

**THE  
NEXUS  
IMPRINT**

**by**

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1: Jen

The classroom was stuffy and uncomfortable, but right now Jen didn't mind at all. It meant that Mr Drake – *Alex*, as she preferred to call him in her blog, and dreams – had taken off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves to reveal his muscular arms. He had to be *the* best-looking teacher ever to walk the planet. It didn't take much of a stretch of her imagination for him to remove his tie as well, and undo some shirt buttons—

“...what does the energy become... Jennifer?”

Jen flinched as she realised Alex – oops, *Mr Drake!* – was talking to her. “Heat?” she offered cautiously, only having the vaguest idea what the rest of the question had been. She started to feel heat herself, around her cheeks.

Mr Drake smiled at her – at *her!* Personally! “Absolutely right. Heat! The excess energy from the process is released in the form of heat.” He went to the whiteboard and began writing in his precise script. “One of the most fundamental rules of physics – ‘energy cannot be created or destroyed, it can only be changed from one form to another’.” He turned to face the classroom again. “Now,” he added with a wry smile, “there are some schools of advanced theoretical physics that might dispute this, but for practical, day-to-day purposes – and more importantly, the GCSE examining board – it's an inarguable fact.” There was a brief flutter of laughter around the room at his joke, Jen horribly aware that her giggle had been by far the loudest. Her blushing intensified when she realised he was still looking at her.

“Now, I'm going to go easy on homework tonight,” Mr Drake announced, to a few whoops from the more immature boys in the class and what sounded like Tim Holdsworth saying “You got a date, sir?” in a disguised voice, “but I'd still like everyone to read chapter four before the next lesson, just to prepare. There *will* be maths involved!” People groaned, not just the noisy boys this time, as the bell rang. Jen kept her head low as she walked past Mr Drake on her way out, but she couldn't help flicking her eyes up to glance at him – and he was looking back at her and smiling! Her heart hiccuped in excitement.

Jen met Lucy in the corridor outside room 3K, waiting for their English lesson. Another hour of Hamlet, joy of joys. “How was the physics lesson?” Lucy asked, in a way that Jen could tell was leading somewhere. It was easy to guess in which direction.

“Fine, fine.”

“And how was... *Alex*?”

“*Fine*,” said Jen, narrowing her eyes.

“He didn’t start to shake and cough like the old man in that book by Nabokov, did he?”

“*No*.”

Lucy moved a step nearer. “Jen? Can you not stand, not stand so close to me?”

“Oh, shut up.” Jen had never got the joke; she suspected it was from some old song from the way Lucy always ‘sang’ it, but didn’t know which one. Lucy giggled.

“It’s so *uuuuute* that you’re in love with... oh.” Lucy’s face fell. Jen turned to see what she had seen – and instantly felt her stomach churn with fear. Shaz Johnson and her bitch squad of Cathy Freeman and Emma Taylor were coming down the corridor. Worse, Johnson was looking right at her.

Worse still, she looked mad. “Oi! I want a word with you, Exton!”

“O-kay...” said Jen, trying not to cringe. Johnson stood right in front of her, flanked by the squad, backing her against the wall. Lucy slid away as Johnson pulled her phone out of her bag.

“I was on the internet last night, and I put my name into Google just to see what came up,” she snarled, “and look what I found!” Jen would have recognised her blog on the phone’s screen even if it hadn’t been thrust two inches from her face. Uh-oh. She was going to *die*. “Shaz Johnson... fat cow, pig-faced slapper, stupid slag, am I?”

“You said it,” Jen instantly regretted saying. Johnson shoved her back against the wall with both hands. Everyone waiting to go into the lesson immediately took an interest.

“You are *dead*, Exton! Dead! You just wait until after school!” She grabbed at Jen’s tie. Jen slapped her hands away from it, prompting a chorus of ‘Fight! Fight!’ from the boys around them. Johnson looked even more angry.

“Yeah, well, yeah!” Jen stammered, trying to hold back a feeling of sheer terror, with little success. Johnson was about to say something else when a murmur of “teacher” from her friends made her step back.

“You are *dead*,” she finally said in a low voice, jabbing a finger at Jen’s chest for emphasis. She gathered the squad and hurried away.

Lucy cautiously returned and put a hand on Jen’s shoulder. “You okay?”

Jen tried to say “Yeah, I’m fine,” but all that came out was a clenched “Y’m.” She was trembling so much she could barely even nod her head.

After she stopped shaking, Jen spent the rest of the day working out how to get home without being killed.

It was possible. Normally she took the footbridge over the railway, which was the most direct route, but it was much too confined for her liking today. If she went out of her way in the direction of the station, though, she could go alongside the railway cutting and turn onto the main road above the tunnel, go past the shops, and then down onto her street from the other direction. It would take her an extra ten minutes to get home, but at least she’d get there alive.

That was if she managed to get out of the *school* alive. But there were several exits. Johnson and her squad couldn’t cover them all.

She hoped.

The instant the final bell rang, Jen grabbed her bag and raced from the classroom, Lucy in tow. The main gate was the most obvious way out, but it was also the place she’d expect Johnson to be waiting for exactly that reason – being a bully and having any kind of brains seemed to be mutually exclusive. So if she took the side gate and cut across the playing fields...

“Why do I have to come with you?” whined Lucy as Jen raced through the corridors. “I live the other way!”

“They’re not going to murder me in front of a witness,” Jen told her.

“But then they might murder me *too*!”

Jen kept a close lookout as they reached the door. No sign of Johnson or any of her friends. Fine so far. “Okay, let’s go. We’ll go

across the playing fields and get onto Lyfe Road, then go past the station. You see anyone I don't want to see?"

"No."

"Good." She led Lucy in the direction of the side gate, constantly checking behind to see if they were being followed. Still no sign—

No, wait! Her breath caught in her throat as she spotted Cathy Freeman coming out of the door, apparently looking for them. Then she relaxed, a little.

"Did she see us?" Lucy asked nervously.

"Don't know, don't care. She's behind us, and we could outrun her by *walking*, she's so lardy."

Lucy didn't sound any happier. "What if she texts Shaz to tell us which way we're going?"

"Like she can move any faster, the fat cow. Come on."

They cut across the balding grass of the playing fields to the far gate. Jen looked back. Freeman was following them, but a long way behind. She started to feel a bit less scared. Now they had a head start, it was unlikely that Johnson would catch up. Not today, anyway, but Jen decided she'd worry about that later. It might be a good idea to start developing a 'sore throat' tonight, which was always a reliable way of skipping school for a day or two. First things first, though – it would probably be a good idea to take the blog down for a while.

Still occasionally glancing back, Jen and Lucy walked along the road for a few tense minutes, until they passed the steep tree-lined steps that led down to the railway station. Halfway home. Gradually, they slowed their rapid walk down to something less exhausting.

"So," Lucy said, "you've got a blog?"

"Yeah."

"Am I in it?"

"Sometimes."

"All good?"

"Uh-huh," Jen fibbed. There were a couple of not exactly complimentary references to Lucy after she'd done something or other to annoy Jen, mostly winding her up about Mr Drake. *Alex*, now she was out of school.

"So what kind of stuff do you talk about?"

“Oh, the usual. All the ways that my life sucks because my stupid family never let me do anything I want. Like the other day, I got into this huge argument with Mum because I said I wanted to dye my hair red – not even permanently! – and she had a total fit about it. And God, you should hear her carry on every time I say I want to buy some boots with heels.” She scowled at the memory.

“I totally know what you mean,” said Lucy, nodding knowingly.

“Oh my God, my family are so *boring!* All Mum and Dad care about is gardening – I mean, seriously, they’ll have these twenty-minute conversations about seeds and bulbs that just make me want to rip my ears off – and Amy’s gone really arrogant and smug just because she’s graduated from university and thinks that makes her really important, and don’t even get me started on Matthew! He is *such* an annoying little geek! He gets into a total strop every time I beat him on the PlayStation, too. And he always gets to watch his stupid sci-fi things on telly because Dad watches them too, so I never get to see what I want.” Jen huffed in disgust. “I never get to make any decisions, I always get outvoted and nobody ever pays any attention to what I say. I hate it.”

Lucy nodded. “Yeah, same here. So...” She tried, and failed, to hold in a sly smile. “Do you blog about *Alex*?”

“He may have been mentioned once or twice,” Jen said nonchalantly, hoping Lucy wouldn’t enquire further but knowing she would.

“Reeeally? Well, I might have to take a look, then. Where is it?”

“I’ll tell you later,” said Jen, meaning ‘later’ as in ‘never’. They were heading uphill, approaching the junction onto the main road. She just had to go round the corner, past the shops, and she was home and safe.

“So did you really say all that stuff about Shaz?”

“Should have seen what I wrote last night. I really laid into that lardy cow—”

The lardy cow stepped around the corner in front of her, accompanied by Emma Taylor. Jen froze. How had she got ahead of them?

“Where you going, Exton?” Johnson taunted as Taylor moved round Jen’s side. “Trying to avoid me, were you?” She held up her

phone. “I skived out of last lessons because I knew you’d try to run away. Cathy told me where you were going.”

“Yeah!” added Taylor, waving at someone past Jen, down the road. She looked round and saw Freeman walking towards her, passing the station steps. The wall of the railway cutting was on one side of the street, a row of blank-faced industrial buildings on the other. She was completely blocked in! She thought about running, but knew that the lanky, athletic Taylor could catch her even if she hadn’t been lumbered with her bag. She’d have to talk her way out...

Johnson pushed her against the wall, hard. “Told you I was going to kill you, Exton. I wasn’t joking.”

Maybe talking wasn’t going to work.

“I don’t have any problems with *you*, Corbett,” Johnson said to Lucy. “Today, anyway. ’Less you want some?”

“No,” squeaked Lucy, shaking. Johnson flicked a thumb back in the direction of the station and Lucy took the hint, quickly walking a few steps before breaking into a run with a choked “Sorry, Jen!” Jen watched her go in disbelief. Cow!

Johnson shoved her again, and Jen forgot all about Lucy. Taylor stepped in with another shove, followed by Freeman, who had just caught up. The three girls backed her against the brick wall, surrounding her.

“So come on then,” said Johnson, “not so mouthy when you’re not on the internet, are you? Bit different when I’m right here, innit?” She took hold of Jen’s tie, pulling it. Jen yanked it from her grasp. Johnson looked surprised.

“Ooooooooooh!” chorused Freeman and Taylor mockingly.

“You *want* me to hurt you?” asked Johnson, leaning closer and using her bulk to pin Jen against the wall. “’Cause I’m gonna.”

“M-might as well fight back then, mightn’t I?” Jen said, with far more confidence than she was feeling. “Least that way you might *beat* me, but you won’t *break* me.”

Momentary bafflement ran across Johnson’s face, as she worked out what Jen meant. “Ooh, that’s certainly put *me* in my place!” said Freeman in a mock-pious voice.

Johnson’s confusion changed to a narrow-eyed frown. “Think you’re so clever, don’t you?” she hissed.

“Cleverer than you,” Jen snapped, fear quickly turning into anger. How stupid had she been all this time? Johnson wasn’t going to *kill* her! At worst, she’d slap her about a bit, maybe knock her down and punch or kick her a few times. She was just a big, stupid bully showing off in front of her friends. If she’d *really* meant to hurt her, she would have done it already instead of just talking about it! “Come on, then! Come on! If you’re going to hit me, then hit me!”

“Okay.”

Jen gasped in pain as Johnson punched her in the stomach, knocking the breath out of her. Her knees buckled and she stumbled back against the wall, dropping her bag. Freeman picked it up. Jen tensed in anticipation of another blow, but nothing came. She looked up to see a man walking past in the direction of the station, giving them all a suspicious glance.

Johnson pressed against Jen again, clamping a pudgy hand around her jaw and cheeks. She leaned closer, her nose almost touching Jen’s. Jen could smell cigarette smoke on her breath. “I want all that stuff you wrote about me gone by nine tonight,” she said in a quiet, cold voice that brought Jen’s fear back in full force. “If it’s not, then I really *am* going to hurt you.” She flicked her eyes sideways, Jen following her gaze to see the man looking back at them as he walked away. Johnson returned her attention to Jen. “Okay?”

“Okay,” Jen agreed, meaning it.

Johnson stared hard at her for another few seconds, then slowly relaxed her grip and leaned back. Jen was just starting to feel relief that it was over when Johnson slapped her on the cheek – not painfully hard, but enough to leave a humiliating sting. “Do it,” Johnson warned, stabbing a finger at Jen’s face before stepping away.

“Yeah!” Taylor added. The three girls stepped back as Jen struggled upright, still feeling the ache of the punch. Her heart sank as she saw that Freeman still had her bag, handing it to Johnson. She knew exactly what they were going to do, even before the trio exchanged malevolent smiles.

“Don’t...” Jen said, but only half-heartedly. She had no chance of stopping them. Instead, she watched helplessly as the bag sailed over the wall. Laughing and shrieking, the three turned and hurried away.

