
The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

No. 17 • November 2002 ~ Published with Cosmopolis No. 32

Contents

The Haunt in the Cellar

by Joel Anderson

Page 2

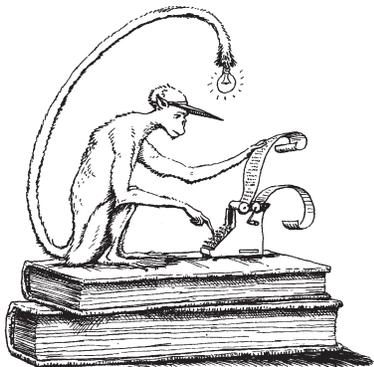


Coralia

Chapters 12–16

by Till Noever

Page 13



Editorial

Gentle Readers.

Here is *CLS* 17, with a story from Joel Anderson, and a big chunk of *Coralia*. It might have to do for the next two months, since I'm not sure that I'll have the time to put together another *CLS* before December. Also, I've had no stories submitted since Joel's. So, unless someone sends me something that'll make me think 'I *have* to put this out there!', I will probably focus on what is a very new, and somewhat scary, kind of project for me, namely shooting a movie.

However, fear not, shooting will be done by the end of November. It probably would be sensible to take a well-deserved break then. However, if experience is anything to go by, I probably won't and will instead try to get out another *CLS*. Quite possibly the next edition will not be exactly timed with the publication of *Cosmopolis*, but 2002 will not expire with another *CLS*. Maybe for Christmas? We'll do a super-edition, with twenty stories from a wide range of contributors.

Ahh, yes, dreams...

Till Noever



The Haunt in the Cellar

by Joel Anderson

Rodney Loadcraft Bench peered through the lenses of his mask at his detector. So far as he could tell without subjecting the grain to a series of tedious divinations with the tinctures and aspect-tattles at his shop back in town, the crop was sound.

Olson's corn was always sound, or at least it had been for three generations, which was as far back as the diviner's records went; but the farmer always ordered these tests after harvest, just as his father and grandfather had done. Rodney drove out every autumn with his load of equipment, just as his father and grandfather had done. A man had to make a living one way or another.

A Guernsey stood by the fence in the cow yard, watching dumbly as Rodney slung his portable detector over his shoulder and tacked a Certificate of Wholesomeness for Non-Perishable Livestock Provender and Cereal Grains to the side of the corn crib. The dealers who bought Olson's produce didn't care whether it was certified or not, but Rodney still had a supply of the fancy notices his father had had printed, and a number of local farmers continued the tradition of having the official-looking bits of paper stuck to their outbuildings and granaries.

Up behind the manure pile, a door in the barn swung open. Osco Agrico Olson, owner of the corn, sauntered down to the corn crib. "Are you done then, Rodney?"

The diviner started an unintelligible reply, then reached behind his head to undo the straps of his respirator. As he did so, the detector slipped off his shoulder. It fell into the grass at his feet and made an ear-splitting ululation, alarm lights blinking.

The Guernsey reared her head and galloped clumsily across the pasture. "What's wrong?" Olson demanded, also moving away.

Rodney squatted and shut off the alarms. He looked at the indicators on his detector. "Organic aspect, not too old," he said after he had pulled off his mask. Rodney stood again, sniffed and examined the soles of his boots. "Manure."

Olson adjusted his cap with some irritation. "So the corn's all right. Did you do the beans and the last crop of hay?"

"Everything was fine," Rodney said.

Olson nodded. They stood silent for a moment, then together said the Maladicendi Prioeres. Rodney held out his hand, meaning to shake Olson's and close the deal. Olson raised his eyebrows at Rodney's rubber gloves. He put his hands into his pockets and led Rodney up to the house where Olson gave him half a ham and a basket of eggs. Rodney got out of his yellow, poison-proof suit, packed his equipment and fee into his wheel and set off for town.

He passed a number of small farms and dairy operations, few of which used his services. In the middle of one stubbled field a tall concrete obelisk stood at an angle, still bearing a few stripes of flaking black and yellow paint. Rodney had no certain idea of what the obelisk signified, but whatever lay buried under it was of little or no danger in this day and age.

Rodney drove through the bean fields surrounding the shoyu manufactory, then past Grunewald's chicken farm. He piloted his wheel into the business district of town, down quiet streets and finally into the lane beside his house.

He brought his divining equipment into the shop and changed clothes. There was beer in the cupboard and Rodney was thirsty, but it was almost supper time and his wife Ida would be back by now from her job at the high school.

Rodney stood on a rug in the kitchen and took off his boots. A chicken pie sat on the counter, steaming from slits in its crust. It must be later than he thought.

The pantry door flew open. Ida bustled into the kitchen, wielding a broom. She kissed his cheek. "What did Osco Olson come up with this year?"

Rodney stumbled as he pulled up his socks. "Some ham. Two or three dozen eggs."

"As if we needed eggs," said Ida, who kept twenty laying hens and sold their produce to some of the neighbors. "How big a ham?"

"Oh, ten pounds, maybe."

Ida snorted. "Your dad got a side of beef or more for the same job. Well, why don't you pour the coffee. Sally will be home any minute, and I've got to set the table."

Rodney filled the cups. The door banged open, and his daughter Sally came breathlessly into the room. "How soon is supper?" she asked.

"Pretty soon now, I suppose," said Rodney.

Sally selected a doughnut from the jar on the counter. "I've got to go right back for the game. Emily's coming too." Ida came from the pantry with a pile of dishes, and she and Sally set the table.

Ida told Sally to gather up the dishes when they had finished eating. "I'll get some apples for dessert," she said, going to the basement door.

"There's two whole pecks of new Haralsons in the shop," Rodney said as Ida disappeared down the steps.

"I suppose you'd have me throw out the ones I canned last year!" came a faint challenge.

Sally turned from the sink at the sound of a timid rapping from the front door. "That's Emily! Tell Mother I won't have time for dessert."

As Rodney reached for the coffee pot, he heard a muffled shriek from the basement.

Sally and her friend Emily, coming back for Sally's jacket, stopped in the kitchen door at the sound.

There was a quick tattoo of footsteps on the stairs. Staring behind her, Ida tripped into the kitchen. She fumbled a glass jar in her hands. It flew out of her grasp, spun into the air and smashed on the floor, spraying wedges of preserved apples and syrup across the floor.

Rodney put down the coffee pot. Sally said, "Mother, what's the matter?"

Ida dropped to a chair, face white, hand on her heart.

Rodney went to the stairs, looked back at his wife.

"What's wrong, Mother?" Sally said, trying to loosen Emily's grip on her arm.

"A haunt!" whispered Ida, turning to stare at the basement door. "A haunt spoke to me!"

"A haunt!" said Emily in a tiny voice.

Rodney frowned quizzically. "What do you mean, a 'haunt'?"

Ida regained some of her composure and frowned back at him. "I mean what I said—a fright, a wraith, a ghost! If you don't believe me, go down there yourself!" Ida looked fretfully at the basement door, then at the floor. "Sally, bring me the dust pan and a damp rag. This syrup will ruin the waxing I gave the floor!"

But Sally ran after Emily, who had fled the kitchen in terror.

Ida busied herself cleaning up the mess. Rodney put his boots on and went down into the basement. At the foot of the stairs a glowing bulb still swung from the joists, upset by Ida's passage. Firelight flickered through the draft holes in the furnace door. Rodney stooped under the ductwork as he made his way over the cracked concrete floor.

The door to the fruit cellar was in the north wall. Rodney poked his head into the little room. The air in the cellar was cool, dry but still a little musty. The light here, too, was still burning. Rodney saw nothing unusual. Ida's apples and pears, jellies, jams, beans, tomatoes and pickled pork stood in their gleaming glass rows, all neatly labeled and undisturbed. Onions hung braided on the wall, the potatoes and carrots were heaped in their bins.

Just what had Ida heard? Had she imagined it? His wife was generally very sensible, or had been before joining the Seekers last winter.

Unlike the Roman Redemptionists, the staid, respectable church in which both Rodney and Ida had been brought up, the Seekers embraced all manner of faddish, revisionist dogma, although like the Redemptionists, they denied the existence of ghosts. Even so Ida, and many people Rodney knew, both Seeker and Redemptionist, seemed to overlook this bit of teaching.

Rodney made a careful investigation of the fruit cellar, but found nothing out of order.



Saturday morning Ida burned the toast. Rodney chewed it stoically along with the scrambled eggs and fried ham, which were up to his wife's usual standards. Sally glanced at uneasily at Ida. "Did you sleep all right, Mother? Did you hear anything in the night?"

Ida snorted dismissively.

"Well I tossed and turned all night," Sally confessed. "Emily said she'd sit up and pray for us, but I don't know if it did any good."

Ida was silent.

"Who won the game last night?" Rodney asked his daughter.

"Oh, we did, I think. Robby Gamble made a touch-down, but then he got hurt. We talked to him on the sidelines; he might have a sprained wrist. Emily thought the game was excessively violent."

Rodney said, "I've seen the preacher's boy play. Awful quick to claim he's got an injury."

Sally surreptitiously watched her mother. Ida belatedly noticed the burnt toast, and now she was fretfully scraping the slices with a butter knife.

"Father," Sally began hesitantly. "Couldn't you do something? Couldn't you divine it or something?"

"A sprained wrist? The Revered Gamble can send his son to the medico. He's got plenty of money."

"I mean the ghost, Daddy!"

Rodney chewed a mouthful of ham. Osco Olson knew how to cure and smoke pork properly. "Divining isn't meant to find ghosts."

"What's it for, then? Didn't Great-Grandpa used to tell people where the ancestors left their aspects?"

"Aspects aren't ghosts. You know better, Sally. An aspect is like the dangerous side to something that you wouldn't look at twice in ancient times, like water or corn, before they hid poisons and traps all over the place."

"I haven't seen any poison lately," Sally said.

Rodney glumly buttered a piece of blackened toast, unable to correct his daughter on that point. Ida got up from the table and took a pail out from under the sink. "Well, the house has a dusty 'aspect' this morning. I've got work to do, even if no one else does!"

Sally dutifully went to get the carpet-sweeper. Holding a slice of toast in his mouth, Rodney put on his jacket and went outside before Ida had time to write him up a schedule of Saturday projects.

He stood on the back steps for a minute. The wood pile was good and long, and in the basement were split elm, corn cobs and kindling. He had drained and cleaned the cistern on Thursday.

There didn't seem to be much to do in the side yard or at the front of the house. Sally had raked up the leaves, and the trees were almost bare now. Ida might say the hedges needed pruning again, but if she had her way with them they'd be little more than stumps and never have a chance to blossom properly in the spring.

"Ahoy, Bench!" came a voice over the honeysuckle. Rodney's neighbor, Hobuck Bestmart Pederson, stood on the other side, his eyes and the dome of his head just visible above the branches. "You putting up your storms today?"

Rodney grunted. His house had no storm windows, being double-glazed in the antique style, as Hobuck well knew.

"I suppose you're going to finish the new porch, then," Hobuck speculated with a grin.

Rodney looked at his house. His home-improvement project for the summer was to have been the erection of a new front porch. Originally the house had had shown nothing to the street but a massive chimney and a row of high, slot-like little windows in a brick wall; the front door was off to the side, tucked into an alcove beside the chimney. Some years ago Rodney's grandfather had put up a small porch in front of the door. His motivation had probably been nothing more than to give visitors a better idea of how they were to gain entrance to the house, but it seemed no one had been convinced, and even today the kitchen door was the one people used. Nor was the porch convenient for calling to neighbors who might be passing on the sidewalk, and so it hadn't seen much use from inside, either. Recently signs of rot in the useless porch's floor and roof had become too certain to ignore, so Rodney had decided to pull the whole thing down and start over. Under it he had discovered broad brick steps leading to a doorstone of honey-colored limestone, complemented on one side by a long, low planter. Although the foundations must have settled since the doorstone teetered very slightly when weight was applied, the movement didn't seem dangerous, and Rodney had decided that the house was better without a porch. Once he had filled the planter with marigolds (which were still brilliant orange), Ida had concurred with Rodney's opinion. The front door might even get some use now.

Hobuck had apparently given up on getting a rise out of Rodney. He was busy now in front of his double-height entrance foyer with its skinny white columns, digging in the iris bed. Rodney sighed and weighed his options. Ida knew very well that he had no divining work to do today. He resigned himself to the inevitable and went back to the garden.

By noon he had spread a layer of composted straw and chicken droppings over the garden. He looked it over, sweating despite the chilly day. The compost was two years old and dusty, but its stench was still overwhelming. Rodney put a finger to one nostril and blew discolored mucus from his nose. He had considered wearing one of his divining masks while he worked, but Rodney had been afraid Hobuck would make fun of him.

The garden looked very tidy though, all tucked in under its straw, ready for whatever the winter might

bring. Ida called him for lunch from the kitchen door. Rodney walked up to the house, blowing his nose again, feeling weary but virtuous.

Sally was next door, having lunch with Emily, Donna and Hobuck. Rodney ate tomato soup and a dish of beans, rice and onions dressed with Ida's spicy sauce.

Rodney asked Ida if she had heard any more from the ghost in the cellar. "Oh, how you talk!" she said.

He smiled and took another helping of beans.

Ida sipped her soup. "What are you up to this afternoon?"

Rodney shrugged.

"You haven't forgotten that the Faith Partners are coming for Saturday Circle, have you?" said Ida, looking at him. "I think you might take a bath and put on your navy-blue sweater."

Rodney slowed his chewing. He *had* forgotten. Although Ida told her friends he was 'studying the Path' with her, he hadn't undergone initiation yet (and never would, he told himself), and he didn't care to sit around chanting with Ida's co-religionists or suffer the sad stares with which they favored those unappreciative of their beliefs.

He pushed away from the table. "I've got some stuff to do outside yet." Ida stood with her hands on her hips as Rodney went out the kitchen door.

He went around to the front of the house and clipped a few blades of grass at the edges of the brick steps. Hobuck Pederson appeared again and Rodney stood by the hedge with him speculating on the prospects of the local club in the upcoming hockey season.

When Hobuck saw Donna, Emily and Sally coming across the backyard toward Rodney's house, all carrying their mantra-tablets and tasseled prayer bonnets, he hastily broke off the discussion and disappeared around the side of his house.

Rodney, slower to react, returned their waves. At the same time a small club-wagon came humming down the street and stopped near Rodney's house. Six Seekers disembarked. Three more climbed out of an open cart hitched to the rear of the vehicle, chanting and singing snatches of hymns. Rodney went to his shop at the back of the garden.

The building that housed Rodney's workshop had been used originally as a retirement dwelling for some aged relative of the family. A room at the back now served as Ida's chicken house, and Rodney's father had

added a small lean-to for the garden tools. Between the shop proper and the chicken house was a narrow room, once a kitchen, later fitted with benches, lockers and a shower, a sort of dressing room used by the journeymen diviners employed by Rodney's predecessors when the trade had been brisker. It was filled now with old divining equipment, egg cartons and sacks of corn for the chickens. The other end of the building contained Rodney's shop. In it was a work bench, his desk, file cabinets, an ancient imitation leather sofa probably original to the building, county land-plats, piles of old trade journals.

Rodney replaced a broken receptor tube on his detector and tested it with samples of noxious aspects he kept in bottles for such purposes. He stood looking at a pile of receipts and invoices for a few minutes, then sat down on the sofa and paged through a recent number of *Diviner's Digest*. . . there was a gruesome cut illustrating the results to a cow's internal organs after it had ingested oats infected with some germ manufactured by the old-timers, a virus set free upon the earth to destroy another, previously released organism, originally intended as beneficial to soft fruits, but that had later mutated and fallen into disfavor. Rodney blinked at the magazine, yawning. The next article looked to be equally dull. He slumped back on the sofa and closed his eyes.

An insistent ringing woke him. Rodney stumbled to his feet and opened a cabinet in the wall. "Agricultural diviner's. R. L. Bench speaks."

