

The Plague Star
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“No,” Kaj Nevis told the others firmly. “That’s out. We’d be damned stupid to involve any of the big transcorps.”

“Oh, stuff and nonsense,” Celise Waan snapped back at him. “We have to get there, don’t we? So we need a ship. I’ve chartered ships from Starslip before, and they’re perfectly comfortable. The crews are polite and the cuisine is more than adequate.”

Nevis gave her a withering look. He had a face made for it—sharp and angular, with hair swept back hard and a great scimitar of a nose, his small dark eyes half-hidden by heavy black eyebrows. “For what purpose did you charter these ships?”

“Why, for field trips, of course,” Celise Waan replied. She plucked another cream ball from the plate in front of her, lifting it delicately between thumb and forefinger and popping it into her mouth. “I’ve supervised many important researches. The Center provided the funding.”

“Let me point out the nose on your damn face,” Nevis said. “This is not a field trip. We are not poking into the mating habits of primitives. We are not digging around for obscure knowledge that no sane person could possibly give a damn about, as you’re accustomed to doing. This little conspiracy of ours is about to go after a treasure of almost unimaginable value. If we find it, we don’t intend to turn it over to the proper authorities, either. You need me to see to its disposition through less-than-licit channels. And you trust me so little that you won’t tell where the damn thing is until we’re underway, and Lion here has hired a bodyguard. Fine, I don’t give a damn. But understand this—I am not the only untrustworthy man on ShanDellor. Vast profit is involved here, and vast power. If you’re going to continue to yammer at me about *cuisine*, then I’m leaving. I have better things to do than sit here counting your chins.”

Celise Waan snorted disdainfully. She was a big, round, red-faced woman, with a loud, wet snort. “Starslip is a reputable firm,” she said. “Besides, the salvage laws—”

“—are meaningless,” said Nevis. “We have one set of laws here on ShanDellor, another on Kleronomas, a third on Maya, and none of them mean a damn thing. And if ShanDi law did apply, we’d get only one-quarter the value of the find—if we got anything at all. Assuming this plague star of yours is really what Lion thinks it is, and assuming that it’s still in working order, whoever controls it will enjoy an overwhelming military superiority in this sector. Starslip and the other big transcorps are as greedy and ruthless as I am, I promise you. Furthermore, they are big enough and powerful enough so that the planetary governments watch them closely. In case it has escaped your notice, let me point out that there are only four of us. Five, if you count the hireling,” he said, nodding toward Rica Dawnstar, who favored him with an icy grin. “A big liner has more than five pastry chefs. Even on a small courier, we’d be outnumbered by the crew. Once they saw what we had, do you imagine for even a second that we’d be allowed to keep it?”

“If they cheat us, we’ll sue them,” the fat anthropologist said, with a hint of petulance in her voice. She plucked up the last cream ball.

Kaj Nevis laughed at her. “In what courts? On what world? That’s assuming we’re allowed to live, which is unlikely on the face of it. You are a remarkably stupid and ugly woman.”

Jefri Lion had been listening to the squabble with an uncomfortable expression on his face. “Here, here,” he interrupted at last. “Let’s have no name-calling, Nevis. No call for it. We’re all in this together, after

all.” A short, square block of a man, Lion wore a chameleon cloth jacket of military cut, decorated with rows of ribbons from some forgotten campaign. The fabric had turned a dusty gray in the dimness of the small restaurant, a gray that matched the color of Lion’s bristling spade-shaped beard. There was a thin sheen of sweat on his broad, balding forehead. Kaj Nevis made him nervous; the man had a reputation, after all. Lion looked around to the others for support.

Celise Waan pouted and stared at the empty plate in front of her, as if her gaze could fill it with cream balls again. Rica Dawnstar—“the hireling,” as Nevis called her—leaned back in her seat with a look of sardonic amusement in her bright green eyes. Beneath her drab jumpsuit and silvery mesh-steel vest, the long, hard body looked relaxed, almost indolent. No concern of hers if her employers wanted to argue all night and all day.

“Insults are useless,” Anittas said. It was hard to tell what the cybertech was thinking; his face was as much polished metal and translucent plastic as flesh, and only minimally expressive. The shiny bluesteel fingers of his right hand interlocked with the mocha-colored fleshy digits of his left; he studied Nevis with two shining silver-metal eyes that moved smoothly in black plastic sockets. “Kaj Nevis has made some valid points. He is experienced in these areas, where we are not. What is the use of having brought him into this affair if we are unwilling to listen to his counsel?”

“Yes, that’s so,” Jefri Lion agreed. “What do you suggest then, Nevis? If we must avoid the transcorps, how will we reach the plague star?”

“We need a ship,” Celise Waan said, loudly stating the obvious.

Kaj Nevis smiled. “The transcorps have no monopoly on ships. That’s why I suggested we meet here today, rather than at Lion’s office. This dump is close to the port. The man we want will be here, I’m sure.”

Jefri Lion looked hesitant. “An independent? Some of them have rather, uh, unsavory reputations, don’t they?”

“Like me,” Nevis reminded him.

“Still. I’ve heard rumors of smuggling, even piracy. Do we want to take that kind of a chance, Nevis?”

“We don’t want to take any chances at all,” Kaj Nevis said. “And we won’t. It’s a matter of knowing the right people. I know lots of people. The right people. The wrong people.” He made a small gesture with his head. “Now, way in the back there, that dark woman with all the black jewelry. That’s Jessamyn Caige, mistress of the *Free Venture*. She’d hire out to us, no doubt. At a very reasonable rate.”

Celise Waan craned around to look. “Is she the one, then? I hope this ship of hers has a gravity grid. Weightlessness makes me nauseous.”

“When are you going to approach her?” Jefri Lion asked.

“I’m not,” Kaj Nevis told them. “Oh, I’ve used Jessamyn to move a cargo or two for me, but I won’t take the risk of actually riding with her, and I’d never dream of involving her in anything this big. The *Free Venture* has a crew of nine—more than enough to handle me and the hireling. No offense, Lion, but the rest of you don’t count.”

“I’ll have you know I’m a soldier,” Jefri Lion said, in a wounded tone. “I’ve seen combat.”

“A hundred years ago,” Nevis said. “As I said, the rest of you don’t count. And Jessamyn would as soon kill all of us as spit.” The small, dark eyes regarded each of them in turn. “That’s why you need me. Without me, you are just naive enough to engage Jessamyn, or one of the transcorps.”

“My niece serves with a very successful independent trader,” Celise Waan said.

“And who might that be?” Kaj Nevis inquired.

“Noah Wackerfuss,” she said, “of the *World of Bargains*.”

Nevis nodded. “Fat Noah,” he said. “That would be a lot of fun, I’m damn sure. I might mention that *his* ship is kept constantly in weightlessness. Gravity would kill the old degenerate—not that it matters. Wackerfuss isn’t especially blood-thirsty, that’s so. Fifty-fifty chance he wouldn’t kill us. He is, however, as greedy and as shrewd as they come. At the very least, he’d find a way to get a full share. At worst, he’d get it all. And his ship has a crew of twenty—all women. Have you ever asked your niece about the precise nature of her duties?”

Celise Waan flushed. “Do I have to listen to this man’s innuendoes?” she asked Lion. “This was my discovery. I won’t be insulted by this third-rate hoodlum, Jefri.”

Lion frowned unhappily. “Really now, enough of this squabbling. Nevis, there’s no need to flaunt your expertise. We brought you into this for good cause, I’m sure we all agree. You must have some idea of who we can engage to take us to the plague star, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Nevis agreed.

“Who?” prompted Anittas.

“The man is an independent trader, of sorts. Not a very successful one. And he’s been stuck on ShanDellor, for want of a cargo, for half of a standard year now. He must be getting desperate—desperate enough, I’d think, so that he’ll jump at this opportunity. He has a small, battered ship with a long, ridiculous name. It’s not luxurious, but it will take us there, which is all that matters. There’s no crew to worry about, only the man himself. And he—well, he’s a little ridiculous, too. He’ll give us no trouble. He’s big, but soft, inside and out. He keeps cats, I hear. Doesn’t much like people. Drinks a lot of beer, eats too much. I doubt that he even carries a weapon. Reports are that he barely scrapes by, flitting from world to world and selling absurd trinkets and useless little geegaws from this beat-up old ship of his. Wackerfuss thinks the man’s a joke. But even if he’s wrong, what can one man alone do? If he so much as threatens to report us, the hireling and I can dispose of him and feed him to his cats.”

“Nevis, I’ll have no talk like that!” Jefri Lion objected. “I won’t have any killing on this venture.”

“No?” Nevis said. He nodded toward Rica Dawnstar. “Then why did you hire her?” His smile was very nasty, somehow; her returning grin was pure mocking malice. “Just so,” Nevis said, “I knew this was the place. Here’s our man now.”

None of them except Rica Dawnstar was much versed in the art of subtle conspiracy; the other three all turned to stare at the door, and the man who had just entered. He stood very tall, almost two-and-a-half meters, and his great soft gut swelled out above his thin metal belt. He had big hands, a long, curiously blank face, and a stiff, awkward posture; everywhere his skin was as white as bleached bone, and it appeared that he had not a hair on him anywhere. He wore shiny blue trousers and a deep maroon shirt whose balloon sleeves were frayed at the ends.

He must have felt their scrutiny, for he turned his head and stared back, his pale face expressionless. He kept on staring. Celise Waan looked away first, and then Jefri Lion, and finally Anittas. “Who is he?” the cyborg demanded of Kaj Nevis.

“Wackerfuss calls him Tuffy,” Nevis said. “His real name, I’m told, is Haviland Tuf.”

Haviland Tuf picked up the last of the green star-forts with a delicacy that belied his great size, then straightened to regard the gaming board with satisfaction. The entire cluster was red; cruisers and dreadnaughts and star-forts and all the colonies, red everywhere. “I must claim the victory,” he said.

“Again,” said Rica Dawnstar. She stretched, to untie the knots that hours bent over the game had put in her limbs. She had the deadly grace of a lioness, and beneath her silver mesh-steel vest her needler was snug in its shoulder holster.

“Perhaps I might be so bold as to suggest another contest,” said Haviland Tuf.

Dawnstar laughed. “No thanks,” she said. “You’re too good at this. I was born a gambler, but with you it’s no gamble. I’m tired of coming in second.”

“I have been most fortunate in the games we have played thus far,” Haviland Tuf said. “Undoubtedly, my luck will have run its course by now, and you will obliterate my poor forces on your next attempt.”

“Oh, undoubtedly,” Rica Dawnstar replied, grinning, “but forgive me if I postpone the attempt until the boredom becomes terminal. At least I’m better than Lion. Right, Jefri?”

Jefri Lion was seated in a corner of the ship’s control room, perusing a stack of old military texts. His chameleon cloth jacket had turned the same brown as the synthawood paneling of the bulkhead behind him. “The game does not conform to authentic military principles,” he said, with a hint of annoyance in his voice. “I employed the same tactics that Stephen Cobalt Northstar used when the 13th Human Fleet enveloped Hrakkean. Tuf’s counterthrust was completely wrong under the circumstances. If the rules had been written properly, it ought to have been routed.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “You have the advantage of me, sir. You, after all, have the good fortune to be a military historian, and I am merely a humble trader. I lack your familiarity with the great campaigns of history. How fortunate for me that thus far, the deficiencies of the game itself, and my extraordinary fortune, have conspired to make up for my ignorance. Still, I would welcome the opportunity to strengthen my grasp of military principles. If you would care to assay the game once again, I will carefully study your subtle strategies so that I might in future incorporate a sounder, more authentic approach into my own poor play.”

Jefri Lion, whose silver fleet had been the first eliminated in every game they had played during the past week, cleared his throat and looked uncomfortable. “Yes, uh, you see, Tuf,” he began.

He was saved from embarrassment by a sudden shriek and stream of profanity that issued from the adjoining compartment. Haviland Tuf was on his feet at once; Rica Dawnstar was right behind him.

They emerged into the passageway just as Celise Waan staggered out of the living quarters, in pursuit of a small, fleet black-and-white form that went hurtling past them into the control room. “Catch it!” Celise Waan screamed at them. Her face was red and puffy and swollen, and she looked furious.

The door was small, Haviland Tuf large. “For what purpose, might I inquire?” he asked, blocking the way.

The anthropologist held out her left hand. There were three short, deep scratches across her palm, welling blood. “Look what it did to me!” she said.

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “And what did you do to her?”

Kaj Nevis emerged from the living quarters with a thin, hard smile on his face. “She picked it up to toss it across the room,” he said.

“It was on my bed!” said Celise Waan. “I wanted to take a little nap, and the damned creature was asleep on my bed!” She whirled to face Nevis. “And you, wipe that smirk off your face. It’s bad enough we all have to be cooped up together in this shabby little ship. I simply refuse to share what little space there is with this impossible man’s filthy little *animals*. And it’s *your* fault, Nevis. You got us into this! Now do something. I demand that you make Tuf get rid of those vicious pests, do you hear me, I demand it!”

“Excuse me,” Rica Dawnstar said from behind Tuf. He glanced back at her and moved aside. “Is this one of the vicious pests you had in mind?” Dawnstar asked, with a grin, as she stepped into the passageway. She was cradling a cat against her chest with her left hand, and petting it with her right. It was a huge tom with long, soft, gray hair and arrogant yellow eyes; it must have weighed twenty pounds, but Rica held it as easily as if it had been a kitten. “What do you propose Tuf do with old Mushroom here?” she asked

as the cat began to purr.

“It was the other one that hurt me, the black-and-white one,” Celise Waan said, “but that one’s just as bad. Look at my face! Look at what they’ve done to me! I can scarcely breathe, and I’m breaking out all over, and whenever I try to get a little sleep I wake up with one of them on my chest. Yesterday I was having a little snack, and I put it down just for a moment, and when I came back the black-and-white one had knocked over my plate and was rolling my spice-puffs around in the dirt as if they were toys! Nothing is safe around these animals. I’ve lost two light pencils and my best pinky ring. And now *this*, this *attack!* Really, this is just intolerable. I must insist that these damned animals be put down in the cargo hold at once. *At once*, do you hear?”

“My hearing is quite adequate, thank you,” said Haviland Tuf. “If your missing property has not turned up by the end of our voyage, I will be most pleased to reimburse you for its value. Your request in regard to Mushroom and Havoc, however, I must regretfully deny.”

“I’m a passenger on this joke of a starship!” Celise Waan screamed at him.

“Must you insult my intelligence as well as my hearing?” Tuf replied. “Your status as a passenger here is obvious, madam; it is not necessary for you to point it out. Permit me to point out, however, that this small ship which you feel so free to insult is my home and my livelihood, such that it is. Furthermore, while you are undeniably a passenger here and therefore enjoy certain rights and prerequisites, Mushroom and Havoc must logically have substantially greater rights, since this is their permanent abode, so to speak. It is not my custom to take passengers aboard my *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*. As you have observed, the space available is scarcely adequate to my own needs. Regretfully, I have suffered various professional vicissitudes of late, and there is no gainsaying the fact that my supply of standards was veering toward inadequacy when Kaj Nevis approached me. I have bent all my efforts to accommodate you aboard this craft which you so malign, to the extent that I have given over my ship’s living quarters to your collective needs and made my own poor bed in the control room. Despite my undeniable need, I am now coming to deeply regret the foolish and altruistic impulse that bid me take this charter, especially as the payment I have received was barely sufficient to refuel and provision for this voyage and pay the ShanDi landing tax. You have taken grievous advantage of my gullibility, I fear. Nonetheless, I am a man of my word and will do my best to convey you to this mysterious destination of yours. For the duration of the voyage, however, I must require you to tolerate Mushroom and Havoc, even as I tolerate you.”

“Well, I never!” Celise Waan declared.

“I have no doubt,” said Haviland Tuf.

“I’m not going to put up with this any longer,” the anthropologist said. “There’s no reason we all have to be crammed up inside one room like soldiers in a barracks. This ship was not nearly this small from outside.” She pointed a pudgy arm. “Where does that door go?” she demanded.

“To the hold and cargo compartments,” Haviland Tuf said evenly. “There are sixteen of them. Even the smallest, admittedly, has twice the space of my meager living quarters.”

“Aha!” said Waan. “And are we carrying any cargo?”

“Compartment sixteen is packed with plastic reproductions of Cooglish orgy-masks, which I was unfortunately unable to sell on ShanDellor, a situation I lay entirely at the door of Noah Wackerfuss, who undercut my price and deprived me of my small hope of profit. In compartment twelve I store certain personal effects, miscellaneous equipment, collectibles, and bric-a-brac. The rest of the ship is quite empty, madam.”

“Excellent!” said Celise Waan. “In that case, we will convert the smaller compartments into private rooms for each of us. It should be a simple matter to move our bedding.”

“Quite simple,” said Haviland Tuf.

“Then do it!” snapped Celise Waan.

“As you wish,” said Tuf. “Will you be wanting to rent a pressure suit?”

“What?”

Rica Dawnstar was grinning. “The holds aren’t part of the life-support system,” she said. “No air. No heat. No pressure. No gravity, even.”

“Ought to suit you just fine,” Kaj Nevis put in.

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

Day and night are meaningless aboard a starship, but the ancient rhythms of the human body still made their demands, and technology had to conform. Therefore the *Cornucopia*, like all but the huge triple-shift warships and transcorp liners, had its sleep cycle—a time of darkness and silence.

Rica Dawnstar rose from her cot and checked her needler, from long force of habit. Celise Waan was snoring loudly; Jefri Lion tossed and turned, winning battles in his head; Kaj Nevis was lost in dreams of wealth and power. The cybertech was sleeping too, though it was a deeper sort of sleep. To escape the boredom of the voyage, Anittas had parked on a cot, plugged into the ship’s computer, and turned himself off. His cyberhalf monitored his biohalf. His breath was slow as a glacier and very regular, his body temperature down, his energy consumption cut to almost nothing, but the lidless silver-metal sensors that served him as eyes sometimes seemed to shift slightly, tracking some unseen vision.

Rica Dawnstar moved quietly from the room. Up in the control chamber, Haviland Tuf sat alone. His lap was full of gray tomcat; his huge pale hands moved over the computer keys. Havoc, the smaller black-and-white cat, was playing around his feet. She had gotten hold of a light pencil and was batting it to and fro on the floor. Tuf never heard Rica enter; no one heard Rica Dawnstar move unless she wanted them to hear.

“You’re still up,” she said from the door, leaning back against the jamb.

Tuf’s seat swiveled around and he regarded her impassively. “A most remarkable deduction,” he said. “Here I sit before you, active, busy, driven by the demands of my ship. From the scant evidence of your eyes and ears, you leap to the conclusion that I am not yet asleep. Your powers of reasoning are awesome.”

Rica Dawnstar sauntered into the room and stretched out on Tuf’s cot, still neatly made up from the previous sleep cycle. “I’m awake too,” she said, smiling.

“I can scarcely believe it,” said Haviland Tuf.

“Believe it,” Rica said. “I don’t sleep much, Tuf. Two or three hours a night. It’s an asset in my profession.”

“No doubt,” said Tuf.

“On board ship, though, it’s a bit of a liability. I’m bored, Tuf.”

“A game, perhaps?”

She smiled. “Perhaps of a different sort.”

“I am always eager to learn new games.”

“Good. Let’s play the conspiracy game.”

“I am unfamiliar with its rules.”

“Oh, they’re simple enough.”

“Indeed. Perhaps you would be good enough to elaborate.” Tuf’s long face was still and noncommittal.

“You would never have won that last game if Waan had thrown in with me when I asked her to,” Rica said conversationally. “Alliances, Tuf, can be profitable to all parties concerned. You and I are the odd ones out here. We’re the hirelings. If Lion is right about the plague star, the rest of them will divide wealth so vast it’s incomprehensible, and you and I will receive our fees. Doesn’t seem quite fair to me.”

“Equity is often difficult to judge, and still more difficult to achieve,” said Haviland Tuf. “I might wish my compensation were more generous, but no doubt many could make the same complaint. It is nonetheless the fee that I negotiated and accepted.”