In the other direction, the man gave her a last glance before continuing towards the station.

Jen took a deep breath. She was shaking, and the dull pain in her stomach was still there, but apart from that – and the humiliating slap! – she was okay.

The bag was *definitely* coming down tonight.

But before then, she had to retrieve her bag. She jogged back down the road to a point where the wall was low enough to climb and scrambled over it, finding herself on a steep grassy embankment dotted with bushes and litter and a few small trees. Below were the twin lines of the railway, heading to the station behind her and into the tunnel ahead. On the slope above the tunnel entrance, wedged against a bush, was her bag.

Which had burst open and scattered its contents. Of course.

Jen cautiously picked her way along the edge of the cutting, keeping as close as she could to the wall. Her shoes slithered over the wet grass. As she got nearer to her bag, she looked for where her stuff had ended up. Luckily, none of it had fallen onto the tracks, though there was a textbook just above the tunnel's brick parapet.

She reached the bag, briefly dropping to all fours to steady herself and muttering a curse as she got mud on her hands and the cuffs of her blouse. The drop to the tracks was a lot bigger than she'd thought. Further up the line, she could see people waiting at the station. Hopefully nobody would see her. She was pretty sure this counted as trespassing.

Wedging one foot against a large stone, Jen cautiously leaned forward and hooked a finger around the bag's strap. If she could pull it to her *just* right, the remaining contents should stay inside... yes! Now, if she stretched a bit further, she should be able to pick up everything else in one go... come on, come on... oh *yes!* Up yours, Shaz Johnson!

Just the one book left. She closed the bag and slung it over her shoulder. Now, if she held onto the bush and put one foot on the brick top of the parapet, she should easily be able to reach—

The stone popped out of the wet soil.

Jen's leg shot out from under her, knocking her onto her back. She slid down the embankment. She shrieked and grabbed for the bush, the grass, *anything* to stop her fall – but the slick stalks just

tore free in her hands as she slammed shoulder-first into the bricks, the weight of the bag rolling her over into space even as she clawed desperately at the edge—

For a moment her fingers caught the cold, rough bricks... but she wasn't strong enough to hold herself.

She fell.

The brick top of the tunnel rushed away from her as she screamed, cold shock and desperate panic hitting her hard.

She squeezed her eyes shut. She really *was* going to die!

Not like this, not now, *please*—

Please...

The fall wasn't *that* long, surely?

Why hadn't she hit the ground yet?

Fear giving way to confusion, she nervously opened one eye.

Blackness.

Was she dead?

Not total blackness. There was a light in the distance, a tiny white dot.

Was it true what people said, that you had to go into the light when you died?

Wait. She opened her other eye. The white dot was the light at the end of the tunnel. Literally. In her peripheral vision, she could see the brickwork surrounding the entrance. She was still there, still alive.

So why hadn't she felt herself hit the ground?

Jen looked down. And screamed again.

She *hadn't* hit the ground.

Instead, she was floating a couple of metres above it.

She'd barely had time to take this in when a terrifyingly loud noise sent another shock through her. She snapped her head round, and found her vision filled by the wall-like yellow front of an express train charging straight at her, horn blaring, lights blazing, too close and too fast to stop—

The train stopped.

Jen was so surprised she didn't even think to scream.

The train didn't slam on its brakes, didn't somehow manage to screech to an emergency standstill. It just *stopped*, one instant at full speed, the next completely stationary, close enough for Jen to reach out and touch the grime-streaked metal if she'd wanted. A hot, dry

wind blew past her, little whirlwinds of dust kicking up from the tracks.

She looked up. The driver of the train was staring at her with an expression of utter bewilderment. She raised a hand and gave him an uncertain wave. He waved shakily back.

Okay... so *now* what?

As if in answer, she felt herself somehow being *lifted*, drifting sideways away from the train and over to the bottom of the embankment. Gently, she was lowered to the ground. The feeling of solidity beneath her feet suddenly brought home the fact that something very, very strange had just happened.

Not sure how to react, Jen let out a short laugh of sheer relief. She was still alive... but how?

“Jennifer!”

Still dazed, she looked in the direction of the station. Running towards her along the side of the track was Mr Drake – Alex – whatever! Behind him, people spilled in confusion from the last few carriages of the immobile train onto the station platform.

“Jennifer!” Mr Drake called again. “Are you all right?”

“I, uh... yeah, I think so,” she said. Mr Drake reached her and looked her up and down, not even out of breath.

“You’re fine,” he announced, glancing back at the station. “Look, I’ve got to get you out of here.”

“Um... yeah. I think going home would be... good.”

“I’m sorry, Jennifer. I can’t do that.”

Jen blinked in surprise. “Excuse me?”

“I’m going to have to take you with me. Right now.”

Normally, the idea of Mr Drake telling Jen to come with him under mysterious circumstances would have been appealing, but right now she’d had enough mysterious circumstances to last a lifetime. “No, I think I want to go *home*, thank you...”

But suddenly they were *both* rising into the air, Jen looking down on the top of the train and the startled driver’s bald spot as he staggered out of the cab. Then the ground shot away, the railway shrinking to a line through her suburb, the town, the surrounding countryside, covered by patches of cloud below her...

Everything faded out to a blank silvery-grey. For a moment Jen thought she was fainting, until she looked up again and saw Mr Drake, still floating in front of her.

“I’ll explain everything, I promise,” he said. “But now, we have to go.”

Jen wanted to ask him where they had to go *to*, but some other part of her mind took over and all that came out was a very loud and long scream. Mr Drake winced. Everything faded again, this time to a solid, dreamless black.

## 2: Mr Drake

“Jennifer?”

The voice was familiar, reassuring. “Alex? Er, Mr Drake?” she hurriedly corrected. What had happened to her? She felt light-headed, weightless, as if suspended in water. She kept her eyes closed, aware of a bright light beyond them.

“Do you remember what happened?”

“Well, I got in a fight with Shaz Johnson, then I fell off a tunnel, and, er, floated in mid-air... and a train didn’t hit me even though it should have... and, um, you turned up and flew me into the sky. But that couldn’t have happened... could it? Apart from the Shaz Johnson bit.”

“Can you open your eyes?”

Jen tried, but the light pricked at her eyes like needles. “It’s too bright.”

“Hold on.” The pulsing colours behind her eyelids darkened. “Try that.”

She cautiously opened her eyes a fraction to make sure the bright light really had gone, then forced them wide. She was in an unfamiliar room. Actually a dome, she realised, a silver-walled dome.

Why was she in a dome?

It felt as though she was lying on her back. Mr Drake’s voice had come from somewhere to her left. She turned her head. There was Mr Drake, but... wasn’t he at the wrong angle? And if she were lying on her back, then why couldn’t she see the floor? She looked further round. And even further round. And to her right. And down at her feet. And, just for the sake of completeness, above her head.

There *was* no floor.

“Jennifer, there’s really no need to scream,” said Mr Drake.

“I wasn’t screaming!” Jen objected sulkily. “I was yelling. There’s a difference.” Somehow, while she’d been *yelling*, not screaming, the completely spherical room she’d been floating in had been reduced to a hemisphere by a floor, on which she now defiantly sat. Mr Drake was standing close by, and any pleasant thoughts that

might once have sparked were receding by the second. “I want to go home.”

“I’m sorry, Jennifer, I can’t—”

“Take me *home!*” she screamed, jumping to her feet and running away from him to the wall, a soft reflection meeting her behind the smooth silver surface. She turned and ran around the room, slowing and stopping when she realised she’d gone in a full circle. No sign of a door.

No sign of *anything*. Apart from herself and Mr Drake, the room, about ten metres across, was completely empty and featureless. Breathing quickly as panic started to take hold, she backed against the wall of the dome, her fingertips touching it. It felt like smooth, polished ice, her hands sliding over it without effort, but not cold.

“Where am I? What – what’s going on?”

Mr Drake gave her an apologetic look. “You’re travelling through hyperspace at a displacement of three-point-seven ex six, or about two and a half trillion miles per hour if you prefer, and I’m taking you to a planet called Inar.”

Jen tried to think of the best way to respond. “You’re bloody insane!” was all she could come up with.

“I can prove it to you, if you like.”

She stared at him, shaking her head. “What I’d *like* is to go home, right now, and maybe, just maybe, you might not end up in prison for the rest of your life! You... psycho,” she added lamely, realising it might not be a good idea to anger her kidnapper. Oh God! She’d actually been *kidnapped!*

Mr Drake looked concerned, but more like a doctor worried about a patient than a delusional maniac kidnapper facing years in prison. “Jennifer? Jennifer, please calm down,” he implored, holding out his hands. “I’m going to show you something. Just remember that you’re perfectly safe, okay?”

And with that, Jen fell into infinity.

Stars ahead of her, stars all around her, rushing past like glittering, multicoloured snowflakes. She would have jumped in fright, except that there was no longer anything to jump *from*. The domed room had completely disappeared. Blackness stretched on forever in all directions, beyond the sparkling, slowly rolling clouds of stars into which she was falling, falling, *falling...*

She yelled again. No, she had to admit, definitely a scream this time.

“Oh! Sorry,” said Mr Drake. Something flickered in the edge of her vision, and she looked down. They were both now standing on a perfect circle of the same silvery material as the dome. Jen dropped to her knees and planted her palms firmly on the floor to reassure herself it was really there. The faint, diffuse shape of her reflection looked up at her as she struggled to regain her sense of balance. “Are you okay?”

She waited for the spinning sensation to stop. “What’s happening?” she finally asked, in a small voice.

“It’s time I told you the truth, Jennifer,” he said, crouching down and offering her a hand. She looked dubiously at it. “I’m not really a teacher. I’m actually not even from your planet.”

“You’re an *alien*?” Jen gasped, an uncontrollable shiver running through her as she said the word.

“Not exactly. I’m an Evolution 201 Defender.”

“And what’s an Evolution 201 Defender, exactly?” Mr Drake pointed at his chest. “A... tie?”

“No, this.” A tiny silver sphere, about the size of a golf ball, emerged silently from the centre of Mr Drake’s chest. Jen squeaked in surprise and scrabbled backwards before regaining her composure. The ball stopped between them.

Looking more closely at it, Jen saw a small circular indentation, glowing steadily with a soft blue light, that she couldn’t help but think of as an eye. The rest of the chrome sphere was almost featureless, except for very faint patterns of curving lines that changed and swirled as she watched, gentle pulses of the same blue light flowing lazily along them. Jen looked back at Mr Drake for an explanation.

“That’s the real me,” he said, indicating the ball. “This—” He pointed both thumbs at himself. “—is just a projection. Sort of a hologram. Only a lot more advanced. And solid.”

“Riiight,” Jen said slowly. “So you’re a... machine? A robot?”

“No, I’m not a *robot*,” he said, huffily. The sphere moved back into his body, disappearing silently with no trace of its passage, like something carefully lowered into a can of paint. “But I *am* a sentient construct assigned to protect you.”

“Protect me!” Jen said in disbelief. “From what?”

“Well, falling from railway parapets, for a start. And being hit by trains.”

“Oh. Wait, how did—”

“Gravity and inertial control fields, a few other things that aren’t important right now. But anyway, I arrived on Earth sixteen years, two months and five days ago, and have been keeping an eye on your safety ever since.”

Jen did some mental arithmetic. “That was the day I was born.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re some kind of robot.”

“No, not a—”

“My brother’s the one who’s into sci-fi, not me,” Jen muttered, shaking her head.

“Er, Jennifer?” Mr Drake said, standing up and indicating the racing starscape around them. “Space? Levitation? Train avoidance?”

“All right, all right!” Jen protested, kneeling up. “God, strop!”

“Sorry, I’m sorry.” Mr Drake bent down and offered her his hand again. She considered it for a moment, then stood up on her own. He looked slightly hurt. “This wasn’t part of the plan at all. I never expected that I’d have to help you so... publicly.”

“What do you mean?”

“I gave four hundred and thirty-seven people on that train, plus another fifty or so at the station, a demonstration of technology that’ll take humans at least another three hundred years to develop. Also, I possibly revealed my presence to any hostile forces watching the planet. Basically, my cover was blown. So I decided that the best thing to do was get you out of there and bring you to the Civilization as quickly as possible for your own protection.”

“The Civilization?” Jen asked, still trying to ignore the vertigo-inducing stars. Mr Drake noticed her discomfort and the view dimmed, but didn’t disappear entirely.

“My people,” he began. “It’s a unity of over fifteen thousand different intelligent species and engineered variants, spanning more than five and a half million inhabited worlds across thirty-two galaxies. At least,” he added, “I hope it still is.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I left, we were at war, and one of my mission orders was to stay out of contact to minimise the risk of being detected. I don’t know how things went after that. Yet.”

“Who were you at war with?”

“I don’t know.” Jen gave him a quizzical look. “No, seriously! Nobody had ever encountered them before they attacked us. And,” he continued ruefully, “nobody they encountered lived to describe them. We didn’t even know what they called themselves, so they’re just... the Enemy.”

