they come up with a big fat fee.”

Kiri grinned. “Meet my public defender.”

Senaria bridled again. “It’s true, though. And you’ve never failed a commission, either.” Gelhinda nodded in agreement.

“Well, I hope it’s not some stupid corporate database piece of crap again,” Kiri snorted. “The least they can do is come up with something interesting this time.”

Later after supper Kiri and I ended up out on the back lawn, as the twilight yielded to an incredible starlit night. By the time the last sunlight had faded I found myself beneath an utterly black dome stretching from horizon to horizon, dusted with more stars than I’d ever seen. Even the view from the *Futaba* paled somewhat in comparison, for here there were no soft panel lights reflecting off the interior hull. I noticed that the windows facing the yard had been thoughtfully

darkened.

For a little while we sat silently enjoying the cool night air. I found myself thinking how strange it was, to be on a distant planet, speaking an alien language without difficulty—and yet the surroundings didn't seem in the least familiar; there was no feeling of *déjà vu*, no feeling that I had been here before. It was almost dreamlike in a way, a sensation heightened by the friendly family surroundings and the warm, cozy house.

I felt Kiri's arm around my shoulder and responded in kind. "Better than Fontana?" she asked softly. It took me a moment to find my voice. "It's like nothing I ever imagined," I finally replied.

"Our atmosphere is actually cleaner than pre-industrial Earth's," she said. "Even primitive societies did a lot of burning. Nothing goes into the air here without good reason. Besides," she added, "Qozernon's moon is so distant and so small it's virtually indistinguishable from the other stars. I have to admit I miss Earth's moon sometimes," she added a bit ruefully, "but in return we get an almost perfect view of the universe." She pointed out several familiar constellations, most virtually intact, a few oddly distorted by our thirty-five light-year shift of position.

"What's that light on the horizon?" I asked, as my eyes adjusted sufficiently to detect a very faint glow barely visible to the east.

"That's Nedro," she said, "the little village I mentioned earlier. Tomorrow we'll stop in for a visit."

"Must be pretty small," I said. "I can barely see it."

She chuckled. "Actually, it's got a population of about ninety thousand. But town lights here are designed to shine down, not up, to limit the amount of light pollution. On Qozernon you won't find any neon infernos like Las Vegas, which you can sometimes see from a hundred miles away."

She directed my attention to one of the constellations and pointed out a dim yellow star where none was visible from Earth. "That's your sun," she said softly. "Homesick yet?" I felt her hand tighten on my shoulder slightly.

"That's never been home for me," I answered. "Even since long before I met you." I remembered the dream, of playing with the red-haired girl on a broad lawn, under a brilliant sun, and told Kiri about it, and about the terrible sensation of loss I had felt when I awoke. "I don't know why, but somehow that felt more like home to me than anywhere I've ever actually been." I turned to Kiri to see the stars reflecting dimly off her cheeks.

“You know, Will,” she said, “I’ve spent the past thirty years trying to go back home. And when I decided to bring you back from the limbo I left you in, it was because I’d finally given up. I didn’t want to admit it to myself until now, but it’s true. After thirty years I’m no closer to seeing a free Deshtiris than I was then. Maybe it’s time to take a deep breath and make a life here, and quit looking back.” She disengaged her arm from my shoulder and started to stand up.

“Kiri—?” I began uncertainly.

“I need to be alone for a little while,” she said softly. “I guess I have some thinking to do.” I watched her as she walked slowly back to the house, a dark silhouette in the starlight. For a while I stared silently at the house, then turned back and absently surveyed the stars for a while.

I started as someone unexpectedly plopped down next to me, and I turned to find Senaria eyeing me intently. “Hi,” she said. “Mind if I join you for a couple minutes?”

“Sure,” I agreed, a bit uneasily (remembering the previous night’s festivities rather too well). Her next words reassured me.

“Look, I’m really sorry about last night,” she apologized. “I didn’t know you two were an item, or I wouldn’t have been quite so, uh—”

“Friendly?” I suggested. “It’s okay, but let’s just keep it friends. And Kiri and I aren’t exactly an ‘item.’ I guess there are some things that need to be worked out first.”

“Oh, I think I get it,” she announced after a moment’s pondering. “She hasn’t figured out which one of you she’s really mooning over.”

“Hey, slow down a little,” I protested, rather alarmed at her perceptiveness.

“Oh, please,” she snorted. “She has all the symptoms. I’ve seen pictures of the two of you when you were still on Deshtiris, and I can see why it would freak her out. Don’t worry,” she added, “she’ll come around soon enough,” and with that cheery reassurance she smoothly performed a strategic retreat back to the house.



The next morning Senaria joined Kiri and me for a drive (this time in the larger vehicle) into the nearby town of Nedro to pick up a few groceries and other provisions. Like the preceding day, the weather was bright and clear, and so it was all the more impressive when we crested a small rise and saw before us was what looked for all the world like something out of a child's building block set. It was a moderately-sized town consisting of relatively small (one- and two-story) buildings, but liberally interspersed with tall, narrow and very brightly-colored towers, extending as much as ten or twelve stories into the air. Some had tops decorated with pointed onion-like domes reminiscent of pictures I'd seen of the Kremlin. The overall effect was very colorful and very cheerful.

Where an Earth town would have had streets I saw instead grassy walkways; as we grew closer the effect reminded me more of a park than a city. Just before we reached the first outer buildings our barcoded road ended, joining a circular roadway extending the circumference of the town. As we approached it Kiri punched something into the keypad and our vehicle slowly left the roadway and headed for one of the colorful structures.

"Parking towers," Senaria explained as we approached one, and I saw that each one had a series of platforms jutting out from all four sides, just wide enough for a vehicle and walkway on either side. We pulled into one about six stories above the ground and stopped. I thought of the cavernous concrete parking garages back home and shuddered at the comparison.

I noticed that most of the vehicles already parked on the other platforms had a logo on each side which Kiri's lacked. "They're public vehicles," she explained. "You call for one and sign it out and it travels to your home or office or whatever. Once you reach your destination you enter a command and after allowing you time to exit it returns back to its base." The direct cost to the user? Nothing.

She explained that the savings in parking, congestion, etc. more than made up for the expense of providing and maintaining the

vehicles, ultimately creating a net profit for the government, and hence for the citizenry. “You do pay for it if you want it for more than twenty-five* hours, though,” she added. “A lot of people who commute sign one out from work, keep it home overnight, and release it after they return to work the next morning.”

“Try sell that to American taxpayers,” I commented sadly. “Even if it saved the government, hence the taxpayer, money, you’d never be able to convince the public that it wasn’t a—what’s the word?—‘boondoggle.’ ” Kiri responded with a snort, muttering something about people not being taught to think until it was far too late.

Following her lead, I stepped out of the vehicle and through a doorway in the tower, where an elevator waited. Soon we were on our way to ground level.

There I found myself in an outdoor mall. There were only a few vehicles traversing the grassy walkways (always floating several inches above the ground), and those appeared to be public transportation of some kind, resembling nothing quite so much as open-sided trolley cars. Kiri confirmed this as one approached, instructing me to hop onto the side platform as it passed. We rode it for several blocks, then dropped off and caught another on an intersecting street. A few minutes later we hopped off again in front of a large store with the rough equivalent of “Nedro Market” lettered above the entrance.

“The bigger cities do have some vehicle traffic,” Kiri explained, “but even there most people use public transportation. There are no prohibitions against owning your own private vehicle, but the majority of people just don’t need one.”

“So how did you happen to end up owning two?” I asked curiously, wondering just how privileged this seemingly unpretentious little family was.

“This was Dad’s flier,” Senaria explained. “It was provided for him as part of his ambassadorial rank. When he died they left it with my mother.”

“How long ago was that?” I asked cautiously, not knowing how sensitive a topic it might be. She thought for a moment. I noticed she had an almost invisible scar on one cheek, very thin but extending from her chin to about an inch below her left eye. I wondered what kind of accident would produce a scar that couldn’t be removed by what I assumed was the advanced medicine of this world.

“Twelve years ago, I guess,” she decided. “I mean, that’s when he

* The Qozernan day is twenty-five hours long.—*Ed.*

died. I think he first got it about fifty years ago.” Seeing my face, Kiri laughed.

“*We Build Cars To Last*,” she pronounced sententiously, imitating that one announcer that seems to have been hired to do every car commercial ever broadcast in the United States during the past century.

“But fifty years?” I protested.

“Your economy is built on things deliberately failing and being replaced every few years,” she said as Senaria disappeared into the market. “But here the market for vehicles is relatively small, since most people don’t need them. So they’re somewhat expensive but built to last for decades. If they need to be upgraded, for example if there are improvements in the navigation circuitry, they get upgraded, not replaced. Besides, the population is stable, so there’re no new markets to service.”

We found ourselves a suitable spot on the turf where we wouldn’t be in the path of one of the frequent hovertrolleys, as I thought of them, and settled comfortably on the soft grass. “If you like to watch people, this is a good spot,” Kiri said with a grin. “Sooner or later everyone’s got to eat.”

“People actually go to the grocery store to buy food?” I marveled. “I would have expected that you’d be doing all your ordering online and having it delivered.” I thought of the gushing predictions that computer magazines were so fond of, in which the humans of the future basically sat back on their collective couches and had everything they wanted brought to them. Humans of the future were going to be tremendously obese, I had concluded skeptically.

But these people were trim, healthy, and often carrying bags of groceries and other purchases. Some pulled small carts behind them, carts which like the vehicles floated a foot or two above the ground. Once or twice I saw an ownerless empty cart float down the street and into the market. “Would you really want to buy strawberries online?” Kiri snickered. “Or pears? There’s no substitute for actually seeing, smelling and pinching what you’re about to eat. Even virtual reality simulations are no match for the real thing.”

“It’s like a festival in the park,” I continued, struck by the relaxed, friendly atmosphere I saw everywhere. Somehow it was hard to even imagine a crime being committed here, nor did I see anything resembling a peace officer. “Do you have such a thing as police?”

Kiri laughed. “Of course. People are still people, and they sometimes do things that they shouldn’t. There are professional police to make investigations and handle difficult arrests. But for the most part

people police each other here. If you were to attempt to pocket something in the market, you'd probably have ten people clustering around you politely requesting that you put it back, and asking just what in the world you were thinking of. On Earth you'd consider people like that busybodies, but here it's part of one's civic duty."

"On Earth I'd expect someone to pull a knife or a gun on me if I tried to prevent them from shoplifting," I replied dubiously. I was answered with a long silence, and I looked at her in surprise, wondering if I'd said something wrong.

"People in your adopted country have no sense of community," she said finally. "They might love their family and care about their close friends, if they're lucky enough to have any. They might even belong to a small group like a church or club and think that provides them with a 'sense of community.' But that's as far as they get. A relative few claim to love their country, but hardly any of them act as if they actually believe in what it's supposed to represent. 'Patriotism' for them is an excuse to harass the foreign born, or to enforce their particular brand of conformity. The remainder treat their own government as something to thwart at tax time or even to actively subvert, as though 'nation' means a set of colors sewn onto a piece of cloth."

"You know, in a lot of ways I admire the courage of Earth's peoples. So many of them go through life terribly alone, living in a sea of predators endlessly selling them on things that will supposedly give their life meaning, whether they're political philosophies, religions, or diet pills. And yet in spite of that they muddle through, trying to make their own existence count for at least something before they're swept under. Some of them even manage to create a little beauty amidst it all."

"But we love our *planet*," she went on, her eyes brightening. "It's much more than just a 'country.' It's our mother and father, our community, and our home. As a people we're all part of it. You could say that we really do worship the ground we walk on." Her voice shook slightly with the last sentence.

It was a rare and unexpected glimpse into her inner self, and for a moment I was rather stunned. I think that's when I finally understood just how hard the events of the past thirty years must have hit her. "I guess that makes us both orphans twice over, doesn't it?" I said softly.

For a moment she looked at me sharply, and I saw the fire in her eyes fade. "For you, yes," she said finally, "I suppose it does. But for me it's thrice over."

She stood up. "I guess we'd better find where Senaria got to."

It was in this fashion that I spent the next few days with Kiri, Senaria or Gelhinda, or some combination of the three, whom I was already coming to view as my own adopted family. There were endless new natural wonders to see, new customs to absorb (and a few gaffes that I won't go into further here), and the wonders of a civilization centuries more advanced than Earth's and yet in many ways far simpler.

No, not simpler. More commonsense, really, with a solid feeling for when technology was and wasn't appropriate. There were no cyberspace wars here, no computer jacks permanently embedded in the backs of people's necks. What I saw was a solid sense of decency and consideration for others, symbolized by such minor matters as the lack of "boom boxes" on the streets and in vehicles (Qozernans would find it simply unthinkable to inflict their own musical tastes on innocent bystanders). In fact, the longer I remained the more impressed I became with how little people's hopes and needs really differ when you get right down to it.

"By the way," Gelhinda commented casually that evening at dinner, "Zee's coming back tomorrow evening, and this time Lev's coming along." I saw Senaria's ears prick up. "They said you had some serious catching up to do. I wonder if it has anything to do with what happened on Earth? It's been a long time since the Brizali bothered you like that."

Afterwards, Kiri told me that she was going to be working for a while, and that if I needed her she'd be in her computer lab, now moved to the second floor of the house from the *Futaba's* living quarters. I watched another episode of *Himiko-den* with Senaria that evening (her television tastes appeared to be omnivorous), and saw no sign of Kiri by the time I hit the sack for the night.



Vren. Bri. Doh. Gred.

We were sitting at breakfast the next morning, Kiri and Gelhinda discussing the morning news while Senaria wolfed a cinnamon roll only slightly smaller than Massachusetts, when the odd words popped into my head again for the first time in several weeks. “Kiri,” I broke in, “since you’ve been solving so many of my life’s mysteries lately, maybe you know something about this one. I keep remembering these strange words, ‘Vren,’ ‘Bri,’ ‘Doh—’ ”

To my astonishment Kiri shouted “Stop!” and literally jumped out of her chair and shoved a hand over my mouth while Gelhinda and Senaria looked on in amazement. “Mmmph!” I remonstrated, and she reluctantly removed her hand. She did her best to look nonchalant, but I could tell she was in a fine state; her face was flushed and her eyes gleaming with excitement.

“You don’t think—” said Gelhinda.

“Tell you what,” said Kiri with obviously feigned casualness, “let’s go discuss this outside,” and led me by the hand out the back door. The yard was a very large one, with a well-equipped training area reminiscent of Kiri’s garage in Fontana extending down one side and a few ancient trees along the back border.

“Now suppose you say that again,” she said, “all of it this time.”

“Vren, Bri, Doh, Gred,” I said obediently. Kiri and Gelhinda looked at me expectantly while Senaria watched the proceedings, wide-eyed with fascination at Kiri’s latest stage show.

“Feel anything strange?” said Kiri finally.

“Only that I think you seem to be even crazier than usual,” I retorted.

“Point to that tree,” she said, jabbing at one of the distant trees with her forefinger, “and think of a lightning bolt.” I did so, and of course nothing whatsoever happened. “I guess not,” she said in disappointment.

“Kiri, please don’t hurt the trees,” protested Gelhinda. “They’re very old.”

“Will someone please tell me what the BLOODY HELL is going on here!” I finally exploded.

“Kiri!” exclaimed Gelhinda. “You mean you never told him?”

“Told me what!?” I crackled.

Kiri shook her head in response to Gelhinda’s question. “No, Gelhi. I thought he’d had enough shocks for a few days.”

“Shock me,” I snapped.

“Sorry if I pissed you off,” Kiri offered unapologetically. “Let’s go back inside.” We returned to the kitchen table, tempers cooling somewhat.

“I told you that my father genetically altered me during my mother’s first few weeks of pregnancy,” Kiri began. “What I didn’t tell you is that I found out much later that he apparently altered you as well.” I felt my stomach knotting up at the words, wondering what was coming. “His position as court physician enabled him to do it without anyone being the wiser. In my case it was obvious right from birth because of my hair and eyes, but originally there was no clue that you had been tampered with too. It was a good thing for him, because the penalty for using the heir to the throne as a guinea pig would have been extreme to say the least.”

“Ten years ago I secretly returned to Deshtiris to gather what information I could.” I saw Gelhinda pale visibly at the memory. “I brought back computer files of many of my father’s research records. As I decoded them I found that they were incomplete; apparently large parts of them had later been deleted or moved to some other storage system. But there were partial records of his work on you and me.”

“Everything I found referring to myself corresponded with what the doctors and researchers had already determined in endless years of tests,” she said, a distinct weariness in her voice. “But apparently he had also enhanced you with some kind of power that was vaguely described as the ability to project electric charges. The records stated that this ability would remain dormant until activated by some sort of ‘keys,’ but nowhere were these keys described. Obviously these were only brief summaries of the actual records, which were presumably stored elsewhere. Of course you weren’t available to do tests on, which was probably just as well for you.” She shuddered, and I pictured her having endured a purgatory of endless pokings and sample-takings.

“Kiri and I both had the same thought when you mentioned that a phrase had begun to recur to you,” added Gelhinda, “that perhaps the words you remembered were the keys referred to. But it doesn’t look like that’s the case.”

“Great,” I said ruefully, “so apparently I’m some kind of Zeus but with no way to switch on my lightning bolts. Just my luck.”

“Count your blessings,” answered Kiri solemnly. “Not all gifts are what they seem.”

After breakfast Kiri excused herself, explaining that she needed to work again for a few hours. Reminding her that Zyanita and Masakor Lev would be arriving that evening, Gelhinda extracted a promise that she’d be out of her den by early afternoon at the latest. “I know how she can be once she starts on a project,” Gelhinda explained to me with a wink.

With Kiri buried again in her work, I found myself wandering around aimlessly. Sad to say, I ended up in the television room surfing channels and munching corn chips. (I should explain that channel surfing on Qozernon is a bit different than on Earth. Between native Qozernan programming and pirated Earth broadcasts, plus some propaganda courtesy of Deshtiris, there are several thousand available channels. One “surfs” by entering various keywords, or creating a detailed profile of one’s interests, and then browsing through the resulting lists. It reminded me more of Earth’s Web search engines than channel surfing.)

Of course, with several thousand available channels, there was nothing interesting on. My fruitless search for relevance was ended by a mocking voice behind me. “You’re going to get fat and shapeless if you keep that up, you know.” It was Senaria.

Looking at her, I thought to myself that she was by no stretch of the imagination fat and certainly not shapeless. In fact, she had the build of an aerobics instructor, though usually wearing even less clothing. “So how do you do it?” I asked, remembering *Dallas*.

In response she adopted one of the fencing stances I’d learned with Kiri. “I train when I’m not vegetating,” she answered with a grin. “I’ve heard you’ve gotten pretty good again. Feel like testing yourself against a new opponent?” It sounded like a lot more fun than talk shows or soap operas, so a few minutes later we were noisily clashing blades in the training area out back.

She was good. In fact, she was very good, and I found myself wondering just how much Kiri had been pulling back during our practice sessions. Senaria answered my question without my asking it. “Ever manage to beat Kiri?” she said.

I shook my head. “I’m getting closer, though.” She laughed.

“I somehow doubt it. I used to think the same thing, until I found that the better I got the harder an opponent she becomes. You do know

she's genetically enhanced, of course."

"And your point is?" I said, almost catching her on the arm.

"Agility and strength are two of her enhancements," she answered without missing a beat. "I've seen her jump a good eight feet straight up. She's the perfect trainer, unless you have a male ego problem about being beaten by a woman," and she served me a painful poke in the chest. "You're dead, by the way." I dropped my sword point and wiped the sweat from my eyes.

"You're not bad yourself," I said admiringly.

"Yeah, well, that's as good as I get, though. Me you can probably beat. Eventually," she added as she lunged furiously and nearly caught me off guard. I got a lot of exercise that afternoon.

I also found that Senaria was not quite the lazy brat she had at first seemed. She was currently home because she was job-hunting, and therefore between classes. If that doesn't appear to make sense, it didn't to me either until she explained it. "I know how on Earth you have this rigid system of grades and degrees, but it doesn't work like that here. We get a general education through the public schools until we're about twenty. Then we start looking for a first job. Whoever hires us knows that at the same time we'll be taking classes in the area we're working in, so in effect the employer doesn't have to train us, but does have to pay us while we're still learning the job."

"More like the apprenticeship system we still have in some fields," I suggested. "But that means you finished school a couple years ago, right?"

She looked sheepish. "Well, I've tried a few jobs but haven't really found one I like yet. I did work a little with vehicle electronics repair but it wasn't very challenging. Then I spent a few months trying to learn medicine, but that was a disaster." She sighed.

"Too bloody?" I suggested.

"Hell, no," she snorted. "I'm not sure why, but I don't have a problem with that. No, too much paperwork. You spend more time filling out forms than fixing people. I might go back and try emergency work," she mused, while still maintaining an effective wall of steel around herself.

"So you really just haven't decided what you want to be when you grow up," I gibed.

"Nope," she shot back. "Have you?"

"Touché," I admitted, and a moment later it became especially apropos as she gave me another painful jab, this time in the side. "Right in the guts," she said. "That would have hurt." I assured her earnestly

that it did.

“When Kiri asked me to come with her,” I said, more to myself than to Senaria, “I made her promise that there’d be something useful for me to do here. So far she hasn’t said anything further about it.”

Senaria snorted. “If I know Kiri, she’s probably got plans to make you Emperor of the Universe or something like that. And you’d better watch out, because if anyone can do it she can.”

As it happened, I almost lost track of the time. “You really ought to get cleaned up before Lev gets here,” said a derisive voice unexpectedly. It was Kiri, her chin propped on the fence as she watched us. Senaria blushed noticeably, but nonetheless made a quick excuse and vanished into the house. “Sorry to abandon you like that,” said Kiri with a grin, “but it looks like you’ve been having a good time anyway.”

“Sure,” I said. “Why didn’t you tell me you were holding back in my training?”

“Why discourage you?” she said nonchalantly, but I thought I saw a cloud pass momentarily over her eyes and I hastily steered the conversation elsewhere, kicking myself mentally.

“Tell me about this fellow Masakor Lev,” I said as we headed back to the house.

She explained that Lev worked for the Qozernan security forces, and had primary responsibility for gathering information regarding developments on Deshtiris. He had also long since taken on Zyanita as his second in command. The two had worked as a team (purely professionally, she added) for the past fourteen years or so. Lev, about fifty-five Earth years old, was previously married, now divorced.

“Sen’s had google eyes for him for the past year and a half,” she added. “I know he’s noticed it but he’s never really said anything. He does seem to like her a lot. I suspect he’d make something of it except that he’s excessively wary of personal relationships that might complicate his job. Poor Sen,” she finished as we reached the house. “She’s got a case all right.”

I had just showered and dressed when I heard our guests arriving, and hurried downstairs. Lev turned out to be a tallish well-built fellow, in appearance in his late thirties, with light brown hair, grey eyes and an efficient, no-nonsense manner. Senaria made what she no doubt considered a discreet effort to remain in sight, casually engaging him in conversation whenever she could, and I soon saw that the gruff exterior ill-concealed a sensitive, considerate personality. Kiri was right; there was definitely a warm spot in his heart for our slightly ditzy golden girl.

Zyanita, on the other hand, made little effort to conceal her impatience, more than once in her deceptively quiet way reminding Senaria that we had “important business” to discuss. I found her and the Amkors to be an interesting contrast. I had noticed that neither Kiri nor they ever used any kind of makeup or wore jewelry (except for an unobtrusive gold chain barely visible around Kiri’s neck), but Zyanita was never without a pair of small but elegant earrings. In addition, her relatively short black hair was always carefully trimmed, while I had often kidded Kiri about the fact that her mane could look windblown on a dead calm day, something Senaria tried rather unsuccessfully to imitate.

Dinner was pretty much reserved for pleasantries and casual conversation. At one point I found myself again enthusiastically describing our flight from Earth. “I realize that you all take space travel for granted, but I’m just a poor Earthling who’d never even left the lower atmosphere before,” I added apologetically.

“And he’s an aerospace engineer, too,” Kiri gibed.

“Hey, I just built ’em, I never got to ride ’em,” I retorted. “Besides, nothing I ever helped design had the view the *Futaba* does.”

Lev grinned. “You might be disappointed to see what most of our craft are like. Kiri’s ship is pretty unique, even for us. I hope one of these days I get a chance to ride it.”

“You’ve never been up in the *Futaba*?” Kiri said in surprise, and I suddenly noted a mischievous glint in her eyes. I wondered what she had in mind. Lev shook his head, a bit sadly I thought.

“Tell you what,” Kiri said. “I’m going to be tied up for the next week or two on that troubleshooting contract I landed, but Senaria knows how to fly it. Of course,” she added, glancing at the startled girl, “that’s if she’s willing to take you up.” I saw Gelhinda smothering a grin, while Senaria was clearly at a loss for words.

“I wouldn’t want to put you to any trouble, Senaria,” Lev said apologetically. At this point she realized that if she was going to say anything she’d better say it soon, and managed to gulp out, “It’s really no trouble. Honest. I’d be delighted.” She had by now turned distinctly pink under her tan, which Lev tactfully ignored.

“Well,” Zyanita sniffed, “I’m perfectly happy having solid walls around me when I leave the ground.”

Kiri looked taken aback. “That’s right,” she said, “you’ve never ridden in the *Futaba* either, have you?”

“No, and that’s how I’d just as soon keep things,” was her typically brusque response.

When we got down to business after the meal I was surprised to find that both Senaria and Gelhinda made themselves comfortable as well. Lev quickly clarified things for me in his forthright manner. “Wilorian—”

“Will,” I said. “If you don’t mind.”

“Will, Kiri has told me all about you. I trust her judgment implicitly, and therefore I must trust you too. You need to understand that you’re going to hear things this evening that officially I’m not telling you or anyone else here. I’ve worked with Kiri and the Amkors for many years and they’ve all been an invaluable help to me, and I haven’t hesitated to help them as well when I could. But always keep in mind that if things blow up unexpectedly I was never here, and neither was Zee. Those are the ground rules.” I nodded. Zyanita shifted impatiently.

“So what have I missed?” said Kiri. “I get the impression it’s not good news. Teyn rattling his saber again?” Lev nodded.

“It’s worse than that. You know how hard it’s been to get information out of Deshtiris for the past twenty years. The computer links you set up for us a decade ago were invaluable, enabling us to tap into some of their data traffic, but even that’s heavily secured. We finally managed to crack one of the major military codes, and from what we’ve decrypted we’ve determined that Deshtiris has been building up a fleet of starships for the past four years that we knew nothing about.”

“Starships?” Kiri said incredulously. “Not freighters? You mean military ships?” Lev nodded. “But what would they do with those?” she exclaimed. “They already have our trade; they’ve buffaloed the government into signing agreements that give them all the advantages. Surely they don’t mean to—”

“These are military ships, with a troop capacity of five hundred per ship,” Lev went on woodenly. “And if our projections from the data traffic are correct, there are at least eight thousand ships.”

The room fell silent. It was Gelhinda who finally put into words what we were all thinking. “Eight thousand ships? I don’t mean to be condescending, of course, but that’s simply impossible. That would take a major part of the planet’s resources. And what would invading Qozernon accomplish? It would cost them more than they’d get out of us in ordinary trade.”

“You’re right, it doesn’t make sense,” Lev answered. “But unless the whole thing is a deliberate deception, and an incredibly sophisticated one, those are the numbers we come up with again and

again.”

“Could they be planning to invade Earth rather than Qozernon?” Senaria ventured. “How do we know we’re the target?”

Zyanita broke in this time. “Because it would be an incredibly stupid thing to do. Earth is bristling with weaponry, including missiles with fusion warheads, and even with the green lasers Deshtiris is churning out they’d be risking huge casualties. Qozernon, on the other hand, is virtually unarmed. Besides, even four million troops is a relatively small army compared to what the Earth governments could muster.”

“Four million troops,” Gelhinda said softly. “How can they support an army of four million troops?” No one spoke.

Zyanita finally broke the silence. “As you know, I maintain contacts with the Deshtiran refugee community here on Qozernon. Recently they’ve asked me to look into some unexplained deaths. After examining the police reports and interviewing witnesses, I’ve come to the conclusion that Deshtiris has begun an organized campaign of assassinations. So far at least twenty-five deaths appear to be involved, all of them persons with information potentially dangerous to Deshtiris.”

At that an outraged babble broke out. “That’s insane!” exclaimed Gelhinda. “They haven’t interfered directly with Qozernon in at least twelve years. The last time they tried, it almost caused a major trade disruption, and their economy is so screwed up that they couldn’t survive that and they know it.”

“Unless,” Kiri said slowly, “they don’t need to worry about that any more. For example, if an invasion is imminent.”

Zyanita nodded. “That’s my interpretation.”

“I think,” said Lev gravely, “that you should all be very careful from now on. The Brizali know who and where you are. Up until now they’ve left you alone because they couldn’t risk an incident here. Apparently hotter heads are prevailing. Your little mishap on Earth,” and he glanced at Kiri and me, “is almost certainly related to all this.” I felt a cold shiver. This comfortable little homestead on the plains suddenly felt much less safe than it had an hour earlier.

“Damn,” Kiri said softly.

The party broke up shortly thereafter. I noticed that Senaria managed to sneak several minutes with Lev out on the front porch, bringing their conversation to a quick conclusion as Zyanita approached. I thought she looked a bit downcast when she returned to the house.

“Gelhi,” Kiri was saying as the two disappeared down the highway, “from now on I want that intruder alarm on twenty-five hours a day,” ignoring her protests about the resulting inconvenience for visitors. We were all noticeably preoccupied as we headed for our beds that evening, and I awoke the next morning with vague memories of unsettling nightmares and a splitting headache.



I found Kiri already hard at work at her computer. Apologizing, she explained that after the previous evening's revelations she really had to get this project out of the way in case she was needed for more important things. Eventually I ended up sword training with Senaria, although she seemed considerably less ebullient than usual.

"So when are you taking Lev for his ride in the *Futaba*?" I asked jovially, hoping to cheer her up.

"Who knows?" she said dejectedly. Seeing my surprise, she added, "He said he'd let me know when he had time. You know how it works, don't call me, I'll call you."

"You're probably just misreading him," I reassured her. "He is pretty busy, you know." She nodded, clearly unconvinced.

As it happens I was right for once, as a few minutes later she was called away to the telecom and returned now on the opposite end of what was developing into an impressive mood swing. I managed to extract from her that she was indeed taking Lev up in the *Futaba* the next afternoon. After that her mind was clearly elsewhere, as I actually managed to disarm her once and she looked positively stunned as her sword went clattering off against the fence.

"Try that again when I'm concentrating," she protested.

"You are concentrating," I said with a grin, "just not on this."

When Kiri appeared for supper that evening she also seemed utterly distracted, and all through the meal I got the impression that she was unaware of her immediate surroundings. Gelhinda was clearly annoyed, and seeing the perfect opportunity, finally spoke her mind in her usual forthright manner.

"Kiri, you can't worry a problem to death. Leave it alone for a while. It'll solve itself, and in the meantime you can at least enjoy what you're eating. You're driving us all crazy these days, you know."

"I am enjoying what I'm eating," Kiri mumbled absently, a loaded butter knife in one hand, her enormous green eyes staring fixedly at something apparently in another dimension.

"Then why are you so carefully buttering your napkin?" demanded

Gelhinda triumphantly. Even Kiri had to join in the laughter that followed, once she had ascertained to her dismay that Gelhinda was indeed speaking the truth.

“All right, Gelhi, you win,” she conceded gallantly. After that she seemed to free her mind from whatever had been occupying it so totally, and we spent the rest of the meal in a much more relaxed atmosphere. In fact, to my surprise she made no effort to return to her work after the meal, and we ended up watching two hours of *Urusei Yatsura** before we finally staggered off to our respective bedrooms.

The next morning after breakfast Senaria became a seething mass of energy as she scuttled around the kitchen for several hours creating various delightful smells, and presumably the dishes that accompanied them. I say presumably because when I inevitably went to investigate I was sternly warned off with the admonition that if I ate or even so much as touched anything I’d be sautéed alive in a bathtub of boiling butter.‡ Assured that it was for the evening’s supper, and that I was indeed invited, I decided to let prudence be the better part of valor and executed a tactical withdrawal.

When Lev arrived that afternoon he was greeted by a remarkably tongue-tied Senaria. Promising to meet her at the *Futaba* in a few minutes, he quietly asked me if Kiri was home, and while Senaria was loading the ship I took him up to Kiri’s computer lab. There they spoke together in hushed tones for several minutes, and as I left I thought that they both looked rather grim.

A few minutes later Lev, again wearing his most cheerful face, bid me a good afternoon and strode out to the *Futaba*. Soon the ship was lifting off and disappearing like a tiny soap bubble into the vivid blue sky. I had a feeling that Lev was in for quite a ride, as I suspected that Senaria would be doing her best to show off her piloting skills, and grinned in spite of myself.

It was about four hours later that I heard voices out on the front lawn, and looked out the window to confirm that the *Futaba* had returned. A moment later the front door was flung open and Senaria loudly announced to everyone within range, “All right, everybody, we’re back! Supper’s in twenty minutes and if you’re late you starve. That includes you, Kiri.” Clearly she was in an excellent mood, as was

* Also known in English as *Those Obnoxious Aliens*.—*Ed.*

‡ Margarine, actually, as animals are neither harvested nor exploited for by-products on the Twin Planets. However, Wilorian has consistently used the word “butter,” and for clarity I’ve left his text unaltered.—*Ed.*

Lev.

“Well,” said Gelhinda, emerging from her study, “did you scare the pants off poor Lev here with your flying? Or did I use the wrong expression?” she added wickedly, seeing Senaria again turning pink beneath her tan. Lev, chivalrously pretending not to notice, assured her that he had had a wonderful time, and hoped it wouldn’t be the last. I saw Senaria’s eyes light up.