“Negotiations can be reopened,” suggested Rica Dawnstar. “They need us. Both of us. It occurred to me that if we worked together, we might be able to...ah...insist upon better terms. Full shares. A six-way split. What do you think?”

“An intriguing notion, with much to recommend it,” said Tuf. “Some might venture to suggest that it was unethical, true, but the true sophisticate retains a certain moral flexibility.”

Rica Dawnstar studied the long, white, expressionless face for a moment, and grinned. “You don’t buy it, do you, Tuf? Down deep, you’re a stickler for rules.”

“Rules are the essence of games, the very heart of them, if you will. They give structure and meaning to our small contests.”

“Sometimes it’s more fun just to kick over the board,” Rica Dawnstar said. “More effective, too.”

Tuf steepled his hands in front of his face. “Though I am not content with my niggardly fee, nonetheless I must fulfill my contract with Kaj Nevis. I would not have him speak poorly of me or the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*.”

Rica laughed. “Oh, I doubt that he’ll speak poorly of you, Tuf. I doubt that he’ll speak of you at all, once you’ve served your purpose and he’s discarded you.” She was pleased to see that her statement startled Tuf into blinking.

“Indeed,” he said.

“Aren’t you curious about all this? About where we’re going and why Waan and Lion kept the destination secret until we were aboard? About why Lion hired a bodyguard?”

Haviland Tuf stroked Mushroom’s long gray fur, but his eyes never left Rica Dawnstar’s face. “Curiosity is my great vice. I fear you have seen through to the heart of me, and now you seek to exploit my weakness.”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” said Rica Dawnstar.

“An unpleasant suggestion, but unlikely on the face of it,” Tuf commented.

“But satisfaction brought him back,” Rica finished. “Lion knows this is something huge. And hugely dangerous. To get what they want out of this, they needed Nevis, or somebody like Nevis. They have a nice four-way split set up, but Kaj has the kind of reputation that makes you wonder if he’ll settle for a fourth. I’m here to see that he does.” She shrugged, and patted her needler in its shoulder holster.

“Besides, I’m insurance against any other complications that might arise.”

“Might I point out that you yourself constitute an additional complication?”

She smiled icily. “Just don’t point it out to Lion,” she said, rising and stretching. “You think about it, Tuf. The way I see it, Nevis has underestimated you. Don’t you go underestimating him. Or me. Never, never, *never* underestimate me. The time may come when you’ll wish you had an ally. And it may come sooner than you’d like.”

Three days shy of arrival, Celise Waan was complaining again over dinner. Tuf had served a spiced vegetable brouhaha in the manner of Halagreen; a piquant dish, but for the fact that this was the sixth such

serving on the voyage. The anthropologist shoved the vegetables around on her plate, made a face, and said, “Why can’t we have some real food?”

Tuf paused, speared a fat mushroom deftly with his fork, lifted it in front of his face. He regarded it in silence for a moment, shifted the angle of his head and regarded it from another angle, turned it around and regarded that aspect of it, and finally prodded it lightly with his finger. “I fail to grasp the nature of your complaint, madam,” he said at last. “This mushroom, at least, seems real enough to my own poor senses. True, it is but a small sample of the whole. Perhaps the rest of the brouhaha is illusory. Yet I think not.”

“You know what I meant,” Celise Waan said in a shrill tone. “I want meat.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “I myself want wealth beyond measure. Such fantasies are easily dreamed, and less easily made real.”

“I’m tired of all these puling vegetables!” Celise Waan screeched. “Are you telling me that there is not a bit of meat to be had on this entire puling ship?”

Tuf made a steeple of his fingers. “It was not my intent to convey such misinformation, certainly,” he said. “I am not an eater of flesh myself, but there is some small poor quantity of meat aboard the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*, this I freely admit.”

A look of furious satisfaction crossed Celise Waan’s face. She glanced at each of the other diners in turn.

Rica Dawnstar was trying to suppress a grin; Kaj Nevis was not even trying; Jefri Lion was looking fretful. “You see,” she told them, “I told you he was keeping the good food for himself.” With all deliberation, she picked up her plate and spun it across the room. It rang off a metal bulkhead and dumped its load of spiced brouhaha on Rica Dawnstar’s unmade bed. Rica smiled sweetly. “We just swapped bunks, Waan,” she said.

“I don’t care,” Celise Waan said. “I’m going to get a decent meal for once. I suppose the rest of you will be wanting to share now.”

Rica smiled. “Oh no, dear. It’s all yours.” She finished up her brouhaha, cleaned her plate with a crust of onion bread. Lion looked uncomfortable, and Kaj Nevis said, “If you can get this meat out of Tuf, it’s all yours.”

“Excellent!” she proclaimed. “Tuf, bring me this meat!”

Haviland Tuf regarded her impassively. “True, the contract I made with Kaj Nevis requires me to feed you through the duration of this voyage. Nothing was said about the nature of the provender, however. Always I am put upon. Now I must cater to your culinary whims, it seems. Very well, such is my poor lot in life. And yet, now I find myself taken by a sudden whim of my own. If I must indulge your whim, would it not be equitable that you should similarly bend to mine?”

Waan frowned suspiciously. “What do you mean?”

Tuf spread his hands. “It is nothing, really. In return for the meat you crave, I ask only a moment’s indulgence. I have grown most curious of late, and I would have that curiosity satisfied. Rica Dawnstar has warned me that, unsatisfied, curiosity will surely kill my cats.”

“I’m for that,” said the fat anthropologist.

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “Nonetheless, I must insist. I offer you a trade—food, of the type you have requested so melodramatically, for a poor useless nugget of information, the surrender of which costs you nothing. We are shortly to arrive in the system of Hro B’rana, your chartered destination. I would know why we travel there, and the nature of what you expect to find on this plague star of which I have heard you speak.”

Celise Waan turned to the others again. “We paid good standards for food,” she said. “This is extortion.

Jefri, put your foot down!”

“Um,” said Jefri Lion. “There’s really no harm, Celise. He’ll find out anyway, when we arrive. Perhaps it is time he knew.”

“Nevis,” she said, “aren’t you going to do anything?”

“Why?” he demanded. “It doesn’t make a damn bit of difference. Tell him and get your meat. Or not. I don’t care.”

Waan glared at Kaj Nevis, and then even more fiercely at the cool pale face of Haviland Tuf, crossed her arms, and said, “All right, if that’s the way it has to be, I’ll sing for my supper.”

“A normal speaking voice will be quite acceptable,” said Tuf.

Celise Waan ignored him. “I’ll make this short and sweet. The discovery of the plague star is my greatest triumph, the capstone of my career, but none of you have the wit or the courtesy to appreciate the work that went into it. I am an anthropologist with the ShanDellor Center for the Advancement of Culture and Knowledge. My academic specialty is the study of primitive cultures of a particular sort—cultures of colony worlds left to isolation and technological devolution in the wake of the Great War. Of course, many human worlds were so affected, and a number of these have been studied extensively. I worked in less well-known fields—the investigation of nonhuman cultures, especially those of former Hrangan slave worlds. One of the worlds I studied was Hro B’rana. Once it was a flourishing colony, a breeding ground for Hruun and dactyloids and lesser Hrangan slave races, but today it’s a devastation. Such sentients that still live there live short, ugly, brutal lives, although like most such decayed cultures, they also have tales of a vanished golden age. But the most interesting thing about Hro B’rana is a legend, a legend unique to them—the plague star.

“Let me stress that the devastation on Hro B’rana is extreme, and the underpopulation severe, despite the fact that the environment is not especially harsh. Why? Well, the degenerate descendants of both Hruun and dactyloid colonists, whose cultures are otherwise utterly different and very hostile to each other, have a common answer to that: the plague star. Every third generation, just as they are climbing out of their misery, as populations are swelling once again, the plague star waxes larger and larger in their nighttime skies. And when this star becomes the brightest in the heavens, then the season of plagues begins. Pestilences sweep across Hro B’rana, each more terrible than the last. The healers are helpless. Crops wither, animals perish, and three-quarters of the sentient population dies. Those who survive are thrown back into the most brutal sort of existence. Then the plague star wanes, and with its waning the plagues pass from Hro B’rana for another three generations. That is the legend.”

Haviland Tuf’s face had been expressionless as he listened to Celise Waan relate the tale. “Interesting,” he said now. “I must surmise, however, that our present expedition has not been mounted simply to further your career by investigating this arresting folk tale.”

“No,” Celise Waan admitted. “That was once my intent, yes. The legend seemed an excellent topic for a monograph. I was trying to get funding from the Center for a field investigation, but they turned down my request. I was annoyed, and justly so. Those shortsighted fools. I mentioned my annoyance, and the cause, to my colleague, Jefri Lion.”

Lion cleared his throat. “Yes,” he said. “And my field, as you know, is military history. I was intrigued, of course. I buried myself in the Center databanks. Our files are not nearly as complete as those at Avalon and Newholme, but there wasn’t time for a more thorough investigation. We had to act quickly. You see, my theory—well, it’s more than theory, really—I believe, in fact I’m all but certain, that I know what this plague star is. It’s no legend, Tuf! It’s real. It must be a derelict, yes, abandoned but still operational, still carrying out its programs more than a millennium after the Collapse. Don’t you see? Can’t you guess?”

“I admit to failure,” said Tuf, “lacking your familiarity with the subject at hand.”

“It’s a warship, Tuf, a warship in a long elliptical orbit around Hro B’rana. It’s one of the most

devastating weapons Old Earth ever put into the void against the Hrangans, in its own way as terrible as that mythical hellfleet they talk about from those last days before the Collapse. But it has vast potential for good as well as ill! It's the repository of the most advanced biogenetic science of the Federal Empire, a functioning artifact packed full of secrets lost to the rest of humanity."

"Indeed," said Tuf.

"It's a seedship," Jefri Lion finished, "a biowar seedship of the Ecological Engineering Corps."

"And it's *ours*," said Kaj Nevis, with a small grim smile.

Haviland Tuf studied Nevis briefly, nodded to himself, and rose. "My curiosity is satisfied," he announced. "Now I must fulfill my portion of the trade."

"Ahhh," said Celise Waan. "My meat."

"The supply is copious, though the variety is admittedly small," said Haviland Tuf. "I shall leave you the task of preparing the meat in a manner most pleasant to your palate." He went to a storage locker, punched in a code, and removed a small carton, which he carried back to the table under his arm. "This is the only meat aboard my vessel. I cannot vouch for its taste or quality. Yet I have not yet received a complaint on either count."

Rica Dawnstar burst into laughter and Kaj Nevis snickered. Haviland Tuf, neatly and methodically, removed a dozen cans of catfood from their carton, and stacked them in front of Celise Waan. Havoc leapt onto the table and began to purr.

"It's not as big as I expected," Celise Waan said, her tone as petulant as ever.

"Madam," said Haviland Tuf, "the eyes can often deceive. My main viewscreen is admittedly modest, a bare meter in diameter, and this must of course diminish the size of any object displayed thereon. The ship itself is of sizable dimensions."

Kaj Nevis came forward. "How sizable?"

Tuf folded his hands together atop the bulge of his stomach. "I cannot say with any precision. The *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices* is but a modest trading vessel, and its sensory instrumentation is not all that it might be."

"Approximately, then," Kaj Nevis snapped.

"Approximately," Tuf repeated. "Regarded at the angle at which my viewscreen is now displaying it, with the longest axis taken as 'length,' the ship we are approaching would seem to be, approximately, some thirty standard kilometers long, approximately some five kilometers in width, approximately some three kilometers in height, but for the domed section amidships, which rises slightly higher, and the forward tower which ascends, approximately, one additional kilometer above the deck from which it rises."

They had all gathered in the control room, even Anittas, who had been awakened from his computer-regulated sleep when they emerged from drive. A hush fell over them; even Celise Waan seemed briefly at a loss for something to say. All of them stared at the viewscreen, at the long black twisted shape that floated against the stars, here and there shining with faint lights and pulsing with unseen energies.

"I was right," Jefri Lion muttered at last, to break the silence. "A seedship—an EEC seedship! Nothing else could possibly be so large!"

Kaj Nevis smiled. "Damn," he said.

"The system must be vast," Anittas said speculatively. "The Earth Imperials had a sophistication far beyond ours. It's probably an Artificial Intelligence."

“We’re rich,” burred Celise Waan, her many and varied grievances forgotten for the moment. She grabbed hold of Jefri Lion’s hands and waltzed him around in a circle, fairly bouncing. “We’re rich, rich, we’re rich and *famous*, we’re all rich!”

“This is not entirely correct,” said Haviland Tuf. “I do not doubt that you may indeed become wealthy in the near future; for the moment, however, your pockets contain no more standards than they did a moment ago. Nor do Rica Dawnstar and I share your prospects of economic advancement.”

Nevis stared at him hard. “Are you complaining, Tuf?”

“Far be it from me to object,” Tuf said in a flat voice. “I was merely correcting Celise Waan’s misstatement.”

Kaj Nevis nodded. “Good,” he said. “Now, before any of us get any richer, we have to get aboard that thing and see what kind of shape it’s in. Even a derelict ought to net us a nice salvage fee, but if that ship’s in working order, there’s no limit, no limit at all.”

“It is obviously functional,” Jefri Lion said. “It has been raining plagues on Hro B’rana every third generation for a thousand standard years.”

“Yeah,” said Nevis, “well, that’s true, but it’s not the whole story. It’s dead in orbit now. What about the drive engines? The cell library? The computers? We’ve got a lot to check. How do we get aboard, Lion?”

“A docking might be possible,” Jefri Lion replied. “Tuf, that dome, do you see it?” He pointed.

“My vision is unimpaired.”

“Yes, well, I believe that’s the landing deck under there. It’s as big as a spacefield. If we can get the dome to open, you can take your ship right in.”

“If,” said Haviland Tuf. “A most difficult word. So short, and so often fraught with disappointment and frustration.” As if to underline his words, a small red light came on beneath the main viewscreen. Tuf held up a long pale finger. “Take note!” he said.

“What is it?” asked Nevis.

“A communication,” Tuf proclaimed. He leaned forward and touched a much worn button on his lasercom.

The plague star vanished from the screen. In its place appeared a weary-looking face—that of a man of middle years, sitting in a communications room. He had deep lines in his forehead and graven down his cheeks, a full head of thick black hair, and tired blue-gray eyes. He was wearing a uniform out of a history tape, and on his head was a green billed cap emblazoned with a golden theta. “This is *Ark*,” he announced. “You have entered our defense sphere. Identify yourself or be fired upon. This is your first warning.”

Haviland Tuf held down his SEND button. “This is the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*,” he annunciated clearly, “Haviland Tuf commanding. We are harmless unarmed traders out of ShanDellor, *Ark*. Might we request permission to approach for docking?”

Celise Waan gaped. “It’s manned,” she said. “The crew is still alive!”

“A fascinating development,” Jefri Lion said, tugging at his beard. “Perhaps this is a descendant of the original EEC crew. Or perhaps the chronowarp was employed! To warp the very weave of the fabric of time, to hurry it or hold it still, yes, they could do even that. The chronowarp! Think of it!”

Kaj Nevis made a snarling sound. “A thousand damn years and you tell me they’re still alive? How the hell are we supposed to deal with that?”

The image on the viewscreen flickered briefly. Then the same tired man in the uniform of the Earth Imperials said, “This is *Ark*. Your ID is improperly coded. You are moving through our defense sphere.

Identify yourself or be fired upon. This is your second warning.”

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf, “I must protest! We are unarmed and unprotected. We mean you no harm. We are peaceful traders, scholars, fellow humans. Our intentions are not hostile, and moreover, we lack any means of doing harm to a ship as formidable as your *Ark*. Must we be met with belligerence?”

The screen flickered. “This is *Ark*. You have penetrated our defense sphere. Identify yourself immediately or be destroyed. This is your third and final warning.”

“Recordings,” said Kaj Nevis, with some enthusiasm. “That’s it! No cold storage, no damned stasis field. There’s no one there. Some computer is playing recordings at us.”

“I fear you are correct,” said Haviland Tuf. “The question must be asked: if the computer is programmed to play recorded messages at incoming ships, what else might it be programmed to do?”

Jefri Lion broke in. “The codes!” he said. “I have a whole set of Federal Empire codes and ID sequences on crystal chips in my files! I’ll go get them.”

“An excellent plan,” said Haviland Tuf, “with but a single obvious deficiency, that being the time it will require to locate and utilize these encoded chips. Had we the leisure to accomplish this, I might applaud your suggestion. I fear we do not, alas. The *Ark* has just fired upon us.”

Haviland Tuf reached forward. “I am taking us into drive,” he announced. But as his long pale fingers brushed the keys, suddenly the *Cornucopia* shook violently. Celise Waan shrieked and went down; Jefri Lion stumbled into Anittas; even Rica Dawnstar had to grab the back of Tuf’s chair to retain her footing. Then all the lights went out. Haviland Tuf’s voice came out of the dark. “I fear I spoke too soon,” he said, “or perhaps, more accurately, acted too tardily.”

For a long moment, they were lost in silence and darkness and dread, waiting for the second hit that would spell an end to them.

And then the blackness ebbed a little; dim lights appeared on all the consoles around them, as the *Cornucopia*’s instrumentation woke to a flickering half-life. “We are not entirely disabled,” Haviland Tuf proclaimed from the command chair where he sat stiffly. His big hands stretched out over the computer keys. “I will get a damage report. Perhaps we shall be able to retreat after all.”

Celise Waan began to make a noise; a high, thin, hysterical wailing that went on and on. She was still sprawled on the deck. Kaj Nevis turned on her. “Shut up, you damned cow!” he snapped, and he kicked her. Her wail turned into blubbing. “We’re dead meat sitting here like this,” Nevis said loudly. “The next shot will blow us to pieces. Damn it, Tuf, move this thing!”

“Our motion is undiminished,” Tuf replied. “The hit we took did not terminate our velocity, yet it did deflect us somewhat from our previous trajectory toward the *Ark*. Perhaps that is why we are not being fired upon now.” He was studying wan green figures that uncoiled across one of the smaller telescreens. “I fear my ship has suffered some incapacitation. Shifting into drive now would be inadvisable; the stress would undoubtedly rend us to pieces. Our life support systems have also taken damage. The projections indicate that we will run out of oxygen in approximately nine standard hours.”

Kaj Nevis cursed; Celise Waan began to beat her fists on the deck. “I can conserve oxygen by shutting down once more,” Anittas offered. Everyone ignored him.

“We can kill the cats,” Celise Waan suggested.

“Can we move?” Rica Dawnstar asked.

“The maneuvering engines are still operable,” Tuf said, “but without the ability to shunt into stardrive, it will take us approximately two ShanDish years to reach even Hro B’rana. Four of us can take refuge in pressure suits. The viral airpacs will recycle oxygen indefinitely.”

“I refuse to live in a pressure suit for two years,” Celise Waan said forcefully.

“Excellent,” said Tuf. “As I have only four suits, and we are six in number, this will be of help. Your noble self-sacrifice will be long remembered, madam. Before we put this plan into motion, however, I believe we might consider one other option.”

“And what’s that?” Nevis asked.

Tuf swiveled about in his command chair and looked at each of them in the dimness of the darkened control room. “We must hope that Jefri Lion’s crystalline chip does indeed contain the proper approach code, so that we might effect a docking with the *Ark*, without being made the target of ancient weaponry.”

“The chip!” Lion said. It was hard to see him. In the darkness, his chameleon cloth jacket had turned a deep black. “I’ll go get it!” He went rushing back toward their living quarters.

Mushroom padded quietly across the room, and leapt up into Tuf’s lap. Tuf settled a hand on him, and the big tom began to purr loudly. It was somehow a reassuring sound. Perhaps they would be all right after all.

But Jefri Lion was gone for too long a time.

When they finally heard him return, his footsteps were leaden, defeated.

“Well?” Nevis said. “Where is it?”