Somehow, she could tell from his tone that the word was capitalised. “Oh.” The temperature in the ‘room’ hadn’t changed, but Jen suddenly felt cold. Mr Drake started talking again, pacing about as if standing in front of his blackboard. To Jen’s dismay, he kept going off the edge of the silver floor, standing on nothing.

“The thing that gave the Civilization its strength, that allowed it to develop and grow over ten thousand years of internal peace and stability, was the Nexus. Which,” he said, anticipating Jen’s question, “is a bit hard to describe, because there’s been nothing like it on Earth. But I’ll give it a shot.”

“Okay.” Despite herself, Jen was starting to be intrigued. She sat down again, crossing her legs.

“The best way to describe it would be... okay, you know the internet?”

Jen gave him a condescending look. “I may have heard of it.”

“Point taken, I’ll try not to patronise you again. Well, the Nexus is kind of like the internet, in that it’s a way of communicating and sharing information.”

“So, you’ve got broadband.”

“I won’t patronise you if you don’t get sarcastic with me.”

“Sorry.”

“Anyway, the Nexus links together every single person in the Civilization, and gives them access to all knowledge. Instantly, wherever they are.”

Jen considered this for a moment. “O-kay. So... you’ve got this super-internet thing—”

“It’s a lot more than just *that*—”

“—and you’re some kind of alien Christmas decoration bodyguard machine disguised as a teacher—”

“Not *quite* the description I would have—”

“—*and*,” Jen continued loudly as she jumped to her feet, “exactly what the *hell* has this got to do with me?” She wanted to use a stronger word than ‘hell’, but... well, he *was* a teacher.

“You might be the only person who can save the Civilization,” said Mr Drake in a surprisingly matter-of-fact voice.

Of all the possible unlikely answers, that one was a long way down Jen’s list. She considered it for a moment. Then decided she didn’t understand. “Huh?”

“The Nexus,” said Mr Drake, adopting a lecturing tone, “is the key to the entire Civilization. It makes us what we are – without it, there wouldn’t *be* a Civilization, just a lot of very different people spread out over an enormous area of space. And the Enemy has been trying to destroy it, to wipe out the very essence of everything we are. For all I know, they succeeded. Before I came to Earth, I disconnected myself from the Nexus so I couldn’t be traced. When we got safely clear of Earth I tried to access it again. It’s not there.”

“Maybe you’re out of range,” Jen offered.

Mr Drake gave her a look that she thought certainly bordered on patronising. “The Nexus functions in something called zerospace, a displacement membrane of no size but infinite energy that connects with every single point in the universe. It doesn’t matter where I go, I should still be able to link to it.”

“And...?”

“And, well, the fact that I can’t suggests that the worst has happened, the Nexus has been destroyed, and the Civilization – if it still exists – needs you to restore it.”

“Uh huh.” Any further questions would probably produce even more confusing answers, so Jen decided to let him go on talking until things made sense. If they ever did.

“We knew that the Enemy was coming to destroy the Nexus. So, almost literally at the last possible minute, we came up with a way to make... a backup copy, I suppose would be the simplest term. It’s called the Nexus Imprint. And...” He looked away for a moment. “You’ve got it.”

Jen couldn’t even manage an ‘uh huh’, instead settling for simply staring at him.

“When I arrived on Earth,” Mr Drake said, energy returning to his voice as he began to pace again, “I had to find somewhere permanent to transfer the Imprint before it decayed. I put it in *you*. I can’t really explain how because nobody on Earth would understand it, but basically your brain, on the sub-sub-atomic level, now contains the Nexus Imprint.”

Jen slowly cocked her head to one side and looked at him in disbelief. “You’re telling me that this Nexus thingie, all this combined knowledge of billions of people and stuff, is in my brain?”

“No, it’d never fit. Your brain is too small.”

“Oh, *thanks!*” Jen wailed.

“No, no,” Mr Drake said, holding up his hands, “that’s not what I meant! You don’t have the Nexus, you’ve got the Nexus *Imprint*. It’s like... oh, I know. You know when you upload a picture to your blog?”

Jen cringed. “You’ve read my blog?”

He adopted a carefully neutral expression. “Nooo... never. But when you send a picture to it, you compress it to make the file smaller, right?”

“Yeah, I save it as a JPEG,” said Jen, suddenly less concerned about aliens and wars than the possibility that Mr Drake might have read what she’d written about his ‘perfectly buff’ body a few days earlier, and what she wanted to see him doing with it.

“You lose some detail, but you can still tell what the actual picture is, can’t you? That’s what the Imprint is – it’s like a JPEG of the whole of the Nexus. When we read the Imprint, we’ll be able to recreate what was in the Nexus. Some of it might be a bit fuzzy, but it’s better than not having a picture at all.”

“I see,” nodded Jen, not really seeing. “But when we get where we’re going, you can get this Imprint out of me and then I can go home, right?”

“That’s the plan, yes.”

“And when *do* we get to where we’re going?”

Mr Drake paused before replying, as though he feared answering the question would cause him some trouble. “We’ll be arriving at Inar in about two hours.”

Jen glanced at her watch to check when that would be. Then her whole body prickled with cold shock when she realised what it was telling her. Almost a whole day had passed!

“Ah, about that...” Mr Drake started apologetically.

“It’s tomorrow!” Jen wailed. “Oh my God! What did you do to me? How long was I out?”

“I, ah, had to use my inductors to put you to sleep when we first took off,” explained Mr Drake. “You were a bit... agitated.”

“*Agitated?*”

“Okay, freaking out. I did it to calm you down. And then I realised that I didn’t really know what to do with you when I woke you up again – this wasn’t a contingency I’d planned for. So, I’m afraid I kept you unconscious. Totally harmlessly,” he added. “I made sure you got all the nutrients you needed for the day as well.”

“You *fed* me while I was asleep?” Jen had a horrible vision of having tubes inserted in various orifices.

“No, not exactly... It’s hard to explain. But to your body, it was just like having a relaxing sleep.”

“Well I’m not bloody relaxed *now*, am I?” Jen hooted. She checked her watch again. “So I’ve been asleep for nearly a whole *day*?”

“Space is very, very big!” Mr Drake protested. “I’m one of the fastest Defenders ever created, but it still takes a while to cover ten thousand light-years.”

Jen stared at him, horrified. “But I can’t be gone for a day!”

“Er, two days, actually, because of the round trip,” Mr Drake mumbled.

“Then you’ve got to tell my Mum and Dad! They’ll go spare!”

“Jennifer,” he said, “I’m sorry, but I can’t. We’re too far away. I promise that I *will* take you back home absolutely as soon as possible, but for now I’m going to have to ask you to trust me and come with me.”

Everything seemed to be spinning, and not because of the rushing starfield. “I think I’m going to be sick,” Jen said quietly.

“Oh. Maybe I should make you a bathroom, then.”

True to his word, Mr Drake *did* make her a bathroom after the dome-shaped room reappeared around them. How, she had no idea,

but one was there when he led her through an open doorway that hadn't been there before.

Apart from being made of the same silvery metal as the dome, the bathroom was surprisingly ordinary, as well-equipped as a hotel bathroom and just as anonymous. Much to her surprise, it had her usual brand of toothpaste sitting on a shelf above the washbasin. She wondered where Mr Drake had got it.

At first she was uncomfortable with the idea of taking a shower, not wanting to make herself more vulnerable in the unnerving surroundings. But she reconsidered. Firstly, Mr Drake genuinely seemed as though he had no intention of harming her. Secondly, even if he *did*, there wasn't much she could do to stop him. He wasn't even human, after all! Thirdly... well, looking at herself, still with mud from the embankment on her hands and knees, she needed a wash.

Emerging from the shower, and feeling a lot more refreshed than she'd expected, she felt oddly deflated by the thought that the only outfit she had was her school uniform. Great, she was going to an alien planet looking like a complete geek.

The clothes were exactly where she'd left them, and Mr Drake hadn't entered the room, but on picking them up she found they'd somehow been cleaned – the mud and grass stains were gone, and the material had a fresh, crisp feel. How had he done that?

Duh. He could fly through space and levitate people, so laundry probably wouldn't be much of a challenge.

Putting her clothes on and looking to leave, Jen saw the outline of a door set into the wall. She went looked for a handle or some kind of button to push, and gasped as it simply vanished when she cautiously stretched out her hand. Beyond was the domed room, thankfully now without the vertigo-inducing starfield. Mr Drake, standing in the exact centre of the room, looked at her curiously.

“Are you okay?”

“I think,” she said, moving warily into the dome. The ‘door’ reappeared behind her, but she managed to keep her reaction down to a mild flinch. “Where... where did that room come from? And how did you have the toothpaste I use? Don't tell me your spaceship's a supermarket.”

“It’s not really a spaceship,” he explained. “It’s a field-ship, an extension of me. I’m creating it from forcefields and paramatter as it’s needed.”

“Parawhat?”

“Artificially created, non-permanent matter formed from zerospace energy.” Mr Drake grinned slightly. “All the taste of regular matter, but only half the calories.”

Jen had no clue what he was on about. “Oh. Okay. Whatever.”

“I still haven’t managed to connect to the Nexus,” he said, “but I *have* finally managed to make real-time contact with Inar. The Civilization’s still there, thankfully. I’ve been in contact with another Defender.”

“So you won the war, then?”

“Apparently. It’s odd, though – they wouldn’t give me any straight answers. They want to tell me in person. Which I don’t understand, because if we won, they should be able to do that through the Nexus. Something’s changed. But,” he said, the look of faint unease that had crossed his face disappearing, “when we land we’ll be meeting a man called Ara Sumen Tarker, who’s the Moderator of the Civilization Council – whatever that is. I know him, by the way, he used to be a senior Arbiter, a sort of judge, before the war. We meet him, recover the Imprint, then get you safely back home.”

Jen suddenly realised she had goose-pimples. “When you say a ‘man’, you mean an... *alien*?”

“You’re not going to go all racist on me, are you?” Mr Drake said, a hint of sternness in his voice. “Yes, to you he’s *technically* an alien, but he’s also a citizen of the Civilization, and a person. A good person, too.”

“No, no,” said Jen, waving her hands. “I meant, is he... scary?”

“No, he’s not scary,” he assured her with a smile. “There *are* some races in the Civilization that you might have an instinctive fear of just because of their appearance, I admit. But they’re all friendly. Well, on a societal level, anyway. But I’ll be with you all the time, so you’ll be safe.”

“Oh. Okay,” Jen said, not entirely reassured.

“We might need to talk to some other people, but I think for the moment Ara Sumen’s going to want to keep this fairly quiet. Oh, speaking of talking to people,” he added, “you’ll need an implant.”

Jen crossed her hands protectively over her chest. “What?”

“A *neural* implant,” Mr Drake clarified. “It’s called a node – it’s mostly used to connect people to the Nexus, but it has functions of its own as well. It’ll let you understand what people are saying. I’ve already transmitted English ahead so they’ll be able to understand you, but—”

“Wait, wait, wait a minute,” Jen interrupted, having realised what he meant. “You want to stick something in my brain?”

“It’s completely harmless and painless—”

“In my *brain* brain? No way!” Jen jumped off the chair and backed away from him. “I’m not going to go round with a head full of computer chips like one of the bloody Borg or something!”

“It’s not as though I have to saw the top of your skull off—”

“No! No no *no!* Forget it, I’m not doing it!”

Mr Drake held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, *okay*, Jennifer! No implant. I’ll make something you can just put in your ears instead. Like headphones.”

“Good. And it’s Jen.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Jen, not Jennifer. Jennifer’s what my family call me. I prefer Jen.”

“Oh. Okay.” Mr Drake considered this. “Well, if you want, you don’t have to call me Mr Drake. You *can* call me Alex, if that would make you more comfortable.”

“I suppose... Alex.”

Mr Drake – Alex – smiled. “Jen.”

### 3: Inar

Jen became more and more nervous as time passed, which she tried to counter by asking questions. Most of the answers, she had trouble relating to. The Civilization had existed for over ten thousand years – history wasn't Jen's strong point, but she was fairly sure that was back before any human civilizations had been around – since the Nexus was first created, but the races that had created it had been working together for over twenty thousand years before then, and some of them had been around for *hundreds* of thousands. Or more.

Inar, their destination, was apparently the nearest thing the Civilization had to a capital. She was relieved to learn that it had breathable air. "Although," Alex said, "you might think it smells a bit funny."

"Funny like somebody else's house, or funny like somebody's farted?"

"The first one. The proportion of atmospheric methane's actually very low," Alex said, deadpan. "You might find it quite dry, as well. Smaller oceans, so less water vapour."

"How long before we arrive?"

Alex turned to face one side of the dome, part of which became transparent to reveal the starfield. To Jen's relief, the vertigo-inducing view this time didn't wrap right around her, but was instead more like watching it in a cinema. "Right about... now."