By that time even Kiri had crawled out from her cyber-cave and made an appearance, her large green eyes hideously bloodshot (not an attractive combination, by the way) with fatigue. “So how many interplanetary speeding tickets did the Galaxy Police give her?” she giped as Senaria fled to the kitchen to finish supper preparations.

“Galaxy Police?” said Lev, puzzled for a moment, then laughed. “No, actually she’s a very good pilot. But I imagine that in a pinch she could do some pretty hair-raising things if she had to.”

“Dinner is served,” bellowed Senaria from the kitchen.

The evening meal was as delicious as the morning’s cooking odors had promised, and thoroughly entertaining as well. I found to my amusement that it was now Lev who was attempting to steal surreptitious glances at Senaria, and doing a glaringly conspicuous job of it for a secret agent. As for Senaria herself, she was in fine fettle, cracking jokes (rare for her) and laughing at everyone else’s (also rare for her). It was with great regret that we all finally pushed our chairs away from the table and tried to stand up, with varying degrees of success. I know at least that my own center of gravity had dropped a good foot or more within the past hour.

After supper Lev asked to speak privately with Gelhinda for a bit, and they disappeared into her study. Some ten minutes later I was passing by the closed door on my way to the first floor bathroom, and heard Gelhinda speaking, her raised voice clear through the thin wood. “That’s all the more reason for you to do something about it now.” She didn’t sound angry, only insistent. “Neither of you is going to live forever, you know.” Not wanting to eavesdrop, of course, I continued on my way and heard nothing further.

When I returned to the living room, Kiri and Senaria were deep in discussion. Dinner seemed to have revived Kiri considerably; even her eyes appeared a little less bloodshot than earlier. “Did you encounter any problems with the hyperspace transition?” she was asking.

“Er, not that I noticed,” answered Senaria vaguely.

“Would you have noticed if there were?” I insinuated, prompting an indignant rejoinder (and another blush).

“So when will you need the *Futaba* again?” Kiri asked with a grin.

“Soon, I hope,” Senaria murmured dreamily, just as Lev and Gelhinda returned. Senaria gave her mother a piercing look, but Gelhinda’s face might as well have been a stone slab for all the information she could glean from it. But she gave me a sly wink when no one else was looking.

As it happened, by the time he left Lev had made a date for the day after next for another flight with the elated girl. We all headed for bed that night in a considerably improved frame of mind.

“I think you need to learn to fly the *Futaba*,” Kiri said to me the next morning after breakfast. It was certainly the last thing I would have expected; I had in fact been rather startled when she had suggested to Lev that Senaria take him for a ride. Prior to that I had assumed that it was Kiri’s exclusive pride and joy and that to touch the control stand would be death to any interloper. She laughed. “Both Senaria and Gelhinda know how to fly it. In fact, I had Senaria do the piloting on one of my visits to Earth.”

“You’ve taken Senaria to visit Earth?” I said in some surprise.

“Of course. I told you it was a popular place. You haven’t heard her speak English, have you? She’s picked up one nasty Texas accent from watching too much *Dallas*, in fact.”

Actually, I thought to myself, she’d probably fit right in. “So where’d you go?” I asked curiously.

“Let’s see, Canyonlands,” she ticked off, “the Yucatan, London, and of course we checked up on you. That was about three years ago, I think. Unfortunately some poor schmuck tried to put the make on her in London and wouldn’t take no for an answer until she beat the crap out of him, so we had to make a quick getaway. She still considers that the best part of the trip,” she added with a sigh.

That day I flew a starship for the first time. Under Kiri’s expert tutelage I turned the ship nose up, took us through the atmosphere and a few thousand miles into space, then returned to the planet in a long, slow glide like the one we’d used during our landing a few days previously. It was, and still is, one of the high points of my life, and it and our visit to the plains overlook seem now like a sunlit oasis before the onrushing darkness.

The *Futaba* turned out to be much easier to fly than I had expected. The trick was to make sure your destination was entered in advance and let the ship do most of the thinking. Fancy maneuvers like the ones we had used on Earth were another story, however, and required considerable facility with the control stand.

“Why don’t you just use voice commands, like you do for the transformations?” I asked in some puzzlement.

“I see you’ve fallen for all the hype about voice recognition,” she snorted. “We went through that phase about two centuries ago. We found out the hard way that when people get flustered, they’re a lot more likely to speak than to type without thinking first. That resulted in some truly spectacular disasters, including a fusion reactor that blew up when the operator crashed the backup computer with a series of completely contradictory and illogical commands.”

“Imagine for a moment that you had been piloting the *Futaba* with voice commands and trying to get away from those Brizali back on Earth. ‘*Futaba*: up. No, don’t point the nose up, rise. Faster, that’s too slow. Now forward. Wait, look out for those cliffs! Down! I mean slow down! Go up! Not rise, nose up! Now full speed. No, that’s too much acceleration! I can’t breathe! Aaarrggghh!’” By this time I was having some trouble breathing myself.

“I get the picture,” I gasped.

“Anyway,” she finished a bit more calmly, “we use voice recognition for just two things: cases where you don’t want to have controls exposed where anyone can reach them, and security situations where your voiceprint is the key. Otherwise it’s rather pointless.”

Once again that afternoon Kiri disappeared into her computer lab, not even emerging for supper this time. I saw no further sign of her until breakfast the next morning, and then she looked distinctly the worse for wear. However, she insisted that we continue our flight lessons, and proved to be as patient and thorough an instructor as she was in swordsmanship. When we returned to the Amkors shortly before noon she soon vanished again, and as I had been doing for some time now I sought out Senaria for lessons of a noisier and more painful variety.

Not surprisingly, she was practically boiling over with excitement, for she had a date later that afternoon with Lev for another flight in the *Futaba*. I had to grin a bit in spite of myself as I mentally pictured her asking Kiri for the keys to the family car. Except that this family car happened to be a starship.

“Kiri’s really got her nose into it this time,” she commented at one point. “Working all night, isn’t she?” I nodded. “She asked me to take care of your flight lessons tomorrow,” she added casually. “Is that okay with you?”

“Of course,” I said, admittedly surprised. “She has a high opinion of your flying skills. But what on earth is she doing, anyway? Is this

still that job assignment she received?”

Senaria shook her head. “That’s anybody’s guess. She can get really close-mouthed when she wants to, and it’s no use trying to pry it out of her. Don’t worry; she’ll fill us in when she’s ready. She always does.”

In spite of Senaria’s reassurances, I found myself falling prey to an unease I hadn’t felt since that fateful goodnight kiss had gone so awry. For several days I saw very little of her, and when I did she seemed distant, though not outright cold. Telling myself to be patient, I spent the days with Senaria honing my sword arm and flying the *Futaba*, but not even the thrill of taking it into hyperspeed for the first time could alleviate the gloom I felt gathering within me.

Things weren’t helped much when Zyanita came to visit one morning; Lev would be returning that evening to give us another update on the crisis. It was obvious that she read the situation, though her take on it rather startled me.

“Don’t you understand that Kiri’s just using you?” she said coldly. “She’s had her eye on the Deshtiran throne for as long as I can remember. You’re handy to have around right now, but don’t count on her once she has what she wants.” I held my tongue, realizing that the words I wanted to let fly would not exactly fall under the category of “cutting her some slack.” But I became considerably more cautious around her after that.

When Lev arrived later that afternoon I went to fetch Kiri from her computer lab. Utterly preoccupied, she barely acknowledged my existence and waved me off. She finally appeared about twenty minutes later, and said very little during supper. It seemed as if her mind was rolling a problem back and forth, unsuccessfully trying to find an opening. We had retired to the living room and Lev had just begun to give a report on the latest developments when she unexpectedly broke in.

“It’s just wrong,” she exploded. “It’s all wrong.”

“Well, of course it is,” I said, surprised. “Isn’t that the whole point?”

Ignoring me, she went on. “The technology use is all wrong. It doesn’t make sense.” More perplexed than ever, I discreetly kept my mouth shut this time.

“Explain,” said Lev.

“Let’s go to my computer lab,” she suggested. “I want to show you something.”

We followed her upstairs into her room filled with the computer

equipment I had previously seen on the *Futaba*. As she loaded a file, she spoke rapidly. “The idea came to me as a result of a computer strategy game I stumbled across on Earth. It was pretty primitive, but the concept was brilliant, in that instead of just blowing things up you had to build a civilization by choosing and developing various technologies. It occurred to me that the technology we’re seeing on Deshtiris doesn’t seem to be developing in any rational way.”

She brought up a complex chart onto the monitor. It vaguely reminded me of a tree lying on its side, with the trunk on the left and branching ever more elaborately towards the right. “This is a rough diagram of how technology developed on both Qozernon and Deshtiris up until about fifty years ago. You can see that each new advance was the result of either an elaboration of existing knowledge, or the result of two existing technologies being combined in an unexpected way. That’s how technology normally develops. Now look at this.” She entered a command and an entirely different chart appeared. “This is Deshtiris over the past fifty years,” she said.

Even to my twentieth century Earth eyes it looked different. “Things just pop out of nowhere,” I said.

“Exactly,” she replied triumphantly. “Take the laser rifles, for example. We’ve been able to determine how they work, but we had to develop a whole new basis of crystal theory to explain it, and we still don’t quite understand the electronics of the control mechanisms. Normally there would have been years or decades of progress in crystal theory, and of the necessary electronics, before the laser rifle technology would have been mature enough to develop a theoretical model, much less create an actual working model.” We all nodded agreement.

“And your point is?” said Lev.

“They all appeared at once. All together. Out of the blue.” Pointing to a number of branches that seemed to have no attachment to anything else, she went on, “This happened with all of these innovations. They didn’t develop from existing knowledge. They just suddenly appeared fully grown, complete with all necessary supporting technology.”

She stopped and paused meaningfully. “It’s as if they were ordered from a catalog.” Fascinated, none of us spoke. “And then there are the holes. In spite of having technology like this, they’re still using rubber tired vehicles, running on synthetic petroleum. They’re generating electricity from fission. And their starships are decades behind the *Futaba* in sophistication. It’s like a crazy quilt. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“Couldn’t there be one mind behind all this?” I said finally. “After all, genius does sometimes make unexpected leaps of intuition. You’ve said yourself that your father was brilliant, and that he hasn’t been heard from since the Brizal takeover. Could he be the source of these innovations?”

Kiri nodded. “That occurred to me. Especially considering that this all started about fifty years ago. Forty-six, to be precise.”

“Then—” I started, and she finished the sentence for me. “The first piece of orphan technology to appear in this entire insane tapestry was me.”



“Well, that would seem to settle it,” Lev observed as we retraced our steps to the living room. “We’re looking at Romikor Tenako’s fingerprints here.”

Kiri shook her head. “That’s what I thought at first. And we’ve taken for granted all these years that what was done to me was Tenako’s work. But I’ve looked more closely at the research done on my ‘enhancements’ since then, as well as the work my father did previously. Brilliant, yes. But over the past few days I’ve realized that not even he had the necessary foundation to have done what he did. Forty-six years after the fact, our most advanced researchers in the field of genetic engineering still can’t figure out just how it was done.”

“And done to you too, Will. Apparently every cell in your body contains a microscopic battery of some kind. How it was done, how it would work, and how some kind of ‘key’ could trigger it is still a mystery. No, there’s something else here, and I can’t help but think that understanding it is going to become a life and death issue for Qozernon.”

“Perhaps sooner than you think,” said Lev quietly. “That’s why Zee and I are here today. There are some things you need to know. Most importantly, we have strong reason to believe that Teyn’s fleet will be sailing for Qozernon within the next week or two.”

Stunned silence followed this bombshell. Gelhinda finally broke the silence. “And what have we been doing all this time? Anything?”

Lev shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “We—meaning the Qozernan government, of course—have for the past six weeks been secretly retrofitting all available ships with a laser cannon we’ve developed from the laser rifles we captured and dismantled. However, as you know, they don’t contain their own energy source, apparently drawing it instead from some kind of hyperspace transmission. We don’t have access to that energy, so the best we can do is a stored energy concentrator that charges from the ship’s engines—like a capacitor, in your terms,” he added to me in explanation.

“So the bottom line is—” Kiri began. “The bottom line is that each cannon can only be fired once every thirty-five minutes,” he finished

for her heavily. There was an instant uproar.

“This is suicide,” fumed Gelhinda. “And when you say ships, do I assume you mean ordinary merchant ships? I don’t suppose we can hope that our ever-budget-conscious government has been secretly building up a military arm of its own?”

Lev shook his head. “This is the best we can do. Qozernon is in big trouble. Really big trouble.”

Silence again settled over the group. Kiri especially appeared lost in thought. Finally she spoke very softly, almost to herself. “Meeting them head on won’t work. We have to find out why they’re doing this. Somewhere there’s a key, and I have to find it.”

Zyanita shrugged. “Well, you do it your way and we’ll pursue ours. But all your pretty charts and diagrams aren’t going to stop that fleet,” she added coldly. And on that unpleasant note the meeting broke up.

I escorted our guests to the door and saw them off, after glimpsing the now-customary mini-drama featuring Senaria and Lev. When I returned to the living room I found Kiri stretched out on her back on the couch, snoring softly. As I gently picked her up in my arms, she stirred slightly and mumbled something that sounded vaguely like “Washuu dune?”

“I’m putting you to bed,” I answered, and carried her up to her room without further protest. A few minutes later she was fast asleep in her own bed.

I had hoped that she might be more like herself after a good night’s sleep, but the next morning she seemed as preoccupied as ever, absently picking at breakfast. I finally got a reaction from her when I mentioned my bizarre conversation with Zyanita, receiving an exasperated shrug in response. “Leave it to her to try stab me in the back. Well, don’t worry about it; it’s hardly the first time. She has a lot of problems of her own and I’m used to it. Besides, she’s spent the better part of her life learning every corner and byway of Deshtiris and is just too valuable to us. Do me a favor and forget about it.”

The next few days were hell. I saw almost nothing of her, and when I did I was as likely to get my head bitten off as anything. On top of that was the menace from Deshtiris. The thought of this remarkable family being in danger from Brizal assassins hung over me like an unshakable black cloud. Senaria appeared to be as frustrated as I, and several times I caught her pacing around like a caged animal. Much to my surprise, there was no mention of any of this on Qozernan television.

“I guess there’s not a lot of point in alarming people,” she suggested as I searched unsuccessfully for any real news in the available programming. “After all, we know and a lot of good it’s doing us.”

“What’s this Krigghin Teyn like?” I asked. “I’ve heard his name enough times, but I don’t even know what he looks like.”

In response, Senaria took the remote and punched in a series of commands. I saw the words “Krigghin Teyn” and “documentary” flash across the screen, along with some file numbers and other characters, and then I found myself viewing an ordinary-looking man, seemingly in his early forties, with short brown hair and an earnest expression. At the bottom of the screen a caption appeared: “Krigghin Teyn: Portrait of a Savior.”

“It’s a Brizal propaganda film,” Senaria warned me. “Required viewing in the Deshtiran schools. But it’ll give you the general idea.” It opened with Teyn shaking hands with what I presumed were intended to be “the common people,” visiting hospitals, and similar such stuff, while the narrator introduced him in a worshipful tone as the man who had saved Deshtiris from chaos and corporate greed. Then Teyn himself began to speak, and I realized that he had the most hypnotic eyes I had ever seen. Even on a video (albeit a 3D video, of course, like most non-Earth television) the effect was almost frightening, as banal platitudes suddenly acquired deep meaning and I caught myself actually admiring the sincerity of the man.

“Enough,” I said, taking a deep breath. Senaria grinned.

“Did the same thing to me the first time I saw it. He knows how to work an audience, all right. From all reports, though, he’s really not terribly bright, and the general assumption is that he has some kind of council behind him that actually makes the decisions. They must be good, because the planet’s a model of organization, even if it is an ecological disaster area. Nobody knows who they are, though.”

She also explained that “Brizal,” the name the party was generally known by, was a nickname derived from “BRZ,” the initials of the party’s real name in Deshtiran. For some time afterward I found myself haunted by the image of Teyn, remembering those intense eyes and the warm, trusting feelings they engendered. If Teyn wasn’t running Deshtiris, who was? I wondered.

“That’s enough of the Brizali,” announced Gelhinda behind us. We turned in surprise to see her standing in the doorway, a mock-serious glare on her face. “You’re going to end up with nervous breakdowns if you keep this up. We all need a rest from Krigghin Teyn and his goons,

and I've decided to do something about it." She stepped aside to reveal Lev standing behind her, obviously amused at her performance.

"Lev?" Senaria stammered. "What are you doing here?"

"His boss told him the same thing I'm telling you," Gelhinda responded for him. "To get out of the office for a day. Right now it's all up to the politicians anyway. So, we're going on a picnic," she concluded grandly.

As we packed up the necessities, Gelhinda made one last attempt to drag Kiri away from her work. She shortly returned from the field of battle, evidently vanquished. "Sorry, Will," she said with mock solemnity. "My mission was a failure. I guess you'll have to put up with me as your date for this trip." She didn't look terribly sorry about it, either, so I chivalrously took her picnic basket as we walked arm in arm from the house.

Not much later we were on our way in, of all things, the *Futaba*. "I thought the *Futaba* wasn't for pleasure trips," I said to Senaria in surprise as she lifted us just above the atmosphere and headed southeast. "Not for an hours' drive," she answered with a grin, obviously delighted to be able to show off her piloting skills for Lev again. "But we're going to the other side of the planet, and for that this is more practical."

Before our departure, Gelhinda had informed us that since she had taken care of the guest list and packed the lunches it was up to Senaria to decide on our destination. For a moment the girl had looked nonplused, then her eyes had lit up with a distinctly ominous gleam. Other than telling us to wear light clothing, she had firmly refused to let anything further slip out. A true stepsister to Kiri, I thought grimly.

Once out of the atmosphere it took only a few minutes to semicircumnavigate the globe, and soon we were descending onto what appeared to be a savanna, with broad grassy plains alternating with scattered clusters of trees, eventually landing in a small clearing within one of the larger clumps. During the descent I had seen no sign of roads anywhere in the area we were entering, although there were occasional glimmers of water here and there. Senaria had been carefully examining a screen similar to the one Kiri had consulted back in the ill-fated house in the desert mountains, and eventually emitted a satisfied chuckle as a small cluster of blue squares appeared on the screen.

"Leave the lunches on the ship for now," she instructed us as she settled a few feet above the thick yellow grass and had the *Futaba* extrude a nifty ladder from the portal. Cautioning us not to make more noise than necessary, she led us out of the clearing along what looked

like a game path into the surrounding trees.

For several minutes we followed the path, the sounds of bird life all around. The heat, while not ferocious, was considerable, but the air was refreshingly dry. I saw the gleam of sunlight on grass ahead, and a moment later we emerged onto a broad open plain.

That was when I found myself walking directly into what looked like a pretty realistic herd (or whatever you call it) of *lions*. I will admit that I may not have entirely covered myself with glory during the moments that followed.

“Lions,” I half stammered, half whispered. “Lions. They’re lions.”

“Of course they’re lions,” Senaria snorted, making no great effort to keep her voice down. “That’s why we’re here.” Lev and Gelhinda were grinning broadly; driven insane by fear, I charitably assumed. Senaria strode into the group, moving as fluidly as the lions themselves and speaking to them in soft purring tones. One of them looked up, yawned in boredom, and then put its head back down as she gently scratched behind its neck.

“Are you all right, Will?” asked Gelhinda calmly. She claimed later that I was standing there with my mouth opening and closing like a fish trying to breathe air; I deny it; that’s my story and I’m sticking to it. On the other hand, I will admit to being somewhat disconcerted. I had visions of a tombstone bearing the epitaph *Something he disagreed with ate him*.

By this time Lev had joined Senaria, the girl showing him where the creatures (admittedly magnificent) liked best to be scratched. Gelhinda urged me to do likewise. “Didn’t Kiri tell you about the wildlife here?” she asked curiously.

“Just that it all originally came from Earth,” I managed, my heart rate finally beginning to relax into the three digit range.

“Leave it to her to skip the important part,” she sighed. Patiently she explained that the Virrin had genetically implanted a complete indifference to humans in every species of fauna transplanted from Earth. Normally it was perfectly safe to approach any animal on the planet, although under extreme circumstances (such as a sudden loud noise or a threat to their young) this could be unexpectedly overridden.

“Just watch out for cubs,” she cautioned me. “If one comes up to you, freeze until it leaves. Otherwise you’re quite safe.” I should add that this indifference to humans in no way affected their behavior towards other species; Qozernan lions remain the most fearsome predators on the planet.

Well, I did manage to overcome my skepticism and ended up

sitting on the grass comfortably leaning against one of the gorgeous beasts and feeling its purring vibrating through my body like an immense motor. It was actually with some reluctance that we returned to the ship to fetch our lunches and fly elsewhere for our meal, Senaria explaining that if we had tried to eat around the lions we would have been compelled to share our food, which would have been a severe violation of environmental regulations. Besides, we would have been lucky if anything had remained for ourselves.

Gelhinda and I ended up on a small bluff overlooking a broad river and watched a gorgeous sunset. Senaria and Lev had drifted off somewhere on their own, and returned only as dusk was settling, looking rather a bit tousled. Gelhinda gave me a knowing wink as we headed back to the *Futaba*.

When we finally returned to the house, I discovered Kiri in her computer room slumped over the keyboard, fast asleep. On the screen in front of her was a small warning box reading “System Error: Stuck Key,” accompanied by an irritating repetitive beeping. Judging from the system time displayed on the error message, she had been out for at least two hours. Once again I lifted her in my arms and carried her off to her bed, this time receiving only an unintelligible mumble in response.



It was a good thing that Kiri had gotten the rest she did, because as best as I could determine that was the last time she slept for three days straight. Once or twice I found her in the kitchen at odd hours, grabbing a snack, and always totally preoccupied. Regardless of the hour, if I walked by the door to her computer lab I saw her light shining under the door and could hear the quiet clicking of her keyboard. On the second day I took the bull by the horns and risked entering (after knocking *very* quietly).

“So what is it you’re trying to do?” I asked, hoping to at least draw her into a conversation for a moment. To my surprise she actually answered my question, rubbing the fatigue from her eyes. “Their systems keep locking up unexpectedly. There doesn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason to it.”

“So this is the corporate problem you’re working on,” I said. She nodded.

“You’re probably wondering how I can be working on this with that other thing hanging over our heads. I can’t say how, but something keeps telling me that what I need is here.” I looked at her in perplexity. “I don’t really understand it either,” she said helplessly. “It’s just a feeling.” It sounded as if she were suffering from severe sleep deprivation, I thought to myself with some alarm.

“It doesn’t appear to be a hardware problem as far as I can tell.” For a moment this comment seemed to come from out of the blue, and then I realized she was again talking about the systems puzzle she had been hired to solve. I thought about it for a moment.

“So maybe it’s a software problem?” I suggested. She shook her head. I could see she was losing patience with me pretty quickly. “I’d be able to do a dump if that were the case. This locks up everything.”

Something rang a bell. I vaguely remembered hearing something like this on one of the computing newsgroups on the Internet a while back. “So how about an illegal instruction that the CPU can’t handle?”

“That would always trigger an exception*,” she snapped irritably. “Look, just let me work, okay?” and rudely turned back to her screen. I beat a hasty retreat out of the room, backing into someone who put their arms around my waist from behind and gave me a friendly squeeze. It was, of course, Senaria.

“Don’t worry,” she said softly into my ear. “She gets this way when she’s really obsessed with a project. She was like this when she was finishing the *Futaba*. Once she’s done she’ll transform back into a normal human being.” At this point I wasn’t quite sure about the last part, but decided to let it pass.

Senaria herself seemed to be in a state verging on euphoria, something I attributed to the fact that she had only just now returned from yet another date with Lev the previous evening. I’m glad someone’s life is still moving forward, I thought to myself rather petulantly.

That evening I found Gelhinda sitting in her study and shared my concerns with her. Somewhat to my surprise, she did not seem at all alarmed. “I’ve never seen her become irrational from lack of sleep, or from anything else for that matter. I think it’s more likely that she’s just seeing something we’re not. When she’s ready, she’ll rest.”

“It’s just that—well, she almost seems like a different person than the one I arrived with,” I said. Gelhinda read my expression all too well.

“You know, Will,” she said quite seriously, “Kiri may seem to you to be the galaxy’s most self-assured life form, but I’ve known her all her life and I’ve seen a much different person at times. Your parents took her in as though she were their own when her family self-destructed, and they were really the only parents she ever knew. I don’t believe that she ever got over their deaths. Since then she’s carried a lot of emotional baggage around with her, although she’s usually pretty good at keeping it under wraps.” I nodded, remembering that first day on the *Futaba*.

“Has she spoken much to you about your parents, Will?” she asked with an odd expression on her face.

“We talked a bit on the trip here,” I said, “but she didn’t really say much. I got the impression that she didn’t want to discuss them. Can

* An exception is a signal a chip generates to notify the operating system that something terrible has happened, so that the system can decide how to handle it. One example is the infamous “Attempt to divide by zero” message DOS users used to receive just before losing all of their unsaved work.—*Ed.*

you tell me a little about them?” Gelhinda leaned back in her chair.

“My husband and I—he was the Qozernan ambassador at the time, as you already know—were close friends with them. They were a sweet, loving couple, and wonderful parents. Their family was everything to them, and the way they took Kiri in was heartwarming to all of us. Unfortunately, they were also incompetent.” For a moment the remark caught me by surprise, as though I’d heard a sour note in a Mozart symphony. She stood up and poured a pair of drinks from a liquor cabinet. Handing me one, she sat down and resumed.

“Please don’t tell Kiri I spoke to you about this,” she went on. “It’s one of her blind spots, I think. To her they could do no wrong. But they were as much responsible for the disaster on Deshtiris as Teyn was, in my view. My husband and I saw what was coming, and tried to warn them, but they just weren’t listening.”

“You have to understand that on Deshtiris, the monarchy was not a figurehead position the way it’s become in most nations on Earth. Nor was it an autocracy, but it did have a vast amount of power. On Deshtiris the government was structured much like your United States government, with an elected lawmaking body, courts, and chief executive. However, above them were the Emperor and Empress, who could themselves issue laws as well as veto bills passed by the assembly. By longstanding tradition, this power was rarely used, but it was there.”

“Unfortunately, your parents watched developments on Earth with fascination, and took them a bit too seriously. A few years before you were born the Second World War had run to its conclusion, and, badly misreading both your and our histories, they became enamored of the idea that pure democracy was the wave of the future and that monarchies were an outdated relic of the past. They resolved to never ‘misuse’ their position, as they saw it, and determined that they would remain figureheads only.”

“We all saw what was happening to the country as the Brizali began gaining strength, and urged them to speak out. They assured us that ‘the people’ would never let it happen, that their innate common sense would reject such barbarism. They had no concept of the evil that can result when sufficient money is poured into the political engines. Even without issuing edicts of their own, by merely speaking out, they could have rallied popular opinion and stifled the horrible thing in its nest. But they felt that their role was to ‘build a consensus,’ not to press their own values on the nation. They never understood that it’s the politicians’ role to build consensus; that their role was to act as a

conscience over and above the political maelstrom. By the time they realized their terrible error it was far too late. Too much of the political structure of the nation had been bought up with Brizal money.”

“And now Kiri has to face that legacy,” she finished, “and somehow feels that it’s her responsibility to correct things. She’s built up a wall between her and the rest of the world. I think she’s afraid that she’ll hurt someone else if she gets too close to them. Senaria learned that the hard way a few years ago when she told Kiri she loved her.”

I glanced at her in surprise. “You knew about that?”

For a moment she seemed taken aback by the question. “She’s my daughter. Of course she told me about it.” Then something clicked, and she chuckled. “Oh, of course. I keep forgetting that your culture still has hissy fits over things like gender. No, it wasn’t what she told Kiri that shocked me, it was what Kiri did. A few days afterwards she told us that she was going on an expedition to do some research and wouldn’t be back for a ‘little while.’ Then she disappeared for over fifteen months. We received occasional hyperspace messages from her for the first three, and then they became too faint to come through. It was nine months later that we finally heard from her again as she came back into range. Senaria was an absolute basket case. I don’t think she’s ever quite forgiven her. Or gotten over her, either.”

“Did Kiri ever tell you where she went? Or why?” I asked, rather stunned myself.

“No,” Gelhinda answered thoughtfully. “My feeling is that she was just running away from an awkward situation in order to avoid hurting someone. Of course, the result was just the opposite. She did the same thing once to someone on Earth, a physicist if I remember correctly.”

“On top of that, even though she’d never admit it, I think that deep down inside she still believes that people consider her something of a freak. She’s never really forgiven her father for what he did to her. It’s ironic, in a way, because when she was a child she was probably the closest thing Deshtiris ever had to an Earth-style celebrity. I remember how those wonderful eyes used to show up all the time on magazine covers and television news spots. She was probably the most beloved person on Deshtiris, partly because she never seemed to realize it. People adored her for her utterly unspoiled personality. Since then she’s developed a hard edge to her character, but underneath she’s still a very vulnerable little girl in a lot of ways.”

“She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known,” I said more to myself than to Gelhinda. We were both silent for a moment.

“You’re in love with her, aren’t you?” Gelhinda said unexpectedly.

“And she’s more or less keeping you at arm’s length. That’s not easy for anyone to deal with.” Caught off guard, I nodded and looked away. “Give her time, Will. I’m sure she feels the same way about you. But you have to keep in mind that she’s terrified of doing to someone else what her parents—that is, your parents—did to her, at least in her own mind. She felt horribly abandoned when she first arrived here from Deshtiris, and then having to hide you away on Earth just a week later nearly destroyed her. I remember that when she returned she cried for days. I think the only thing that kept her going at all after that was knowing that your future depended on her.”

She sipped her drink and eyed me meaningfully. “You might just have to bully her a bit, Will. Don’t let her make all your decisions for you. It’s your life too.”

The next evening, for the first time, there was a news report about worsening relations with Deshtiris. Citizens were warned that they might receive important instructions within the next few days. There was no mention of an impending invasion.

And Kiri worked through the night again. But the next morning I found her asleep in her bed. To my amazement she slept through the entire day, and that night as well. She was still asleep when I returned to my own room, wondering what the next sunrise would bring.



The following morning I was awakened for the first time in ages by a furious pounding on the door and Kiri's cheery breakfast call. I wasted no time getting myself dressed and downstairs and found her and the others already digging in.

"Gelhinda, check your accounts," Kiri declared ebulliently. "You should find a fat new credit there. I sent in the fix before I crashed and this morning had a message back that everything was working and payment had been transferred."

"So you finally solved the problem, then?" Gelhinda asked, looking more relieved than anything.

"More than one," Kiri replied cryptically. She looked exceptionally pleased with herself, I thought.

"So how much did you get?" demanded Senaria. Kiri named a figure.

"How much is that in real money?" I couldn't resist asking.

She thought a moment. "I think it would be about eighty-six thousand U.S.," she decided. "Since there's no official exchange rate it's a little bit hard to say, exactly." I whistled. "By the way," she added, "thanks for the tip. You were right; it was an illegal instruction." Her eyes gleamed as she said it, as if relishing a private joke.

After breakfast she asked if I felt like going on an excursion. Since I was starting to feel a severe touch of cabin fever after several weeks of interplanetary television, I hastily agreed. So it was that a few hours later we were standing on a railroad station platform, watching a sleek passenger train roll in on, of all things, flanged wheels on steel rails. Some technology is just too efficient to pass up, I thought to myself. I'd always enjoyed trains, and much regretted the American tendency to cram passengers into flying sardine cans and call it "travel."

It turned out that Qozernan trains are designed more along European lines than American, with individual compartments that open directly onto the platform. We were fortunate enough to get one to ourselves, and were soon cruising through the gently rolling landscape at an estimated three hundred miles per hour or so on glass-smooth roadbed. Kiri had put in her contacts and restored her hair back to its

sandy-colored camouflage for the first time since our arrival on Qozernon, and we looked for all the world like a pair of college students out on a weekend date.

“So where are we going?” I asked, as usual not really expecting an answer.

To my astonishment, I got one. “We’re going to visit a very old and very rich man, someone who makes me feel dirty every time I even think about him.”

Seeing my surprise at the evident bitterness in her tone, she continued, “His name is Neng Jinhos. He used to be CEO of the largest pharmaceutical firm on Deshtiris during the decade before the Brizal takeover. When they suddenly threw him out and nationalized the company, he saw which way the wind was blowing and fled to Qozernon. He’d squirreled away fat sums in various locations in the meantime, and lucky for him part of it was here. He’s now living in a large mansion on the edge of Lernesdi, surrounded by bodyguards. Apparently there have been several assassination attempts.”

“If he’s so reclusive, how did you get him to agree to see you? Just who did you impersonate?” I demanded.

She laughed. “You’re getting to know me a bit too well. Actually, I told him Romikor Mikiria and a friend wanted to see him, and that we’d be arriving under assumed names. I had to hack around his computer firewall to get the message to him, but I got an email back this morning with just one word: ‘Agreed.’ I think his conscience is probably bothering him. So here we are.”

As we glided along through the gradually urbanizing countryside, she filled me in on the details. The company had been making simple pharmaceuticals and an honest profit. About ten years before the Brizal takeover, it began marketing a series of remarkable medicines, capable of reversing a number of previously terminal conditions. In a shocking repudiation of the accepted practices of the time, the company (whose name was of course Deshtiran but which I will loosely render here as “SamariCorp”) did not patent its products or publish its research, instead claiming “trade secrets.”