“Gone,” Lion said. “I looked everywhere. It’s gone. I could have sworn I had it with me. My files—Kaj, truly, I meant to bring it along. I couldn’t bring everything, of course, but I duplicated most of the important records, the things I thought might prove useful—material on the war, on the EEC, some histories of this sector. My gray case, you know. It had my little computer, and more than thirty crystal chips. I was going over some of them last night, remember, in bed? I was reviewing the material about the seedships, what little we know, and you told me that I was keeping you awake. I had a chip full of old codes, I know I did, and I really meant to bring it along. But it’s not there.” He came closer. They saw he was carrying the hand computer, holding it out almost as an offering. “I went through the box four times, and searched all the chips I had out on my bed, on the table, everywhere. It’s not here. I’m sorry. Unless one of you took it?” Jefri Lion glanced about the room. No one spoke. “I must have left the codes back on ShanDellor,” he said. “We were in such haste to leave, I...”

“You senile old fool,” said Kaj Nevis. “I ought to kill you right now, and save a little air for the rest of us.”

“We’re dead,” wailed Celise Waan, “we’re dead, dead, dead.”

“Madam,” said Haviland Tuf, petting Mushroom, “you continue to be premature. You are no more deceased now than you were wealthy a short time ago.”

Nevis turned to face him. “Oh? You have an idea, Tuf?”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

“Well?” prompted Nevis.

“The *Ark* is our only salvation,” Tuf said. “We must board her. Without Jefri Lion’s code crystal, we cannot move the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices* closer for a docking, for fear of being fired upon once again. This much is obvious. Yet an interesting concept has occurred to me.” He raised a finger. “Perhaps the *Ark* might display less hostility toward a smaller target—a man in a pressure suit, say, propelled by air jets!”

Kaj Nevis looked thoughtful. “And when this man reaches the *Ark*, what then? Is he supposed to knock on the hull?”

“Impractical,” admitted Haviland Tuf, “and yet I believe I have a method of dealing with this problem as well.”

They waited. Tuf stroked Mushroom. "Go on," Kaj Nevis said impatiently.

Tuf blinked. "Go on? Indeed. I fear I must beg your indulgence. My mind is most distracted. My poor ship has suffered grievous harm. My modest livelihood lies ruined and devastated, and who will pay for the necessary repairs? Will Kaj Nevis, soon to enjoy such wealth, shower me with largesse? I fear not. Will Jefri Lion and Anittas buy for me a new ship? Unlikely. Will the esteemed Celise Waan grant me a bonus above and beyond my fee to compensate for my great loss? She has already promised to seek legal redress against me, to have my poor vessel confiscated and my landing license revoked. How then am I to cope? Who will succor me?"

"Never mind about that!" Kaj Nevis said. "How do we get inside the *Ark*? You said you had a way!"

"Did I?" said Haviland Tuf. "I believe you are correct, sir. Yet I fear the weight of my woes has driven the concept from my poor, distracted mind. I have forgotten it. I can think of nothing but my sorry economic plight."

Rica Dawnstar laughed, and clapped Tuf soundly across his broad back.

He looked up at her. "And now I am roughly pummeled and beaten as well, by the fierce Rica Dawnstar. Please do not touch me, madam."

"This is blackmail," screeched Celise Waan. "We'll have you put in prison for this!"

"And now my integrity is impugned, and I am showered with threats. Is it any wonder I cannot think, Mushroom?"

Kaj Nevis snarled. "All right, Tuf. You win." He looked around. "Do I hear any objections to making Tuffy here a full partner? A five-way split?"

Jefri Lion cleared his throat. "He deserves at least that, if his plan works."

Nevis nodded. "You're in, Tuf."

Haviland Tuf rose with immense, ponderous dignity, brushing Mushroom from his lap. "My memory returns to me!" he announced. "There are four pressure suits in the locker, yonder. If one of you would be so kind as to don one and render me your aid, together we shall go to procure a most useful piece of equipment from storage compartment twelve."

"What the hell," Rica Dawnstar exclaimed when they came back, carrying their booty between them. She laughed.

"What is it?" demanded Celise Waan.

Haviland Tuf, who loomed large in his silver-blue pressure suit, lowered the legs to the ground and helped Kaj Nevis get it upright. Then he removed his helmet and inspected their prize with satisfaction. "It is a space-suit, madam," he said. "I would think that obvious."

It was a spacesuit, of sorts, but it was like no suit any of them had ever seen before, and clearly, whoever had constructed it had not had humans in mind. It towered over all of them, even Tuf; the ornate crest on the great beetling helmet was a good three meters off the deck, and almost brushed the top of the bulkhead. There were four thick double-jointed arms, the bottom two ending in gleaming, serrated pincers; the legs were broad enough to contain the trunks of small trees, and the footpads were great circular saucers. On the broad, hunched back were mounted four huge tanks; a radar antenna sprang from the right shoulder; and everywhere the rigid black metal of which it was constructed was filigreed in strange swirling patterns of red and gold. It stood among them like an armored giant of old.

Kaj Nevis jerked a thumb at the armor. "It's here," he said. "So what? How will this monstrosity help us?" He shook his head. "It looks like a piece of junk to me."

"Please," said Tuf. "This mechanism, which you so disparage, is an antique rich with history. I acquired

this fascinating alien artifact, at no small cost to myself, on Unqi when I passed through that sector. This is a genuine Unquin battlesuit, sir, represented to be of the Hameriin dynasty, which fell some fifteen hundred years ago, long before humanity reached the Unquish stars. It has been fully restored.”

“What does it *do*, Tuf?” asked Rica Dawnstar, always quick to come to the point.

Tuf blinked. “Its capabilities are many and varied. Two strike closest to home in regard to our present quandry. It has an augmented exoskeleton, and when fully charged will magnify the inherent strength of its occupant by a power of ten, approximately. Furthermore, its equipment includes a most excellent cutting laser, engineered to slice through duralloy of a thickness of one-half meter, or of plate steel of significantly greater thickness, when directly applied at zero range. In brief, this ancient battlesuit will be our means of entry into the ancient warship that looms as our only salvation.”

“Splendid!” said Jefri Lion, clapping his hands together in approval.

“It might work at that,” Kaj Nevis commented. “What’s the drill?”

“I must admit to some deficiency of equipment for deep space maneuvering,” Tuf replied. “Our resources include four standard pressure suits, but only two jetpacs. The Unquin battlesuit, I am pleased to report, has its own propulsion vents. I propose the following plan. I will don the battlesuit and make egress from the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*, accompanied by Rica Dawnstar and Anittas in pressure suits and jetpacs. We will proceed to the *Ark* with all due speed. If we make the journey safely, we will use the battlesuit’s most excellent capabilities to gain entrance through an airlock. I am told that Anittas is expert in ancient cybernetic systems and obsolete computers. Very well, then. Once inside, he will no doubt have little trouble gaining control of the *Ark* and will supersede the hostile programming now in place. At that point, Kaj Nevis will be able to pilot my crippled ship in for a docking, and all of us will have attained safety.”

Celise Waan turned a vivid shade of red. “You’re leaving us to die!” she screeched. “Nevis, Lion, we must stop them! Once they’re on the *Ark*, they’ll blow us up! We can’t trust them.”

Haviland Tuf blinked. “Why must my morality be constantly assaulted by these accusations?” he asked. “I am a man of honor. The course of action you have suggested had never crossed my mind.”

“It’s a good plan,” said Kaj Nevis. He smiled, and began to unseal his pressure suit. “Anittas, hireling, suit up.”

“Are you going to let them abandon us here?” Celise Waan demanded of Jefri Lion.

“I’m sure they mean us no harm,” Lion said, tugging on his beard, “and if they did, Celise, how do you propose I stop them?”

“Let us move the battlesuit down to the main airlock,” Haviland Tuf said to Kaj Nevis while Dawnstar and the cybertech were suiting up. Nevis nodded, kicked his way free of his own pressure suit, and moved to help Tuf.

With some difficulty, they wrestled the huge Unquish suit down to the *Cornucopia*’s main lock. Tuf shed his pressure suit and unbolted the armored entry port, then pulled over a stepstool and began to climb laboriously inside. “Just a moment, Tuffy,” Kaj Nevis said, grabbing him by the shoulder.

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf, “I do not like to be touched. Unhand me.” He turned back and blinked in surprise. Kaj Nevis had produced a vibroknife. The slender, humming blade, which could slice through solid steel, was a blur of motion less than a centimeter from Tuf’s nose.

“A good plan,” Kaj Nevis said, “but let’s make one little change. I’ll wear the supersuit, and go with Anittas and little Rica. You stay here and die.”

“I do not approve of this substitution,” said Haviland Tuf. “I am chagrined that you too would truckle to unfounded suspicion of my motives. I assure you, as I have assured Celise Waan, that thought of treachery has never crossed my mind.”

“Funny,” said Kaj Nevis. “It crossed *my* mind. Seemed like a damn fine idea, too.”

Haviland Tuf assumed a look of wounded dignity. “Your base plans are undone, sir,” he announced. “Anittas and Rica Dawnstar have come up behind you. It is well known that Rica Dawnstar was hired to forestall just such behavior from you. I advise you to surrender now. It will go easier on you.”

Kaj Nevis grinned.

Rica had her helmet cradled under her arm. She observed the tableau, shook her pretty head slightly, and sighed. “You should have taken my offer, Tuf. I told you the time would come when you’d be sorry you didn’t have an ally.” She donned the helmet, sealed it, scooped up an airjet. “Let’s go, Nevis.”

Comprehension finally dawned on the broad face of Celise Waan. To her credit, this time she did not succumb to hysteria. She looked about for a weapon, found nothing obvious, and finally grabbed Mushroom, who was standing nearby and watching events with curiosity. “You, you, YOU!” she shouted, heaving the cat across the room. Kaj Nevis ducked. Mushroom yowled mightily and bounced off Anittas.

“Kindly cease flinging about my cats,” Haviland Tuf said.

Nevis, recovering quickly, brandished the vibroknife at Tuf in a most unpleasant fashion, and Tuf backed slowly away. Nevis paused long enough to scoop up Tuf’s discarded pressure suit and slice it deftly into a dozen long silver-blue ribbons. Then, carefully, he climbed into the Unquin battlesuit. Rica Dawnstar sealed it up after him. It took Nevis some time to figure out the alien control systems, but after about five minutes, the bulging faceplate began to glow a baleful blood red, and the heavy upper limbs moved ponderously. He switched to the lower, pincer arms experimentally while Anittas opened the inner door of the lock. Kaj Nevis lumbered in, clacking his pincers, followed by the cybertech and, lastly, Rica Dawnstar. “Sorry, folks,” she announced as the door was sliding shut. “It’s nothing personal. Just arithmetic.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “Subtraction.”

Haviland Tuf sat in his command chair, enthroned in darkness, watching the flickering instrumentation before him. Mushroom, his dignity much offended, had settled in Tuf’s lap, and was graciously allowing himself to be soothed. “The *Ark* is not firing on our erstwhile compatriots,” he told Jefri Lion and Celise Waan.

“This is all my fault,” Jefri Lion was saying.

“No,” said Celise Waan. “It’s *his* fault.” She jerked a fat thumb toward Tuf.

“You are not the most appreciative of women,” Haviland Tuf observed.

“Appreciative? What am I supposed to appreciate?” she said angrily.

Tuf made a steeple of his hands. “We are not without resources. To begin with, Kaj Nevis left us one functioning pressure suit,” he pointed out.

“And no propulsion systems.”

“Our air will last twice as long with our numbers diminished,” Tuf said.

“But will still run out,” snapped Celise Waan.

“Kaj Nevis and his cohorts did not use the Unquin battlesuit to destroy the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices* after their exit, as well they might have.”

“Nevis preferred to see us die a lingering death,” the anthropologist replied.

“I think not. More likely, in point of fact, he wished to preserve this vessel as a last refuge should his plan to board the *Ark* somehow miscarry,” Tuf mused. “In the nonce, we have shelter, provisions, and the

possibility of maneuver, however limited.”

“What we have is a crippled ship that is rapidly running out of air,” said Celise Waan. She started to say something else, but just then Havoc came bounding into the control room, all energy and bounce, in hot pursuit of a bit of jewelry she’d sent rolling in before her. It landed by Celise Waan’s feet; Havoc pounced on it, and sent it spinning with a tentative swipe. Celise Waan yelped. “My glowstone ring! I’ve been looking for that! Damn you, you filthy thief.” She bent and snatched for the ring. Havoc closed with her, and she gave the cat a lusty blow with her fist. She missed. Havoc’s claws were more accurate. Celise Waan shrieked.

Haviland Tuf was on his feet. He snatched up the cat and the ring, tucked Havoc safely under his arm, and handed the ring stiffly to its bleeding owner. “Your property,” he said.

“Before I die, I swear I’m going to grab that creature by the tail and smash its brains on a bulkhead—if it has any brains.”

“You do not sufficiently appreciate the virtues of the feline,” said Tuf, retreating to his chair. He soothed Havoc’s feelings as he had earlier soothed Mushroom. “Cats are most intelligent animals. In fact, it is well known that all cats have a touch of psi. The primitives of Old Earth were known to worship them.”

“I’ve studied primitives who worship fecal matter,” the anthropologist said testily. “That animal is a filthy beast!”

“The feline is fastidiously clean,” Tuf said calmly. “Havoc herself is scarcely more than a kitten, and her playfulness and chaotic temperament remain undiminished,” he said. “She is a most willful creature, and yet, that is but part of her charm. Curiously, she is also a creature of habit. Who could fail to be warmed by the joy she takes in play with small objects left lying about? Who could fail to be amused by the foolish frequency with which she loses her playthings beneath the consoles in this very room? Who indeed. Only the most sour and stony-hearted.” Tuf blinked rapidly—once, twice, three times. On his long, still face, it was a thunderstorm of emotion. “Off, Havoc,” he said, gently swatting the cat from his lap. He rose, then sank to his knees with a stiff dignity. On hands and knees, Haviland Tuf began to crawl about the room and feel beneath the control consoles.

“What are you doing?” demanded Celise Waan.

“I am searching for Havoc’s lost toys,” said Haviland Tuf.

“I’m bleeding and we’re running out of air and you’re looking for *cat toys!*” she said in exasperation.

“I believe I have just stated as much,” Tuf said. He pulled a handful of small objects out from under the console, and then a second handful. After thrusting his arm all the way back and patting about systematically, he finally gave up, gathered his cache, dusted himself off, and began to sort the prizes from the dust. “Interesting,” he said.

“What?” she demanded.

“These are yours,” he said to Celise Waan. He handed her another ring and two light pencils. “These are mine,” he said, shoving aside two more light pencils, three red cruisers, a yellow dreadnaught, and a silver star-fort. “And this, I believe, is yours.” He held it out to Jefri Lion: a shaped crystal the size of a thumbnail.

Lion all but bounded to his feet. “The chip!”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

There was a moment of endless suspense after Tuf had lasered the docking request. A thin crack appeared in the middle of the great black dome, and then another, at cross angles to the first. Then a third, a fourth, more and still more. The dome split into a hundred narrow pie-shaped wedges, which

receded into the hull of the *Ark*.

Jefri Lion let go of his breath. "It works," he said, in a voice full of awe and gratitude.

"I reached that conclusion some time ago," Tuf said, "when we successfully penetrated the defense sphere without being fired upon. This is merely a confirmation."

They watched the proceedings on the viewscreen. Beneath the dome appeared a landing deck fully as large as the ports of many a lesser planet. The deck was pockmarked with circular landing pads, several of which were occupied. As they waited, a ring of blue-white light flicked on around one vacant pad.

"Far be it from me to dictate your behavior," said Haviland Tuf, his eyes on his instruments, his hands in careful, methodical motion. "I would, however, advise that each of you strap in securely. I am extending the landing legs and programming us for a landing on the indicated pad, but I am uncertain how much damage the legs have sustained, uncertain even as to whether all three legs remain in place. Therefore I counsel caution."

The landing deck yawned blackly beneath them. They began a stately descent into its cavernous depths. The illuminated ring of the landing pad loomed larger and larger on one viewscreen; a second showed the wan blue light of the *Cornucopia*'s gravity engines flickering off distant metal walls and the silhouettes of other ships. In a third, they saw the dome reassembling itself, a dozen sharp teeth grinding together once more, as if they had just been swallowed by some vast spacefaring animal.

The impact was surprisingly gentle. They settled into place with a sigh and a whisper and only the smallest of bumps. Haviland Tuf killed their engines, and spent a moment studying the instruments and the scenes on his telescreens. Then he turned to face the others. "We are docked," he announced, "and the time has come to make our plans."

Celise Waan was busily unstrapping herself. "I want to get out of here," she said, "find Nevis and that bitch Rica, and give them both a good piece of my mind."

"A good piece of your mind might be considered an oxymoron," said Haviland Tuf. "I think your proposed course of action unwise in the extreme. Our former colleagues must now be considered our rivals. Having just abandoned us to death, they shall undoubtedly be nonplussed to discover us still alive, and might very well take steps to rectify this contradiction."

"Tuf is right," Jefri Lion said. He was moving from one screen to another, peering at them with fascination. The ancient seedship had rekindled his spirit and his imagination, and he was bristling with energy. "It's us against them, Celise. This is war. They'll kill us if they can, have no doubt of it. We must be similarly ruthless! This is a time for clever tactics."

"I bow to your martial expertise," Tuf said. "What strategies do you suggest?"

Jefri Lion tugged on his beard. "Well," he said, "well, let me think. What's the situation here? They have Anittas. The man's half-computer himself. Once he interfaces with the shipboard systems, he should be able to determine how much of the *Ark* is functional, yes, and perhaps to exercise some control over its functioning, too. That could be dangerous. He might be trying it right now. We know they got aboard first. They may or may not know we're aboard. We have the advantage of surprise, perhaps!"

"They have the advantage of having all the weaponry," said Haviland Tuf.

"No problem!" said Jefri Lion. He rubbed his hands together eagerly. "This is a warship, after all. The EEC specialized in biowar, true, but this was a military vessel and I'm sure the crew had personal sidearms, that sort of thing. There's got to be an armory. All we have to do is find it."

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf.

Lion was rolling now. "Our advantage, well, not to be immodest about it, but our advantage is me. Aside from what Anittas can discover from the computers, they'll be blundering about in the dark. But I've studied the old Federal Empire ships. I know everything about them." He frowned. "Well, everything that

wasn't lost or classified, anyway. At least I know a few things about the general plans of these seedships. We'll have to find the armory first, and it should be close. It was standard procedure to store weaponry near the landing deck, for ground parties and such. After we're armed, we ought to look for—hmmrnm, let me think—well, yes, the cell library, that's crucial. The seedships had vast cell libraries, cloning material from literally thousands of worlds preserved in a stasis field. We must discover if the cells are still viable! If the stasis field has failed, and the samples have decayed, all we have gained is a very large ship. But if the systems are still operational, the *Ark* is literally priceless!"

"While I appreciate the importance of the cell library," Tuf said, "it strikes me that a more immediate priority might be the location of the bridge. Making the perhaps unwarranted but nonetheless attractive assumption that none of the original crew of the *Ark* is alive after the passage of a millennium, we are then alone on this vessel with our enemies, and whichever party gains control of shipboard functions first will enjoy a rather formidable advantage."

"A good point, Tuf!" Lion exclaimed. "Well then, let's get to it."

"Right," said Celise Waan. "I want out of this cat trap."

Haviland Tuf raised a finger. "A moment, please. A problem presents itself. We are three in number, and possess only a single pressure suit among us."

"We're inside a *ship*," Celise Waan said in a voice that dripped sarcasm. "What do we need with suits?"

"Perhaps nothing," Tuf admitted. "It is true, as you imply, that the landing field seems to function as a very large airlock; my instruments indicate that we are now surrounded by an entirely breathable oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, pumped in when the closure of the dome was complete."

"So what's the problem, Tuf?"