"Rodney?" squawked a grille inside the cabinet; "Rodney? Are you there? Oh, come in the house right away!" The telephone went dead.

Rodney pushed the cabinet door shut with some annoyance. He recognized the voice as that of Shawna Buke, one of Ida's Seeker friends, and the house she had referred to must be Rodney's.

He went up to the house. Shawna Buke had short legs and was given to vapors, but she could have walked the few yards out to the shop rather than commandeering his telephone. He would have heard her if she had called across the garden from the kitchen door.

The big company coffee pot was on the stove. Ida's fancy cordial glasses had been set out, too.

Someone butted open the pantry door. Shawna Buke trotted to the sink and dampened a washcloth. She saw Rodney, ran to him and seized his arm.

"Oh, Rodney!" she cried. "We've had such a fright!"

The haunt again, Rodney thought as Shawna pulled him through the pantry and into the dining room. A group of Seekers stood around the table in uncertain postures, several more hovering near the settee in the front room.

Ida reclined on the settee. She caught sight of Rodney and waved off the ministrations of her friends. "Rodney!" she called, sitting up. "I heard it again!"

"Ida fainted dead away at the top of the stairs just as I arrived," testified Ditmar Agrico Nelson, choir master at the high school.

Shawna Buke added, "All she was doing was fetching some of her wonderful cordial for us!" Shawna hid her face in her hands and sobbed resentfully at the meanness of the thing in the cellar.

Rodney sniffed suspiciously for the odor of blackberries. He knew Ida's cordial to be potent, but the glasses in the kitchen had been clean.

The Seekers were all silent, watching him expectantly. Shawna Buke looked up and smiled hopefully. No doubt they thought he should go down into the basement and confront whatever it was they thought had frightened Ida. They probably knew all about her previous experience, and had talked it up until Ida was ready to imagine just about anything. And the Seekers claimed they didn't believe in ghosts!

Rodney set his mouth. He saw no reason to encourage their superstitious zeal, and was about to tell them so when Isobelle Impco Rueese, apparently intending an unannounced departure from the haunted house, trotted back into the front room.

"Oh, Partners!" cried Isobelle. "I just saw the Revered Gamble coming up the street, I'm sure it was him! His Inward Spirit must have perceived our distress! He'll have the boldness to cast out this fearful haunt!"

Rodney looked out of a high window. A black carriage with tall, spoked wheels was maneuvering itself into a space between Ditmar Nelson's sporty little wheel and the Seeker's club-wagon. Rodney could see a well-fed man in a black chasuble behind the tiller.

The Seekers crowded into the narrow gallery leading to the front door, ready to welcome their minister. Isobelle, though disappointed when Harold O'Day confessed to having telephoned the minister, defended his perceptive qualities and was confident the situation would soon be set right. "I know dear Shawna meant well to call in Mr. Bench, but a land-diviner isn't the

man for a job like this—why, he hasn't even Sought yet! Really, you could just as well call in Axel, who brings us our ice."

Shawna accepted this criticism like a good Seeker, but Rodney felt some resentment. He was a member of the Businessmen's Association, a well-known citizen. His grandfather had served four terms as mayor of the town, and Rodney was just as good a diviner as Granville Bench had been. The problem was that there were so few dramatic cases of poisoning to solve now, and the reputation of the divining trade had suffered. His grandfather and his contemporaries had been too efficient. There were still plenty of contaminants and dangerous rubbish in the earth, but the old diviners had made people too confident of their safety.

Nevertheless, Rodney was entitled to some respect, at least in his own house. Brad Gamble Gamble, Revered or not, wasn't going to show him up in front of everybody.

Rodney pushed past the Seekers went quickly into the basement. If there was by some unlikely chance a real aspect there, he'd find it; if not, he'd show the Seekers and their minister just how foolish they were.

There was a broken bottle of cordial on the floor of the fruit cellar. A sweet, heavy aroma competed with the usual earthy ones. Rodney stood up on his toes, then bent over, inspecting the shelves of jars and bottles. Could some neighborhood youngster, possibly Jimminy Pinson, whom Ida had scolded last week for bothering her chickens, have sneaked into the cellar, thinking to give her a scare in revenge? Rodney used a lower shelf as a step and peered between the jars near the ceiling joists. Jimminy Pinson was small, quite capable of hiding in such a cramped space.

Rodney rattled jars aside. "Come on out! It'll go easier on you if—"

"Halt," husked a dry, insect-like little voice. "Proceed no further . . ."

The toes of Rodney's boots slipped off the lower shelf. His weight was transferred to his hands and the upper shelf bowed. Rodney dropped to the floor. First one, then another jar smashed on the cement. A third teetered. Rodney lunged, trying to push it back, and lost his balance. He stopped his fall with his hand, but his left knee crunched down on a broken jar of apples.

He got up carefully. There was some blood on one leg of his overalls. Rodney picked a shard of glass from

his knee . . . the wound appeared to be superficial. His shout had probably been unwarranted.

Rodney turned his head slowly toward the upper shelf. But that voice hadn't been Jimminy Pinson's. It had been too low, its accent strange, full of menace.

Limping backwards out the door, Rodney pulled the door shut behind him. A thorough investigation would have to be made, with better light, and perhaps some protective equipment. He wondered if he should order everyone out of the house.

Rodney went to the stairs. Timorous, questioning voices drifted down from the kitchen. The Seekers might have been alarmed by his yell. He opened his mouth, ready to call up and reassure them.

But the house became silent before he could say anything. There was a squeak on the floorboards over Rodney's head. He heard a deep voice advise calmness and a period of silent reflection. The speaker himself would venture downstairs and see to Mr. Bench.

Rodney looked at the door to the fruit cellar. The newcomer upstairs, the Revered Gamble, must have come into the house just as the haunt had manifested itself. As Ditmar Nelson probably had when Ida was down here last. Had the ghostly words been meant for Gamble, rather than Rodney? He thought for a moment. He shook his head with a wry grin, then climbed the stairs as quickly as his knee would permit.

The Revered Gamble stood nearest the door. Ida and the Seekers had gathered in a clot in the center of the kitchen. Gamble smiled at Rodney, his face sturdy but kind, carefully shaven. His black chasuble hung in neat folds, lending him an ecclesiastical dignity, but the checked trousers under it snapped with color, and he wore stylish white boots.

The kitchen was silent. Rodney said, "I think I've figured out what's been going on."

But the Seekers' eyes were fixed on Rodney's bloody knee. Shawna Buke made a bleating sound. Two of her Faith Partners hurried to support her, recognizing the signs of an imminent faint. Emily Pederson clutched her mother's arm and gasped out a series of little hoots: "Oo . . . oo . . . oo! The haunts—they've gnawed off Mr. Bench's leg!" The Seekers buzzed with fear and concern.

"I just fell on some broken glass," Rodney explained.

The Seekers looked at him with uneasy sympathy. Ditmar Nelson suggested that Rodney had been so horrified by the haunt that his brain had overloaded, caus-

ing it to substitute a more acceptable memory of his injury.

The Revered Gamble smiled, spreading his arms. "Come, come, dear Partners! We who Seek are free from fear as we follow the Path. We do not give faith to false sprites or any sort of ghostly beings."

Again the kitchen became silent. The Revered Gamble nodded, mouthing the names of two or three who seemed most upset. "The explanation for the trouble dear Sister Ida has experienced is quite simple," Gamble declared, looking in turn at each Seeker. "You see, friends, the imaginings and mind-workings of people either bless or afflict them as they Seek along the Path. Many tread the Path at any given time; when doing so they give out emanations, much like radio waves; some are upbuilding, some are mean. But the waves have no physical substance. They aren't no real danger to us. Dear Ida has picked up some of these emanations, evidently troubled ones."

The Revered Gamble took Ida's hands and smiled warmly. "Of course I don't mean in no way to criticize you, Ida; oh, surely no! But while in your cellar, I feel most confident in saying, you heard no demon, no dead ancestor, but simply the thoughts of some Seeker who was not so serene as he, or she, ought to be. It was simply chance you were in the cellar at the time."

Rodney opened his mouth, but Gamble continued to speak, now to Rodney. "I know that many use the so-called errors of our poor ancestors to excuse their bad farming habits or to find blame for their sickness. Some even use these old tales to make money off of their neighbors! I'm sorry I have to say that, Mr. Bench, knowing your trade, but I know you're big enough not to take offence."

He smiled and winked at Rodney, then turned back to Ida. "Your perceivings, dear Sister, are merely evidence of your high spiritual nature. Your husband's imagination has been fired up by your experience; hence, he has redefined your experience to agree with his own superstitions. What we must do now is radiate feelings of good will to all those who walk the Path."

"You're wrong," Rodney said tightly.

The Seekers stared at him. "I heard the voice too," Rodney said. "I heard it with my own two ears. It was real, and it was in the fruit cellar. But I don't think it was talking to me. In fact, I think *you're* the one it was speaking to, Revered Gamble."

All the Seekers started talking at once, scandalized at the insult their minister had received. The tassels on Emily Pederson's bonnet trembled. She wept, breathing in gasps. Donna angrily led her away, complaining that Rodney had upset her daughter so badly that now she would have to be tonicked. Shawna Buke shook her finger and reproved him for his rudeness to the minister. Ida scowled dangerously at him.

Rodney stood silent for a minute as they chattered, then turned and went outside.

He went around to the front, stopped before the broad brick steps. It was getting dark. Donna and Emily, dim shapes in the back yard, hurried home. Rodney looked at the sky. The green-mottled face of the moon glowed between the leafless branches. The poisoners' long curse lay on it, as it lay on earth's hills, lakes and prairies . . .

And here too, right under his house. Hardly a case of poisoning, but enough to frighten people who didn't understand its purpose. Rodney squatted beside the door stone, favoring his knee, and tentatively pressed it with his hand.

"Halt," it whispered. The voice was distant, buried, and Rodney would never have noticed it if he hadn't been listening carefully, bent down near the step. He stared at it meditatively, shivering a little in the fall night.

"What's going on?" came a call out of the darkness. Hobuck Pederson, his face another moon, peered over the the hedge.

Rodney stood up. "How's Emily?"

"Oh, she's all right, or will be until Donna makes her drink the fish oil." Hobuck pushed through the hedge and came up beside Rodney. "Did you really tell off the Revered Gamble?" he whispered, looking at the yellow-lit windows of Rodney's house.

Rodney looked too. "Never mind Gamble," he said, and pulled Hobuck down to the door stone. "Listen to this."

He made the haunt speak again. Hobuck was impressed, but not at all frightened. He wanted to go down into the cellar and investigate.

"The house is still full of people," Rodney said. "Let's go back to the shop. We can have a beer or two."

While Rodney daubed ointment on his knee and wrapped a length of linen around it, he filled Hobuck in on the history of the voice in his cellar. Hobuck lis-

tened, leafing through an old book that described some of the remarkable machines his ancestors had built in their pride and madness. One device in particular sounded as though it might have been capable of actually making ghosts, or something very like ghosts in Hobuck's opinion. Hadn't they turned men into machines, machines into men?

While Hobuck was impressed by the old-timers' often terrifying technical capabilities, and was convinced that tearing down the porch in front of the Benchs' door must have awakened whatever this manifestation was, he had doubts as to the likelihood of anything very amazing or dangerous being hidden in Rodney's basement. "Nobody's actually seen a ghost, have they? You just hear it, right? It's probably only a recording or something. I doubt if it's any big deal. There's antiques that are useful, you know. Look at the electrical compost grinder under my sink. Must be a hundred, two hundred years old. Still works, too."

Rodney finished his bandaging. "Yeah. Real useful if you want to grind up your leaves and potato peels a handful at a time."

"But your doorstep machine's probably something just as harmless, and you might be able to train it to be of some use. The Seekers have too much imagination. No offense to Ida, of course. Or Donna."

"Of course not," Rodney agreed. "Whatever it is is most likely only some kind of fancy doorbell. I don't why it sounds so unfriendly, but maybe the neighborhood was dangerous back then . . . That's what I'm trying getting at. The Seekers think we bad-mouth the poisoners for no good reason. Things aren't so bad now, and they don't want to think it wasn't always this easy to live. They think we're safe now."

Rodney paused. "And we are, more or less. But they don't know why, they don't remember how it *got* safe. They bury history and common sense in this ridiculous spiritual crap."

"Is that your line, or did you steal it?"

Rodney laughed. "I'm pretty sure the 'crap' part is mine. I want to have a little fun with the Seekers, though, and debunk one or two of their goofy doctrines if I can. You want to help?"

Hobuck emptied his bottle. "I wouldn't mind seeing Gamble taken down a peg. He grates on my butt. What have you got in mind?"

"I know where to start, and then we'll play it by ear."

"Let me get another beer."



In the kitchen, the Revered Gamble clapped his hands three times. "I think it's time we settled down," he said, somewhat out of breath. "Let us hope that the troubled spirit has been encouraged to make his emanations upbuilding, rather than denying. Let us hope he will now say, 'Well met, Seeking Friend!'"

The Seekers sighed in approbation. They were all tired, though refreshed inwardly, after the spirit-dance the Revered One had led them in. Ida went into the pantry to put together a tray of restorative snacks while the Revered Gamble kindly showed one of the younger girls the correct method for retying her karma-tassels.

There was a rattle at the kitchen door. It creaked open and banged against the wall. Two figures, bulky in yellow plastic suits, stood against the autumn night. The first, tall and broad, clumped forward, hissing through a pair of canisters attached to either side of his masked face. The other one, short and round, shuffled behind with an armload of arcane machinery.

The Seekers stood with mouths hanging open. The youngster beside Gamble's chair muttered, chewing on her tassels: "Spinners!"

"Yes, yes! They're Spinners, come down from space to take us for breeders!" squealed Shawna Buke before she fainted.

"What is this? Who are you?" said the Revered Gamble, rising from his chair.

A muffled voice from the smaller one said, "You must have seen diviners before."

Valves clicked and filters wheezed. "You're not really a diviner," the taller one told his companion.

The tall one turned and addressed the Seekers. "Don't use the front door when you leave. There's an aspect under the steps. We're going to disperse it." Speaking to his companion again, he waved a gloved hand. "Downstairs."

The strange pair stumped slowly down the steps, trailing cables and wires. Ida came out of the pantry with a platter of sandwiches. "What's the matter now?" she asked the astonished Seekers.



Rodney and Hobuck strung up an extra light in the fruit cellar. Rodney cleared the shelves, making teetering piles of canned goods on the floor. "Ida's going to be mad at you," Hobuck cautioned.

"It's wood in back of the shelves," said Rodney. "There's got to be a space behind there."

He selected a clawed hammer from the belt at his waist, climbed up and attacked the wall behind the shelving. After removing two planks, Rodney pulled out several handfuls of wool-like insulation and inserted the wand of his detector. As he had expected, there was no indication of poison or radiation, but the wand hit something. "Look in here," he told Hobuck. "What do you see?"

"What? I don't see anything," Hobuck said inside his fogged mask, ducking and peering between the lower shelves.

"You have to be up higher—hold on a minute." Rodney got down, looked around, then, grunting and straining, he pulled a bin out from the wall and stood on top of the pile of potatoes, bending under the joists. Hobuck climbed up beside him and stretched over the top shelf.

Hobuck unhooked the light from a nail in the joist overhead and directed its beam into the cavity Rodney's demolition had revealed. Wires hung between the planking and the exterior concrete foundation. Hobuck managed to grab hold of something hanging at the end of the wires. He shone the light on it and mumbled.

"What?" asked Rodney eagerly.

"Can I take off this mask now?" Hobuck said more clearly.

Rodney looked behind; no one seemed to have followed them downstairs. "Yeah, I think they were properly impressed."

They removed their headgear. Hobuck held the light on what he had retrieved from inside the wall, a metal-framed paper cone. "Looks like some kind of annunciator."