Although this created a considerable amount of bad publicity (for up to that time the healing arts had not yet begun the sickening slide from a profession into an industry), it was nothing compared to SamariCorp’s voracious marketing practices, which were truly new to the Deshtiran health profession. Price gouging, special licensing fees, and a barrage of harassment lawsuits against competitors made their ugly appearance.

However, when pushed to the wall people will generally choose life over money, and SamariCorp prospered mightily in spite of becoming the most hated corporation on the planet. Ironically, Kiri explained, her researches had revealed that SamariCorp, and the example it had set for the rest of the industry (which soon jumped enthusiastically into the same wallow), had during the next decade been a major factor in the rise of the Brizali and their charismatic leader, Krigghin Teyn. Teyn had made the obscenity of health care as corporate profit center a keystone of his propaganda, and even some who were horrified at the Brizali's blatant disregard for individual rights had held their noses and supported them as a result.

We disembarked at a small, well-kept suburban station on the outskirts of Lernesdi, and took a public transport to the gates of a high-walled property. A guard with a sword and portable telecom at his belt at first tried to turn us away, and snorted when Kiri informed him that we had an appointment. Finally he took our names (the assumed ones, of course) and phoned to someone inside. A few moments later he grudgingly opened the gate and admitted us. "I'm not sure why you're so special," he muttered grumpily. "The old guy hasn't seen any visitors for the past two months."

Surprisingly, considering the obvious wealth inherent in a property of this size and location, the landscaping was clearly going to seed, and the mansion which loomed through the untrimmed trees had a distinctly run-down appearance. "He's afraid to let anyone in to maintain the place," mused Kiri under her breath. At the front door we were met by an elderly butleress and ushered into an ornate but dusty study. Along the way I noticed another armed guard sitting in a darkened alcove within easy reach of the front door. Sitting with his back to the shuttered window of the study was a very old man, the first such I had seen on Qozernon, with white hair and a shriveled, crafty face.

He looked suspiciously at Kiri. "I received your email, but I know what Romikor Mikiria looked like, and to me you don't look anything like her. How do I know you're who you say you are?" In response she reached into her eyes and removed her contacts, placing them in a small case she had taken from a pocket of her jacket. Jinhos' own eyes widened, and even his sinister, wizened face seemed to soften for a moment.

"Those eyes," he said reflectively. "Those were probably the most beautiful eyes on the planet. You know, if it were anyone else I would have told them to go to hell. But seeing you again... It's like turning back the clock for an old man." There was a distant look in his

yellowing eyes. I felt Kiri shiver slightly.

“Jinhos,” she said, trying to keep the ice out of her voice, “something happened on Deshtiris thirty years ago and I have to find out why. There’s nothing I can do to force the truth from you, but I think you were as horrified as I about what happened to our world. I don’t know if I can do anything about it now or not, but I’m going to try and I think you know something that might help.” Jinhos looked—guilty, yes, guilty, I thought to myself. About what? “Tell me about SamariCorp,” she said softly.

He closed his eyes. For a few moments I thought he had fallen asleep, then he began to speak. I realized he didn’t want to look Kiri in the eyes as he told his tale. “When I took over SamariCorp, it was a small, modestly profitable company,” he began. “I was ambitious, I was already ninety-five years old, and I wanted more. We didn’t have the research talent or the facilities to come up with breakthroughs. We were coasting along with twenty-year-old drugs that were gradually being superseded by our competitors, with their larger staffs and laboratories.”

“And then your father came to me one day and made an astonishing proposition.”

“When was this?” Kiri broke in.

“It was about five years after you were born,” answered Jinhos, mildly annoyed at the interruption. “He said he had access to some medical research information that could make our company, and me—I remember, he specifically mentioned me—wealthy beyond our dreams. He said he couldn’t make use of it himself because of his recent notoriety, but that the data was so complete we wouldn’t even need research staff to develop it. All we’d have to do was develop the engineering for mass production and market the stuff.”

“Naturally I was skeptical. It sounded like a sting of some kind, but at that meeting he handed me some data files—he called it a good-faith preview—and when I looked them over I realized he was handing me something no investigative agency would dare pass around as mere bait. It was nothing less than a cure for,” and here he used the Deshtiran term for what on Earth is known as Parkinson’s Disease. “Everything was there: biophysiological scans, the complete neurochemistry involved, enough in short to get us past the necessary approvals in record time. If it worked.”

“I asked what he wanted. I expected to be hit for a fat payoff up front. Instead, he simply said that once the product was approved, went into production, and hit the market he wanted half the profits. Under

the table, of course.” He opened his eyes and found Kiri’s green orbs staring coldly into his, and winced. “Well, what would you have done?” he whined. “It was an incredible opportunity. It wasn’t our concern where the data came from. And if it turned out to be bogus, we’d be out the relatively minor expenses of engineering development, rather than the astronomical research and regulatory costs usually involved.”

“I wanted to know why he was willing to trust us. ‘If this is going to be as profitable as I think,’ I said, ‘we’re going to be talking about a lot of money indeed.’ His answer startled me. He said that this was only the tip of the iceberg, and that if we tried to cheat him we’d be throwing away future wealth that we couldn’t even imagine.”

“A total of seventeen billion yled over ten years,” Kiri said coldly (about thirty-three billion U.S. dollars, I mentally calculated). Jinhos looked at her in mingled astonishment and fear. “I’ve gone through SamariCorp’s records already, Jinhos. I knew the money was missing. What I didn’t know was where it went and how you got the technology.” She stopped and stared intently at him for several moments. “Jinhos,” she said finally, her voice hard, “I need to know what my father did with that money.”

“I don’t know,” he said nervously. “It was like pouring it into a black hole. I had a number of agents keeping an eye on Tenako. I thought I’d see signs of the money somewhere, like highly paid research staff disappearing from positions in other companies, or large amounts of equipment being bought up. I couldn’t afford to have him do something stupid and get caught. But the money just—*disappeared*. I don’t know, I swear it,” he finished with panic in his voice, facing Kiri’s unwavering icy stare. Finally she stood up and, taking out her contact case, slowly put her contact lenses back in.

“Jinhos,” she said softly, “you are as responsible for what happened on Deshtiris as anyone alive. If I were a vengeful person I’d probably relish cutting your throat right now.” He flinched at the words. “But to be perfectly frank, I think you’re already living in Hell and you know it better than I. Thanks for taking the time to see us.” Somehow the courtesy at the end of her speech made the rest all the more chilling. We got up to leave.

“You’re going to Deshtiris, aren’t you?” he said. Kiri nodded silently. I suddenly felt cold. “I don’t know if this will be of any use to you,” he continued. “There are several underground passageways from the plant headquarters to some of the outbuildings. I had them put in after the plant was first built, in case of an emergency evacuation. I

don't think they're on any plans. I don't know if anyone ever told the Brizali about them."

"Which outbuilding would be easiest to reach?" asked Kiri.

"Building 23. The entrance was from the basement, hidden in the back of a custodian's closet. Room number 156, I think."

"Thanks," she said. We left without further words.

In the train on the way back Kiri sat lost in thought, while I found myself musing over the odd parallels between what had happened on Deshtiris and what was going on in my own former adopted country. In Jinhos' case he had obviously made a very good business deal, and had not hesitated to profit from it at the expense of the public. But the connection between that and our concerns eluded me.

"But what did he do with the money?" Kiri suddenly mused out loud.

"Didn't he give it to Tenako?" I answered, a bit puzzled.

Kiri looked at me, slightly annoyed as usual at my denseness. "Of course Jinhos did. But what did Tenako do with it?"

"It must have amounted to huge sums," I noted. "But how could he have spent it without anyone noticing?"

"He didn't have a private lab of his own; he couldn't have hidden an establishment of a size sufficient to swallow up funds like that," she said mostly to herself. "And he'd have had no way to use it once the Brizali took over." She stopped in evident frustration. "Everything involving him always ends up at a blank wall there. He hasn't even been seen since then. But I keep having this nagging feeling that somehow there was a connection, and that the connection still exists."

I had a sudden thought. It didn't make a lot of sense, but right now not a lot did. "Could he have been passing the money along to the Brizali when they were gaining strength?" I suggested. "You said yourself that no one could figure out where their financing was coming from."

Kiri shook her head. "The possibility had occurred to me. But no matter how hard I try I can't think of any rational motivation for it. The Brizali nationalized SamariCorp along with the rest of the health industry. That would have cut off his source of funding, whatever he was doing with it."

"It's the only place the money could have gone, and yet it made no sense for him to do it," she summed up. "Something essential is missing." For a long time she was silent, lost in her thoughts. I watched the farmlands fly by and wondered what was going to happen to this peaceful idyllic world, so similar to Earth and yet so different.

It was growing dark outside the compartment, and we had about two hours left before our station, when I was jolted out of my reverie. “Will,” Kiri said in a low voice, “a long time ago you promised to wait for me, and I promised to let you know when I had things sorted out. You’ve been as good as your word, and it’s time for me to keep mine.” Something in the way she said it made my throat tighten. “I said I would always be here for you as a friend. I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but I think you’d be better off if we left it that way.”

I was stunned. For a moment I wondered if I’d heard her correctly. “I should never have taken you away from Earth,” she continued hesitantly. “I had no idea things were so critical here.” There was something artificial in the way she said it, as if she were reading lines from an unfamiliar play.

“You’re not making sense to me,” I said hoarsely. “What does that have to do with the way you feel? This is your decision to make, and I’ll accept it whatever it is, but I think I have a right to understand why.”

She looked taken aback, as if a fellow actor had started ad libbing unexpectedly. “I’ve found out things since we returned that I didn’t expect,” she said. “I didn’t know matters had gotten this dangerous. There’s going to be a war, Will, maybe in just a few days, and the only possible way to stop it is for me to do some very foolhardy things. This isn’t your war. It’s not even your world any more. You didn’t know what you were getting yourself into when you left Earth, and I wouldn’t have brought you here if I had known what I know now.” I stared at her incredulously. I could feel my heart thrashing wildly. “It’s not fair to you,” she finished lamely.

“Fair?” I finally exploded. “We’re not talking about the rules of some kind of game here, Kiri. I’m sorry, but I’m going to be unfair as hell to you right now. I’m going to ask you the question you’re avoiding answering. I don’t want to know if it’s fair, or if you should or shouldn’t have done something. I only want to know one thing: whether or not you *love me*.” She flinched visibly at the words. “Because if you don’t, I’ll drop the subject and never mention it again. But if you do, all the rest of this is just bullshit.” For a few seconds the lights of a small town passed by the window, illuminating Kiri’s frozen expression with a series of eerie flashes. There was a momentary clatter as we banged over a crossing with another line.

“I know you do love me,” I continued, the words seemingly pouring out on their own. “Everything you do, everything you say tells me you do. But you won’t tell yourself. What are you afraid of, Kiri?”

It's not like you to hide from the truth; the truth is what you live for."

We had left the town behind. Her low voice seemed one with the near darkness of the compartment. "Because in a few days I'm going to have to leave here, and you, for Deshtiris. I don't know if I'll ever come back. I pulled you out of a comfortable life, and you put it all aside without complaint and came along to another world you don't even remember. I'm going to have to leave you here. And now you want me to tell you something that could haunt you for the rest of your life, the way what I did thirty years ago has haunted me. I can't do that to you, Will. It's not fair to you. Please don't ask me to."

I ran my fingers lightly over her face, wiping away tears. "Whatever you do or don't do, Kiri, understand that what I'm about to say won't be changed by that. When you leave for Deshtiris, I'm going with you. Wherever you go, I'm going with you." She started to speak and I abruptly cut her off, the words coming in a desperate rush. "If you try to leave without me I'll track you to the farthest star, to the edge of the galaxy if I have to. I love you, Kiri, and you're not going to leave me behind now just because of something you had to do thirty years ago."

Kiri turned her head away as I continued; I could hear the anger rising in my voice and made no effort to restrain it. "You've let yourself become a prisoner of your past, and all you see is that past and the dark future you've so painstakingly built on it. This is the present, and it's just as real, just as important. We may have two hundred years left together, or two days. Whatever it is, you don't have a right to throw it away. And dammit, don't try to protect me. This is my life too, and you *are* my life." At that point I abruptly ran out of words and shut up, staring unseeingly out the window.

For a long time the only sound was the soft metallic hiss of the wheels on the rails, and an occasional quiet clatter as we flew over a switch or crossing. Then I felt her hand in mine and turned back to face her. Her eyes were shining in the dim light.

"I do love you, Will," she said in wonderment. "I always have, I think. My first memory as a young girl is of you, and I think that in some kind of childish way I loved you even then. And after that first evening together on Earth, I knew I loved the other you, even with your different past and different memories. You're the only person I've ever really loved, and I think that's what frightens me so much. I can't face the thought of losing you again. But I guess I can't shut you out, no matter how hard I try, can I?"

Slowly she pulled me to her and gave me a gentle kiss. Then she

reached into her eyes and pulled out her contacts, tossing them into the trash receptacle. For a few moments her magnificent green eyes stared into my own.

“I love both of you. Is that okay with you?” she said finally. It took me a moment to digest this typically astonishing statement, and then I took her in my arms and silently gave her my answer as the lights of another small town flashed by the window. And this time there was no one applying any emergency brakes.

As it happened, we damn near missed our stop that evening, and it was a distinctly disheveled-looking pair that Senaria met on the station platform. Fortunately we were the only ones disembarking there. I hope I never lose the memory of those emerald orbs flaming fiercely in the dark compartment each time the glare of a passing street lamp flashed by the window.

“Oh, wow,” marveled Senaria as she looked us over. “You two finally, um, cool...” and then she decided to leave well enough alone and poured us into the back seat of the vehicle without further words. I don’t even remember the ride home.



The next morning I woke up before her. She was lying on her back, one arm draped off the side of the bed. The sun was already shining through the window, and I found myself just staring at her profile, admiring the slightly upturned nose and the shaggy mane of crimson hair. Though she certainly wouldn't be considered "glamorous" by conventional standards, to me they added up to a beauty far superior to any other I had seen. She stirred slightly, and lazily half-opened her eyes, adding a brilliant splash of green to the mixture. "Mmmmmmm," she said, stretching, and rolled over on her side facing me and draped an arm over my neck. "Is it morning already?"

"Lazy lout," I chided her. "It's already after ten."

"And how long ago did you wake up?" she retorted suspiciously. I admitted to about ten minutes or so, receiving a satisfied snort in return as she closed her eyes again. Running my fingers through her hair, I noticed once more the pendant hanging from a small gold chain around her neck. I had seen the chain before, but not the pendant, a small semicircle of iridescent metal, until last night. Gently I slipped my fingers between her throat and the chain and raised the pendant for a closer look.

"It's from my mother," mumbled Kiri sleepily, without opening her eyes again. "In fact, it's the only thing I have from her." The surface of the pendant had an oddly intricate appearance, reminding me of a computer chip.

"I thought you never knew your mother," I said, hoping it wasn't a sore subject.

"Your mother gave it to me when I was four," she answered. "She said my mother had given it to her with the request that she pass it along to me someday. I've worn it ever since." Unexpectedly her eyes were open, boring into mine. "Will, promise me something," she said, and there was no trace of sleep in her voice. (I never ceased to marvel at how quickly her mood could change without warning.) "If anything ever happens to me, I want you to take this. Promise me that."

"What brought that on?" I asked, suddenly feeling uneasy.

“Nothing,” she replied carelessly, then ran a hand over my face. “What am I saying? Like hell, ‘Nothing.’ Will, I just don’t know what’s going to happen in the next few days. I feel like we’re living on an active volcano right now. Just promise me, please?”

Surprised, I agreed. “I am going with you, you know,” I reminded her. She nodded.

“But that’s not today,” she added, pulling my lips to hers. It was near noon when we made it to “breakfast,” much to Gelhinda’s and Senaria’s amusement.

I noticed that Kiri waited until the meal was over before privately breaking the news of our impending expedition to Gelhinda, who made no attempt to conceal her horror. “You’re not going back to that awful place again, Kiri?” she said earnestly. “You haven’t forgotten the close call you had last time? Things are much worse now.” While Kiri tried unsuccessfully to reassure her I wondered just what close call that had been.

Later that afternoon Lev and Zyanita arrived, demanding a report on the previous day’s outing. “So what’s the importance of a tunnel between the old SamariCorp headquarters and an outbuilding?” I asked. “I thought the plant was nationalized years ago.” It was the usual six of us in the living room, Gelhinda and Senaria having also joined us.

“SamariCorp wasn’t just nationalized,” Kiri explained. “For some reason the Brizali turned it into their main administrative center. It’s now virtually a small city, renamed Tar Deshta.” I shivered. Literally translated, Tar Deshta meant Heart of Deshtiris. Somehow it seemed appropriate. “The old plant headquarters building now has some kind of special importance, more than just a central office complex, but I don’t know what that is. I do know that it’s exceptionally well-guarded. Something tells me that it’s going to be our final destination.” It was just as well that I didn’t know then how truly she spoke. I saw a startled expression cross Senaria’s face, and realized that Gelhinda hadn’t yet told her what we were considering.

Kiri added, with sudden vehemence, “Emergency evacuation, my ass! He had that put in as an escape route in case he ever had to make a sudden disappearance. Otherwise he’d hardly have hidden an entrance away in a closet. My guess is that he was cooking the books long before he ever got tangled up with my father. He may well have accepted the deal as much out of desperation as greed, if he was afraid the accountants were going to catch up with him.”

“Unfortunately, there’s nothing we can legally do about him,” said Lev. “He hasn’t broken any Qozernan laws. But at least we have a little

more information to go on.”

“Well, it looks like he made a deal with the devil,” said Gelhinda. “I almost feel sorry for him. But only almost.”

There was a long silence, finally broken by Lev. “I understand you’re considering going to Deshtiris. I think you should know that we have reason to believe that their fleet will be launching within the next three or four days. Our forces, such as they are, are on full alert. If you are going to do something, you’re going to have to do it soon.” Kiri nodded as he continued. “You know that the Qozernan government doesn’t recognize your activities; in fact we’ve made a point of turning a blind eye towards them as long as nothing blows up in our faces. However, I think we have a right to know what you’re considering.”

Another pause ensued, if anything even more uncomfortable than the first. Senaria had turned deathly pale, her eyes fixed unblinkingly on Kiri’s face. Gelhinda stared uncomfortably at the floor.

“Your ships will crumple like tin cans in front of the Deshtiran battleships,” Kiri observed sadly. “Their weapons are light-years beyond ours. But I think there is a way,” she added, and we all listened intently.

“Everything I’ve learned about Deshtiris in the last decade indicates that they’ve poured all their resources into a handful of top-secret plants scattered over the planet’s surface. Virtually all of their available energy is directed into those plants, to the point that they’re using synthetic petroleum for transportation and other everyday needs and ignoring the ecological disaster that’s developing as a result.”

“I can’t absolutely prove it,” she went on, “but I’m certain that these plants are the energy sources for their weapons. Think of them as transformers, converting the electricity being fed into them from all of their fusion plants into some kind of hyperspace energy that their weapons can utilize, even when light-years from home. These plants are controlled by a computer system centralized in Tar Deshta, specifically in the old converted SamariCorp plant in the center of the city. Thanks to something Will mentioned, I now think I can disable that system, but only if I can get access to a terminal in the control center. The system is too well protected from outside attacks for me to hack in from here.”

“The control center?” Lev interrupted in astonishment. “You’re out of your mind. Tar Deshta is the most well-guarded installation on Deshtiris. We’ve lost several of our best operatives just trying to get someone into place there.” So far nothing I was hearing was easing the knot in my own stomach, either. Kiri smiled grimly and continued.

“But now we have the last piece,” she said. “Jinhos’ passageway. It may be a long shot, but I think we can get into the city at least, and if we can reach that outbuilding we’re as good as there.” Lev shook his head skeptically. “It’s an awful risk you’re taking.”

“Well, what’s the alternative?” she snapped in evident frustration. “Letting our merchant fleet get pulverized playing soldier? You might as well surrender now for all the chance they’ve got. They couldn’t even ram the Deshtiran fleet before being vaporized. At least this plan has a faint chance of success, and I have to try it. Don’t tell me that you’re going to forbid it, because unless you place me under arrest and lock me up I’m going.”

“And I,” I said, somewhat to my own surprise. Senaria was about to speak up, but caught a warning shake of the head from Kiri and closed her mouth in evident dismay.

Lev shook his head. “I knew you would, and I didn’t expect you to change your mind. That’s why before we got here Zee and I agreed that we would be going with you.” Kiri and I both stared in astonishment. “You’re going to need help with this, and the two of us probably know more about Deshtiris than anyone else on Qozernon, yourself excepted.”

Kiri looked for a moment as though she were going to object, then thought better of it. “So be it,” she said finally. “Agreed. I suggest we make arrangements tomorrow and leave the following morning.” Everyone nodded silently. A few minutes later the gathering broke up in a somber mood.

“I believe I can get us maps through some of my contacts in the refugee community,” Zyanita offered on the way out. “I know several people that used to work at SamariCorp and brought files out with them.”

“That would be great, Zee,” said Kiri gratefully. “I knew I could count on you.” An unusual woman indeed, I thought to myself, reflecting that not everyone is necessarily what they seem.



“So you’re determined to go,” said Kiri the next morning. It wasn’t so much a question as a statement. I nodded. “Well, I won’t stop you, and I have a feeling I’ll need all the help I can get.” She dug into a drawer and pulled out a leather object. Tossing it to me, she said, “Put this on. You’d better get some practice wearing it.” It turned out to be a plain black sword belt, with an additional loop that went up over the opposite shoulder. “Standard Brizal issue,” she added.

The sheath for the sword was empty, a situation quickly rectified as she opened a cupboard in the back of her closet and carefully handed me a gleaming blade, hilt first. “Can I trust you not to slice open your thigh with this the first time you draw it?”

Ignoring the utterly unwarranted gibe, I examined the weapon with admiration. It was the same length and weight as the practice sword I had been using, but the surfaces were of a mirror-like perfection, with just a trace of iridescence. The hilt was inlaid with intricate designs in various metals, so perfectly worked that it was as smooth to the touch as glass. “I had hoped you’d never have to use this,” she said sadly. “It belonged to you on Deshtiris.”

Unlike the practice blade, the point and first few inches were razor sharp. Below that one could safely run a finger along the edge without danger. “I always thought swords were sharp along their entire length,” I commented in some surprise.

Kiri snorted contemptuously. “The idea is to disable your opponents, not hack them apart. Besides, that would drastically increase the risk to the wielder. You might want to practice drawing it, by the way. Also walking around with it; I’d hate to see you do yourself a serious injury,” she added with a slight snicker. I had to admit she was right; it does take a bit of practice to ambulate safely with two and a half feet of steel flapping from your belt.

“Shouldn’t I train with this a bit?” I asked. She shook her head vigorously.

“It’s never a good idea to practice with a real blade. You’ll inevitably pull back your thrusts, and that’s the last habit you want to

be saddled with if you wind up in a real fight. The idea of the practice blades is to let you safely get accustomed to hitting your opponent full strength and not hold back.” I nodded, ruefully recalling many painful bruises earned learning that particular lesson. “If something does go wrong,” she added, “just let your instincts take over. You’ve still got your reflexes from your early training even if you don’t remember it.”

The day was a strained one at best. The previous evening, after our other guests had left, a near-hysterical Senaria had cornered Kiri in the hallway demanding to know what the hell she thought she was doing, and finished by insisting on going along. Kiri had deftly steered her to her room, where I had heard raised voices punctuated by long silences for at least a good hour. When Kiri finally reappeared, she had wearily collapsed onto the couch, her eyelids puffy and red.

“Can’t she understand that this isn’t her fight?” she said bitterly, more to herself than to me. “I just can’t take responsibility for her too. It’s bad enough that you’re going along. She’s still practically a child.” I could see that she was wound up like a spring, and set about massaging some of the tension from her shoulders, receiving a grateful glance in return.

“I tried to explain to her that with this new thing between her and Lev, she’d just be a distraction to him too,” she went on. “We don’t know what kind of split-second decisions we’re going to have to make. She could get him killed, dammit.” I suddenly realized just how hard it must have been for her to agree to my own participation.

She stopped for a moment, looking around to make sure the girl was out of earshot. “Lev asked me privately before the meeting to please not let her go, although he didn’t tell me then he was coming along. I know he’s in love with her, and it must have been terribly hard for him to volunteer for this. He’d be a nervous wreck with her along. So would I,” she added almost inaudibly. “But will she ever forgive me?”

That was last night. Since then we had seen no sign of Senaria, and I thought it better that I not try to seek her out. I suspected that she’d emerge soon enough, and that we hadn’t heard the last of her pleas.

The rest of the day was as hectic as the night before a summer vacation excursion. Kiri spent part of the time on the telecom with Lev, making final arrangements for him and Zyanita to meet us at the house the next morning. Kiri also spent about an hour in the *Futaba*’s cockpit, entering information into one of the panels. “Transformation data for the vehicle we’ll be using on Deshtiris,” she said briefly, motioning toward a wireframe image of a truck of some kind floating in midair

before her. She had just finished when we heard a hesitant knock at the door.

It was Senaria. "I think you'd better see this," she said unsteadily. The frozen look on her face sent chills up my spine. She led us to the television room, where she keyed something into the remote and for a moment the words "Replay time index 5:13-5:17" appeared on screen, shortly replaced by an announcer apparently standing in the middle of a crime scene. I quickly recognized it as the dusty interior of Jinhos' study. The room looked undisturbed except for what appeared to be a crumpled pile of wet laundry in the middle of the floor. For a moment I was too puzzled by the grotesque sight to notice anything else, and then the announcer's voice intruded into my consciousness.

"The victims have been identified as Neng Jinhos, a long-time Deshtiran refugee, and three of his household staff," he was saying. "Government sources have confirmed the killings as the work of the Deshtiran assassination creatures popularly known as Liquidators," and the scene switched to a close up of the soggy clothing, "but declined to comment on the political implications. It has been over twelve years since the last such attack, and several prominent figures have already issued a call for a strong formal protest—"

At that point Kiri switched off the set and turned away for a moment. It took me a few minutes to find my voice, my stomach churning. I remembered the dripping police uniforms worn by our attackers back on Earth. "You mean, that was—was Jinhos?" She nodded. I could see the muscles of her jaw working.

"Looks like you got to him just in time," Senaria said finally. The bizarre horror of the televised scenes had left me without much of an appetite for supper. "At least in the end he tried to make up for what he did," I commented, "even if only in a small way. I guess we were lucky."

Kiri stared unblinkingly at the darkened screen for an uncomfortably long time. "I wonder," she said finally, more to herself than to me.

Dinner culminated in an uncomfortable scene when Kiri flatly turned down Senaria's renewed request to come along, and was climaxed by Senaria stomping off to her room followed a moment later by the bang of her door. We saw no more of her for the rest of the evening. Gelhinda also excused herself early, leaving just the two of us to finish dinner. Neither of us said much to each other that evening, other than the endless routine of going over supplies checklists and gathering materials from various storerooms and cabinets. When sleep

finally came it was the end product of total fatigue.

The next morning found Kiri and me sitting in the living room, covering some last minute details as we waited for Lev and Zyanita. Senaria was again nowhere to be seen. Kiri and I were just reviewing for one last time the list of supplies we needed to bring when the doorbell rang and I got up to answer it. It was Zyanita, with a strange expression on her face.

“Zee? Isn’t Lev with you?” asked Kiri from behind me in some surprise. For a moment Zyanita looked unsure of what to say, then took a deep breath. “I only found out this morning when I went to pick him up,” she said. “Lev was assassinated last night. Like Jinhos,” she added meaningfully. “It was apparently kept out of the news.”

Stunned, I stepped back and let her into the room. Kiri had turned deathly pale. Some sixth sense caused me to turn around, and I saw Senaria standing in the doorway, a stricken expression on her face. Before I could say anything she abruptly turned and ran down the hallway and up the stairs. I automatically waited for the bang of her door but heard nothing.

“Will,” said Kiri softly. “Look after her. Please.” I nodded agreement and headed upstairs, to find her door closed. I gently knocked and waited patiently. After a very long time I heard a muffled “Come in.”

I expected to find her lying on her bed, face down in her pillow, but she was sitting upright in a chair staring out the window. She said nothing as I entered and sat on the bed behind her. “Sen, I’m really sorry,” I said. She nodded, saying nothing. “I know he meant a lot to you.”

“Everything has just gone crazy,” she finally said softly, her back still to me. Abruptly she spun around to face me, her face glistening. “You know, Will, I’ve only loved two people in my entire life,” she said, “and Masakor Lev was one of them.” She started to say something else and stopped, turning back to the window.

“I know, Sen,” I said slowly, “and Romikor Mikiria was the other.” She stared at me with wide red-rimmed eyes.

“How did you know that?” she whispered.

“She told me,” I said. “I think you know that in her own way she loves you back just as much.” For a moment several emotions seemed to flit simultaneously across the girl’s face, and to my surprise it was anger that won out.

“So now she’s going back to that horrible place to get herself killed as well,” she burst out furiously. “And I’m supposed to stay here and

wait for the obituary notice, just as docile as can be. Shit! Doesn't she understand? I'd rather die on Deshtiris if it comes to that. At least I'd be doing something. Can't she just understand that?" she repeated desperately.

"And if you go Gelhi's going to be left behind waiting for you, isn't she?" I said carefully. It took a moment for her to digest the point. "Don't get me wrong, Sen," I went on. "I'm not saying you should or shouldn't do this. Just don't make the right decision for the wrong reason." *Don't let her make all your decisions for you. It's your life too.* "And whatever decision you do make, fight for it if you have to. Kiri's not a machine, you know." She looked at me in puzzlement for a moment, and then buried her head in my shoulder, sobbing her heart out as I held her tightly for several minutes.

"I have to get back," I said. "Do what you have to do. I won't take sides." I found my way back to the living room, where the two women were trying to put the pieces of our shattered expedition back together. Kiri was making a valiant effort to act as though all was business as usual, although I could see that she was under a tremendous strain. Zyanita appeared to be her usual bloodless self. "Will," said the latter, "we've got to decide if we're still going to attempt this."

I stared at her in amazement. "Do we have a choice?" I exploded. "Nothing has really changed, has it? Sure, we're one person short, but Krigghin Teyn's not going to cancel his invasion because of that." Kiri shot me a grateful glance. It was apparent that Zyanita had been urging aborting the trip. "Besides," I said, "the plans I've heard so far don't require any specific number of people. It's not like it's a ballet, for god's sake."

"And," said a determined voice from the doorway, "you've still got four people." It was Senaria, a resolute look on her face. "I'm going too, Kiri." Kiri started from her chair, but hadn't gotten further than opening her mouth before Senaria ran over her like a locomotive. "Goddammit, Kiri, there are two of us here that love you, and neither one of us is going to let you do this by yourself. You're so used to doing things on your own that you've forgotten that some of the rest of us have a stake in this as well. You're not doing us any favors with your martyr act, and as far as I'm concerned you can shove it up your ass. Now, when are we leaving?"

Kiri just stared at her, still openmouthed, not saying a word. I found myself suppressing a cheer, almost forgetting the grim circumstances that had prompted this. For a few seconds the whole scene could have been a staged tableau as no one moved a muscle,

nervously waiting for an explosion.

It never came. Kiri finally just shook her head helplessly. "I guess everyone's got their reasons," she commented in a calm voice, looking directly at me as she said it, "and they're all unassailable as usual. Well, all three of you know the risks. Suit yourselves. Sen, it's up to you to break the news to your mother. And," she added simply, this time with just a hint of a catch in her voice, "thanks."

"Well, if you're really determined to go, then count me in," said Zyanita. "And here," she continued, pulling out a data crystal from her shirt pocket, "are the maps I promised to get, courtesy of the usual confidential source." She was as good as her word, for when the files were loaded into Kiri's computer they proved to be detailed maps of not only the city of Tar Deshta but of the mysterious plant itself.

"This," Zyanita said, tracing out a highlighted crooked line across one part of the map, "is the passageway Jinhos was talking about. If we can get to it, we may be able to get directly to the control room." In a few minutes Kiri had printed out hard copy onto some oversize sheets of waterproof paper and added it to the pile of materials we had amassed.

Without further ado we set to work loading the supplies into the *Futaba's* living quarters. I won't go into the scene that ensued when Gelhinda returned home except to say that between Senaria's decision, Lev's death, and Kiri's urgent request that she stay incognito with relatives in Lernesdi for the next few days, it was one very miserable Gelhinda that Senaria drove to the station later that morning. When I asked Kiri if Gelhinda could really be a target, her response was that at this point anything was possible.

Senaria returned a half-hour later, her eyes redder than before, and I felt secretly grateful to have missed what had evidently been yet another painful scene. By that time the ship was ready. Soon we were securely strapped into our seats as Kiri pointed the *Futaba's* nose almost straight up and accelerated us through the atmosphere, though without the breathtaking force I remembered from my first flight. "You were pulling about two G's then," Kiri explained. "No need for that kind of haste now."

It was a distinctly dispirited party that lifted off the planet's surface that morning. Under normal circumstances I would have been thrilled to find myself once again heading into space, but now I felt instead a premonition of imminent doom hanging over us all. I tried to shake it off and looked around at the other passengers, only to see Zyanita's face, pale as a ghost, her eyes closed.

“I think you’re the only friend I have who’s never taken a ride in the *Futaba*,” Kiri said to her comfortingly. “It must be a bit unsettling for you.” Zyanita nodded. “I’ll be all right,” she said through clenched teeth.

Something tugged at the back of my mind, as though I were faintly reminded of something. For a few moments I worried the idea, trying to tease it to the front of my consciousness, and then it was gone.



Like Earth, Exor is thirty-five light-years from Bashti, so that the trip to Deshtiris took just over twenty-four hours. Once we made the switch to the faster-than-light drive, we had plenty of time to review the maps and other information we would need to be familiar with. Somewhat to my surprise the time passed rather quickly.

Kiri finally insisted that we all try to get the equivalent of a good night's sleep, something easier said than done considering the uncertainties ahead. Leaving the ship on automatic, we all headed for the *Futaba's* living quarters and engaged in the somewhat incongruous nightly rituals of teeth brushing, etc., eventually retiring to our respective rooms.

For a long time I lay awake in the semidark, trying unsuccessfully to sleep. There was something eerie about the stillness, broken only by the sound of Kiri's breathing. It was hard to imagine that we were traveling at many times the speed of light towards a planet so utterly different from the idyllic haven we had just left. Finally I looked over at Kiri and found her watching me intently. "What?" I said.

"I was just thinking about something," she said softly. "I guess I never really thought I'd see you lying there next to me like this, after all these years. Do you remember on Earth when I asked if you were willing to come with me? To an unknown destination?" I nodded; it's not easy to forget a moment that redefined one's life so completely. "Do you realize that if you had said no, I would have left you there? If you had built a happy life for yourself, without knowing who you really were or where you were from, I wouldn't have torn you from that."

"And you?" I asked.

For just a moment I saw the shadow of a melancholy smile pass over her face. "'The journey is the reward,' " she quoted in her typically opaque way. "Can't sleep?"

"No," I responded unnecessarily. "I keep wondering. What happens if we're successful in shutting down the transformers or whatever you called them? Then what? Does everybody just say 'oops' and go home? It can't be that easy."

“No,” she answered. “It won’t be that easy. What we’ll have then are two evenly matched fleets on a direct collision course, and there’s probably no battle bloodier than one between two equal forces.”

“But with the Brizal weapons disabled, what do they fight with?” I asked. “I thought Lev said the Qozernan ships had only makeshift weapons. One-shot laser cannons, if I remember correctly.”

Kiri shook her head. “Both sides have some conventional weapons used for defense against the occasional space marauder. We do have criminals here, remember,” she added, seeing my surprise. “Those weapons don’t have the destructive power of the Brizal ones, but with thousands of ships blasting away at each other, even with low-powered weapons, there are going to be appalling casualties. Probably more than if the Deshtiran ships just overwhelmed the Qozernan ones in an unequal struggle.”

“So what do we do?” I wondered. “Just let them collide?”

“We catch up to them, hopefully before they meet, and ask them to stop,” she said simply.

“We just ask them to stop,” I echoed in disbelief.

“You have a better plan?” she retorted, and I could sense the frustration in her voice. “It’s all a huge puzzle, isn’t it? One thing affects another, and that keeps another piece from fitting, and it just goes on and on. I’m sorry, Will, I don’t know a better way. Now, we’d better try get some sleep.”

I sighed. “I don’t think I’m going to have a lot of luck. Somehow sleep just seems a long way away right now.”

“I know a cure for that,” she said, drawing me to her.

I woke up much later with an odd continuous beeping sound still ringing in my ears. Shaking the sleep from my eyes, I saw Kiri sitting up, wide awake.

“*Futaba*, what is it?” I heard her say. A disembodied voice replied, seemingly emerging from midair directly in front of her. *A large body of vessels is proceeding in our direction at hyperspeed.* “*Futaba* display: console,” she said urgently. A floating panel appeared in midair before her, and her fingers ran rapidly over the disembodied controls. Then she sighed and the panel disappeared.

“What’s going on, Kiri?” I asked, now wide awake myself.

“The Brizal fleet,” she answered dully. “They’ve apparently just left Deshtiris.”

“Then we’re too late,” I said, my heart sinking. She shook her head.

“No, not too late. Their ships are much slower than this one. I’d

estimate, assuming the Qozernan sensors have also picked them up, that the two fleets will meet in about three days halfway between the Twin Planets. The *Futaba* is at least six times faster, so we have a very good chance of overtaking them. *If* we're successful on Deshtiris," she added heavily.

By this time there was no way I was going to get back to sleep. We had gotten about six hours' worth, and Kiri was already dressing, so I decided to do likewise. As we headed down the long hallway towards the *Futaba*, Senaria appeared in a doorway, and Kiri quickly explained the situation. A moment later Zyanita had joined us as well.

"Can they spot us?" Senaria asked. "No," Kiri reassured her, "the *Futaba*'s mass is so far into the negative because of our speed that it can't be picked up on the sensors they have available. And I've ordered the *Futaba* to make a course correction that will keep us from passing directly through their fleet. But this does mean the countdown has started. The clock is ticking for real now."

"I think I could use some tea," I suggested. "Anyone else?" Senaria and Zyanita both declined, obviously fascinated with the displays showing the fleet's position ahead. Only Kiri followed me to the kitchen as I heated some water.

"Well, I don't think we're going to get any more sleep," she murmured. "We have at least four more hours before we drop out of hyperspace. Any suggestions?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation. "Tell me what I've missed." She looked at me quizzically. "I want to know what it was like to live on Deshtiris, with you, with my parents," I said earnestly. "Please. Whatever you can remember for me. You're my memory now."

And so for the next few hours she told me her story, and mine, as I sipped tea and relaxed on the comfortable sofa in the living quarters' lounge, her head nestled in my lap, her legs dangling over one end. Sometimes her eyes were closed, and sometimes I had the luxury of gazing into their verdant depths. At times, as I listened to her, it was as though I could see the past itself in them.

Part III: Mikiria's Story



Her very earliest memories were of doctors: poking her, pressing objects against her that stung as they emitted unpleasant hissing noises, waving odd devices over her. It never seemed to end; long after she had fled to Qozernon years later she still received politely worded requests from well-intentioned researchers begging for the privilege of inflicting this or that newly devised scourge upon her. Even now she shuddered involuntarily at the sight of the medical practitioner's standard light blue t-shirt.

As she became self-aware, as she discovered what mirrors were and how different she was from other children her age, the continual attention on the part of the well-intentioned scientists only served to exaggerate even more in her own mind her feelings of being different, feelings that over the years since had been submerged but never quite eradicated. Although the children sharing the palace with her were always courteous and considerate (she was, after all, the adopted daughter of the Emperor and Empress as she later learned), there were inevitably the occasional cutting comments in the heat of a childish argument, comments that cut far deeper than her playmates might have realized.

But on the other hand there was Wilorian, her ever-present friend; even back then he was called Will by nearly everyone. Almost exactly the same age (he had been born two weeks after her), he was her playmate, companion in mischief, and eventually confidant. How well she remembered chasing each other up and down and through the labyrinthine stairwells and passageways of the ancient palace, itself the very heart of Deshti, at that time the capital city of Deshtiris.

There were comfortable dinners in a little private dining room reserved for the royal family, and vast state dinners in the great hall. Of the latter she well remembered the elaborate costumes they had been required to wear, with a perfectly unbelievable amount of glistening metallic trim, but more than that was the memory of the incredible skylight above, covering a ceiling the size of a football field, and bathing those below with colors so intense you could almost taste them.

A favorite target of mischief had been the palace major domo, a gifted martinet by the name of Elikan Valkar. He was very old, even for a Deshtiran; no one seemed to be quite certain just how old. It was his responsibility to keep the palace running smoothly, and to head off the inevitable breaches of protocol that can so inflame those who consider themselves important, and he did a masterful job of it. For a long time he terrified her and Wilorian, though as she grew older she began to realize that there was a subtle but well-developed sense of humor lurking beneath the forbidding exterior.

And that was fortunate, because for reasons she never did quite fathom he became the butt of Wilorian's very best practical jokes, some of them rather good ones, too. Although Valkar stormed and raged at them when these pranks reached their inevitable climaxes, he never went to the point of complaining to the Emperor or Empress, and it certainly wasn't out of fear of the latter. She wondered what had happened to him; there had been no word of him in the accessible Deshtiran records for years, but neither had there been any report of execution or other decease. One more link with the past left dangling, she reflected sadly.

After a few years they were joined by Zyanita, three years their junior, who soon adopted the familiar role of the "younger tagalong brat." In those days she was as high-spirited and mischievous as the rest of them, or sometimes even more so as she attempted to outdo them in one prank or another. The sight of the three was a common one on the palace grounds, as they prowled about looking for a new focus for their attentions.

As far as Mikiria was concerned, the thoughtful, loving couple that people respectfully addressed as "Emperor" and "Empress" were her mother and father, and she was four before they carefully explained to her one evening that she was something called "adopted." They had known that sooner or later she would glean the information from her peers, or from the news programs or magazines that she had learned to read at an unusually early age.

Assuring her that in their eyes (and those of the rest of the planet) she was as much their child as Zyanita or Wilorian, they explained that her real parents were no longer able to take care of her, and that they had done so because she was so important to them. Only in later years did she gradually learn the darker story behind those words.

One thing from that evening stuck vividly in her memory. Her mother had handed her a small iridescent pendant on a gold chain, and gently placed it around her neck. "Your real mother asked that you be

given this some day, to remember her by. Wear it always, Mikiria.” She had been shown a photograph of a gentle, almost ethereal looking woman, with eyes that seemed to bore into her own from the 3D image. Even then she realized that somehow they were her own eyes, if not so large or quite so green.

As she grew older, and the hurt of discovering how different she was began to ease, her life had become a golden paradise. She found that the studies which gave the other children such difficulties were appallingly easy for her, and there was soon no question that she had inherited her father’s remarkable intellectual powers. (For some reason which defied explanation, only chemistry resisted her dogged attempts; it somehow just didn’t mesh with the way her mind operated, she supposed.) Since Deshtiran schools are not built upon grades and tests, she didn’t suffer the jealousies and snubs that such success would have inevitably cost her on Earth. Before long she was experimenting with equipment provided by her teachers, and not long after it was found that she was actually coming up with useful improvements.

To her surprise, she found herself several times the subject of media interviews and reports, although she had no idea just how original some of her ideas had been (nor of just how much the public was taken with this singular child). The attention spurred her to start seriously immersing herself in the fundamentals of hyperspace propulsion. Even so, she was stunned when a paper she had written proved to identify the cause of several previously unexplained disasters, involving the disappearance of several ships. (It was later to lead to her discovery of the principle of the “gateways,” with their controlled access to what she had whimsically described as “alternate universes.”) From then on, Deshti’s science researchers were happy to indulge her with whatever equipment or materials she might request, within reason.

Wilorian, while sharing her passion for space travel, could not hope to keep up with the depths of theory into which she was now digging. However, he understood and left her alone when she was in the throes of another project. Besides, it was becoming obvious that she also had remarkable athletic abilities and strength, which made her a boon companion for him. They spent much of their time together in swordplay and other athletics (though not team sports, of course, which are regarded on both planets as distastefully barbaric forms of commercial entertainment).

It was for them a thrilling moment when, on their sixteenth birthdays, they were formally presented with two gorgeous swords of

their own, hand-crafted relics belonging to the royal family and dating back no-one was quite sure how far. There was no question of their actually using them, of course; one does not employ real blades for practice or even formal competitions. Nonetheless they had a fascinating history associated with them, a history which was by no means concluded.

She never knew if it was her increasing closeness to Wilorian or something else, but it was at about this time that Zyanita, normally by nature a cheerful and fun-loving child, began to display occasional flashes of moodiness. Where before she had idolized them, and would have accompanied them everywhere they went if they had permitted it, now she sometimes grew aloof and haughty. Perhaps it was when she discovered that Mikiria was not “really” a princess but an adopted one, or perhaps it was seeing Mikiria’s face on television and magazine covers. It was when she was eleven that she had first informed Mikiria that she was just a “commoner” and had no business putting on royal airs.

Mikiria, stunned, had protested that she was doing nothing of the sort, and that it wasn’t her fault how people treated her. Wilorian had also given her a piece of his mind, in the direct way that only siblings can, but from then on Zyanita seemed frequently preoccupied with finding ways to assert her “royal prerogatives” and chip away at her adopted sister.

It was one evening when Mikiria was commiserating over some new snub with Darita, who among other duties acted as tutor to Zyanita, that the elderly retainer had exploded in astonishment. “Don’t you know that she’s collected every article and video clip in existence about you? She even enlisted one of the telecom reporters to provide her with some unreleased clips that never made it onto the news. She idolizes you, silly child. But don’t tell her I told you, though,” she added prudently.

After that Mikiria made it a point to answer Zyanita’s barbs with nonsensical ones of her own, treating it as a kind of game that left Zyanita thoroughly confused and effectively took the sting out of the exchanges. Eventually the uncalled-for sniping quietly faded away. Wilorian, of course, was most bewildered of all and never did quite grasp what had been going on.

Making up somewhat for Zyanita’s petty intrigues was Mikiria’s growing friendship with the Amkors, at that time the ambassadorial family from Qozernon. By now she had become a striking girl of fourteen, with a merry face and a razor sharp mind, and they found her

to be delightful company and whenever possible invited her and Wilorian to their social events. Amkor Kurinton, the ambassador, she remembered as a dignified, imposing figure in his public appearances, but in private a fount of more funny stories than she could remember hearing in her lifetime.

It was his wife Gelhinda, however, that to her became almost a third mother. It was with her that she shared her hurt over some of the petty insults and indignities inflicted by Zyanita and her small circle of like-minded friends, hurts that she would never have dreamed of passing along to her adopted parents.

It was at about this time that she became vaguely aware of a kind of cloud hanging over the royal couple. Far more occupied with her increasingly fascinating scientific studies than with the tedium of daily politics, she was almost unaware of the rise of the force that came to be known as the Brizali. What she did notice were the increasingly distracted silences at the dinner table, silences which she cheerfully filled with excited reports of her latest projects.

One of those projects was the building of her own starship. Although this might sound like an immense endeavor, it should be kept in mind that the technology for faster-than-light travel had been common knowledge for hundreds of years, and the necessary apparatus had long since shrunk to the scale of a good-sized television set. Utilizing a standard hollow hull, available relatively cheaply for the equivalent of a few thousand dollars and about the size of a large motor home, she had added her own version of the hyperspace propulsion engine to produce a ship that she expected would easily exceed currently available speeds.

Ground tests had checked out perfectly, and it was with tremendous impatience that she and Wilorian had finished adding the necessary amenities to the interior, such as control consoles and seats. (It was Wilorian who pointed out the need for bathroom facilities as well, and fortunately he had taken it upon himself to hunt up and install the necessary hardware, a task she found hopelessly mundane.)

She still vividly remembered the day of the first test flight, seeing the ground drop away from them as they cautiously took the ship into the upper atmosphere. She was all too eager to take the ship to light speed, and once again it was Wilorian who had insisted that they first make sure it could handle such basics as takeoff and landing without losing atmosphere. By the time they landed she was a bundle of nerves, desperate to try out her new hyperspace engine. He, on the other hand, had calmly shown her a checklist of things that hadn't worked properly,

and told her that when they were fixed they could go for a real flight.

They stepped out of the ship to find that their comfortable, cheerful world was gone forever.



As they landed in the strangely deserted courtyard, their first intimation that something was seriously wrong was the smoke rising from one wing of the palace. Dashing into the building, they found chaos everywhere, with furnishings smashed, doors broken in, and, most ominously, what appeared to be bloodstains in several locations on the walls and floors. And then they rounded a corner to find the corpses of a dozen palace guards and a larger number of strangers they had never seen before scattered about in a scene of bloody horror. They were only half-aware of the odd emblems they saw on the shirts of the unfamiliar bodies.

Now in a state of utter panic, they raced through the hallways, looking for their parents. Once they heard loud voices approaching and ducked into a darkened room until they passed. Through the slightly opened door they saw a gang of ruffians, several with crude bandages dressing fresh wounds, stride by uttering loud curses.

Their search ended in a small anteroom to the main throne room. There were two bodies on the floor, with a third huddled over them. Frozen with shock they had recognized the horribly mutilated remains of the former Emperor and Empress of Deshtiris. A moment later the third figure had moved and they found themselves looking into the grief-ravaged features of the elderly retainer Darita.

Incoherent with grief, she had not recognized them at first. "Go ahead," she had mumbled, "kill me too. Animals. I don't care now."

"Darita," Mikiria had managed, "it's us. Wilorian and Mikiria. What has happened here? Who did this?" They had been unable to get anything from the elderly woman, however, except that they should flee, run, anything. They heard voices in the throne room, and Wilorian had quickly bolted the door. A moment later someone on the other side had unsuccessfully tried it and begun pounding angrily, coarse voices booming through the ancient but still stout wood.

They had gently pulled Darita from the bodies on the floor and slipped back into the hallway. "The ship," Mikiria had whispered. "It's our only chance now." For a moment Wilorian had looked dazed, then suddenly his face turned an even paler shade of white, if that was

possible. “Zyanita,” he insisted. “We’ve got to find Zyanita.” They heard a crash in the anteroom as the door gave way.

They had dashed back down the corridor, half-dragging Darita with them. A quick look into the various rooms they passed, including Zyanita’s bedroom, provided no trace of the missing princess. Passing by their own rooms, she had spotted the two priceless swords they had been given only a few short months before, and had handed them to the uncomplaining Darita in much the same way one seizes the most unlikely objects imaginable when fleeing a house fire. The raucous voices behind them grew nearer.

“Will, we have to go,” she had insisted desperately. Stunned by her loss, she comprehended only one thing, and that was that she wasn’t going to lose Wilorian too. Finally she had done the only thing she could think of. Closing her eyes for a moment, she had calculated her strength as accurately as she possibly could, then opened them again and landed her fist with unerring precision directly on the point of his unsuspecting jaw. He had dropped like a felled ox before her and the aghast Darita.

Blood pounding in her own temples, she had frantically felt at his neck for a pulse. Feeling a strong steady one, she had slung his limp body over her shoulder as if it were a sack of flour and headed for the ship, dragging Darita along with her free hand. It was with infinite relief that she saw it, still untouched, where they had left it only a few short minutes before.

With Darita’s help she had strapped the unconscious Wilorian into one of the freshly installed seats and a few moments later they were lifting off from the courtyard, just as a howling mob of Brizali had begun pouring from the doorways. No sooner was the palace vanishing below them when the communications screen lit up. The unfamiliar officer wore a Deshti police uniform, but to her shock she saw again the unfamiliar logo she had first noticed in the palace. “You are ordered to turn about and land,” he commanded.

“The hell we will,” she had snapped.

“Then you leave us no alternative but to disable your vehicle,” he had responded in turn. With a sudden surge of panic, she remembered that all Deshtiran police vehicles have the capability of accessing any personal vehicle’s control console through a security override module.

“I don’t think so,” said a slurred voice behind her, and she turned to see a now-awake Wilorian nursing his jaw with one hand and holding out a sweat-stained checklist with the other. “It’s not working yet, remember?” he reassured her. “Now get us out of here.”

She had made an obscene gesture at the startled face on the screen, then switched it off and put the ship on full acceleration out of the atmosphere. There was a tense moment after they had cleared the planet when they saw several patrol ships converging on them from all directions, and she had held her breath and pushed the Big Blue Button, silently praying that the untested drive did indeed work as intended. A moment later they were streaking towards Qozernon far faster than light, leaving the Deshtiran ships hopelessly behind.

Once in space, they had all experienced a severe emotional reaction to the horrors behind them. Darita had been in the worst shape of all, being dangerously close to hysteria. Urgently assuring her that she was needed now more than ever before, they had finally managed to calm her somewhat. Unlike the *Futaba-to-be*, the ship had no separate living quarters; the closest it came was a tiny restroom and the capability of folding the seats back to form small and rather awkward beds. They had made Darita as comfortable as they could, and left her to sleep as they discussed the situation in hushed tones at the other end of the cramped little ship.

“I’m sorry, Will,” she had said hesitantly. “There was no sign of Zee anywhere.” Silently she reflected to herself that she had just made her first life-and-death decision, and wondered if there would be more.

To her relief, Wilorian was calm now and understanding. “You did the best you could, Kiri,” he reassured her. “I’m just glad you’re all right.”

They had reached their destination cramped and hungry after two seemingly interminable days in hyperspace. They had contacted the Qozernan authorities and received immediate permission to land at the main port in Lernesdi. A more cynical government might have pondered the wisdom of taking in refugees from a suddenly volatile and violent society, but it would have been unthinkable for Qozernon to have done so.

Assured of a place to land, they had only then come to a realization of their real plight—homeless on a foreign planet, with nowhere to stay and no way to support themselves. All that changed abruptly when, about four hours from their destination, they had found the Amkors hailing them anxiously from their telecom. Asking what they were going to do once they arrived, and finding that landing was about as far ahead as they had considered, the ambassadorial family had immediately volunteered to take the three in for as long as needed.

No better oasis could have offered itself to three shell-shocked, grief-stricken casualties of a battle none expected or understood. With

infinite kindness, sensitivity, and often patience in dealing with nerves frayed to the breaking point, the ambassador and his wife had done their utmost to make the refugees feel welcome and, more important, cared for. Gradually the three began to realize that their lives had not ended, even if they had taken a very painful turn, and that they could be rebuilt over time.

In less than a week after they arrived what little happiness they had found in their new home was shattered, possibly forever.

The household had retired to their beds for the night, except for Mikiria. Tense, feeling like a tightly coiled spring, she had several times sprawled out on her bed, and as many times had given up on sleep and wandered back out to the living room to read and pace. She had once more determined to sleep, if it took her all night to do it, and was passing by Wilorian's closed door when a horrendous yowl from inside split the air.

She had flung open the door and thrown on the light, to see a black-garbed figure standing over the bed. For an instant they both froze, the blood dripping from the knife indelibly burning itself into her memory, then the intruder had thrown himself through the open window and vanished into the night.

She would have followed him, and with her extraordinary agility and ability to see in near-pitch dark would probably have caught him, but her only concern was for the figure on the bed. For an instant all she could see was the blood welling through the torn sheets and her heart skipped a beat.

And then Wilorian had opened his eyes with a groan and tried to sit up. "Dammit," he said through clenched teeth, seeing her standing there staring down at him. "Worst case of heartburn I've ever had." The shocked expression on her face at last broke through the befuddlement one feels when unexpectedly awakened from a deep sleep, as he looked down at himself and the sheets. "Is that me bleeding? What the hell is this?!"

Throwing off the paralysis that seemed to have seized her, she had torn away the sheets and examined the stab. The blade had slid along a rib, creating a painful, bloody, but not dangerous wound which she bound up with torn pieces of the sheet while desperately fighting off hysterical laughter.

Hearing a noise, she had looked up to see Kurinton and Gelhinda standing in the doorway. It had taken Kurinton only a moment to size up the situation. "I'll call the police and meds," he offered.

"No," Mikiria had said unexpectedly.

“What? Kiri?” Wilorian protested. “This hurts, you know.”

Her mind had been working rapidly, once it regained its footing. “If we do that, it’ll be all over the news that he’s okay. And sooner or later they’ll be back.”

Kurinton had nodded in comprehension. “I know who can take care of this,” he had said curtly as he spun on his heel and left, while Gelhinda went to look in on Darita, whose room was on the other end of the house (it turned out that she was still asleep, and it was decided not to wake her). A few minutes later Kurinton was back. “Will, can you hold out for about ten more minutes?”

The boy had grimaced, but nodded. “The bleeding’s mostly stopped,” Mikiria assured him. “You’ll be okay.”

It was almost exactly ten minutes later that several high-speed fliers* had landed outside and a dozen figures came running across the lawn to be admitted by Gelhinda. Three of them were medical officers, who quickly began giving Wilorian appropriate treatment. The others conferred for several minutes with Kurinton and Mikiria, then set about performing a multitude of tasks, including taking videos, checking the room for fingerprints, clothing threads, and DNA fragments.

At one point they had asked the already much-abused Wilorian to perform a passable imitation of a corpse, draping him with the bloody sheets and coaching him in just the right wide-eyed open-mouthed death stare as they filmed him from all angles. Shortly afterwards they left, except that three silent figures remained stationed almost invisibly in various shadowy niches around the periphery of the house.

The next day the media was filled with sensational news about the assassination of a Deshtiran refugee—in fact, a member of the former Deshtiran royal family—in the very home of the Qozernan ambassador and his wife. Suitable indignation was expressed by various political figures, and although there was no proof that the Brizali were involved it was generally agreed that they were behind the deed.

In Mikiria’s and Wilorian’s minds there was no doubt. Mikiria was not a threat to the Brizali, for although she had been formally adopted by the Emperor and Empress she was not in the bloodline and would not be considered a serious contender for the throne. Wilorian, on the other hand, was a potentially deadly one, and the Brizali had proven to

* Unlike the regular fliers used for commuting, etc., a high speed flier is capable of ascending above the atmosphere and traveling at spacecraft speeds. Use of these fliers is generally restricted to emergency and military applications.—*Ed.*

be nothing if not meticulous about attending to details. Admittedly their assassination techniques needed work, but they were to remedy this deficiency during the coming years in a particularly hideous manner.

In the end, after several days of discussion between the two, with occasional input from Kurinton and Gelhinda, it was agreed that sooner or later the Brizali would succeed. Ultimately there can be no foolproof defense against a determined assassin.

To hide on Qozernon was impossible. In spite of its having a population of over a billion souls, it was very much one society and one in which Wilorian's face would be instantly recognized. In addition, a Deshtiran assassin would be far too much at home in a world so similar to his or her own to be detected in time.

Only Earth was sufficiently chaotic. On Earth a person could vanish into the rich patchwork quilt of cultures and societies like a needle into a haystack. Los Angeles was, if anything, Earth in microcosm, with its incredible variety of cultures, its contrasts, and its vast confusions, and Los Angeles they chose as their destination.

It was Wilorian himself who pointed out that his own memories would be his most dangerous enemy. As long as he knew who he was, he would be in danger of giving away his identity through some small slip, some trivial indiscretion. Only if his memories were suppressed could he safely continue to live on Earth without detection.

Darita had been horrified when she discovered what they were contemplating, calling the plan insane and cruel. Wilorian had been insistent.

To Mikiria's anguished objections he retorted that Earth had already reached a point of primitive computerization. The spread and availability of personal data had been held firmly in check on the Twin Planets by a deep-rooted conviction of the sanctity of individual privacy, and this had for centuries acted as a check on the voracious appetite of computer networks for such information. Earth's societies, on the other hand, shared no such scruples, and past experiences suggested that within a few decades it would be possible to precisely identify and track any individual on the planet within minutes.

"This isn't just about me. I'm the only remaining member of the royal family. If it weren't for that, I'd stay here and take my chances. But there's more at stake than that."

"Will, it's going to take years to re-educate you after a memory wipe," Kiri had protested desperately. "And I only have to make one slip to give you away. What if I'm in an accident, and end up in a hospital somewhere on Earth? One glance at my eyes and the doctors

would be yelling for the press, and then the Brizali would be on us in an instant.” At that point Darita had softly cleared her throat.

“I have raised three generations of Emperors and Empresses for Deshtiris,” she had informed them proudly. “I think I can handle raising one more. If you are really going to go through with this, then I shall expect you to retain my services this last time.”

Mikiria never forgot that moment, when the gentle, elderly woman that they had known and taken for granted all their brief lives suddenly grew so immense in stature before their astonished eyes. “Darita?” Wilorian had finally said. “But your—your years? Do you really want to do this?”

“I have spent well over a century with the Royal House of Nendor,” she had stated calmly but firmly. “Please do not refuse me this. I do not wish to spend my last years on Qozernon as an obsolete appliance, retained out of pity. Clearly this is where my duty now lies.” She slowly looked at each of them in turn. “It is also my right.”

They silently nodded their assent, and so it had been decided.

All involved agreed that as far as the world would know, Wilorian was dead, brutally assassinated a few days after his flight into exile. Only Darita, Gelhinda, Kurinton and Mikiria would know the truth. A small contingent of Qozernan agents, sworn to secrecy by Kurinton, were aware that the assassination was unsuccessful, but not even they ever knew what had really become of the missing royal heir afterwards. To their immense credit, as far as is known, not one ever breathed so much as a whisper of the fateful secret.

Of that first trip to Earth, and of its events, not even after thirty years could she bring herself to speak any further.



Once having returned to Qozernon, as she gradually emerged from the overwhelming depression that had seized her, she began to adjust to the idea that she needed to find some way to support herself. The Amkors would have been perfectly happy to have simply raised her as their own, and to a great extent they did, but her pride demanded that she at least cover her own expenses.

The solution appeared unexpectedly a few months after her arrival, when they were shopping in Nedro and stopped in at an establishment owned by a friend of the family. There they found the business in a state of near chaos, due to an inexplicable insistence of the resident computer to adjust prices in totally random ways. A technician was unsuccessfully looking over the program code, trying to find the problem without success.

“Perhaps I can help,” she had offered. Not fully aware of her already considerable reputation in Deshtiran scientific circles, the Amkors had looked a bit embarrassed. However, when within a few minutes of scanning the debugging displays she had found that the power supply was corrupting memory with random power spikes, their expressions changed considerably.

Before they left the grateful owner had insisted that she collect a small fee for her trouble, and she felt an inordinate amount of pride later that evening when she in turn handed it to the Amkors over their protests. That was when she first began what eventually became a lucrative career in computer troubleshooting.

Her first attempts at earning a living like any ordinary person had brought home to her that she really was a refugee, and for a little while she had sought out contact with some of the other Deshtirans that had fled the Brizal uprising. At first she felt a sense of identity with them, but she soon began to realize that most of them were living in the past, endlessly reliving past glories, or devising impractical and futile schemes to regain what they had lost. She had almost resolved to cut off ties altogether when one of them had approached her and asked to speak with her privately.

Expecting yet another intrigue, she had almost refused, but something led her to humor the man, and that evening over dinner he had introduced himself as Masakor Lev, head of Qozernan security for Deshtiran affairs, and just nine years her senior. It had been the start of a long and productive relationship that had ended only with his tragic murder.

As he grew to know her, and realized that she could be trusted with what she was told, and that in addition hers was a relatively stable and well-adjusted personality, he began to share with her some of his recently collected information about events on Deshtiris. She in turn had worked with him to tap into the considerable Deshtiran computer traffic available to Qozernan sources, such as communications with the various trading ships which still plied between the two planets. Soon she was able to use the seemingly innocuous data streams to probe into some of the less well-protected networks back on Deshtiris.

In addition, as her familiarity with the Deshtiran computer net grew, she began to seek information about acquaintances left behind. For the most part what she found was a depressing list of imprisonments and occasional executions, for after all the majority of her acquaintances had been associated in one way or another with the ruling elite of Deshtiris. She had also sought for any word on Zyanita, but to her dismay it appeared that the unfortunate girl had vanished from the face of the planet.

For the next few years she made a point of returning to Earth for several weeks at a time, sometimes several times a year, to check on Wilorian and Darita. Fearful of accidentally triggering a return of his memories, she had adopted a disguise as an older woman, under the unlikely name of Aunt Mickey. It was a relatively simple matter to temporarily wrinkle and age her skin, and with the aid of grey hair dye and the usual set of contact lenses she was able to adopt a persona unlikely to be recognized.

The first few visits were terribly painful for her, as Wilorian, her beloved Will, might for all the world have been a two year old child. However, as he mastered English and began reacquiring skills long since learned she found herself strangely drawn to this new incarnation of a familiar friend. Watching him rediscover the world in all its wonder somehow proved a healing experience for her, as she sat for hours with him watching Earth films, exposing him to music and helping him with his first hesitant attempts at reading.

For Darita she did everything she could, providing her with whatever news of Deshtiris she could acquire, and eventually bringing

her back to Qozernon for visits whenever Wilorian was away at summer camp or other extended trips. At first fearful that for all her devotion Darita would prove an unacceptably dour guardian, she had been reassured to find Wilorian developing into a normal, if somewhat introverted, individual. Within a few years he had caught up sufficiently to be enrolled in a local high school with the aid of a private tutor.

By that time she had realized that her “Aunt Mickey” persona had become an unacceptable risk, and she and Darita had agreed that her visits would have to end. From then on she had resolved to stay out of his sight and check on Darita only when he was away, little realizing the impact her fictional character’s “death” would have.

It was in the same year that Aunt Mickey “died” that another face from the past made its unexpected appearance, as Lev one day informed her that there was someone he wanted her to meet and arranged to accompany her to the capital city of Lernesdi.

Once there he had taken her to a small complex on the outskirts of the city, where he had led her down a cheerfully painted corridor, lined on both sides by doors with small windows. She noticed that the doors all had external locks. “This is a detention area,” he had said apologetically. “They’re not quite cells, but they are secure.” Stopping at one, he had gently tapped on the window. “Come in,” said a tired, muffled voice, and he had unlocked the door with a voice command.

A girl was sitting by the window, looking out. “What do you want this time?” she had said, the voice oddly familiar, sounding somehow like a half-remembered dream out of the past, and she had turned to face them. Both she and Mikiria had stared at each other in utter shock for several seconds.

“You?” croaked the girl at last, in years about nineteen,* with a pale, drawn face. “It’s you?” For a moment conflicting emotions seemed to be writhing across her features as she rose to her feet.

“Hello, Zee,” Mikiria had responded shakily, finding her own voice again. “I’m really glad to see that you made it out okay. I’ve tried to get information on you for the past few—”

She recoiled backwards in shock as one emotion finally emerged triumphant on Zyanita’s face, the raw hatred suddenly dominating it accompanied by an onslaught of vituperation couched in language so brutal that Mikiria for several seconds couldn’t even consciously connect it with the gaunt young figure standing before her. For what

* Although to a native of Earth she would appear to be about fifteen.—*Ed.*

seemed forever the words poured out, until the girl collapsed back onto her chair sobbing hoarsely.

“You left me there,” she finished bitterly. “You just left me there. My parents were dead. I thought Will was dead, and you too. You just left me there in that awful place.” She stopped for a moment, sucking in air. “I spent six years hiding from those beasts. The horrible things they did. I saw things—”

Mikiria tried to say something, only to be cut off with renewed fury. “And then I found out that you were alive, living in luxury on Qozernon while I barely survived as a common vagrant, and that you had left me behind. You’d gotten away in your pretty little spaceship and left me behind.”

“I’m sorry, Zee,” Mikiria said softly. “But there was no time. I had to save Will, and we couldn’t find you. There was just no time.”

“You had to save Will?” she screamed unexpectedly. “Why? So you could *kill him*?”

At that Mikiria had simply frozen, utterly dazed. “What?” she had finally croaked. Lev stood by, saying nothing, but the stricken expression on his face spoke mutely of his sympathy for what she must be experiencing.

“I heard how no sooner were you on Qozernon than Will was ‘assassinated,’ supposedly by ‘Brizal terrorists.’ Who did you think you were fooling? You left me to die on Deshtiris, you put Will out of the way, and what does that make you? What you always wanted, of course. Ever since I was little you were always taking over, stepping into my place. ‘Princess’ Mikiria! That’s a load of stinking shit! You were the orphan daughter of a criminal, and now you’re in line to be Empress. Am I next? How are you going to get rid of me this time?” Her voice had by now risen to a hysterical pitch, and Lev had quietly taken Mikiria’s hand and led her uncomplainingly from the room.

Shaken to the core, she had nevertheless insisted on providing assistance for Zyanita when Lev, against his better judgment, made arrangements to release her. The primary purpose of the meeting had been to verify her identity, and in that it had been all too successful.

It was a strangely subdued Zyanita whom Mikiria encountered the next morning, as she and Lev once again entered the little apartment. The girl’s eyes were red and puffy, and at first she avoided Mikiria’s gaze. “You’re free to go,” Lev informed her politely. “We apologize for the temporary detainment, but we had to be sure you were who you said you were.”

“I understand.” The voice was flat and unemotional.

“Where will you go, Zee?” asked Mikiria quietly. “Do you know anyone here?” The girl shook her head. “Let me find you a place to stay,” Mikiria continued cautiously, not sure whether to expect another outburst at any moment. Instead she received only a surprised and grateful stare. There was an awkward silence.

“Lev left the reports on Will’s—assassination with me last night,” she said finally. “I’m terribly sorry about what I said yesterday.” Her apology sounded genuine, although Mikiria found herself wondering just how unstable she might be after six years under the Brizali.

“I nearly went crazy the night I heard about Will,” she resumed hesitantly. “I had thought you were both dead. And then one day a few months after the—the Brizali took over I was sitting in a cheap little tavern, spending the few yled I’d managed to accumulate that week on some rice cakes, and I heard the Brizal announcer mention your name. I remember him saying something about you being on Qozernon and the only surviving member of the royal family, and how just after you arrived there the Qozerman secret police had had Will assassinated and then blamed it on the ‘peace-loving Brizali,’ and I just blindly ran out and looked for somewhere to curl up and cry. I guess I really gave up hope then, and even though I knew the Brizal story was propaganda I wasn’t too rational by that time because I somehow convinced myself that you must have done it.” She shook her head. “It sounds so stupid, now,” she said apologetically. “I guess it’s going to take me a while to get used to living in the real world again.”

In fact, their first two meetings proved to be their future relationship in microcosm, for over time Mikiria was to find that one day Zyanita could be polite, thoughtful and considerate (though never affectionate), and the next as cold and callous as anyone she had ever encountered. She sometimes wondered if there were a cruel streak deep inside that years of deprivation and fear had dragged dangerously near the surface.

For a brief time Kurinton and Gelhinda had provided her with temporary lodgings until permanent accommodations could be found. It was quickly apparent that the bustle and excitement of a large city suited her far more than the small-town atmosphere of Nedro, and it was in the capital city of Lernesdi that she wound up settling, provided by Mikiria with introductions to many of the prominent families of Qozernon.

Zyanita proved to be much more interested in the Deshtiran refugee community than Mikiria was, and eventually became deeply involved in their arguments and their many intrigues, although Mikiria

more than once had the impression that she was somehow observing them sardonically from a closed space of her own. Over time the two developed a kind of working friendship, yet something in Mikiria kept her from ever mentioning the other refugee safely hidden away on Earth.



By this time Mikiria was a young woman in her twenties, lonely and feeling utterly adrift in spite of the efforts of her affectionate (if bemused) foster parents. At one point she had gone so far as to enroll as a “foreign” student at California University/Fontana, where Wilorian, now Wilbur Barton, was pursuing his aerospace studies.

To her dismay she found herself in the same advanced mathematics class as him, and her first impulse had been to drop the course. But her desperate longing for his company won out, and when he had timidly asked her out to a concert near the end of the semester she had accepted all too willingly. They had attended several concerts and movies together, and by the end of each date she was finding it more and more difficult to say goodnight afterwards. Nor was he of much help, his interest all too apparent.

Rapidly finding her emotions winning out over her judgment, she had finally used the end of the semester as an excuse to gently break things off. To both her relief and sorrow he had during all this shown no signs of recognition, either of his “Aunt Mickey” or from his earlier life.

Afterwards, back on Qozernon, with him thirty-five light-years distant, she had shuddered at how easily she could have led the Brizali to him, and she had sworn not to let it happen again, or at least not until she was ready to at last bring him home. However, she had also discovered the pleasures of academic studies as a way to while away the otherwise dreary weeks on Earth. She had deliberately avoided any but the most casual friendships during her extended stays, although as she became more experienced in the ways of Earth she had managed to purchase several homes for her use when visiting, and made arrangements with various businesses for their maintenance during her absences.

It was during a visit several years later that she had gone back to the university at Fontana and discovered that Alan Brinkman had joined the faculty the previous spring. A child prodigy who had held a top security clearance at Lawrence Livermore while still in his late

teens, the physicist had a reputation that even reached Qozernon, whose theoreticians kept a close eye on developments on their ancestral planet.

Her first attempts to enroll in his physics seminar were scornfully rebuffed by the admissions department, who informed her in cold bureaucratese that entrance to the seminar was by invitation only. She had quickly settled that by writing him a personal letter outlining a few discreetly chosen aspects of her hyperspace developments, carefully phrased in purely theoretical terms. She had received an invitation by return mail practically begging her to enroll.

She soon found herself entranced by the physicist, and not only intellectually. Consumed with loneliness, hearing only secondhand reports of Wilorian's first efforts in his chosen career field, she had quickly found herself attracted to the man's dry wit and physical magnetism. At the time still in his late thirties and not yet the notorious pursuer of freshman bimbos he was later to become, he had proven irresistibly attractive to her, and before she knew it their relationship was as much physical as intellectual. Nor was she consumed by guilt; Qozernans and Deshtirans tend to be realistic about such things, and she knew there was no hope in the foreseeable future of her becoming closer to Wilorian (even assuming he was ever able to regain his memories).

It was the first time she had ever pursued a physical relationship, and after years of loneliness the warmth and depth of her feelings had led her to confide far more in Brinkman than she had intended, to the point of telling him who she really was. Naturally he had assumed that she was delusional, or at least seriously disturbed, and only when she had driven him out to her ship, safely hidden at a house in the hills above Fontana, and taken him up above the planet, had he finally believed her. After that they mostly kept no secrets, although it was only many years later that she told him, in guarded terms, about Wilorian.

It was in fact a humiliated and chastened Brinkman who had finally broken off the affair, explaining shamefacedly that he had been called into the Provost's office and privately warned that student-teacher relationships were not acceptable at California University/Fontana and that he could either discreetly break off the relationship or seek other employment. After that they saw each other only in class, or in neutral ground such as the university library.

It was during her early studies with Brinkman that she had become intrigued by a Qozernan researcher's report describing how she had

managed to create a small bubble of space-time, the interior in effect being located in one of the infinite number of available simultaneous universes. Working with Brinkman, pursuing the mathematics far beyond anything the original researcher had managed, she had developed what on paper should be a way to not only access such a bubble, but to control its shape and size, and to configure the interior to match the laws of physics of her own universe.

Ultimately, after returning to Qozernon, she had built what amounted to a prototype of a gateway into such an alternate bubble, which could be opened and closed like a doorway. Realizing that the only way to find if it worked was to test it, and being all too aware of the dangers to her and her surroundings if her calculations were off by so much as a decimal point, she had quietly written up a will and left it where it could be easily found, and set out in her little ship for a distant star system well away from Bashti and Exor.

There she had configured the newly created bubble as a large rectangular space several hundred feet long, about ten feet high, and eighty feet wide. The atmosphere she set to match that of Qozernon's (and not incidentally Earth's), and to the boundaries of the bubble she gave the properties of steel. Although her instruments provided her with reassuring readings, it was nonetheless with not a little trepidation that she slowly opened the doorway and shone a torch into the interior.

She found herself peering into what might have been a long, very wide hallway. Gingerly she set a foot onto the "floor" of the bubble, and found it to be reassuringly solid. Soon she had walked from one end of the enclosure to the other, reflecting with awe that as far as she knew she was the first human to ever leave her own universe.

On the trip back her head was filled with exciting visions of the announcement she would make of her discovery, as one possible application after another emerged from her fertile mind. And then, as she had neared Qozernon, she had tuned into the news and heard for the first time about the nightmarish creatures which were to become known, with macabre humor, as the Liquidators. That was when she decided that for the time being her own discovery might be best left unpublicized, for she had only then recognized the potential hazard it could hold for her adopted world.

She of course showed her "bubble" to Kurinton and Gelhinda, whom she trusted without reservation. It was Gelhinda who suggested laughingly that with a bit of refurbishing it could become a "home away from home," and Mikiria had seized enthusiastically on the idea. For years afterward she would be adding new rooms and decorating

them with souvenirs of her frequent trips to Earth.



At about the same time Wilorian had been finishing his college degree, Kurinton and Gelhinda had added a decoration of their own to their quiet existences, as Gelhinda's first and only child was born and christened Senara. She having obviously inherited Kurinton's ice blue eyes and golden blond hair, it didn't take long for it to become apparent that she also had her mother's deceptively quiet, thoughtful nature and the iron will it concealed. To her surprise Mikiria found herself vastly enjoying this new locus of disruption in the Amkor household, especially after a few years as Senara proved to have a penchant for physical activities of all kinds.

In particular the girl found Mikiria's frequent training sessions with practice swords to be utterly fascinating, and would watch entranced for hours as the older "sister" with the deep red hair would match blades with Kurinton, Gelhinda (who was no mean practitioner herself at the time), or anyone else she could lure into practicing with her. Naturally Senara had soon begged to be allowed to learn herself, and since swordsmanship (at least with practice blades) is one of the more popular sports on Qozernon, Mikiria had humored her by teaching her the basics once she was old enough to safely handle the relatively harmless practice blade.

Carefully stashed away with her most precious belongings Mikiria still retained the swords she and Wilorian had been given on Deshtiris, and on rare occasions could be persuaded to display them for visitors if the subject came up. Senara, already inordinately proud of the dull practice blade she had been given, was speechless at the sight of the gorgeously wrought weapons and had to be sternly cautioned that they were not ever to be touched under any circumstances.

Senara was only ten when Kurinton died unexpectedly. There is little that even the most advanced medicine can do when a key component of the body abruptly fails completely and irreparably, and for her the blow was so sudden and so stunning that for several weeks she withdrew completely into a silent world of her own. When she finally emerged, there was somehow aimlessness where before there

had been purpose; in spite of her seeming return to normal behavior it gradually became apparent to Gelhinda that there was a hole in her child's life that none of her efforts could mend.

Mikiria too had withdrawn in her own way, burying herself in the construction of a new ship more advanced than any yet built. To both of the remaining Amkors she seemed distant, as though part of her were somewhere else. Gelhinda understood, knowing what effect the loss of yet another parent must have had on her psyche, but to Senara it seemed only that her beloved Kiri no longer cared about her when she needed her most. In retrospect her behavior might seem cold, selfish even, but then who are we to judge another's response to such a bitter hurt?

It was about a year later that Senara managed to extract Mikiria's carefully preserved swords from their hiding place and persuaded one of her playmates, a boy of about the same age, into clashing blades with her. He had panicked and slashed her cheek, then galloped off into the house screaming that he had killed her, he had killed her. When Gelhinda and Mikiria came dashing out, they had found her still standing there with an oddly pleased expression on her face, proudly wiping the blood away with the back of her hand.

After a doctor had sealed the gash (which was a deep one, and could have cost her an eye if it had been half an inch longer) she had received a thorough bawling out from a furious (and frightened) Mikiria. The stunned look on the girl's face as she finally burst into tears had opened Mikiria's eyes, and she had wrapped her arms around the little girl and held her tightly until her crying ceased, reassuring her that she would always be her friend, that she would never neglect her again.

She had then further softened the blow by promising that if Senara would swear to never again use a real sword outside of a combat situation she would give her one of her own when she turned sixteen. True to her word, it was indeed on the girl's sixteenth birthday five years later that Mikiria had presented her with a beautifully wrought blade which was a near match to the two salvaged from Deshtiris. It was that blade that she had carefully polished up and brought with her on this expedition.

It was on that same sixteenth birthday that she had announced that from now on she wanted to be called Senaria, and for the most part so she had been.

Incidentally, although the doctor could have easily rendered the scar completely invisible, the girl had insisted that it be allowed to heal

naturally, a whim the infinitely tolerant Gelhinda had gone along with, since it could be cosmetically removed at any time later if Senaria so chose. She never did.

Although Mikiria had made a point of spending as much time as possible with Senara after her near-disaster with the swords, she had nonetheless proudly unveiled her new and considerably faster ship just a few months later, finally finishing over a decade of work completed in odd hours stolen from her computer consulting and family obligations. Although she was shortly to render the new ship utterly obsolete, at least for her own purposes, it was nonetheless far ahead of any currently in use.

At the suggestion of Lev she had incorporated a hull material which absorbed microwaves rather than reflecting them, making the ship almost invulnerable to detection. In speed it was easily twice as fast as anything in space, in one jump leapfrogging twenty years of development in space technology. In addition, it included in the back the gateway to the ship's living quarters, located in their own universe.

Even while she was finishing the last few weeks of work, she had made the connection which was to render the yet unconceived *Futaba* unlike anything ever built before. She had been idly watching a telecom documentary on an exotic material called amorphous diamond, which in essence was diamond configured at the molecular level by computer-controlled subatomic fields into any form desired. The substance was relatively expensive, but the main obstacle to its use was the incredible complexity of the computer simulations required to form it into a given shape.*

Computer simulations, however, were something Mikiria snacked on between meals, and before long the idea had solidified in her mind of a ship unlike anything in existence, one which could reshape itself as needed. In addition, the substance possessed incredible strength due to the subatomic fields used to configure it, making possible a much lighter and more easily maneuverable vessel.

* In addition, it retained evil associations from a century prior, when it had been used to create "restraint collars" for prisoners. The intention (yet another brick in the road to Hell) had been to provide a humane way of restraining violent prisoners, by placing a collar around the neck which could be caused to shrink if the prisoner attempted to leave a designated area. The resulting discomfort was expected to "persuade" the prisoner to remain where they belonged, without prison walls or handcuffs. A few gruesome and well-publicized accidents eventually led to their abolition.—*Ed.*

The greatest difficulty proved to be getting a sufficient supply of the remarkable stuff, for in the quantities she needed it was not exactly cheap. For a while she drove herself mercilessly, seeking new contracts, sometimes working on several at once, to raise the necessary funds and still contribute her share to the family expenses. More than once she had gone without sleep for several days at a stretch, suddenly finding herself on the floor or slumped over her keyboard with half a day unaccounted for.

The nascent ship was still only a skeleton, consisting of the floor decking with the associated electronics beneath, the control stand, and a finished but untested gateway in the back, when Lev and Zyanita unexpectedly paid a call. In his usual way, Lev had gotten to the point quickly and without wasted words.

Although direct communication with Deshtiris had been cut off for years, trade still flourished between the two planets, and with the trade came communications traffic. For years Mikiria had been valued for her ability to tap into this encrypted traffic and, more importantly, to insert hidden commands that resulted in even more data being routed in her direction. However, she and the codebreakers she worked with realized all too well that there were serious gaps in the information flow that they couldn't fill, particularly in military traffic.

What was needed was to physically access a terminal with a relatively high security ranking and insert the necessary commands from there. Unfortunately, it quickly became apparent that this meant a machine on Deshtiris itself, as none of the trade freighters were granted access to such high-level traffic.

Although there were a few agents in place on Deshtiris (for whom life expectancy tended to be deplorably poor), none had the expertise to do what was needed; in fact only one of the Qozernan intelligence computer specialists was considered capable of performing such a task. However, getting in and out of Deshtiris would be nearly impossible with the ships currently available, which were too large and slow to evade the Deshtiran tracking systems.

In short, Lev needed a ride, and Mikiria's recently finished ship would fill the bill nicely. Would she be willing?

No, she answered. It would be foolish to risk two people for a job that one could do. One ship, piloted by one agent. And that agent would be her.

He tried to dissuade her, but she insisted. For twenty years she had been frittering her life away trying to do little tasks here and there. Now she had the opportunity to do something important, and she had the

necessary skills and knowledge. She would not be denied.

Finally it was agreed, albeit reluctantly. For several weeks she spent her days, and some nights, working with Lev's intelligence staff to create a cover story, devise the necessary tools, and learn all the little things a spy has to know in order not to be fatally tripped up over some trivial technicality.

She had created an identity for herself in the Deshtiran computer web: she was a low-level technician in the Computer Security Corps (better known as CompSec), stationed in one of the large Brizal administrative centers. Orders were carefully designed and planted indicating that she had been instructed to visit one of the relatively minor military command posts out in the countryside and upgrade their security protocols.

Everything was worked out to the last detail, and she had the mind to retain it all. She had the necessary Brizal clothing, equipment, and identity. Her hair was dyed black to reduce the chance of her being recognized, and she wore a pair of brown contact lenses. To even a discerning eye she would appear to be an average Deshtiran. Only if something unexpected were to occur would she be forced to improvise, and if that happened she would have to fall back on whatever inner resources she could muster.

Don't worry, Zyanita had assured her. Nothing can possibly go wrong.



She had dropped out of hyperspace as close to Deshtiris as she dared, for the less distance she traveled under power the less chance there was of detection. She had allowed her ship to coast to a point about two hundred miles above the surface, then applied the minimum power needed to bring her into a geosynchronous orbit above her destination. Her orbital speed exactly matching that of the planet's rotational speed, she in effect was hovering motionless above her destination. Then she had applied a small pulse of power, just enough to put her into free fall towards the planet's surface.

It had taken a long time to fall two hundred miles. Unlike a meteor, which enters the atmosphere at an extremely high velocity to start with, her speed was limited to what gravity could induce minus the friction of the atmosphere. Her terminal velocity was sufficiently low that she needn't fear ending up as a shooting star, but quite sufficient to abruptly end her career if not checked before she reached the ground. Against that she had to balance the fact that Deshtiris had a sophisticated net of detectors capable of picking up the low-speed engines used by both fliers and by spaceships when maneuvering in the atmosphere. A third factor she had to consider was that too great a deceleration in too little a time would have smashed her quite as effectively as a direct impact with the surface.

Her life would depend upon the accuracy of her calculations, calculations carried out to seven decimal places of accuracy. The timing of the actual deceleration was far too delicate to leave to chemically based nerve cells and sluggish muscle fibers, and so she had entered the information into the ship's autopilot interface, rechecking every last digit of every number before storing the commands. Then she had rotated the ship into a horizontal orientation, lowered her chair back, and stretched herself out and waited.

She was suddenly crushed into her seat with tremendous pressure, the breath forced from her lungs. She could not move even her hands, much less sit up. Her vision began going dark, and she felt herself blacking out. Then suddenly she could breathe again, and all sensation

of motion was gone.

She found herself just thirty feet above the treetops of a deciduous forest. At that height the Deshtiran sensors would be unable to pick up the radiations from her well-shielded surface drive, and she set out on the prearranged course towards her chosen landing spot several dozen miles away. She knew that during her brief deceleration she had probably appeared on the Deshtiran screens, and could only hope that after a brief search of the vicinity the authorities would conclude that the odd “blip” had merely been a glitch of some kind.

When she finally dropped to a landing in a small ravine and stepped outside it was dark. Carefully hiding the ship in a narrow side gully, she had waited until mid-morning; then, unpacking a small motorcycle (typical Brizal standard issue for lesser officers), she had set out along the base of the ravine and in about ten minutes had reached a highway bridge. Soon she was on her way towards her destination, a secondary Brizal base about ten miles away. With her she carried a small case, containing the usual tools and components used by a technician in her position. Included with them, inconspicuous among the jumble of assorted parts, was a small data crystal.

Her identification and associated computer records on file had provided her with easy entry at the main gate. As Lev’s advance intelligence had forecast discipline was slack, as was typical for a relatively unimportant installation. According to her orders, she had come from a major Brizal communications center about ninety miles to the south, a reasonable distance to have traveled via the light motorcycle. Explaining her mission to the guard on duty, she had received directions to a low, flat building near the center of the base, where she had parked her motorcycle and checked in with the technician in charge.

“Just a minor upgrade of your security protocols,” she had explained casually, flashing her identification card. To her alarm, the technician on duty insisted on slipping it into a card reader attached to his telecom. For a moment she held her breath, then inwardly sighed in relief as her picture appeared on screen, surrounded by the forged information she had planted several days previously. Scanning it carefully, the technician finally nodded.

“CompSec certainly picked a hell of a day to send you here for this,” he grumbled as he led her to her requested destination. For a moment she was uncertain what to do next, not knowing if displaying ignorance would betray her in some way. Balanced against that, she realized, were the unknown dangers of inadequate information.

“Why’s that?” she asked casually.

“Didn’t they tell you?” he snapped, looking at her a bit strangely, she thought. “Teyn’s coming for one of his ‘inspections.’ ” The way he inflected the last word, with just the hint of a sneer, gave her a very uneasy feeling, even more than the reference to Teyn. “He’ll be here some time today.”

“Well, it’s not my problem,” she grumbled. “I’ve got my orders, and that’s all I care about.” Once again he gave her an odd look. With luck, she thought, she’d be finished and away long before the dictator arrived.

For a while she input a series of carefully planned commands, which to even a skilled computer expert would be recognized as legitimate procedures for the reconfiguration of the encryption software. Then, seeing to her satisfaction that the technician had lost interest and wandered off to the other side of the room, she began slipping in additional instructions, whose ultimate purpose would be to route copies of all secure data to a fictional address. The real effect would be to pass the data into the hyperspace communications systems used to communicate with ships on trading missions to Qozernon. Once in that relatively open data channel, it could be easily intercepted and decoded by Qozernan security forces.

There was one more task to accomplish, and for this she needed access to one of the consoles in the main administration building. Asking the technician for directions, she had packed up her equipment and emerged into the sunlight, for by now it was near noon.

As she stepped into the lobby of the much larger building, a voice addressed her sharply. “Hey! You, back against the wall, arms out.” It was a guard, with a symbol on his shoulder that for a moment baffled her as she complied. Then with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach she recognized the insignia for Teyn’s personal bodyguard. Looking around, she saw two other bodyguards standing at attention, with the remaining occupants of the room also standing obediently against the walls, their arms straight out horizontally in the Deshtiran equivalent of the American “hands up!” position.

A moment later four men emerged from a central corridor. Three of them were more bodyguards. The fourth she instantly recognized as Krigghin Teyn. She had never forgotten that moment, as she stared at the man who had been responsible for the death of her adopted parents, Wilorian’s decades of exile on Earth, and the evil that had befallen her home planet. With a supreme effort she had eradicated every trace of emotion from her face, lest her hatred betray her and her mission.

As they passed within a few paces of her, Teyn had hesitated for a moment, directly meeting her blank gaze. Then he had slowly looked her up and down with an unpleasant leer that sent shivers down her spine. As they had continued on and out of the building, the remaining bodyguards in the room falling lazily into step behind them, she saw Teyn whisper something to the man next to him.

Only when the seven were completely gone did the room suddenly return to life, as a buzz of quiet conversation sprang up where before there had been an uncomfortable silence. Forcing herself to focus on the task at hand, she had shaken off the uneasy emotions that had seized her for the moment and obtained the directions she needed. Soon she was once again seated before a data console, looking for all the world like a bored low-level technician performing routine maintenance.

Entering a series of search commands, she located the target she had sought for so long. Years of cautious probing had told her where in the Deshtiran data network the information she needed was located, and now at last she was at a terminal that would provide her with access. From her work case she removed the small data crystal, after furtively glancing around to make sure she wasn't being watched too closely. Slipping it into an open socket, she entered one more command and waited as her father's long-sought research archives at last fell into her possession.

She glanced nervously at her watch. She knew it would take forty seconds to download the information she needed, and for forty seconds she resumed keying in innocuous instructions in case anyone glanced in her direction.

The download completed, she had just finished removing the crystal and slipped it back into her case when there was a commotion in the hallway and a moment later two of Teyn's guards swaggered into the room. Brushing off a technician's protests, they strode directly towards her.

"You," one of the guards said curtly. "Come with us."

Suddenly feeling a knot at the pit of her stomach, she managed to choke out, "Have I done something wrong?"

"Just follow us," the guard snapped. The two seemed to be sharing a private joke of some kind. "Don't worry," the other guard said to the technician. "We'll get her back to you soon enough."

A few moments later she was in the corridor between the two guards. "What's this all about?" she said defiantly, guessing that a truculent approach could do no harm in the current circumstances. "I

have work to do. You can confirm my orders with CompSec headquarters.”

“Oh, don’t worry, babe,” laughed one of the guards, the stern demeanor now abandoned as they boarded an elevator. “You’ll be back in plenty of time before the office closes. Besides, Teyn outranks your boss.”

“Teyn?” she said, her throat suddenly dry.

They left the elevator and stepped into a corridor. Apparently this was a floor reserved for VIPs, as the carpeting and walls were much richer than the institutional decor they had just left. A moment later they entered a luxuriously furnished suite. There was a door at one end of the room with a bored-looking guard standing next to it.

“Now listen closely,” the first guard warned. “Our leader and inspiration Krigghin Teyn,” and the words reeked of thinly veiled sarcasm, “took a fancy to you earlier this afternoon. And what Teyn wants, Teyn gets. I’d suggest you do *anything* he asks for, no matter what it is. Get the picture?”

She had during all this had an escalating apprehension of what was going on, and her quick mind had already eliminated the alternatives and fastened upon what appeared to be the only feasible plan of action.

“Oh, is that what this is all about?” she said, adding a distinct leer to her voice. “Why didn’t you say so in the first place? I was just wondering what to do for a little excitement this evening. I suppose I could do a lot worse than our beloved leader, couldn’t I?” She slowly ran a hand through her artificially black hair and grinned lewdly as the guard ran a scanner over her tight-fitting clothes, a bit more slowly than necessary, presumably checking for weapons.

“That’s the spirit, babe,” laughed the guard by the door, opening it for her. “Go for it.”

Taking a deep breath, she put on what she hoped was an eager expression and stepped into the room. She found Teyn lying on the bed, covered only by the bedsheet, waiting for her. After slowly looking her up and down, as he had in the lobby, he ordered her to undress, and she did. When she finished, he eyed her approvingly, slipping off the side of the bed and stepping over to her.

With what he no doubt considered a seductive smile, he slid a hand around her slender waist and sighed in satisfaction as he felt her hands slip softly around his neck. Then the glint in his eyes was replaced by sudden terror as he felt those same hands fasten around his throat with a grip of steel.

For just a moment he struggled, unable to breathe, fighting the

superhuman strength of those hands, and looking into a face bearing an expression even more horrified than his own. The last thing he heard was the sharp crack of his own neck.

Shaking with revulsion, she thrust the hideous thing away from her onto the bed and sank to her knees, fighting nausea. She listened for any sign that the guards outside had heard anything out of the ordinary, but there was no sound, and she concluded that the room was relatively soundproof.

The next half hour was the longest of her life. She forced herself to bundle the body into the bed and arrange it and the sheets to appear as though Teyn were asleep, facing away from the door. Then she waited, sitting on the edge of the bed with a sheet wrapped around herself in case one of the guards should unexpectedly enter.

Finally, the time she had allotted now expired, she dressed herself, took a deep breath, and softly opened the door. Summoning every last reserve of self control, she winked at the guard still waiting by the door and closed it behind her.

“Someone ought to explain to that guy that his women like to enjoy themselves too,” she sighed in disgust. “Fast asleep,” she added in explanation. “That’s no way to treat a lady.”

The guard grinned. “You’re kind of old for him, you know,” he said. “Fourteen-year-olds are more to his taste.” He leered at her. “Now I, on the other hand, can appreciate a nice ripe woman like you.”

She ran her tongue over her lips. “Sounds promising. You free later?” Suddenly fearing that he was going to ask Teyn, she hurriedly added, as casually as she could, “Oh, before I forget, your boss wants a wake up call in a half hour.”

“Typical,” sighed the guard. “Tell you what,” she said enticingly, “how about if I check back in an hour? I should have that job done by then. Or does Teyn object to you getting his leftovers?” she jeered.

The guard grinned again in anticipation, obviously not offended. “As long as he gets first crack, he’s not fussy. See you later,” he added, as she gave him another wink on her way out.

Once in the hallway, out from under Brizali eyes, she nearly fainted from suppressed tension. For a moment she thought she was going to collapse, as her legs threatened to liquefy beneath her, then she pulled herself together and strode purposefully out of the building. A few minutes later she was back on the highway, her case with the precious data crystal safely strapped to the rear of the little motorcycle. She knew that even if the guards waited the specified thirty minutes to give Teyn his “wake up call,” her margin of safety would be

vanishingly small.

Of her flight from the planet, she preferred to say as little as possible, even after ten years. Suffice it to say that she had barely lifted off before she found herself hotly pursued; obviously Teyn's body had been found.

Her ship crippled by a direct hit as she left the atmosphere, she had narrowly escaped being marooned forever in limbo between universes. Her return to Qozernon was a bitter one, saturated with self-loathing for what she had compelled herself to do.

Unfortunately, there was more. Two days after her return she was stunned to see a perfectly healthy Krigghin Teyn addressing the monthly meeting of the planet's puppet legislature. Hardly believing her eyes, convinced it was a holographic deception, she had run the broadcast through every computer algorithm she could think of, as well as several new ones she had created in a frenzy of panic. All confirmed that the images she had seen were real, not altered in any way.* She couldn't fathom how or why, but Krigghin Teyn was alive.

That evening an odd message appeared in her email. Unlike most communications, this included no video, or even a holographic still. It was simply plain text, and her blood ran cold as she read it.

* Television transmissions on the Twin Planets are holographic and carry far more information than the blurry, flat images conveyed via Earth television. A side effect of this is that it is far more difficult to modify a live broadcast without detection, as even highly advanced computer imaging programs inevitably introduce repeating patterns and artificial regularities that a real-life image lacks, and which sophisticated computer analysis can detect.—*Ed.*

My Dear Mikiria:

I congratulate you on your remarkable initiative and resourcefulness. Regrettably, as you have doubtless determined by now, your efforts were for naught. Nonetheless it was an impressive performance and a considerable inconvenience to myself.

I recommend that in future you remain on Qozernon, where I can assure you that you will not be bothered. However, if you should be so foolish as to set foot on Deshtiris again, the results would be unfortunate. I trust you will prefer to avoid such an unnecessary end to your very interesting career.

With warmest regards,

T

She must have reread the message a dozen times, wondering what was real and what wasn't; what it was all for; what it all meant. And then, for the first time since leaving Wilorian on Earth twenty years earlier, she had allowed herself to cry.

Part 10: Deshtiris



There was a knock at the door. “Kiri? Will? We’re almost there,” came Senaria’s soft voice. “All right Sen,” Kiri acknowledged. “We’ll be with you in a moment.” In spite of the urgency of our mission, I found myself regretting not hearing the rest of the story. I was haunted by a feeling that I was running out of time.

Once again we reviewed every scrap of information we had. Finally, it was time to change into our Brizal uniforms. I was surprised to find that they essentially consisted of short-sleeved shirts, shorts, and boots, all black. “You’re going to find that Deshtiris is miserably hot almost everywhere,” Zyanita explained. “The Brizali have poured so much junk into the atmosphere that they’ve triggered a serious greenhouse effect.”

There were various insignia of rank on the sleeves of the shirts, but otherwise few markings except for the ugly Brizal emblem: a red equilateral triangle in a white circle, with a small yellow star in the center. Seeing me fingering the symbol, Zyanita filled me in on its origin. “Krigghin Teyn himself claimed to have designed it. I read his explanation of what it meant a long time ago, but it was just a lot of mystical mumbo-jumbo about the party, the people, and the mission—that’s the triangle—with the leader at the center, or something like that.”

Zyanita had provided the information necessary to create the uniforms. Gelhinda had made some reluctant last minute alterations to enable Lev’s uniform to fit Senaria, and needless to say the shirt was a bit tight, something Senaria didn’t seem to object to. Zyanita explained that Kiri’s insignia was that of a secret police captain, an entity that even most Brizali would prefer not to approach too closely. Zyanita and Senaria wore patches for lower ranks in the same organization, while mine was for a sort of all-purpose support staff.

Kiri also handed each of us a small plastic card with our picture, name, and an encoded computer ID symbol. “I’ve created detailed histories for all of us, in case they run a check,” she said grimly. “But if we’re actually brought in for interrogation, there’s no way you’ll be

able to slide by if they start testing your cover story, so we'll just have to be careful."