"No doubt I am being overcautious," Haviland Tuf said. "I admit to some disquiet, however. This *Ark*, though perhaps abandoned and derelict, is nonetheless dutiful. Witness the plagues it still regularly visits on Hro B'rana. Witness the efficiency with which it defended itself against our approach. We cannot know, as yet, why this ship was abandoned, nor how the last of the crew met their end, but it seems clear that it was their intent that the *Ark* live on. Perhaps the external defense sphere was only the first of several lines of automatic defense."

"An intriguing notion," said Jefri Lion. "Traps?"

"Of a particular kind. The atmosphere that awaits us may seethe with pestilence, plague, and biogenetic contagion. Dare we risk it? *I* would be more comfortable in a pressure suit, myself, though each of you is free to decide otherwise."

Celise Waan looked uncomfortable. "I should get the suit," she said. "We only have one, and you owe it to me, after the beastly way I've been treated."

"We need not enter into that discussion again, madam," said Tuf. "We are on a landing deck. Around us, I observe nine other spacecraft of varying design. One is a Hruun fighter, one a Rhiannese merchant; two are of designs unfamiliar to me. And five are plainly shuttlecraft of some sort, identical to each other, larger than my own poor vessel here, undoubtedly part of the *Ark*'s own original equipment. It is my experience that spacecraft invariably are equipped with pressure suits. It is my intention, therefore, to don our single remaining suit, exit, and search these neighboring ships until I have found suits for each of you."

"I don't like it," Celise Waan snapped. "You get out, and we're still stuck here. "

"Such are the vicissitudes of life," Tuf said, "that each of us must sometimes accept that which he does not like."

The airlock gave them a bit of trouble. It was a small emergency lock, with manual controls. They had no

difficulty opening the outer door, entering, and sealing it behind them. The inner door was another and more difficult proposition.

Atmosphere came flooding back into the large chamber as soon as the outer door was closed, but the inner door was jammed somehow. Rica Dawnstar tried it first; the huge metal wheel refused to turn, the lever would not depress. "OUT OF MY WAY," Kaj Nevis said, his voice twisted into a rasping croak by the alien comm circuits built into the Unquin battlesuit, and boosted to deafening levels by external speakers. He trundled past her, the huge saucer feet ringing loudly on the deck, and the battlesuit's great upper arms seized the wheel and turned. The wheel resisted for a moment, then twisted and buckled, and finally came loose of the door entirely.

"Good work," Rica said over her suit speaker. She laughed.

Kaj Nevis growled something thunderously unintelligible. He seized the lever and tried to move it, and succeeded only in breaking it off.

Anittas moved closer to the stubborn inner lock mechanism. "A set of code buttons," he said, pointing. "The proper code sequence, if we knew it, would no doubt gain us entry automatically. There's a computer outlet, too. If I could interface, perhaps I could pull the correct code out of the system."

"WHAT'S STOPPING YOU?" Kaj Nevis demanded. His faceplate glowed balefully.

Anittas lifted his arms, turned his hands over helplessly. With the more obviously organic portions of his body covered by the silver-blue of his pressure suit, and his silver metallic eyes peering out through the plastic, he looked more like a robot than ever. Kaj Nevis, standing huge above him, looked like a much larger robot. "This suit," Anittas said, "is improperly designed. I cannot interface directly without removing it."

"REMOVE IT, THEN," Nevis said.

"Will that be safe?" asked Anittas. "I am unsure."

"There's air in here," Rica Dawnstar put in. She gestured toward the appropriate bank of indicators.

"Neither of you has removed your suit," Anittas pointed out. "Were I to make a mistake, and open the outer door instead of the inner one, I might die before I could seal up again."

"DON'T MAKE A MISTAKE," Kaj Nevis boomed.

Anittas crossed his arms. "The air might be unhealthy. This ship has been derelict for a thousand standard years, Kaj Nevis. Even the most sophisticated system goes down from time to time, experiences failures and glitches. I am unwilling to risk my person."

"OH?" Nevis thundered. There was a grinding sound. One of the lower arms came up slowly; the serrated metal pincer opened, seized Anittas about the middle, and pinned him against the nearest wall. The cybertech squawked protest. An upper arm came across, and a huge metal-gloved hand dug in under the collar of the pressure suit. It pulled. The helmet and the entire top of the suit came ripping off Anittas. His head almost came off, as well.

"I LIKE THIS SUIT," Kaj Nevis announced. He gave the cybertech a little squeeze with the pincer.

Metal fabric tore and blood began oozing through. "YOU'RE BREATHING, AREN'T YOU?"

Anittas was almost hyperventilating, in fact. He nodded.

The battlesuit flung him to the floor. "THEN GET TO WORK," Nevis told him.

That was when Rica Dawnstar began to feel nervous. She backed away casually, leaned against the outer door as far from Nevis as she could get, and considered the situation while Anittas removed his gloves and the shards of his ruined suit and slid the bluesteel fingers of his right hand into the waiting computer plugs. She had strapped her shoulder holster on over her pressure suit, so her needler would be accessible, but suddenly its presence didn't seem entirely as reassuring as it usually did. She studied

the thickness of the Unquin armor, and wondered if maybe she had been unwise in her choice of ally. A three-way split was much better than Jefri Lion's small fee, to be sure. But what if Nevis decided he didn't like a three-way split?

They heard a sharp, sudden *pop* and the inner door began to slide open. Beyond was a narrow corridor leading down into blackness. Kaj Nevis moved to the doorway and peered into the dark, his glowing red faceplate throwing scarlet reflections on the walls. Then he turned ponderously. "YOU, HIRELING!" he boomed at Rica Dawnstar, "GO SCOUT IT OUT."

She came to a decision. "Aye, aye, bossman," she said. She drew her needler, moved quickly to the door and down the corridor, followed it about ten meters to a cross-corridor. From there she looked back. Nevis, hugely armored, filled the airlock door. Anittas stood beside him. The cybertech, normally so silent, still, and efficient, was shaking. "Stay right there," Rica called back to them. "It's not safe!" Then she turned and picked a direction at random and began to run like hell.

It took Haviland Tuf much longer than he had anticipated to locate the suits. The nearest of the other spacecraft was the Hruun fighter, a chunky green machine bristling with weaponry. It was sealed up securely, however, and although Tuf circled it several times and studied the various instruments that seemed designed to command access, none of his tugging, prodding, pushing, or fiddling produced the desired result, and he was forced to give it up finally and proceed onward.

The second ship, one of the strange ones, was wide open, and he wandered through it with a certain amount of intellectual fascination. Its interior was a maze of narrow corridors whose walls were as irregular and pebbly as a cave, and soft to the touch. Its instruments were incomprehensible. Its pressure suits, when he located what looked to be pressure suits, might have been functional, but could never have been worn by anyone over a meter tall or bilaterally symmetrical.

The Rhiannese merchant, his third try, had been gutted; Tuf could locate nothing useful.

Finally, there was nothing to be done for it but to hike all the way to one of the five distant shuttlecraft that stood side by side, snug in custom launching berths. They were big ships, larger than the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*, with black pitted hulls and rakish wings, but they were clearly of human design and seemingly in good repair. Tuf finally puzzled his way into one of them, whose berth bore a metal plate with an engraved silhouette of some fanciful animal and a legend proclaiming it to be named *Griffin*. Pressure suits were located where they should have been located. They were in excellent shape, considering that they were a thousand years old, and quite striking as well: a deep green in color, with golden helmet, gloves, and boots, and a golden theta emblazoned upon the breast of each. Tuf selected two of them and carried them back across the echoing twilight plain of the landing deck, to where the scarred, crippled teardrop that was his *Cornucopia* squatted on its three splayed legs.

When he got to the base of the ramp that led up to the main lock, he almost stumbled over Mushroom.

The big tom was sitting on the deck. He got up and made a plaintive noise, rubbing himself against Tuf's booted leg.

Haviland Tuf stopped for an instant and stared down at the old gray tom. He bent awkwardly, gathered up the cat, and stroked him for a time. When he climbed the ramp to the airlock, Mushroom followed, and Tuf found it necessary to shoo him away. He cycled through with a pressure suit under each arm.

"It's about time," Celise Waan said when Tuf entered.

"I told you Tuf hadn't abandoned us," Jefri Lion said.

Haviland Tuf let the pressure suits fall to the deck, where they lay like a puddle of green and gold.

"Mushroom is outside," Tuf said in a flat, passionless voice.

"Well, yes," Celise Waan said. She grabbed a suit and began squeezing into the green metallic fabric. It

bound her tightly about the middle; the members of the Ecological Engineering Corps had seemingly been less fleshy than she. “Couldn’t you have gotten me a larger size?” she complained. “Are you sure these suits still work?”

“The construction seems sound,” Tuf said. “It will be necessary to infuse the airpacs with whatever living bacteria remain from the ship’s cultures. How did Mushroom come to be outside?”

Jefri Lion cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Uh, yes,” he said. “Celise was afraid you weren’t coming back, Tuf. You were gone so long. She thought you’d left us here.”

“A base and foundless suspicion,” said Tuf.

“Uh, yes,” said Lion. He looked away, reached for his own suit.

Celise Waan pulled on a golden boot, sealed it. “It’s your fault,” she said to Tuf. “If you hadn’t been gone so long, I wouldn’t have gotten restless.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “What, might I venture to ask, has your restlessness to do with Mushroom?”

“Well, I thought you weren’t coming back, and we had to get out of here,” the anthropologist said. She sealed up her second boot. “But you made me nervous, you know, with all your talk of plagues. So I cycled the cat through the airlock. I tried to get that damned black-and-white one, but it kept running away and hissing at me. The gray one just let me pick it up. I dumped it out and we’ve been watching it through the screens. I figured we could see whether or not it got sick. If it didn’t show any symptoms, well, then probably it would be safe for us to risk coming out.”

“I grasp the principle,” said Haviland Tuf.

Havoc came bounding in the room, playing with something. She saw Tuf and headed toward him, walking with a pronounced kittenish swagger.

“Jefri Lion,” said Tuf, “if you would, please apprehend Havoc, take her back to the living quarters, and confine her there.”

“Uh, certainly,” Lion said. He caught up Havoc as she went by him. “Why?”

“I would prefer henceforth to keep Havoc secure and separated from Celise Waan,” Tuf said.

Celise Waan, helmet cradled under her arm, made a noise of derision. “Oh, stuff and nonsense. The gray one is fine.”

“Permit me to mention a concept with which you are perhaps unfamiliar,” said Haviland Tuf. “It is referred to as an incubation period.”

“I’m going to kill that bitch,” Kaj Nevis threatened as he and Anittas made their way down a dark hallway. *“Damn her. You can’t get a decent mercenary anymore.”* The battlesuit’s huge head turned to search for the cybertech, the faceplate glowing. *“Hurry up.”*

“I cannot match your strides,” Anittas said as he hurried up. His sides ached from the effort of keeping up with Nevis’s pace; his cyberhalf was strong as metal and quick as electronic circuitry, but his biohalf was poor tired wounded flesh, and blood still oozed from the cuts Nevis had opened around his midsection. He was feeling dizzy and hot, as well. “It’s not far now,” he said. “Down this corridor and to the left, third door. It is a substantial substation. I felt it when I was plugged in. I will be able to meld with the main system.” And rest, he thought. He was incredibly weary, and his biohalf ached and throbbed.

“I WANT THE DAMN LIGHTS ON,” Nevis commanded. “AND THEN I WANT YOU TO FIND HER FOR ME. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?”

Anittas nodded, and pushed himself harder. Two small hot pinpoints of red burned on his cheeks, unseen by his silver-metal eyes, and for an instant his vision blurred and wavered, and he heard a loud buzzing in

his ears. He stopped.

“WHAT’S WRONG NOW?” Nevis demanded.

“I am experiencing some loss of function,” Anittas said. “I must reach the computer room and run a check on my systems.” He started forward again, and staggered. Then his balance deserted him totally, and he fell.

Rica Dawnstar was positive that she had lost them. Kaj Nevis was pretty formidable in his giant metal monkey suit, no doubt of that, but he was anything but silent. Rica had eyes like one of Tuf’s cats, another advantage in her profession. Where she could see, she ran; in the corridors that were totally black, she felt her way along, as quickly and quietly as she could. Down here the *Ark* was a maze of rooms and hallways. She threaded her way through the labyrinth, turning and twisting and turning once again, doubling back on herself, and listening carefully as Nevis’s clanging tread grew steadily fainter and finally faded altogether.

Only then, when she knew she was safe, did Rica Dawnstar begin to explore the warren in which she found herself. There were light plates set in the walls. Some responded to the touch of her hand, others did not. She lit her way wherever she could. The first section she passed through was residential—small sleeping rooms off narrow corridors, each with a bed, desk, computer console, and telescreen. Some rooms were empty and sterile; in others she found beds unmade and clothing strewn across the floor. Everything was neat and clean. Either the residents had just moved out the night before, or the *Ark* had kept this whole portion of the ship sealed and inviolate and in repair, until their approach had somehow activated it.

The next section had not been so fortunate. Here the rooms were full of dust and debris, and in one she found an ancient skeleton, a woman, still asleep in a bed that had collapsed into shapeless decay centuries before. What a difference a little air can make, Rica thought.

The corridors led into other corridors, wider ones. She peered into storage rooms, into chambers full of equipment and others packed with empty cages, into spotless white laboratories in endless succession that lined the sides of a corridor as wide as the boulevards of Shandicity. That led her, eventually, to a junction with an even grander corridor. She hesitated, unsure for a moment, and drew her needler. This way to the control room, she thought to herself—or to something important, at any rate. She stepped out onto the main way, spotted something in the corner; dim shapes, hunched down into little niches in the wall. Cautiously, Rica moved toward them.

When she got close, she laughed and holstered her weapon. The dark shapes were a row of scooters of some kind—small three-wheeled vehicles, each with two seats and big soft balloon tires. They were set into charging-slots in the walls.

Rica pulled one out, swung herself lithely into the driver’s seat, flicked on the power. The gauges registered a full charge. It even had a headlight, which cut through the dark and the shadows ahead quite nicely, thank you. Grinning, she rolled off down the broad corridor. She wasn’t going very fast, but what the hell, at least she was getting there.

Jefri Lion led them to an armory. It was there that Haviland Tuf killed Mushroom.

Lion was flashing a hand torch over the room in swift, excited arcs, exclaiming at the stockpile of laser rifles, projectile weapons, screechguns, and light-grenades. Celise Waan was complaining that she had no familiarity with weapons, and didn’t think she could kill anybody anyway. She was a scientist and not a soldier, after all, and she thought all this was barbaric.

Haviland Tuf held Mushroom cradled in his arms. The big tomcat had purred loudly when Tuf had

re-emerged from the *Cornucopia* and scooped him up, but no longer. Now he was making a pitiful sound, half mewling, half choking. When Tuf tried to stroke him, the long, soft gray fur came out in clumps. Mushroom screeched. Something was growing inside his mouth, Tuf saw; a web of fine black hairs crept from a black fungoid mass. Mushroom howled again, more loudly, and struggled to get free, wielding his claws uselessly against the metal of Tuf's suit. His big yellow eyes were covered with film.

The others had not noticed; their minds were on larger concerns than the cat that Tuf had voyaged with all his life. Jefri Lion and Celise Waan were arguing with each other. Tuf held Mushroom very still, despite the tom's struggles. He stroked him one last time and spoke soothingly to him. Then, in a single swift clean motion, he snapped the cat's neck.

"Nevis has already tried to kill us," Jefri Lion was saying to Celise Waan. "I don't care what your qualms are, really, you must do your part. You can't expect Tuf and me to carry the whole burden of our defense." Behind the thick plastic faceplate of his pressure suit, Lion frowned. "I wish I knew more about that battlesuit that Nevis is wearing," Lion said. "Tuf, will laser fire cut through that Unquin armor? Or would some kind of explosive projectile be more effective? A laser, I would think. Tuf?" He turned around, swinging the hand torch back and forth so shadows danced wildly against the chamber walls. "Tuf, where are you? Tuf?"

But Haviland Tuf was gone.

The door to the computer room refused to open. Kaj Nevis kicked it. The metal buckled inward in the center and the top of the door popped free of the frame. Nevis kicked it again, and again, his massive armored foot slamming with awful force against the thinner metal of the door. Then he shoved the crumpled remains of the barrier out of his way and entered, with Anittas cradled in his stiff lower arms. "I LIKE THIS DAMNED SUIT," he said. Anittas groaned.

The substation was filled with a thin subsonic humming, a buzz of anxiety. Tiny colored lights blinked on and off like fireflies.

"In the circuit," Anittas said. His hand flailed about weakly in what could have been either a gesture or a spasm. "Get me in the circuit," he repeated. The parts of him that were still organic looked terrible. His skin was covered with beads of black sweat; tiny drops of moisture as shiny as liquid ebony oozed from every fleshy pore. Mucus ran freely from his nose, and he was bleeding from his single organic ear. He couldn't stand or walk and his speech seemed to be deteriorating as well. The dull red glow from the battlesuit's helmet gave him a deep crimson caul that made him look even worse. "Hurry," he told Nevis. "The circuit, please, get me in the circuit."

"SHUT UP OR I'LL DUMP YOU HERE," Nevis answered. Anittas shuddered, as if the magnified volume of Nevis's voice was a physical assault. Nevis scanned the room until he found the interface station. He lugged the cybertech over there, and dropped him down in a white plastic chair that seemed to flow out of the console and deck. Anittas screamed. "SHUT UP!" Nevis repeated. He picked up the cybertech's arm clumsily, almost ripping it out of its socket. It was hard to gauge his strength in this damned suit, and fine manipulation was even harder, but he wasn't about to take it off—he *liked* this suit, yes he did. Anittas screamed again. Nevis ignored him, spread the tech's bluesteel fingers, jammed them into the interface. "THERE!" he said. He stepped back.

Anittas slumped forward, his head slamming against the metal and plastic of the console. His mouth gaped open. Blood dripped out, mingled with some thick black fluid, almost like oil. Nevis scowled. Had he gotten him there too late? Had the goddamned cybertech gone and croaked on him?

Then the lights blinked on, and the thin wild humming rose in pitch, and all the tiny little colored lights flashed on and off, on and off, on and off. Anittas was in the circuit.

Rica Dawnstar was rolling down the main way, feeling almost jaunty despite everything, when the blackness ahead of her became a blaze of light. Overhead, the ceiling panels stirred from long slumber, one after another, racing down the kilometers, turning the night into a day so bright it hurt her eyes for a moment.

Startled, she braked to a halt, and watched the wave of light recede into infinity. She glanced behind her. Back from where she'd come, the corridor was still filled with darkness.

She noticed something that hadn't been obvious before, in the dark. Set into the corridor floor were six thin parallel lines, translucent plastic guide-strips in red, blue, yellow, green, silver, purple. Each no doubt leading somewhere. Pity she didn't know which led where.

But as she watched, the silver tracery began to glow with an inner light. It stretched out in front of her, a thin, scintillating silvery ribbon. Simultaneously, the overhead panel just above her darkened. Rica frowned, and edged her scooter forward a couple of meters, out of the shadows and back into the light. But when she paused, that light went out as well. The silver ribbon in the floor throbbed insistently. "All right," Rica said, "we'll do it your way." She gunned her scooter and moved down the corridor, as the lights winked out behind her.

"He's come!" Celise Waan screeched when the corridor lit up. She seemed to jump a good meter in the air.

Jefri Lion stood his ground and scowled. He was holding a laser rifle in his hands. A high-explosive dart-pistol rode in a holster on one hip and a screechgun on the other. A huge two-man plasma cannon was strapped securely to his back. He wore a bandolier of mindbombs over his right shoulder, a bandolier of light-grenades over his left, and a large vibroknife sheathed on his thigh. Inside his golden helmet, Lion was smiling, his blood pounding. He was ready for anything. He hadn't felt this good in over a century, since the last time he saw action with Skaeglay's Volunteers against the Black Angels. To hell with all that dusty academic stuff. Jefri Lion was a man of action, and now he felt young again.

"Be quiet, Celise," he said. "No one's come. It's just us. The lights came on, that's all."