"Like in a radio, or a telephone. Well, this is Ida's haunt, then." Rodney elbowed himself forward and reached for the wires from which the cone depended. He grabbed the light and shone it upward. "Let me see . . . I imagine that thing hung up in the wall by the door at one time. Probably fell down here, years ago, and nobody's thought about it since."

"My cousin Dodgey Bengtson over in Forest Prairie has a thing by his door, so that if you press a button it

plays music, like chimes. There's no real chimes, only a little box under the stairs."

Rodney pulled back from the shelf. "A doorbell, like I said. The Seekers will like that. 'Emanations from the spiritual plane'—you bet!"

Hobuck said, "Still, they must have been a strange breed, you know? 'Halt!' it says. Not too polite for when neighbors come calling."

"Well, maybe they were feuding with them. Let's see where these wires go."

It was hard to see, but they located a wire with insulation that matched the annunciator's, overhead in the corner made by a joist and the wall planks. They followed it out into the basement proper. It ran along a beam for a few feet and disappeared into the wood room. Rodney scrambled up the pile of stove wood. He turned and called to Hobuck. "It goes up a hole in the ceiling."

Hobuck held up the light and studied the joists. "Whereabouts would this be? Under the kitchen, I guess. There's the pipes coming down from the sink."

"No, we're under the pantry here . . . man, but there's a lot of old wires down here. I think this is still the right one, though. It's got that kind of plastic stuff on it instead of cloth." Rodney considered. "Let's be quiet going up. I don't want to make another commotion until we have this thing nailed down."



Upstairs, the Seekers milled around the front room, nibbling nervously on Ida's snacks, putting on their coats. Despite the minister's assurance that Mr. Bench and Mr. Pederson were merely playing a childish trick on them, several of them had gone home already.

Donna and Emily, on the other hand, had come back for Ida's little supper. Donna had missed her husband's entrance with Rodney, but caught sight of him now through the door leading from the dining room into the pantry. "What on earth? Hobuck! What is that you're wearing?"

Ida hurried to her side. On the pantry floor were piles of plates, cups, platters, gravy boats, sugar bowls and relish dishes. Rodney was handing a knife up to Hobuck, who stood on the counter. Ida turned, smiled quickly to her guests, then stuck her head into the pantry. "Rodney!" she hissed. "Must you embarrass me further? Keep your nonsense to the basement. Better

yet, you and your playmate go out to the shop. Hobuck, get those dirty boots off my clean counter this minute!"

The pantry door slammed shut. Hobuck made as to climb down, but Rodney pushed him back. "We'll be done in a minute, and you know I can't fit up there. Did you get it open?"

Hobuck glanced toward the door, then returned his attention to a box near the ceiling. "There's a lot of paint on it, but . . . there! That does it."

"Let me see!" said Rodney. He pulled out a drawer to stand on.

Hobuck had broken off the tip of the knife, but the box was open. Beneath the dust inside was an impossibly complex pattern woven of transparent filaments and dull gray organics. Hobuck blew some of the dust away, coughed, then carefully removed a nodule from its socket. "I don't think it's in working order," he said. "This thing here's all sort of burnt-looking. Probably an overload guard."

Rodney removed one of his gloves and took the tiny thing from Hobuck. "That's probably why the voice is so low and quiet. Maybe it'll play a hymn for Gamble if we fix it. Let's try, anyway. I want to see what it does. Ida will make me take it out tomorrow, haunt or no haunt."

Rodney knew little of antique bioelectrics, but he knew how to outwit a fuse. He hunted in the pantry drawers until he found a bit of copper wire and told Hobuck what to do with it. "There!" said Hobuck after a moment. A green light now glowed inside the box.

"Let's go test it," Rodney said.

Rodney and Hobuck went out the back, around the side of the house to the front. Two Seekers already sat in the cart, and others were getting aboard the club-wagon. A few stood on the sidewalk chatting with the Revered Gamble. Ida again offered her apologies for the unseemly goings-on at their Saturday Circle. Gamble shook her hand, accepting gracefully.

"Hey, Revered!" shouted Rodney, beckoning to Gamble. "Come on over here! I'll show you your troubled spirit!"

Ida clucked in embarrassment. Brad Gamble Gamble smiled patiently. "Certainly, Mr. Bench. Show me what you will."

Rodney waited until the minister stood next to him, then rested one boot on the door stone. "Halt!" intoned a sepulchral but now clearly audible voice. The annunciator still hung in the cellar, but the repairs to the box

in the pantry seemed to have given it more power, or perhaps had activated another annunciator. "Halt!" it commanded sternly as Rodney tapped the stone again.

"See?" Rodney laughed. "It's like a door bell! My Great-great Grandfather probably put it in to keep the peddlers away!"

The Revered Gamble frowned. Pushing back the tassels of his hat, he bent down and examined the door stone in the light of the moon. "Ha-hum," he said, straightening up again. The Seekers who had gotten into the bus leaned out the windows. The others grouped themselves around him, waiting for the Revered One's pronouncement.

"After careful analysis," Gamble said with a brow wrinkling frown, "I feel quite confident in saying that this stone is the cusping-point for the emanations of the spirit in question, one possibly long-departed from his earthly husk." He held up his finger. "Indeed, and possibly contrary to orthodox precepts, I expect that this here doorstep may well be the troubled one's own tombstone, the house built later atop it! Not a ghost—certainly no!—but something the unenlightened might call one. No doubt this poor influence has been afflicted by all the horrid things said about him and the people of his time, the so-called poisoners. 'Halt, halt!' I heard it cry, begging for a cessation to torments in the imagined netherworld to which it has so sadly sentenced itself. As soon as I return home I shall embark on a program of focused meditation which might free the sorry spirit."

Ida, who had murmured the Redemptionists' traditional Maladicendi Prioeres when the haunt spoke, gasped in dismay when she understood the effects of her uncharitable words. Some of the others, also brought up as Redemptionists, wore guilty expressions, thinking about all the curses they had heaped upon their ancestors before setting themselves on the True Path.

"Shit," muttered Hobuck. Both Donna and Emily heard him. Emily burst into tears; Donna swung at him with her prayer bonnet.

"You're crazy," Rodney said, losing patience. "It means you're supposed to stop and not come in! There's no ghost or troubled spirit involved. It'll probably explain itself better if I stand on the step long enough. Here, watch!"

Rodney pushed past Gamble, stepping up onto the stone. Hobuck said, "Maybe you shouldn't do that . . ."

"Halt!" said the voice. "Proceed no further! Swipe idee matrix. Halt! Swipe AmCitz idee! Idee nonpossessor render temp nonfunc pend rev authority's scan, enabled FedCode three three eight seven three, scandump nineteen: HomesitePrivAct, three-two, seventeen."

"What are 'idea metrics'?" Hobuck whispered.

Rodney stared down at the stone. "I don't know. Probably it's Latin." He was surprised by the stone's, or rather the door bell's, sudden loquaciousness, and its poor English. He got off the stone, but the voice wouldn't shut up now. It was still deep and flat, but Rodney detected a distinctly threatening tone in its nonsensical words. The voice grew louder, as though the speaker was waking up. "Subject determ: absence reg orgimaplants," it bellowed. "Determ: noncitz. Subject con disassembly, induct orgbank, reg FedCode eighteen thirty-two seven seven eight one two one."

There was a pop, and flat knifeblades of light flickered from the door casing. A terrible man, eight feet tall and armored in gleaming black plastic, suddenly stood three inches from Rodney's face. An illuminated patch on the monster's chest bore the stylized depiction of an elderly couple in antique dress peeping from the door of a charming little cottage. Twining roses over the door spelled out 'Caring Neighbor HomeSec, Ltd Pty'.

The monster seemed no neighbor, caring or otherwise. Rodney staggered backwards. The Seekers howled and scattered, some running across the street, others jumping into the neighbors' hedges.

The monstrous haunt was quiet for a moment. Rodney cautiously reapproached the front door, coming up from the side. The monster grimaced behind the grille of its helmet. "Halt!" it roared. Several Seekers stopped in their tracks, trembling. The haunt didn't look at them, but stared forward at the empty sidewalk.

The vision shuddered and buzzed. Rodney could see the mail box through it. "It's only a picture!" he called to the Seekers. "It's not real! I'll show you."

Rodney swallowed and stepped forward, right through the haunt. The image of the poisoners' monster flickered over his yellow suit like the moving pictures shown uptown on Friday nights. Rodney put his hand on the door handle, intending to go straight to the pantry and pull out the troublesome box.

There was a loud buzz. The ghost flickered and was gone, but Rodney was frozen in its place. Brilliant light crackled out from both sides of the door casing, flash-

ing, jumping, outlining his body in a network of green lightning.

He folded slowly and dropped. The haunt reappeared, its legs growing out of Rodney's back. "Tampering con person detainee forbidden prior arrival relevant disposition agency," it informed the terrified onlookers.



Rodney felt something pulling at his hair. He opened his eyes. Ida hovered above him, brandishing a comb. "Oh!" she cried, dropping her comb.

The Revered Gamble's smooth face replaced Ida's. Seeing that Rodney was conscious, he threw up his arms. "Oh, cry out your praises! Cry them hither, cry them yon! Rodney Loadcraft Bench's spirit is returned home, I feel most confident in saying, in response to the fervor of our meditations!"

Rodney sat up in his own front room. Seekers stood all around him, looking very tired. Sally embraced him, and Emily Pederson began to chant a prayer of thanksgiving.

Ida pushed Rodney back down onto the settee and held a glass of blackberry cordial to his lips. "We've had such a terrible scare," she said, although she smiled.

Rodney saw that it was still dark outside. "How long was I out?"

"Nearly three hours." Ida shook her head, still amazed. "It's been a frightening night for all of us. Just after the haunt smote you, there was another ruckus at the old town hall; the sheriff's deputy told us all about it. Another haunt—or poisoner's aspect, I suppose—broke out of the wall in the furnace room! It ran on wheels over here, roaring and jabbering, waking up the whole town. It had snapping arms and spoke in a terrible voice. It wanted to take someone—you, I'm sure!—to the authorities, to a Facility Medical! At least there isn't one of *them* in our town, praise the Holy Redeemer!"

Revered Gamble raised his eyebrows, but Ida didn't notice him and made a cross with her hand. "Luckily we already had you indoors. This second monster came right up to the house over the lawn and knocked itself against the door over and over again. I thought I'd die of fright! But Hobuck and the sheriff's deputy doused it with coal oil and set in on fire, and most of it melted.

I'm afraid the lawn is in awful shape. You'll have to dig out the contaminated soil and put down new sod next spring."

Rodney got up and looked out the window at the blackened hulk that lay near the door. "Good lord," he whispered. "What did I wake up? Something else might come! We've got to get that aspect out of the pantry, right now! Where's Hobuck?"

"Hobuck's taken care of that. He put on that diviner's mask you gave him and pulled out a lot of wires."

"The telephone wires, too, I think," Sally added sadly.

"Where is he now? Are you sure—"

"He went home," said Donna. "He's taking our electrical compost-grinder out from under the sink. I suppose it's all for the best, but I'll miss it."

"We're more blessed without such things," Emily said piously.



Coralia

by *Till Noever*

Chapter 12

With a gentle jolt the shuttle docked with the station. Clamps locked in place; the cabin lights came on; air hissed into the transition chambers. Passengers undid their harnesses and began to recover their luggage from the overhead lockers. Their movements, for the most part, were awkward and uncertain. The velcro slippers which covered their other footwear made little tearing noises as they moved with little steps toward the exit. They surrendered the slippers to a flight attendant who stuffed them all into a large bag, and then made the disorienting transition into the station's pseudo-gravity environment.

Jack and Claury, now Lothar Kolyad and Aine O'Connor, followed in the last trickle of disembarking passengers. Jack entered the station with apprehension. There were people here who knew him. Especially Hilyer Kern by whom Jack definitely did not want to be seen. He would have no credible explanation for what he was doing here, in this outfit, and heading straight toward the *Lister Diamond's* embarkation gate.

They'd seen the giant ship hanging off the starboard side as the shuttle drew closer to the station. The huge sphere dwarfed the station's disk, making it appear that the station was the attachment, rather than the other way around. A strange feeling had overcome Jack as he stared out at the ship that was going to take them to Earth, and whose hulk seemed to fill the sky.

The *Daniel Lewis*, now just another dwarf, was floating off to one side with two small maneuvering pods attached to its 'tail'; waiting for the leviathan to vacate the docking port. Jack had wondered why he felt nothing at seeing the ship he had piloted for almost a year now. Or maybe there was a tinge of an emotion. Relief, that this period of his life was finally over.

Once inside the station, Jack and Claury did not tarry but headed straight through the arrivals area and into the direction of the departure gate. Jack kept looking around anxiously, ready to duck out of sight the moment a face he didn't want to see happened to

appear. He hoped that at least Rigoster was still on the surface. That immediately halved the number of people who knew him by sight—and he was happy for any advantage fate had to offer.

A steady stream of people were trickling past the check-in and into the tube which connected the station to the *Lister Diamond*. Jack and Claury handed their 'cards to a young female attendant in the GenSpac Line's blue, skin-tight uniform with the red diagonal stripe across the chest. She smiled professionally and held them against a sensor pad.

"Joining us here?" she said brightly when their data came up on a display. "Welcome aboard! I hope you have a nice trip."

She studied the display. "No luggage?" she asked.

"We intend to purchase most of our requirements on board," Jack said.

"Of course," the young woman replied. "You'll find establishments catering to all your needs on the Promenade."

She returned them their 'cards and they 'climbed' up a long spiral staircase toward the center of the station. As they proceeded, the centrifugal pseudo-gravity decreased to almost zero. The tube connecting the station to the *Lister Diamond* was attached here. Its inside appeared to be rotating slowly, though it was 'really' the station which was spinning.

Jack and Claury grabbed the hand rails and hauled themselves along toward the other end. About a hundred meters further on they reached the entry lock to the *Lister Diamond*. A sign displaying a human figure indicated which way was going to be 'down' once they entered the ship. They brought their bodies into alignment with the figure and stepped into an airlock. The door behind them hissed shut and one in front opened. They stepped across an invisible threshold and gravity suddenly tugged at them. Claury's hand tightened on Jack's arm until the moment of disorientation and dizziness passed.

Jack and Claury produced their 'cards, which were examined again. When these were found satisfactory they continued along a long corridor, the floor of which consisted of a slowly moving conveyor. The far side was sealed by a door.

"Please stand in place," they were told. As the conveyor transported them toward the other end they passed through a battery of scanners which probed

them for the presence of contraband: weapons, illegal or dangerous substances, outlawed implants.

They came to the other end. *"Thank you for your compliance,"* a carefully modulated voice told them. *"Welcome aboard the Lister Diamond. We hope you have a pleasant transit. For a guide to the ship please insert a datapod into any of the clearly marked data-outlets."*

The door slid open. The freedom of the ship was theirs. They stepped into a hall with a huge vaulted ceiling. Around the sides, five evenly-spaced levels, with broad walkways which provided access to a bewildering array of shops of all sizes: the Promenade. A total of five elevator bubbles provided transit between the levels. For those who were willing to exert themselves, several stairways were also provided.

What a waste of space. The spaceman in Jack recoiled at such frivolous abuse. Not even the *Berenice* had had such an extravagant design.

"Can I help you?" Jack and Claury stopped gaping at the sight and looked around. A male attendant in a GenSpac uniform smiled at them. "I have been dispatched to show you to your quarters. Since you are joining us here you may not be familiar with the ship's general layout." He smiled. "It's not as complex and forbidding as it appears at first sight."

Claury nodded. "Show us the way." They followed the young man to the other side of the Promenade, listening to him chatter away happily, explaining, as he must surely have done a thousand times, the basics of the interior layout.