"You've got to do something about that hair," Zyanita insisted. Kiri had already dyed it into its usual sandy-colored disguise, and now she tied it back tightly, giving her face a surprisingly angular and harsh appearance, not at all eased by the pale blue contact lenses. Zyanita expressed her approval of the results and for the next half hour briefed us again on some of the various customs and practices we needed to be aware of, until we dropped out of light speed and Deshtiris began expanding in front of us.

Even from this distance it was apparent that something was different about this planet. Instead of a brilliant blue-green ball hanging in the stars, what we saw before us was a pale greenish-grey globe with barely visible hints of cloud patterns. It was just possible to make out the continents against the ocean expanses. As we drew closer, we could see a brownish ring surrounding the planet at the very base of the atmosphere. Kiri was shaking her head slowly as she steered us into a shallow approach.

We entered the atmosphere at a much slower speed than we had when approaching Qozernon. "To avoid visible shock waves," Kiri explained. Slowly we descended. After a while the inky blackness around us was replaced by a dark blue, gradually changing to a pale greenish-blue, while Deshtiris' sun acquired a reddish hue as it approached the horizon behind us. We would be arriving just ahead of it, I calculated. I could finally make out clouds below, at first almost indistinguishable from the haze.

"Don't they have radar or something?" I asked. "Surely they'll know we're here."

"The *Futaba's* crystalline shell is transparent to microwaves," Kiri answered, "and the equipment inside is small enough that their sensors won't see anything other than a few bits of metallic junk falling out of the sky. Also, the *Futaba's* low-speed drive uses a slightly different principle than the standard ones and shouldn't be recognizable as such. I doubt if their filtering systems would even pass the information on to the operators."

We dropped into a thick cloud mass, and for several minutes were surrounded by pure white nothingness. Then suddenly we emerged from the bottom and the landscape of Deshtiris was spread out before us in the early morning light, although still with a mile of hazy air in between. "Deshti," said Kiri morosely.

I suppose I had been subconsciously expecting a small walled

fortress à la Edgar Rice Burroughs, perhaps capped with exotic turrets and parapets. What I saw instead was a gigantic modern industrial city, with freeways, parks, factories, and, off in the distance, a massive range of skyscrapers, all set on a flat shelf of land which dropped off behind us into a vast brown treeless plain. On the other side of the city a breathtaking mountain range arose, the peaks hidden in the clouds.

But there was no sign of life anywhere. The freeways and streets below were devoid of movement, factory chimneys were smoke-free, many of the latter partially crumbled away. Several times we passed over what had obviously been major rail yards, now with rails and rolling stock long gone.

Here and there we noticed small pockets of habitation, where vacant lots had been plowed into fields and a few tiny figures could be seen moving about. Nowhere was there any evidence of vehicle traffic.

“All of the able-bodied population was moved long ago to the Brizali’s new industrial centers,” Kiri explained in a melancholy tone. “You’re looking at what used to be a city of over twenty-six million people.” We continued over the center of the city, where some of the skyscrapers actually rose above us into the clouds, many of the windows now broken out. On the far side of the city center was what appeared to be a huge park, with a number of scattered buildings connected by sidewalks and a few discreet access roads, the whole surrounded by a giant traffic circle. Near the center was an immense building complex with an oddly mottled roof on one end.

“That’s the imperial palace of Deshti, where I grew up.” Resolutely shaking off the sadness that seemed to be enveloping her, Kiri added, “We’ll be driving there after we find a place to land.”

“Are you sure we can’t be seen from here?” asked Zyanita nervously. “We’re really not very high up at all.”

“The *Futaba* is virtually invisible from this altitude,” Kiri reassured her. “With our transparent sides and the silver end, it would be like spotting a soap bubble from a few hundred yards away. Even if someone saw us they’d probably write us off as a bird.” Slowly we passed beyond the ruined city and into the far mountain range. Soon we were descending into a forested area, directly onto the remains of a paved road that led from the mountains down into the city.

Before we disembarked, we strapped on our swords. “Remember,” Kiri said, “these are a last resort. If we have to use them things are going to get one hell of a lot more complicated. Don’t pick any fights,” and she looked meaningfully at Senaria, receiving a half-hearted glare in return.

As I stepped out of the *Futaba* I was conscious of a distinct chemical smell in the air, mingling with the pine scent around me. For a moment I was reminded of a smoggy day in Fontana. I was brought back to the present by Kiri's clipped instructions for us to stand well back from the ship. "*Futaba* transform: truck," she commanded, and we watched as our glass bullet repoured itself in its remarkable liquid way into the shape of a rubber-tired vehicle, apparently half jeep, half truck, all according to the data Kiri had previously entered. "This is a typical Brizali utility vehicle," she explained. "We shouldn't be too conspicuous in this. I've created phony records for the license number, so as long as we're not stopped we shouldn't attract any attention."

"And if we are stopped?" asked Zyanita.

"Then we hope I didn't screw up our computer identities," said Kiri casually. "Remember, I'm a secret police captain. Most people, including other Brizali, don't want to mess with someone like that if they can avoid it. If I have to I'll try intimidation. If that doesn't work—well, we're armed." We clambered into our new vehicle, which emitted realistic (if thoroughly offensive) noises and fumes, and were soon bumping our way down the long unmaintained road towards the city.

"This is amazing," I said. "The *Futaba* can actually reform itself into an internal combustion vehicle. Where does the fuel come from?"

Kiri's eyes flashed in momentary amusement. "It's really more of a simulation," she said. "It looks, sounds and smells like a truck, but it's all still made up of amorphous diamond. If by some miracle you could cut open the engine block or gasoline tank, you'd find the electronics modules that are normally under the walkway. Even the tires are rock hard; they just continually reshape themselves as the axle rotates so that they appear to be flexible. I had to beef up the suspension so we wouldn't get shaken apart on these decrepit roads. Let's hope no one tries to kick the tires," she added.

It took us about an hour to reach our first destination, which as Kiri had said was the palace grounds. Along the way we saw very few living souls. Occasionally we would spot an elderly figure in a doorway or sitting on a crumbling porch. Several times we passed over what apparently used to be major rail lines, judging from the number of tracks and the remains of overhead electrification. Now only rotting ties were left.

The drive through Deshti proved to be one of the most depressing experiences of my life. If somewhat more exotic in appearance than Lernesdi (Deshtiris had after all achieved civilization several hundred

years earlier), it still bore a strong kinship to the large Earth cities of my own experience, although even in decay I saw none of the squalor that so mars our own. The streets were not potholed (that requires traffic, after all), just crumbling from age. Everything metal was covered with a thick layer of powdery corrosion, and some lamp posts had literally rotted through and collapsed across the streets. They were so fragile that we simply drove over them, leaving tire tracks of crumbled white dust.

Ahead I saw a stand of trees, some still retaining sickly yellowish leaves, and others long dead. I realized that we had reached the palace grounds. The remains of an arched gateway stood over a driveway entrance, and Kiri steered us into the once-parklike grounds. “Why are you doing this, Kiri?” asked Zyanita softly.

“I have to see it once more,” Kiri said, her voice tightly under control.

“She hasn’t been back here since—well, you know,” Senaria whispered into my ear from behind.

At one time there had evidently been various fences and guard posts to direct the public to appropriate areas, now long rusted or rotted away. Kiri navigated along the maze of drives with the ease of long familiarity, and we eventually found ourselves before an immense building with an ornately carved facade. In spite of the severe deterioration, I recognized it as the imperial palace in the photograph from my youth. The huge main doors, apparently once made of massive wooden timbers, were now a flimsy tangle of rusted iron bands and shreds of rotted lumber, long since pushed aside by other visitors.

“I’ll wait in the *Futaba* if you don’t mind,” Zyanita said. I could tell that she disapproved of this unproductive indulgence in sentimentality.

“Hit the horn if you need to signal us,” Kiri answered curtly. “It also works.” The remaining three of us gingerly trod through the massive doorway, Senaria wide-eyed with fascination. The only sounds were our footsteps and the occasional cries of wild birds.

I expected to find deep gloom within, but instead stepped into a gigantic open room, easily the size of a football field, lit with mottled patches of hazy sunlight and scattered shreds of intense color. Looking up I saw the remains of a skylight which at one time had apparently covered the entire chamber. I realized that this was the odd-looking roof I had seen from the *Futaba* earlier.

“This used to be the great hall,” Kiri said sadly, almost to herself. “The celebrations, the receptions, the ceremonies that I remember

here—it was...” She stopped, unable to continue.

I looked around. The room had evidently been thoroughly gutted; the walls were bare, and there were marks on the floor where various unknown objects had once stood. Only the remains of some stone benches were still in place along the walls, shrouded in relative gloom. “There’s someone there,” Senaria said, nudging Kiri and pointing at a shadowy sitting figure silently watching us.

“It’s okay,” she answered as we continued toward the center of the chamber, decades of accumulated debris crunching softly underfoot and echoing faintly in the vast space.

Kiri stopped and looked up at the shattered skylight, from which most of the stained glass had long since crumbled or been broken out. I knew that in her mind’s eye she was seeing it the way she had seen it as a child, a stunning creation in brilliant colors that she had once proudly shown me in an old book. As she stood silently in a patch of hazy sunlight, I saw a tear slowly roll down one cheek.

“You’re not like any Brizali I’ve ever seen,” said a cracked voice behind us. Startled, we whirled around to see the oldest woman I had encountered anywhere on Qozernon or Deshtiris staring at us intently. It was the figure who had been sitting quietly in the shadows along the walls. “I don’t think you are Brizali,” she continued matter-of-factly. “Who are you?”

Kiri stared at her dully for several seconds before she finally spoke. “My name,” she said slowly, “is Mikiria.”

The old woman seemed undisturbed at this revelation and nodded. “Yes. The eyes and the hair are different, but the face—yes, I knew that face. We all knew that face. So you’ve come back. It’s not what you remember, is it?” Kiri slowly shook her head.

“I come here and sit,” said the old woman. “I remember what it was like.”

“So do I,” said Kiri. Somehow it seemed as if she were speaking from across a great gulf.

“You’re here to fix things,” said the woman matter-of-factly. Kiri nodded silently. For several minutes there was silence, broken only by the sound of the birds outside. “When?” asked the old woman at last, looking around meaningfully at the remains of the vast room.

“Soon, I hope,” said Kiri. “Soon.”



We had left the ruined city far behind as we wound down off the elevated plateau, and before us the road stretched out across a vast treeless plain. Along the highway were the decayed remnants of lodgings, eateries, and other accoutrements of a formerly busy travel artery, all now empty and windowless. Eventually they thinned out to nearly nothing as the road continued across what was rapidly becoming an arid desert, with only a form of dry yellow plant life giving color to the rocky ground. Ahead, at a crossroads with another evidently better-traveled road, we saw what appeared to be an actual operating diner of sorts, and we all agreed that a brief stop for some refreshments would not only be appropriate but a good chance to practice our unfamiliar roles.

We pulled up in front of what could only be charitably described as a “greasy spoon,” apparently sustained by the traffic on the other road (since ours seemed quite deserted). We parked the truck, and with a few last admonitions from Kiri we sauntered inside and found a table near one wall.

The proprietor was identical to every other proprietor of every other such eatery I had ever been inside; I assume there’s something about the job that causes severe genetic alterations. In our case, the owner’s surliness genes were clearly well-developed. We managed to order something resembling food and heaved a sigh of relief as he left us a bowl of greasy chips and shuffled off to the kitchen. For a few moments we were left to ourselves, exchanging rude comments about the genealogy of our host, when there was a minor commotion and three authentic Brizal guards made a noisy entrance. The party consisted of two men and one woman, one of the men bearing the insignia of a sergeant.

The latter, seeing us, swaggered over and was presumably about to demand identification when he spotted Kiri’s insignia. While I wouldn’t exactly say he paled, he definitely deflated somewhat. “Sorry, sir,” he mumbled, “I didn’t see you there.”

“Don’t let me interfere with the performance of your duties, sergeant,” she snapped back with a distinctly arrogant edge. “I imagine

you need to see our identification?” Yanking out an ID card from a side pocket, she shoved it into his face. “Perhaps this will do.” Glancing at it, he muttered an apology and slunk back to his table.

Several times I saw him looking daggers at us as we munched stale chips, but he was always careful not to look at Kiri. I got the definite impression that the Brizal secret police were not at all popular within their own organization. After a few minutes he left the table and disappeared into a side corridor. “Probably calling in my ID number for a check,” Kiri said softly, as the proprietor brought out bowls of soup having a thoroughly unappetizing appearance and set them before us.

“I think I need to use the, uh, facilities,” said Zyanita. I noticed that she looked distinctly unwell. I wondered if it was illness or fright; she was certainly pale.

“Watch your step, Zee,” Kiri admonished her. “If anyone asks you anything, just refer them to me.” Nodding, Zyanita wobbled off to the other corridor where the Deshtiran equivalent of our international restroom symbol hung.

“I hope she’s all right,” Senaria said after a few minutes, but the issue suddenly took a back seat as the sergeant returned and quickly whispered something to the other two. “Uh oh,” Kiri murmured, and her premonitions proved accurate as a moment later the two stood up and all three drew their swords and faced us menacingly.

“Qozernan spies! You’re all under arrest,” snapped the sergeant, a satisfied sneer lighting up his face. “Put your arms out and stand up.”

He wasn’t quite prepared for the literalness with which Kiri took his suggestion. Without warning she made an astonishing leap a good six feet straight up, grabbing the light fixture hanging above us, and planted a powerful two-legged kick directly in the sergeant’s face. As he flew backwards, I took her cue and with a quick motion overturned the table onto the other two, drenching them with the repulsive hot soup. Our actions bought just enough time for Kiri, Senaria and me to draw our own weapons. I got a glimpse of Zyanita standing frozen in the corridor with a horrified look on her face. “Zee, get the hell out of here! Go start the truck!” yelled Kiri and a moment later the three were upon us.

Let me tell you, there is a considerable difference between fencing in a garage with dull practice blades and facing a real swordsman with a razor-sharp weapon, and a good swordsman at that. For a moment I felt sheer panic, then instinct and drill took over and I was no longer thinking but instead parrying and thrusting as if I had been doing this all my life. After a few moments of general free-for-all Kiri wound up

dueling the woman, Senaria the sergeant, and I the remaining officer. Once I saw the horrified proprietor pick up his telecom and an instant later with a quick side-swipe Kiri had sliced right through the cable, disabling the instrument.

Then three things happened simultaneously. Senaria gave her opponent a good whack upside the head with the flat of her sword and he staggered to the floor, stunned; I tripped over something underfoot and fell backwards and a moment later saw my own opponent standing directly over me about to run me through the chest; and then Kiri's blade slid through his throat and out the back of his neck. For just a moment he stood with a surprised look on his face as Kiri yanked out her blade, then he slumped to the floor with a horrible gurgling sound, blood pouring from his mouth.

The Brizal woman, momentarily aghast at these developments, backed away and Kiri took the opportunity to shout, "Run for it! Let's get the hell out of here." We dashed out to the truck and climbed aboard, pulling out onto the highway as the remaining two, the leader still half-stunned from Senaria's blow (not to mention Kiri's kick), clambered into their own truck and pulled out after us.

"*Futaba* display: console!" Kiri barked and the familiar control stand appeared in midair between the two front seats. "Jamming their telecom," she explained in clipped tones, as she quickly keyed in some commands.

Without firearms, we had no immediate way to shake off our pursuers, and I knew that we couldn't let them alert the authorities or our project would become near-hopeless. Kiri obviously realized the same thing, and a moment later shouted over the windstream, "Fasten your seat belts, everyone. Your lives are going to depend on it in a few seconds. Everyone set?" As soon as she heard three affirmative voices, she touched something on the control stand and I suddenly realized we were lifting off the road in a steep climb.

Senaria laughed gleefully. "Just because we look like a truck doesn't mean we can't fly, right, Kiri?"

The next thing I knew we were doing a full 360-degree loop and for a moment I was hanging in my seat belt looking straight down at the ground several hundred feet below. The other vehicle was now directly below us, and as we finished our loop we were gliding down behind the Brizali and coming up on them fast. "Hang on, everyone, hands inside," shouted Kiri and an instant later we were directly alongside the other truck. There was a momentary glimpse of two horrified faces, then Kiri turned the *Futaba* hard against the other

vehicle and it flew out of control into the desert, rolling several times and hurling its occupants out onto the rocky soil, while we bobbed wildly for a moment ourselves before Kiri regained control.

“That had to hurt,” mused Senaria as we set back down onto the highway and became for all intents and purposes an ordinary Brizal truck again. Kiri was shaking, her face ashen.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

She shook her head and said nothing for a few minutes. “Back there—it wasn’t really his fault,” she said finally, her voice unsteady. “He was just doing his job. Damn, that was horrible...”

“It wasn’t your fault,” I said. “And you saved my life.”

She shook her head again. “I’ve always tried to disable an opponent. Having to kill someone is—well, I just hope I never get used to it.”

Senaria, apparently trying to cheer her up, suggested that the two in the truck might have gotten off with a bad bruising. Somehow I doubted it, but I kept my mouth shut. “Piss on them,” Kiri snorted unexpectedly, beginning to return a bit to her usual self. “Maybe it’ll teach them to use seat belts next time. Will! You’re bleeding!” Surprised, I looked down, and realized my shirt was soaked with blood, with more fresh blood slowly dripping off my right hand.

For a moment there was general panic, and then I found that the bleeding was from a cut across my right shoulder, but that most of the blood on my shirt was from the unfortunate Brizal I had been battling. The cut proved to be shallow, and I hadn’t even felt it until now, I realized. Senaria had it skillfully bandaged up within a few minutes. “Well,” Zyanita sighed, “so much for that uniform.”

“Now,” Kiri said after we’d gone a few more miles and there was no sign of other pursuit, “we’ve got to make some changes. The owner of that greasy spoon is going to fix his telecom sooner or later, and even if he doesn’t he’s somehow going to have to report what happened. After all, he’s got a dead Brizal on his floor to explain.” Telling Senaria to take the wheel, she had the other two of us clamber into the rear of the truck with her, where at the back I saw the familiar gateway to the *Futaba*’s living quarters.

There she had Zyanita put on her own uniform and insignia, while she donned an informal outfit of tank top, cutoffs and a relatively plain (for her) pair of boots. She also removed the tie from her hair, which promptly resumed its normal chaotic appearance. Surveying Zyanita, something still didn’t seem quite right, and then it came to her. “Zee, you’ll have to take off those earrings,” she said. “They’re a dead

giveaway. Against regulations.” I wondered if they had served to tip off our recent opponents. Zyanita grudgingly removed them and stowed them away in a drawer.

“Will, I’m not sure what to do with you,” Kiri commented in exasperation, surveying the mess I had made of my uniform. “I really wasn’t planning on this.” Rummaging around in the room (the same one I had stayed in during our trip from Earth, I realized) she unearthed a pair of my jeans and a T-shirt and suggested I change into them. Fortunately the T-shirt hid the bandage, which might have attracted undue attention. “If we’re stopped we’ll have to hope they buy the idea of a few stray workers being taken in for interrogation. I think we can leave Sen as she is.”

Soon we were clambering back into the front of the vehicle with our new personas, Senaria remaining at the wheel as Kiri intently worked at the *Futaba*’s control console updating our cover stories. Finally she expressed satisfaction with the results and took the wheel once again.

About a half hour had elapsed when we topped a small rise and looked out across a broad valley, through the center of which ran an evidently important divided highway. Even from several miles away the heavy traffic was visible, including a considerable number of trucks. “That’s the route to Tar Deshta,” said Kiri. “It’s now or never,” and we headed down the long shallow slope to the interchange, first crossing over a rail line and under a high tension power line paralleling the freeway.

A few minutes later we heard sounds above and looked up to see several aircraft, the first I had seen on Deshtiris, with orange flashing lights on each end. They vaguely resembled transport helicopters but without the rotors, making only a low humming sound as they moved rapidly in the direction we had come. “Brizal police,” Kiri observed. “I guess our proprietor finally fixed his telecom. That was too close for comfort.”



For about two hours we proceeded along the freeway, Kiri carefully matching our speed to that of the other traffic (this was definitely not a good time to earn a speeding ticket, I reflected). Several times we crossed over other highways, which for the most part dumped their traffic onto ours, until we found ourselves in the middle of what was developing into a heavy mass of bumper-to-bumper traffic. At the same time I gradually became aware of a dark blot along the horizon ahead, visible even against the dull grey of the polluted sky. Once I thought I heard a train whistle of some kind from the paralleling rail line, followed by the rattle of freight cars, but at the time we were several lanes deep with solid traffic on all sides and the sounds remained only sounds.

As the dark smear ahead gradually developed into a dome of brownish yellow smog our speed began dropping accordingly, until we were crawling along at perhaps twenty miles per hour by the time we entered the outskirts of what was evidently a large industrialized city. A distinct plume of black smoke was beginning to separate itself from the general blot until it stood out clearly ahead and slightly to the left, with the major part of the smog off to the right.

“I don’t understand this,” muttered Kiri, clearly working herself into a nervous state at the delay. “This is supposed to be the bypass route around the city.”

The mystery was soon solved in a rather dismaying manner, as we found ourselves being routed off the freeway directly towards the city at the next interchange. As we swung up and over the empty lanes I got a glimpse of a huge object, seemingly the size of an ocean liner, engulfed in flames at the base of the giant plume of smoke, surrounded by a cloud of emergency vehicles both on the ground and in the air.

“That’s a Deshtiran battleship,” said Kiri, awe in her voice.

“Not everyone’s on their way to Qozernon,” Zyanita added calmly. Judging from the immense halo of scorched landscape surrounding the wreckage, I suspected that it had been an impressive mishap.

“Looks like this war’s already taken its first casualties,” I remarked unthinkingly.

“No, not the first,” said Senaria softly, looking away from the rest of us. No one spoke for the next few minutes as we entered Watu Djamus, as the city was called.

“Well, I guess we’re going to get a close-up look at one of the Brizali’s industrial hellholes,” Kiri sighed. “I really hadn’t planned on this. Let’s see if we can stay out of trouble this time.”

Any hopes I might have had of our diverging route taking us through the city on a high-speed freeway were quickly dashed as our detour soon dumped us directly onto an ordinary city street. From then on we were slowly working our way from one intersection to the next though honking, foul-smelling traffic as we entered the bowels of the city. Along the way I learned that the four-color Deshtiran traffic lights followed the color conventions commonly in use on the Twin Planets, with blue indicating a favorable condition (equivalent to the way green is almost universally used on Earth), orange a danger situation (or “stop”), and green and yellow for progressively more unfavorable intermediate states. As it happened, I was later to encounter these colors under rather more interesting circumstances.

It took very little time for me to realize that Watu Djamus was one of the ugliest cities I had ever seen. In addition to the severely polluted air (far less breathable than that we had encountered upon landing), the city itself had the aspect of a giant industrial park, with the narrow streets threading their ways between gigantic factory complexes of sheet metal and poured concrete. Overhead were countless assemblages of piping, electrical cables, catwalks, and conveyer belts. What little one saw of the sky was an occasional glimpse of flat brownish-grey, and at times the smog was so thick that vehicles drove with their lights on.

The people I saw were uniformly dressed in the drab grey shirts and faded shorts of the Brizal work force. Occasionally one saw a black shirt, indicating a member of the Brizal organization. Although at times we passed through what could have been considered a residential area, it generally consisted of drab lookalike buildings with stores on the first floor and multiple apartments above, so squeezed into such various corners and gaps in the surrounding factory buildings as to seem an afterthought.

Here and there were what amounted to conveyer belts for humans, which appeared to be as close to public transportation as anything we saw, and which generally connected a cluster of apartments with one of the nearby factories. The vast majority of the vehicle traffic around us consisted of official business, the vehicles being occupied by at least

one Brizal in addition to any other passengers, or of truck deliveries of all sorts. Occasionally a police or emergency vehicle appeared overhead on its way to some unknown crisis.

What I found most interesting was what I didn't see. Watching the crowds of workers waiting at stoplights, or boarding the conveyer belts, I realized that this was no *1984* scenario. I saw innumerable instances of courtesy and good humor as the crowds jostled their way along, and an occasional smile here and there. It hit me that this was a defeated, occupied world, not a sea of brainwashed automatons. Noting also the occasional side glance full of suppressed hatred directed at the omnipresent Brizal officers, I suspected that eventually there would be a reckoning, and I wondered just how civilized the Deshtirans would prove then.

It took us a good three hours to work our way through the dismal place, and at that we were probably lucky. It was with tremendous relief that we found ourselves crossing under an immense aggregation of power line towers and over another rail line, and then accelerating back onto the freeway from which we had been so rudely ejected. Soon we were leaving the last outskirts behind.

"Traffic looks a lot lighter now," Kiri noted gratefully. "There are no other cities between here and Tar Deshta, and it's a relatively small town. Let's hope there aren't any more detours." I glanced back to see the black plume of smoke still roiling high into the air, eventually disappearing into the overall murk. I wondered how many people had perished in the mishap, and felt my stomach knot up as the realization hit me that whatever the number, it would easily be dwarfed by the catastrophe looming ahead.

Eventually Zyanita crawled over the seat and disappeared into the back, to return a few minutes later with sandwiches and containers of fruit juice. "I think we'd best avoid any more rest stops if we can," she commented dryly. "If you need a break, bathrooms are through the back and third universe on the left." I had to grin; it was certainly the closest to humor that I'd heard her attempt.

For a while we munched in silence as we watched the barren scenery slide by. Ahead stretched the freeway, bordered on one side by a tremendous series of transmission towers and on the other by the single rail line, as far as the eye could see. Finally breaking the silence as she looked around at the rest of us, Kiri seemed to be thinking aloud as she said, "The hardest part of all this is going to be getting through the checkpoint at Tar Deshta. It's not a place just anyone can enter. We're going to have to play it very cool, and it might be a good idea if

several of us hid in the living quarters just in case. The less we resemble the police description the better.”

I nodded, feeling a bit like a criminal myself. “We’ve gotten this far,” Senaria said softly. “We’ll do this somehow.” Those were the last words spoken for a considerable time, as we each rode cocooned in our own thoughts.



We had been traveling with the flow of traffic for several hours since leaving Watu Djamus, and the sun was getting quite low in the sky, when I caught a peculiar sound from behind. Turning, I saw an astonishing sight on the rail line paralleling us. A train was coming up fast, doing about eighty, I guessed, and above the brilliant glow of the headlight rose a huge plume of white smoke.

“A steam locomotive?” I said in astonishment. “Here?”

Kiri chuckled. “I told you the technology mix on Deshtiris was bizarre. They’re avoiding using normal energy sources for anything except military aircraft and the transformers like the one at Tar Deshta. The process they use to manufacture artificial petroleum for these antiquated motor vehicles produces a combustible substance similar to coal as a by-product. And steam locomotives are much easier to manufacture than diesels. So what could be more logical than to use them for transportation?” A moment later the locomotive was passing us, the traditional “chuff chuff” speeded up into a shuddering roar, followed by the heavy metallic clatter of the freight cars.

“I can’t believe how much that looks like an Earth locomotive,” I said admiringly. I had only seen steam locomotives in movies, but even on a 2D screen in black and white they had been impressive. Here it was overwhelming.

“It should look familiar,” Kiri snorted. “It’s built from plans for a Nickel Plate Berkshire type, circa 1943. When someone here got the idea to use steam for locomotion, it was easier to copy the plans from an Earth library than to design one from scratch.” The train appeared to be carrying a wide variety of freight, including many boxcars, some tank cars, and a number of flatcars bearing Brizal motor vehicles. There were also a few empty flatcars mixed in here and there.

“That is so cool,” raved Senaria, her eyes wide, as the train pulled past us. “Too bad we can’t hitch a ride.” Kiri turned and stared at her, until Zyanita nervously mumbled “Uh, Kiri, the road...”

“Will, get me the road map,” Kiri abruptly demanded. “It’s in that compartment there. Oh, don’t let it blow away, for god’s sake.”

Baffled, I found the map and unfolded it, and Kiri traced the road we were traveling between glances at the highway ahead. Apparently finding what she wanted, she emitted a gleeful laugh. “Senaria, you’re a genius!”

“What?!” said Senaria, as puzzled as anyone.

“Will, you show her,” Kiri retorted impatiently. Quite as mystified as Senaria, I just sat openmouthed. Finally she broke down and explained. “Tar Deshta is located up in the mountains ahead; in fact, it was originally a mine before SamariCorp got into pharmaceuticals and turned it into a factory. The rail line takes the long way around while the highway goes directly up a steeper grade. There’s a side road here,” and she vaguely gestured at an indeterminate location on the map, “which follows the tracks part of the way. Once we’re out of sight of the freeway we can overtake the train and hitch that ride.”

“And then we just wait in the *Futaba*’s living quarters while the train is inspected, and once inside we go about our business,” finished Zyanita admiringly. “Not bad.” Senaria beamed proudly.

Sure enough, we soon saw the flat plain ending in what appeared to be low hills rising ahead as the tracks began veering off to the right, the train itself long gone. A few minutes later we reached another exit, labeled only “Access Road,” which we took. It turned out to be the remains of a paved road, now very bumpy and with most of the pavement long gone. Before long the freeway had begun climbing out of sight as we took the more roundabout route, and within another five minutes we were alongside the tracks again, feeling as if our teeth were going to be rattled out of our gums in spite of the truck’s supposedly “enhanced” suspension.

Now out of view of the freeway, Kiri lifted the *Futaba* into the air and over the tracks and began accelerating until we were flying along at over ninety miles an hour. We easily overtook the train, already slowing on account of the mild grade, and since Deshtiran trains don’t use cabooses (neither do American ones any more, by the way) we were able to fly over it and select a suitable empty flatcar without detection. The track was curving its way through a series of cuts, and we were well out of sight of the locomotive and its crew. A moment later we touched down and became just another unremarkable piece of freight.

“Now what?” I asked.

“Now we hide in the living quarters until we’re past the inspection point,” Kiri answered, shutting down the *Futaba*’s control console and switching off the truck’s “motor.” We all clambered over the seats and

through the disguised entrance to the living quarters, Kiri entering a command into a keypad on the wall as she closed the door behind us. A clear window appeared in the gateway.

“Can’t they see us in here when they do the inspection?” Senaria asked.

“No. This is a view screen, not a window,” Kiri replied. “Also, I’ve disabled the latch on the other side. As far as they can tell, it’s locked or jammed. I doubt if they’ll make an issue of it at this time of night. Now we might as well make ourselves comfortable. It’s probably going to be a long wait.” She wasn’t far wrong, either, as the train began slowing severely for the steepening grade, and was soon panting along at only fifteen miles an hour or so.

I suddenly started to laugh aloud. Seeing Kiri and the others staring at me in surprise, I explained, “Sorry, but it just hit me. Here I am on a planet thirty-five light-years from Earth, attacking a super-scientific enemy installation in a shape-shifting starship, hitching a ride on a railroad flatcar behind a 1950s-era steam locomotive.”

“1940s era,” Kiri corrected me with a grin.

“You forgot about the swords,” added Senaria, also getting into the spirit of things. Zyanita of course failed to see any humor whatsoever in the situation.

Later that evening I asked Kiri a question that had been nagging at me ever since our misadventure at the crossroads. “Maybe I shouldn’t bring this up,” I said, quietly enough so that the others wouldn’t hear, “but it’s about what you said about killing that soldier.” She looked at me expectantly. “You didn’t seem to feel much remorse about those Brizali back on Earth that you nuked. What was the difference?”

“No, I didn’t,” she said without hesitation. “The Liquidators aren’t sentient, first of all. They’re more like biological machines than conscious beings. They have no will power, no conscience, and just enough programmed intelligence to follow orders without detailed explanations. Not to mention that they had obviously just murdered several innocent police officers. And the one human you saw—” Her jaws clenched. “His real name was Jor Mirdis, but he was better known as the Brizal Butcher. It was a real pleasure to send him to Hell.”

“Listen, Will,” she added resolutely, “if we’re successful, more people are going to die, and directly because of us. And most of them probably don’t really know what it is that they’re a part of. But if we don’t do—what we’re going to do, the holocaust ahead will dwarf anything you or I could ever imagine. We can’t avoid making that decision, because our doing nothing will yield results just as real and as

horrifying as anything we could do.” And on that dark note she left me to my thoughts.

It was a good two hours, and pitch dark outside, before we began to see lights moving alongside the train through the viewscreen. It was an eerie feeling to see the motion through the little “window” but to feel absolutely no sensation of movement where we were standing (which was, of course, actually the case). In the meantime we had been reviewing the maps Zyanita had provided for Tar Deshta and particularly for its heart, the former SamariCorp plant.

Kiri unfolded a detailed map of the city. “There’s the main roadway into the plant,” she told us, tracing one of the many streets. “Obviously we can’t go that way; it’ll be heavily guarded. We’ve got to find another way across.”

“Across what?” I asked. She explained that as the SamariCorp plant had expanded, the plateau it was situated on was expanded outward with earth fill and concrete until it jutted out a considerable distance from the mountain side. Since then the Brizali had dug a deep trench around the base of the fill as an additional security precaution, so that simply climbing up the concrete wall was out of the question.

The trench, or moat as I wryly thought of it, extended in a semicircle around the plant itself. Kiri pointed to a building at the edge of the trench on the plant side. “That’s the building Jinhos was talking about: the tunnel starts in its basement. There’s a small bridge or catwalk here,” and she traced her finger along a narrow line crossing the trench, “which leads across directly into that building. If we can reach it we may be able to slip over without attracting a lot of attention.”

Eventually the train came to a stop in a brightly lit railyard, and we could see inspectors in Brizal uniforms, bearing the same general-purpose support insignia that I had worn earlier, swarming over the various cars, cyber-clipboards in hand. As I had expected, the unfortunate fellow assigned to our car was obviously in a quandary, for after all this flat car was supposed to be empty. For some time he stood scratching his head in evident perplexity. Finally he left, returning with several other officers in Brizal secret police uniforms.

Kiri entered a command into the keypad, and now we could clearly hear their conversation, with the metallic sounds of the railyard in the background. For a few minutes they speculated on whether this could be the same vehicle used by the nefarious Qozernan spies reported earlier, and then proceeded to go over the vehicle with the proverbial fine-tooth comb. At one point they seemed to be looking directly at us

through the viewscreen, but of course were actually only inspecting the rear door, which to them appeared solid.

Finally, after carefully examining the engine serial number and the embossed identification numbers on the sides (which Kiri had altered on our way to the freeway), they concluded that a clerical error must be at fault. Double-checking the computer records for the registration once more, and apparently finding the results to their satisfaction, they left, and a few minutes later the train clanked back into motion.

I suddenly realized that my heart had been pounding wildly, and took a deep breath. "Don't relax yet," Kiri said grimly. "This part was a piece of cake." She adjusted the viewscreen so that instead of looking into the *Futaba's* rear compartment we were looking out the back of the truck, making it considerably easier to see the landscape we were passing through. It appeared to be a small city, with street after street of cookie-cutter institutional dwellings and offices, broken up by the occasional corner convenience store. There was no sign of parks, monuments, or any attempt at more than functional architecture.

"Another fugly place to live," observed Senaria.

"No one's allowed here except Brizali and support staff," Kiri explained. "No families at all. It's just as well," she added darkly. Eventually we entered another railyard, this one much larger, and finally came to a stop. "Perfect," she said in satisfaction, "we're right alongside a street. I was afraid we'd end up surrounded by freight cars somewhere in the center." She took a deep breath.

"This is where it's really going to get dangerous," she said quietly to all of us. "Once we leave now, there's a good chance we won't be coming back, even if we're successful. If anyone wants to stay here, I'll understand. If we're not back by daybreak, you can transform *Futaba* and outrun anything they have in the air back to Qozernon. I've set the ship to respond to all of your voices." She looked at us, and behind her contacts I saw a momentary flash of green through the artificially small pupils as the light caught her eyes.

"I'm with you," I said.

Senaria was right behind me. "Of course I'm coming, you ditz."

"And I," said Zyanita.

Kiri looked away and said nothing for a few moments, then turned back to us. "You're all crazy," she said, "but I love you for it. All right, then. Whatever you do, don't bring along any maps or other stuff you shouldn't. If we are picked up, we might be able to bluff our way out since our computer records are good as far as we know. Let's go."



Kiri reset the viewscreen to the *Futaba's* interior, and after satisfying herself that no one was lurking in the truck she gingerly opened the door and we filed into the back. Our only equipment consisted of our sword belts and a small pocket torch apiece. In addition, Kiri carried a tiny laser cutter. Motioning for us to stay where we were, she looked around cautiously, then whispered "*Futaba* display: console." A moment later we had silently lifted off the bed of the railcar and gently set down on the adjacent street. Starting the engine (now much quieter than before, thanks to a bit of hurried reprogramming), we slowly drove through the nearly deserted streets. Apparently not a lot went on in this part of Tar Deshta after dark.

Before long we began to see other vehicles as we approached a busier sector of the town. No one seemed to be paying us much attention; apparently a truck with a lone driver was not unusual at this time of night. Soon we were crossing a main thoroughfare, and we all caught our breaths sharply as we peered cautiously through the side window of the truck.

The road we were crossing led up a steep incline and ended far above us in a brilliantly lit maze of buildings, towers, and piping, resembling nothing quite so much as an oil refinery at night. In the center a tall building rose even further skyward, topped off with a central cone-shaped tower projecting hundreds of feet into the air. A coruscating bluish glow surrounded the tower. I realized that I was looking at our target, the old SamariCorp plant, now the center of Brizal power.

In the fleeting glimpse we received as we crossed the road, I also saw a well-guarded checkpoint at the spot where the road began climbing. Kiri continued across and into some side streets, eventually parking in a darkened alleyway amid a maze of girders and industrial equipment.

A few minutes later we were silently creeping along the darkened back streets. Looking up, I saw the buildings of the main plant a good sixty feet above us. The main bridge was several city blocks away, but

almost directly overhead I saw a narrow catwalk silhouetted against the sky, starting somewhere in an apparently abandoned framework of girders and pipes above and extending across the gap.

“How the hell are we supposed to get up there?” muttered Zyanita. Ignoring her, Kiri led us around the perimeter of the darkened installation and eventually found a gate in the chain-link fence, secured with a padlock and plastered with warning signs.

“Keep an eye out,” she whispered, and a moment later we saw the brilliant red flickerings of a laser cutter as she burned through the latch. It took only a few moments before the gate swung open with a metallic groan.

“Now we look for a stairway,” she whispered. “And be careful. Some of this stuff can be dangerous.” For several minutes I found my torch revealing machinery and plumbing in various states of decay, and then Senaria gave a soft whistle and we found her standing before a metal stairwell, sealed off with steel grating welded to the support posts. It took Kiri a bit longer to burn through this time, and once we had to stop and freeze as we heard footsteps outside the compound and saw the flashing of a torch. Finally the guard left, apparently not noticing the broken lock, and wandered on down the street.

The cutting job done, Kiri and I carefully pulled away the grating and set it down as silently as possible, and then the four of us began the climb. I was relieved to find that in spite of the abandoned appearance of the installation the metal stairwell was still in good shape and not yet corroding away, especially after we had climbed a good sixty feet and headed for the catwalk which stretched out in front of us.

I looked down into the trench, half-expecting to see water and moat monsters below, but discovered instead that it was apparently being used as a dumping pit for unwanted equipment. A fall from here would be a very ugly experience, I thought to myself as we stepped out onto the catwalk, Kiri and Zyanita in the lead, with Senaria and myself bringing up the rear.

We had traversed perhaps a quarter of the length of the walkway, which was about three feet wide with a single metal rail on each side, when we heard an angry voice from below shout something and the glare of a brilliant torch hit us full on. “Run for it!” Kiri hissed, and we threw caution to the winds as a blinding green streak narrowly missed us and with a crackling hiss sent a cascade of sparks showering down from one of the tanks above.

“Damn! He’s got a laser pistol,” I heard Zyanita exclaim. A moment later we heard a second voice join the first.

There was another brilliant green flash, and Senaria screamed as the metal decking beneath her gave way, one of its supports vaporized. I barely managed to grab her hand as she fell, and was in turn smashed face down against the decking as her weight yanked me off balance. Just in time my other hand found a hold on one of the railing posts and an instant later I was staring down at her dangling form, as well as the jagged mass of discarded valves and piping a good hundred feet below, feeling as though I were going to be torn in half at any moment. "Hold still, Sen!" I shouted as her terrified writhing threatened to rip her hand out of my grasp.

An instant later I felt an incredibly strong grip on my legs. I glanced back and saw Kiri also lying flat on the deck, her arms wrapped around my legs and her legs in turn wrapped around a post.

"I've got you, Will," she said calmly. "Let go of the railing and take her with both hands." I did as she instructed, and a moment later had Senaria firmly in hand and began pulling her up as Kiri pulled me in turn back from the edge. In a few seconds Senaria was able to wrap her legs around a support and with my help dragged herself back onto the platform, shaking with fright. "Let's get out of here," said Kiri as several more green bolts hissed by harmlessly, and a moment later the four of us reached the doorway.

As luck would have it a lone guard, apparently alerted by the uproar, was just opening the door inward as we arrived. Lunging at it with all her strength, Kiri knocked the door open violently, hurling the unfortunate guard backwards, and a moment later we were inside and out of reach of our pursuers' weapons.

Not out of danger, though, as the guard, nursing a bloody nose with one hand, faced us with sword drawn in the other. I reached for mine, but before I could draw it Senaria emitted a blood-curdling noise, whirled around on one foot, and with the other landed a high kick directly on the unlucky fellow's jaw. He flew across the room and crashed into the far wall with a clatter and lay still, while Senaria, losing her balance, performed an ungraceful stunt fall directly onto her rear. Unlike the guard, she did not remain at all silent, instead emitting a string of epithets that impressed even Kiri as I helped her to her feet.

"This way," said Zyanita urgently, leading us into a hallway and down a stairway. Behind us we heard shouts and the clatter of boots on metal.

Fortunately there didn't seem to be anyone ahead of us, and stopping before a metal door Zyanita announced that this should be the room we were looking for. Opening the door yielded a typical

custodian's storeroom, and as soon as we were inside she switched on her torch and closed the door behind us. The passageway proved to be just where the map said it should, located behind a metal cabinet that hadn't been moved in many years, judging from the rust stains it left on the floor as we slid it aside. An almost invisible panel opened easily with a push, revealing a dark void beyond.

We slid the shelving back into place as best we could from inside the passage and closed the panel, hoping that it would delay the searchers at least briefly. I knew that the rust-streaked scratches left behind would tip them off before long.

"Where the hell did you learn that little maneuver?" Kiri said admiringly to Senaria as we made our way along the passage. "I saw it in an Earth movie," she admitted, "and it looked pretty cool, so I practiced it until I got it right. I never thought I'd ever actually use it, though."

"Your follow-through needs work," I said helpfully, and received a vicious glare in return.

To our mounting dismay we soon discovered that the passageway was not a simple tunnel from point A to point B as the map had shown. We found ourselves passing numerous junctions from either side, and eventually reached a fork where either direction looked equally valid. I shook my head and looked at Kiri. She shrugged her shoulders helplessly. Choosing one of the openings at random, we continued on but soon encountered more forks. Apparently there was an entire network of these tunnels under the old plant. Finally I suggested we stop at a small alcove set into the passageway. I could tell Kiri was boiling with frustration.

I unsheathed my sword and dragged it over the floor, which seemed to have a kind of plastic covering similar to linoleum. I was pleased to see that the point left a distinct streak. "I have an idea," I said. "It's futile for all of us to go wandering around like this. I'll explore ahead and see if I can discover which route actually leads somewhere. I can use my sword point to mark my path so I don't get lost."

"That's a good idea," responded Zyanita thoughtfully, "but it would make more sense if Kiri and I went. We know how the map looked, and we might have a chance of recognizing the correct route from the pattern of turns. You stay here with Sen and cover our backs in case someone comes along unexpectedly." I looked at Kiri, and she nodded. I felt uneasy about the whole idea, but reluctantly agreed. A moment later their torches were disappearing down the passageway,

trailed by the faint sound of Kiri's sword point scraping along the floor.

For what seemed an eternity Senaria and I waited restlessly in the alcove. I soon found myself pacing like a caged animal, as Senaria nervously chewed on a knuckle. This was accomplishing nothing, I finally concluded, and so I decided to start over and try think things through, out of habit shoving my hands into my jeans pockets. My left hand encountered something small and round, and I pulled it out and examined it absently. This time I recognized it: it was the back or retaining clip for a pierced earring. These must be the same jeans I wore when we first fled Earth, I thought.

Something again tugged uneasily at the back of my mind. I had never seen Kiri wear earrings, and I was positive that her ears weren't pierced (or any other part of her body, for that matter).

Zee, you'll have to take off those earrings. They're a dead giveaway.

Something else surfaced. What was it Kiri had said to her?

I think you're the only friend I have who's never taken a ride in the Futaba. It must be a bit unsettling for you.

And then—

They even knew where the Futaba was hidden. How?

Suddenly my blood was running cold in my veins.

"Come on," I exclaimed, grabbing an astonished Senaria by the wrist. I felt panic taking over. We dashed down the passageway, recklessly shining the torch full strength along our path to save time.

"I don't understand," protested Senaria between pants. "What's wrong?" We had gone maybe three hundred feet when a turn in the tunnel answered her question, as we entered a junction with several diverging openings, all of them pitch dark. My torch swung around wildly and came to rest on a still figure in the center of the chamber, lying face down in a ghastly lake of blood. Not even the garish light of the torch could disguise the familiar tank top and cutoffs, or the wild shock of sandy-colored hair.



I don't know how long I stood frozen in my tracks. I heard Senaria make a slight choking sound as she tried to speak but failed.

I saw a small wound in the upper left back, just below the shoulder blade. Then slowly I knelt by the body, gently took it by the shoulder, and rolled it over. Although covered with blood, Kiri's features were unmistakable. There was a second wound on her left breast, directly over the heart, and I realized that she had been run through. Only a small amount of blood still oozed from either wound. I placed my hand over her heart, but felt nothing.

I looked up at Senaria, her face a shadowy mask in the pallid torch light, and slowly shook my head. "Who—" I heard her whisper.

"Zyanita," said a detached voice that sounded vaguely like my own. "It was her all along. I realized too late. Too late..." I saw tears mingle with the blood on Kiri's face and realized they were mine, and felt Senaria's hand on my shoulder.

"Will," she said softly, her own voice barely intelligible. "We've got to finish what we started. Otherwise this was for nothing."

I nodded dumbly. "Just another moment," I said. I saw the chain around Kiri's neck, remembering what she had said earlier. *If anything ever happens to me, I want you to take this. Promise me that.* I had promised, and now I kept that promise, gently pulling the chain and pendant over her head and placing it around my own neck. "All right," I said finally. "Let's go."

"And where do you plan to go, exactly?" said a mocking male voice in return, as we were suddenly lit by the glare of torches from three of the entrances to the chamber. Drawn laser pistols glinted in the unearthly light. A moment later five uniformed Brizali stepped out of the darkness, followed by Zyanita.

"I told you the bait would bring the rats," she said, and began to laugh. It was a shrill, unnatural laugh, and even in my benumbed state it sent chills down my spine.

"Quiet, you fool," the squad leader finally snapped, and slapped her. She stopped laughing, but her face, still spattered with Kiri's

blood, held a fixed expression of unholy triumph. Like a doll, I thought, a doll possessed by a malevolent ghost. The ghost of the past.

The squad leader tapped a small telecom device on his left wrist and spoke. "We have them, sir." I couldn't hear the response, but he looked pleased.

"You will come with us. Bring that along," he said, gesturing at the still figure on the floor. "You are being honored with an interview," and he chuckled, "with the person you've been trying to meet. Too bad you won't survive it." He motioned toward one of the entrances. I slowly gathered up Kiri's lifeless body in my arms and followed silently as two guards led the way ahead of us with torches, the rest following behind. Several times I heard Zyanita giggling softly to herself.

Dazed, overwhelmed by what had happened, I found my mind wandering on its own back to that unanticipated day when my life had been turned upside down, the day a cheerful young college student had accosted me at my desk and fast-talked me into an evening of *Tenchi Muyo*. It seemed so very long ago now. And this is where it had all led, I thought numbly, barely feeling her weight in my arms.

For many minutes we wound our way through the twisting passageways, then began climbing steadily, at last stopping before a steel door with several embedded electronic locks. The other guards stepped aside as the leader entered a combination and the door swung open. We stepped through into an entirely different environment, a high-ceilinged room with walls festooned from floor to ceiling with indicators, gauges, and screens displaying various readouts and continually changing patterns.

One entire wall was covered with a mosaic of glowing blue indicators, each bearing a symbol of some kind. Given the convention of using blue to indicate a favorable condition, it was a safe assumption that everything here was running smoothly.

The far end of the room was a single giant window overlooking an enormous cavity extending far above and out of sight below. There were huge glowing cylinders positioned vertically through the cavity along which bolts of bluish energy seemed to be continually pulsing upwards.

Of immediate interest were the two figures standing before us in the center of the room. One was dressed more gaudily than any Deshtiran I had previously seen, with elaborately decorated shirt and trousers and a pair of high black (and absurdly shiny) boots. There was certainly no danger of mistaking Krigghin Teyn for anyone else, I

thought dully.

The other figure, off to one side and watching us intently with its inhuman dim orange stare, was a Liquidator.

“Here they are, sir, as you ordered,” announced the squad leader nervously as he deposited our weapons on the floor before Teyn. For a moment the dictator stared uncomprehendingly at me, then at Zyanita.

“What is this?” he said finally, an angry edge in his voice. “The Boss said he wanted them alive.” Her only response was another eerie giggle. Striding up to me, he stared intently at the bloody figure I held in my arms, and then I swear he went deathly white. For several seconds he seemed incapable of speech. He finally turned back to the unfortunate officer, and I could see that his hands were trembling.

“What have you done?” he managed, his voice barely a whisper, his face a mask of fear. The fellow motioned apprehensively towards Zyanita. “It was her doing. She came to us and said she had arranged to lead them into a trap. When we arrived at the rendezvous we found them as you see them.”

“Do you know what you’ve done?” Teyn repeated almost inaudibly to Zyanita.

“Just what I intended to do,” she giggled, a bizarre grin spread across her usually dour features. “What I’ve wanted to do for years. What she deserved.” The surrounding Brizali noticeably edged away from her, and I suddenly felt that something terrible was about to happen. I was terribly right.

“Well, little princess,” Teyn began softly, “it seems that we can no longer be entirely sure where your loyalties lie. One assignment after another you’ve botched; that I can forgive. But apparently you’ve decided that you no longer need to follow orders at all.” The vapid grin on Zyanita’s face had finally begun to fade, to be replaced by the beginnings of fear. “I think it is time for us to dispense with your services, Princess Zyanita,” he finished. “Kill her,” he shrieked unexpectedly, motioning to the Liquidator standing by the wall.

For just a moment her face was distorted with terror. An instant later she was bathed in orange light from the creature’s third eye and I was aware of a very faint but unpleasant high-pitched warbling sound. She screamed, a horrible scream cut short even more horribly.

And then she dissolved before our eyes. It was as if she were a wax figure exposed to an open blast furnace. Skin, flesh, bones, all seemed to lose form and slumped into a shapeless mass, then melted down into a ghastly puddle of thick yellow-orange liquid. Only her clothing remained intact, though now a sopping slimy mass. One of the guards

looked sick; the others seemed unaffected. I suspected they had seen this too many times before.

For several seconds we all stood frozen in the nightmare tableaux. At least Kiri had been spared this, I thought. As for the rest of us... and I shuddered. Teyn was speaking rapidly in a low voice to the five guards, who nodded in agreement. I had the distinct impression that they were all thoroughly frightened about something.

Teyn motioned to me. "Put that down over there," he said coldly, and motioned towards the side wall near the door we had come through. Silently I did so, knowing that I would most likely be joining "that" very shortly. Then he signaled for the two of us to move back against the far wall, and stood uncertainly with the other Brizali as if waiting for something. I felt Senaria's hand groping for mine and took it, giving it a reassuring squeeze. I could feel her shivering uncontrollably.

And then I heard a door open and another man stepped into the room. He was of advanced middle-aged appearance by Earth standards; only his white hair revealed to my now-experienced eyes that he must be well over ninety years old. To my shock Teyn immediately bowed down on one knee and gave him a respectful salute. The newcomer carefully surveyed the scene, taking in the body lying against the wall and the grisly mess in the center of the room. "All right, Teyn," he said finally, motioning for the dictator to stand. "Explain. What has happened here?"

Teyn took a deep breath. "These are the agents we've been expecting. Zyanita acted without orders, and killed one of them out of some kind of grudge. I think she finally went over the edge." He stopped abruptly, while the older man digested this rather incoherent recital, then slowly walked over to the body against the wall and gave it a cursory glance. He came up to me and stared intently into my face. There was something strangely familiar about his features that I couldn't quite place.

"Someone you cared about?" he asked quietly. I nodded dumbly. "I'm sorry," he said in the same unexpected tone. I couldn't tell if he was serious or not. I wondered absently why he looked so familiar, and then I felt Senaria suddenly stiffen.

"Tenako," she said in a strangled voice. "You're Tenako."

Romikor Tenako. Kiri's father. There was indeed a resemblance, I realized with a shock. Something about the voice also sounded hauntingly familiar for some reason. I wondered if it were possible that he hadn't recognized her.

Tenako turned to Teyn and gestured towards what had been Zyanita. “Was that really necessary, Teyn?” he said softly. Teyn said nothing, and I again saw the fear in his eyes I had noticed earlier. “We’ll discuss this later,” Tenako added ominously, turning his attention back to us.

“So you’re the brave fighters for freedom and justice,” he said finally. “How cooperative you have been, saving us the effort of tracking you down. You’re still alive here for one reason only, you know. But first, I have to congratulate you on your initiative, if not your choice of associates. I didn’t really think you’d ever get as far as using the map we provided.”

So they had known all along, I thought bitterly, glancing again at the still figure lying against the wall. “As your reward,” he continued, “I’ll treat you to a little show before we continue,” and he touched a few controls on a console at his side.

The large glass window at the far end of the room seemed to vanish. Instead, it was as though we were in space looking out through a huge opening in a ship’s hull. Spread before us were uncountable battleships, all of them with the ugly Brizal emblem emblazoned on the side. “Our fleet is already on its way to Qozernon. Contact with their fleet is projected for fifty-two hours from now. I anticipate that this will all be wrapped up within the next three days.” He looked back at us with a melancholy smile. “What an unfortunate mistake you’ve made. Such a waste, really. Nothing you could possibly have done would have stopped us.”

“Qozernon is peaceful,” protested Senaria unexpectedly. “We only have trading ships, not warships.”

“Shut up, bitch,” Teyn snapped, cutting her off with an imperious gesture.

“At least let the girl go,” I said in desperation. “She’s just a child. She stowed away on this mission. She had no idea what she was getting into.”

Senaria glared at me and faced the two. “I knew what I was doing and I’ll accept the consequences,” she said in a steady voice, although I felt her shiver again. I pondered the wisdom of a suicide charge, but could see no way to accomplish anything more than a slightly earlier death.

“Tenako, why are you doing this?” I said quietly. “You were a man of science, respected by your peers. There’s more here than meets the eye. You’re not a power-mad genius; those only exist in movies and novels.”

To my surprise Tenako didn't cut me off. When I finished, he turned to Teyn and the guards. "Leave us," he said. When Teyn started to protest, Tenako pointed to the Liquidator, who was staring at us unblinkingly with that hideous orange eye, faintly glowing like a hot coal.

"I will be quite safe, I assure you." Turning back to us, he added rather unnecessarily, "I suggest you not move an inch. Trust me, you can't outrun the speed of light try as you like." Reluctantly the Brizali left, Teyn shooting a baleful glare in our direction.

Tenako walked over to a cabinet and opened a door to reveal a small safe. Entering a combination, he opened the safe and pulled out a small crystalline cube. "Do you know what this is?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Neither did I," he went on, "when forty-eight years ago an explorer turned it over to me in my capacity as Head of Imperial Research. He thought it was some kind of mineral specimen. I discovered it was a holographic storage device accidentally left behind by the Virrin. I decoded it and found it to be a complete record of the Virrin's technology, apparently left unerased in the rush to go to—wherever they went to." I said nothing, listening.

"The technology in here would terrify people. If word had gotten out that it was available, there would have been tremendous pressure to destroy it. I couldn't have that happen. The contents of this cube can move humanity ahead a million years within the next few decades. But that can only happen if there is no one out there to destroy, through fear, what can be accomplished. I cannot allow that. That's why I created the Brizali, the Liquidators, even the Imperial Deshtiran Battle Fleet. Only when all opposition has been neutralized can this supreme leap forward take place."

The brilliance of his strategy was suddenly obvious. "You funded the Brizali with the money from SamariCorp," I said, "and in the process created the very social unrest needed to put them into power." He looked pleased.

"You were wrong, Will," Senaria commented darkly. "He is a power-mad genius."

He laughed, a kindly, condescending laugh such as an adult might make at a child's foolish comment. "Power? Do you think that power is what I'm after? In a way, yes, I suppose it is. Listen, then."

"This station is identical to dozens scattered over the surface of the planet. The Brizali think that their purpose is to provide power for their weapons, and the Liquidators. And they're partly right, but that's not the real purpose. These transformers all function together as a single

unit. Once we take over Qozernon, we'll set up a similar set of stations there. After that, Earth will follow in its turn."

"At that time, each planet's transformers will cause the entire planet to function as one pole of a giant subatomic planar field, stretching between the three. At the center of that triangle is a point at which the entire effect of the field is concentrated. Any matter that touches that point will be instantly and utterly converted into energy. It's only necessary to feed a continuous stream of fuel—anything will do—into that point and pick up the energy from a series of relays surrounding it. The result will be more energy for humanity to work with than ever before in its history, inexhaustible, reliable energy. Enough energy to compensate even for the decay of suns."

"The Brizal symbol," Senaria said, finally understanding. "Teyn didn't even create that."

Tenako chuckled dryly. "He has an excellent voice and a very persuasive manner. Unfortunately, apart from that, he's really quite stupid. Up to now, the only living people on this planet who know that Teyn takes his orders from me are his personal bodyguard, whom you've just met, and my private staff."

"Unfortunately for you," he added after an ominous pause, "it would not do at all for that to become public knowledge. I'm sure you both realize that I can't let you leave this room alive." I suddenly realized who else Tenako reminded me of. I had known an animal control officer who seemed sincerely saddened by his task of destroying "unwanted" animals. It was, however, necessary, as he once sorrowfully explained to me.

"But why invade Qozernon?" I asked, frantically trying to buy time. "Couldn't you come to some friendly agreement? Why do you need a war for this?"

He sighed. "Almost half the resources of this planet go to supporting these stations. No democratic government could survive committing that level of resources to a mere pipe dream. Once we have Qozernon reorganized, their resources will support their own stations. And so with Earth. Until the planar field is operative, only a police state could manage this kind of operation. I'm sure even you can understand that."

"Now, perhaps you can gain yourselves a few more minutes of life by providing me with some information I want." He smiled ironically. "Oh, don't worry. I'm not going to ask you to betray your world or anything like that. You're at least intelligent enough not to imagine that you could save your lives that way." He paused for a moment, and his

expression softened.

“What I want to know,” he said quietly, “is the whereabouts of my renegade daughter Mikiria.” Needless to say, the question took my breath away. I realized that not only had he not recognized his own daughter, but apparently Zyanita hadn’t told them either. I fought desperately to focus as I tried to conceive of a way to turn this to our advantage, and then the issue was taken right out of our hands in the most unexpected way imaginable.

“I’m right here, Father,” said a tired, hoarse voice from the other side of the room.



Every eye turned to see an apparition from Hell, smeared with half-dried blood from head to thigh, hair matted, leaning unsteadily against an equipment cabinet behind one of the control consoles. Senaria gasped audibly. The Liquidator turned towards her and Tenako waved it off with a sharp gesture.

“I’m so glad to hear that you haven’t forgotten me after all these years,” continued the apparition sarcastically. For several seconds I found myself unable to breathe, my heart pounding wildly, as Mikiria—*Kiri!*—idly tapped a few keys at the keyboard before her with one hand and removed her contact lenses with the other, revealing her brilliant green eyes to Tenako’s dumbfounded gaze.

“You?” he stammered finally. “Here? How?”

“That’s right, Father. Your people didn’t kill me on Earth, and they didn’t succeed in killing me now.” Tenako looked more bewildered than ever, nor was he alone at that moment as I stole a glance against the wall where she had lain and saw only a dark puddle of half-congealed blood instead. I turned back to see Tenako staring intensely at me. Recognition finally dawned. “Wilorian,” he whispered. I nodded.

He turned to Kiri. “I never tried to hurt you,” he said in a strangely defensive tone. “I just wanted you to stay out of the way. I’ve protected you from Teyn all these years. Why did you come back? I warned you not to.”

“So that’s what it’s about,” Kiri mused. “I knew you were involved somehow, and that there had to be something behind it all that we didn’t understand. But I never expected that it would be this.”

“You know now what it’s all for,” insisted Tenako in the same oddly defensive voice. “I’ve watched you for years, you know. You’re a practical person. You know I’m not pursuing an evil cause. Why don’t you help me instead of fighting me? With your mind you could be invaluable here.” I realized then that he was pleading with her, and wondered if after all this time he still somehow loved his daughter.

His next words dispelled the mood. “Besides,” he added in a colder

tone, “you could also save your friends’ lives.”

She shook her head. “Until a few minutes ago I really wasn’t sure if I could go through with this. Ten years ago I thought I killed a man in cold blood, and didn’t know if I could live with myself afterwards. What I have to do will probably kill a lot more. But you’re right; I understand now what you’re attempting. And I know that I have to stop you, whatever it takes.”

She continued randomly poking keys. “You see, I’ve done some research too. I think you might find it interesting.” She stopped for a moment, as if to catch her breath. “Let’s go back a few thousand years. We both know that the Virrin left suddenly, and one hundred twenty-three years later a supernova was sighted in the Sigma quadrant. Our astronomers finally determined that the supernova was one hundred twenty-three light-years away from us. Now how do you interpret that?”

Tenako still looked rather dazed as he responded, “Obviously the Virrin were notified of a problem and returned home because of it.”

Kiri nodded and went on. “And obviously they had hyperspace communications as do we. But we didn’t know why they were summoned. I do.” Tenako tried unsuccessfully to hide his surprise.

“You know as well,” she continued, “that when a hyperspace transmission is made, it also propagates as ordinary electromagnetic radiation at the speed of light. Well, I decided to overtake those transmissions. Do you recall a few years ago, when I vanished for almost fifteen months?” Tenako, now obviously fascinated, nodded slowly. I suddenly realized I was watching a battle of minds unlike anything I had ever seen. I felt Senaria’s hand reach for mine again and grip it tightly.

The hoarse voice went on, fighting pain and exhaustion. “It took me over seven months in the *Futaba* to overtake the transmissions. It took me almost all of the equally long trip home to decipher them. But I did. And what I found out was that the Virrin had been using the same planar field that you’re setting up. That was where their energy came from, and it made them masters of this corner of the galaxy.” Tenako began to smile in satisfaction.

“And then one day—I don’t know if it was years, centuries, or a million years after they set up the field—they found that a stray planet was going to intersect the energy point. They weren’t worried. Plans were made to simply shut off the transformers until the object had passed through. And then they found that the field was self-sustaining, and they couldn’t turn it off.” Tenako’s smile had frozen on his face,

and he was now distinctly pale as Kiri mustered her strength to finish the tale.

“The Virrin here were summoned home. Every available mind was needed. But in the end all they could do was watch as the planet touched the intersection point and nine sextillion tons of matter were converted into pure energy. Even a supernova pales in comparison, and it left them and their empire a cloud of gas drifting through the galaxy.” She tottered for a moment and nearly fell, and stopped to regain her breath again. I saw a streak of fresh blood glistening on her left breast. “So you see, Father, why I can’t let you do this,” she said finally, tapping a few more keys.

Tenako unexpectedly laughed, an ugly barking laugh, and an unconvincing one, as he sought to regain his composure. “A clever story, my child. And you seriously expect to frighten me with it? Stop me? We can all see that you’re totally helpless, daughter. What do you think you can do that these misguided children,” and he gestured toward us, “couldn’t? You can’t even stand by yourself.” And he laughed again, a hysterical edge creeping into his voice.

I felt Senaria tense and I turned to her, tightening my grip on her hand. “Will, we have to do *something*,” she hissed almost inaudibly. “Shhh,” I whispered, shaking my head almost imperceptibly. I didn’t know just how hair-trigger the Liquidators were and didn’t want to find out now, of all times.

I had finally begun to dimly comprehend what Kiri was attempting, and through an incredible combination of circumstances she had ended up just where she wanted to be. Whether she could buy enough time to succeed I didn’t know, for Tenako could easily kill his daughter at any moment if he so chose, as he was much closer to her than I. And of course there was that Liquidator patiently standing by. Desperately I sought a solution but could summon only confusion as the bizarre duel of personalities unfolded.

And then I suddenly understood why Tenako’s voice had sounded so familiar. At the realization a chill ran through my body, and simultaneously something somewhere deep inside my mind told me to reach up and grasp the pendant hanging from my neck. Several seconds later, still reeling from the resulting shock, I knew what I could do.

“When you ‘improved’ me, Father,” Kiri finished bitterly, “you enhanced three things: my survivability, my vision, and my strength. But I *inherited* your intelligence. And, unlike you, I’ve spent the last ten years looking for just one thing,” and she tapped a few more keys. “And that is?” Tenako said tonelessly, not moving.

“How”— *tap*— “to”— *tap*— “crash”— *tap*— “your”— *tap*— “system.” With the last word she poked one final key. *Tap*. “It’s showtime, Papa.”

I saw her green eyes fixed on me, burning into me. “Goodbye, Will,” she said quietly, her voice almost inaudible. Slowly she sank back against the cabinet behind her, utterly exhausted.

And nothing happened.

Nothing at all.

I felt my heart sink. The worried look that had begun to surface on Tenako’s face was quickly replaced by a sarcastic sneer. Then something behind him caught my eye, and I glanced over his shoulder.

One indicator, out of a wall of solid blue, had silently blinked green, then yellow. Tenako turned to see what I was looking at, just in time to see it turn orange, and he froze. I heard a single soft beep.

And then everything went crazy. Scattered indicators began changing color, followed by others around them, within seconds rendering the formerly serene blue wall of light a seething menacing mass of yellows and oranges, and somewhere in the building an alarm began to wail, followed an instant later by a second. A high voltage cabinet in one corner unexpectedly exploded with a sharp bang into a shower of white sparks, followed by a cloud of ugly yellowish smoke.

The giant display of the battle fleet vanished in a burst of static, revealing power cylinders visibly sliding out of synchronization with each other to disorienting effect. I became aware of an unpleasant low-pitched thrumming sound, punctuated every few seconds by thunderclaps audible even through the heavy glass barrier as savage discharges of energy arced from one cylinder to another. Slowly Tenako turned around, his face white, and then blind fury swept over his features and I realized that he had utterly lost whatever self-control he had managed to maintain until now.

“Vandal! Idiot!” he screamed furiously. “Do you really think you can sidetrack the future of humanity that easily? Your interference ends now!” He signaled viciously to the Liquidator with a gesture in Kiri’s direction, but the creature was holding its head in both hands and moaning in apparent agony, then it collapsed to the floor. Tenako looked around frantically for a instant, then, spotting the pile of weapons at his feet, snatched up a sword and turned to Kiri, his face almost unrecognizable with blind rage.

“*Vren*,” I said loudly, my hand still on the pendant. Tenako turned and looked at me, his fury frozen in perplexity for a instant, then turned back. Kiri stared at me, her mouth open, as if I had lost my mind.

“*Bri*,” I continued. He stopped and eyed me again, as though a long-forgotten memory was surfacing. I held out the pendant for him to see.

“*Doh*.” Kiri began to grin through the blood and the pain now. Recognition finally came to Tenako, and with it sheer terror. “No. You couldn’t know that. You can’t imagine—” His voice rose to a scream. “*Gred*,” I finished and stretched out my hand toward him.

The blinding bolt from my fingers hit him in midsection, in a millisecond flashing all the water in that part of his body into steam, blowing him apart. Something crystalline bounced against the far wall. A second bolt blew the Virrin data crystal into a million shards. A stench of burning flesh filled the room. For a moment everything was still, except for the noise of distant alarms and a quiet horrifying sizzling sound.

I grabbed Senaria’s hand and the two of us raced to the console where Kiri had been standing. She had slid to the floor, leaving a bloody streak down the cabinet she had used to support herself. I scooped her unconscious form off the floor into my arms as another alarm, much closer, began to sound. I turned to Senaria and found her arms loaded with our weapons. “We’ve got to get to the *Futaba* in a hurry,” I barked. “Come on,” and we headed out the same exit the guards had used a few short minutes earlier.

Still more alarms were sounding as we entered a main corridor, and it was obvious that panic was in the air as none of the terrified officers, clerks, and other personnel we encountered along the way made any effort to detain us. Getting away was clearly the only thing on anyone’s mind at this point, and we managed to leave the plant and cross the main causeway, now crowded with fleeing Brizali, without incident. A few moments later we reached the disguised ship, only to find a very young and obviously terrified guard waiting by the craft.

“Damn Zee!” hissed Senaria. “She must have tipped them off about the *Futaba*, too.” At our approach the youth bravely raised his sword and ordered us to stop.

“Look, kid,” I exploded in exasperation, “this place is going to blow sky high in a few minutes. Do yourself a favor and get the hell out of here.” For a moment he hesitated, and then Kiri stirred and opened her eyes.

“Is that Princess Mikiria?” he gasped, and I suddenly realized just how legendary this woman was.

“Yes it is,” I snapped, “and if you don’t let us pass, she, you, and the rest of us will be cinders within a few minutes.”

To my astonishment he threw his sword on the ground at my feet.

“My parents told me about her when I was a boy,” he said earnestly. “Please take me with you. I’d give my life to serve her.” I don’t know why, something in his expression I guess, but I nodded and shouted over the increasing din, “*Futaba* transform: starship!”

In an instant the *Futaba* had metamorphosed back to its familiar configuration, and I strapped Kiri into the co-pilot’s chair and fired up the power cells as Senaria and the youth took the rear seats. A moment later we were rising into the air amid a swarm of other craft heading helter-skelter in all directions. The lone highway was jammed with vehicles, barely moving. I glanced at the building we had just left, and saw that every corner, every projection was flickering with static electricity, like a nightmarish version of the St. Elmo’s fire described by ancient mariners.

“Hang on,” I shouted, as I turned the *Futaba*’s nose straight up and applied full power, barely missing several other ships. Much as I hated exposing Kiri to the acceleration I had a strong feeling that we didn’t want to be in this vicinity in the very near future. In seconds the city was receding below us as we were pressed heavily into the seats. I kept my eyes fixed on the altitude readout, watching it climb ever so slowly (or so it seemed), though in less than a minute it had passed the fifteen mile point.

“Holy shit,” breathed Senaria, having turned her head with difficulty to look back and seeing the entire city suddenly surrounded by a corona of glowing plasma.

“Shut your goddam eyes!” croaked Kiri hoarsely, startling us, and hardly had we obeyed when the cabin was filled with a blinding flash. Even with our eyes closed it was a good fifteen seconds or so before any of us could see anything except brilliant blue afterimages, then just as objects around us started taking shape again the shock wave hit. It was like catching a very large wave while body-surfing, not throwing us out of control but hurling us outward into space even faster than before, and after a few seconds the craft settled down to a steady climb as we streaked away from the planet.

With the worst turbulence behind I was finally able to ease off the acceleration in preparation for the shift to hyperspeed. I looked back to see at least seven or eight fireballs of immense size scattered over the landscape. Apparently some kind of chain reaction had occurred. I breathed a silent prayer that none of the transformers were left intact.

Kiri stirred again in her seat and half-opened her eyes. I could see that she was biting her lip from the pain, and a small trickle of blood was inching down her chin. “Please hold me,” she said in an almost

inaudible voice. I unbuckled her and myself and gently lifted her onto my lap, her head nestled against my shoulder.

“Kiri,” I said as reassuringly as I could manage, “hang on just a little longer; you’re going to be okay.” She looked back at me and grinned weakly, though her face was grey with pain.

“Of course I will,” she answered, and taking my hand in hers placed it on her right breast. To my astonishment I felt a steady, if weak, heartbeat. “Two hearts,” she said, then grimaced. “Still hurts like hell, though,” and she let her head sink back onto my shoulder.

“You little shithead,” I muttered, “scaring me like that.”

“I love you, Will,” she answered quietly. A few moments later the universe had turned inside out and the stars were shifting positions against each other as we left ordinary light behind.



“This is the command ship *Rina* of the Imperial Battle Fleet of Deshtiris. Identify yourself at once or be fired upon,” said the grim face on the screen. I was again at the controls of the *Futaba*, and following Kiri’s instructions had piloted the ship directly toward the battle fleet, just before Senaria and the youth took her back to the living quarters for some urgent medical care. It seemed like a desperate gamble, but at this point we were “out of options,” as they say. Without instructions to the contrary the fleet could be expected to pursue the attack, and we had all agreed that an interplanetary war would be the ultimate disaster.

Above me to my right was the tactical display. The *Futaba* appeared in the center of the screen as a tiny yellow blip, surrounded by a cloud of diamond-shaped objects in stark black and white, the official Brizal colors. With its superior speed, the *Futaba* had taken just over four hours to overtake the much slower Deshtiran vessels.

I looked at the face on the screen. Would he buy it? I wondered. Well, here goes, and I switched on my end of the communications. “This is Prince Wilorian of the Royal House of Nendor. I urgently need to speak to your fleet commander.”

For a moment the officer looked startled, then angry. “What kind of joke is this? Everyone knows Wilorian has been dead for thirty years. I don’t think you realize your position, fellow. Your ship is covered from all sides.” Then his eyes widened and his mouth fell open.

“Perhaps you recognize me, then, Holan,” said the hoarse voice behind me. “We used to play together at the palace when we were children. Do you still remember me?” Senaria had cleaned her up and washed the dried blood and coloring from her hair, and although still pale as a ghost she looked every inch the green-eyed, flame-haired goddess I had first seen on the *Futaba* those weeks (or was it years?) ago. She placed her hands on my shoulders to steady herself.

“Kiri?” Holan said, his voice shaking as he involuntarily stood up, then corrected himself. “Princess Mikiria, is it really you?” There was a long pause, during which I thought he was in a panic, his face

twitching, and then I realized he was fighting off tears. Several other officers appeared behind him, staring in wonderment.

“Yes, Holan,” said Kiri softly. “I’m back. And this really is Prince Wilorian, who I hid on Earth those thirty years ago. We’ve finally come back to fix things. I’m sorry it’s taken so long.”

There was another momentary pause before Holan, desperately trying to regain his composure, said in a cracked voice “How can I serve you, Princess? And you, Prince,” he added quickly, looking at me apologetically.

“I need a secure line to the fleet commander,” she said, her voice now crisp. “As quickly as possible.”

The screen went blank for about thirty seconds, and then an older face, with a trim grey beard, appeared before us. “Is this some kind of—Oh my god, it’s true. Princess Mikiria.” For a moment the previous scene seemed about to replay itself, then he regained control of himself and continued firmly, “Princess, what is your proposal?”

“We don’t have much time, Uncle. If this war ever gets started, it’s over for all of us. It has to be stopped *now*. Can you do this?”

“What about the Brizali?” he responded helplessly. “We’ve lost contact with the home bases, and I can’t just reverse our orders without good cause. We have Brizal officers in every unit. We’re getting reports that some of the Liquidators have collapsed, but they’re all confined in the Brizal quarters and no one is being allowed in. What the hell is going on?”

“Krigghin Teyn is dead,” she answered briefly, not mentioning Tenako, “and Tar Deshta is now a very large hole in the ground. The central power station overloaded and self-destructed, and destroyed the others in some kind of chain reaction. The Liquidators should all be dead by now. I think you’ll find that your advanced weapons are useless, too,” she added meaningfully. “If the two fleets meet, they’re going to be very well matched. The casualties will be enormous, and on both sides.”

She paused to let her words sink in before she continued, suddenly sounding very tired. “Now, can you do this? Because otherwise we’re all staring into a very deep abyss.” The commander hesitated for a second longer, then nodded grimly.

“Stand by,” he said and the screen went blank.

For what seemed an eternity we waited on the *Futaba*, Senaria pacing back and forth, the boy watching the displays, Kiri again cradled on my lap, her eyes closed. No one spoke. “Eternity” proved to be about ten minutes, when Senaria suddenly gave a shout and pointed at

the tactical display. We all stared, hardly daring believe what we saw. One ship after another on the screen was changing color to green and yellow, the official colors of the House of Nendor. A few minutes later a signal came over the telecom line to drop out of hyperspace on command, and I set the *Futaba*'s controls to respond as well.

“We’ve done it,” said Kiri softly, closing her eyes again. “It’s over.”



“So you didn’t have *any* warning that Zyanita was working for the Brizali?” Gelhinda was saying. She and I were sitting around Kiri’s bed in the command ship’s sick bay, where she was propped up on several pillows. Her crimson hair and emerald eyes stood out starkly against her still shockingly pale face, but she was otherwise in good spirits and making a rapid recovery.

Within minutes after the fleet had struck the Brizal colors we had requested emergency medical assistance, and in less than an hour the ship’s surgeons had been repairing the damage to her left heart. Remarkably, Zyanita’s blade had managed to miss any other vital structures, and the collateral circulation from her other heart had been sufficient to avoid permanent damage to the organ, which was now beating normally again. The general prognosis was that there would be no permanent ill effects. In fact, the doctors were astonished at the speed of her recovery.

We found out later that immediately after we had broken the connection with the fleet commander he had sent out the code word “Mikiria,” an action evidently long planned in advance. Only a suitable opportunity had been lacking, and with one unexpectedly at hand officers and crew still loyal to the old royal house (after 30 years!) had within minutes placed all Brizal officers in confinement.

The biggest worry had been the Liquidators, but to everyone’s surprise (not to mention relief) they were all found to be quite dead. Apparently they could not survive without the energy radiated by the Tar Deshta transformer and its substations.

The makeshift Qozernan fleet had been contacted before the two forces met and peace negotiations hurriedly initiated. The potential bloodshed that had been averted was beyond calculation. The main question now was what government Qozernon would be negotiating with. About two-thirds of the fleet had already been dispatched back to Deshtiris to maintain order. The balance, including ourselves, remained in place awaiting—what?

“Not a clue,” replied Kiri to Gelhinda’s original question. “We had

stepped into a junction of five corridors, really poorly lit, with me in the lead, and I suddenly felt a hard blow on my back. I looked down to see several inches of steel sticking out of my chest.” I shuddered. Seeing my expression, she added with a certain malicious glee, “I guess by all conventional standards I was dead before I hit the floor.”

“In the back!” she continued in disgust. “Even the Brizali weren’t that cowardly. Well, I suppose she still didn’t deserve the fate she got; no one could.” At that moment Senaria and the youth we had rescued, whose name was Parkor Rann, walked into the room and Senaria froze in astonishment. “Mom?! How did *you* get here?”

Kiri chuckled and answered before Gelhinda could. “The same way she saved my butt ten years ago.” Gelhinda started to protest, but Kiri cut her off imperiously; she was obviously returning rather quickly to her everyday self. “Gelhi, please. It’s ancient history now. Besides, it’s just between us here. It’s not like someone’s going to write a book about it someday.” She went on matter-of-factly, “She walked here through the *Futaba*’s living quarters.”

Seeing the girl’s look of total incomprehension, she explained. “The ship’s living quarters exist in another time-space continuum, remember? They don’t actually go anywhere. The doorway from the *Futaba* isn’t so much an opening as a gateway.” She sighed when she saw Senaria shaking her head in confusion. “All right, I’ll start at the beginning and see if that helps.”

“Ten years ago, as you already know, I returned to Deshtiris to gather as much information as I could. What I didn’t tell you, because of Gelhi’s silly modesty, is that on the way back my ship—the immediate predecessor of the *Futaba*—took a direct hit from an energy blast. I was able to get out of the atmosphere, but when I engaged the hyperspeed drive the ship went totally berserk. Apparently the blast had fried some essential circuits.”

“I tried to make emergency repairs, but the whole power compartment was surrounded with a high-voltage corona and I had no way to shut it down so that I could even work on it. Worse yet, my speed was increasing out of control and I knew that in a short time it would exceed the design limits of the ship and reduce it and me to elemental particles.”

“I did the only thing I could do. I fled to the living quarters and disengaged them from the ship, so that the energy release wouldn’t wind up destroying them too. There I was, stranded in another universe, with no way to ever get back. I remember sitting down on the couch in total despair, not so much for myself as because the information I’d

collected was priceless and I knew I'd never be able to use it."

"And then I heard Gelhi's voice calling my name anxiously and I looked out into the hallway, and there she was at the other end waving hello! She hadn't heard from me at the designated time and had gotten very worried, and then it occurred to her that she ought to be able to enter the living quarters from my other ship then under construction (the ship that eventually became the *Futaba*) and just walk in! It was a sobering victory of plain common sense over intellect, and one I've never forgotten, because it had never occurred to me that more than one gateway could be active at once."

Gelhinda blushed as everyone present stared at her with new respect. Kiri continued, "I walked down the corridor with her and opened the door and there I was back on Qozernon in the half-built *Futaba*-to-be. Since then," she finished, "I've always made sure that a working gateway was available back home. Gelhi, don't be so modest. After all, you did ultimately save three worlds in the process." At that Gelhinda turned bright red with embarrassment and had to turn away for a few minutes.

"That's it!" I burst out, the light finally dawning. "That's the missing piece!" Everyone turned to me in astonishment. "That's how Zyanita found out where you were on Earth," I added, a little more calmly, and pulled the earring clip from my pocket and held it up for all to see. I explained how I had picked it off the floor at Kiri's mountain house and then forgotten about it.

"Way back then?" said Kiri in surprise. "When did you realize what it meant?"

"Too late," I answered ruefully and described how I had found it in my jeans pocket in the tunnels under Tar Deshta. She nodded.

"She'd heard the story a few years ago, and it would have been easy enough for her to pop through the spare gateway, determine her whereabouts, and pop back home and notify the Brizali. Of course, she didn't know I was there to get you," she added, "and when she found out that she had nearly liquidated her own brother it must have been a bit of a shock for her."

"She apparently got over that quickly enough," I snorted. "But I don't understand why Zyanita didn't just tell the Brizali that it was us coming to Tar Deshta."

"I'm not sure if we'll ever fully understand her motives," Kiri mused. "I don't think she really understood them herself. You'll remember that she tried to dissuade us from going to Deshtiris after notifying us of Lev's murder. And apparently she kept the fact that you

and I were part of the expedition a complete secret. Who knows what was going on in that twisted mind of hers? Poor Zee,” she finished unexpectedly.

It struck me that there was something ironic about the continued use of the nickname, but then I reflected that she had after all been family in a way, even if she had proven to be the black sheep.

“Besides, she had plenty of opportunities along the way to turn us in, and didn’t. I think part of it was the way the diner incident went awry. I doubt that she was ready for what happened there and was terrified that next time she might be caught in the middle.” Only then did I realize that Zyanita must have tipped off the commander while supposedly using the “facilities,” and again kicked myself mentally for my stupidity.

“Don’t feel bad, Will, I didn’t catch it then either,” Kiri said, seeing my expression. “Besides, I think she had a different agenda. She wanted *me*, due to whatever catalog of imagined grievances she’d built up over the years, and didn’t want the Brizali to get me first. I guess we should be thankful to her for making everything work out in the end, in spite of herself.”

“By the way,” she said suddenly, looking directly at me, “you really thought I was dead? Didn’t it ever occur to either of you two clowns to check for a *pulse*?”

Under the circumstances, I did what any red-blooded male would do: I deflected the blame to someone else. “Hey, wait a minute,” I said indignantly. “Senaria’s the one who spent six months in med school, not me.”

All eyes turned to Senaria. For a moment she was at a loss for words, a sheepish look on her face. “Well, you looked pretty dead to me,” she said finally.

“I’m lucky you didn’t bury me,” Kiri grumbled. “Now where were we?” She stopped for a few moments to sip some liquid from a container by her bed and collect her thoughts. “Oh, yes. I had just been skewered,” and grinned again at my pained expression. “The next thing I knew, I was staring up at the ceiling of Tenako’s control room. I had no idea how I’d gotten there, but it couldn’t have worked out better, except that I was so dizzy and sick to my stomach I didn’t know if I was going to barf all over the keyboard. That would have put an inglorious end to our plans in a hurry.” She savored the thought for a moment.

“How *did* you do that?” Gelhinda asked. “I can’t believe that such a critical system would be so easily crashed.”

“Tenako used Virrin technology for his weaponry and genetic engineering, but to control it he used ordinary computers developed by error-prone humans. Although the systems had been upgraded over and over through the years, they were all based on a processor design done about fifty-five years ago, which had a very minor and very obscure flaw. Normally if a processor encounters an illegal instruction, it’s supposed to set an internal flag that lets the operating system work around it, triggering an error message or starting a self-correcting routine.”

“It seems that there existed one series of instructions that would simply cause it to stop processing altogether, locking up the system. It was a really obscure bug, mentioned in a footnote in a design document, but no one worried about it because it wasn’t a sequence that anyone would ever intentionally use. And then, with each new generation of chips, the same flaw wound up being unknowingly carried through because no one did their homework properly. A half century later, it was still there. Thanks to Will and a consulting contract from a Qozernan firm, I found out about it just in time.”

“However, because of all the security safeguards in place on Deshtiris, I couldn’t hack in from outside; I had to actually be at a system console in order to gain access to the core kernel. What I was doing at the keyboard was typing in code, compiling it into a tiny program all of eleven bytes in size, and then telling the system to run it. The rest you saw.” We all shook our heads in disbelief.

“Once I managed to crash the feedback system, I expected that Tenako would kill all of us, but at least I knew that in spite of his boasts he couldn’t restart the system in time to prevent the overload. And then you pulled that little rabbit out of your hat,” she added accusingly, looking directly at me. “So how did you get those words to work, anyway? Weren’t those the same ones we tried back on Qozernon? And what *was* that you were holding?”

“Tenako’s notes referred to keys, not a key,” I explained. “It never occurred to any of us that it was a combination of the nonsense words and something else,” and I pulled out the pendant from inside my shirt, enjoying for a change the surprise on Kiri’s face as she involuntarily sought at her own throat for it.

I recounted how I had taken the pendant in that dark moment, never dreaming that it had a special purpose. “When I put my hand around the pendant in the control room, the sensation was incredible. It was as if I had suddenly become aware of energy stored in every cubic centimeter of my body, as though I were a giant charged battery. And at

the same instant I somehow just *knew* that the pendant and the phrase together were the keys. After that it was a matter of waiting for the right moment, which wasn't long in coming."

"And you've been wearing that pendant ever since?" she said incredulously. "Even at night?" I nodded, puzzled at the question. She shook her head slowly, muttering to herself. "It's a good thing you don't talk in your sleep..."



Later, after the others had left, I finally had some time alone with her. For a long time we just sat together, saying very little. “I can’t believe it’s really all over,” she said at last, her eyes closed.

“Well, not quite,” I said. “There’s going to be a lot of sorting out to do. But at least our part is done.” After a while I thought she had fallen asleep, but then she opened her eyes again and fastened them firmly on me.

“Were you able to find out what I asked about this morning?” she said, dashing my hopes that she had forgotten.

“I did,” I answered hesitantly. “But are you sure you want to know this?” She looked away.

“No, I don’t. But I have to.”

I shook my head helplessly. “I won’t hide the truth from you, if that’s what you really want.” I took a deep breath before continuing. “The military won’t have accurate figures until all Brizal fugitives are accounted for. But the current best guess is about twelve thousand fatalities at Tar Deshta, and another thousand total for the other transformer stations that self-destructed.”

“My god,” she breathed. “Will, I just never expected something that horrible.” I saw her hands involuntarily clutching at the sheets, and took her nearest one and held it tightly. I could feel her trembling.

“What else could you have done, Kiri?” I pleaded. “Do you have any idea how many lives you saved? How many people are alive today only because of you? Not to mention that the planet is finally free of the Brizali after thirty years. Even if you had known the cost, could you have done anything different knowing the fate of Deshtiris was in your hands?” Eyes tightly closed, she shook her head. I saw a tear roll down her cheek.

“You did the right thing,” I said after a long pause. “You know you did.”

“Yes,” she answered slowly. “I know I did. I’d do it again if I had to. But it would be a lot harder.”

“This must have been terrible for you, too, Will,” she added

apologetically. "I know I've made a bit of a joke out of it all this afternoon, but you know as well as I that that's how I cope with things. When Zee stabbed me, I had just enough time to realize what it would do to you, and that hurt far more than the blade. And then, in the control room, I knew what I had to do, but I also knew what it could mean for all of you as well. I hope to god I never have to make decisions like that again as long as I live."

"I think my own heart nearly stopped when I saw you alive poking at that keyboard," I confessed. "Although you looked so awful I wasn't sure if you really were alive or if I were seeing some kind of hideous phantasm."

"Thanks a lot," she said sourly. "Those were certainly the most nerve-wracking minutes of my life. I thought that any moment Tenako would lose patience and have me liquefied, and it would all have been for nothing."

"I don't think so," I ventured. "I think he still bore some kind of paternal love for you, and that he was telling the truth about having protected you all these years." I told her about Teyn's reaction when he first encountered us. "My guess is that Tenako had warned him that if anything ever happened to you at his hands, he'd be the very next to go. When he recognized you I swear I could see his life flashing before his eyes. And then the very next thing he did was to silence Zee as quickly as possible. I suspect that if Tenako hadn't shown up right then he'd have disposed of the remaining evidence, namely us, without further delay."

"Then Tenako sent him away," Kiri observed scornfully. "He must have been peeing his pants wondering if you were going to inadvertently spill the beans. But what about the attack on us back on Earth?"

"Easy," I speculated. This is fun, I thought to myself, sort of like those mystery novels where everything is revealed at the end. "I doubt his men would have left any evidence behind at the mountain house to connect them with your disappearance, and as far as Tenako would have known you'd have taken a routine trip to Earth and vanished without a trace. Happens to people there all the time."

She nodded approvingly. "Very good explanation. I have just one last question, Monsieur." She paused theatrically. "What happened to Krigghin Teyn?"

Now that brought me up short, let me tell you. She read my stunned silence all too well. "We may never know," she said finally. "If he did escape, he'd probably head for Earth where it would be his turn

to vanish without a trace. There's certainly nowhere left for him to hide here." I had a momentary vision, a dreadful one, of Krigghin Teyn in the White House.

"So what do we do now?" I asked a bit shakily. "A house in the country with three cats?"

She grinned weakly. "I'd hope for a little more excitement than that. There's always the *Futaba*, for example, and lots of places to go. Besides, we're not allowed to keep cats, remember?"

"We could take up rock climbing again, like we did as kids," I suggested slyly. Swallowing the bait, she nodded, then suddenly her eyes were wide.

"Will! You remember that!?"

"I remember it all," I said with a half-smile. "Something the pendant did when I grasped it. Ever since then things have just been coming back in a rush. So now you're stuck with both of me at last."

She must have seen the momentary bleakness in my eyes. "You remember everything, don't you?"

I nodded. "'Not all gifts are what they seem,'" I quoted. "But it's worth it to have gained another sixteen years of memories with you," and I kissed her lightly on the lips.

"How is Senaria holding up through all this?" she asked. "She's had more than her share of heartache over the past few days." I told her that I had several times inadvertently caught her sitting alone in the *Futaba* staring vacantly into space, but that otherwise she seemed to be slowly regaining her usual good spirits. "After losing both Lev and you, I was afraid she'd fall apart completely," I added, "but she bore herself magnificently at Tar Deshta."

"So I saw," Kiri agreed. "Well, you know Sen; bouncing back is one of her strengths."

"Especially if Rann has anything to do with it," I added mischievously.

"Rann?" she said in surprise.

"The Brizal boy we picked up on the way out." I explained. "He's been following her around like a puppy. About her age, too."

She cocked an eyebrow and pondered the information for a moment. "Well, I imagine she could do worse. Of course, I'm a great judge of character, aren't I," she added in disgust, and for a while the conversation turned to Zyanita.

"I wonder what led her down that path?" Kiri mused. "She wound up working for the people that murdered her parents, enslaved her planet, and tried to kill what little family she still had left on

Qozernon.”

“I’m guessing that Teyn promised her something,” I theorized. “Maybe that once Qozernon was conquered she could lead a figurehead government or something of the sort. She was obviously jealous of you, and when I turned up alive what little remaining legitimacy she might have had before went down the tubes.”

“But I can’t imagine what it must have been like for her,” I added. “To find her parents murdered, her brother and sister missing, to spend the next few years running for her life, without any real comprehension of what it was all about. And then to find that you were alive, and that she had been left behind...” Another long-buried memory unexpectedly surfaced, of a pretty pre-teen girl with long straight black hair and dancing dark brown eyes, laughing and giggling as Kiri and I mock-threatened to toss her into the palace pool in return for some imaginary transgression, and I suddenly found myself blinking away tears.

“Well, we’ll probably never really know,” Kiri sighed. “But it wasn’t something I would have ever expected. I really trusted her.”

I leaned over and kissed her again. “One of your weak points,” I said. “And one of your strongest ones,” I added, and kissed her again.

“I’ve got to let you get some rest,” I said finally. “I’m surprised the doctors haven’t thrown me out already.” Out of habit I glanced at my watch, which after all this time was still set to the Earth’s calendar. “Damn!”

“What’s wrong?” demanded Kiri, suddenly alarmed.

“I just lost my apartment lease!” I exclaimed in mock dismay.

Kiri started to giggle, then to laugh. “Ouch! That hurts!” she gasped. By this time I was helpless too, and as we parted we were both wiping tears of laughter from our eyes. I suspect that after the events of the past week we were both a little closer to hysteria than either of us would care to admit.

It was later that same evening that an officer approached me in the mess and explained that my presence was requested at a very important meeting. Following him to a room just off the ship’s bridge, I found myself in an impressive board room, currently occupied by more brass than I had ever in my life seen assembled in one place. I wasn’t exactly well-versed in Deshtiran insignia yet, but it didn’t take “rocket science” to realize that I was surrounded by what were now the most powerful men and women of Deshtiris. Much to my surprise, they all greeted me with evident deference.

Apparently we were waiting for one more attendee, and as we did I looked around curiously. There was a long, perfectly polished wooden

table running down the middle of the room. The walls were hung with portraits, and to my astonishment I recognized myself, Zyanita, and my parents among them, all from thirty or more years ago, of course. There was also a painted version of the photograph I remembered from my youth, and somehow I felt less nervous with Kiri's emerald eyes staring down at me. I suspected it had once been a very popular picture on Deshtiris. I also guessed that these portraits hadn't been on display here in a very long time.

Then our last attendee appeared, and he turned out to be the fleet commander that Kiri had called "Uncle." (He really was, by the way, being Tenako's half-brother and a long-time friend of the royal family.) As he entered, he walked directly over to me and put a hand on my shoulder.

"My boy," he said quietly, "I want to say this before everything becomes official. What you and the Princess have done lies beyond gratitude. I never dared hope to live to see this day." He led me to a seat in the center of one side of the table as the others respectfully rose to their feet, then seated himself across from me. Once everyone had settled back into their chairs he wasted no time in getting to the point.

"Prince Wilorian," he began in a more formal tone. "As you know, the situation here is more than precarious at the moment. Deshtiris is going to require a symbol for our people to rally around, or we will face the grave danger of civil conflicts tearing our world apart. There are millions of Brizali, and their followers, who have everything to lose from peace." He paused, and I felt every eye in the room fixed upon me. Squirming nervously, I wondered just where this was going. I didn't have to wait long.

"You are the sole surviving member of the royal family which was so brutally overthrown thirty years ago. We want—we desperately need—you to become the new Emperor of Deshtiris. Will you accept?"

I was stunned. I guess I should have seen this coming, but somehow I hadn't really thought ahead to what would happen once the Brizali were overthrown. I replied slowly, choosing my words very carefully for once. "This is a very great trust which you propose to place in me. But for all practical purposes I am still a stranger to your world." I stopped for a moment. "There is someone who your people all know and love, who knows your world well, and who would make an exceptional leader. I am of course referring to Princess Mikiria."

They looked at each other uncomfortably. The commander cleared his throat. "Naturally we have considered that. And I don't think I would be exaggerating to say that any one of us would gladly lay down

our life at her request. She is probably still the most beloved citizen of Deshtiris, even after thirty years. But—” and he paused.

“But?” I prompted, my heart sinking.

“We need a real continuation of the former royal line if we are to unite our people. She is, after all, the daughter of Romikor Tenako, not of our former Emperor. This is a moment when legitimacy is literally everything.”

Silence reigned supreme for several minutes. “I need time to consider this,” I said at last.

The commander nodded. “But keep in mind that we are sitting on a time bomb even as we speak. We must open full negotiations with Qozernon as soon as possible. A single incident could reignite the war at this point. And the longer we remain away from Deshtiris the greater the danger of civil unrest.”

I was in a bit of a daze as I set my steps toward the sick bay. I was certain of just one thing: this wasn’t remotely what I’d had in mind when I’d left Earth with Kiri. I was still trying to sort it all out when I ran into Gelhinda, evidently on her way back to the *Futaba*. “Anything wrong?” she asked, seeing my glum expression.

“You might say that,” I mumbled. “Got a few hours?”

“You look like you could use a drink,” she responded cheerfully. “My treat.”

A few minutes later we were sitting at a table in the ship’s bar over some mild drinks as I explained what had happened. “I can’t do this,” I finished in desperation. “Kiri’s the one they should be offering this to. Not only do they owe her big time, but she’d be one hell of a better leader than I could ever be.”

Gelhinda had been staring at me with increasing astonishment, and finally leaned back and let out a piercing laugh, attracting several interested stares from some of the other patrons. I wondered if the drink had gone to her head. “I’m sorry,” I said in some annoyance. “I didn’t realize the situation was that amusing.”

Still chuckling, she replied, “But it is, Will. This is too easy. You really are so simple-minded, sometimes.” Before I had time to take fresh offense, she added, “All you have to do is—”

A few minutes later I was headed back to Kiri’s room, now walking on air. I found her sitting up in bed reading, and quickly described the situation to her (but craftily omitting Gelhinda’s solution). “That’s wonderful!” she exclaimed, beaming in delight. “This is what you were born to, Will. So why are you hesitating?”

“Kiri,” I said, “if anyone ought to be leading this planet back into

the light of day, it's you. They think an accident of birth is more important than leadership. Does that make sense to you?"

She was silent for what seemed a very long time as she considered her words. When she finally spoke, it was slowly and deliberately. "Yes, Will, it does. People don't need 'leadership' right now. The problems facing all of us are going to require experts in areas like transportation and industrial reorganization, faceless people with far greater specialized abilities than either of us. What people do need is a symbol to keep them going while all those ugly details of reconstruction disrupt their lives. And you are the long-lost heir to the royal family, a dream come true for them."

"I promised when we left Earth that there would be useful work for you, and I've kept my promise," she continued. "I wasn't talking about feats of derring do, although you certainly acquitted yourself impressively there. This is the duty you were born to, Will, whether or not you choose to accept it." Then she at last noticed that I was quite unsuccessfully suppressing a grin. "Hey!" she exclaimed. "Was my speech that bad?"

In response, I looked into her marvelous green eyes and said, "I have two questions for you, Kiri. First, do Deshtiran ship's captains have the same authority that they do on Earth?"

It was finally my turn to perplex her for once, and I savored the moment. She thought about it for several seconds and suddenly her eyes sparkled as she realized where I was heading. "Yes, they do, at least for what I think you're getting at. And the second question?"

"I believe you already know what that is," I answered.

Two hours later I was again sitting before the council, this time with Kiri at my side in a wheelchair (she had begged me to let her walk, but the physicians firmly drew the line there). Those powerful movers and shakers had clustered around her like children around a cotton candy stand. Only after a quarter of an hour or so were things finally brought to order, and then with considerable difficulty.

All eyes turned to me. "So, Prince Wilorian," inquired the fleet commander gravely. "Have you made your decision?"

"I have. You've got yourself an Emperor. And as soon as your ship's captain can find a moment to perform a certain part of his duties," I added, "you'll have an Empress as well."

THE END