Celise Waan seemed unconvinced. She was armed, too, but she kept dragging the laser rifle along the deck because she said it was too heavy, and Jefri Lion was half afraid of what would happen if she tried to arm and throw one of her light-grenades. "Look," she pointed, "what's that?"

The floor had two bands of colored plastic inset into it, Jefri Lion saw. One was black, one orange. Now the orange one lit up. "It's some sort of computerized guideway," he pronounced. "Let's follow it."

"No," Celise Waan said.

Jefri Lion scowled. "Listen here, I'm the commander and you'll do what I say. We can handle anything we might meet. Now move along."

"No!" Celise Waan said stubbornly. "I'm tired. It's not safe. I'm staying right here."

"I'm giving you a direct order," said Jefri Lion impatiently.

"Oh, stuff and nonsense. You can't give me orders. I'm a full Wisdom and you're only an Associate Scholar."

"This isn't the Center," Lion said with irritation. "Are you coming?"

"No." She sat down in the middle of the corridor and crossed her arms.

"Very well, then. Good luck to you." Jefri Lion turned his back on her and began to follow the orange guide-light alone. Behind him, immobile, his army stubbornly and sullenly watched him depart.

Haviland Tuf had come to a strange place.

He had wandered down endless dark, narrow corridors, carrying Mushroom's limp body, hardly thinking, without plan or destination. Finally, he had emerged from one such corridor into what seemed to be a large cavern. The walls fell away on all sides of him. He was swallowed by empty darkness, and his footsteps sent echoes ringing off distant walls. There were sounds in the dark—a low humming, at the threshold of hearing, and a louder sound, a liquid sound, like the ebb and flow of some endless underground ocean. But he was not underground, Haviland Tuf reminded himself. He was lost aboard an ancient starship called *Ark*, and surrounded by villains, and Mushroom was dead by his own hand.

He walked on. How long he could not say. His footsteps rang. The floor was level and bare and seemed to go on forever. Finally he walked right into something in the dark. He was moving slowly, so he was not hurt, but he dropped Mushroom in the collision. He groped ahead, tried to determine what sort of object had stopped him, but it was hard to tell through the fabric of his gloves. It was large and curved.

That was when the lights came on.

For Haviland Tuf, there was no explosion of light; what illumination existed in this place was dim, murky, subdued. As it shone down from above, it cast ominous black shadows everywhere, and gave the lighted areas a curious greenish cast, as if they were covered with some radiant moss.

Tuf gazed about. It was more a tunnel than a cavern, perhaps. He had walked all the way across it, a distance of at least a kilometer, he judged. But its breadth was nothing to its length, it must run the full length of the ship, along its major axis, for it seemed to vanish into dimness in both directions. The ceiling above was a shroud of green shadows; high, high overhead, echoes rang off its dimly seen curves. There were machines, a good many machines—computer substations built into the walls, strange devices the like of which Haviland Tuf had never seen, flat worktables with waldoes and microhands built into them. Yet the main feature of this huge, echoing shaft was the vats.

Everywhere there were vats. They lined both walls as far as the eye could see in either direction, and a few even bulged down from the ceiling. Some of the vats were immense, their swollen translucent walls large enough to contain the *Cornucopia*. Elsewhere they were *cells* the *size* of a man's hand, thousands of them, ascending from floor to ceiling like plastic honeycombs. The computers and work-stations dwindled into insignificance beside them, small details easily overlooked. And now Haviland Tuf discerned the source of the liquid sound he had heard. Most of the vats were empty, he saw through the greenish gloom, but a few—one here, one there, two farther on—seemed to be full of colored fluids, bubbling, or stirred by the feeble motions of half-seen shapes within.

Haviland Tuf regarded the vista before him for a long time, its scale making him feel very small. Yet finally he turned away, and bent to pick up Mushroom once again. As he knelt, he saw what he had walked into in the dark: a vat, a medium-large one, its transparent walls curving away from him. This vat was full of a thick, murky yellowish liquid, shot through with moving swirls of red. Tuf heard a faint gurgling, and felt a slight vibration, as if something were stirring inside. He leaned closer, peered in, and then craned his head up.

Within, floating, unborn and yet alive, the tyrannosaur stared down at him.

In the circuit there was no pain. In the circuit he had no body. In the circuit he was mind, pure sweet white mind, and he was part of something vast and powerful and infinitely greater than himself, greater than any of them. In the circuit he was more than human, more than cyborg, more than mere machine. In the circuit he was something like a god. Time was nothing in the circuit; he was as swift as thought, as swift as silicon circuitry opening and closing, as swift as the messages that raced along superconductive tendons, as swift as the flash of microlasers weaving their invisible webs in the central matrix. In the circuit, he had a thousand ears and a thousand eyes and a thousand hands to ball into fists and strike with; in the circuit he could be everywhere at once.

He was Anittas. He was *Ark*. He was cybertech. He was more than five hundred satellite stations and monitors, he was twenty Imperial 7400s ruling the twenty sectors of the ship from twenty scattered substations, he was Battlemaster, Codebreaker, Astrogator, Drive Doctor, Medcenter, Ship's Log, Librarian, Bio-Librarian, Microsurgeon, Clonetender, Maintenance and Repair, Communications, and Defense. He was all the hardware and all the software and all the back-up systems and all secondary and tertiary back-ups. He was twelve hundred years old and thirty kilometers long and the heart of him was the central matrix, barely two meters square and all but infinite in size. He touched here and there and everywhere and moved on, his consciousness racing down the circuits, branching, dancing, riding on the lasers. Knowledge raced through him in a torrent, like a great river running wild, with all the cool steady sweet white power of a high voltage cable. He was *Ark*. He was Anittas. And he was dying.

Down deep in his bowels, down in the ship's intestines, down at substation seventeen by airlock nine, Anittas let his silver-metal eyes track and focus on Kaj Nevis. He smiled. On his half-human face, it was a grotesque expression. His teeth were chrome steel. "You fool," he said to Nevis.

The battlesuit took one threatening step closer. A pincer raised itself with a grinding, metallic sound, opened and closed. "WATCH YOUR MOUTH."

"Fool I said and fool it is," Anittas told him. His laughter was a horrible sound; it was full of pain and metallic echoes, and his lips were bleeding freely, leaving wet red smears on those shining silver teeth. "You killed me, Nevis, and for nothing—for impatience. I could have given it all to you. It's empty, Nevis. The ship is empty, they're all dead. And the system is empty, too. I'm alone in here. No other mind in the circuit. It's an idiot, Kaj Nevis. The *Ark* is an idiot giant. They were afraid, those Earth Imperials. They'd achieved true Artificial Intelligence. Oh yes, they had their great AI warships, their robot fleets, but the AIs had minds of their own, and there were incidents. It's in the histories—there was Kandabaer and the action off Lear and the revolt of *Alecto* and *Golem*. The seedships were too powerful, they knew that as they built them. The *Ark* had duties for two hundred—strategists and scientists and eco-engineers and crew and officers—and she could carry more than a thousand soldiers, too, and feed all of them, and operate at full capacity, and lay waste to *worlds*, oh yes. And everything worked through the system, Nevis, but it's a safe system, a big system, a sophisticated system, a system that can repair itself and defend itself and do a thousand things at once—if you tell it to. The two hundred crewmen made it efficient, but you could run it with only one, Nevis. Not efficiently, no, not at anything near full capacity, but you could do it. It can't run itself—it's got no mind, no AI, it waits for orders—but one man can tell it what to do. One man! I could have done it easily. But Kaj Nevis got impatient and killed me."

Nevis moved still closer. "YOU DON'T SOUND DEAD TO ME," he said, opening and closing his pincer with a sudden menacing snap.

"But I am," said Anittas. "I am sucking power from the system, boosting my cyberhalf, giving myself back a speech capacity. But I'm dying all the while. Plagues, Nevis. The ship was horribly undermanned in its last days, only thirty-two left, and there was an attack, a Hruun attack. They broke the code, opened the dome, and landed. They stormed up the halls, more than a hundred of them. They were winning, threatening to take the ship. The defenders fought them every step of the way. They sealed off whole sectors of the *Ark*, evacuated all the air, turned off all the power. They got a few that way. They set up ambushes, fought them meter for meter. There are still places that are battle-scarred, dysfunctional, beyond the *Ark*'s repair capacities. They let loose plague and pestilence and parasite, and from their vats they summoned their pet nightmares, and they fought, and died, and won. In the end all the Hruun were dead. And you know what, Kaj Nevis? All but four of the defenders were dead as well. One of those was grievously wounded, two others sick, and the last was dead inside. Would you like to know their names? No, I thought not. You have no curiosity, Kaj Nevis. It is no matter. Tuf will want to know, as will the ancient Lion."

"TUF? LION? WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? THEY'RE DEAD, BOTH OF THEM."

“Incorrect,” Anittas said. “They are both aboard even now. Lion has found the armory. He’s a walking arsenal, and he’s coming for you. Tuf has found something even more important. Rica Dawnstar is following the silver trace to the main control room, the captain’s chair. You see, Kaj Nevis, the gang’s all here. I have awakened every part of the *Ark* that remains functional, and I am leading them all by the hand.”

“STOP IT, THEN,” Nevis commanded. He did not hesitate. The great metal pincer reached out and embraced Anittas about his biometal throat. Black sweat oozed down onto the pincer’s serrated blade. “STOP THEM RIGHT NOW.”

“I have not completed my story, Kaj Nevis,” the cybertech said. His mouth was a smear of blood. “The last Imperials knew they could not go on. They shut down the ship, gave it up to vacuum and silence and the void. They made it go derelict. Yet not entirely, you see. They feared another attack, by the Hruun or perhaps, in time, others yet unknown. So they told the *Ark* to defend itself. They armed the plasma cannon and external lasers and kept the defense sphere functional, as we learned to our sorrow. And they programmed the ship to take a terrible vengeance for them, to return again and again and again to Hro B’rana, whence the Hruun had come, and to deliver its gift of plague and pestilence and death. To guard against the Hruun building up immunity, they subjected their plague tanks to constant radiation, to encourage endless mutation, and they established a program for automatic genetic manipulation to fashion ever newer and more deadly viruses.”

“I DON’T GIVE A DAMN,” Kaj Nevis said. “HAVE YOU STOPPED THE OTHERS? CAN YOU KILL THEM? I WARN YOU, DO IT NOW OR YOU’RE DEAD.”

“I am dead anyway, Kaj Nevis,” Anittas said, “I’ve told you that. The plagues. They left a secondary defense in place. Should the ship be breached once again, the *Ark* was programmed to wake itself, to fill the corridors with atmosphere, oh-yes, but an atmosphere tainted by a dozen different disease vectors. The plague tanks have been churning and boiling for a thousand standard years, Kaj Nevis, mutating again and again. There is no name for what I have contracted. Some kind of spore, I think. There are antigens, medicines, vaccines—the *Ark* has been manufacturing those, as well—but it’s too late for me, too late by far. I breathed it in, and it’s eating my biohalf alive. My cyberhalf is inedible. I could have given us this ship, Kaj Nevis. Together we might have had the power of a god. Instead we die.”

“YOU’LL DIE,” Nevis corrected. “AND THE SHIP IS MINE.”

“I think not. I have kicked the idiot giant soundly, Kaj Nevis, and it is awake again. Still an idiot, oh yes, but awake, and ready for orders you have neither the knowledge nor the capacity to give. I am leading Jefri Lion straight here, and Rica Dawnstar is ascending toward central control even now. And more—”

“NO MORE,” Nevis said curtly. The pincer crunched through metal and bone and took the cybertech’s head clean off with a single swift snap. The head bounced off Anittas’s chest, hit the floor, and rolled. Blood jetted from the neck, and a thick protruding cable gave a final futile hiss and threw off a blue-white spark before the body sagged against the computer console. Kaj Nevis drew back his arm and swung, smashing the console again and again, until it was a ruin and hundreds of shards of plastic and metal were scattered over the floor.

There was a high, thin whirring sound.

Kaj Nevis turned, faceplate glowing a bright bloody red, searching for the source.

On the floor, the head was looking at him. The eyes, the shiny silver eyes, tracked and focused. The mouth split into a wet grin. “And more, Kaj Nevis,” the head said to him. “I have activated the final line of defense programmed by those last Imperials. The stasis field is down. The nightmares are waking up now. The guardians are about to come forth and destroy you.”

“DAMN YOU!” Nevis shouted. He set a huge, flat foot atop the cybertech’s head, and brought down all his weight. Steel and bone alike crunched under the impact, and Nevis worked his foot back and

forth, back and forth, grinding away until there was nothing beneath his heel but a red-gray paste spotted by flakes of white and silver.

And then, at last, he had silence.

For a long ways, two kilometers or more, the six traces in the floor ran parallel, although only the silver was alive and glowing. The red broke away first, veering off to the right at a junction. The purple terminated a kilometer farther on, at a wide door that proved to be the entrance to a spotless automated kitchen-mess hall complex. Rica Dawnstar was tempted to pause and explore a bit more, but the silver trace was throbbing and the overhead lights were going out one by one, urging her onward, down the main way.

Finally she came to the end. The broad corridor she was following curved gradually to the left and met another corridor just as grand. Their terminus was a huge wheel from which a half dozen lesser hallways branched off like spokes. The ceiling was high above her. Looking up, Rica spotted at least three other levels, connected with catwalks, bridges, and great circling balconies. At the hub of the wheel was a single large shaft that ascended from floor to ceiling—an elevator, clearly.

The blue trace followed one spoke, the yellow a second, the green a third. The shining silver guideway led straight to the elevator doors. The doors opened at her approach. Rica drove her scooter right to the base of the shaft, stopped, dismounted, hesitated. The elevator beckoned. But it looked awfully enclosed in there.

She hesitated too long.

All the lights went out.

There was only the silver trace, a single thin line like a finger, pointing straight ahead. And the elevator itself, its lights still blazing.

Rica Dawnstar frowned, drew her needler, and stepped inside. “Up, please,” she announced. The doors closed and the elevator began to ascend.

Jefri Lion walked with a spring in his step, despite the weight of the weapons he was carrying. He felt even better since leaving Celise Waan behind; that woman was nothing but a nuisance anyway, and he doubted that she'd be of much use in a skirmish. He had considered the possibility of stealth, and rejected it. He was not afraid of Kaj Nevis and his battlesuit. Oh, it was formidably armored, he had no doubt of that, but after all, it was of alien manufacture, and Lion was armed with the deadliest weaponry of the Earth Imperials, the height of the technological and military prowess of the Federal Empire of Old Earth as it had been before the Collapse. He'd never even heard of the Unquish, so what kind of armigers could they be? No doubt some obscure Hrangan slave race. He would deal with Nevis in short order if he found him, and with that treacherous Rica Dawnstar, too—her and that stupid needler. He'd like to see how a needler could possibly stand up against a plasma cannon. Yes, he'd like to see that.

Lion wondered what plans Nevis and his cohorts were making for the *Ark*. Something illegal and immoral, no doubt. Well, it made no matter, because he was going to take this ship—he, Jefri Lion, Associate Scholar in Military History at the ShanDellor Center, and one-time Second Tactical Analyst of the Third Wing of Skaeglay's Volunteers. He was going to capture an EEC seedship, perhaps with Tuf's help if he could find him, but he would do it in any event. Afterwards, there would be no selling of this treasure for crass personal gain. No, he would take the ship all the way to Avalon, to the great Academy of Human Knowledge, and turn it over to them with the proviso that he remain in charge of its study. It was a project that would last him the rest of his life, and when it ended Jefri Lion, scholar and warrior, would be spoken of in the same breath as Kleronomas himself, who had made the Academy what it was.

Lion strode down the center of the corridor with his head thrown back, following the orange trace, and as he walked he began to whistle a jaunty marching tune that he had learned in Skaeglay's Volunteers a good forty years ago. He whistled and walked, walked and whistled.

Until the trace died out.

Celise Waan sat on the deck for a long time, her arms crossed tightly against her breasts, her face set in a petulant frown. She sat until the sound of Lion's footsteps had faded away entirely. She sat and brooded on all the insults and wrongs she had been forced to endure. They were all impossible, every one of them. She should have known better than to throw in her lot with such an unpromising and disrespectful crew. Anittas was more machine than man, Rica Dawnstar was an insolent little wretch, Kaj Nevis was no better than a common criminal, and Haviland Tuf was just unspeakable. Even Jefri Lion, her colleague, had proved unreliable in the end. The plague star was *her* discovery, and she had let them in on it, and what had it gotten her? Discomfort, rudeness, and finally abandonment. Well, Celise Waan didn't intend to stand for it anymore. She had decided not to share the ship with any of them. It was her find, and she would go back to Shandicity and claim it under the salvage laws of ShanDellor, as was her right, and if any of her wretched companions had any complaints, they would have to take her to litigation. Meanwhile, she didn't intend to talk to any of them, not ever again.

Her rear was getting sore and her legs had begun to fall asleep. She had been sitting in one position for a long time. Her back ached, too, and she was hungry. She wondered if there was any place she could get a decent meal aboard this derelict. Perhaps there was. The computers seemed to be working, and the defense systems, and even the lights, so perhaps the commissary was functioning as well. She got up and decided to go see.

It was obvious to Haviland Tuf that something was happening.

The noise level in the great shaft was rising, slowly but appreciably. He could make out a low humming sound quite distinctly, and those gurgling sounds were more noticeable as well. And in the tyrannosaur vat, the suspension fluid seemed to be thinning and changing colors. The red swirls had faded or been sucked away, and the yellow liquid grew more transparent with every passing moment. Tuf watched a waldo unfold from one side of the vat. It appeared as though it was giving the reptile an injection, though Tuf had difficulty observing the details, since the lighting was poor.

Haviland Tuf decided on a strategic retreat. He backed away from the dinosaur vat, and began to walk down the shaft. After he had come only a short way, he came upon one of the computer stations and work areas he had observed. Tuf paused.

He had experienced little difficulty discerning the nature and purpose of this chamber he had chanced upon. The *Ark* had at its heart a vast cell library, containing tissue samples from literally millions of different kinds of plant and animal and viral lifeforms from an uncounted number of worlds, or so Jefri Lion had informed him. These samples were cloned, as the ship's tacticians and eco-engineers deemed appropriate, and so the *Ark* and its lost sister ships could send forth disease to decimate a world's population, insects to devastate its crops, fast-breeding armies of small animals to wreak havoc on the ecology and food chain, or even terrible alien predators to strike fear into the heart of the enemy. Yet everything began with the cloning.

Tuf had found the cloning room. The work areas included equipment obviously intended for complex microsurgery, and the vats were undoubtedly where the cell samples were tended and grown to maturity. Lion had told him about the chronowarp as well, that vanished secret of the Earth Imperials, a field that could literally warp the fabric of time itself, albeit only in a small area, and at vast cost in energy. That way the clones could be brought to maturity in hours, or held, unchanging and alive, for millennia.

Haviland Tuf considered the work area, the computer station, and Mushroom, whose small body he still carried.

Cloning began with a single cell.

The techniques were no doubt stored in the computer. Perhaps there was even an instruction program. "Indeed," Haviland Tuf announced to himself. It seemed quite logical. He was no cybertech, to be sure, but he was an intelligent man who had operated various types of computer systems for virtually his entire lifespan.

Haviland Tuf stepped up to the work station, deposited Mushroom gently beneath the hood of the micro-screen, and turned on the computer console. He could make no sense of the commands at first, yet he persisted.

After a few minutes he was intent on his labors—so intent that he did not notice the loud gurgling sound behind him when the thin yellow fluid in the dinosaur vat began to drain away.

Kaj Nevis smashed his way out of the system substation looking for something to kill.

He was angry—angry at himself for being impatient and unthinking. Anittas could have been useful; Nevis just hadn't considered the possibility of contagion in the ship's air. The damn cybertech would have had to have been killed eventually, of course, but that would not have been difficult. And now everything was falling apart. Nevis felt secure in the battlesuit, but still uneasy. He didn't like hearing that Tuf and the others had somehow gotten aboard. Tuf knew more about this damn suit than he did, after all; maybe he knew its weaknesses.