One hemisphere, all two hundred and sixty million cubic meters of it, was completely dedicated to housing people, crew and passengers alike. The bridge, nav-eng section, and crew quarters occupied a relatively small volume at the imaginary apex of the 'people' area of the ship. Another somewhat larger volume, containing the 'supply' areas, was situated almost exactly in the middle of the hemisphere: food and equipment storage; kitchens; laundries. At the base of the hemisphere were more storage areas, waste-processing and life-support systems, as well as a small emergency fusion reactor. In twenty parallel rings around the inside of the hull sat six hundred life pods which could hold up to ten people each and would provide life support for the maximum complement for a period of up to ten days. Any or all of these could be jettisoned within seconds if an emergency arose.

The first-class cabins formed a layered series of rings wedged between those created by the life pods. All of these offered the privilege of a direct view into space through at least one transparent metaplast port-hole; a luxury not afforded to those in the second and third classes, who were confined to cabins closer to the center and the base of the hemisphere.

The whole of the 'people' section was connected through a bewildering network of lifts and stairs, and through an even more bewildering, albeit invisible, network of pipes, ducts, cables, crawl-ways, and service shafts and lifts.

Passengers' movements were restrained in a hierarchical fashion. Except for particular social occasions, the rule was that 'lower' classes had no access to the living areas of the 'upper' ones; nor to their ballrooms, lounges, bars, and restaurants—except by special dispensation from a ranking crew member or an 'approved' invitation by a first-class passenger. On the other hand, 'upper' classes had unlimited access to 'lower' class areas.

The exception was the Promenade, an area of democratic congress where folk of all classes would mix without regard to their status; though, of course, everybody made sure that they knew who was what.

Despite all this, the distinction between 'upper' and 'lower' classes aboard this ship really was one between the very rich and the merely well-off: even the most menial berth aboard the *Lister Diamond* cost more than an equivalent on even the most luxurious of combi-transporters. However, traveling on this vessel also provided a greater degree of luxury—and sheer living space—than any combi-trans could ever hope to provide.

Jack's head was still reeling from the size of the Promenade. Things got worse as their guide—a certain Kofaba M'bili, whose pale skin stood in stark contrast to the ethnic origin of his name—took them to their cabin.

"You could find your own way without any problem, of course," he said. He pointed at a square pad at a wall next to him. Jack and Claury had noticed these things all over the ship.

"These identify you by finger or voice print," Kofaba told them. "On request, they will provide you with the most efficient route from your current position to your cabin, or any place you care to go to. They also act as general purpose communication devices throughout the

ship. We discourage the use of UnIfacs for this purpose, since the intercom is much more reliable.”

And traceable, Jack thought.

The cabin took their breath away. All the crew quarters of the Daniel Lewis taken together would have filled up less space than this one room with its walk-in wardrobe and adjacent bathroom. Their guide declined a gratuity and left them to their own devices.

Jack closed the door.

“Wow!” said Claury. “Do you believe this?” She walked over to the porthole, a flat rectangle about a meter wide and half a meter tall. “Look at this view!”

Jack joined her. As it happened, their window provided a good angle on the shuttle dock where the vessel that had brought them to the station was detaching, while another was already waiting to dock. “I’d certainly hope so,” he said dryly. “Nineteen thousand EUs from Herrykairn to Earth.”

She made a little sound of disbelief. “You’re joking.”

Jack shrugged. “Nope. But don’t worry about it. It’s only about half of my fee for a four-week trip.”

She stared at him. “You guys do rake it in, don’t you?”

“With bonuses it can come even higher. Depends on the contract of course.”

“Wow!” She turned from the window and looked around the room. Her eyes fell on the bed. Jack followed her gaze and grinned.

“One of the nice things about this low gravity stuff is that you don’t really need a bed,” he told her.

“Sir!” she considered him with mock severity. “Are you suggesting...”

“I certainly am.”

“Indeed!”

“Actually,” Jack said and looked around thoughtfully. “This being a first-class cabin with no frills spared...” He considered the walls, reached out, and touched one. It felt soft and resilient. Glancing around he noticed the absence of sharp edges and pointed corners, and the way the covers were wrapped around the bed.

He grinned broadly.

“What are you looking at me like that for?” Claury asked, her eyes laughing.

Jack came up to her and put his arms around her waist. “Gravity to one percent normal,” he said loudly.

Claury squealed as he pushed himself, and her as well, off the floor, and both started to float toward the ceiling.

“Thought so,” he whispered in her ear. “Zero gravity,” he said louder and they continued floating upward until they bumped into the ceiling, and bounced off to begin a slow, languorous tumble through the room.

“Now we can both be on top together.”

Claury pulled his face to hers and kissed him fiercely. In the process they completely lost all sense of up and down.

“But how do we get our clothes off?” she whispered. She let go of him, only grab him again as she started floating away.

He laughed and pulled them closer together.

“Let me show you.”

“Please prepare for departure,” a carefully neutral voice said. *“This ship will begin maneuvers in exactly one half-hour. All passengers must be strapped into an emergency web for the undocking procedure.”*

“Damn!” Claury nibbled on Jack’s ear. “How about we have a shower and pick up where we left off later?”

Jack laughed. “One tenth normal,” he said and they began to drift ‘down’ and, by a fortuitous contrivance, landed on the bed, albeit in a bit of an awkward tangle. It was all right to be locked together like that in zero-G but not under any other circumstances. Claury laughed and unwrapped her legs from around Jack’s waist.

“Half normal,” she said. The return of weight was an eerie sensation.

Still laughing they rolled off the bed and made their way into the shower.

“We’ll need some clothes,” she said glancing at the crumpled mess on the floor and the bed.

“Later.”

“Undocking procedure commencing.”

Jack and Claury sat, strapped in emergency webbing, in a pair swiveling seats attached to the wall just beside viewport in such a manner that the occupants could choose to face the spectacle outside. It occurred to Jack that the designers had thought of just about everything. What, after all, is the point of having a great view if you can’t enjoy it?

The artificial gravity almost completely masked the acceleration as the ship pulled away from the station. From their point of view it was as if the station simply coasted away. It continued to do so at an increasing rate until it had shrunk to a tiny dot against the backdrop of Herrykairn’s oceans and landmasses. Presently the

planet itself drifted off to one side and out of their field of view, to be replaced by the sharp pinpoints of the stars.

"I've never seen it like that," Claury breathed, her gaze fixed on the outside view. "On all those ships there's never been a view like this."

Jack nodded. "Same for us Pilots, really. Viewports are a dangerous luxury. They weaken the integrity of the hull and require additional reinforcing structures. Besides, the visual effects associated with a ship in A-space have been known to drive people crazy. That's why even Pilots don't see the world through viewports but screens."

"Undocking procedure terminated. Emergency webbings may now be released."

Claury tore her attention away from the viewport. They undid their webs and caused the chairs to retract into the walls.

"What now?" Claury asked, eyeing the bed.

Jack laughed. "Are you serious?"

She turned to look at him. Her face displayed a number of rapidly shifting, conflicting emotions.

"I'm scared."

"Of what?"

Her hands dropped from his face. She turned and made a gesture encompassing the cabin. "That all this is going to end," she said sadly. "That it's all going to be taken away again." She looked at him. "Do you know what I mean? Don't you feel like that?"

"A bit." He took her hands. "Remember what your dad told you," he said. "Sometimes it happens."

She gave him a wry grin and shook her head, "Still the same old Jack," she muttered. "Always assuming the best."

"This time I'm right."

"You're incorrigible."

He kissed her on the cheek. "Of course I am. And you love me for it."

Claury sighed. "I always have."

"I know," he said. "And I love you, Claurinda Finisterre. And now that we've got that straight, I suggest we get on with our lives and stop fretting over imponderables. Besides, wasn't it you who decided never to allow herself to be driven into despair?"

"I had nothing to lose then."

"So?"

"You're incorrigible."

"You already said that."

"Repeatedly."

He kissed her on the mouth, to which she responded with enthusiasm. When they separated he hooked an arm under hers. "Time to shop," he told her. "And then, when we get back..."

"Jack?"

The voice was familiar: like it might belong to Cale Perdek. Jack put down his cup of coffee. He took his cue from the direction of Claury's gaze and turned around.

It *was* Cale Perdek. Wiry, black, bald, and grinning from ear to ear. His Pilot's uniform was crisp and creaseless.

Jack got up from his seat and held out a hand which Cale enfolded in his own.

"Jack, you old rascal! It's good to see you!"

Jack laughed and shook the hand. "And you! What're you doing here?"

Cale drew himself up. "I work here," he grinned.

Jack nodded. "Good going! Congratulations. Since when?"

"Just a few months."

Cale grinned and clapped Jack's shoulders. "It's great to see you!" He looked at Claury. "And who's this?"

Jack introduced Claury. Cale's eyes went round. "*That* Claury? He finally found you? I don't believe it! Do you know how long this guy's been looking for you? Do you know what 'obsessive' means?" He shook his head. "Unbelievable!"

Jack motioned at a chair. "Have you got some time?"

"Sure! My off-shift."

Cale sat down and took in Jack's outfit. "I almost didn't recognize you! You're not wearing the uniform and all that. Are you changing professions or something?"

Jack nodded. "Something like that."

Cale frowned. "Why? You're one of the best."

Jack smiled cynically. "Thanks, but it seems you're one of the few who think so," he declared.

Cale shook his head. "Not really. The Register says otherwise. Last time I checked you'd pushed Postas Held out of tenth place. At that pace you'll be back in the top three within the year."

"Register positions don't help much if employers shit themselves when they look at your decision-making processes." Jack looked at Claury. "The 'Register' contains the Guild's current evaluation of a Pilot's standing,

relative to his peers. My index was set back to zero when the tribunal found me partially responsible for the loss of the *Berenice*.”

Cale nodded. “Yeah, and look where he is now!” he said to Claury. “Right up there again!” To Jack: “And you want out?”

Jack shrugged. “I’ve had enough. Too much of it. Too much shit from the companies. The ones I’d like to work for won’t even look in my direction. They’re too scared that I’ll trash another multi-billion EU investment.”

“What’re you going to do?”

Jack shrugged. “Don’t know yet,” he said vaguely. “Right now we’re heading back for Earth. We’ll see after that.”

Cale sighed. “Damn shame, if you ask me.”

Jack waved it aside. “Nice of you to say so, but that’s the way it is.” He looked at Claury. “Cale’s one of the good guys. One of the few who didn’t shun me after the *Berenice* incident. And he happens to be one of the few who knows my new face—if for no other reason that he came and visited me in hospital. The only one actually...”

He had a sudden idea—but immediately thought of Polkad Mobil and decided that it wasn’t so good after all. He wasn’t going to drag someone else into this mess. Especially not Cale.

“How’s your career doing?” he asked his friend.

Cale grinned. “Good. When they’re taking you on here it’s got to mean that you’re on your way up.”

Jack nodded. “Quite a place,” he agreed.

“Isn’t it ever!” Cale agreed. “Did you know this thing’s got the largest mobile reactor ever built? Even bigger than the *Berenice*. And those linacs, short as they are, still can get us to critical velocity within ten hours. They never do, mind you; but it’s possible.”

Jack noticed that Claury was listening with increasing incomprehension. He chuckled. “Boys-and-toys stuff,” he told her with a wink. “The mine-is-bigger-than-yours syndrome expanded to a grotesque scale.”

Cale laughed. “That’s one way of looking at it.”

“How’s the reactor behaving?” Jack asked.

Cale shrugged. “Seems all right. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, you know me,” Jack said vaguely. “Still paranoid.”

Cale gave him a queer look. “Jack!”

“Well, it’s a big reactor. You know, the probability of cusping going up exponentially with the volume.

Stuff like that. I was just wondering how the regcomp is coping.”

“Seems fine,” Cale declared. “A few glitches here and here, but that’s to be expected.”

Jack gave him a quick look. “What kinds of glitches?”

“Nothing serious,” Cale said easily. “The usual. Sporadic instabilities. Slips into the cusp, but then it regulates itself back out of it. Nothing to worry about. The regcomp handles it all by itself. Doesn’t even generate reports for the trivial stuff anymore. If parameters exceed their limits it does, but they’re set pretty broadly.”

“By who?”

“The big muckamucks in engineering.” Cale shrugged. “There’s nothing to worry about, I tell you. This reactor’s been up and on-line for over a year without serious complications.”

“So was the *Berenice*’s. For several years, I believe.” He shrugged with a carelessness he didn’t feel. “Still, if you say it’s all right: who am I to question it? Just remember that any two spaced closer than, say, a minute, are critical, no matter *what* your parameters are set to.”

Cale frowned. “Says who?”

“I do. It’s a sure-fire indication that the regcomp isn’t coping.”

“Two a minute? You’ve got to be kidding! We’re talking about a microsecond response time!”

Jack nodded. “Exactly. Which is why the *Berenice* is no more.”

“Meaning?” Cale leaned forward and looked closely at his friend.

Jack shook his head. “Nobody listens to Jack.” He grimaced. “I told the tribunal the same thing. Did they listen? Ha! They didn’t even read my report—not if their questions were anything to go by.”

Cale grimaced. “Look, Jack, I know you...”

Jack made a placating gesture. “It’s all right, Cale. Don’t worry about it. I mean, it’s not likely to happen—but just remember what I said. It won’t hurt to keep an eye on it.”

Cale shrugged. “All right. Why not? I’ll tell the others. And the engineers.”

Jack laughed. “Just don’t tell them why! I don’t think they’d like to know this tidbit originated with Jack Corwin.”

Cale nodded thoughtfully. He looked troubled. "I guess you're right. Well, I don't care what they think. I'm not going to throw it in their faces, but I'll keep an eye on it."

Jack smiled. "Thanks." He patted Cale's shoulder. "The chance is remote. I've calculated the risk factor once. It worked out to some pretty good odds against it happening."

Cale pursed his lips. "Yeah, but when you're talking about plasma cusping, you know what your stats are worth." He stood up. "Look, I'll let you two get on with becoming familiar with everything. Maybe we can get together for dinner soon?"

"That would be lovely," Claury told him, and Jack saw in Cale's face that she had made another conquest. Claury was like that. When she had decided that she wanted a slave she generally had no problem in getting one.

"We're in B-124," Jack told Cale.

"Oh, I'll find you," Cale said easily. "There's no way anybody can not be found around here."

That was the problem! How long would it take Cale to ascertain that nobody by the name of Jack Corwin was on board?

Jack thought fast and decided on the most straightforward course. "Maybe not as easy as you think," he told his friend. "I'm not here as myself—if you know what I mean."

Cale gave him a puzzled look. "Why not?"

Jack shrugged. "Privacy. I'm trying to put things behind me. They remodeled my face. I thought I might complete the process."

Cale shook his head. "Man, you're serious about getting out!"

"Yeah."

"Must have cost you a packet!"

"It didn't come cheap," Jack agreed. "And I had help..."

Cale, still bemused, nodded pensively. "Hmmff. Well, who am I looking for?"

"Lothar Kolyad." Jack spelled the name.

"Fair enough." Cale gave Claury a little bow. "I'll see you two around, huh?"

He shook their hands and departed, disappearing in the crowds milling around this level of the Promenade.

Claury looked after him. "He seems like a nice fellow," she said.

"He is," Jack agreed. "One of the few who didn't shun me when it all came down."

She put a hand on his. "I'm glad you weren't alone," she said softly.

Jack shook his head. "When we needed each other we were both alone," he said.

Claury squeezed his hand but said nothing. For a while they sat in silence watching the activity around them.

"What's 'cusping'?" Claury asked.

"Techno-speak for something going wrong so badly that it can't be fixed," Jack told her.

She looked at him like she wanted to know more.

"In this case we're talking about fusion reactors of course; about the current 'state' of the reaction in the compression chamber. The reaction is controlled by the regcomp, whose purpose it is to keep it within the required tolerances. It does that by adjusting the magnetic and gravitational fields in the chamber, and injecting new reaction materials when necessary.

"Unfortunately, reactions on such a small scale—and a 'small scale' it is when you compare it to what happens in the interior of a star!—are always unstable, and the regcomp tends to have its hands full to keep them in line. In order to make the job easier it attempts to compute the likely future states of the reaction, and thereby anticipate what's going to happen; rather than waiting for it.