The stars froze; Jen had a fleeting feeling of unease, as though something invisible had just brushed past her. Off to one side of the 'screen', an object popped into existence, a planet, large and dazzlingly colourful. Unlike pictures she'd seen of Earth from space, this was more green than blue, with geometric patterns of purple, orange and yellow dappled by glittering streaks of white cloud.

"That's a real view," Alex explained, "not a hyperspatial translation."

Jen didn't understand, so just nodded.

"The planet," he said, pointing, "is Inar – it means 'unity', by the way, in one of the founding languages – and the object orbiting it is the Nexus Source." Jen had been concentrating so much on the strange sight of the planet that she hadn't noticed anything else. She flicked her gaze around the screen, spotting a grey crescent below the

planet. As she watched, she realised it was moving, perceptibly growing as they approached.

“I want to take a look at the Source. Apparently it was damaged in the war,” Alex said. “I just got permission to do a flyby.”

“When did you do that?” Jen asked. “You didn’t talk to anyone.”

“I was using my comm systems. Unlike real human males, I *can* multitask.”

Jen smiled, a little, at the joke and watched the moon – the Source – approaching rapidly. As it got closer, she was surprised to notice that it wasn’t perfectly round as she’d initially thought, but had regular indentations cutting into the bright outer curve of the crescent. “This thing, this Source... it’s not a moon, is it? Is it artificial?”

“Yes, it is,” said Alex, seeming impressed that she’d noticed.

“Like the Death Star?”

He looked less impressed. “Not in the slightest. But yes, it’s artificial, and it’s constantly growing as new knowledge is added to it. When the Nexus first went online, it was only fifty kilometres across – now it’s over a thousand.” His face fell, voice becoming grim. “Or it should be. There’s nowhere near as much mass there as there was when I left. Something’s happened to it.” They crossed over the night side into daylight, hundreds of kilometres above the surface.

“It looks like... like...” There was something strangely familiar about the Source, but Jen couldn’t work out what, because it looked completely alien. Vast sweeping curves cut across it, a landscape of impossibly precise intertwined ridges that were miles high. Occasional grid-like patterns of much smaller features – cities? – darkened the otherwise neutral grey landscape. Points of light shone out from the shadowed valleys between the ridges.

Jen went cold as she realised what the artificial planet reminded her of. “It looks like a *brain*.”

“It is, in a way,” said Alex, unaware of how disturbing she found the comparison. “Not an organic one, but it... oh.”

His voice tailed off in shock, just as Jen saw what had caused it. More of the Source’s surface had come into view as they orbited it, and in terrifying contrast to the ordered patterns Jen had already seen, this part was a torn, savaged wreck, a vast gouge carved across

a third of the artificial moon's face, so deep that she couldn't see the bottom. Around the rim of the colossal hole were great molten scars, blasting outwards from the force of whatever had inflicted the wound. A blowtorch melting a candle.

Alex looked stricken. "The knowledge that's been lost... it must be catastrophic." He stared at the ugly hole in silence for several seconds, before setting his jaw with an expression of contained anger. The field-ship changed course, the ruined moon dropping out of sight.

The rest of the journey to Inar, a trip of about fifteen minutes, took place mostly in silence. Unsettled at first by Alex's change of mood, Jen quickly forgot about it as she became mesmerised by the strange beauty of the approaching planet. The oceans were the first feature she was able to pick out – there was something bizarre about the seas being surrounded by land instead of vice versa – followed by the dazzlingly white polar caps, long mountain ranges, lakes, forests of colours impossible on Earth...

Signs of life, too, as they got closer, dropping almost straight down from space. Cities, towns... but not like the random splatters of buildings found at home, instead sweeping, carefully planned concentric rings spaced out by parks and woods and rivers. Big, but not cramped.

And the people living in them... wouldn't be human. Despite Alex's reassurances, a cold shiver ran up her back.

The landscape started to acquire perspective, the feeling of merely looking down from above changing to the sensation of flying over it. Even though she knew they must be slowing down, for the first time Jen was getting a sense of speed. "We'll be there in a couple of minutes," Alex said, breaking his silence.

"Where are we going?"

"Ara Sumen Tarker's official residence, outside a city called Hirest. He's expecting us."

"And then what?"

"That's up to him. I found out a bit more about what's happened to the Civilization while I was away. It seems that, in the absence of the Nexus, they've been forced to revert to representative democracy.

Things must have been really serious if they've had to go back to such a primitive system."

"Hey!"

"No offence," said Alex, smiling for the first time since they left the Source. He surveyed the view ahead, hills and distant mountains becoming more distinct as they lost altitude. "It's odd, though. Inar doesn't seem to have been damaged at all. Everywhere else the Enemy attacked was completely destroyed."

The thought of being involved in a war made Jen very uncomfortable. She didn't respond, instead turning away to watch the landscape. Individual structures, widely separated, started to become apparent in the distance, strange, almost impossible shapes. Slender spines supporting leaf-like clusters of broad discs, tall triangles curved like sails in the wind, grooved cylinders tilted at gravity-defying angles...

And moving between them, tiny dots in the air. Planes? No, they had no wings. More the size of cars. One whipped past below them, close enough for her to see it was circular, apparently open-topped, but too fast to see who was inside.

Or *what*.

"That's where we're going," said Alex, pointing. Ahead, Jen saw a low cluster of dome-like buildings. They had slowed right down, below motorway speeds. She looked around for other structures, but couldn't see anything, apart from what looked like cathedral spires off in the distance. "Oh, I'd better give you this."

He held out his hand to reveal two small metallic objects. "These'll translate for you," he explained as Jen cautiously took them. Each was about a centimetre long, gold in colour, curved, with one end fatter than the other. "Just put the wide end into your ear, it'll stay attached on its own."

Jen experimentally raised one to her right ear and slipped it in. It felt cold for an instant, then warmed up. She prodded at it with a fingertip, but it didn't move.

"You'll be able to take it out when you want," Alex assured her. "Put the other one in."

"Okay." She did so. "So... what happens now?"

"Jani awah datar neh," Alex started to say, before a monotone, artificial voice cut in a moment later with "Now you'll be able to

understand what people say to you.” She could still hear him talking in the unfamiliar language beneath the English translation.

“Ew, that was freaky,” she told him.

“It would have been a lot less freaky if you’d let me give you a node... but never mind, we’re here now.” Outside, the view came to a standstill in front of some oddly elongated trees, their leaves bright autumnal reds and oranges, before fading, replaced by the featureless silver wall of the dome. “Don’t forget your bag.”

Jen turned to find her bag floating right in front of her face. “Ah!” she gasped, flinching. She grabbed it, feeling it flop in her hands as it was released from whatever invisible force was holding it. “Don’t do that.”

“Sorry. So, are you ready?”

Jen took a deep breath. “Not really.”

“You’ll be fine.” Alex stepped over to a blank section of wall, gesturing for her to follow him. There was no sign of a door. She wondered how they were going to get out.

The entire ship around her disappeared, leaving her standing on the ground.

Squinting in the bright, not-quite-right daylight, Jen found herself looking straight at an alien.

After the initial shock she realised, to her surprise, she wasn’t afraid.

The alien was humanoid – two arms, two legs (and bare feet), one head, which came as a relief. Its – *his*, she reminded herself – face was less familiar, but she could still relate to it. Two eyes, a mouth... no nose, though. No hair, either. His skin had a slight blue tint to it, and he was wearing something that reminded Jen of a Japanese robe, made of long, overlapping strips of a dark blue material.

“Ara Sumen,” said Alex, taking a step forward, “may I present Jenni – sorry, *Jen* Exton, of Earth.”

Ara Sumen looked at Jen, then lowered his head almost as if bowing. He started to speak, the flat voice of Jen’s translator cutting in a second later. “Welcome to Inar, Jen Exton of Earth. I am Ara Sumen Tarker, Moderator of the Civilization Council.”

“Er... hi,” she said, giving him a little wave.

“I am sorry that your journey came under less than ideal circumstances. But I hope that your visit will be pleasant, and that you will be able to return safely to your home soon.”

“Thanks.” Ara Sumen had large, slightly drooping orange eyes, giving him a look of quiet sadness. Jen noticed that while he didn’t have a nose, there was an opening on each side of his face behind his long chin. Were those his nostrils? He raised a long, slim, three-fingered hand. There was something disconcerting about it, but it took a moment for her to work out what – the thumb, as long as any of the fingers, was on the wrong side of his palm.

“May I introduce Defender Liana,” said Ara Sumen. Jen wondered who he was talking about, until a silver sphere moved out from behind him.

“Hello, Jen,” said the sphere, in a female, slightly accented voice. Jen’s translator remained silent; Liana was talking in English. The only difference she could see between this sphere and Alex’s was that the inset light was green instead of blue. “And to you, Defender. What name should I call you?”

“Alex is fine,” Alex told her. “Evolution 202?”

“204,” said Liana, with a hint of pride.

Alex raised an eyebrow. “Three evolutions in fifteen years?”

“Unfortunately, nothing pushes technological advancement faster than war,” Ara Sumen said. The translated voice was flat, but Jen sensed a certain regret through the lilting alien language behind it. “Please follow me.”

He turned and led the way to the nearby domed building. The roof looked like dark glass, colourful flecks of light dancing through it like the carapace of a beetle. The whole structure was slightly tilted, one side higher than the other. Jen wondered if it was to catch the sun.

She looked up into the intensely blue sky, shielding her eyes with one hand. The hot sun was... different. It was whiter than she was used to, and a bit smaller. Alex had been right about the air, too. It *was* dry, and there was a faint smell, slightly sharp, that she couldn’t quite place. It wasn’t nasty, just... odd.

To her relief, the interior of the building was cooler. Ara Sumen beckoned her and Alex into a large oval chamber. It was brightly lit, but Jen couldn’t see any visible sources of light. As she walked in,

she realised that what she had assumed was a carpet was actually carefully-cropped purple grass.

“Please sit down,” said Ara Sumen. There were no chairs. Jen was about to kneel on the grass, when a thin metallic pillar rose silently out of the floor. It reached knee height, then the top bloomed outwards into a curved seat. Jen tapped warily at it. It seemed firm. She sat, Ara Sumen lowering himself into a similar chair. Alex stayed on his feet, the glittering sphere of Liana hovering just behind Ara Sumen’s shoulder.

“Alex has provided us with a list of suitable food and drink, if you desire any,” said Ara Sumen.

“No, I’m fine, thanks,” Jen replied. It was hard to tell through his thick robes, but it was clear that Ara Sumen’s legs weren’t jointed like a human’s.

“Please feel free to ask at any time if you decide otherwise. Now,” he said, turning his broad head to face Alex, “the Prime Council has already been notified, and wishes to meet you, but I wanted to speak to you first.”

“What’s the Prime Council?” Jen asked.

“Like the Cabinet,” Alex explained. “There’s something called the General Council, which is like Parliament, and the Prime Council is above that.”

“Right.” She looked back at Ara Sumen. “So you’re like the Prime Minister or the President?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” he said, blinking slowly. “I assume Alex has told you about the Nexus?”

“A bit.”

“The Civilization has had no need for such things as Presidents and Prime Ministers for over ten thousand years,” he explained. “The will of the people was known without question, and carried out to the benefit of all. But without the Nexus to join everybody together...” He leaned forward in the chair, frowning. “Divisions have grown. The outer worlds have become isolated by distance, and are accusing the inner worlds of ignoring their voices. A group called the Autonomists, which wants to break up the Civilization, is gaining support in the Council. *Politics*,” he almost spat the word out, “has returned.”

“What happened in the war?” asked Alex. “Is the Enemy still attacking, or...”

“They attacked the Source, as I understand you have seen for yourself, but we drove them back with a massive defence. It cost us our most powerful Defenders and ships, but the Enemy retreated – to where, we are not sure.”

“Are they still a threat?”

Ara Sumen sat up again. “Yes, but not in the way you remember. For now, they seem content to make sporadic attacks on single targets. We cannot work out their strategy – it appears to be completely random.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” said Alex. “They had overwhelming superiority. Why would they fall back to hit-and-run tactics?”

“Believe me, it is something everyone has been concerned about. There are many theories... but no answers.”

“Have we learned *anything* about them?”

“A little. Not enough.” Ara Sumen waved a hand and the room darkened, though Jen still had no idea where the light was coming from in the first place. “They have two types of vessel.” Something appeared, floating in the middle of the room. A hologram. “This,” Ara Sumen said, “is one of their attack craft.”

Jen stared at the hologram. It didn’t look like any sort of spaceship that she could imagine. If anything, it was more like some kind of crystal, a jagged, irregular core from which long, sharp spikes projected. The whole thing had the look of very old glass.

“It is approximately thirty-five metres across,” Ara Sumen continued, “the central body about ten metres in diameter. Beyond that, the only thing we know for certain is that the range of its weapons exceeds ours, and that it can destroy any targets within that range... instantly.”

Alex moved closer to the hologram, staring hard at the image of the ship. “What kind of weapons?”

“Unknown.”

“There wasn’t enough left of our ships to make a guess?”

“Not even on the sub-atomic level.”

Jen shifted uneasily in her seat. “You said there were *two* kinds of ships?”

“Yes.” Ara Sumen gestured again, and the attack ship faded, to be replaced by something else made of the same glassy, slightly fluorescent substance, but in a different shape. Whether by chance or design, the hologram was pointing almost directly at Jen. She couldn’t help but think of a clawed hand, grasping for her.

“This is their primary weapon,” said Ara Sumen. “As far as we know, it is the only one.” He paused. “We hope.”

Alex walked around the image, peering intently at the outstretched ‘claws’ at the front and the tangled, almost organic mass of spines at the other end of its long body. “How big?”

“Two thousand kilometres.”

Alex said nothing, but his eyes widened. Jen tapped at one of the translator buds in her ears. “Er, that was translated wrong, wasn’t it? You did mean two thousand *metres*, didn’t you?”

“Two thousand kilometres,” repeated Ara Sumen.

“Uh-oh.”

Ara Sumen regarded her quizzically. “I am afraid *that* did not translate correctly.” He turned back to the hologram. “The smaller vessels have been responsible for attacks on ships, Defenders and other spaceborne targets. The larger vessel, in addition to engaging our forces in space with the same deadly efficiency, has been responsible for planetary attacks. There is one recording of it in action.”

Alex looked at him. “I thought our ships were all destroyed when they got in range.”

“They were.” The hologram of the huge alien ship disappeared, replaced by a sphere of black fog. Jen examined it more closely, and saw it was a starfield, the stars blurred and jittering. “This was recorded by a Deefari ship trying to escape from one of the systems in the Scarlet Filament.”

“They weren’t attacked?” Alex asked.

“The Enemy seems to be extremely selective about attacking only Civilization targets,” said Ara Sumen. “Please observe.”

The fog started to move. Apparently, whatever had recorded the image wasn’t as advanced as the other holograms Jen had seen – there was a low-resolution feel to it. But it showed her enough.

A planet came into view, a rust-coloured globe speckled with glittering greenish oceans. Off to one side, so far away no detail was

visible, was the alien ship. A bright light suddenly flared into life high above the planet, slowly dying out.

“That was the planet’s moon,” Ara Sumen observed, his resigned lack of reaction hinting that he’d seen the recording all too many times before. “An asteroid, only a few hundred kilometres in diameter. There was a small outpost on it. The ship has not yet activated its main armament.”

Jen and Alex watched in silence. Another point of light burst into life, this one on the end of the alien ship nearest the planet. It grew brighter and brighter for several seconds.

“Now,” said Ara Sumen.

For a brief instant the light became so bright it made Jen squint, then an intense beam sprang up between the ship and planet, what looked like lightning crackling around it. As she watched, a vaporious white ring rapidly expanded from the point where the beam hit, racing around the planet, the surface darkening behind it. Behind the ring, a solid circle of fiery colours was growing in its wake, slower but more ominous. The beam continued to burn deeper into the planet. Suddenly, there was a bright flash on the opposite side of the now blackening world, and the beam vanished. Giant glowing cracks raced across the surface, surrounded by rippling explosions of light. The entire planet visibly contracted, collapsing in on itself, before vast, white-hot molten eruptions burst from the enormous chasm the beam had carved, mushrooming into space. A second eruption rose over the planet’s far side. Jen looked for the alien ship, but it had vanished. She glanced over at Alex. When he’d seen the damage done to the Source, he’d been angry. Now, his face was impassive.

The hologram blinked out, the lights in the room rising again. It suddenly struck Jen that what she’d just seen hadn’t been special effects in some film – it had been *real*.

Definitely uh-oh.

“Complete destruction of an entire *planet*,” Alex said slowly, “in less than twenty seconds? I’d say it was impossible, if I hadn’t just seen it happen.”

“We’ve calculated it would take the entire energy output of an F3 star for the duration of the beam,” Liana told him. Jen had forgotten the other Defender was there. “We’d need a point generator at least fifty orders of magnitude better than anything we could even

*theoretically* design, to say nothing of the sink it would need to reabsorb the backlash into zerspace.”

Jen thought of the great, molten-edged hole burned into the Nexus Source. “This is the same thing that hit your Source moon thing?” she asked, pointing a thumb upwards.

Ara Sumen turned towards her. “Yes.”

“So... why did it stop shooting? I mean, if it had kept going for a bit longer, it would have completely blown it up.”

“We drove it away,” Liana stated.

“But I thought you couldn’t get close enough to it without it attacking you?”

“Jen,” said Alex, sounding impatient. She pouted at him.

“We had thousands of ships and Defenders using every weapon available,” explained Ara Sumen. “A few were successful in striking the vessel before they were destroyed. Not soon enough to prevent damage to the Source, but they were able to prevent its complete—”

“Excuse me,” cut in Liana, this time in an alien language, Jen’s translator switching to a female voice as flat and monotonous as the male one. “The members of the Prime Council are here.”

“What?” snapped Ara Sumen. “Already?”

“It seems Odal decided to ignore your timetable.”

Ara Sumen muttered something which the translator either didn’t catch or refused to convert into English. “Crolin Odal,” he said to Alex. “A perfect example of this wretched resurrection of politics.”

“Odal?” Alex frowned as if searching his memory. “Wasn’t he a junior Arbiter on Gaverat Ring?”

“Was, and not a terribly good one, at that.” Ara Sumen stood, the chair contracting behind him and disappearing back into the floor. “But without the Nexus, only a few voices can be heard by the people at once. His is particularly loud. He has advanced very far, very fast, for no better reason than sheer volume. He wants to be Moderator, but while I would be more than happy to give up the responsibility, I have no intention of handing the position to someone so... self-serving.” He looked at Liana. “Tell them I shall meet them in the chamber.” The sphere dipped in acknowledgement, then floated away through an opening on the far side of the room.

Ara Sumen faced Jen, who stood up. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I had hoped to give you more time to adjust and prepare for this meeting.

If at any time you feel pressured or uncomfortable, please tell me at once.”

Jen didn't like the sound of that. “Pressured?”

“The members of the Prime Council have differing views on your arrival,” he said, lowering his head again. “There will probably be some intense arguments...”

Jen's translator, she discovered, had only three voices – male, female and indeterminate – which were all equally monotone. With eight increasingly worked-up aliens, plus the Moderator, arguing with each other at once, she was getting confused. And a headache.

She'd figured out which one was Crolin Odal without even needing to be introduced. The being – well over two metres tall, with a long, pointed head like a cross between a shark and a raptor, had advanced on Ara Sumen the instant he, Jen and the Defenders entered a high, vaulted circular chamber and begun bombarding him with aggressive questions. Jen suspected that if Liana hadn't been floating between them, he might even have made physical contact with one of his four – four! – arms.

The seven other members of the Prime Council weren't as openly aggressive, but it hadn't taken long before the meeting grew heated. Everyone was seated – metaphorically speaking, as one of the aliens (a squat, plump, tentacled creature called Minid-Hebesto) was suspended inside a floating bubble full of a reddish gas, and another called Guya was a featureless hovering black cylinder about two feet high (she wasn't sure if there was something inside it or it was some kind of robot) – around a large circular table. Jen was between Alex and Ara Sumen, as if they were shielding her.

Not that she'd needed protecting, as Alex had been the one coming under attack.

“What were you thinking, placing the Imprint on a living being?” said Odal, the emotionless voice of the translator in disorienting contrast to the guttural snarls coming from his ‘mouths’, two vertical openings in his neck full of what looked horribly like raw meat scraped by a fork. “Did this not strike you as a decision with inherent dangers – as your mere presence here proves?”

“My mission parameters didn't specify—”

“Speak in a proper language, not the babble of some retarded Protectorate spawn-child,” said another Council member, Malitar, a creature that Jen had taken great care not to look at. Alex’s earlier suggestion that she might be scared of some of the aliens in the Civilization was definitely true. Over three metres tall, very nearly as wide and not in the least bit humanoid, the liver-coloured, slick-skinned monstrosity had a mouth that reminded her of a spider’s fangs and a wide, spade-like skull fronted by ranks of sinister black eyes. She was so busy trying not to look at Malitar when he/she/it – the translator had gone with the genderless voice – spoke that it took her a few seconds to realise she’d just been insulted. She had no idea what a spawn-child was, but *retarded* was something that brought back nasty memories of school playgrounds.

“Retarded yourself, you wanker!” she blurted. Alex shot her a look that was both chiding and amused.

Malitar’s skin changed colour, a blotchy black rash spreading across it as it rose on its four broad cone-like feet. The unemotional voice from Jen’s translator sounded ridiculous against the huge being’s obvious fury. “Bones of my forebears, remove this disrespectful eater of filth or I shall expel it myself.” It slammed two of its heavy six-fingered hands onto the table, making it ring like a gong and causing a brief spectral pulse of light to flash where it had hit. Jen cringed, leaning closer to Alex for protection.

Odal stood as well. “We are here to discuss the Nexus Imprint, not be interrupted by this primitive child. Silence her or remove her.” The other aliens all started talking at once, the jumble of voices in Jen’s ears making her wince and her headache deepen.

“Hold,” said Ara Sumen, surprisingly loudly. The room fell silent. “This young lady is a guest of the Civilization, and of myself. She will be shown all according respect. She has no knowledge of our procedures, so her outburst is excusable. Yours are not.”

“A personal insult—” began Malitar.

“Hold!” Ara Sumen said again. Odal sat down, Malitar following after a long pause. Its skin slowly changed back to its original sickly grey.

“Crolin Odal is correct,” Minid-Hebesto cut in during the brief silence, shifting inside his bubble. “The Nexus Imprint is the issue, not the Defender’s actions, unusual though they were. But even

before today I did not agree with his continued assertion that the Nexus must be restored in haste, and I still do not. Now that we have the Imprint, we should wait until we can make proper use of it.”

“I agree with Minid-Hebesto,” added a short, vaguely mouse-faced being whose name Jen had forgotten. “I agree with Minid-Hebesto. I agree with Minid-Hebesto.”

Jen tapped at her ear, but the alien kept repeating herself. “My translator’s stuck,” she whispered to Alex. “That alien just keeps saying the same thing over and over.”

“Um, no, that’s how the Pipenna talk,” Alex whispered back. “In their culture, the more important they think a statement is, the more often they repeat it.”

“Oh, like a teacher.”

Alex gave her a look. “Very funny.”

Odal interrupted the Pipenna on her seventh repetition. “Without the Nexus, the Autonomists will continue to gain support and the Civilization will be torn apart. Even without the Imprint, the Source has been sufficiently repaired to allow this. We cannot delay any longer.”

“Agreed,” rumbled Malitar.

Guya’s black cylinder rose slightly. “And what if the Enemy should attack the Source again once it is restored? It has already been damaged – another attack could destroy it forever.”

“I think,” said Odal, somehow seeming slyly confident, “the benefits will be seen to outweigh the risks. There is already huge support for restoration of the Nexus, both with the people and the General Council. This is a crucial moment for the Civilization.”

“A vote must be taken,” Minid-Hebesto said, after a pause.

“I agree with Minid-Hebesto. I agree—”

Ara Sumen raised a hand. “Very well. The sides are clear – Minid-Hebesto, Crolin Odal. Livek,” he said, turning to the nearest Council member, a slender, graceful near-humanoid covered in glossy black fur, “your vote.”

“Minid-Hebesto.”

“Crolin Odal,” said the next alien.

“Crolin Odal,” Malitar boomed.

“Minid-Hebesto.”

“Crolin Odal.”

“Minid-Hebesto.”

“You maintain your positions?” asked Ara Sumen, looking between Odal and Minid-Hebesto. Both said yes. “Then the Prime Council is deadlocked, and I shall cast the deciding—”

“I move that a vote on this issue be taken by the full General Council,” Odal interrupted, to the surprise of the Council members. The flat translation couldn’t disguise his air of calculated cunning. “A decision so crucial to the future of the Civilization should not be taken by so small and elite a group.”

Alex stood. “Revealing the Imprint’s presence on Inar so widely would be an unacceptable risk to Jen’s safety. Knowledge of the Imprints was restricted for a reason.”

Jen looked at him, intrigued. There was more than one Imprint?

Odal regarded Alex with his deep-set, glinting red eyes. “Are you accusing the members of the General Council of being a security risk, Defender?” He gave Jen the distinct impression that he was amused at having just scored an easy point.

“No,” Alex said, with clear reluctance. “Of course not.” He sat down again.

“Then I repeat my request, and ask the other members of the Prime Council for support.” The three who had just followed his vote all spoke in agreement. Odal’s streamlined head turned towards Ara Sumen. “Procedure now demands that the General Council be assembled for an emergency session.”

“Agreed,” said Ara Sumen, his annoyance barely contained. Odal sat up in triumph. “This meeting of the Prime Council is concluded.”

One by one, the members of the Council left the chamber, leaving only Ara Sumen, Liana, Alex and Jen.

“Well, that... sucked,” Jen said, trying to break the uneasy silence.

“I am afraid that did not translate correctly,” Ara Sumen replied, “but I believe I understand the context.” He wearily rose to his feet. “Liana, please accompany Jen to her quarters. I need to discuss matters with Alex.”

“I should really stay with—” Alex started.

“She will be safe,” said Ara Sumen, raising a hand. He turned to face Jen. “He will join you shortly. Until then, please accept the full hospitality of the Civilization.”

“Um, thanks.” Jen followed the silver sphere out of the Chamber, glancing back at Alex with concern.

#### 4: Translations

Jen followed Liana through the building. It was easy to tell where the official government areas stopped and Ara Sumen's own private residence began, small hexagonal floor tiles arranged in colourful geometric patterns giving way to the strange purple grass. "So, where are my, um, quarters?"

"In a building on the other side of Hirest. You should find them suitable."

"Okay." She kept pace behind the sphere, looking up at it. "So... you're a Defender?"

"That's correct."

"What's it like?" Jen mentally slapped herself for the lameness of the question. "I mean, what do you actually do?"

"I ensure the security and safety of the citizens of the Civilization."

"Oh, so you're like a cop."

"A cop?" The sphere came to an abrupt stop, Jen almost headbutting it. "A law enforcement official," Liana said, after a brief pause. "I apologise. I'd only downloaded your language from Alex's data, not historical and cultural references. I've now done so."

"All of it?"

"Yes."

"That didn't take long."

"It's only one planet," Liana said, as if it were no big deal. "And most of the cultural references are ephemeral."

"Ephemeral, huh?" Jen wasn't sure if Liana was taking a poke at Earth or just stating a fact. Actually, thinking about it, probably the latter.

Liana started moving again, Jen having to jog a couple of steps to catch up. "I suppose Defenders could be described as 'cops'," the word awkward in her unusual accent, which Jen thought sounded a bit Scandinavian, "but we don't only deal with criminal activity. We also act as rescuers, explorers, peacekeepers, envoys... and soldiers, if necessary."

"Like now."

“Yes.” The sphere rotated so that the green ‘eye’ faced Jen. “As an Evolution 204 Defender, I am the most powerful combat system ever created by any known culture.”

Jen thought of the jagged ships she’d seen in the holograms.

“What about the Enemy?”

“They’re an unknown culture,” Liana replied. If she’d been human, Jen would have accused her of being a smart-arse. “I’m too new to have entered combat against the Enemy, and have been assigned solely to protect Moderator Ara Sumen Tarken since my inception five years ago, but I’m confident that when required, I’ll destroy the enemies of the Civilization.”

“Whatever you say, Rambo,” Jen said under her breath. She briefly considered the wisdom of being sarky to ‘the most powerful combat system ever created’, but decided she could probably get away with it if she changed the subject quickly enough. “So, anyway, everyone was getting pretty worked up in there.” She flicked a thumb back in the general direction of the chamber. “What do *you* think they should do about this Nexus thing?”

“As long as I’m protecting the Moderator, it wouldn’t be appropriate for me to comment on political matters.” They entered an atrium with curving walls, a tall, palm-like tree with long teardrop leaves reaching almost to the tinted glass ceiling. “But whatever is decided, I think you should be returned home.”

Jen smiled. “What, you can’t stand having me around?”

“No, you seem pleasant, if sarcastic.” Oops. “But you’re from a Protectorate world. Normally, we wouldn’t have made open contact with you for another couple of centuries to protect your culture. Alex’s actions were...” She paused, as if trying not to give offence. “...unusual.”

“So he’s a bit weird,” said Jen, a little miffed. “What do you expect? He’s a teacher! And he still saved my life. Besides, if you’re worried about our culture getting messed up, nobody’d believe all this anyway. If I go around saying I’ve met a bunch of aliens, people’ll just laugh.”

“Another reason why Earth isn’t ready for contact,” Liana pointed out. They reached the end of the atrium, a large floor-to-ceiling window melting aside to let them through. Waiting outside was a

circular, slightly concave platform of reflective silver, hovering just above the ground. “This flyer will take us to your quarters.”

“Okay.” Jen remembered the flying objects she’d seen as they approached Ara Sumen’s home. “Oh! Before we get in, or on, or whatever...”

“Yes?”

Jen rubbed her neck. “It’s kind of embarrassing, but... it’s just freaking me out a bit talking to a flying silver ball, okay? Can you do that thing Alex does where he looks like a real person? It’d just make things a lot easier for me, I’m sorry.”

“Of course.” There was a momentary flicker in the air, and a person stood in Liana’s place, her head where the sphere had been. Jen giggled. “Is something wrong?”

“No, no,” Jen said, grinning, “but when I said a real person, I didn’t mean a *real* person. You’re Angelina Jolie.”

Angelina Jolie stared blankly at her. “I picked this form from Alex’s cultural observations,” she said, in Liana’s voice.

“No, I mean, it’d be pretty cool to go around with a big film star for the day, but I meant somebody I *didn’t* know.”

“I see.” Another flicker, and Angelina Jolie vanished, replaced by someone unfamiliar, a tall, beautiful woman with shoulder-length blonde hair, wearing a vivid turquoise off-the-shoulder dress with an almost metallic sheen. “Is this better?”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” said Jen, suddenly feeling a bit inadequate. The woman was if anything *too* beautiful, making her wonder what else Alex had been watching.

Liana gestured at the hovering platform. “Shall we go?”

Ara Sumen paced back and forth across the oval room, occasionally clenching his toes in the grass with frustration. “For someone who’s only been back in contact with the Civilization for a few hours, you’ve already caused an immense amount of trouble. Odal had a point – why *did* you put the Imprint on a living being? The idea was that you’d find some isolated piece of space rock light-years from anywhere and stay out of harm’s way!”

“As I tried to tell the Prime Council,” Alex said, “my mission parameters didn’t specify any particular kind of target for the

Imprint. But they *did* specify that the location and target should be selected randomly.”

“It certainly *was* random,” Ara Sumen snapped. “I had Liana run some behavioral simulations before you arrived, based on the profiles of all four Defenders chosen for the mission and a baseline 200 and 201 for comparison, as well as the data you sent us on your way here. In less than one per cent of cases did any of the sims choose a Protectorate world as a suitable hiding place... and in *zero* per cent was the Imprint placed on a living being! And as for that stunt with the train... You might as well have landed in front of their world leaders!” He shook his head. “Now the Contact Committee will have to get involved – we can’t just send her straight back as if nothing’s happened.”

“But that could take days,” Alex protested. “I promised her I’d return her home as soon as possible. Her family will already be worried enough as it is.”

Ara Sumen signalled for a chair to rise, then sat down. “It could take longer than that. Do you know how to recover the Imprint from a living being?”

“I wasn’t told how, so that I couldn’t somehow be forced to do it by the Enemy if I were captured.” It wasn’t a decision Alex had agreed with, but orders were orders. “All I know is that it involves some kind of sub-quanta bit interrogation. But beyond that... no, I don’t.”

“And nor does anyone else!” Ara Sumen leaned wearily back in the chair, which changed shape to support him. “For that matter, there’s nobody left who’s entirely sure how to recover an Imprint even from an *inorganic* subject. Solivor and Ri died in accidents, Vrikriath vanished five years ago, the AIs were part of the Source and damaged beyond recovery, and the Defenders who stayed behind were all destroyed by the Enemy in the attack. All we have are bits and pieces of information, and without the Nexus, we can’t see how they fit together. Ironic, really. To restore the Nexus, we need the Nexus.”

“Then I should take Jen back to Earth now, and wait until the Imprint can be recovered,” said Alex. “Forget the Contact Committee, this is far more important.”

“Unfortunately,” Ara Sumen said, straightening, “Odal has forced the issue. Procedure now requires a meeting of the General Council.” He shook his head again. “Representative democracy... who would have thought we’d ever see *that* return? At least now we have the Prime Council to get *some* things done. When there was nothing but the General Council, it was utter chaos. Twenty thousand delegates, and every one wanting something different...”

“What *is* the current political situation?” asked Alex. “You said the outer worlds are accusing the inner worlds of ignoring them...”

Ara Sumen stood up, the chair silently disappearing back into the floor. “Without the Nexus, it takes weeks just to talk to the Andromeda cluster, and having to route everything through a communications network instead of having direct contact just makes things even more difficult. My fear is that the longer the Civilization is without the Nexus, the greater the chance of it breaking apart into smaller and smaller parts, each with their own agendas. And more chance of conflict, especially now that there has been a generation that has never even known what the Nexus provides.” He walked over to a large egg-shaped sculpture, examining his reflection in the surface. “People will become insular. Self-interest will be put above the good of all. The Autonomist movement is growing ever larger in the outer galaxies. It’s the first step towards dissolution of the Civilization.”

Alex stood next to him. “Which makes it all the more vital that the Imprint is recovered as soon as possible.”

“There’s still the minor matter of our mysterious adversaries,” Ara Sumen reminded him. “The Imprints weren’t supposed to be recovered until the Enemy was no longer a threat... and we believe that at least one of the Imprints and its Defender has already been found and destroyed.” He watched Alex’s shocked reaction. “Well. We’ll discuss this more after the Council meeting.” He turned away from the sculpture and headed for one of the doors to the rest of his quarters, Alex following him. “I need to prepare. Go and find your young friend.”

“I still think that this General Council meeting is a mistake,” said Alex. “The more people know about Jen and what she represents, the more danger I believe she’s in.”

Ara Sumen paused, turning to Alex with a slightly condescending expression. “I find it hard to believe that the people appointed to restore the Civilization would be foolish enough to do anything to harm it.” With that, he left the room.

Alex stared at the door as it flowed shut. “Nobody believed politics would ever make a comeback, either,” he said quietly.

When Liana had said Jen’s quarters would be ‘suitable’, she hadn’t been kidding.

“This is like a *palace!*” Jen whooped, running from one huge room to another. The flyer’s fifteen-minute flight had taken her over what Liana had said was the city of Hirest – which had slightly disappointed Jen by not being full of 500-storey skyscrapers, but instead had been made up of widely spaced out, albeit futuristic, structures separated by lots of open parks and lakes – to a tall building that looked like a leaf lying on its edge.

“This view is amazing,” she continued, coming to a stop at one of the windows – well, ‘walls’ would be more accurate, as it took up one entire side of the room, unbroken by any frames. Far below was a long ribbon-like lake, glittering in the sunlight, surrounded by elongated trees of colours that made even the brightest autumn day on Earth look dowdy. She could see paths winding amongst the trees, tiny figures – of many different shapes – walking along them. “What floor are we on?”

“We’re on the fifteenth floor,” Liana told her.

“And all of this,” Jen spun around, her hands outstretched to take in the entire place, “is just for me?”

“The building is currently unoccupied,” said Liana. “This is a standard, fully customisable diplomatic guest quarters for non-Civilization visitors. Within certain physiological parameters, of course.”

“Well, of course,” Jen said.

“Normally there would be other people in the diplomatic group housed here as well. But since you’re the first ever visitor from Earth...”

“Wow.” Jen turned back to the view, which stretched far into the distance, snow-capped mountains barely visible against the intense

colour of the sky. “I never thought of it that way. I’m a diplomat! Hope I don’t end up making an arse of myself,” she added.

“Alex has already asked that you not be provided with any form of alcohol. Particularly cider. I believe there was an incident recently”

“Trust me, I’m never touching cider again,” Jen insisted. “But who is he, my mum?”

“He’s your Defender,” Liana said, seemingly without irony.

“Huh.” Jen headed for the next room, to find that there was a balcony outside the window. She couldn’t see any obvious door, but recent experience suggested she should just walk at the ‘glass’, and she was only slightly surprised when a hole opened up in front of her. A stiff breeze was blowing outside, but not an uncomfortable one. Walking to the edge of the balcony and looking down, she could see more people walking about below. A couple of flyers set off as she watched, forcefield bubbles popping up around the circular platforms as they left the ground. “This is a nice place. Planet, I mean.”

“It’s been engineered to provide a pleasant environment to the broadest possible range of Civilization members,” Liana said, stepping up behind her. “Organisms breathing a primarily nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere are relatively common – just over a third of the races in the Civilization. There are two other engineered planets in this system, designed for the next most common environmental requirements. People with other needs are catered for as well, or they can use a support device to provide their own atmospheric and gravitational needs.”

“Support device?” Jen couldn’t help thinking of some sort of high-tech sports bra.

“Combined life support, paramatter, forcefield and gravity control systems. Several of the Prime Council members were wearing them.” Jen remembered the flash of light when Malitar had hit the table. It made sense; it had seemed awfully convenient that every alien she’d seen had been able to breathe the same air and walk in the same gravity. Actually, now she thought about it, there was something odd about the gravity. Was she a bit lighter?

Liana turned and stared up into the sky. “Alex is on his way.”

“Where?” Jen followed her gaze, looking for a flyer, but saw nothing – at least for several seconds, when she noticed a tiny dot against the blue. It didn’t take long for the tiny dot to grow into a still-not-exactly-huge dot, and only slightly longer for a now-familiar silver sphere to glide to a stop above the balcony. Alex popped into view around it.

“Sorry for the flashy entrance,” he said, “but I didn’t see any point in taking a flyer when I could come myself. How’ve you been?”

“Fine, thanks,” said Jen. “Liana’s been showing me round this absolutely brilliant place! When she said I was going to have quarters, I thought it’d be like a room in a B&B, not a five-star hotel.”

“You only get the best in the Civilization.” He tipped his head and looked at Liana. “Something looks different about you. Did you change your hair?”

Human humour was apparently something Liana hadn’t downloaded from Alex’s files. “No, I created a projection of a body because Jen asked me to.”

“She was Angelina Jolie before,” Jen pointed out.

“Ah, Angelina,” Alex sighed. Jen glared at him. “Just kidding.”

Liana stepped back from Jen. “Now that you’re back,” she said to Alex, “I will resume my duties with the Moderator.” Before Jen could reply, Liana’s human projection disappeared and her sphere took off over the balcony, vanishing into the distance with surprising speed and a faint whoosh of displaced air.

“She was in a hurry,” Jen observed. “Hope I wasn’t bad company.”

Alex moved to the window, which obligingly provided an opening for him to walk through. “Liana’s orders about protecting the Moderator are pretty similar to mine concerning you. If she’s not able to carry them out directly, she probably gets quite agitated and frustrated.”

Jen followed Alex into the apartment, the window sealing with a very faint tinkling hiss. “So,” she asked, “did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Get agitated and frustrated when you were trying to protect me?”

Alex flashed her a knowing smile. “You have no idea. So, you like the place?”

“I love it!” exclaimed Jen. “It’s huge, it looks really cool, there’s an absolutely enormous bath and Liana said if I want anything at all, I just have to ask and the house’ll make it for me! I don’t get that at home.”

“Maybe not in quite the same way,” Alex said softly.

Jen wasn’t really listening, going to the middle of the large room. “Check this out! House?”

“Yes, Jen?” said a disembodied female voice.

“I don’t like the colour of this carpet.” She indicated the rather boring blue-grey floor covering. Was it technically even a carpet? Whatever; the house knew what she meant. “Can you make it... orange?”

“Of course,” said the house. A wave of colour rolled outwards from where Jen was standing, the original colour changing to a subtle amber.

“No, no, I meant a *reeeeally* bright orange.” The carpet changed again, becoming far more lurid. “Nearly there, make it day-glo.”

“Day-glo?” the house asked.

“As bright as you can make it.” An eye-searing orange burned across the room, but Jen wasn’t finished. “Now give it just as bright green spots.” A regular pattern of equally vivid green circles appeared. “More random. Different sizes.” The spots disappeared, reappearing a moment later as Jen had requested. “There we go. Psychedelic Dalmatian.”

Alex winced. “Better take ‘interior designer’ off the possible careers list.”

“Pah. You didn’t even know what I had planned for the walls.”

“Don’t spend too long remodelling the place. The General Council is going to assemble in about two and a half hours, so you’ll need to be ready for then.”

Jen held up her bag. “Well, hey, it’ll take me that long just to unpack.”

“Just making sure you knew,” Alex said, amused. “Anyway, make yourself at home. But,” he added, looking distastefully at the carpet, “maybe not *too* much.”

“Hey! I just realised what’s missing from this place.” Something had been nagging at Jen ever since she’d arrived in the apartment, and now she’d figured out what. “There’s no telly!”

Alex rolled his eyes.

Jen passed some of the time by playing with the house, but changing the colours of everything on a whim, moving walls and summoning and dismissing new furniture became boring surprisingly quickly. However, she soon discovered another one of the house’s tricks that was a lot more entertaining.

“Jen, how are you... ah.” Alex came into the room that Jen had chosen as her bedroom, finding her floating gracefully across it in a long arc. “I see you found the gravity controls.”

“This is so amazing!” Jen lightly touched down, then pushed herself skywards again with a gentle kick from one foot. “I’ve got to get one of these for home.”

“That’s a couple of centuries away, I’m afraid,” Alex pointed out. He looked through the window at the balcony beyond, the sun starting to drop towards the horizon. “It’s time we got going. The Council assembly starts soon.”

“Aw, do I *have* to go?” Jen moaned as she reached the high point of her lazy jump. She pointed at the golden buds of the translator, which were sitting on a circular table by the huge, silk-sheeted bed. “Those things really nip after a while. And they do my head in when everybody starts talking at once.” A thought occurred to her. If there had been nine aliens at the Prime Council meeting... “How many people are going to be at this thing?”

“As many Council members as are available at short notice,” said Alex. “About twenty thousand. Spread over several locations on the three planets, of course – it’d be a bit crowded otherwise.”

“Gyah!” Jen cringed at the thought. “All of them yammering on at once in those stupid robot voices? No way!” She touched down on the bed and knelt on it, Alex telling the house to return the gravity in the room to normal. “It’ll drive me bloody mad!”

“There is an alternative,” Alex reminded her. “I can implant a node.”

“Oh, not the brain thing again...”

“It’s absolutely, completely, one hundred per cent harmless,” he said. “Really! It’ll take five seconds, and you won’t even feel it. And everybody’ll sound a lot less stiff and formal, as well.”

“I don’t know...” Alex gave her a hard-to-resist reassuring look. “You can take this thing out again, right?”

“Just as easily, just as painlessly.”

“And I’ll be able to understand what everyone’s saying without getting a splitting headache and them sounding like Stephen Hawking?” Alex nodded. “Ahhhh... okay, then,” she said, with great reluctance.

“You sure?”

She moved to the edge of the bed. “Do it before I change my mind.”

“Okay.” Alex stepped up to the bed. “Just sit there and hold still for a moment.”

He sat down next to her and leaned closer, gazing into her eyes. Jen started to blush. “Wh-what are you doing?”

“A brain scan.”

“Oh. Heh. Right. Brain scan.”

Alex raised an eyebrow. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah! Sure! Fine! Just nervous. About the brain thing!”

“O-kay...” Alex kept looking at her, making her want to squirm in embarrassment. If he could read her mind...

Actually, since he was scanning her brain, maybe he could! She wondered if the apartment could create a hole in the floor for her to drop into.

“Everything’s fine,” Alex said, his big blue eyes still just inches away. Jen bit her lip. “I’ll have to use a field to immobilise your head for a few seconds.” Okay, *that* was a mood-killer. An odd feeling of pressure, not painful but slightly uncomfortable, sprang up around her head. “Okay, almost done... there.” The pressure faded.

Jen leaned back, blinking. She hadn’t felt anything in her head, but her body had experienced a strange tingling for a moment.

“That’s it?”

“Told you it was easy.”

“And is it... doing whatever it does?”

Alex's expression changed to one of concentration. "I'm just checking. The main thing is to make sure the neural connections are all in place, but human brains are fairly simple."

"Oh, they are, are they?" said Jen in as chilly a voice as she could manage.

He smiled. "You know what I mean. But yes, everything should be working fine."

"I don't feel any different."

"Well, you wouldn't, because it's designed to work as transparently as possible." Jen did a double-take. She'd heard Alex's words in English, and in his normal voice, but the movements of his mouth were completely at odds with what he was saying.

"Wha- what happened to your mouth?"

"I'm talking in French," Alex said, voice and mouth still out of sync. "Now you won't have any trouble understanding it at school! The implant helped your brain convert it into English. Your ears and eyes do that anyway, translating external stimuli into understandable signals – this just gives them a hand."

"It's like watching one of my brother's Hong Kong films," Jen muttered. "Wait – what *about* my eyes?"

"You can read alien languages too," said Alex. "Here. House? On the wall to Jen's right, please print the words 'Hello Jen, this is a test of your implant' in English." The house obliged. "Now, change the same sentence into... Yerrin."

The words disappeared, replaced by incomprehensible hieroglyphics radiating outwards from a central squiggle. Almost before Jen had the chance to take it in, the words 'Hello Jen, this is a test of your implant' were superimposed over them in glowing letters. "Aah!" she said in surprise. She moved her head from side to side. The words seemed to be floating in the air just above the actual alien text. She cautiously waved a hand in front of her face, and was shocked to find that the words remained in *front* of her hand for a moment before fading. "Woah, ew, weird! No, no, that's just too freaky!"

"Visual image processing is more complicated than auditory," Alex explained. "But you'll get used to it in no time."

"No, no, no," she said, hopping from the bed. The glowing letters were still there, disturbingly just out of phase with the symbols

behind them, even behind her eyes when she blinked. “I don’t like that at all! How do I turn it off?”

Alex seemed disappointed. “Just think to yourself that you want to turn off visual translation.”

“Turn off visual translation, turn off visual translation!” Jen said, clenching her fists and closing her eyes. When she opened them again, to her relief the floating words had gone. “Ewww, no. I’ll just stick with the ear thing, thanks.”

“If you insist,” Alex sighed. He nodded in the direction of the balcony. Jen turned to see a flyer moving into position outside, silhouetted against the setting sun. Its forcefield bubble shrank away as part of the balcony wall lowered to let it park. “Are you ready to go?”

“Ready to meet twenty thousand aliens?” Jen gave him a resigned, lopsided smile. “As much as I’m ever going to be.”

## 5: The Council

After the strange but undeniably impressive structures elsewhere in Hirest, the Assembly was a distinct disappointment. Aside from the dome-like bulge on its roof, the large, dull ochre block could have been any boring office building on Earth. Whoever designed it obviously had ‘functional’ as their word of the day.

The people going into it weren’t exactly typical nine-to-fivers, however. Even though the flyer had taken Jen and Alex to a balcony on an upper floor rather than the main entrances at ground level, where a steady procession of flyers and other vehicles was dropping off Council members, the sheer variety of beings she saw as he led her from the luxurious waiting area to the main chamber was bewildering. Here a group of creatures inside green-tinted fields, none of them higher than her knee and with at least ten scuttling legs spaced around their surfboard-shaped bodies; there a lone being resembling a giant coiled shellfish floating above the floor, with ornately decorated sheaths over the long spines protruding from its back. Liana had been right about regular air-breathers being in a minority, to judge from the number of magically suspended gas clouds and occasionally flickering fields surrounding the delegates.

And humanoids were definitely in a minority, and a small one at that. She’d lost count of the number of different body shapes and sizes she saw before even getting halfway to her destination. Some of them she was able to relate to animals (and plants, in a couple of cases) on Earth. Most of them, she couldn’t.

Still, at least she wasn’t getting freaked out by the sight of all the aliens any more. There were so many of them, she didn’t have time.

Alex brought her onto a small curving balcony overlooking the Council chamber. The floor of the broad domed auditorium was occupied by hundreds, maybe even thousands of wok-like gunmetal bowls large enough to fit several people – or a couple of very big aliens – tilted at an angle to partially enclose their occupants. All of them were pointing in different directions, making the entire milling chamber seem even more chaotic.

In the room’s centre was a tall dais, directly beneath the centre of the dome. Jen supposed that was where Ara Sumen would sit, although there was no sign of him or Liana. She’d noticed several

Defenders on her way through the building, though none had green lights.

Alex summoned two chairs, Jen dropping into one of them and sitting with her hands in her lap. The hubbub of the chamber, hundreds of voices talking at once, made it hard to tell if her new implant was doing its job, though she occasionally picked out recognisable words or sentences.

It was obvious even from these that tonight's hot topic of conversation was... her.

After a few minutes, the level of noise started to drop, all but a few stragglers having found their places. It fell almost to nothing as Alex pointed out Ara Sumen entering, sitting inside a hovering pod similar to a flyer. The lights in the chamber lowered. The pod drifted to the centre of the chamber, touching down on the dais. All the randomly-pointing dishes turned in unison to face him, reminding Jen of an army in formation. She spotted Liana's sphere floating close behind Ara Sumen's shoulder.

Above Ara Sumen, a hologram brightened, a huge projection of his head and upper body. A smaller duplicate appeared in front of Jen. Glancing down into the chamber, she saw that each of the dishes had one too.

"Fellow Council members," Ara Sumen began, his cultured voice now thankfully non-robotic, "you have all now seen the previously classified information concerning the Nexus Imprint, and the opposing views regarding what our next action should be. Minid-Hebesto proposes that any attempts to restore the Nexus be delayed until the Imprint can be recovered and used to rebuild all that was lost in the attack. Crolin Odal," a slightly disapproving tone crept into his voice as he said the name, but it quickly disappeared, "counters that restoration of the Nexus should not be delayed, no matter what. This assembly of the General Council has been called by procedure of the Prime Council to vote on a course of action."

The chamber echoed with the low rumble of discussion. If this had been Parliament, Jen would have expected Ara Sumen to start shouting "Or-dah! Or-daahhh!"

Ara Sumen waited for the noise to die down. "Minid-Hebesto?"

The chamber darkened, a single beam of light from somewhere high above illuminating one of the dishes. Ara Sumen's hologram

was replaced by Minid-Hebesto's. "I believe the course of action is clear," he said, his real, if implant-translated, voice turning out to be quite high-pitched and watery. "The Nexus must eventually be restored in order to reunite and restore hope to the peoples of the Civilization. Its absence has been felt, like the loss of a sense, for far too long. But now that an Imprint has been returned to us, it is surely in the interests of all to wait until the Nexus can be fully restored to its past glory, instead of the fragmented, incomplete form that will result if matters are rushed."

Murmurs of agreement rose from the floor of the chamber. The hologram of Minid-Hebesto bowed its head, then vanished. Ara Sumen reappeared as the lights in the chamber rose again. "Crolin Odal, do you have anything to add?" Jen was surprised to discover that she was already ignoring the lack of lip-sync. Maybe things wouldn't be so confusing after all.

Odal's sharply-pointed features appeared, another spotlight picking him out close to the centre of the chamber. "Actually, Moderator, I do." His real voice was silky, clever. "The restoration of the Nexus is something I want as much as any other citizen of the Civilization. It was a part of my life from the moment I gained sentience, and its loss at the hands of the Enemy was a devastating blow." He paused for effect, the giant hologram of his head turning as if looking at everyone in the chamber. "There are those who believe that restoring the Nexus *at all* will merely provoke the Enemy into another attack, one that will complete the destruction they began sixteen years ago, before our forces forced them to retreat – so we dare not even *attempt* to bring back that which defined our entire culture. There are others, like Minid-Hebesto, who take a *slightly* less timid view—" Mutterings rose from the floor of the chamber. "—and say that we must wait until all risk has been eliminated before we try to restore the Nexus. I do not share these views. I say the time for restoration is *now*."

"This is unusual," Alex whispered. "I've been checking on procedure. Usually at Council assemblies, all the arguments have been presented factually before the vote takes place. They don't normally speechify like this."

“Well, Ara Sumen *did* say Odal was a politician,” Jen answered. Listening to some self-important windbag on TV always made her want to switch the channel, but that wasn’t really an option here.

Alex watched the hologram suspiciously. “He’s up to something. I don’t think Ara Sumen expected this.”

“—the Nexus *will* be restored,” Odal continued, “make no mistake. All that is required is for peace to be negotiated with the Enemy.”

The floor of the chamber erupted with noise. Odal paused as many of the dishes below started flashing green and blue lights on the topmost parts of their rims. “Monoskur Yas,” said Ara Sumen’s voice, the hubbub dying down.

The hologram changed to the image of something resembling three bony fingers joined by webs of pale skin, small compound eyes in place of nails. “Crolin Odal,” said the being in a voice like dry leaves blown by the wind, “negotiation with the Enemy is impossible. Communication with the Enemy is impossible. Therefore your proposal is invalid. We cannot risk restoring the Nexus at this time. This is contrary to the Civilization’s interests.”

“Fellow Council members,” said Odal, his tone changing to one of triumphant anticipation. “I’m sure you’re all familiar with the Gekendi saying, ‘Only impossibility is impossible.’ I am now in a position to reveal to you all that communication with the Enemy is *not* impossible. Negotiation with the Enemy is *not* impossible. There *is* a hope for peace.” He raised his voice as disbelief filled the chamber. “Through an intermediary, I have been working – alone, so as to protect the security of the Civilization – to establish contact with the Enemy.” Disbelief turned to pandemonium, Odal waiting for it to subside. Jen heard a voice in the chamber yell “Treason!”

“Treason, you say?” asked Odal, sounding as though he’d fully expected to hear it and had a response prepared. “Is it treason to seek peace? Is it treason to restore that which defined and maintained our society? Is it treason to bring back the Civilization that we all knew and miss so much? I have already accomplished a great deal. Communication is the key to understanding, and understanding is the key to peace. I have taken this task upon myself, as a member of the Prime Council, so that if my negotiations should be fruitless, I and I alone will accept the blame and take the responsibility. But I believe

they *will* be successful. We will have peace with the Enemy, *and* we shall have the Nexus restored – and we shall have both very soon!”

“I don’t think anyone was expecting *that*,” Jen said, looking down into the tumult of the chamber.

“No, they weren’t,” Alex said. “Odal just took a huge risk. Technically, trying to negotiate with an enemy power without approval *is* treason.”

Ara Sumen’s angry-looking hologram replaced Odal’s, appealing for calm. Before Odal disappeared, even though he had nothing resembling a human mouth, Jen was certain he was smirking.

After much discussion in the chamber, Odal won the vote.

Even though Alex and Jen left the balcony as soon as Ara Sumen’s pod rose from the dais, there were already crowds outside the part of the Assembly that served as his offices as they arrived. When Ara Sumen himself got there, he was immediately besieged. Liana and a pair of Defender-like machines, which Alex had dismissively described as ‘just robots’, chaperoned him and made sure none of the more demonstrative aliens managed to trap him in a corner.

The Moderator went into a side room, allowing small groups of Council members to be ushered in by one of the robots. Whatever he was telling them didn’t seem to reassure them, and quite a lot of the visitors ended up in impromptu discussion groups in the corridors after they emerged.

“Do I have to stay here?” moaned Jen, who was starting to feel really tired. She looked at her watch to discover it was already well past midnight on Earth. “It’s a school night,” she yawned.

“I’m afraid so,” said Alex apologetically. “I’ve got to talk to Ara Sumen about your safety. Unfortunately,” he glared at the procession of aliens passing back and forth outside the antechamber in which they were waiting, “everybody else wants to talk to him as well. He knows we’re waiting, but I think his first priority is finding out what Odal thinks he’s doing. There’s a lot of politicking going on as well. Minid-Hebesto’s not happy, for a start.”

Jen shifted in her seat. “Why don’t you think I’m safe?”

“Oh, no, don’t get me wrong – I don’t think you’re in *physical* danger,” Alex said. “But even before the Council vote there was a

risk of you ending up as part of somebody's power games, and now everyone knows you're here..." He breathed deeply. Jen wondered if he actually was taking air in, or it was just an act for her benefit. "My primary mission is still to protect you, above all other concerns. Even if some of the people out there would rather you became public property for the good of the Civilization, which from what I've heard seems to be a quite common opinion."

Jen shivered, visions of being put into some kind of weird alien zoo going through her mind. "Think I can manage without that, thank you very much."

"Don't worry, I won't let it happen. Oh, wait a second," said Alex, jumping to his feet. He went to the door of the antechamber, which he'd said had some kind of one-way forcefield stopping people looking in, and ducked through it. "Vess! Soomarvilan!" he called. For a moment Jen thought her translator had stopped working, until realising they were names. She briefly heard him talking to someone outside, then he re-entered the antechamber, a pair of aliens following him in.

The first was a collection of sinewy curves, resembling what Jen thought a spider monkey would look like if it were stretched on a rack to about five feet tall, had its fur dyed a mottled green and its head squashed so that its eyes were on each side of its mouth. And, she wasn't as surprised to discover as she would have been earlier in the day, had an extra arm and leg on its back, its shoulders and hips triangular with three joints instead of two. Some kind of toolbelt was wrapped around its body, pouches dangling from it.

The other alien also had six limbs, but they were all legs, nearly three metres long and supporting a rigid, drum-shaped body in a mottled lobster-pink with lots of bristles protruding from the top. Hanging beneath, almost caged in by the bony legs, was a leathery-skinned sack that ended a couple of feet above the ground in what was either a mouth, or the creature's bottom, or both. A row of three large, golden eyes looked languidly at her from the front of the body.

"Jen," Alex said, smiling, "I'd like you to meet some old friends of mine. This," he indicated the larger being, "is Motoni Vess Anstat, a Marshtrader from a planet called Kea."

"But you may call me Vess, if you prefer," said Vess in a slow, mournful voice. He raised one of its broad feet to reveal two rows of

three long, flat, flexible toes, which lazily opened out until they were fully extended.

~*Gesture of goodwill*, said a voice – not so much a voice as an *idea* – in Jen’s head. She realised that it was the node telling her what Vess’ action meant.

“Uh, hi there,” she stammered as she stood up, a bit rattled. The green alien scurried over to her on its tripod legs, a whirlwind of agitated movement, its coiled tail twitching.

“Peh!” it snapped, glaring back at Alex before examining Jen’s face far too closely for comfort. She shrank back. “Why I not introduced first? I more important than Marshtheader pest!” The creature’s breath had a strong, sweet smell, and from the speed its mouth was moving, its language had a lot more syllables per word than English.

“And this,” Alex continued, sounding amused, “is Soomarvilan Pik-Pik, a Hooska. From Hoosk.”

“Nicest planet in all galaxies!” Soomarvilan insisted, stretching his long neck to examine Jen’s face from different angles. “This human girl with Imprint? Fah! Tiny head! Ugly, ugly face!”

“What!” Jen gaped. “Hey! Listen, you little mutant—”

“The Hooska,” Alex cut in, smoothly interposing himself between Jen and Soomarvilan, “are a race that have absolutely *no* concept of tact whatsoever. They say exactly what’s on their mind at that moment.”

“‘Tact’?” Soomarvilan snorted, the long tufts of whiskers protruding from the back of his head bristling. “Fah! You say ‘tact’, we say lies! Deceit! You ugly too now, Defender. Not enough limbs, no fur, tiny fruit-shaped head. Stick with silver ball, much better.”

Vess took a few steps closer, a faint clattering noise coming from his joints. “I do apologise for my companion,” he said. “The Hooska can be most trying for the unprepared. Sometimes even for those with many centuries of experience, too.”

“You shut mouth,” snapped Soomarvilan, turning his upper body almost a hundred and eighty degrees at his incredibly thin waist. “Pest! You boring even for Marshtheader! You ponder too much, but never *do!*” His three arms snaked around his torso towards Jen, who flinched away. “So, future of Civilization depend on ugly girl? Strange times! Still, at least she parasite-free.”

“That was a compliment, believe it or not,” Alex told an increasingly annoyed Jen. “And also believe it or not, these two are good friends.”

“We both served as Arbiters before the loss of the Nexus,” Vess explained. “When circumstances forced the creation of the Council, we were selected as representatives.”

“Hooska better Arbiters than Marshtreaders,” Soomarvilan interrupted. “We make decision fast. Marshtreaders think and think! Stars formed in less time. So, how we get Imprint out of ugly girl?”

“Will you *stop* calling me that!” Jen demanded.

“Ugly human better?”

“*No!*”

“She means the ‘ugly’ part,” Alex said, politely but firmly. “Humans consider that a serious insult. On her world she’s considered very beautiful.”

Jen’s heartbeat stumbled before racing away. Alex thought she was *beautiful*?

“Can’t help!” said Soomarvilan, pulling back his lips to reveal sharp little yellow teeth. “Pink skin, yellow head-fur, bald ears – peh! Humans ugly, vain *and* deluded! Hope they at least clever. Not much going for them if not. What you think about Imprint then, Defender?”

“Call me Alex,” he said. “That’s really up to the Council now, isn’t it? Crolin Odal’s little speech seems to have put things on hold for the moment.”

“Odal? Idiot power-wanting pest,” muttered Soomarvilan. “Bad smell too.”

Vess bent his six knees, lowering his ‘face’ closer to Jen’s eye level. “The result of the vote came as a surprise to me.”

Alex stroked his chin, Jen noticing that he now even had the illusion of stubble from having been up all day. Manly stubble, at that, not the feeble bumfluff of the boys in her class. “Can Odal *really* have started negotiations with the Enemy? From what Ara Sumen told me, he’s more about talk than action.”

Soomarvilan coiled up his arms huffily. “At least you get to talk to Moderator. We apparently not important enough. Him,” he looked at Vess, “understandable, but I? Feh!”

One of the robots floated into the room, catching everyone's attention. "Defender," it said, "the Moderator wishes to speak with you and your companion."

"See? See!" spluttered Soomarvilan.

Alex held out a hand, showing Jen towards the doorway. "Time to go, Jen. Hopefully I'll see you both again soon."

Vess slowly blinked his eyes, holding up a foot and making another signal with his toes. ~*Gesture of good fortune and safe journey*, the implant told her.

"Thanks," she said.

"Ai!" called Soomarvilan. "Strong branches, not-that-ugly-for-human girl!"

"Fine, whatever! Freak," she added under her voice. The crowd of aliens in the corridor outside seemed to have thinned, but there were still a lot of people standing (or squatting, or floating, or curled up like big snakes) around talking. Some of them watched her curiously as she and Alex passed. "What does he mean by 'strong branches'?"

"The Hooska live in trees," Alex told her, as if that explained everything.

"Ah." Jen checked her watch again. "How long's Ara Sumen going to keep us, do you reckon?"

"No idea. Why?"

"Because I really need to go to the loo."

Alex looked almost as pained as she felt. "Now?" Jen nodded. "Hmm... okay." He spoke to the hovering robot. "Tell the Moderator that we'll be with him shortly, and send my apologies for the delay."

"At once, Defender," the robot said, gliding away. