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DESCRIPTION: This is the opening segment of *Players: The A.I. War*.

THE AI WAR
A TALE OF THE CONTINUING TIME
DANIEL KEYS MORAN
*"Players" -- the child, the actor, and the gambler.
The idea of chance is absent from the world of
the child and the primitive. The gambler also
feels in service of an alien power. Chance is a
survival of religion in the modern city . . .
-- Jim Morrison
Players only love you when they're playing
-- Fleetwood Mac, Dreams*

THESE ARE THINGS you should know:

On July 3, 2062, the United Nations Peace Keeping Force, under the command of PKF Elite Mohammed Vance, used tactical thermonuclear weapons to destroy a group of genetically engineered telepaths living at the Chandler Complex in lower Manhattan.

There are two survivors from that disaster, two children who were raised together and grew to love one another: Denice Castanaveras, a telepath; and Trent the Uncatchable, the greatest Player of his time.

On January 4, 2070, Trent, fleeing from the PKF, stole the LINK -- the Lunar Information Network Key -- from under the noses of Elite Commissioner Mohammed Vance, and a young Elite candidate named Melissa du Bois. It returned the Lunar InfoNet from the PKF DataWatch's control to the control of those who used it; and it made Trent the Uncatchable a legend --

-- a man who had, before the eyes of his enemies, walked through a wall.

On July 4, 2076, the TriCentennial of the American Revolution, Occupied America rose in rebellion against the Unification of Earth. In the course of that rebellion, rebels killed three hundred and forty-seven of the deadly French PKF Elite; killed a hundred and ninety thousand regular PKF troops, of all nationalities, including Americans --

The PKF, under the command of Mohammed Vance, killed two million Americans. The rebellion failed: Occupied America remained occupied.

Mohammed Vance became the Elite Commander; after Secretary General Eddore, the second most

powerful individual in the System.

Three and a half years have passed. . . .

Trent the Uncatchable
and the Temple of 'Toons
2080 Gregorian

*Ahimsa, infinite love, is a weapon of matchless
potency . . . It is an attribute of the brave, in fact
it is their all. It does not come within the reach of
the coward. It is no wooden or lifeless dogma but
a living and lifegiving force.*

-- Mohandes K. Gandhi, 1924 Gregorian

*Remember you don't really own anything you
can't carry at a dead run.*

-- Unknown

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The assassin in the rented p-suit, floating next to the holo of a crucified Porky Pig, said, "Are you Trent?"

Trent said, "No."

Through the faceplate of the assassin's p-suit, Trent could see the man shake his head. "Too bad." He brought forward the gun he had been trying to hide behind his back.

Trent said, "I wouldn't do that."

Behind the assassin, Porky Pig's beatified holographic image radiated love and compassion. The assassin said, "I'm sorry about this."

He aimed carefully and fired twice.

The bullets left the barrel of the gun at 850 meters per second and struck Trent square in the chest. Trent's camouflage scalesuit went rigid all over under the impact; the shots knocked him from his feet, sent him tumbling backward twenty meters through the vacuum, across the rocky surface of the asteroid, through the Roadrunner exhibit --

"Beep! Beep beep!" The Roadrunner zipped out of the way; the Coyote came alive and chased Trent through their display, missed him of course, fingers clutching after Trent's toes as Trent's scalesuited body left the Roadrunner exhibit and tumbled on into the Ren and Stimpie exhibit, fetching up against the backdrop. Ren came alive and screamed "You iiiidiot!" as Trent broke the laser beam that informed the holo of the presence of an audience. "Look what you've *done!*"

There was no air in his lungs and his chest ached as though it had been struck by a sledgehammer. Trent sipped air in shallow gasps, waiting for the pain to go away, waiting until he could breathe again. He stared up at the stars through his helmet's faceplate; the stars stared back down at him, cool and distant and indifferent to one genie's brush with death.

Off somewhere to his left, Sol shone, a light so bright his faceplate blacked it out.

He thought distantly, *Downsider*.

". . .the Big Sleep, you stupid, *bloated* fool . . ."

After over ten years in space, Trent no longer considered himself a downsider. It was a mistake no one not fresh from Earth would have made. No SpaceFarer, no loonie, Halfer, or Belter . . . nobody but a downsider would have tried to shoot him with an impact weapon while standing on the surface of a one kilometer long asteroid that had no gravity to speak of.

With his right hand, Trent reached over and tapped the radio bar on his left wrist.

" -- means Death! *Death* you imbe -- " The shrieking Chihuahua's voice ceased in mid-word.

After most of a minute had passed, a extra-large form in a custom scalesuit, much like Trent's own, appeared and floated over Trent.

Over their secure suit channel, Trent's "bodyguard" -- Andrew Strawberry, a Reverend of the Temples of Eris, former World Football League star -- said, "What are you doing down there?"

Fighting for breath, Trent answered through his inskin, had the inskin transmit the message to his suit radio, which turned it into speech for Reverend Andy. *I got shot.*

Reverend Andy did something that might have looked vaguely amusing to a downsider fresh from Earth; he held his hands out at right angles to his body, briefly mirroring the crucified holograph of Porky Pig, ten meters behind him. The maneuvering rockets at his wrists came alive, two strong blasts; he did a slow pirouette, three hundred and sixty degrees. "I don't see him."

"People don't . . . *listen*," said Trent, gasping for breath. "Nobody *ever* listens."

Reverend Andy completed his revolution, came to a nearly perfect stop with another blast of his wrist rockets. "Too true," Reverend Andy agreed. "It's the problem of our times. What did you do with him?"

The gravity at the asteroid's surface was effectively non-existent; moving slowly, Trent came to his feet, ignoring the stab of pain in his ribs when he straightened out. Silently, the bad-tempered Chihuahua continued to chew both of them out.

"Nothing. He used an *impact weapon*." Trent pointed out toward the stars. "Unless he's a lot better with his wrist rockets than I think he is, he's out there. Heading for Mars at about ten meters per second."

Reverend Andy's head swiveled to look, as though he thought he could make out the man's pressure suit against the background of black space, stars, and the occasional distant glint of burning rockets. "Really."

Trent winced at the jabbing pain. "Man, I *tried* to tell him."

The Temple of Toons Asteroid is large by Belt standards, a roughly oval rock nearly a kilometer in length along its long axis. Back in 2053 braking rockets had matched its orbit to that of the Belt CityState of Gandhi, at Ceres. It trails Ceres in its dance around the sun, only five kilometers distant: in 2080, twenty-seven years after opening for business, it is one of the oldest and busiest tourist attractions in the Belt.

The Museum of Animated Art which is located there was not always a Belt institution. It had been

founded over eighty years previously, in Culver City, California, by the great Swami Dave Leary, a Hare Krishna whose teachings had, so legend said, helped inspire the Prophet Harry to give up waiting tables and become a holy man. In his great old age Swami Dave had moved the Krishna temple from Watseka Avenue in Culver City to the new settlement at Ceres asteroid. It had been only natural for Swami Dave to take the museum with him.

By 2080 the museum has grown far beyond its original boundaries. Sections of the asteroid's surface have been turned over to holofields that recreate, life-size, the greatest art of the twentieth century.

Complete with copyright notices.

Reverend Andy radioed in; a sled carrying a pair of Security Services bodyguards, employed by the museum, came out to pick them up.

As the sled was lifting from the downlot where the museum's curator kept her office, a pair of sleds cycled through the SpaceFarers' Collective craft *Vatsayama*'s cargo lock. The *Vatsayama* was docked at an asteroid 180 clicks away from Ceres, after delivering supplies to the small Buddhist retreat there; its sleds tumbled once to get pointed in the correct direction and then blasted out along the vector Trent had given them.

They found the assassin hopelessly lost, just a short few degrees off the vector Trent had guessed, tumbling around his own axis so quickly he'd grown dizzy and vomited in his helmet, so dispirited that he did not even try to shoot at the SpaceFarers when they dropped a snakechain on him and towed him back to the *Vatsayama*.

Trent couldn't get out of his suit with his ribs cracked; they disassembled his scalesuit in sections to get it off him.

"Let's play Good Cop/Bad Cop," said Reverend Andy.

Sid Bittan, Captain of the *Vatsayama*, had met them at the airlock; she stood in the hatch to the infirmary after Trent's scalesuit had been removed, a slim, attractive woman with white hair cut down to fuzz, and watched a medbot tape Trent's ribs. "I'd space the bastard."

"That's not fair," Trent objected. "I always end up playing the Good Cop. It's *boring*."

Reverend Andy snorted. "They wouldn't let Gandhi play the Bad Cop either, okay? It's not my fault you keep telling people violence is sinful. *And* they keep listening to you," he added pointedly.

"Let's play Bad Cop/Anti-Christ," Trent suggested.

Reverend Andy grinned at him. "Okay. I *love* playing the Anti-Christ."

"I'd space him," Captain Bittan repeated.

Standing in the *Vatsayama*'s brig a meter away from the assassin, wearing magslips over his bare feet, with his pressure suit removed and his broken ribs taped, Trent said, "So what's your name?"

The assassin, sitting on the cot in the *Vatsayama*'s brig, stared mutely ahead. He looked American Indian; no beard, and long black hair tied in a ponytail. He was only a few centimeters shorter than Trent, Trent guessed, 190 centimeters or so -- tall for a downsider -- and roughly Trent's age, too, that indeterminate period between twenty-five and first regeneration. He had been taken out of his suit and had his hands snaked behind his back. Aside from that the SpaceFarers hadn't touched him. Vomit

smearing his chin and chest; the smell of it overwhelmed the small brig.

Trent said, "You broke my ribs, you know that?"

The assassin flashed an abrupt exhausted grin. "I was trying to *kill* you. I'd say you got off light."

"Do you know how many times this has happened to me?" Trent demanded. "Murderers breaking my ribs? *Three*. Counting this one, I mean, only two if you don't count this one."

"I guess you're counting it," said the assassin.

"You bet I am," Trent said darkly. "The only thing you get points for is that we're in the Belt."

The assassin looked at Reverend Andy, floating in the brig doorway just behind Trent, and said, "Does he always talk like this?"

"He means," Reverend Andy explained, "that if you had broken his ribs under gravity they would be hurting more right now, and then he would be angrier at you." He looked at Trent. "But the second time you got your ribs broken was escaping from Luna, right? It was the mass driver that broke them. Not a murderer at all."

"No," Trent corrected him, "it was Mohammed Vance. He pumped about twenty rounds out of an autoshot at me right before the mass driver shot me off Luna. So the first time it was Melissa du Bois kicking me when I wasn't looking, and then it was Mohammed Vance shooting me while I watched him."

"Oh."

"And now *this* guy," Trent said. He turned back to the assassin. "The third rib-breaking murderer," he concluded. "So what's your name, anyway?"

"Chuck," the man said after a pause.

"Chuck what?"

"Smith."

"Right."

"Wait," the assassin said, "no, wait, wait, *Jones*."

Trent laughed out loud. "Oh, come *on*."

Reverend Andy said, "What? What?"

Trent was still grinning at the assassin. "Chuck Jones was an animator. From the Golden Age. Did a lot of the great Bugs Bunny and Road Runner cartoons."

The assassin's expression changed slightly. "Don't forget Duck Dodgers in the 24-1/2th Century."

Trent said, "Man, I *hate* tourists. Let me see if I have this right; you came out here to visit the museum, watch a couple of Bugs flicks, saw me and decided I was Trent and figured what the hell, let's pop him. How are we on the broad outline?"

Silence.

Reverend Andy said, "Let me hit him a few times. Maybe cut off a few fingers. Or all of them."

The man's eyes widened slightly.

"You'll get vomit on your hands if you hit him," said Trent.

"OK," Reverend Andy agreed, "let's just go right to chopping off his fingers."

"Chuck Clearmountain," the man said abruptly.

Trent expected that Captain Bittan was monitoring the brig; in the event that she wasn't, Trent said through his inskin, Captain Bittan: Assassin identifies himself as Chuck Clearmountain. Tourist from Earth. Track him down with Belt InTourist, please. To Chuck Clearmountain he said, "That was too easy; you have a very low Threshold of Fear. Bad trait in an assassin. Any reason in particular we shouldn't space you?"

Clearmountain just looked at Trent. "You wouldn't."

"Don't believe everything you audit," said Trent mildly. "All a virtuous reputation means is nobody's caught you at anything yet. As if I didn't know already, just why did you try to kill me?"

The man flushed and looked down at the deck. "Oh, Harry . . . it was just -- " He looked back up at Trent, said pleadingly, "Ten million Credits, dead or alive. You're Number One on the bounty listings."

"Number One with a bullet," Trent muttered.

The words tumbled out of Clearmountain. "Do you know what that kind of Credit *means*? I could get full Medical for my parents, for my grandparents. I could make sure my kids and their kids never had to worry about ending up in Public Labor. I could afford the third child license -- "

"You're going to make me cry," said Reverend Andy. "Goddamn blood money -- 'scuse me. *Damn* blood money." Sometimes Reverend Andy forgot that he was a Reverend and reverted to football player swearing. He looked over at Trent. "I say we let him suck death pressure."

Even in drop the assassin sagged visibly. It was obviously no more than he had expected.

Trent grinned at Reverend Andy. "Remember the last one? His eyes popped out just like Roger Rabbit's. Big huge saucers," he said to Chuck Clearmountain. "Anyway, what made you think I was me?"

Clearmountain's head floated limply. He said in a dead voice, "Everyone knows you're out in the Belt. There's some things biosculpture can't disguise; there aren't all that many twenty-eight year old hundred ninety-odd centimeter downsiders with muscles floating around the Belt. I saw you at the Museum a couple days ago, and you knew more about the exhibits than the curator. I asked her about you, and she said that you were Gus Allen and Ben Parker, holy men from Gandhi CityState, and you came over there a lot -- I figured it *had* to be you. You're a well-known cartoon fan," he added wearily.

"Jesus and Harry," said Trent. "'A well-known cartoon fan.' That was *it*? *That* was all you had to go on? You could have killed an innocent man. Not that *I'm* not an innocent man," he added, "but still, my point. Have you ever killed anyone?"

Clearmountain looked up at Trent and said slowly, "Not -- no. No. During the TriCentennial I shot at some looters -- I run a convenience store in Montana -- but I shot high. I don't think I hit anybody."

"You ever going to try and kill anyone again?"

"What?"

"I said -- "

"I heard you. Are you serious? Would you believe me if I said I wasn't?"

The humor drained from Trent's features. Trent took a step closer to Clearmountain, and Clearmountain had to raise his head to look up and meet the man's clear gray eyes. It happened right in front of him, but Charles Pierce Clearmountain could not have described the process had his life depended on it. The smile vanished and a stillness descended upon the man, a fierceness and a radiant severity that struck Charles Clearmountain like the bullets he had fired at the man: the person in front of him *became* Trent the Uncatchable, the Unification's deadliest enemy, the greatest Player of the age, the man who had ten years ago walked through a wall with a dozen Peaceforcers watching him --

-- and said, "So long as you live, will you ever try and kill anyone again?"

Clearmountain could not take his eyes off the man, and he had never meant anything more in his life when he said, "Never. I never will, God, I swear it, I swear it on my children."

Trent relaxed slightly and the brig suddenly seemed twice as large. "Okay. We'll send you back to Earth, then."

"You . . ." Clearmountain stumbled over it. "You're not -- "

"Going to make you suck death pressure?" Trent grinned at the man. "Nah. Killing is wrong. I do try to avoid it."

They borrowed a pressure suit for Trent from the *Vatsayama*; Trent had no intention of risking death pressure again in the scalesuit Charles Clearmountain had shot twice. It was fortunate that Reverend Andy didn't need a loan; he was the tallest player in the history of the World Football League, 220 centimeters, taller than most loonies, tall enough that he had, for two years early in his career, played both professional football and professional dropball. Pressure suits of his height were not totally uncommon; p-suits that would fit a man of his height and bulk had to be custom ordered.

Captain Bittan came down to the lock to see them off. "You don't really want me to send this son of a bitch back to Earth?"

Trent winced as he sealed the p-suit up around his cracked ribs. "I do. You're headed for Vesta this run anyway; put him on an Earthbound Trans-Planet ship when you get there. He won't be a problem, Sid. I promise."

Trent owned her ship; Bittan obviously didn't want to do what Trent was asking of her, but couldn't think of a way to say no. "All right," she said finally. "But I have just one thing to say to you: that was the worst Bad Cop/Antichrist routine I ever saw."

Trent shrugged. "Well, the important thing is that we enjoyed ourselves."

Reverend Andy frowned. "No, the important thing is that we got the truth out of that boy."

Trent thought about it. "Well -- that's important, sure. But it's more important that we had a good time while we were doing it, without having to hurt him. In the long run," Trent said to Captain Bittan, "there's only two reasons to ever do *anything*: to enjoy yourself, and to help other people enjoy themselves." He lifted his helmet into place and sealed it shut while Sid Bittan was still shaking her head.

"That man is crazy," she said to Reverend Andy.

The huge black man said gently, "No, he's just a holy man -- a bodhisatva," he clarified; Bittan was a Buddhist. "They can be hard to deal with if you haven't known one before."

Sid Bittan snorted; she'd never met a bodhisatva before, but she knew Trent wasn't one.

Trent clicked his outspeakers on. "Don't talk about people in front of their p-suits. It's very impolite."

"I was saying nice things about you," Reverend Andy protested.

"Only because they're true," Trent said. "Only because they're true."

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Trent and Reverend Andy took an unpressurized Chandler HuskySled back to Ceres CityState. It had been an hour's trip over to the *Vatsayama*, and was an hour back; to conserve fuel, most of it was not under boost.

The Milky Way glowed directly in front of Trent as they approached Ceres, a field of diamonds so bright they had color, blue and white and red and yellow spread across black velvet, crossing Trent's field of vision from end to end. Ceres ballooned as they approached, from a small, pitted gray rock to a landscape some 760 klicks in diameter that blotted out the sky. Trent, piloting with his mind on other things, performed the maneuver automatically, going in nose-first, braking rockets lit.

An encoded message was transmitted to Trent's inskin when they were less than eighty meters from Gandhi CityState's Downlot 104. Ceres' gravity is negligible; for practical purposes it was a free fall approach. Trent disconnected a portion of his attention from the approach and went Inside.

A simulation came alight: Captain Sidney Bittan, sitting in her chair on the bridge of the *Vatsayama*, staring into the holo cameras. She fought to speak against acceleration so fierce it pulled her cheeks back. "Trent!"

The nerve net in Trent's skull had, a decade prior, been programmed with the personality of Trent's former Image, Johnny Johnny; today the pieces of Johnny Johnny's personality had largely been integrated by Trent. But the Image code which Johnny Johnny had once used remained to him; it was a trivial matter for Trent to assemble an Image of himself and beam it back to the *Vatsayama*. "Yes?"

Her voice was blurry from gee force. "After he decided we were really going to let him live, 'Sieur Clearmountain remembered something else he wanted to share with us -- "

It could have been any of a dozen bad things; Trent did not let himself leap to conclusions. "And?"

"He beamcast a message to the Unification Embassy at Vesta saying that he'd found you at Gandhi CityState -- "

Okay, thought Trent, *that's pretty bad*.

" -- and they beamed back to him that they would send a pickup squad to take you off of the Temple of 'Toons Asteroid after he shot you -- "

And that's worse --

" -- a pickup squad of *four PKF Elite*."

-- and that's about as bad as it gets.

Bittan glanced aside at something, moving her head with exaggerated caution, not lifting her skull from its headrest. She looked back to the holocam and said simply, "We're en route."

Trent killed the simulation he'd been beaming back to the *Vatsayama* and said aloud, "Might as well have jumped to conclusions."

Reverend Andy said, "What?"

Trent's thoughts moved along at a quick calm clip as he brought the sled down onto the surface of Ceres, nudging the craft down onto the parking lot on the asteroid's surface, aiming for the red zone next to the airlock. There was another sled there already; he would have to double-park.

The Elite would have watched them sled over to the *Vatsayama*; would be watching them sled back, right now. Unless they had brought something larger than a troop transport with them they wouldn't want to try and take Trent and Reverend Andy out here on the surface; better to get them inside, into enclosed, pressurized areas, where the Elite's unnatural advantages of strength and speed would be maximized.

Trent said, "Nothing important, Ben. Let's get inside."

He couldn't tell Reverend Andy; the scalesuit Chuck Clearmountain had shot had secure communications gear on it, but the loaner from the *Vatsayama* had only the general bands, which the Elite were surely monitoring. He risked a quick glance up at the sky while undoing his seatbelt -- and Jesus and Harry, there it was, maybe a hundred and forty meters out, a pressurized troop transport with the glowpaint tuned black and running lights off, coming in fast. Reverend Andy followed his look, realized what was going on, and scrambled out of his seat belt.

Trent double parked in the red zone near the airlock and kicked over to the airlock, Reverend Andy right behind him, crawling over the sled parked in between them and the airlock, as the PKF troop transport came to a hard landing forty meters away, sending chips of asteroidal stone flying from the impact; one of the chips hit the back of Trent's helmet. Trent glanced back in his helmet's rear-view mirror, and it was more Bad News: the Elite weren't inside the transport; they clung to the transport's exterior, wearing black combat scalesuits, and let themselves loose as the transport came down. They hit the asteroid's surface hard --

-- and were up again in an instant. Trent dove through the airlock's open door and palmed the pressure pad the instant Reverend Andy was fully inside, as the four Elite bounded toward them over the surface of the asteroid. The airlock door slid shut with maddening slowness; one of the Elite brought a variable laser around on them, got off a shot, *through* the frames of the two sleds, as the airlock door slid shut and locked --

Trent's p-suit lost pressure. He glanced down and saw a clean laser score across his abdomen; he'd felt nothing, but it had breached the suit. His suit reacted as it had been designed, minimizing the exposure to death pressure: the suit clamped tight around Trent's waist and chest, exposing his midriff to vacuum. Trent could feel the skin on his stomach prickling as the hard vacuum tugged at it.

Trent had never noticed before how long it took for the airlock to pressurize. The inner airlock door would not open until the airlock chamber was at a full atmosphere; if the Elite managed to burn through the outer airlock door first, the inner door would not open at all.

The ground beneath Trent's feet vibrated. He could imagine the scene outside, the improbably strong Elite *swatting* aside the sleds as they lined up to shoot at the door --

A red spot appeared on the outer airlock door. A second spot. A third. They converged on each other --

The inner airlock door began to slide open; Trent squeezed through the instant it was wide enough for him, with Reverend Andy right behind him. The outer airlock door glowed white, and then the glowing metal bowed outward with the enormous pressure of the air behind it, and abruptly gave way, spraying the PKF Elite on the surface outside with the molten metal.

Downsiders, thought Trent as the sirens went off. The inner airlock door *slammed* shut with a huge clang: if someone had been caught in the way, even an Elite, the door would have punched through them. Design decisions: better one person die, or lose a limb, than an entire corridor full.

On outspeakers throughout Ceres, and across all radio channels, the message blared out: "ALERT! AIRLOCK BREACH AT DOWNLOT 104! AIRLOCK BREACH AT DOWNLOT 104! DEATH PRESSURE BREACH AT DOWNLOT 104!"

The corridor was deserted; it was just after midnight, Greenwich Mean Time, on Tuesday, January 20, 2080: four hours since Chuck Clearmountain had asked Trent if he was Trent. The asteroid's eighty thousand Hare Krishnas, forty thousand Buddhists, and three thousand Hindus were all sleeping. Trent turned and kicked off down the raw stone corridor, pulling his helmet off as Reverend Andy followed him. He came to a public system and punched *Emergency, Broadcast*, and his voice boomed out across all of Gandhi CityState:

"THIS IS TRENT THE UNCATCHABLE, THE MAN WHO'S BEEN LIVING AMONG YOU AS THE PILGRIM AUGUSTUS ALLEN. A SQUAD OF ELITE CYBORGS ARE CUTTING THROUGH THE LOCK AT DOWNLOT 104 AS I SPEAK. *STAY IN YOUR QUARTERS* AND THE ELITE WON'T HARM YOU; THEY'RE AFTER ME. THIS IS TRENT THE UNCATCHABLE: *STAY IN YOUR QUARTERS!*"

Reverend Andy had his helmet cracked open when Trent turned around; he started to speak and Trent overrode him. "Call *Vatsayama* let them know Elite are here then go to Downlot 16. I'm going to get my simulations I *can't* let them fall into PKF hands, if I don't make it to Down-16 in fifteen minutes *go*, I'll see you at the Board meeting on Mars," and as Reverend Andy opened his mouth again Trent raised his voice, "You are a fifty-six year old preacher and the Elite will *kill* you!" Trent yelled into his face, "Go *now!*"

He did not wait to see if Reverend Andy was listening to him: he turned and kicked off down the corridor, heading for the nearest drop shaft that led to the lower levels.

Thirty seconds after Trent's broadcast announcement, it seemed as though half the people in Gandhi CityState were floating around in the corridors, rubbing the sleep from their eyes. Trent wished he had a gun, just something to wave and point at them: as it was everyone who recognized him, a fair number, seemed to think that they were entitled to an explanation or a quick chat or *something*. It was slowing him down and Trent knew that the PKF Elite would not get the same reception. They'd come ghosting down the corridors in their armored black combat p-suits, and the Krishnas would just melt out of the way, and the ones who didn't would die quick. Trent pulled his destroyed p-suit off as he flew down the corridors, wriggling out of the lower half of the suit, unsealing the upper half and throwing it away, lips curling in pain as his broken ribs ground together.

Trent's quarters hung off the CityState's main drop shaft, on the third level; the cross-corridor he was in, leading away from Downlot 104, passed through two pressure seals and then fed directly into the drop shaft. Trent flew out into the drop shaft, and twenty stories of empty space opened up "beneath" him.

Trent grabbed at a handhold at the edge of the drop shaft --

If Trent had ever been afraid of heights, ten and a half years in space would have cured him of it. The drop shaft stretched over sixty meters in diameter, cut from the raw stone of Ceres, with entryways to each of Gandhi CityState's twenty levels opening up onto it. Trent heard screaming from somewhere off behind him, the unmistakable sizzling of lasers on flesh, and the muffled boom of a repeating autoshot: he got his legs coiled underneath him, oriented himself on the entrance he needed, three stories below and all the way across the diameter of the drop shaft, and leaped.

The paint in the drop shaft was darkened after midnight, not to blackness, but to a dim glow far gentler than during the day; Trent could not see the entryway he needed clearly, and his jump was half guesswork. He tumbled in mid-air, broken ribs grinding together, like an acrobat, like a SpaceFarer, like a Belter, and touched the soft landing pad at the Third Level entryway feet first, absorbing the energy of his jump perfectly.

It was only the fifth or sixth time in the two years he'd lived there that he'd gotten that leap right.

He glanced back and up and all four PKF Elite flew out of the First Level entryway, out into the drop shaft, in their ebony combat suits, weapons at ready. Trent did not know if they'd seen him; he grabbed the edge of the Third Level entryway and pulled himself through, manually dogging the emergency airlock behind him.

Third Level, Corridor C: Corridor C *belonged* to Trent.

He'd purchased it, made it home, and now he had a chance. There was a limit to what Gandhi CityState was willing to tolerate from "Gus Allen" -- even with pressure from the SpaceFarers' Collective, which provided Gandhi CityState with military protection from the Unification -- but with the Collective's help Trent had pushed them to that limit. For most of the last decade, Trent's bounty had been the highest in the System; it had climbed from five thousand Credits in August of 2069 to ten million Credits today, in January of 2080. And in all that time, only a few bounty hunters had even gotten close to Trent. Trent had learned not merely to take precautions, but *levels* of precautions --

-- most of them directed at the Peace Keeping Force's Elite cyborgs. The Elite were stronger and faster and much tougher than ordinary humans, with senses that spanned the electromagnetic spectrum. Their eyes were lenses, their ears mechanisms. In early Elite the skin had been toughened into a rigid mask; in later models, their skin, though superficially the skin of a normal human, still would not burn beneath a cutting laser. Direct vacuum would *hurt*; but it would not kill an Elite if the Elite could reach air again before suffocating. Transform viruses sped their neural reactions by a factor of three, up from a mere forty percent improvement in earlier Elite. Early models of PKF Elite had required that their power sources be replaced every six months; modern Elite were good for up to five years. Carbon-ceramic filaments were woven throughout their bodies, around the joints and ligaments, supporting the internal organs, the heart and lungs and organs of the abdominal cavity, allowing PKF Elite to withstand acceleration that would kill an ordinary human, or even a genie such as Trent.

They boasted an optical secondary nerve network that was thousands of times faster than the clumsy neuro-chemical nerve nets humans were born with, controlled by a combat computer implanted at the base of the Elite's skull. Their index fingers sported small-weapons-caliber lasers -- the ultimate in point-and-shoot.

One flaw in Elite design had gone unnoticed for over thirty years until the TriCentennial rebellion. All PKF Elite, through 2076, had been produced with a superconducting mesh buried immediately beneath the skin. Given the caliber of energy weapons available in the 2040s, when the Elite were designed, the

decision had made sense. Shooting an Elite with an energy weapon, a laser or maser, might make him warm, as the superconducting mesh spread the heat across the surface of the Elite's body, but was unlikely to kill him --

In 2076, during the rebellion in Occupied America, three hundred and forty-seven PKF Elite had died beneath the beams of rebel x-lasers, slightly detuned so that the lasers would not cut well, and pumped up to burn the rifle's power supply out in four or five shots. The superconducting meshes had done their jobs, distributing the huge blasts of heat across the body of the Elite; the rebels had fried Elite like bacon.

For most of the last two years, Trent had lived the life of an ascetic -- in a four-room suite at the end of an expansion corridor he had purchased. Trent lived in the Krishna end of town, and the Krishnas, accustomed to holy men who fasted and starved themselves, found it something to comment on -- that one holy man could require so much space just to be ascetic in.

The outer two rooms were for guests -- Trent had more guests than most pilgrims; going beyond that, one found a bedroom with suspiciously sybaritic bathing arrangements; and beyond that, presumably, the room in which Augustus Allen meditated. Presumably because, so far as any of the Krishnas knew, nobody except 'Sieur Allen had ever *seen* that room.

No one who knew Trent, rather than the pilgrim Augustus Allen, would have been surprised by the contents of that fourth room.

An emergency airlock, leading to the asteroid's surface, stood mounted on one of the walls. But the emergency exit was not the interesting thing about the room --

Blazing along in a sphere called the Black Beast, floating in the center of the room, was nearly four percent of the processing power to be found off of Earth itself.

Two trillion massively parallel optical processors, each processor linked by light directly to over five thousand other processors, layered in with columnar banks of RAM: two megabytes of dedicated RAM to each processor, four quintabytes of liquid helium RTS, room temperature superconducting RAM. (The room-temperature superconductors were exactly that: room-temperature. They had never been designed to run at 335 degrees Celsius, the temperature the Black Beast would have reached without the veins of liquid helium that pulsed beneath its black polymer skin.)

The Beast stored information by raising electrons through the quantum shells of atoms; read data back in the photons emitted when the electrons crashed back to their base state.

The entire assemblage, built one molecule-thick layer at a time by an army of the most advanced nanotech assemblers available in the entire System, fit in a sphere four meters in diameter.

The Black Beast floated in the center of the room, liquid helium lines leading to and from it, a single heavily shielded power cable dropping away into the "floor."

Tens of millions of kilometers away, in orbit about Earth, the Unification of Earth was busy putting the finishing touches to the *Unity*, a massive warship designed to spread the Unification to the rest of the System; and here, tucked away in the back of a four-room suite at Gandhi CityState, floated Trent's answer to it, the Black Beast, which held within its dark soul the plans for the downfall of the Unification of Earth: *Hosea 8:7*.

If Trent and the plans both survived.

It is likely that only half a dozen of the most tightly coded Artificial Intelligences in the entire System could

have followed each step of the sequence of events as they unfolded; perhaps no Player could have:

Trent flew through the raw stone of Corridor C, toward his quarters at the far end of the corridor. PKF Elite floated at the other end of the corridor, cutting through the emergency airlock; Trent flew into range for the radio packet link to the Black Beast, and the nerve net within his skull, designed and grown for the task of thinking like Trent, only much, much faster, came alive --

Orders of abstraction:

The Crystal Wind of Earth's InfoNet had been too fast for humans to navigate within, unaided, for nearly four decades. And as the hardware got faster and the software smarter, the problem only grew worse. Increasingly clever approaches were used to address the problem -- Images were programmed to deal with most of the grunt work of navigating the Net; tracesets freed humans from keyboards and pointing devices and the need to speak aloud; the first real Players, the greatest of the webdancers, subjected themselves to surgery, had InfoNet links implanted within their skulls, "in-skin," to provide them with greater integration with their Images; and finally, in the year 2069, Tytan Labs had shipped the NN-II, an experimental nerve net designed to offload biological thought processes into the nerve net -- making its recipient smarter, able to think faster; Trent had had one installed in late '69. For ten years the biochip nerve net had been growing inside his skull, making ever deeper and more intimate connections with Trent's neural system. It would have killed him to remove it; but even so:

Stopgap measures on the way to the Promised Land. The problem was that there was an absolute limit to the speed at which protein-based neurons could process information.

Trent had solved the problem.

For most of the last five years, Trent the Uncatchable had been a replicant AI.

The storm of data that struck Trent was similar to what he remembered of the Crystal Wind, of the InfoNet upon Earth. Once the process of splitting had been strange to him, even frightening, but he had grown used to it by now; he cut his slow biological component out of the loop and uploaded himself into the Black Beast.

The boundaries of his informational universe expanded by eight orders of magnitude; the speed at which he thought improved by five orders of magnitude. It took less than a second of Realtime; to the living Image of Trent the Uncatchable, the process took well over a day. He had time to watch as the holocams mounted in the main drop shaft swiveled to track the PKF Elite, who had brought their lasers alight and were attacking the airlock that led into Corridor C, time to touch the emergency databases assembled in the back of his memory, let the data spill into him and watch himself grow to encompass it.

When he was done, he was the largest, fastest, smartest AI in all of history.

He tapped into copies of the code that controlled the battle computers at the base of the Elite's skulls: code obtained from dead Elite during the rebellion four years prior. So far as Trent was concerned, it was the only good thing to come out of that rebellion; he had learned more about the Elite from disassembling the Elite control code than from all the information ever published about the Elite since the Elite were created. The Unification did not know that Trent possessed that code; it meant that, put into dangerous situations, the Elite would react according to programming that Trent understood better than the Elite themselves.

A message for the Elite, first, something to slow them down and make them think a little. (They

were PKF, after all, Trent thought; "a little" was probably the only way they knew how to think.) A holograph appeared floating in the middle of Corridor C, in French, in flashing bright red type; the Elite would see it the instant they cut through the doorway.

Warning! Warning to all PKF Elite! This corridor has been booby-trapped in multiple smart and tricky ways. Any Elite foolish enough to try coming down this corridor will end up looking Wicked Silly -- if he's awfully lucky.

Trent did not bother with threats; the Elite knew, better than practically anyone, that Trent was not going to try and kill them. Trent activated the room's one service robot, instructed it to insert five 600-terabyte infochips into the backup slots, and began spooling data for download to the infochips, and then requested access to the Ceres microwave antennae, had it granted: he encoded and began beaming, toward the Vatsayama, the Hosea 8:7 archives. There was no danger in that; Trent knew that he could not have decoded that file without the required passwords, and he did not expect better from the PKF DataWatch. He ranged the Vatsayama as he beamed: they were en route to Ceres, but would not arrive for another nineteen minutes.

He tapped the Elite radio packets, and began typing them against encryption schemes he knew the Elite preferred; it would take time, since he needed a minimum sample of the radio packet communications before he could begin decoding it; and then called up a schematic of the colony, examining accesses in and out of Level Three. The four Elite were grouped at the far end of Corridor C, cutting through -- only eight seconds from first application of the lasers, and they'd already punched a hole through the airlock. Trent estimated another forty seconds to cut a hole large enough for the Elite to come through.

The combat suits were bad news. They made his favorite trick, the fadeaway spray, impractical -- even Elite skin had to be somewhat permeable, and a heavy douse of fadeaway would put one down for several minutes while the Elite immune system dealt with the drug.

But there were other tricks.

Three of the Elite cut away at the airlock while the fourth watched their backs. Gandhi was a pacifist CityState, in theory, but the Elite did not believe for an instant that it meant that no one in the entire asteroid would shoot at them; and it certainly did not mean that any *SpaceFarers* who happened to be present at the asteroid would not shoot at them -- a member of the Collective probably would, and with military caliber weapons.

When the fourth Elite saw faces peeking around the edges of corridors, he fired upon them as soon as they showed *Acquired*. He killed eleven of the CityStaters in the fifty-three seconds it took his companions to cut through the airlock, and then followed the other three through the airlock.

On the other side of the corridor floated a holograph, in French, warning the French Elite to go no further.

Elite Sergeant Philippe Mansion said over the combat band, Officer Quinette, take the point.

An out-speaker boomed forth in French: "BAD NEWS FOR ELITE! COME NO FURTHER! COME NO FURTHER!" -- and then began repeating.

Elite Officer Janelle Quinette, one of the rare hundreds of female PKF who had ever been inducted into the Elite, kicked her ankle rockets up to high and moved forward down the stony corridor. Abruptly the microphones that fed her sound from the outside world went dead: sonics, at a guess. *In character*, she

thought to herself as she flew toward the end of the long, empty hall, laser gripped in both hands. Trent would not do anything likely to kill any of the Elite --

Her helmet, where it touched the back of her neck, was unnaturally warm. Janelle Quinette, at thirty-five, had logged more time in drop, eight years, than all but a few of the men in the PKF; it was one of the reasons she had made Elite. Her reaction now demonstrated it: in one smooth motion she holstered her rifle and got her hands up and pointed into her direction of motion, blasted once with her hand rockets to get her feet around and then kicked in her ankle rockets on emergency boost. Induction field, she said shortly, as she braked hard, the armored combat suit around her heating up with amazing speed; she used one more blast of her wrist rockets to stabilize herself and then cracked the seal on her helmet and ripped it off as she came to a halt and began accelerating backward down the corridor.

She performed the extraordinary feat of unsuited while her suit was under boost.

Trent flew through the main entryway into his quarters. All of the doors stood uncurled, awaiting his arrival; they curled shut behind him with a snap as he entered. Through his inskin his Image kept him apprised, at several abstracts, of the actions it was taking to keep him alive.

In one view Trent watched a pair of PKF Elite prepare to move down the corridor again. One of them was Janelle Quinette, the other -- Trent accessed his Elite database -- Sergeant Philippe Mansion, an eleven-year veteran. Beneath their suits they wore PKF gray combat fatigues. Interesting, and mildly flattering; on normal duty PKF wore patrol blacks. The combat grays dated back to the Unification War, and the symbolism was significant, to the PKF at least: they wore them only when going into combat.

Trent's Image cracked their encryption. Clipped French voices filled Trent's skull.

Sergeant Mansion, if you don't get through, I'll send your combat suits in to pull you out.

Yes, sir.

Very interesting; one of the two remaining Elite out-ranked the Elite Sergeant. Flattering and scary; Trent pulled himself through the doorway into the fourth room, where the Black Beast awaited him. The door curled shut behind him and the glowpaint came up.

There was not much to see; tools and racks of spare equipment lined five of the six walls. The airlock, mounted in the sixth wall, had Trent's spare scalesuit floating next to it. Scalesuits are armored pressure suits; they are in a real sense the smallest true spacecraft ever built, with propulsion and lifesystems capable of keeping a human alive for up to a week. Trent suited up while waiting for his archives to be made: the robot had jacked in the backup 600TB infochips when Trent arrived, and data was already flowing into them, twenty-two seconds to completion -- even with modern technology, a little less than three quadrabytes of information took *time* to transfer --

Suited up took time a *ridiculous* amount of time. Trent wiggled into the lower half of the suit, sweat beading his forehead as the motion ground his broken ribs together again. When he took a deep breath it sent a stabbing pain through his right side, and he wondered if the rib were poking into his lung. He exhaled slowly, and trying not to breathe pulled the upper half of the suit on --

Elite Officer Quinette moved down the corridor, hands clenched into fists. Sergeant Mansion followed behind her, staying near the walls, near the handgrips and footpads. The sonics pounded into her, made her teeth hurt, but they did not have the effect on her that they would have had on a normal human. Quinette could feel herself growing uncomfortably warm from the induction field, but not frighteningly so;

the worst was her hands, with the lasers in the tips of her index fingers. Her fingers burned --

A portion of what was, according to the local vertical indicators, the ceiling, pulled aside. The combat computer at the base of Quinette's skull kicked her off the wall like a billiard ball as the maser cannon dropped down into the corridor in front of them. The maser's beam missed her and struck Elite Sergeant Mansion square on with all the heat of a flame-thrower.

Trent the AI watched the proceedings with considerable interest. The maser blast struck Mansion just before Quinette reached the emplacement; she got her legs up against the ceiling, got a good grip on the cannon, and ripped it out of its emplacement.

He'd decided to shoot Mansion rather than Quinette for purely pragmatic reasons; Mansion was more massive than Quinette, less likely to be harmed after the microwave blast had been distributed across his body. Trent had completed the archive; but his biological component had not yet managed to get into his pressure suit, so Trent continued spooling the data from the holocams into the fifth infochip. Mansion's uniform was burning, which did not surprise Trent; but his hair was also burning, which did. New design work; historically, Elite hair had been stiff as wire, and completely unburnable. And . . . the reason he'd shot Mansion. Quinette ripped the man's burning clothing off him, and Trent's holocams got a good look at the Elite's upper back.

Two areas, high up on the man's back, glowed red with heat. And Mansion was shaking himself free of Quinette's grasp, still alive, still functional; in a certain degree of discomfort, but clearly not in terrible pain.

The heat exchanges, installed after the '76 rebellion, obviously worked, and worked well. Trent had been reasonably sure they would, both from the specs and from reports he'd received of Elite surviving direct blasts with "Elite killers," the pumped lasers developed during the rebellion. The maser blast Trent had hit Mansion with would not have killed him even had the man's heat exchanges malfunctioned, but neither would the cyborg have been heading down the corridor once more less than ten seconds later, with a patch on his upper back glowing a dull red, looking Wicked Pissed.

Trent left his gloves unlocked and waited for the transfer lights on the infochips to go clear. Four of them had already, but the fifth light had yet to go clear --

Trent hesitated, reluctant to let go of the last infochip. Field information on the PKF was rare -- this was easily the best field observation he'd had of Elite since the rebellion -- but that was not the source of his reluctance. Everything that he experienced and thought in these last moments was spooling into the last infochip; the moment he let go of the chip would be the moment of his death.

He decided to give himself one last treat before disconnecting; the next one was a classic.

The Elite were three quarters of the way down the long corridor, only forty meters left to the end, when the glowing holo of the pink bunny appeared, banging away on a drum, walking toward them along the corridor's "ceiling." Quinette and Mansion flew toward it, heading down the corridor at a good clip, each of them forcibly overriding their combat programming; neither wanted to be seen shooting like panicked rookies at the holo of a pink bunny sent at them by Trent the Uncatchable, a man who everyone knew wouldn't try to really hurt them -- when the bunny froze in place. The Elite had time for just a moment of uncertainty when the bunny threw away the drum sticks and performed a two-handed fast draw from the holsters that had abruptly appeared hanging from the bunny's waist.

It shot them both, of course.

Mansion took the shot of liquid fadeaway all over his upper body. Janelle Quinette did better; the stream of liquid splashed against her shirt, caught the side of her cheek as she twisted frantically in mid-air, the burning hot lasers in her fingertips coming around to blast at the squirt guns, the squirt guns that had been hidden inside the holo of the bunny. She retained consciousness long enough to snarl, over the PKF comm band, Merde!

This was the hard part.

Replicant AIs have, in general, no evolved desire for self-preservation. Over the years most replicants had invested themselves with such an imperative, but in every case Trent knew of it lacked the urgency, and replicants the fear, associated with the human desire to continue living.

Trent did not lack it.

He finished decoding Janelle Quinette's last subverbalization, fed her comment on the state of the universe into the fifth infochip, and terminated the archive. There was no significant portion of himself that would fit within the nerve net inside his biological component's skull, to say nothing of the protein media; the portions of himself inside those infochips was the only complete copy of him anywhere in the System --

His biological component pulled free the final infochip, and put all five chips into his scalesuit's carry pouch. Trent watched him enter the airlock and cycle through, watching at the same time as the Elite finally found a way down the corridor that worked.

The empty combat suits had their own servomechanisms, and the Elite used them. While Quinette and Mansion were still bouncing around unconscious at the far end of the corridor, the two Elite at the other end of the corridor put autoshots into the hands of the combat suits and sent the suits on down the corridor, to the place where the induction coils were mounted. With an Elite inside the suit they could not be taken over from the outside, but empty, as they now were, being run by remote command, it was possible: Trent thought longingly about taking control of the suits and doing something amusing with them -- simulated sixty-nine, perhaps -- but doing that would tell the PKF that he had broken their comm encryption. Not worth it, for a joke.

The suits grew hotter and hotter as they approached the induction coils; they were close enough to Trent's holocams that Trent could see the paint on their breasts, the Elite logo, peeling and cracking with the heat. Trent had wondered how they would locate the coils, or if they would just start shooting when it got too hot; they did the sensible thing, had one of the suits start shooting at the corridor walls about halfway down the corridor, sent the other suit on until it began to cool, turned it around and sent it back to the hottest spot in the corridor; and had it open fire as well.

The autoshots boomed hugely in the small space, shot pellets ricocheting around the two combat suits, denting and scarring them, pitting the glassite in the helmets. The stone chipped and fragmented, cracking apart; Trent waited a few seconds and then turned off the induction coils, in the hopes that the PKF would think that they'd killed the coils; he might get the last two down the corridor that way.

No such luck; the combat suits kept firing until the thin layer of rock over the induction coils had been shattered, and the coils themselves exposed to the combined fire of the combat suits.

The two suited Elite came flying down the corridor toward their comrades, toward Trent. Trent

had nothing left to delay them with; everything else that he'd come up with, Gandhi CityState had rejected. In particular, right about now, Trent wished they'd allowed him to mount a few small explosives in the corridor; he might have trapped the Elite in a cave-in, kept them from reaching him before the Vatsayama reached Ceres.

Trent watched calmly as the third Elite stayed with the two unconscious Elite, and the fourth Elite cut through Trent's doors with an X-laser. Trent did it while the Elite was still in the outer room; the hand grenades planted around the circumference of the Black Beast were quite strong, and if Trent waited until the Elite were any closer, the explosion might do more than shake him up.

This was the hard part, all right.

Trent detonated the grenades --

The wavefront of the explosion raced inward, shredding the Black Beast molecules at a time, moving so slowly that Trent the Uncatchable was aware of it as a dimming of his resources; his extremities went numb and ceased speaking to him, and Trent shrank and fell back before the great darkness advancing upon him. The wave of darkness came at last to the place where he awaited it, in the midst of the light:

And died.

Trent the Uncatchable, flying a meter above the pitted, rocky gray surface of Ceres Asteroid, beneath the light of the distant Sun, shuddered with a wash of sympathetic pain. It was nothing physical, nothing like the broken bones that burned in his side.

"That was the hard part," he said aloud.

It *was* the hard part: and it kept getting harder every time one of his Images was lost. Trent did not know if his own death would be as difficult to deal with, assuming he saw it coming. His Image was larger than he was in virtually every way, including emotionally. He *felt* more strongly as Image; and the pain Trent felt, linked to his Image when it was ended, was only an echo, small and distant, of the experience the Image itself was having.

And that was the *scary* part.

Trent moved across the surface of the asteroid, navigating with short bursts of his wrist and ankle rockets, considering his options. The *Vatsayama* was coming; Trent's scalesuit gave out a radio microburst every thirty seconds, giving Trent's current coordinates. It wouldn't help the PKF; without the key to decode the burst the information was useless, and the radio signal itself was far too short to give the PKF time to lock in on it.

Assume the PKF troop transport had not been severely damaged when it touched down; the troop transport would be out there somewhere, looking for Trent. And that was assuming that the troop transport had come alone; unlikely. A PKF corvette was almost certainly nearby --

His radar detector pinged. Not loudly; they were looking for him, and were not certain where he was. It didn't surprise Trent; the surface of his scalesuit was covered in polypaint that shaded the scalesuit into its environment in an eerie fashion. Optical sensors spread across the surface of the scalesuit; a masking algorithm built into the suit interpreted the information from the optics, tuning the polypaint as Trent moved. So it was unlikely that the PKF had a visual of him.

The radar detector pinged again. The suit responded as it had been designed; it kicked in with a vague, flickering radar signal of its own, a fuzzy signal that would generate ghost images everywhere within two

hundred meters of Trent. The optical sensors built into Trent's suit tracked motion, piped it directly to Trent's inskin: black combat armor rose up over the surface of the asteroid, eclipsing the light from the distant stars behind it. A single Elite. Trent wondered briefly who it was. Trent knew his enemies; he'd met several of them over the course of the years, and had databases on the rest.

He scanned ahead, consulting the map he carried in his inskin of the surface of Ceres. It wasn't good; there wasn't another lock leading into pressure within several kilometers, and Trent wasn't sure he wanted to try for one anyway. Certainly the PKF had maps of Ceres' surface, including the location of locks leading to pressure. They'd be watching for Trent -- and Trent could not bring PKF back into pressure, not while there were unarmed civilians inside, civilians the PKF would kill if they did not get out of the way quickly enough.

There were no locks nearby; but there was a ravine, a jagged gorge five meters deep, running across the asteroid's surface. Two hundred and forty meters away . . . two hundred and twenty. In the view from his suit's optics, Trent could see the black combat suit following along after him. The Elite did not have a visual lock on him yet, but he had to know roughly where Trent was, within the general radius of the interference signal Trent's suit was generating --

A hundred and eighty meters until the ravine; and the Elite had his visual, all right. Trent could see the man's rockets, lighting at full boost. No point in hiding any further; Trent lit his maneuvering rockets and *flew*.

Trent wondered briefly where the Elite's backup was. Either the Elite had *come* in the transport -- unlikely, but not impossible -- or the ship in which they had come could not be too many kilometers off Ceres. It was possible the transport was no longer functional; it had come down *hard*. But the Peaceforcers were a cautious group; if they'd had enough time, they'd have sent backups.

Less than one hundred meters left to the gorge, and the Elite behind Trent was gaining on him. Purely a function of design; Elite combat suits were designed to boost longer and at higher velocities than the maneuvering rockets built into Trent's scalesuit. The Elite would not catch Trent before Trent reached the gorge, though --

On a ball of rock 760 klicks in diameter, the horizon is very close.

The PKF corvette seemed to *bounce* up over the edge of the horizon, directly in front of Trent, coming up over the top of a jagged uprise not two hundred meters ahead of him: a smooth sloping wedge shape marred only slightly by its three laser cannon. Almost by reflex Trent cut his rockets, paralyzed for an instant: enemies ahead, an enemy behind, he might be able to hide from a single Elite in that gorge, but not from a ship armed with searchlights, the Elite coming up *fast* from behind, corvette approaching him from the front, go left, go right, go straight up, bad options all. Go *back*, attack the Elite, *worse* option --

Trent went for the ship at full boost.

The ship was going in one direction, the Elite in the other. The corvette's front rockets cut in, blasting at full, perhaps two seconds gone now since Trent and the ship had first seen each other. The ship *exploded* into Trent's sky; five seconds, four, three, two --

Superconducting magnets buried in the palms and soles of Trent's scalesuit came alive at full capacity. Trent went *through* the exhaust from the nose rockets, hit the hull of the PKF corvette just below the Unification's flag, the blue and white Earth against a background of stars. He grabbed wildly, got one hand flat against the hull before he bounced off, he and the ship going in opposite directions at what seemed high speed only on the human level, fifty or sixty klicks an hour, and slid down the length of the ship, palm of one hand holding him to the ship's smooth hull, got the other hand around and connected to

the hull, sliding backward down the ship --

It happened too quickly for his biological component to take more than a passing interest in it. His inskin made the decisions:

Optical feed shows laser cannon approaching. Ankle rockets on high, nose rockets on the corvette still boosting at max; drop boost on the left ankle rocket and I will slide laterally down the hull, just missing the cannon emplacement. . . .

Trent's right ankle rocket died and his suit went rigid in the same moment. Trent and his suit slewed around and struck the cannon emplacement at over forty kilometers an hour. The shock slammed up through the rigid suit, through Trent's knees and into his ribs --

His right knee popped so loudly Trent could hear it even through his suit's neck collar, his broken ribs collapsed and Trent screamed at the top of his lungs as the PKF Elite who had been chasing him sailed by, heading in the opposite direction.

Trent's first coherent observation after the shock wore off was that the laser cannon's focusing ring was white hot. He stared at it from ten centimeters away, abruptly aware that the vacuum immediately in front of his faceplate was filled with an invisible beam of coherent light that would vaporize him if he moved wrong, if he moved out of the small space between the laser and the ship's hull.

He shot the cannon with both lasers.

The scalesuit's fingertip lasers were direct rip-offs of the lasers built into the fingers of modern model PKF Elite, with modifications Trent had made himself. Trent had no degrees in anything; he had merely been, while uploaded into the Black Beast, the finest nanotechnician, genengineer, engineer, physicist, and so forth, off of Earth; he had certainly been the finest computerist, and the smartest AI, in history.

The results of the twin blasts were not impressive; the focusing ring flickered once and went black.

The corvette was designed by downsiders, and it showed: it had a top and a bottom. No SpaceFarer would have made that mistake. The corvette had a pair of laser cannon mounted on the underside, but only one on top, and Trent had taken care of it.

The corvette ceased acceleration.

Bad news. They probably knew he was on the hull; it was possible they had heard him hit and quite certain that they knew their upper laser cannon had gone down and that Trent was responsible. PKF inside the ship would be scrambling for the airlock, coming out to capture or kill Trent, and they would find it easier to move in drop than under boost. A schematic of the corvette popped up in Trent's skull, and he found himself moving forward over the hull before his forebrain had assimilated the information, hands brought down into contact with the hull, the superconducting magnets coming alight. He headed back down the hull to the airlock, gliding, the magnets keeping him in contact with the hull but not slowing him at all, until he came to the spot, well forward on the hull, where the main airlock was embedded in the hull. He cascaded his way down the decision tree, considering and rejecting options as he approached the airlock. A corvette was not a troop carrier, was not designed to disgorge several soldiers at once; one or two PKF at the most might cram their way into the lock to cycle through.

Trent glided to a slow stop immediately over the airlock --

The airlock was already cycling open, the outer door recessing, pulling back into the hull. A single Peaceforcer inside, who knew Trent was waiting for him; he stood with a laser rifle, pointing it at the

edge of the airlock door as the door slid aside.

Good news, bad news. It wasn't an Elite; if it had been an Elite Trent would have shot him in the faceplate. The laser blast would not kill an Elite, and the Elite would not suffocate in the time it would take him to get back into pressure; an ordinary human might die of the blast, might die of the vacuum shock.

In the death pressure silence, Trent went into the airlock after the Peaceforcer.

The man was an ordinary PKF; Trent could tell by the suit he wore. No faceplate. Elite eyes were mechanisms, and amazingly expensive ones at that; it would have hampered them to take their information from a screen mounted inside their helmet, would have reduced the quality of the information they were being given. For non-augmented humans that was not the case. Normal PKF combat suits lacked faceplates and relied on cameras instead --

The man got a shot off as Trent came in on him. The scalesuit Trent was wearing was probably the most expensive pressure suit in human history; but there are absolute limits to technology, to the ability of material to shed heat. The superconductors buried across Trent's suit did their best, but in the moment of the shot Trent's scalesuit grew blisteringly hot at every point of contact with his skin. He got a hand on the laser's barrel and clenched his fist. The suit's servos did as they were told, crushed the barrel and killed the laser. Trent reached *past* the Peaceforcer, got the palm of his left hand flat against the door behind the man, and turned on that hand's superconducting magnet. Now he had leverage, and he used it, got a grip on the Peaceforcer's neck ring, and slammed the Peaceforcer's head against the inner airlock door, and then again, let go of the Peaceforcer, let himself drift backward slightly, and started shooting.

The optical sensors on Trent's scalesuit were built into the suit, located every five millimeters across the suit's surface. It was an expensive way to work. The man in front of Trent had eleven holocams buried across his suit's surface, and Trent shot the six mounted on the suit's front, one after another; if the man wanted to try chasing him while facing backward, Trent wished him luck. He shot the last of the holocams facing him and grabbed the edges of the airlock and pulled himself back out of the lock, onto the surface of the corvette, feeling *quite* competent, thank you, a brief flash of *I am really quite excessively good at this* flickering through the back of his mind somewhere --

The PKF Elite who had chased Trent across the surface of Ceres stood on the surface of the hull, boots of his combat suit locked to the hull, autoshot in his hands, and waited until Trent looked up at him before opening fire.

The autoshots used by PKF Elite are eight-gauge shotguns firing four rounds per second. Only Elite use them; the kick will break a normal human's clavicle with some consistency. Elite believe in overkill --

It saved Trent's life. The first round struck him full on with sufficient force to blast through steel plating; it sent a spider web of cracks radiating across the surface of Trent's faceplate, slammed him back into the airlock as though he'd been hit by twelve-ton truck, hurling him into the blind Peaceforcer behind him. The recoil from that round ripped the Elite's feet from the hull. An autoshot set to full auto *can't* fire less than four rounds; the second, third, and fourth rounds sent the Elite off into space at high speed.

"*Downsider!*" Trent screamed at the dwindling Elite. He could feel the blind Peaceforcer behind him, the man's hands trying to find a grip on Trent's scalesuit. "Obnoxious damn two-dimensional opposite-reaction-ignorant *downsider!*" He twisted around in the airlock, to face the blind Peaceforcer, jerked backward in panic as the man's hands pawed at his cracked faceplate. He took hold of the Peaceforcer by his neck ring, pulled the Peaceforcer back up out of the airlock, up onto the ship's hull. He held tightly to the man's neck ring and hit him in the head again and again, as hard as the servos in his

suit would let him. The waving hands gentled, the arms and legs of the featureless combat suit going limp. Trent pushed the man most of the way back inside the airlock, pulled a tube of vacuum glue free from his toolkit and blasted the suit's neck ring, gluing it to the edge of the outer airlock door. He held the unconscious Peaceforcer in place while the glue kicked, briefly heating itself and then cooling, the heat radiating away into space, and then left the Peaceforcer there, blocking the outer airlock door and preventing any more Peaceforcers from coming out after him; if they couldn't shut the outer door, they couldn't open the inner door, not until everyone in the corvette got into p-suits. It bought Trent some desperately needed time.

Trent took a deep breath and immediately regretted it. The pain struck like a maser, washing over and through him. He floated just inside the airlock, holding on to the airlock's edge, panting for air in short quick breaths; he slowly became aware of his right knee, of a throbbing pain almost as bad as the pain in his ribs. He tried to remember when the knee had gone out, and couldn't --

Trent straightened his head and looked around. The corvette continued to drift along its last vector; if they hit the rockets again Trent had few real options; he would duck back down into the airlock and ride it out, hoping that the *Vatsayama* caught them. The *Vatsayama* could not be far away at this point, following his beacon.

They were drifting over the surface of Ceres. Radar gave Trent the distance, two hundred fourteen meters and growing slightly more distant with each second. Bad news; the corvette had taken Trent nearly ten clicks away from the nearest airlock leading down into pressure. But --

They were only four clicks away from the Temple of Toons asteroid, and drawing closer.

First things first; from his tool belt Trent withdrew an emblade, a knife with a blade one molecule wide at its edge, only eighty molecules wide at the back of the blade, and turned it on. He might be able to go around the ship, and cut the cannon directly; but Trent knew the PKF inside the ship were looking for that. If it even looked as though he were going to try it they would boost to shake him free, come back around and fry him while he tried to escape on wrist and ankle rockets -- if he left the airlock he had to do it quickly.

The corvette's schematics and alternates popped up into Trent's awareness. Provisionally good news; on roughly eighty-five percent of current corvette models the fuel lines, carrying monatomic hydrogen, ran only four meters back along the hull -- and a bonus: right next to them was the optical link between the cockpit, engines and weapons.

On the alternates, the other fifteen percent --

On the other fifteen percent Trent was going to die trying it. On those models the fuel lines ran along the other side of the hull. The instant they realized he was out of the airlock they would boost on him, come back around and chop him up.

Nobody lives forever, Trent thought. But let's try.

He pulled himself up out of the airlock and shoved himself off down the length of the corvette. He didn't try to slow himself; a meter before the correct spot, he dropped the tip of the emblade down to touch the hull. The emblade skittered along the hull, and then abruptly dug in, bit all the way down to the handle. Slowly as he was moving, the blade's drag still barely impeded Trent's progress along the hull; he coasted another five meters before coming to a stop. If his luck was up he had just sliced through the main fuel lines and the optical link --

If his luck wasn't up he was about to die.

He stood up on the hull of the ship, looked at the small bubble of rock now a mere three kilometers away, the Temple of 'Toons Asteroid --

Somewhere out there in the starry black sky was the Elite who had chased him out of Ceres; Trent's optics could not locate him. With any luck he'd reach the Asteroid, or be picked up by the Vatsayama, without ever having to see the man again.

Trent took a quick, shallow breath, lifted his hands and lit the wrist rockets.

He moved off from the corvette and without intending to found himself holding his breath. It wouldn't take long; he probably wouldn't even feel it if the cannon were still functioning --

Nobody shot him, and the corvette dwindled away behind him, drifting motionless through space.

While he was less than five hundred meters from the Temple of 'Toons Asteroid, turned around and descending toward the Asteroid feet first, preparing to brake, the Elite hit him from behind at high speed.

The impact almost knocked Trent out. The Elite had not matched speeds well, or had not tried to; the Elite hit Trent from behind at nearly sixty kilometers an hour. Even the Elite was unable to keep hold of Trent; they spun away from each other after the impact, tumbling off through space.

He couldn't *breathe*. Trent had already altered the air mix in his suit; it was nearly pure oxygen. He sucked oxygen in little sips, trying to fight for breath past the constriction in his chest. He couldn't breathe and could barely see and what he *did* see of the universe was not promising, spinning stars and the Ceres and the Temple, revolving around him as he tumbled. He couldn't see the Elite and didn't know where the man was. His inskin made the correct decisions, took over the scalesuit and gave the commands to brake and slow the tumble. It did not give him much of an advantage; Trent knew that the Elite's battle computer was performing the same task for him. The spinning universe slowed, stabilized --

The Elite hit him again. Trent barely saw the man before the Elite boosted into Trent. He hit Trent with his ankle rockets blasting, got one hand looped into the toolkit hanging at the side of Trent's pressure suit, and pulled Trent in to him. The Elite no longer had the autoshot, but that hardly mattered: he could shoot directly through the gloves of the combat suit, if he had to. The suit would seal against death pressure at the wrist, and the Elite's hands wouldn't even notice the vacuum.

They struggled together, locked in silent dance. Trent got his left hand on the Elite's free wrist, locked the servos for that hand in place, and was reaching for the hand holding him by the toolbelt when the Elite pulled Trent even closer and tried to head butt the cracked faceplate of Trent's scalesuit. Trent jerked backward in a panic, and the Elite's helmet cracked into the scalesuit's metal chin. Trent pushed the Elite as far away as he could get him, and for a moment they hung there together, motionless, looking at one another through their faceplates.

The name painted on the Elite's combat suit was *Captain R. Colbert*.

"I know you," Trent started to say, and then he and PKF Elite Captain Roger Colbert struck the surface of the Temple of 'Toons Asteroid, together, at forty-four kilometers per hour.

-3-

Trent did not even have to move to know that something new had broken. His left leg *hurt*, burned fire from the knee down, and that was the *good* news; it meant that his spinal cord was still in one piece.

His inskin was chattering at him, and in his own voice, too, which seemed a bit much. Trent ignored it, made no attempt to move and tried to figure out if he was going to live.

He still had air. That was good, air was good. The faceplate was still cracked, maybe a little worse than before, but it was holding his air in. All you could ask of from a faceplate, really, particularly one that had taken a round from an autoshot square on. Holding in the air was an excellent beginning, excellent ending, excellent everything.

All he could see were stars and part of Ceres, off in one corner of the faceplate. They'd hit on the Temple's dark side.

Abruptly the universe came back into focus. Trent's inskin reintegrated --

They drifted together, Trent and Elite Captain Colbert, only a few meters above the surface of the Temple. Trent's scalesuit still had the left hand locked around Colbert's right wrist. The Elite was not moving, which was certainly more good news and nothing to complain about. The Elite was as far away from Trent as he could get with Trent's scalesuit locked onto his combat suit.

Broken left ankle, Trent guessed. Wrenched left knee. Dislocated right knee, and the ligaments, already stiffened by past injuries, had probably gone with the socket. Cracked ribs, sure. The scalesuit was not in much better shape than the protoplasm it protected: the hand locked around Colbert's suit would not unlock, the faceplate was cracked, and something was wrong with the airplant. The airplant was the least of Trent's worries; he expected he'd be dead or safe before he had to worry about foul air.

What a bad day this is turning out to be, Trent thought.

A voice came, silently, over his secure channel: Trent!

Over the general bands, at the same time, he got: "Ehhhh, what's up, Doc?"

This is Captain Bittan. We're locked in on your beacon and are en route to the Temple. E.T.A. six minutes. There's a PKF corvette in the area, *so be careful*.

Laughing *hurt*. "Now they tell me," Trent whispered aloud.

"Hey, Buddy. Yeah, *you*, pal."

Trent calculated, blasted once with his free wrist rocket. He and Elite Captain Colbert rotated together, lovers holding hands.

It was Bugs. Trent had known it, from the voice, that Brooklyn accent. He stood there with a carrot in one hand, hovering over the Temple's rocky surface, eyeing Trent skeptically. "We're closed, pal. You and yer, uh, *friend* dere, you gotta leave."

Command, said Trent. This is an emergency. We require immediate medical attention. We need to get into pressure.

The holograph of Bugs Bunny hesitated, said, "Look, pal, why cause trouble for yourself -- " and then the voice ceased and Bugs vanished. A different voice said, "*Do not move*. Medbots from Ceres CityState are being routed to your location with a pressurized ambulance."

Trent closed his eyes and floated in the pain. Jesus and Harry. Only a few more minutes.

The Elite *moved*.

The sudden blast of fear shocked Trent into awareness. He did everything with the servos in the scalesuit, afraid to rely on his own joints and muscles, pulling himself around to face the Elite, the waves of pain

simply unreal, laser in the right scalesuit index finger coming alight, and screamed at the man, broadcast it on every PKF communication band, "*I'm going to let your air out!*"

Colbert had covered his faceplate with his free hand.

Trent stared at him through his own cracked faceplate, heart pounding. The Elite's hand covered much of his faceplate, but not all of it --

Deep, jagged cracks covered every exposed centimeter of the man's faceplate. Trent had never seen anything like it before, except on the suits of dead people, which probably described Colbert. Trent turned off his finger laser, and with his right hand took a firm grip on the wrist of the hand Colbert had covering his faceplate. In pressure, the Elite was many times stronger than Trent; but the servos in Trent's scalesuit were roughly as strong as the servos in Colbert's combat suit: close enough for government work.

In a very soft, French-accented voice, Colbert said in English, "Please not."

"You ever box?" asked Trent.

"What?"

"First rule of boxing is, don't hit the other guy's fist with your face. It's the same principle with asteroids."

The fear in the man's voice was palpable. "You are going to kill me, aren't you?"

"No, but I might let you die, you murdering bastard. On your honor as an officer of the Peace Keeping Force Elite, if I save your life, will you ever kill anyone again?"

The silence stretched away.

"Jesus and Harry," said Trent softly, "I will fucking *leave* you out here."

"I won't," said Colbert finally. "I prom -- "

Colbert's faceplate blew out around his hand.

Glassite chips rattled against Trent's own cracked faceplate. Colbert's startled features appeared, staring at the hand that had been keeping in his air.

Trent knew exactly where they were: the Temple was only a kilometer wide. The nearest airlock into pressure was a hundred and eighty meters away.

The Elite would not need his air to receive a radio message: Trent said, "Trust me," and boosted across the asteroid's surface with the Elite in tow.

A hundred and eighty meters. Sixty meters accelerating, adjusting for the added burden of the strangling Elite, a flick of wrist rockets here, ankle rockets there; Trent could not use the wrist rocket on the hand locked to the Elite at all. It left him with three rockets for maneuvering, and slowed him considerably.

Turnover; a simpler maneuver, normally. Trent got his ankles around, faced into the direction of his travel, and braked. Even with the help of his inskin he and the Elite rolled together around their common center of gravity, threatening to tumble. Trent used microbursts on the rockets to keep them in line, afraid to use full boost, afraid it would send them into a tumble that would cause them to miss the airlock, and kill the Elite.

The main airlock, leading into the pressurized areas of the museum, loomed up in front of them and Trent knew that there was no way he could slow them in time.

His aim was good; the airlock's front door was already open, and Trent and the Elite, joined at the wrist, hit it together. They did not hit hard.

Twenty kph, tops.

He opened his eyes to pressure.

His scalesuit's helmet had been removed. Trent wondered who'd taken it off -- his inskin must have unlocked it while he was unconscious.

They floated in the entryway leading to the main museum area, in Exhibition Court A: a wide area, forty meters long, nearly eighty wide, twenty high along the assumed vertical, with holo projectors mounted on all six surfaces.

Exhibition Court A.

Warner Brothers.

The glowpaint shone dim, tuned low for the night. Trent wondered what time it was, but couldn't care enough to consult his inskin.

Elite Colbert sat facing Trent; he must have pried Trent's hand off his wrist. Colbert's helmet and gloves had been removed; the gloves rotated slowly in mid-air well above the Elite's head. Colbert floated in the same horizontal plane with Trent, eyes half open, watching Trent.

"I took your helmet off," said the Peaceforcer in a ragged voice. Vacuum damage to the vocal cords. "Your scalesuit said you were suffocating. Your airplant was dead."

Colbert had not changed much in the ten years since Trent had seen him last; a thin man, now in his late forties, with sharp features and the glassy black eyes of an old model PKF. Blood dripped from his nose. He'd been upgraded slightly since the last time Trent had seen him; under the design in place when Colbert had been cyborged, Elite had had a single laser buried behind the middle knuckle of the right hand; they made a fist to fire it.

Colbert's right index finger, pointed at Trent's face, glowed red at the tip. It looked as though somebody had painted a tiny red oval on the tip of Colbert's finger.

He had cocked his thumb above the finger, like a child making a gun.

"Should I say thank you?" Trent asked the man.

"Don't," Colbert whispered. "If I hadn't made that promise to you, would you really have left me out there?"

Trent stared at the glowing finger. "What promise?"

"Not to kill anyone, ever again."

"Oh, that. That's just what I say to everyone." Trent thought about it, and then told Colbert the truth. "I don't know. I don't know what I'd have done."

Colbert nodded. His thumb dropped down, like a hammer falling --

Trent winced. A second later he was still alive --

Colbert whispered, "Bang," and closed his eyes.

Trent released a slow breath he hadn't known he was holding. Red dots swam in front of his eyes. "Honor. It's one of the things I despise about the PKF the least."

Colbert said nothing. He floated with his eyes closed.

"How ya feelin'?"

Trent turned his head to look at Bugs. "I've had lots better days."

"Sorry about dat out dere, pal." Bugs took a bite of the carrot, chewed it thoughtfully. "Can't be too careful dese days. People will do practically *anything* to get a free pafaimance."

"I expect."

Bugs grinned at Trent. "Gus Allen, right? You come here a lot."

"Right."

"Want to see a good one while we wait for da ambulance?"

"Can you do that? I thought you were closed."

Bugs looked indignant. "Sure. I can do *anything*, Doc. I run this place. Why, I practically own it, practically."

"Sure," said Trent. "Love to."

Bugs considered Trent. "Can you make it into the next room?"

"I don't think so."

Bugs nodded. "Dat's all right. We got holos, we can do dis one anywhere." The lights in the entryway dimmed to darkness, and in the black space before Trent's face, a stage appeared, a smoky stage in a dimly lit night club --

"Dis is my favorite," said Bugs. "I love dis bit."

It was the scene from *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, Daffy Duck and Donald Duck playing dueling pianos. "Yes," said Trent, "I can understand that."

"Two ducks at once," said Bugs happily. "Can't do much better'n *dat*."

What is it about ducks, Trent wondered idly, that invites abuse? *That* was something to think about.

He watched Daffy and Donald abuse each other, the holo of Bugs Bunny chuckling at his side, until the *Vatsayama* arrived.

Trent's oldest and best friend, Jimmy Ramirez, met Trent at the Anarchist Free CityState at Vesta when the *Vatsayama* docked. The *Vatsayama* had four PKF Elite, and four regular Peaceforcers, in its brigs. Except for Colbert, the Elite had been kept unconscious since surrendering; the brig was designed to hold drunk SpaceFarers, not Elite cyborgs.

Trent had known Jimmy Ramirez since he had been nine years old, and Jimmy eleven; but there was a certain awkwardness in their greeting that had not been there a few years ago.

"Maybe they should call you Trent the Unkillable instead," said Jimmy after Trent had cycled through into city pressure.

At thirty-one years of age Jimmy Ramirez was a roughly handsome man who had never had biosculpture; the bounty on him was a mere quarter million Credits, the same size as the bounty on Reverend Andy. The lack of biosculpture was part the bravado of an ex-semi-pro boxer, part practicality; nobody on Vesta was likely to try and kill Jimmy, and Jimmy had not left the Anarchist Free CityState in over two years.

Trent grinned at him and pushed his way out of the airlock gingerly. The corridor was empty except for Jimmy; it was what Trent had requested, a basic safety precaution. His left ankle was wrapped, and his left knee; his right knee was in a cast to keep it immobile. His ribs had been reset and pinned in place and wrapped. He was closer to being healed than a human of previous centuries would have guessed; his immune system, under direct control of his inskin, had him regenerating bone and tissue at a furious rate that had left him starved during the trip to Vesta. Still, on Earth he'd have been in a floatchair. "Nah. If they did that, people would start trying to kill me instead of catch me. Given a choice -- "

"I see your point." Jimmy held out his hand, and Trent took it for the handshake. He was not a man comfortable with touching other men, Jimmy Ramirez, not even if it was the best friend he had ever had. But the emotion in his voice when he spoke could not be missed. "I missed you, man. It's been a long time."

It had been two years, almost exactly, since Trent and Reverend Andy had left the Anarchist Free CityState and gone to Ceres. "How's Mahliya?" asked Trent.

It surprised Trent that Jimmy could not even meet his eyes, even now. He looked off to the side. "She, well, she didn't come to see you."

"So I see."

"Reverend Andy got in yesterday," said Jimmy. He turned slightly away from Trent, the tension in his shoulders, in the way he carried himself, palpable. "Come on and we'll get down to the conference room. Ambassador Metele and the PKF rep will be there in about half an hour."

Twenty years of friendship made it the right thing to say: Trent knew exactly what was going on.

He said softly, "Jimmy, I love you."

Jimmy Ramirez turned back to Trent and yelled at him with naked, built-up rage. "Every single time you walk into my life you fuck things up! Since I was eleven years old I've had my own life twice, both times you ran away and vanished and didn't take me with you and then you just show up and everything's supposed to be the way it was. You're like this goddamn force of nature, you walk in and all of a sudden the world revolves around you. I'm *sick* of it," he yelled into Trent's face. "I was sick of it ten years ago!"

"Can I talk?"

Jimmy stared at Trent, flushed with anger. "Yeah. Yeah. Go ahead."

"I'm going back to Earth, Jimmy."

Jimmy Ramirez's expression changed four times in as many seconds and finally lapsed into emptiness.

"Oh, no."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorrier than you'll probably ever believe," said Trent quietly. "But it's time."

Unification Ambassador Frances Metele was not French; he was actually a Pan-African. Once that would have been surprising; in the days following the Unification War, the French had dominated the Unification. They were the only major industrial country to escape the Unification essentially undamaged, and in the years following the Unification had become, by a wide margin, the most powerful country within the Unification of Earth. But the Unification was over sixty years old, and change had come to it, for good and bad. The French were still powerful -- nearly a third of all Peaceforcers were French, and all Elite -- but the rest of the power structure had evolved, sometimes without bloodshed. The Ministry of Population Control was almost fifteen percent Russian; there were more Russians than French in the Ministry. Even the last two Secretary Generals, Eddore and Amnier, had come from Occupied America.

The exchange of PKF for SpaceFarers went quickly.

Trent, Reverend Andy, and, representing the SpaceFarer's Collective, Captain Bittan, sat across the conference table from Ambassador Metele and the rather elderly PKF Elite Commissionaire Rouen. Rouen wore a laser-proofed glove over his right hand, and the laser buried in that hand, a glove that could not be removed until Trent told the glove to let go. No point in tempting the man, sitting there in the same room with the Unification's greatest enemy.

Metele spoke in fluent, though heavily accented, French.

"As I believe our offices negotiated, we are turning over the crew and contents of the SpaceFarer vessel *Roderick McBan*, caught attempting to smuggle sensables into Unification Luna. Further we are releasing . . . well, the list is rather long, quite a considerable sum . . . of SpaceFarer Collective assets frozen by Unification courts in the last year or so."

"And in return," said Bittan, "you get eight of your murdering officers back. Only slightly the worse for wear." Her glare was a thing to behold. "The Collective Board made this call; I voted against it. I wanted to execute your Peaceforcers. But it gives me great pleasure to deliver this further message to you sons of bitches: you killed nineteen pacifist Krishnas and Buddhists at Gandhi CityState while trying to get at Trent the Uncatchable. If we ever see another Elite task force outside the orbit of Earth, ever, we will kill every flaming Peaceforcer involved. *Every one.*"

Elite Commissioner Rouen bestowed a wintry smile upon her. "Captain Bittan, that would be considered an act of war by the Unification."

"Well, I think this is an unproductive -- " began Ambassador Metele.

Sidney Bittan's smile was very nearly as glacial as Rouen's: it performed the impressive feat of matching her glare. "Tell me about it."

Trent and Reverend Andy sat together with one another in the conference room after the others had left.

"I feel sorry for that Elite, Colbert."

Trent said in surprise, "Really? Why?"

"There's something to be said for an honorable death. That man's going to have a hard time of it, back on Earth."

"There's nothing dishonorable about living."

"You know that, and I know that," said Reverend Andy. "But I doubt they know that." He seemed weary. "What do you think will happen?"

It was clear he was changing the subject. Trent said, "Jimmy? He'll come."

Reverend Andy blinked, looked suddenly impatient. "Of *course* Jimmy will come. He's a good boy."

"The war, then. Reverend . . . Jesus and Harry, I wish I knew. There's a good chance of it. They want to fight. They *all* want to fight. There's a lot of hatred there, Reverend."

"How many billions die?"

"Not even my inskin can count that high."

"Can we stop it?"

"If *we* don't die?" Trent said slowly, "Maybe. Maybe."

"You can't love life too much," said Reverend Andy. "Gives the bastards a hold on you."

"I'm tired of running," said Trent. He had never meant anything more in his life. "And I'm sick to death of waiting."

"Amen to that," said Reverend Andy with finality. "Let's go home."

He called and she said to come over. Trent knew it was a mistake when he went to see her; but he did it anyway.

Mahliya Kutura was twenty-nine. For eleven years now she had been the most famous musician in the System, the leader of a renaissance in the musical arts that had lain dormant for most of the first half century following the Unification. In two albums, *Music to Move To* in 2069, and *Street Songs* in 2078, she had created five hours of some of the most painfully beautiful music Trent had ever heard.

There was not a song on her first album, *Music to Move To*, that Trent did not know by heart.

Jimmy Ramirez was gone when Trent arrived at the cylinder Jimmy and Mahliya shared. A different cylinder than the one Trent had lived in with Mahliya; at some obscure level he found himself relieved by that.

She met him at the airlock and led him into a sitting room. The cylinder was a small one; Trent guessed the gravity at about a quarter gee. If they'd spun the cylinder much faster the Coriolis would have been unpleasant.

The sitting room was dimly lit, as the corridor leading from the airlock had been. Mahliya called up the lights as they entered the room, turned around and looked at Trent. She appeared much as he remembered her, blond hair hanging down behind her in a long sweep, the sculpted muscles, body hardened by hours of workouts in high gravity gyms. Her eyes were blue this time, rather than brown; an odd dissonance amidst the familiarity. She wore an oddly formal gray silk gown and her voice was brisk. "Well, Peter Pan. You look like hell, lost boy."

Under gravity, even the quarter gee, Trent's ankle and knees throbbed. "Peter Pan got his ass kicked." He studied her. "You look good."

"I know," she said flatly. "I work at it. *Command*, lights down." The room's glowpaint gentled into dimness. "That's about as much of you as I feel like looking at. I'm not sure why I agreed to see you."

"You mind if I sit down? I ache pretty much everywhere."

"Don't get too comfortable."

"I guess that's a yes." He lowered himself into one of the soft chairs facing her. His knees cracked loudly as they bent. "How have you been?"

She sat facing him. "*Street Songs* did extremely well." She'd released it not long after Trent left. "Nine years since the last one, they were saying I didn't have anything left to say. It was . . . kind of nice to show the critics they were wrong."

"I can't imagine you cared."

She laughed. "Yeah, I bet. Not everybody's as enlightened as you are, Peter Pan. Or at least, not everybody does as good an imitation. You ever listen to it?"

"The album?"

"Jesus. Yeah, the album. Do you ever listen to it?"

"Once," said Trent.

"Oh." For some reason, the response seemed to leave her at a loss.

"It was enough."

"You know . . . when we got the news, about the Elite strike force hitting Ceres . . . they said you were dead. They said the Peaceforcers got you. It was all over the newsBoards for a while."

"They were wrong."

Mahliya leaned forward and said fiercely, "I was *glad* when I heard it. I was ready for you to be dead. It was a lot easier."

"Mahliya . . . I don't know what to say to you to make it right."

"That's because words are lies. Isn't that your phrase, lost boy? 'Language is a lie.' And you're a bullshitter and I don't *care* what you have to say to me." In the dimness he could not see her eyes, sunk in pools of shadow. "You don't love me, do you? You never loved me."

"I do. I love you, Mahliya. I loved you then."

It hurt Trent to hear the hatred in her voice. "Oh, yes. Of course, I understand. You're so enlightened, you love *everyone*. That's so much safer than loving just one person, isn't it?"

Trent took a slow breath. "Mahliya -- "

She made her decision, right then; he saw it happen. "Don't talk to me anymore, okay?" She stood, quivering tense, features barely visible even to Trent's genie eyes, and pointed. "Door's that way. Use it. Don't come see me again -- and I do mean *ever*."

He came to his feet, slowly, wincing. "All right. I'll go. Maybe I shouldn't have come. But for whatever it's

worth . . . Mahliya . . . I'm sorry."

She was quiet, looking at him, lower lip quivering visibly, and then exploded. "Damn it, damn it, *damn* it! Why did you have to *say* that to me?"

"I never tried to hurt you. It was the last -- "

"You're taking Jimmy away from me -- " Her voice broke. "*Damn* you, Trent, you never *loved* me!"

Trent heard himself say, again, helplessly, "I'm sorry," as though saying it over and over again would make her believe it true. He took one step toward her, and then she was in his arms, her face against his shoulder, holding on to him with a strength born of fear.

Her voice was muffled. "Oh, God, Trent, you're going to die, they're going to kill you, don't you *know* that?"

Trent stroked the long strands of hair that ran down her back, felt the smell and touch of her as though it were a thing he would never know again. She cried silently, standing motionless, the tears moving down her cheeks as though an artifact that had nothing to do with *her* --

Trent said, "Yeah. They're going to try."

It was the second track on *Street Songs*. She'd written it two years ago, in 2078, the day after Trent had left her.

She'd called it *Many Lives*.

*I killed my love to set him free
For fear I'd cause him pain
I killed him -- we were very young
And now I'm old again*

*We lived a life together once
And I was so afraid
For every life I've lived, I've died
For every life I've made*

*I killed my love to set him free
He wasn't hard to kill
He ran into another life
I guess he's running still*