"A teacher of mine once likened the state of the reaction in a fusion chamber to the situation of a metal sphere rolling along a smooth surface in a hilly landscape. The regcomp attempts to adjust the landscape so that the sphere keeps rolling in the desired direction.

"Problem is that the landscape contain a lot of holes. If the sphere falls into any of those the reaction will either die instantly, or, more likely, go out of control: a sedate fusion reaction becomes an uncontrollable explosion. That's a 'cusp'.

"The regcomp tries to look ahead, spot the holes, and adjust the profile of the landscape so the sphere rolls around them. In terms of real time, 'looking ahead' means milliseconds if you're lucky, and microseconds if you're not. And if you're really unlucky then it won't spot them at all and the sphere just drops down the hole and then *boom!*"

"In other words, we're sitting on a live bomb," Claury said tonelessly.

Jack nodded. "A carefully controlled bomb. And the complexity of the regcomp's task grows exponentially with the size of the reactor chamber; which is why decreasing reactor size, while it also drastically decreases the efficiency of the reaction, makes for much—much!—safer technology. Of course, on board a ship you want maximum efficiency even more than on planet-based systems, and so the reactors tend to be on the large—and unsafe—side."

"And on the *Berenice* it all went wrong?"

Jack nodded. "Problem is that some parts of that landscape have more holes than others—and the regcomp is unable to predict that in advance. So it might actually guide the reaction into a part of the landscape where there are so many holes that there's no way it can possibly deal with them all, and no hope of ever finding a way out. The safest solution is to vent the plasma; but in some situations even that may not help, but rather accelerate the catastrophe."

"There are danger signs. What I told Cale—about the less-than-a-minute intervals—that was something I'd figured out long before the reactor on the *Berenice* went critical. But would they listen? No way. That was just speculation as far as they were concerned."

"It always happened when reactor load changed significantly: like when the *Berenice* started a major acceleration cycle; or just before we entered A-space; or right after we came out of it."

"I knew the thing was going to go critical that time. I told them to vent, but they wouldn't. They procrastinated until it was too late. In the end I had to put my neck on the line and use my override authority to force them to evacuate the ship. Which they did—screaming bloody murder and ruination all the way. A couple of my co-pilots backed me up, but that was all. Everybody else was just too shit-scared of the company."

"At that point I got carried away. Well, greedy actually. Thinking of the salvage fee; my reputation; shit like that. Besides, I was arrogant enough to believe I could salvage anything."

"I persuaded Lee Won to stick around. My idea was simple. We'd use the navcomp, interfacing with us intuitively, to help the regcomp figure a way out of the dangerous landscape. The way I saw it, the situation wasn't all that different from finding your way through A-space. You've got to *feel* your way out of this."

"I was sure it could be done. We were going to push the reaction to a state where the plasma could be safely vented. That would have nicely solved the problem."

"We probably would have succeeded—if luck hadn't decided to look the other way. The regcomp missed a prediction; the ball rolled into one of the holes; the reaction went ballistic. The bulk of the ship protected us against the worst. Lee Won got fried—and I don't think they had much hope for me either."

"But what you did... You should have been a hero!" Claury exclaimed.

Jack grinned cynically. "I was. For a few days anyway. The man who saved a thousand lives and put his own on the line. That's until they decided to re-write history and the facts."

"Who?"

Jack smiled cynically. "The company reps on the tribunal. The whole thing was their fault, and they went right into spin-control mode. After all, they'd been endangering lives by using unsafe technology—whose main purpose is to wring the last bit of profit out of the ships. To replace one of those large reactors would have taken four smaller ones—which would have cost significantly more and greatly reduced the energy-to-reactor-mass ratio. Which means the *Berenice*—and the *Lister Diamond* for that matter—would end up much less cost-effective."

"So, they re-wrote the truth. Blamed the ultimate explosion on Lee Won and me: for 'inappropriate interference' with the regcomp's standard algorithms. Especially on me, of course; mainly because I was still alive, and because I was the one who'd used my override authority; which the companies consider a pain in the butt anyway, but which the Guild has, so far, been able to maintain despite all opposition."

"But somebody must have listened!"

"I suppose so. But I couldn't say anything. When the hearing was over I was offered a deal: don't stir shit and you can get back into the game. Start making trouble and we'll crucify you."

Claury stared at him aghast. "That's terrible!"

Jack shrugged. He reached over and ran a finger along her cheek. "It's no worse than what they've done to you."

Claury exhaled and made a grimace. "Bastards," she said lowly.

"The way of the world," Jack noted dryly.

"And it means," she said, "that right now we're sitting in a ship that could blow up any moment!"

Jack made a negligent gesture. "True. But they've added safety features. The reactor in this ship can be jettisoned as a unit. Which means no more need to vent when it all goes critical. Instead you dispose of the whole reactor. There's also a small secondary reactor which can, I believe, handle basic life support in case the big one goes. But, of course, the ship would drift helplessly in space because navigation controls would be non-existent. And if that happened in transit and far away from an inhabited system, it would also mean that rescue might never come.

"Still, it's a major step in safety—even though it's all useless if those who run the ship don't recognize the danger signs."

Jack looked at his coffee, which had gone cold while he'd been talking, and the bags of purchases arranged around their seats. "I think we'd better get these into our cabin."

Claury's eyes twinkled. He could see that the suggestion had temporarily diverted her thoughts into more cheerful directions.

"Quite," she said, "There's so much we have to do!"

He laughed. "You have a one-track mind!"

She stuck out her tongue.

"How are we going to find these people?" Claury asked. She was kneeling on the bed behind Jack and looking over his shoulder at the screen of his UnIfac, which displayed a list of names and associated details.

Klovis Renfield. Male. 58. Field-generator engineer. Single. Origin: Earth.

Claire Zuniga. Female. 32. GenSpac Sales Rep. Single. Origin: Earth.

Said Khatabi. Male. 47. Artist. Single. Origin: Fargo 5;

Three people with whom Jerad Arundel had had contact during their stay on Herrykairn. There might be more, of course, but that was speculation. These three were definite candidates. Any one or all of them might carry the message.

Jack had looked at each of the faces on the UnIfac's screen and asked the same question. *Are you the one?*

But, this time anyway, there had been nothing. He had hoped that his sense would tell him something, but it appeared that he needed more. A personal contact

maybe. A few words. A few more clues. Whatever it was that intuited needed to make decisions.

"I don't think finding them is going to be that much of a problem," Jack told her. "But what are we going to do once we've identified the courier? Or couriers? We can't just walk up to them and demand that they hand over the message!"

"Which they might carry in their heads anyway," she added.

"Quite."

Claury leaned her chin on his shoulder and her cheek against his. "First things first, huh?"

Jack nodded. "Let's find these people. We'll jump off all those bridges when we get to them."

He put down the UnIfac and looked around their somewhat untidy cabin. Shopping bags lay strewn around the floor where they had dropped them in their haste to, as Claury put it, 'get into each other's pants'.

"Let's get dressed. We'd better make a start on this. Right now it looks like we have a lot of time, but I have a funny feeling that's illusion."

He felt her nod. "Hmmm."

He knew how she felt. There was a conceptual abyss between what had been happening between them during the last hour or so and what they had to do 'out there'. A kind of existential discontinuity almost.

"Hmmm?" he said. "That's an agreement, I suppose?"

"Hmmm." She nibbled on his ear and lifted her head off his shoulders, before bouncing herself off the bed and retrieving the bags from around the room.

Some considerable time later she pronounced herself ready to depart. Jack looked at her and wondered how it could possibly have taken so long to put on the sleek gray-and-green overall she now wore.

Some things, he said to himself, were not his to know. At the same time he noticed that he was probably more at ease than he had been for as long as he could easily remember back. He tried to trace the feeling back to its source, but failed. In the end he gave up, promising himself that he would come back to it some time, when he was in a better disposition to comprehend what the hell was going on.

While Claury was getting dressed he busied himself with one of the com outlets in their room. Locating their three quarries was even simpler than he had hoped. Klovis Renfield, Claire Zuniga, and Said Khatabi were all first-class passengers whose cabin numbers

were accessible to any other first-class passenger. Obviously nobody had considered that there might be any but the most innocuous of reasons why anybody from first class might desire this kind of information.

Which was fine with Jack; in this instance anyway. He added the cabin numbers and their locations to the suspect-database in his UnIfac.

Claury came over just as he finished. "Next step?"

"We can hardly knock on their doors are invite ourselves in," he noted dryly. "I'm open to suggestions."

"The whole thing's impossible," Claury declared. "Even if we knew... I mean, short of killing them..."

"Let's just start at the beginning. Besides, I'm hungry."

Jack took her hand and they left their cabin. Claury started heading toward the descensor shaft, but Jack tugged on her sleeve and pointed in the opposite direction.

"I want to have a look at something." She followed him to the end of the corridor, which was only a few steps away. It ended in a door marked 'Pod G145'. In the center of the door was a levered handle, under a transparent plate, set in a red, circular frame. Imprinted on the plate was a symbol depicting a fist smashing it. Jack bent down and read the notice underneath the number.

"What are you doing?"

He straightened. "Just making sure. On the *Berenice* the life-pods had to be centrally released for use. Sheer paranoia and stupidity. As if someone was just going to jump into one and take off. It meant that almost half of them were still inaccessible when they were needed, since the release signal didn't come through because of some cock-up in the central processor.

"I'm relieved to see that they're not doing this here. Every now and then sanity seems to prevail."

Jack checked his time-piece. Six hours had passed since the *Lister Diamond* had detached itself from the station. Maybe another five or six until it would enter A-space. As Jack knew from his previous experience, there was a calendar of social functions, carefully arranged to distract the passengers from the inevitable boredom that comes with being cooped up inside a metal shell for protracted periods. No matter how luxurious and fancy; it was still a prison of sorts, and people's attention had to be diverted from that fact. That was part of what they paid their exorbitant fares for.

Particularly stressful situations had been anticipated and the calendar scheduled accordingly. The time of entry into A-space happened to coincide with the early 'evening', ship time. A suitable time for the ship's social director to arrange for a general get-together with a dance and on-stage entertainment. Everybody was going to be distracted, and by the time the affair was over the ship would be coasting through the incomprehensible void of A-space.

These functions were known as 'Stress Minimization Activities'; abbreviated: 'SMA'.

"Are we going to go to these things?" Claury asked him.

Jack nodded. "I hate them, but that's where you meet people. It's a socially acceptable way to get to know people. With a bit of luck we'll run into our candidates there. Then we'll see what we see."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I'll see if my 'sense' tells me anything."

"And then what?"

Jack shrugged. "We'll improvise."

Claury looked around herself. The Promenade was crowded, as always. "And until then?"

"We'll look around the ship. As first-class passengers we have the run of most of it. Then we'll have some dinner; and then, I suppose, it'll be time for the social events to kick in."



Chapter 13

As it turned out there were two first-class functions; held in halls on different levels off the Promenade.

"Eeny-meeny-miny-mo," Jack went, pointing his fingers alternately at one level and then another.

"Is that your way of making complicated decisions?" Claury chuckled.

Jack grinned at her. "Works just fine. Not just with intuitions."

"Which one is it going to be?"

He pointed. "The 'masque-parade,'" he said. Claury groaned. "Do you know how much I hate these things?"

"I can imagine."

"Imagine more!"

"Come on," he laughed and dragged her toward the ascensor shaft.

"I'm not sure I'm dressed for this!"

"You have no idea *what* you're supposed to be dressed for."

When they got to the hall they found that the 'masque-parade' was exactly what is said, and that it involved everybody who wanted to enter the room.

"You didn't read the whole blurb, did you?" Claury asked from the side of her mouth when one of the attendants at the door displayed a range of masks from which they were to choose one to wear.

"I guess not," Jack muttered.

"Well, what're we going to do?"

"We go in, of course."

"That's going to do a lot of good."

Jack shrugged and grinned at the attendant, who wore the standard GenSpac support-crew uniform. "These masks are meant to come off eventually?"

The attendant, a gaunt male of indeterminate age, with short-cropped, ornately colored hair and watery blue eyes, nodded. "After the parade."

"Parade?" Claury echoed.

"A presentation to allow judging of the costumes. Before the judging the masks are required attire. Physical assets, especially facial ones, are to be de-emphasized as much as possible."

"It's a fashion parade, isn't it?" Claury said darkly.

"In a manner of speaking. It is intended as a celebration of the way in which individuals express themselves through the medium of the garments they wear.

"There are prizes: for the most ornate; the most alluring; the most austere; the most sexually suggestive; the most trans-sexually suggestive; the most deceptive; the blandest; the ugliest; the least noticeable; the most garish. And there are more categories."

"Everybody plays?" Jack asked.

"By entering you consent to participation. Here are your code-numbers." The attendant waited, making sure that Jack and Claury affixed the tabs to their garments.

"Who selects the winners?"

"Certain individuals will circulate among the attendees and select those to be called to the stage. The final selection will be by volume of applause."

Jack hesitated. He considered himself and Claury, and peered into the melee of people inside the hall. It was unlikely that they would be singled out for attention.

He shrugged. "Might as well."

Claury picked a mask: a black affair exhibiting the essential features of a feline visage. She put it on. Her eyes glittered through the slits, and Jack saw her mouth twitch in wry amusement through the lower opening. The attendant adjusted the lastic.

Jack pondered the remaining selection of masks. No two were exactly the same, though there were certain themes and similarities. The choice of his mask was irrelevant, of course, but he hesitated nonetheless. Finally he selected a representation of a slant-eyed human face, which was half red and half white. When the attendant had affixed it to him he felt self-conscious and uncomfortable.

"Why am I doing this?" he muttered to Claury as they drifted into the main hall and mingled with the growing crowd.

"I don't know!" she told him.

But Jack knew; suddenly and unbidden: because his sense had told him that at least one of their quarries was here.

How to locate him—or her?

Just keep walking, he told himself. *Keep looking at the masks.*

Claury had seen through *his* mask. So...

"I told you I wasn't dressed for this!" Claury hissed as they immersed themselves into the masked crowd. Around them a bewildering array of garments whose only common denominator was that no two were even remotely the same. It was an affair for which the passengers had obviously been amply prepared. Accordingly, many of them had evidently spent some significant time and effort—or just money—on procuring themselves outfits that ranged across the spectrum of the conceivable; and, Jack thought, occasionally beyond that. He deliberately averted his gaze from some of the more outrageous creations, some of which must surely have been designed to compete for the 'most grotesque' award. Or maybe there was a category for 'most revolting'. If there wasn't there should have been.

The things people did to avoid becoming subject to boredom...

The two new additions on the other hand found themselves completely out of place. That their purpose for being here was not amusement only added to the sensation of displacement and unreality.

"Why?" Jack asked her. "Were you intending on competing?"

"Of course not!"

"Then what's the problem?"

She elbowed him in his side.

"Ouch!" He was glad that his mask hid his grin.

They approached the bar at the far end of the room and were offered drinks. "No alcohol," Jack told Claury. They chose fruit cocktails and wandered off again, sipping through the straws provided.

"What now?" Claury asked.

"We circulate. I need to see as many people as possible."

A demon mask with a hooked warty nose, wrinkled, red-and-brown features and wearing a black-and-white domino stopped before them, hesitated as if wanting to say something, then drew away again as suddenly as he had appeared.

"What was that all about?" Jack muttered.

"Maybe he thought he recognized us?"

"Hmmff."

They were accosted by a couple in bright red capes, falling from their shoulders right down to their ankles. Their feet were bare and, as the capes swung open on movement, Jack noticed that underneath the capes the wearers were completely naked. The woman's face was hidden behind a polyp-head with waving tentacles. The man's behind what might have been a simulacrum of an ox-beast from Tern.

There was a polite exchange of greetings between total strangers, some excruciatingly inconsequential talk, and, after both parties had decided that a definite social mismatch existed, an equally polite parting.

Thereafter Jack and Claury avoided stopping for fear of repeating the event. Instead they kept on moving around slowly, holding onto each other with one hand and their drink with the other.

On the stage a band began to play dancing tunes, replacing the music from the speakers. The crowd separated out into those who chose to gyrate around the floor and those who preferred to converse or just watch.

Jack and Claury continued their circulating, alternating between the dance floor and the periphery.

About an hour into the event, while dancing at close quarters, Jack looked up and into the grotesque visage of a fly-mask. A thousand faceted eyes stared back at him, their mirrored surfaces hiding the face behind. A hairy tube hung down from the mask, drooping loosely over the wearer's chest. He—because a 'he' it was—wore a skin-tight, yellow-black striped garment, suggesting an enormous wasp.

Jack suffered a momentary sensation of dislocation as his sense told him that here was not only one of their quarries, but that he was indeed a courier. He contrived to guide Claury away from the wasp and its partner, a female gypsy with a mask suggesting the distorted visage of a horned Palenquian fire-demon.

Who was it? Klovis Renfield, the engineer? Or Said Khatabi, the artist. Something in the flamboyant nature of the garment suggested the artist; but Jack was unconvinced. Just because someone spent his time tinkering with technology, it didn't necessarily follow that his fantasies could not be as outré as those of any artist.

There was only one way to find out: they would to wait for the unmasking.

Jack communicated his thoughts to Claury, who agreed. They continued to circulate in the hope of spotting another of their quarries, but found themselves thwarted. After almost two hours of this Claury excused herself.

"Girl's got to go where a girl's got to go. Don't leave."

"Would I?"

"I hope not!" she gave his arm an affectionate squeeze and disappeared in the crowd. Jack was left to his own devices.

His inspection of the other guests was interrupted when a petite figure appeared at his right hand. A tree, if the costume was anything to go by; a fabric of some moulded fiber that imitated the texture of bark and complemented this with surprisingly life-like colors and—Jack sniffed discreetly—a matching scent. Pine needles and bark. Forest floors. A hood with a an integral mask covered the head, suggesting a forest spirit. A dryad, maybe, or a wraith. The garment itself fit snugly enough to give away the sex of the wearer.

"All alone and sad?" The voice was pleasantly husky, without stridency.

Jack shook his head. "Neither alone nor sad," he told the tree.

"What a pity," she said. "Still, you're alone right now. Care to dance?"

There was something about her that he couldn't put his finger on. As if he knew her from somewhere. As if...

Jack shook his head. "Forgive me, but I don't want to confuse my companion when she returns. It's all too easy to get lost in this melee."

The shoulders under the costume shrugged. "Even more of a pity," she said. "But you won't mind talking, will you?..."

They were still making chit-chat when Claury returned. Jack saw her hesitate as she approached. She cocked her head and slowed. Jack nodded almost imperceptibly and she closed the gap between them. Jack introduced the women. "Ainé, this is Teara. Teara, Ainé."

Teara stretched out a hand. "Nice to meet you. And now I must go." She touched Jack's sleeve and disappeared into the crowd.

Claury stared after her. "What was that all about?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Don't know. Nothing, I think. Just someone trying to find someone to talk to. I think she might have been hoping that you wouldn't come back."

"Oh."

Jack took Claury's arm. "Don't 'oh' me," he said into her ear.

"I'll 'oh' when I want to..." She stopped. "But more importantly... I've found her!"

"Found whom?"

"The woman! The one we're looking for."

"How? Where?"

"The masks do come off in front of a mirror!"

Of course...

"Where is she now?"

"Don't know. She left before I could follow. She's wearing one of those little-girl-in-a-fairy-tale costumes. With a red cap or hood. What's it called? Not 'Cinderella'..."

"Little Red Riding Hood."

"That's the one!"

"She's a Little Red Riding Hood?"

"Yes. With a pink and black human-face mask."

Jack discreetly scanned the people around him. "Not here. Let's go and find her."

"Ladies and Gentlemen..."

The band had stopped playing and the compère's voice echoed across the crowd.

"...and now the moment we've all been waiting for..."

The parade and prize-giving commenced.

It was the kind of excruciatingly painful affair that made Jack remember his days on the *Berenice* with other emotions but nostalgia. The affair proceeded along predictable lines. For each of the categories those pre-selected by anonymous judges were called onto the

stage by the number they had been issued at the entrance. Once all were assembled, the compère introduced their costumes one by one. The audience applauded with varying degrees of enthusiasm. A noise-level analyzer computed and displayed the winner-by-acclamation. Once the winner in a category was proclaimed all the participants unmasked and bowed to renewed applause, before leaving the stage again.

The categories attracting the most attention of course were those which promised to provide the most lurid and bizarre costumes.

The fly was a selected entry in the 'best animal representation' category. He didn't win. That honor went to a stout man whose costume was an uncannily lifelike representation of an Earth ape. When it was done the masks came off. The fly was Said Khatabi.

Good guess, Jack. Especially since he suddenly knew that the guy was also a Coralian. Fargo 5, my foot!

Claury knew it, too. He heard her sharp intake of breath.

"I bet you he's 'corps', too," he whispered in her ear.

Which meant he was dangerous: prepared for eventualities, and much more than just a messenger. He'd know who they were. He might even have orders that went far beyond mere delivery of a message. Jack didn't like it; not one bit.

'Understated elegance' was the next category. Numbers were called. A man in a frilly clown suit with a matching mask standing next to Claury glanced sideways at her. "That's you," he whispered.

"What?" Jack felt her tense.

"That was your number," the clown declared. "649."

Claury shook her head. "I don't think so," she said.

She nudged Jack. "Let's get out of here!" she hissed.

Jack looked past her at the clown whose mask was turned in their direction.

"Are you sure that's what they said?"

The mask nodded. "Quite."

"You better get up there," Jack whispered.

"Are you mad?"

"No—but we can't leave here now. I'm still looking for the woman."

"You can't do this to me!"

"Why not? Nothing wrong with 'understated elegance', is there? That's you in a nutshell, isn't it?" He kept his voice carefully neutral but Claury wasn't fooled.

"I'm going to get you for this!" she whispered hotly before detaching herself and making her way to the stage. Jack looked after her disappearing figure. The clown closed the gap between himself and Jack. "She didn't seem pleased!" he said conspiratorially.

Jack shrugged. "She'll be fine."

Claury didn't win anything either; though, as far as Jack was concerned, she should have. She was definitely better dressed—and better looking!—than the woman in the gray two-piece suit who took home the prize.

Was he biased? Of course, but Claury should still have won!

Presently she joined him again. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" he asked.

"You're going to pay for this," she muttered darkly.

"How?" he whispered into her ear.

"I'll think of something," she promised, but he heard the laughter in her voice. Presently she hooked an arm under his and together they watched the rest of the proceedings.

Little Red Riding Hood was a selection in the 'figures from myth and legend' category, but the winner was a man in a golden dragon costume. When the masks came off Jack attempted to reach out to Claire Zuniga to get a mental feel of her. He found a complete blank. Certainly no hint of a confirmation of his suspicions.

Which meant nothing. Only that they would have to establish some kind of a contact and...

Suddenly there was a faint, brief wrenching sensation in his gut. The *Lister Diamond* had made the transition.

Jack looked around and noticed that a lot of others had sensed the event as well. There was the briefest of hesitations before people recovered and went on with their lives and the ludicrous performance on the stage. Jack squeezed Claury's arm. "Let's go."

"Was that it?" she asked.

He nodded. "We're in A-space." He looked at his timepiece. "Cale's probably on duty now."

The lights flickered.

Jack froze and looked up at the light-bars around the ceiling and the periphery of the room. He reached up and wrenched his mask off. It felt like being born anew. Oddly exposed and yet free.

"Did you see that?"

Claury nodded.

"Reactor load just toggled from extreme to low," he told her. "The linacs are off-line. The ship's coasting."

"Are the lights supposed to flicker?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No—but that doesn't mean anything. It's nothing to do with the reactor itself. Just the regulators switching."

"Then why did you tense up?"

They dropped their masks and number tags into a bin at the exit. "Can't hide anything from you, can I?"

"Nope."

"Well, that's all right." He tightened his arm around her.

Claury laughed softly. "Are you going to tell me why you tensed up, or not?"

Jack shook his head ruefully. "Reflex I guess. Knee-jerk stuff. Nothing to worry about. Honestly."

She eyed him sideways. "Why am I not convinced?"

"Because you're a suspicious character."

They stopped on a protruding balcony from where they had a good view of the lower Promenade levels.

"And now?" she asked. "After this ordeal I don't really feel like any more socializing."

He nodded. "Neither do I."

"So, where are we?" she said. "We've definitely identified one. The other is uncertain. That about right?"

"That's about it," he agreed.

"Pretty good work for our first day, don't you think?"

She was right, of course. It was damn good work for one day. One out of three.

"Let's go home," he said.

When they arrived in their cabin they noticed that a shutter had slid across the viewport.

"I was wondering if they'd do that," Jack told Claury. "I guess they really haven't got a choice."

"I liked my view," Claury declared.

"Not this one," he assured her dryly. "The visual effects of looking out at A-space are quite indescribable, but they're almost universally unpleasant. At the very least they'll make you nauseous. At worst they'll leave you a raving psychotic."

Claury caused the door to slide close and stepped closer to him. "The time of the reckoning," she announced, "has arrived."

"What did I do?"

"You sent me up on that stage!"

"Oh, that..."

"Yes, 'that'..."

She did something to the seam of her overalls and they came apart in the middle, falling down to lie in a shapeless heap around her feet.

"Zero-G," she said loudly and reached for him.



Chapter 14

Jack couldn't sleep. Hard to say why; especially since he should be exhausted—like Claury who lay beside him on her belly, snoring softly, one arm decoratively draped across his chest. Well, he was exhausted, but his mind refused to budge and surrender to the body's demands.

Truth was of course, Jack knew very well what was bothering him. He had been through it all before. Several times. And especially on one particular occasion. The symptoms were all there. General unease and a permanent sensation of light nausea. Inability to sleep. A subliminal feeling of claustrophobic frustration.

Damn!

Carefully, so as not to wake her, he lifted Claury's arm off him and rolled himself off the bed. She muttered something unintelligible and twisted into a more comfortable position which ended up with her lying right across where he had lain only moments ago.

Jack caused the cabin light to be turned up just a few notches and watched her for a moment as she quieted down again and her breathing returned to regular and even.

Damn! Wasn't it enough that a bunch of murderous Coralians were after them? Why did everything have to be compounded by this crap? Was there some divine conspiracy against them? Why couldn't everything and everybody just leave them alone to get on with their lives?

In order not to wake Claury, Jack decided to forego voice-control and instead used a remote to activate the large view-plate on the wall. He muted the sound and flicked through the options until he'd located the information he wanted: a guide to the layout of the ship in general and the drive section in particular. He selected a technical overview and pondered what he saw. The main reactor, sitting at the 'bottom' end of the sphere that was the *Lister Diamond*, surrounded by the six linac tubes wrapped in their superconducting layers of coils.

Situated nearer to the center was the secondary reactor. Around the periphery a ring of twenty bays with shuttle craft, used for excursions and engineering purposes alike. The rest of the space was taken up by the energy conversion and storage, as well as the life-support systems; water and air recyclers and purifiers; emergency air storage.

He had to admit that the design appeared cogent. The main reactor was right against the outer hull. Still, if it went wrong, unless there was somebody who had the guts to decide to eject it, it would blow the ship and everybody in it to smithereens, no matter *where* it was located.

He'd have to talk to Cale.

Jack shook his head.

For what? Nobody would listen to him, no matter *what* he said. That's the way it had been when he was still a respectable member of a crew. Now he was an ex-Pilot with a shady history.

Besides, he might just be becoming hysterical and what he thought was his sense warning him of danger might just be nothing but unfounded paranoia.

Sure.

Jack turned off the view-plate and padded back to the bed. He looked down at Claury's soft contours, and he still felt her pressed against him, with her fragrance all around and her voice and her face... and he saw it all burned and wiped out of existence in one terrible, merciless moment of fire and molten metal.

He just couldn't allow that to happen.

Just couldn't.

But what was he going to do about it?

"Dim lights," he whispered to the walls, lay back on the bed, and wriggled himself closer to her.

"What's 'a matter?" she murmured in a half-sleep as she moved to accommodate him.

"Nothing," he whispered.

"Hmm..." She rolled onto her side. Her right arm reached over and draped itself across him again.

It felt good having her there.

What am I going to do?

A chime worked its way into Jack's dream and eventually dragged him out of it.

"What time is it?" Claury asked sleepily.

"Lights," Jack said. "Time?"

"It is nine hours and twenty one minutes, ship standard time."

"Time for breakfast," Jack told Claury.

"Sod breakfast," she replied. "I'm not ready for breakfast."

Jack remembered the chime. He turned his head and saw the message light blinking on the bedside console. The red one. Meaning someone was trying to reach them.

"Voxcom," he told the walls.

"Jack?"

"Cale?"

"Look, Jack, I've just come off duty. Can I talk to you before I go and catch a few winks? There's a couple of things I need to figure out."

"Now?"

"Yeah, that'd be good."

Claury groaned. Jack waved her to silence. He was now fully awake.

"Where?"

"Cathay's Café. Promenade. Level three."

"I'll be there. Give me a few minutes."

"No problem."

Claury lifted herself up on one elbow and looked down at Jack. "Why do I get the feeling that the word 'relaxation' is not in your vocabulary?"

He pulled her down to him and kissed her. "What word was that?"

He let her go and swung himself off the bed. She did the same on the other side.

"You coming?" he asked her.

"Of course," she said.

He wished she wasn't, because he didn't want to worry her with matters she couldn't do a damn thing about anyway. But, of course, he couldn't tell her that. Besides, it wouldn't do any good.

Jack saw Cale's face when he spotted Claury and his insides went cold. Cale didn't want her there either—and the only reason for that had to be that whatever he wanted to discuss was going to be unpleasant.

Cale's pleasant smile hid his feelings. He got up when they approached. A gentleman of the old style; born and reared on Bayiou where people still believed in that kind of thing.

Their table was near the rim of a balcony on level three, affording a panoramic view of the lower levels. A hostess materialized at their side. Jack leaned forward and inhaled the aroma of Cale's coffee.

"Good?"

Cale nodded.

Jack looked at Claury.

She nodded. "Sounds good to me. And toast."

"Coffee and toast for two," Jack said. The hostess went off to attend to their order.

Jack looked at Cale. "Had a good shift?"

Cale wagged his head. "'Interesting' is the operative term." He flicked a glance at Claury. Her attention was momentarily diverted by something outside Jack's range of vision he didn't notice.

Jack shrugged at Cale's unasked question. "Tell it as it is," he said.

Claury's attention whisked back to them. She looked from one man to the other and frowned. Her eyes widened a fraction. "Something's up!"

Cale nodded reluctantly. "You could say that." He detached a UnIfac from his belt and placed in on the table. "What you told me yesterday," he said to Jack. "Could you be more specific?"

"Like what?"

"Any patterns I should be looking for?"

Jack stared at Cale. "Are you telling me this has been going on for long enough to allow you to discern *patterns*?" From the periphery of his vision he saw Claury lean forward.

Cale nodded. "Yes—if you go into the records and dig a level or two below the threshold they've set for event-reporting."

"Shit!"

"What am I looking for, Jack?"

Jack shrugged. "Needless to say everything I have is what I remember. They put the actual records under lock."

"Tell me what you remember."

The hostess came back and deposited their order on the table: crisp slices of warm, buttered toast; mugs of aromatic black coffee.

Jack waited until the hostess had gone. He took a sip of the black brew and put the mug down.

"To begin with you're looking for emergency avoidance actions spaced closer than a minute together. These could be isolated incidents, of course. So you're looking for periodic repeats."

"What kinds of periods?"

Jack shrugged. "A couple of hours maybe. If they come that close together it's the first sign that you're in

trouble. By that time the system's in a pretty deep valley.

"Next you get occasional dropouts. Reaction discontinuities. That's the regcomp trying to run the system over a pretty steep peak, but not succeeding. Almost every time it just slips back into the dip and starts rolling around in there again.

"I've done the analysis and run the models. The critical-state valleys are always surrounded by a larger number of insurmountable peaks than the safe ones."

He looked at Cale's face which had lost some of its healthy brown.

"At this point the regcomp has generally adapted to the new circumstances and adjusted its internal parameters. Which means the reported near-misses suddenly drop off and everything looks normal for a while. Until the next load-toggle that is. Then the whole pattern repeats; only this time the intervals are anything between one and five percent shorter than before.

"And so it goes—possibly for months and even years. Depends on the number of load-toggles. Each pushes the system a bit further into the critical region. The whole thing is so subtle that the regcomp never notices that the reactor already has slipped into a critical state. Especially since its performance index goes up because it's got more near-misses and therefore more stats to beef up the index."

"Shit!"

"It's happening, isn't it?"

Cale shook his head. He picked up the UnIfac and pressed keys on the control pad. He held it so Jack could see it. The high-resolution screen displayed a couple of graphs.

"Seen these before?" Cale asked tonelessly.

The pit in Jack's gut grew into a black hole. He flicked a quick look at Claury who was staring at him with wide eyes.

He nodded slowly.

Cale exhaled sharply and leaned back. "What can we do?"

Jack took Cale's UnIfac and studied the screen. "Want my advice?"

Cale nodded. "That's why I'm here, Jack."

"They're not going to like it."

"It's not *that* bad, is it?"

Jack shook his head. "Not yet. I think if you dropped out of A-space soon—maybe within the next day or so—and vented the plasma..."

Cale shook his head. "They'll never do it! It'll take days to refuel and start up the reactor again. It'll cost the company millions!"

Jack nodded. "I know. But it's the only solution. The plasma inside that chamber is slowly working its way toward a cusp. It mightn't even need any more load-toggles to set it off." He held the UnIfac so Cale could see the screen. "Cale, you're talking about ten-second near-miss intervals!"

Cale shook his head. "Ten seconds is still eight orders of magnitude above the performance limit of the regcomp."

"Yes, but it also means you've lost at least two orders of magnitude safety margin. That's twenty percent on the log scale. In real terms..."

Cale's face was a rictus of indecision.

"You were mentioning millions," Jack told him. "Well, I'm talking about billions—which is the cost of the ship. Not to mention several thousand lives... including yours and ours, if I may be so selfish as to point this out."

Jack looked at Claury again. He knew he was shaken and pale and she'd realize just how serious this was. He had so much wanted to spare her this.

He handed Cale the UnIfac. "You've got to find a way to convince them!" he said urgently.

Cale stared at the little screen in his hand. "This can't be real," he whispered. "It just doesn't make sense."

"Cale!" Jack's voice was sharp. "Don't hide behind that excuse. I know what it's like; but believe me, it doesn't work! This is as real as it gets."

Cale looked up, his eyes wild. "There's nothing I can do!"

Jack inhaled deeply and leaned back in his chair, considering his friend. He knew exactly what was going on inside Cale. The reality of imminent death was hard to swallow when everything around you reeked of normality and steady-as-she-goes. When you're sitting at a table drinking percolated coffee it's hard to conceive of the reality of your personal extinction.

"What can I do to convince you?" he said softly.

"You don't have to convince me!" Cale exclaimed. "It's the captain! The exec. Give me something that I can show to them. Something other than equations and graphs!"

Jack nodded slowly. He glanced at Claury, who was gazing at him with a growing comprehension of the fate awaiting them all.

Why me? I don't want this shit!

And what could he do anyway? He'd asked himself that again and again during the long night and there still was no answer. On this ship he had no authority whatsoever. No magic wand he could wave in everybody's face to make them do what he thought was right.

Cale could, of course; but Jack had an idea that he wouldn't. It took a perceptual shift of major proportions before humans shed their preconceptions and adapted to the uncomfortable new truth facing them. Cale hadn't made that shift and wasn't going to. He just didn't have it in him. It was as simple as that. He'd suffer the inevitable—even if it meant his own death and that of thousands of others—rather than change his perception of the world and do what was necessary.

For a fleeting moment a cold fury took hold of Jack. At that instant he hated Cale. Hated him for everything he was. For his weakness. For his desire to have everything just-so. For being so damned normal. How could he? He was a Pilot and Pilots were intuitives. Cale should *know!*

The burst of loathing subsided as quickly as it has arisen. It wasn't Cale's fault that he was who he was. He was a good man and had been a good friend. He just didn't have it. His intuitive sense was confined to A-space navigation. He was also good at a gambling table. But, unlike it was with Jack, the sense did not operate beyond those confines.

And that was going to kill them all.

Whoa, Jack! — Listen to yourself!

"Get me an appointment with the captain," he told Cale. "I'll convince him."

He knew he'd said the right thing when Cale's eyes lit up. That's what he'd wanted to hear! No matter how unlikely the success of such a meeting. The classic gut-reaction. Un-shoulder your burden onto someone else.

"You're sure you want to do this?" Cale asked dubiously.

Of course I'm sure. And you know it!

Jack nodded. "But make it soon. We haven't got much time."

"What're you going to tell them?" Cale asked. "This stuff you've shown me is not enough. Believe me, I know!"

"Yeah. So do I," Jack agreed. "But there are other ways..."

He pointed at the UnIfac in Cale's hand. "Show them what you've got. Get them thinking. Then slip in my name. See what kind of a reaction that gets. If it isn't totally negative make the suggestion."

Cale hesitated.

"You'd better do it now," Jack urged. "Every minute we lose is a minute closer to the point of no return. If you want to get out of this shit without having to jet-tison the reactor or having it blow up in our faces..."

Cale stood. "I'll see what I can do."

"Good luck!" Jack called after him.

He stared after Cale's disappearing back until the man had drifted out of sight in the ascensor tube.

Then he turned to Claury.

"What if they don't?..." she whispered.

"I have no idea," he said.

"But then..."

He put a hand on hers. "I'm sorry. I'll do my best, but it'll take a minor miracle. The name 'Jack Corwin' isn't exactly a recommendation—especially when someone around here figures out that I've added contract-breaking to the list of my peccadillos."

He looked at his coffee and picked up the cup. It had gone cold. He caught the eyes of the hostess who came over. "Can I have another one, please?"

"Sure!" she said brightly. She looked at the toast which sat on its plate, looking limp and unappetizing.

"No thanks," Jack said to her unspoken question.

When she had gone he turned back to Claury—and momentarily froze in place when he saw the Coralian, Said Khatabi, one level down from them. The man was talking to a woman in a bright blue dress. Compact, petite figure. Just like... what was her name again? Tera...

Very much like her in fact. Jack nudged Claury and pointed. Claury looked over the balustrade and quickly drew back. Her eyebrows shot up as she glanced back at Jack.

"Is that who I think it is?"

"Probably."

"Another Coralian."

"Didn't you feel it?"

"There was something there," she agreed thoughtfully. "So—they know who we are."

"Looks like it."

"And now?"

"Beats me. Right now I'm more worried about this stupid reactor. If they don't deal with this, our personal problems will solve themselves in a most effective, but unsatisfactory, manner."

"Is it really that serious?"

He shrugged. "Honestly? I don't know. I think it is. The numbers tell me it is. My intuition screams at me that it is. But that's all. That's the problem with this shit. The state-spaces of these reactors are so complex that anything's possible. Not everything's equally likely, of course. But as to what's 'possible?'" He grimaced. "For all I know the system could settle down into a perfectly stable state in the next few seconds and we'd be none the wiser."

The hostess came with their coffee, placed it on the table, and took the cold cups.

"Thanks." Jack looked after her. She, too, would be wiped out of existence in the fiery inferno that might be lurking just around the corner. Of course, she'd never know. It would be far too quick. None of them would ever know. They could anticipate, but when it happened it would come with the suddenness of lightning.

Morbid thoughts which were getting them nowhere. He looked at the spot where Said Khatabi had stood, but both he and the petite woman had disappeared.

Two of them.

How many more?

He sipped his coffee and took a bite of the cold toast; decided that he wasn't hungry in the slightest and put it back.

"Let's go back to the cabin," he said to Claury. "I need some peace and quiet to run some simulations. Maybe I can come up with something that'll convince them."



Chapter 15

Cale came and took Jack away. Jack looked at Claury and she thought she saw a kind of grim determination in his face. Nothing was said between them but she knew that he knew what she was thinking. The door closed behind them with a hiss and a sickening finality. Claury threw herself on the bed and stared at the low ceiling of their cabin. Apart from her own low breath-

ing and the ever-pervasive background hum of the ship's machines the silence was complete. She was alone with herself and her thoughts.

Alone... what a strange notion. Amazing how quickly being 'alone' had become a condition she had to get used to again, especially since it had been with her for many years: ever since the separation from Jack and the death of her parents. The years of fear and loneliness. Brought to such a sudden end... when?... could it be only *days* ago?

Difficult to believe that it should be such a short time. A sudden discontinuity: an abrupt transition from a state of total self-reliance and partially-voluntary isolation to one which involved the constant presence of someone else and everything that entailed.

In many ways solitude was simpler. Consideration of only one's own needs had its attraction. The presence of another distracted from that, almost comfortable, self-centeredness which was the natural consequence of social impoverishment: a defense mechanism to guard herself against the existential void which had so often threatened to envelop her like a cold, suffocating blanket.

Only days...

Initially she had been so scared it was unbelievable. Seeing Jack with his strange face... She'd known it was him from the first instant. Not consciously, but she'd known anyway.

But was it really 'Jack'? Her Jack? Or was he somebody else altogether — just like she was somebody else? Twenty years was a long time.

At first their meeting seemed like a cruel hoax. When they were alone, and when she was certain that it was him... there had been a moment when she knew that she'd had a choice. Because she didn't *have* to tell him that she'd recognized him. And if she hadn't he would probably have gone on his way; and her life, in many regards, would have been much easier. There wouldn't have been a bunch of murderous Coralians trying to kill her. Polkad Mobil and Medamé Kijeune would still be alive. And she wouldn't be here waiting for a nuclear bomb to go off under her feet.

Scared again.

Always fear...

But she also would never have experienced the contentment growing out of the recognition that something had finally, miraculously gone right with her life; or the joy of making love to Jack, and of knowing, beyond

any possibility of doubt, that at last the circle had closed, and that something precious, once thought lost forever, had finally been returned to her—to fill that terrifying void and replace it with a warm, sheltering presence.

No! If she had a choice she probably wouldn't change a thing. Despite all the terrors. Despite the fact that, barring a minor miracle, her life was going to be ended long before she was ready for it. Those last few days had been more than worth that inconvenience. She only hoped that when it happened Jack and her would be together.

Please, let us be together.

But for now she was alone, for the first time for several days; and she found, to her surprise, that, instead of it being a relief after all that constant exposure to another human being, it was not pleasant at all. She missed him something awful.

Claury swung her legs off the bed and stood up. She went into the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror.

Claurinda Finisterre...

A sensation, almost electric in its effect, ran through her entire being. The realization that for the first time in many years she saw herself—or, to be more precise, that part of herself Jack saw when he looked at her. The girl that hadn't been screwed over by life and uncounted men; who hadn't tried to commit suicide; who always thought of tomorrow and wouldn't take 'no' for an answer; who believed that love saw you through everything if you just loved strongly enough.

Amazing!

There she was.

Claurinda Finisterre...

The girl in the mirror stared back at her.

Hi, Claury. Where have you been?

A pity that it would end so soon. Jack couldn't accomplish miracles. Nobody could. It wasn't fair to expect it of him. This time the odds were stacked the wrong way.

Stop fighting it. Enjoy what you've got—while you've got it. So, why wasn't he here with her?

Why was she alone again?

Because, the answer came unbidden, he still hopes.

Because Jack, being Jack, had successfully avoided growing up, despite all of life's attempts to teach him otherwise.

She pulled herself up. Who was she to say that he was wrong? How could she, for that matter, desert him in this hour of need, and not share his hope? Wasn't this almost a betrayal of sorts?

Claury splashed her face with cold water and dried it with a towel.

Hope: the assumption that there is a tomorrow—and that it can be good.

For her.

For Jack.

Claury sighed.

All right, Jack, I'm with you. Go get 'em.

She went back into the main cabin, retrieved her little shoulder bag from a drawer, and left a note for Jack with the message system. She wasn't going to closet herself alone in a cabin. She was going to the Promenade to wander around and sit down among the people there, and wait for Jack to finish this thing—whichever way it went. And when it was done he'd meet her there. He had found her on Herrykairn, hadn't he?

The door hissed close behind her as she headed for the descensor.

"Sit down, Mr. Corwin." Captain Lila Sanders, a striking woman somewhere in her eighties, motioned toward one of the chairs in front of her semi-circular desk. The other chairs were occupied by Cale and Drach Kein, her chief engineer.

Jack sat.

"You realize, of course," Sanders told him, "that I didn't call this meeting without some serious misgivings. In fact, only Pilot Perdek's insistence and not inconsiderable persuasive capabilities prompted me to even consider it."

Jack nodded. "I expected nothing else. Still, I'm grateful that you're taking the time to consider what I have to say."

Sanders shook her head. "We've looked over Pilot Perdek's data and they are thought-provoking. However, my chief here tells me that they are, nonetheless irrelevant and speculative; that there's nothing to be truly concerned about."

Jack made a careless gesture. "Again," he said calmly, "I expected nothing else."

Sanders frowned. "And yet you seem to have convinced at least one of my Pilots; albeit one whose opinion of your abilities and competence appears to be somewhat exaggerated." She looked at Cale. "Nothing

personal, Pilot Perdek, but you know how I feel about this.”

Cale nodded. “No offense taken, Captain. But I know Jack. You don’t.”

Captain Sanders shook her head ruefully. “You must have some interesting hidden qualities,” she said to Jack.

Jack grinned. “I wished more people thought so,” he said. He banished the smile from his face. “Captain, I don’t want to waste your time with polite chit-chat, reminiscences, or covering old ground and arguing over past history. None of this matters. What’s important is whether this is just a ritual you’re going through to keep Cale happy, or whether you’re actually capable of conceiving of the possibility that my analysis has any validity at all. Because if you’re not, then we might as well go our separate ways now and wait for the inevitable. I’d rather spend my last hours with the woman I love than making futile attempts at convincing you to listen to me.”

Captain Sanders fixed Jack with a steady gaze that would cowed many a smaller mind. “You are here,” she said with quiet dignity, “because I am responsible for the lives of a lot of people and a billion-EU ship. Pilot Perdek has presented me with material which suggests at least the possibility that these lives and this ship may be in imminent danger of destruction. I wish to evaluate the validity of this evidence and to make an informed decision as to what to do next.”

Jack glanced sideways at the chief engineer who sat in his chair with a bored expression on his face.

“What will it take to convince you that I’m right?” he asked Sanders.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Right now it’s your models and projections against my chief’s experience and assurances.” She held up a hand. “And I assure you, Mr. Corwin, that I am not factoring the *Berenice* affair into this. Besides, if I were, such considerations would make me disposed toward believing you—because you’re not just anyone coming in here to tell me to do something you wouldn’t have the stomach to do yourself—have *done* yourself. Whether you were right or wrong is immaterial. The fact is that your judgment then may well have saved the lives of almost a thousand people. That counts for a lot.” She shook her head. “So, don’t think that I’m against you. I just want to know the truth.”

Jack grimaced. “The truth is that there is no certainty,” he said gently.

“I know that,” she retorted. “But I need more than models and projections.”

Jack nodded. “Fair enough.” He glanced at the chief engineer again. “How about a demonstration?” he suggested.

Sanders raised a questioning eyebrow. “Like?..”

Jack leaned forward. “I’ve been doing some thinking about the patterns Cale showed me. I put what I remembered into some simulations of mine and came up with some predictions.”

He turned to the chief. “How about some predictions?”

Drach Kein wrinkled his high forehead. “What do you mean?”

“Let’s test the system,” Jack said. “It seems to me that a prediction of cause-effect relationships is still the best touchstone for the validity of a theory, don’t you think?”

Drach Kein snorted derisively. “What’s there to test?”

Jack looked at the captain. “The next load-toggle.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think I can predict pretty exactly what’s going to happen the next time the reactor load toggles into ‘high’ mode. And I bet that your chief here can’t.”

Drach Kein chuckled dryly. “I can tell you what’s going to happen. Exactly nothing—or, to be more precise, more or less what is *supposed* to happen.”

Jack shrugged and looked at the captain. “You heard the man,” he said. “He says nothing’s going to happen.”

“What do you say?”

Jack pulled out his Unifac, activated the screen, and made a show of studying it. He didn’t really have to; he had all the figures in his head. Besides, it wasn’t really the Unifac that had produced them. Rather, it had been a cooperative effort, like between a Pilot and a nav-comp. But he couldn’t tell them that. They wanted ‘science’; not intuit stuff.

“I predict that, within less than ten seconds of the load-toggle,” Jack said, “you’re going to get not just one, but at least two—and possibly more—closely-spaced plasma spikes. Plus an almost instant five percent increase in the near-miss frequency. At least that. Maybe more. And less than an hour after that, unless you vent the reactor immediately, the whole thing’s going critical.”

Sanders glanced at her chief, who shook his head. "No way."

Jack laughed, but even to himself it sounded brittle and false. "Of course it's 'outside the specs'. That's the whole point!"

Sanders nodded. "Seems to me it's an easy thing to test," she said. "All we have to do is see what happens when we drop out of A-space at our next stop."

Jack shook his head. "That's not an option."

"What?"

"You wait until then and you're going to get a bit more than a couple of glitches. You'll get your test all right—but I'm afraid it'll be the last thing you'll ever know. I wasn't talking about days from now—but about a few hours at the very most!"

"You want us to drop out now?"

"As soon as possible," Jack agreed.

"Have you any idea what that's going to cost?" Sanders asked.

Jack shrugged. "Not as much as it'll cost you if you leave this until your regularly scheduled transition."

Drach Kein looked at his captain. "Nonsense. Such an exercise would be an irresponsible waste of energy, time, and money."

Sanders nodded thoughtfully. Her gaze wandered back to Jack who returned her inspection with equanimity. He had done what he could—said his bit; played his card. It was out of his hands now.

Captain Sanders looked at Cale. "I don't have to ask you what you think about this."

Cale shook his head. "It appears a trifle when compared to the potential benefits."

Drach Kein made a strangled sound. "What benefits? The whole proposition is absurd. There is no danger. This reactor type has been tested exhaustively. There have never been any problems."

"Except on the *Berenice*," Jack interjected softly.

"The tribunal—" Drach Kein started.

"I don't care about the tribunal," Lila Sanders snapped. "I care about this ship and the people in it. Are you willing to bet your life on Corwin being wrong?"

Drach Kein nodded. "I most certainly am."

Sanders eyed him pensively. "Well, I'm not," she said finally. She got up and looked at Jack. "I hope you're right about this," she said softly. "Because if you're not..."

Jack stood up and stretched out a hand. "I'm an intuit, captain. One of the best, as you can verify if you look at my record. I know what I know—and I know I'm right."

Sanders looked at the proffered hand for a second or two. Then she took it in a firm grip. "You'd better be," she said dryly. She let go of Jack's hand and pushed a button on her desk. "General alert," she said aloud. "This is the Captain. We are executing an emergency transition. Time: one hour from now. Prepare all stations."

She looked at Jack. "I want you on the bridge when we drop out and start up the linacs."

Jack nodded. Then he remembered Claury. "My bonded..." he began.

Sanders looked up. She shook her head. "I cannot allow non-essential personnel on the bridge..."

"Captain," Jack said softly. "There's a chance that I'm wrong."

Sanders' eyes narrowed. Jack held up a hand. "No, I mean that I'm wrong, erring on the side of optimism. If that's the case—and if we're going to die—I don't want her to be alone. So, if you want me on the bridge, it'll have to be the both of us."

Sanders considered him for another moment.

"Captain," Drach Kein interjected. "This situation is preposterous. I wish to go on record as having objected to the whole procedure."

Sanders nodded. "Objection noted. Prepare the ship for transition." She looked at Jack. "Go and fetch your bonded. I want you on the bridge in half an hour. Pilot Perdek, you will accompany Jack Corwin."

"Dismissed."



Chapter 16

Claury glanced at her timepiece. Jack had been gone for almost an hour. Was that good or bad? She wished she knew.

She contemplated ordering another coffee, but decided against it. Instead she continued her observation of the mass of humanity on the Promenade levels visible from her current vantage point. She was here for a reason after all: to try and locate the third of their suspects. The Promenade was still the most

promising place for this: everybody came here sooner or later; for, unless one was willing to share one's time between one's cabin and the daily social events, the Promenade was the only place to 'get out' to: whether it was for shopping, lounging around cafés and bars, gambling and sundry other forms of entertainment, or walking around the carefully maintained botanic gardens on the very top level. Sooner or later everybody passed through here, and all she had to do was wait.

Claury *hated* waiting. Despite everything, patience had never become a part of her psychological makeup—and despite everything psychologists and the so-called 'spiritual' creeds proclaimed, it could not be learned. At least this was her conviction. Patience was something you were born with. Or not.

Because of this her, apparently patient, presence here was an affirmation of her belief that there was enough of a future for Jack and her to care about conspiracies and Coralian spies. It might also have been pure self-deception, of course: a possibility she chose to ignore.

What was she going to do once she spotted anybody she wasn't too sure about? Follow them? Intercept? Do *something*—most definitely. She wished for Jack's, sometimes spooky, 'sense' to tell her what she needed to know. That would make things so much easier!

She wondered what it was like to live inside Jack's head, and to know things, beyond the bounds of reason or explainability. Just by... what? Looking at things? At people? Whatever...

What kinds of clues did it take? Jack had said that he couldn't tell about Claire Zuniga. What was missing? Or was it just that no answer in this instance was negative?

Claury gave her head a vexed shake. She wished she understood Jack better. Sometimes his intuition freaked her out. That was supposed to be something reserved for women, wasn't it? And yet, over ninety percent of Pilots were men. That must mean something, whatever it was.

"May I join you?"

She looked up and right into the face of the woman who called herself 'Teara', though heavens only knew what her real name was. The petite blonde smiled at her; and if Claury hadn't seen her talking to Said Khat-abi earlier, she would have thought that expression perfectly genuine.

"I thought I recognized you," Teara said brightly. "You remember last night? At the masque. I accosted your friend while you were away."

Claury feigned belated recognition. "You're... Teara?"

Definitely a Coralian.

The woman was still standing. Claury motioned at a chair. "Please."

Let them come to you.

"You're on your way to Earth?" she asked the Coralian.

The woman nodded. "I'm coming to the end of my cruise." she said regretfully. "I boarded on Coralia. Almost did the full circle."

"We embarked at Herrykairn," Claury told her. Teara would know that anyway, so it didn't matter.

The woman exhibited polite interest, which appeared almost genuine. "You live there?"

"In a manner of speaking. I've lived there for some time."

"A small community," Teara commented, "but interesting."

Claury contrived a smile. "That they are. Nice people."

Teara's eyes suddenly flicked away from Claury's face. Claury turned and saw Jack and Cale stride toward them. They seemed very much in a hurry. Jack looked relieved when he saw her. She tried to read the result of the meeting in his face and suddenly felt encouraged.

The men stopped at their table. Jack recognized Teara and performed introductions. The Coralian woman gave Jack a smile and Cale a guarded inspection. Underneath her hooded gaze at Jack's friend, Claury thought to discern a definite interest.

"Sorry to interrupt," Jack said politely, "but I'll have to spirit Claury away from here. There's some urgent business to attend to. Maybe we could meet again later; say, for dinner?"

Teara flashed him a quick grin. "I'd like that," she said with an almost unnoticeable flick of her eyes in Cale's direction.

Jack obviously noticed it. "The four of us?" he asked. "Will you be free?" He asked his friend.

Cale looked at Jack significantly. "Looks like I could be— if you have your way," he said dryly.

"Good. About eight then?" Jack said to Teara.

She nodded. "Perfect. Where?"

Jack looked around. "How about we meet here? We can decide on the details then."

Teara indicated agreement. Claury sensed Jack's urgency and got up. They bade farewell to the Coralian and departed.

"What did he say?" Claury whispered in Jack's ear as they strode beside Cale toward the ascensor shaft.

"What did who say?"

"The Captain."

"She."

"Really?"

"Indeed."

"What did *she* say?"

"They're going to do the experiment."

"They are?"

"In just over half an hour. And I'll have to be on the bridge when it happens—and so do you."

They stepped into the ascensor shaft and slowly started drifting upward in the gentle air current, which pushed at their now-weightless bodies. Claury by now had gotten used to the eerie sensation. Some people though just couldn't handle it—and it definitely wasn't suitable for those wearing skirts.

"Why me?" she asked.

"Because I want you with me," he said gently. "Whatever happens. I want you there"

She hooked her arm under his and pulled him closer.

"By the way," he said lowly, "that Coralian... she's clean."

Claury looked at him. Jack nodded. "Said Khatabi isn't, but Teara is. Whatever her connection with Khatabi, I'd say she's not aware of his occupation or his motives."

Meaning she'd probably told her the truth. Interesting.

They arrived at the top level of the Promenade and stepped out into the botanic gardens. Cale turned left, took a few steps and placed his palm on a pad beside a door, which hissed open. They stepped inside a small elevator cubicle which presently conveyed them to the bridge.

Claury looked around at the wide, hemispherical room which opened in front of her. Occupied by more than a dozen people at consoles and in front of displays it was dominated by a central elevation with a towering holographic projection chamber that could be seen from everywhere in the room. Against the wall to their

left was another elevation with a large chair, in which sat a striking looking woman in the blue-and-black uniform of a captain.

She saw them enter and motioned them to come over. When they had reached her she got up and stretched out a hand to Claury. "Lila Sanders."

"Claurinda Finisterre." She wasn't going to lie to this woman; somehow it wasn't right. From her peripheral vision she saw Cale turn his head to look at her. Jack laid a hand on his friend's arm and whispered something in his ear. Cale relaxed visibly.

Captain Sanders observed the exchange but said nothing. She indicated a row of five seats against the wall, just under a large viewer displaying a series of graphs and numbers. "Over there," she said lowly. "Jack will be with you in a few minutes." Claury did as she was told. From her vantage point she could see the entire room. There was an air of organized chaos about it; mixed in with a hint of tension and the imminence of something outside 'routine'.

Jack, the captain, and another individual who didn't look very happy with the whole situation had a brief discussion which presently ended. Jack plonked himself in a seat beside Claury.

"Half an hour," he said

"Then what?"

"Then we'll know if I was right. And, with some luck, we'll still be alive."

She hooked her arm under his again. "Please be right, Jack."

There was nothing they could do but sit and wait. Captain Sanders made a ship-wide announcement about an unforeseen delay and apologized for any inconvenience. She did not refer to any problems, but merely implied unforeseen contingencies.

When the time came she sat down in her seat and nodded to the duty Pilot. There came a wrenching sensation; a slight wisp of nausea. Above their heads shutters hissed aside to reveal huge transparent view panels through which far away stars and wisps of nebulae stared down at them.

Sanders gave another command. The stars drifted past the view panels as the *Lister Diamond* swung around. The tension in the room became a palpable entity. Under Claury's hands Jack's muscles tightened, became like steel cords. His tension transmitted itself to her until she thought she could stand it no longer. The stars stopped drifting. Claury thought she felt an

almost imperceptible jerk. A heaviness that passed almost as quickly as it came.

The captain got out of her chair and made a quick gesture.

"We'll know," Jack whispered to her as he undid her arm and joined Lila Sanders at a console.

Across the bridge he nodded at her.

At that instant the lights flickered.

Everybody froze.

They flickered again.

Claury saw that he was grinning.

"The near-miss rate has gone up by seven point five percent," Sanders said.

"Vent it!" Jack said firmly. "Now. There's no time."

Sanders stared at the readout.

"Captain?"

She looked at him.

"There's no time," he repeated. "In a few minutes you won't even be able to vent safely. You'll have to jet-tison."

He saw the conflict inside her. She looked left, at her chief engineer — who avoided her eyes and stared at the console.

"What do you say?" she snapped. "Are you still willing to bet your life on being right — and Corwin being wrong?"

Drach Kein shook his head. His face looked pale in the light from the display in front of him.

Sanders nodded. "Do it," she said, her voice brittle. Drach leaned forward and typed a sequence of numbers into a keypad. "Authority, chief-engineer. Commence emergency plasma-venting sequence immediately."

"Command accepted. Venting sequence commenced. Auxiliary reactor power ramping up."

On a large wall display the people on the bridge could see a bright glowing tail growing out of the *Lister Diamond's* 'bottom' end. It shot out in a straight line away from the ship, breaking up into eddies and swirls, and dissipating rapidly.

"Venting sequence complete."

The light died. The *Lister Diamond* hung in space, alive but inert.

It was over.

From Lila Sanders came a deep exhalation. Jack felt his knees go weak with relief. He went back to Claury, who had stood up. He took her in his arms, too full for words.

People started talking again. Jack felt a presence behind him. He let go of Claury and turned to face the captain.

"Thank you," he said simply.

She shook her head and stretched out her hand, which he took. "Nonsense," she said. "We both know where the debts lie."

Jack managed a weak grin. "I'll see what I can contrive as payment."

Sanders laughed and turned back to her chief. "Start recharging the chamber. We don't want to lose any more time than absolutely necessary. And reprogram that regcomp! We know the symptoms now and can anticipate them. I hope!"

"Aye, Captain." Drach Kein grimaced, nodded, and left the bridge.

"It will happen again, of course," Jack said. "There's only one permanent solution."

"A total re-design of the reactor system, I suppose," Sanders said siccantly. "Well, the company will have to deal with that when we get to Earth. If I have any say in it, this ship isn't going back into space until those issues have been dealt with."

"There is a somewhat more practical alternative."

Lila Sanders raised an eyebrow. "Care to share this with me? I'm sure the company will be very interested to hear your views."

"Of course," Jack said. "There's nothing mysterious about it. The main problem is the way in which these reactors are run. Load-toggles are the main cause of reactor instabilities. They're all right with the smaller units, but with the larger ones they will invariably push the systems into dangerous regions."

"What would you suggest?"

Jack shrugged. "Simple. It's the linacs that generate most of the load. If you ramp, rather than toggle, their output, it'll make a big difference. It'll considerably increase maneuvering time, of course, but that's a small price to pay, don't you think?"

Sanders looked at him thoughtfully. "It cannot be that simple."

Jack shook his head. "I don't know about 'simple'. You'll have to reconfigure a number of systems: the field generators; the navcomp software—to mention just two. But that's still much cheaper than replacing the reactor system."

Lila Sanders nodded. "I'll tell my chief — and I'll put it into my report to the company." She smiled at Jack

and Claury. "Meanwhile, I'd be honored if the two of you would join me for dinner later."

Jack grimaced apologetically. "Sorry, but we already have a date for tonight. One which includes Cale Perdek incidentally—if you can spare him, that is. However, we'd love to take you up on it tomorrow... if that's all right."

Lila Sanders nodded graciously. "Tomorrow then. As for Pilot Perdek... I think I can spare him for some limited time." She turned to Cale. "While we're waiting to restart the reaction, consider yourself on special assignment. Look after your friends."

Cale grinned from ear to ear. "Yes, ma'am."

Jack saluted with mock seriousness. "Thank you, captain. We'll make best use of the resource!"

He motioned to Cale and together the three left the bridge.