Kaj Nevis had already pinpointed one of those weaknesses himself—his air supply was running low. A modern pressure suit, like the one Tuf was wearing, included an airpac. The bacteria infused in its filters turned carbon dioxide into oxygen as fast as a human being could turn oxygen into carbon dioxide, so there was never any danger of running out of air, unless the damn bugs went and died on you. But this battlesuit was primitive; it carried a large but finite supply of air in those four huge tanks on its back. And the gauge in his helmet, if he was reading it correctly, indicated that one of those tanks was nearly empty. That still left three, which ought to give him more than enough time to get rid of the rest of them, if only he could find them. Still, it made Nevis uneasy. He was surrounded by perfectly breathable air, to be sure, but he was damned if he was going to crack his helmet after what had happened to the cybertech. The organic part of Anittas's body had decayed faster than Nevis would have believed, and the black goop that had eaten up the cybertech inside was as loathsome a sight as Kaj had ever seen, in a life that had featured lots of loathsome sights. He'd sooner suffocate, Kaj Nevis had decided.

But there was no danger of that. If the damned *Ark* could be contaminated, it could be cleansed, too. He'd find the control room and figure out how to do it. Even one clean sector would be enough. Of course, Anittas had said that Rica Dawnstar was already at the control room, but that did not faze him. In fact, he was kind of looking forward to that reunion.

He chose a direction at random and set off, his armored steps pounding against the deck. So let them hear him—what did he care. He *liked* this suit.

Rica Dawnstar sprawled in the captain's chair and surveyed the readouts she had projected on the main telescreen. Well-padded, large, covered with comfortable old plastic, the chair felt like a throne. It made a good place to rest. The trouble was, you really couldn't do anything *but* rest from there. The bridge had obviously been designed so that the captain sat in his throne and gave orders, and the other officers—there were nine other work stations on the upper bridge, twelve more in the lower-level control pit—did all the actual programming and punching of buttons. Lacking the foresight to have come aboard with nine flunkies, Rica was forced to move back and forth across the bridge, from one station to

another, to try and get the *Ark* up and running again.

It took her a while—it was tedious work—and when she entered commands from the wrong substation, nothing happened. But slowly, step by step, she was figuring it all out. At least she felt as though she was making progress.

And she was secure. That had been her first objective, locking that elevator so that nobody else could come up and surprise her. As long as she was here and they were down there, Rica Dawnstar held the trump card. Every sector of the ship had its own substation, and every specialized function, from defense to cloning to propulsion to data storage, had its own sub-nexus and command post, but from up here she could oversee all of them, and countermand any command that anybody else might try and enter. If she noticed. And if she could figure out how. That was the problem. She could only man one station at a time, and she could only get things done when she figured out the proper sequence of commands. She was doing it, yes, by trial and error, but that was a lengthy and cumbersome process.

She slumped back in her padded throne and watched the readouts, feeling proud of herself on several counts. She had managed to elicit a shipwide status check, it seemed. The *Ark* had already given her a full damage report on those sectors and systems that had been inoperative for a thousand years, waiting for repairs beyond the ship's capacities. Now it was telling her what programming was presently engaged.

The bio-defense listing was especially impressive, in a frightening sort of way. It went on and on. Rica had never heard of three-quarters of the diseases that had been unleashed to greet them, but they sounded unpleasant in the extreme. Anittas was no doubt one with the great program beyond the universe by now. Obviously, her next objective should be to try and seal off the bridge from the rest of the ship, irradiate and disinfect and try to see if she could get some uncontaminated air in here. Otherwise her suit was going to start getting pretty gamey in a day or two.

Up on the telescreen, it read:

BIO-DEFENSE PHASE ONE (MICRO)
REPORT COMPLETE
BIO-DEFENSE PHASE TWO (MACRO)
REPORT COMMENCING

Rica frowned. Macro? What the hell did that mean? Big plagues?

STAND-BY BIO-WEAPONS AT READY: 47

the screen told her, and it followed that cryptic bit of information with a lengthy list of species numbers. It was a boring list. Rica slumped back in the captain's throne again. When the list ended, more messages rolled across the screen.

ALL CLONING PROCEDURES COMPLETE
MALFUNCTIONS IN VATS: 671, 3312, 3379
MALFUNCTIONS ABORTED
STASIS FIELDS TERMINATED
RELEASE CYCLE COMMENCING

Rica Dawnstar wasn't sure she liked the sound of that. Release cycle, she thought. What was it releasing? On the one hand, Kaj Nevis was still out there; if this second-phase defense could discomfort, distract, or dispose of him, that was all to her benefit. On the other hand, she already faced the task of getting rid of all these plagues. She didn't need any more problems. The reports began to flash by more quickly.

SPECIES # 22-743-88639-04090

HOMEWORLD: VILKAKIS

COMMON NAME: HOODED DRACULA

it said. Rica sat up straight. She'd heard of Vilkakais and its hooded draculas. Nasty things. Some kind of flying nocturnal bloodsucker, she seemed to recall. Dim-witted, but incredibly sensitive to sound, and insanely aggressive. The message flicked out. In its place appeared a single line.

INITIATING RELEASE

the screen told her. It held a moment and was replaced by a shorter line, a single word that flashed once, twice, three times, and then was gone:

RELEASED

Now, could a hooded dracula possibly have Kaj Nevis for lunch? Unlikely, Rica thought—not so long as he wore that stupid armored suit. “Great,” she said aloud. She didn't have a battlesuit, which meant that the *Ark* was creating problems for her, not for Nevis.

SPECIES # 13-612-71425-88812

HEMOWORLD: ABBATOIR

COMMON NAME: HELLKITTENS

Rica had no idea what a hellkitten was, but she didn't especially want to find out. She had heard of Abbatoir, of course—a quaint little world that had eaten three different colonizing parties; its lifeforms were supposed to be uniformly unpleasant. Unpleasant enough to chew through Nevis's battlesuit, though? That seemed doubtful.

INITIATING RELEASE

How many things was the ship going to belch forth? Forty-some-odd, she recalled. “Terrific,” she said dourly. Fill up the ship with forty-plus hungry monsters, any one of them sufficient to lunch on her mother's favorite daughter. No, this wouldn't do, not at all. Rica stood up and surveyed the bridge. So where did she have to go to put an end to this nonsense?

RELEASED

Rica vaulted over the captain's chair, strode briskly back to the area she'd pegged as the defense command station, and told it to cancel its current programming.

SPECIES # 76-102-95994-12965

HEMOWORLD: JAYDEN TWO

COMMON NAME: WALKING-WEB

Lights flashed in front of her, and the small telescreen on the console told her that the *Ark*'s external defense sphere was down. But up on the main screen, the parade went on.

INITIATING RELEASE

Rica uncorked a string of curses. Her fingers moved swiftly over the console, trying to tell the system that it wasn't the external defenses she wanted dropped, it was bio-defense phase two. The machine didn't seem to understand her.

RELEASED

Finally she got a response from the board. It told her she was at the wrong console. She scowled and glanced around. Of course. This was external defense, weapons systems. There had to be some kind of bio-control station, too.

SPECIES # 54-749-37377-84921

HEMOWORLD: PSC92, TSC749, UNNAMED

COMMON NAME: ROLLERAM

Rica moved to the next station.

INITIATING RELEASE

The system responded to her cancel demand with a baffled query. No active program on this subsystem.

RELEASED

Four, Rica thought sourly. “That’s enough,” she said loudly. She stepped over to the next station, punched in a cancel, moved on without waiting to see if there was an effect, paused at another console to enter another cancel, moved on.

SPECIES # 67-001-00342-10078

HOMEWORLD: EARTH (EXTINCT)

COMMON NAME: TYRANNOSAURUS REX

She ran now. Run, cancel, run, cancel, run, cancel.

INITIATING RELEASE

She made a circuit of the entire bridge, as quickly as she could. By the time she was done, she wasn’t even certain which command, at which station, had done the trick. But up on the screen, the message read:

RELEASE CYCLE TERMINATED

BIO-WEAPONS ABORTED: 3

BIO-WEAPONS RELEASED: 5

STAND-BY BIO-WEAPONS AT READY: 39

BIO-DEFENSE PHASE TWO (MACRO) REPORT COMPLETE

Rica Dawnstar stood with her hands on her hips, frowning. Five loose. That wasn’t too bad. She thought she’d managed to catch it after four, but she must have been a split-second too late. Oh, well. What the hell was a tyrannosaurus rex, anyway?

At least there was no one out there but Nevis.

Without the trace to guide him, Jefri Lion had wasted no time getting lost in the maze of interconnected corridors. Finally, he had adopted a simple policy; choose the wider corridors over the narrower, turn right where the passages were of the same size, go down whenever possible. It seemed to work. In no time at all, he heard a noise.

He flattened himself against a wall, although the attempt at concealment was somewhat compromised by the ungainly bulk of the plasma cannon on his back. He listened. Yes, definitely, a noise. Up ahead of him. Footsteps. *Loud* footsteps, though at some distance, but coming his way—Kaj Nevis in his battlesuit.

Smiling to himself with satisfaction, Jefri Lion unslung the plasma cannon and began to erect its tripod.

The tyrannosaur roared.

It was, thought Haviland Tuf, a thoroughly frightening sound. He pressed his lips firmly together in annoyance and squirmed back another half-meter into his niche. He was decidedly uncomfortable. Tuf was a big man, and there was very little room down here. He sat with his legs jammed under each other awkwardly, his back bent over in a painful manner, and his head bumping against the work station above. Yet he was not ungrateful. It was a small niche, true, but it had given him a place to seek shelter. Fortunately, he had been deft enough to attain that shelter. He was fortunate, also, in that the work station, with its waldos and microscanner and computer terminal, rested upon a heavy, thick, metal table that extruded itself from floor and wall, and not simply a flimsy item of furniture to be easily brushed aside.

Nonetheless, Haviland Tuf was not entirely pleased with himself. He felt foolish; his dignity had been decisively compromised. No doubt his ability to concentrate on the task at hand was, in its own way, commendable. Still, that degree of concentration might be considered a liability when it allowed a seven-meter-tall carnivorous reptile to sneak up on one.

The tyrannosaur roared again. Tuf could feel the work station vibrate overhead. The dinosaur's massive head appeared about two meters in front of his face, as the beast leaned over, counterbalanced by its great tail, and tried to get in at him. Fortunately, its head was too large and the niche too small. The reptile pulled out and screamed its frustration; echoes rebounded all up and down the central cloning chamber. Its tail lashed around and smashed into the work station; the sheltering table shook to the impact, something shattered up above, and Tuf winced.

"Go away," he said as firmly as he could. He rested his hands atop his paunch and attempted to look stern.

The tyrannosaur paid him no heed..."These vigorous efforts will avail you naught," Tuf pointed out. "You are too large and the table too sturdily built, as would be readily apparent to you had you a brain larger than a mushroom. Moreover, you are undoubtedly a clone produced from the genetic record contained within a fossil. Therefore, it might be argued that I have a superior claim to life, on the grounds that you are extinct and ought properly to remain so. Begone!" The tyrannosaur's reply was a furious squirming lunge and a wet bellow that sprayed Tuf with fine droplets of dinosaur saliva. The tail came down once more.

When she first caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of her eye, Celise Waan squeaked in panic.

She backpedaled and whirled to face—to face what? There was nothing there. But she had been certain that she'd seen something, up near that open door. What, though? Nervously, she unholstered her dart-pistol. She'd abandoned the laser rifle quite a distance back. It was cumbersome and heavy, and the effort of lugging it around had tired her out. Besides, she doubted that she'd be able to hit anything with it. The pistol was much preferable, in her view. As Jefri Lion had explained it, it threw explosive plastic darts, so she would not actually have to score a *hit*, just come close.

Warily, she moved toward the open door. She paused to one side of it, raised her pistol high, thumbed off the safety, and then peered quickly into the room.

Nothing.

It was some kind of storage room, she saw, full of plastisealed equipment piled high on floater skids. She glanced around uneasily. Had she imagined it, then? No. As she was about to turn away, she saw it once more, a tiny darting shape that appeared on the periphery of her vision and vanished before she could quite get a clear look at it.

But this time she had seen where it had gone. She hurried after it, feeling bolder now; it had, after all, been quite small.

She had it cornered, she saw when she rounded the looming equipment skid. But what was it? Celise Waan moved closer, gun at the ready.

It was a cat.

It stared at her steadily, its tail flicking back and forth. It was kind of a funny cat. Very small—a kitten, really. It was pale white, with vivid scarlet stripes, an oversized head, and astonishing lambent crimson eyes.

Another cat, thought Celise Waan. That was all she needed: another cat.

It hissed at her.

She drew back, a little startled. Tuf's cats hissed at her from time to time, especially the nasty black-and-white one, but not like *that*. That hiss was almost, well, reptilian. Chilling, somehow. And its tongue...it seemed to have a very long, very peculiar tongue.

It hissed again.

"Here, kitty," she called. "Here, kitty."

It stared at her, unblinking, cold, haughty. Then it drew itself back and spat at her. The spittle struck her square in the center of her faceplate. It was thick greenish stuff, and it obscured her vision for a moment until she wiped it away with the back of her arm.

Celise Waan decided that she'd had enough of cats. "Nice kitty," she said, "come here, kitty. I've got a present for you."

It hissed again, drew back to spit.

Celise Waan grunted and blew it to hell.

The plasma cannon would dispose of Kaj Nevis handsomely; on that score Jefri Lion had no doubt. The strength of the armor on that alien battlesuit was an unknown factor. If it was at all comparable to the armored suits worn by the Federal Empire's own assault squads during the Thousand Years War, it might be able to deflect laser fire, to withstand small explosions, to ignore sonic attacks, but a plasma cannon could melt through five meters of solid duralloy plate. One good plasma ball would instantly turn any kind of personal armor into slag, and Nevis would be incinerated before he even understood what had hit him.

The difficulty was the size of the plasma cannon. It was unfortunately cumbersome, and the so-called portable version, with its small energy-pac, took almost a full standard minute after each shot to generate another plasma ball in its force chamber. Jefri Lion was acutely and uncomfortably aware that, were he to miss Kaj Nevis, he would be unlikely to get a second shot. Moreover, even on its tripod, the plasma cannon was unwieldy, and it had been many years since he had been in the field, and even then, his strong suits had been his mind and his tactical sense, not his reflexes. After so many decades at the ShanDellor Center, he had no great confidence in his eye-hand coordination.

So Jefri Lion concocted a plan.

Fortunately, plasma cannons had often been employed for automated perimeter defense, and this one had the standard minimind and autofire sequence. Jefri Lion erected the tripod in the middle of a broad corridor, approximately twenty meters down from a major intersection. He programmed in an extremely narrow field of fire, and calibrated the targetting cube with the utmost precision. Then he initiated the autofire sequence and stepped back with satisfaction. Inside the energy-pac he saw the plasma ball forming, burning brighter and brighter, and after a minute the ready light flashed on. Now the cannon was set, and its minimind was vastly quicker and more deadly accurate than Lion could ever hope to be firing manually. It was targeted on the center of the corridor intersection ahead, but it would fire only at objects whose dimensions exceeded certain preprogrammed limits.

So Jefri Lion could dash right through the cannon's target cube without fear, but Kaj Nevis, following in his absurdly huge battlesuit, would meet with a hot surprise. Now it only remained to lure Nevis into the appropriate position.

It was a stroke of tactical genius worthy of Napoleon or Chin Wu or Stephan Cobalt Northstar. Jefri Lion was infinitely pleased with himself.

The heavy footsteps had grown louder as Lion had worked with the plasma cannon, but in the last minute or so they had begun to fade; Nevis had obviously taken a wrong turn and would not be coming to the right position of his own accord. Very well then, Jefri Lion thought; he would bring him there.

He walked to the precise center of the fire zone with complete confidence in his own abilities, paused there briefly, smiled, and set off down the cross-corridor to attract the attention of his unwary prey.

Up on the great-curved telescreen, the *Ark* revolved in three-dimensional cross-section.

Rica Dawnstar, having abandoned the captain's throne for a less comfortable but more efficient post at one of the bridge work stations, studied the display, and the data flashing by underneath it, with some annoyance. It seemed she had a lot more company than she had thought.

The system displayed intruding lifeforms as vivid red pinpoints of light. There were six pinpoints. One of them was on the bridge. Since Rica was quite alone, obviously that was her. But five others? Even if Anittas was still alive, there should have been only two additional dots. It didn't add up.

Maybe the *Ark* hadn't been derelict after all—maybe there was still someone aboard. Except the system claimed to depict authorized *Ark* personnel as green dots, and there was no green to be seen.

Other scavengers? Highly unlikely.

It had to mean that Tuf, Lion, and Waan had somehow docked after all. That made the most sense. And, indeed, the system claimed there was an intruding lifeform in a ship up on the landing deck.

All right. That added up. Six red dots equalled her and Nevis and Anittas (how had he lived through the damned plagues? the system insisted it was showing only *living* organisms) plus Tuf and Waan and Lion. One of the others was still up in the *Cornucopia*, and the rest...

It was simple to pick out Kaj Nevis. The system showed power sources as well, as tiny yellow starbursts, and only one of the red pinpoints was surrounded by a tiny yellow starburst. That had to be Nevis in his battlesuit.

But what was that second yellow dot flashing so brightly by itself in an empty corridor on deck six? A hellacious power source, but what? Rica didn't understand. There had been a second red dot quite near to it, but it had moved away, and now seemed to be trailing Nevis, edging steadily closer.

Meanwhile, there were the black dots: the *Ark*'s bio-weapons. The huge central axis that cored the asymmetric, tapered cylinder of the ship was positively livid with black pinpricks, but at least those were stationary. Other black dots, which had to be the beasties that had been released, were moving through the corridors. Only there were more than five. There was one clump of them—thirty or more discrete organisms, moving en masse like a shapeless black blotch upon the screen, throwing off strays from time to time. One of the strays had come up near a red light and had suddenly been extinguished.

There was a red dot in that central core area, too.

Rica asked for a display of that sector, and the screen gave her a much tighter cross-section. The red light was very close to a moving black dot down there—some sort of confrontation. She studied the readouts below the graphic. That particular black dot was species #67-001-00342-10078, the *tyrannosaurus rex*. It was massive, no doubt of that.

She noticed, with some interest, that a red light and one of the wandering blacks were both closing in on Kaj Nevis. That ought to be interesting. It looked like she was missing the party; all hell was breaking loose down there.

And she was up here, safe and secure and in control. Rica Dawnstar smiled.

Kaj Nevis was lumbering down a corridor, growing angrier and angrier, when a sudden explosive blow took him squarely in the back of his head. Inside his helmet, the sound was horrible. The force of the explosion knocked him forward and toppled him. He went smashing to the floor face first, too slow to break his fall with his arms.

But the suit absorbed most of the impact, and Nevis was unharmed. Lying there he made a quick check of his gauges, and smiled wolfishly; the battlesuit was undamaged, unbreached. He rolled over and rose ponderously to his feet.

Twenty meters away, at a corridor intersection, stood a man in a green-and-gold pressure suit, armed as if he had just looted a military museum, and holding a pistol in one gloved hand. “We meet again, blackguard!” the figure called out over external speakers.

“SO WE DO, LION,” Nevis replied. “HOW GOOD TO SEE YOU. COME HERE AND SHAKE HANDS.” He snapped his pincers. The right one was still stained with the cybertech’s blood; he hoped Jefri Lion had noticed. A pity his cutting laser was so short-range, but no matter. He would simply catch Lion, take away his toys, and then play with him a while—pull off his legs, perhaps, and breach his suit, and let the damned air do the rest.

Kaj Nevis lumbered forward.

Jefri Lion stood his ground, raised his dart pistol, aimed it carefully with both hands, fired.

The dart struck Nevis in the chest. There was a loud explosion, but this time he had braced for it. His ears hurt, but he hardly even staggered. Some of the intricate filigree on the armor was blackened, but that was the extent of the damage. “YOU LOSE, OLD MAN,” Nevis said. “I LIKE THIS SUIT.”

Jefri Lion was silent and methodical. He holstered his dart pistol, unslung a laser rifle and raised it to his shoulder, took aim, fired.

The beam glanced off Nevis’s shoulder, struck a wall, and burned a small black hole.

“Reflective microcoating,” Jefri Lion said. He put away the laser rifle.

Nevis had eaten up more than three-quarters of the distance between them with his long, powered strides.

Finally Jefri Lion seemed to realize his danger. He threw down the laser rifle, turned, and darted around a corner, out of sight.

Kaj Nevis lengthened his strides and followed.

Haviland Tuf was nothing if not patient.

He sat calmly, with his hands folded atop his bulging stomach and his head aching from the repeated blows the tyrannosaur had inflicted on the sheltering table. He did his best to ignore the hammering that dented the metal above and made him even more uncomfortable, the blood-curdling bestial roars, the excessive and melodramatic displays of carnivore appetite that occasionally prompted the tyrannosaur to bend over and snap its numerous large teeth futilely at Tuf in his shelter. Instead Tuf thought about sweet Rodelyian pop-berries in honey-butter, tried to recall which particular planet had the strongest and most pungent variety of ale, and devised an excellent new strategy with which to overwhelm Jefri Lion should they ever game again.

Ultimately, his plan bore fruit.

The raging reptile, bored and frustrated, went away.

Haviland Tuf waited until it grew quite still and silent outside. He twisted himself around awkwardly, and lay for a moment on his stomach while the pins and needles in his legs flared and faded and vanished. Then he squirmed forward and cautiously stuck his head out.

Dim green light. Low humming, and distant gurgling sounds. No motion anywhere.

He emerged carefully.

The dinosaur had struck what remained of Mushroom’s poor body numerous times with its massive tail.

The sight filled Haviland Tuf with a vast and bitter sorrow. The equipment at this particular work station was in a shambles.

Yet there were other work stations, and he needed but a single cell.

Haviland Tuf gathered up a tissue sample and walked ponderously down to the next work station. This time he made it a point to listen for the sound of dinosaur footsteps behind him.

Celise Waan was pleased. She had handled herself quite adroitly, no doubt of it. That nasty little cat-thing wouldn't be bothering her again. Her faceplate was a bit smeared where the cat-spit had struck, but otherwise she had come off splendidly from the encounter. She bolstered her pistol deftly, and stalked back out into the corridor.

The smear on her faceplate bothered her a little. It was up near her eyes, and it obscured her vision. She wiped at it with the back of her hand, but that only seemed to spread the smeariness around. Water, that was what she needed. Very well then. She had been looking for food anyway, and where you found food you always found water.

She walked briskly down the corridor, turned a corner, and stopped dead.

Not a meter away, another of those damned cat-things stood staring at her insolently.

This time Celise Waan acted decisively. She went for her pistol. She had some trouble getting it out, however, and her first shot missed the disgusting creature entirely and blew the door off a nearby room. The explosion was loud and startling. The cat hissed, drew back, spit just like the first one had, and then ran.

Celise Waan caught the spittle up near her left shoulder this time. She tried to get off a second shot, but the smeary condition of her helmet's faceplate made it difficult to see where she was aiming.

"Stuff and nonsense," she said loudly in exasperation. It was getting harder and harder to see. The plastic in front of her eyes seemed to be getting cloudy. The edges of the faceplate were still clear, but when she looked straight ahead everything was vague and distorted. She really had to get the helmet cleaned off.

She moved in the direction she thought the cat-thing had taken, going slowly so as not to trip. She tried to listen. She heard a soft scrabbling sound, as if the creature was nearby, but she couldn't be sure.

The faceplate was getting worse and worse. It was like looking through milk-glass. Everything was white and cloudy. This wouldn't do, Celise Waan thought. This wouldn't do at all. How could she hunt down that hideous cat-creature if she was half-blind? For that matter, how could she find where she was going? There was no help for it; she would have to take off this stupid helmet.

But the thought gave her pause; she remembered Tuf and his dire warnings about sickness in the ship's air. Well, yes, but Tuf was such a ridiculous man! Had she seen any proof of what he said? No, none at all. She'd put out that big gray cat of his, and it certainly hadn't seemed to suffer any for the experience. Tuf had been carrying it around the last time she'd seen him. Of course, he had done that big song and dance about incubation periods, but he was probably just trying to frighten her. He seemed to enjoy outraging her sensibilities, the way he had with his revolting catfood trick. No doubt he would find it perversely amusing if he frightened her into remaining in this tight, uncomfortable, smelly suit for weeks.

It occurred to her suddenly that Tuf was probably responsible for these cat-things that were harassing her. The very idea made Celise Waan furious. The man was a barbarous wretch!

She could hardly see a thing now. The milky center of her faceplate had grown almost opaque.

Resolute and angry, Celise Waan unsealed her helmet, took it off, and threw it down the corridor as far as she could.

She took a deep breath. The ship's air was slightly cold, with a faint astringency to it, but it was less

musty than the recycled air from the suit's airpac. Why, it tasted good! She smiled. Nothing wrong with this air. She looked forward to finding Tuf and giving him a tongue-lashing.

Then she happened to glance down. She gasped.

Her glove...the back of her left hand, the hand she'd used to wipe away the cat-spit, why, a big hole had appeared in the center of the gold fabric, and even the metal weave beneath looked, well, *corroded*.

That cat! That damned cat! Why, if that spit had actually struck her bare skin, it would have...it could have...she remembered all of a sudden that she was no longer wearing a helmet.

Down the corridor, the cat-thing suddenly popped out of an open room.

Celise Waan shrieked at it, whipped up her pistol, and fired three times in rapid succession. But it was too fast. It ran away and vanished down around a corner.

She wouldn't feel safe until the pestilential thing was disposed of for good, she decided. If she let it get away, it might pounce on her at any unguarded moment, the way Tuf's obnoxious black-and-white pet was so wont to do. Celise Waan opened her pistol, fed in a fresh clip of explosive darts, and moved off warily in pursuit.

Jefri Lion's heart was pounding as it had not pounded in years; his legs ached and his breath was coming in hard, short little gasps. Adrenalin surged through his system. He pushed himself harder and harder. Just a little farther now, down this corridor and around the corner, and then maybe twenty meters on to the next intersection.

The deck underfoot shook every time Kaj Nevis landed on one of his heavy, armored saucer-feet, and once or twice Jefri Lion almost lost his footing, but the danger only seemed to add spice. He was running like he'd run as a youth, and even Nevis's huge augmented strides were not enough to catch him, though he could feel the other closing on him.

He had pulled out a light-grenade as he ran. When he heard one of Nevis's damnable pincers snap within a meter of the back of his head, Jefri Lion armed it and flipped it over his shoulder and pushed himself even harder, darting around the last corner.

He whirled as he made the turn, just in time to see a sudden soundless flash of blue-white brilliance blossom in the corridor he had evacuated. Even the reflected light that blazed off the walls left Jefri Lion momentarily dazzled. He backpedaled, watching the intersection. Seen directly, the light-grenade ought to have burned out Nevis's retinas, and the radiation ought to be enough to kill him within seconds...

The only sign of Nevis was a huge, utterly black shadow that loomed across the intersection.

Jefri Lion retreated, running backwards now, panting.

Kaj Nevis stepped out slowly into the intersection. His faceplate was so dark it looked almost black, but as Lion watched, the red glow returned, burning brighter and brighter. "DAMN YOU AND ALL YOUR STUPID TOYS," Nevis boomed.

Well, it didn't matter, thought Jefri Lion. The plasma cannon would do the job, there was no doubt of that, and he was only ten meters or so from the fire zone. "Are you giving up, Nevis?" he taunted, trotting backwards easily. "Is the old soldier too fast for you?"

But Kaj Nevis didn't move.

For a moment, Jefri Lion was baffled. Had the radiation gotten to him after all, even through the suit? No, that couldn't be it. Surely Nevis wouldn't give up the chase now, not after Lion had lured him so heartbreakingly close to the fire zone and his plasma-ball surprise.

Nevis laughed.

He was looking up over Lion's head.

Jefri Lion looked up, too, just in time to see something detach itself from the ceiling and come flapping down at him. It was all a sooty black, and it rode on wide dark batwings, and he had a brief vision of slitted yellow eyes with thin red pupils. Then the darkness folded over him like a cape, and leathery, wet flesh closed about him to muffle his sudden, startled scream.

It was all very interesting, Rica Dawnstar thought.

Once you mastered the system, once you got the commands down, you could find out all sorts of things. Like, for example, the approximate mass and body configuration of each of those little lights moving up on the screen. The computer would even work up a three-dimensional simulation for you, if you asked it nicely. Rica asked it nicely.

Now everything was falling into place.

Anittas was gone after all. The sixth intruder, back on the *Cornucopia*, was only one of Tuf's cats.

Kaj Nevis and his supersuit were chasing Jefri Lion around the ship. Except one of the black dots, the hooded dracula, had just gotten hold of Lion.

The red dot that was Celise Waan had stopped moving, although it hadn't winked out. The creeping black mass was coming toward her.

Haviland Tuf was alone in the central axis, putting something in a cloning vat and trying to ask the system to activate the chronowarp. Rica let the command go through.

All of the other bio-weapons were out in the corridors.

Rica decided to let things sort themselves out a little more down there before she took a hand.

Meanwhile, she'd rummaged up the program to cleanse the interior of the ship of plague. First she'd have to close all the emergency locks, seal off each sector individually. Then the process could begin.

Atmosphere evacuation, filtration, irradiation, with massive redundancy built in for safety, and when the replacement atmosphere flowed back, it was infused with all the proper antigens. Complex and time-consuming—but effective.

And Rica was in no special hurry.

Her legs had collapsed first.

Celise Waan lay in the center of the corridor where she had fallen, her throat constricted with terror. It had all happened so suddenly. One moment she was rushing headlong down the hall in pursuit of the cat-thing. And then a wave of dizziness had swept over her, and suddenly she felt too weak to go on. She had decided to rest for a moment, had squatted down to catch her breath. But it didn't help. She only felt worse and worse, and when she tried to get up, her legs had buckled under her and she'd pitched forward onto her face.

After that her legs refused to move. Now she couldn't even feel them. She couldn't feel anything below her waist, in fact, and the paralysis was creeping up her body slowly. She could still move her arms, but it hurt when she did, and her motions were leaden and clumsy.

Her cheek was pressed against the hardness of the deck. She tried to raise her head, and failed. Her whole upper body shook with a sudden stabbing pain.

Two meters away, a cat-thing peered out from around a corner. It stood staring at her, its eyes huge and scary. Its mouth opened in a hiss.

Celise Waan tried to stifle a scream.

Her pistol was still in her hand. Slowly, jerkily, she dragged it forward to her face. Every motion was agony. She lined it up as best she could, squinting along the top of it, and fired.

The dart actually hit.

She was showered with pieces of cat-thing. One piece, raw and wet and disgusting, landed on her bare cheek.

It made her feel a little better. At least she'd killed the creature that had tormented her. At least she was safe from that. She was still sick and helpless, though. Maybe she should rest. A little nap, yes, she'd feel better after a little nap.

Another cat-thing bounded out into the corridor.

Celise Waan groaned, tried to move, gave up the effort. Her arms were growing heavier and heavier.

A second cat followed the first. Celise pushed her dart-gun to her cheek again, tried to aim. She was distracted when a third cat appeared. The dart went wide, exploded harmlessly way off down the corridor.

One of the cats spit at her. It struck her between the eyes.

The agony was unbelievable. If she could have moved, she would have torn her eyes from their sockets, rolled on the ground, pulled at her skin. But she couldn't move. She screamed.

Her vision distorted into a hideous blur of color and then was gone.

She heard...feet. Small, light, padding footsteps. Cat steps.

How many were there?

Celise felt a weight on her back. And then another, and another. Something nudged against her useless right leg; she could dimly sense it shifting.

There was a spitting sound, and agony flared on her cheek.

They were all around her, on top of her, crawling over her. She could feel the stiffness of their fur brushing against her hand. Something bit into the flesh of her neck. She screamed. The biting continued. It took hold, pulling, worrying at her with small sharp teeth.

Another one nipped at a finger. Somehow the pain gave her strength. She flailed at it, pulled back her hand. When she moved, there was a cacophony of hissing all around her as the cat-things protested. She felt them biting her face, her throat, her eyes. Something was trying to squirm down into her suit.

Her hand moved slowly, awkwardly. She brushed aside cat-things, was bitten, persisted. She fumbled at her belt, and at last she felt it, round and hard within her grip. She pulled it loose, brought it up toward her face, held it oh so tight.

Where was the stud that armed it? Her thumb searched. *There*. She twisted it a half-turn, pressed it in as Lion had told her to.

Five, she recited silently, four three two one.

In her last moment, Celise Waan saw the light.

Kaj Nevis had himself a good loud laugh as he watched the show.

He didn't know what the hell the damned thing was, but it was more than enough for Jefri Lion. Its wings folded over him when it hit, and for a few minutes he screamed and struggled, rolling around on the floor with the thing enveloping his head and shoulders. He looked like a man fighting an umbrella. It was downright comic.

After a while, Lion lay still, his legs kicking feebly. The screaming stopped. A sucking sound filled the

corridor.

Nevis was amused and pleased, but he figured it was best not to leave any loose ends. The thing was intent on its feeding. Nevis walked up as quietly as he could manage, which wasn't very quietly, and grabbed it. It made a liquid popping sound when he pulled it off of what was left of Jefri Lion.

Damn, Nevis thought, it did one hell of a job. The whole front of Lion's helmet was staved in. The thing had a kind of bony sucker-beak, and it had punched right through Lion's faceplate and sucked off most of his face. Ugly. The flesh looked almost liquefied, and there was bone showing through.

The monster was flapping madly in his grip, and making a high, hideous noise, half shriek and half whine. Kaj Nevis held it at arm's length and let it flap while he studied it. It struck at his arm, again and again, to no effect. He liked those eyes; real mean, scary eyes. This thing could be handy, he thought. He pictured what it would be like to dump a couple hundred of these down into Shandicity some night. Oh, they'd meet his price. They'd give him any damn thing he asked for—money, women, power, the whole damn world if that was what he wanted. It was going to be fun owning this ship.

In the meantime, though, this particular creature might be a nuisance.

Kaj Nevis took hold of a wing with each hand, and ripped it in half. Then, smiling, he went back the way he had come.

Haviland Tuf checked the instrumentation again, adjusted the fluid flow slightly. Satisfied, he folded his hands atop his stomach and took up his position by the vat. Within, opaque red-black liquid swirled and churned. Tuf felt a certain sense of vertigo watching it; that was a side-effect of the chronowarp, he knew. In that tiny tank, so small he could almost encompass it with his two large hands, vast primal energies were at play, and time itself was hurrying at his command. It filled him with a singular sense of awe and reverence.

The nutrient bath was thinning gradually, becoming almost translucent. Within, Tuf fancied that he could almost see a dark shape taking form, growing, growing visibly, ontogeny taking place before his eyes. Four paws, yes, he could see them. And a tail. That was most definitely a tail, Tuf decided.

He moved back to the instrumentation. It would not do for his creation to be vulnerable to the contagions that had killed Mushroom. He recalled the inoculation the tyrannosaur had received shortly before its unexpected and inconvenient release. No doubt there was a way to administer the appropriate antigens and prophylactics before completing the birth process. Haviland Tuf commenced to do just that.

The *Ark* was almost clean. Rica had sealed the barriers throughout three-quarters of the ship, and the sterilization program was proceeding with its own inexorable, automated logic. The landing deck, engineering, drive room, control tower, bridge, and nine other sectors showed a clean pale blue now on the telescreen status display. Only the great central axis and the main corridors and laboratory areas in close proximity to it were still shaded with that corrosive reddish hue that signified an atmosphere laced through with disease and death in all those myriad forms.

That was the way Rica Dawnstar wanted it. In those interconnected central sectors, another kind of process was working itself out with similar remorseless logic. And the final equation, she had no doubt, would leave her in sole and complete control of the seedship and all its knowledge, power, and wealth.

Now that her environment was clean and safe, Rica had gratefully removed her helmet. She had ordered up some food as well—a thick white slab of protein from some creature called a meatbeast that *Ark* had held in a succulent stasis for a millennium, which she washed down with a tall chilled glass of sweetwater that tasted slightly of Milidian honey. She enjoyed the snack as she watched the reports flow by.

Things had simplified themselves considerably down there. Jefri Lion was gone. A pity, in a way; he'd

been harmless enough, although unbelievably naive. Celise Waan was out of it too, and, surprisingly, she'd managed to take the hellkittens out with her. Kaj Nevis had disposed of the hooded dracula.

Nobody left but Nevis and Tuf...and her.

Rica grinned.

Tuf was no problem. He was busy making a cat. He could be taken care of easily, one way or the other. No, the only real obstacle now standing between Rica and the prize was Kaj Nevis and the Unquin battlesuit. Kaj was probably feeling real confident by this point. Good. Let him, she thought.

Rica Dawnstar finished her meal and licked the ends of her fingers. It was time for her zoology lesson, she figured. She called up reports on the three bio-weapons still out roaming the ship. If none of them would do, what the hey, she still had thirty-nine more in stasis just waiting for release. She could pick and choose her executioner.

A battlesuit? What she had was better than a hundred battlesuits.

When she had finished reading the zoological profiles, Rica Dawnstar was smiling broadly.

Forget the reserves. The only problem was making the right introductions. She checked out the geography up on the telescreen, and tried to consider just how devious a mind old Kaj Nevis had.

Not nearly devious enough, Rica suspected.

The damned corridors went on and on and never seemed to lead anywhere but to other corridors. His gauges showed that he had already begun drawing air from his third tank. Kaj Nevis knew he had to find the others quickly and get them out of the way so he could settle down to the problem of figuring out how this damned ship worked.

He was striding down one especially long, wide corridor when suddenly a kind of plastic stripe inset into the deck lit up under his feet.

Nevis paused, frowning.

The trace gleamed suggestively. It led straight ahead, and turned to the right at the next intersection.

Nevis took a single step. The section of the trace behind him winked out.

He was being pointed somewhere. Anittas had muttered something about leading people around the ship just before he'd had his little haircut. This was how he did it, then. Could the cybertech still be alive somehow, haunting the *Ark's* computer? Nevis doubted it.

Anittas had seemed pretty damned dead to him, and he had a lot of experience with making people dead. Who was this then? Dawnstar, of course. Had to be. The cybertech said he'd led her to the control room.

So where was she trying to lead him?

Kaj Nevis thought about it for an instant. In his suit, he felt nigh-on invulnerable. But why take chances? Besides, Dawnstar was a treacherous little bitch. She might very well just lead him around and around forever, until his air ran out.

He turned resolutely and stalked off, moving in the opposite direction from the seductive silver guideline.

At the next turn, a green trace blazed to life, pointing to his left.

Kaj Nevis turned right.

The passage dead-ended in twin spiral escalators. When Nevis paused, one of them began to corkscrew up. He grimaced and walked down the unmoving one.

He descended three decks. At the bottom, the passageway was narrow and dark, and led off in two

directions. Before Nevis could make a choice, there was a metallic scraping sound, and a sliding panel came out of a wall and closed off the right-hand corridor.

The bitch was still at it, he thought furiously. He looked down to the left. The corridor seemed to widen somewhat as it went, but it also got darker, and here and there it was broken by the hulks of old machinery. Nevis didn't like the looks of it.

If Dawnstar thought she could herd him along into a trap by closing a few doors, she had another thought coming. Nevis turned back to the sealed right-hand passage, drew back his foot, and kicked. The noise was deafening. He kicked again, and again, and then began to use his armored fists. He brought all the augmented exoskeletal strength of the battlesuit to bear.

Grinning, he stepped over what remained of the sliding panel into the dim, narrow passage that Dawnstar had tried to forbid to him. Underneath his feet was bare metal; the walls almost brushed his shoulders. It was an accessway of some sort, Nevis figured, but maybe it led to someplace important. Hell, it had to lead to someplace important. Why else had Dawnstar tried to keep him out of it?

His saucer-feet rang on the floorplates. He walked. It grew darker, but Kaj Nevis was determined. At one point, the passage made a sharp right-hand bend, almost too narrow for him to get through in the battlesuit. He had to squeeze past that point with his arms retracted and his legs half-bent.

Around the turn, a small square of light appeared up ahead. Nevis moved toward it. Then, abruptly, he stopped. What was that?

There was a black blob of some sort, floating in the air ahead of him.

Kaj Nevis advanced cautiously.

The dark blob was small and round, barely the size of a man's fist. Nevis kept about a meter's distance from it, and studied it. Another creature—as damned ugly as the one that had dined on Jefri Lion, too, but weirder. It was brown and lumpy, and its hide looked like it was made of rocks. It looked almost like it *was* a rock, in fact; Nevis only knew it was alive because it had a mouth—a wet black hole in the rocky skin. Inside, the mouth was all moist and green and moving, and he could make out teeth, or what looked like teeth, except they looked metallic. He thought he saw a triple set of them, half-concealed by rubbery green flesh that pulsed slowly, steadily.

The weirdest thing was how incredibly still it was. At first, Nevis thought it was hovering in the air somehow. But then he came a little closer and saw that he'd been wrong. It was suspended in the center of an incredibly fine web, the strands so very thin they were all but invisible. In fact, the ends of them *were* invisible. Nevis could make out the thickest parts near the nexus where the creature sat pulsing, but the webbing seemed to get thinner and thinner as it spread, and you couldn't see where it attached to wall or floor or ceiling at all, no matter how hard you looked.

A spider, then. A weird one. The rocky appearance made him think it was some kind of silicon-based life. He'd heard of that, here and there. It was real god-damned rare. So he had some kind of silicon-spider here. Big deal.

Kaj Nevis moved closer. Damn, he thought. The web, or what he thought was the web...hell, the damned thing wasn't sitting on the web, it was *part* of the web. Those fine, thin, shiny web strands grew out of its body, he saw. He could barely make out the joinings. And there were more than he thought—*hundreds* of them, maybe thousands, most of them too thin to be seen from any kind of distance at all, but when you looked at them from the right angle, you could see the light gleaming off them, all silvery-faint.

Nevis edged back a step, uneasy despite the security of his armored suit, for no good reason that he could name. Behind the silicon-spider, light shone from the end of the accessway. There had to be something important there; that had to be why Rica Dawnstar had tried so hard to keep him away.

That was it, he thought to himself with grim satisfaction. That was probably the damned *control room* back there, and Rica was inside cowering, and this stupid spider was her last line of defense. It gave him the creeps, but what the hell else could it do to him?

Kaj Nevjs shifted to his pincer arms and brought up the right pincer to snip the web.

The gleaming, bloodstained, serrated metal blades closed on the nearest visible strand, smoothly and easily. Gleaming, bloodstained, serrated shards of Unquish metal clattered down onto the floor plates.

The whole web began to vibrate.

Kaj Nevis stared at his lower right arm. Half of the pincer had been sheared off. Bile rose in his throat. He took a step backwards, another, a third, putting distance between him and the *thing* back there.

A thousand web strands, thinner than threads, became a thousand legs. They left a thousand holes in the metal walls when they moved, and they scored the floor with their lightest touch.

Nevis ran. He stayed ahead until he came to the narrow place where the passage turned.

He was still lowering the suit's massive arms and attempting to wedge himself through when the walking-web caught him. It bobbed as it moved toward him, suspended on countless invisible legs, its mouth pulsing. Nevis made terrified choking sounds. A thousand monomolecular silicon arms enveloped him.

Nevis brought up a huge powered hand to grab the head of the thing, to crush it to a pulp, but the arms were everywhere, waving, closing about him languidly. He pushed against them, and they cut through metal, flesh, bone. Blood came spurting from the stump of his wrist. He screamed, briefly.

Then the walking-web tightened its embrace.

A hairline crack appeared in the plastic of the empty vat. The kitten batted at it. The crack widened. Haviland Tuf reached in and caught up the kitten in one large hand, brought it close to his face. It was tiny, and a bit feeble yet: perhaps he had initiated birth too soon. He would be more careful on his next attempt, but this time the insecurity of his position and the need for constant vigilance lest wandering tyrannosaurs interrupt his work had resulted in a certain unseemly haste.

Nonetheless, he judged the trial a success. The kitten mewed. Haviland Tuf determined that it would be necessary to hand-feed it milk from a dropper, yet he had no doubt that he was equal to the task. The kitten's eyes were barely open, and its long gray fur was still wet from the fluids in which it had been so recently immersed. Had Mushroom ever truly been this small?

"I cannot name you Mushroom," he told his new companion solemnly. "Genetically you are one, it is true, yet Mushroom was Mushroom and you are you and I would not have you confused. I shall name you Chaos, a fitting companion to Havoc." The kitten moved in his palm and opened and closed one eye, as if it understood; but then, as Tuf knew, all cats have a touch of psi.

He looked about him. Nothing more remained to be done here. Perhaps it was time to search out his erstwhile and unworthy companions, and attempt to arrive at some sort of mutually beneficial accommodation. Cradling Chaos in his arm, he set off in search of them.

It was all over but the shouting, Rica Dawnstar decided when Nevis's red light vanished from the screen. Now it was down to her and Tuf, which meant that for all practical purposes, she was mistress of the *Ark*.

What the hell would she do with it, she wondered? Hard to say. Sell it to some arms consortium or the highest-bidding world? Doubtful. She didn't trust anyone with quite that much power. Power corrupts, after all. Maybe she should keep it, run it. She was corrupt enough already, she ought to be immune. But

it would get awfully lonely living in this morgue alone. She could hire a crew, of course—bring aboard friends, lovers, flunkies. Only how could she trust them? Rica frowned. Well, it was a knotty problem, but she had a long, long time to get a handle on it. She'd think about it later.

Right now, she had a more immediate problem to consider. Tuf had just left the central cloning chamber and was wandering out into the corridors. What was she going to do about him?

She studied the display. The walking-web was still in its lair, snug and warm, probably still feeding. The rolleram, all four metric tons of it, was down in the main corridor of deck six, rolling back and forth like some kind of berserk living cannonball of enormous size, caroming off walls and searching in vain for something organic to roll over, crush, and digest.

The tyrannosaur was on the right level. What was it up to? Rica punched for more detail, and smiled. If her readouts could be believed, it was eating. Eating *what*? For a moment she drew a blank. Then it dawned on her. It had to be gulping down what remained of old Jefri Lion and the hooded dracula. The location seemed about right.

All things considered, it was pretty close to Tuf. Unfortunately, when it began to move again, it headed off in the wrong direction. Maybe she should arrange a meeting.

She couldn't underestimate Tuf, though. He had already escaped the reptile once; he might be able to do it again. And even if she maneuvered him onto the same level as the rolleram, the same problem presented itself. Tuf had a certain native cunning. She'd never be able to lead old Tufty by the nose the way she had with Nevis. He was too subtle. She recalled the games they'd played aboard the *Cornucopia*. Tuf had won all of them.

Release a few more bio-weapons? Easily done.

Rica Dawnstar hesitated. Ah, hell, she thought, there was an easier way. It was time she took a hand directly.

Hooked over one arm of the captain's throne was a thin coronet of iridescent metal that Rica had earlier removed from a storage cabinet. She picked it up, ran it under a scanner briefly to check the circuitry, and slid it over her head at a rakish angle. Then she donned her helmet, sealed up her suit, and took out her needler. Once more into the breach.

Wandering about in the corridors of the *Ark*, Haviland Tuf found a vehicle of sorts—a small, open, three-wheeled cart. He had been standing for some time, and before that had been hiding underneath a table. He was only too glad to be seated. He drove along at a smooth, steady, comfortable speed, sitting back against the cushion and looking straight ahead. Chaos rode in his lap.

Tuf drove through several kilometers of corridor. He was a cautious and methodical driver. At every intersection he stopped, looked right, looked left, and weighed his choices before proceeding. He turned twice, as dictated partly by stern logic and partly by sheerest whim, but stayed for the most part to the widest corridors. Once he stopped and dismounted to explore a set of doors that seemed interesting. He saw nothing, encountered no one. Now and again, Chaos moved about in his lap.

Then Rica Dawnstar appeared up ahead of him.

Haviland Tuf stopped his cart in the center of a great intersection. He looked right, and blinked several times. He looked left. Then he stared straight ahead, hands folded on top of his stomach, and watched as she came toward him slowly.

She stopped about five meters away, down the corridor. "Out for a drive?" she asked. In her right hand she carried her familiar needler. In her left hand was a tangle of straps that trailed down onto the deck.

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf. "I have been occupied for some time. Where are the others?"

“Dead,” Rica Dawnstar said. “Deceased. Gone. Eliminated from the game. We’re the end of it, Tuf.”

“A familiar situation,” Tuf said flatly.

“This is the last game, Tuf,” Rica Dawnstar said. “No rematch. And this time I win.”

Tuf stroked Chaos and said nothing.

“Tuf,” she said amiably, “you’re the innocent in all this. I’ve got nothing against you. Take your ship and go.”

“If you refer to the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*,” said Haviland Tuf, “might I remind you that it suffered grave damage which has not yet been repaired?”

“Take some other ship, then.”

“I think not,” Tuf said. “My claim to the *Ark* is perhaps inferior to that of Celise Waan, Jefri Lion, Kaj Nevis, and Anittas, yet you tell me that all of them are deceased, and my claim is surely as good as your own.”

“Not quite,” said Rica Dawnstar. She raised her needler. “This gives my claim the edge.”

Haviland Tuf looked down at the kitten in his lap. “Let this be your first lesson in the hard ways of the universe,” he said loudly. “What matters fairness, when one party has a gun and one does not? Brute violence rules everywhere, and intelligence and good intent are trampled upon.” He stared back at Rica Dawnstar. “Madam,” he said, “I acknowledge your advantage. Yet I must protest. The deceased members of our group admitted me to a full share in this venture before we came aboard the *Ark*. To my knowledge, you were never similarly included. Therefore I enjoy a legal advantage over you.” He raised a single finger. “Furthermore, I would advance the proposition that ownership is conferred by use, and the ability to use. The *Ark* should, optimally, be under the command of the person who has demonstrated the talent, intellect, and will to make the most effective use of its myriad capabilities. I submit that I am that person.”

Rica Dawnstar laughed. “Oh, really?”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. He cupped Chaos in his hand, and lifted the kitten for Rica Dawnstar to see. “Behold my proof. I have explored this ship, and mastered the cloning secrets of the vanished Earth Imperials. It was an awesome and intoxicating experience, and one I am anxious to replicate. In fact, I have decided to give up the crass calling of the merchant, for the nobler profession of ecological engineer. I would hope you would not attempt to stand in my way. Rest assured, I will furnish you with transport back to ShanDellor and see to it personally that you receive every fraction of the fee promised to you by Jefri Lion and the others.”

Rica Dawnstar shook her head in disbelief. “You’re priceless, Tuffy,” she said. She stepped forward, spinning her needler around her finger. “So you think you ought to get the ship because you can use it, and I can’t?”

“You have outlined the very heart of it,” Tuf said approvingly.

Rica laughed again. “Here, I don’t need this,” she said lightly. She tossed her needler at him.

Tuf reached up and snatched it out of the air. “It would seem that my claim has been unexpectedly and decisively strengthened. Now I may threaten to shoot you.”

“But you won’t,” Rica said. “Rules, Tuf. You play the game by the rules. I’m the kid who likes to kick over the board.” She slung the tangled straps she had been dragging over her shoulder. “You know what I’ve been up to while you’ve been cloning yourself a kitten?”

“Obviously I do not,” said Haviland Tuf.

“Obviously,” Rica echoed sardonically. “I’ve been up on the bridge, Tuf, playing the computer and learning just about everything I need to know about the EEC and its *Ark*.”

Tuf blinked. "Indeed."

"There's a swell telescreen up there," she said. "Think of it like a big gaming board, Tuf. I've been watching every move. The red pieces, that was you and the rest of them. Me, too. And the black pieces. The bio-weapons, as the system likes to call them. I like the sound of *monsters* better myself. Shorter. Less formal."

"Fraught with strong connotations, however," Tuf put in.

"Oh, certainly. But to the point. We got through the defense sphere, we even handled the plague defense, but Anittas got himself killed and decided to get a little revenge, so he kicked loose the monster defense. And I sat up on top and watched the red and the black chase each other. But something was missing, Tuf. Know what?"

"I suspect this to be a rhetorical question," Tuf said.

"Indeed," mocked Rica Dawnstar, with laughter. "The *greens* were missing, Tuf! The system was programmed to show intruders in red, its own bio-weapons in black, and authorized *Ark* personnel in green. There were no greens, of course. Only that got me thinking, Tuf. The monster defense was obviously a last resort fallback position, sure. But was it intended for use *only* when the ship was derelict, abandoned?"

Tuf folded his hands. "I think not. The existence of the telescreen display capacity implies the existence of someone to watch said display. Moreover, if the system was coded to display ship's personnel, intruders, and monstrous defenders simultaneously and in variant colors, then the possibility of all three groupings being aboard and active at the same time must have been considered."

"Yes," said Rica Dawnstar. "Now, the key question."

In the corridor behind her, Haviland Tuf glimpsed motion. "Excuse me," he began.

Rica waved him quiet. "If they were prepared to turn loose these caged horrors of theirs to repel boarders in an emergency, *how did they prevent their own people from getting killed?*"

"An interesting quandary," Tuf admitted. "I eagerly anticipate learning the answer to this puzzle. I fear I will have to defer that pleasure, however." He cleared his throat. "Far be it from me to interrupt such a fascinating discourse. I feel obliged to point out, however..." The deck shook.

"Yes," Rica said, grinning.

"I feel obliged to point out," Tuf repeated, "that a rather large carnivorous dinosaur has appeared in the corridor behind you, and is presently attempting to sneak up on us. He is not doing a very good job of it."

The tyrannosaur roared.

Rica Dawnstar was undisturbed. "Really?" she said laughing. "Surely you don't expect me to fall for the old there's-a-dinosaur-behind-you gambit. I expected better of you, Tuf."

"I protest! I am completely sincere." Tuf turned on the motor of his cart. "Witness the speed with which I have activated my vehicle, in order to flee the creature's approach. How can you doubt me, Rica Dawnstar? Surely you hear the beast's thunderous approach, the sound of its roaring?"

"What roaring is that?" Rica asked. "No, seriously, Tuf, I was telling you something. The answer. We forgot one little piece of the puzzle."

"Indeed," said Tuf. The tyrannosaur was moving toward them at an alarming velocity. It was in a foul temper, and its roaring made it difficult to hear Rica Dawnstar.

"The Ecological Engineering Corps were more than cloners, Tuf. They were military scientists. They were *genetic engineers* of the first order. They could recreate the lifeforms of hundreds of worlds and bring them alive in their vats, but that was not *all* they could do. They could also tinker with the DNA

itself, *change* those lifeforms, redesign them to suit their own purposes!"

"Of course," Tuf said. "Pardon me, but now I fear I must run away from the dinosaur." The tyrannosaur was ten meters behind Rica. It paused. Its lashing tail struck the wall, and Tuf's cart shook to the impact. Slaver was dripping from its fangs, and its stunted forelegs clawed the air with unseemly eagerness.

"That would be very rude," Rica said. "You see, Tuf, that's the answer. These bio-weapons, these monsters—they were held in stasis for a thousand years, likely for longer than that. But they weren't ordinary monsters. They were cloned for a special purpose, to defend the ship against intruders, and they had been genetically manipulated to just that end." The tyrannosaur took one step, two, three, and now it was directly behind her, its shadow casting her in darkness.

"How manipulated?" asked Haviland Tuf.

"I thought you'd never ask," said Rica Dawnstar. The tyrannosaur leaned forward, roared, opened its massive jaws, engulfed her head. "Psionics," she said from between its teeth.

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf.

"A simple psionic capacity," Rica announced from inside the tyrannosaur's jaws. She reached up and picked something from between its teeth, with a *tsking* sound. "Some of the monsters were close to mindless, all instinct. They got a basic instinctual aversion. The more complex monsters were made psionically submissive. The instruments of control were psi-boosters. Pretty little things, like crowns. I'm wearing one now. It doesn't confer psi powers or anything dramatic like that. It just makes some of the monsters avoid me, and other ones obey me." She ducked out of the dinosaur's mouth, and slapped the side of his jaw soundly. "Down, boy," she said.

The tyrannosaur roared, and lowered its head. Rica Dawnstar untangled her harness and saddle and began to strap it into place. "I've been controlling him all the time we've been talking," she said conversationally. "I called him here. He's *hungry*. He ate Lion, but Lion was small, and dead, too, and he hasn't had anything else for a thousand years."

Haviland Tuf looked at the needler in his hand. It seemed worse than useless. He was a poor shot in any case. "I would be most glad to clone him a stegosaurus."

"No thanks," Rica said as she tightened the harness, "you can't get out of the game now. You wanted to play, Tuffy, and I'm afraid you lose all around. You should have gone away when I offered you the chance. Let's review your claim, shall we? Lion and Nevis and the others offered you a full share, yes, but of what? I'm afraid now you get a full share, whether you want one or not—a share of everything they got. So much for your legal argument. As for your moral claim on the basis of superior utility," she slapped the dinosaur again, and grinned, "I think I've demonstrated that I can put the *Ark* to more effective use than you can. Down a little more." The beast leaned over still further, and Rica Dawnstar vaulted into the saddle on its neck. "Up!" she barked. It stood.

"Therefore we put legality and morality aside, and again return to violence," Tuf said.

"I'm afraid so," Rica said from on top of her tyrant lizard. It came forward slowly, as if she were feeling her way. "Don't say I didn't play fair, Tuf. I've got the dinosaur, but you've got my needler. Maybe you'll get a lucky hit. So we're both armed." She laughed. "Only I'm armed to the teeth."

Haviland Tuf stood and tossed back her needler, overhand. It was a good throw. Rica leaned out to one side, caught it. "What's this?" she said. "Giving up?"

"Your scruples about fairness have impressed me," said Tuf. "I would take no advantage. You have a claim, I have a claim. You have an animal." He stroked his kitten. "I have an animal, too. Now you have a gun." He activated his cart and backed away from the intersection, rolling quickly down the corridor behind him, or at least as quickly as he could go in reverse.

"Have it your way," Rica Dawnstar said. She was done playing. She felt a little sad. Tuf was turning his

cart about to flee headlong instead of backwards. The tyrannosaur opened its mouth wide, and slaver ran from half-meter-long teeth. It screamed a scream that was pure red primal hunger a million years old, and came roaring down on him.

It roared down the corridor and into the intersection.

Twenty meters away along the cross-corridor, the minimind of the plasma cannon took cognizance of the fact that something exceeding the programmed target dimensions had entered the fire zone. There was the faintest of clicks.

Haviland Tuf was turned away from the glare; he put his body between Chaos and the heat and awful noise. It lasted only an instant, fortunately, although the smell of burnt reptile would linger in that spot for years, and sections of the deck and walls would need to be replaced.

“I had a gun, too,” said Haviland Tuf to his kitten.

Later, much later, when the *Ark* was clean and he and Havoc and Chaos were settled comfortably into the captain’s suite, and he had moved all his personal effects and taken care of all the bodies and done what repairs he could and figured out how to placate the incredibly noisy creature that lived down on deck six, Haviland Tuf began to search the ship methodically. On the second day, he found a store of clothing, but the men and women of the EEC had been shorter than he, and more slender, so none of the uniforms fit.

He did, however, find a hat he took rather a liking to. It was a green duckbilled cap, and it fit snugly atop his bald, milk-white head. On the front of it, in gold, was the theta that had been the sigil of the corps.

“Haviland Tuf,” he said to himself in the mirror, “ecological engineer.”

It had a certain ring to it, he thought.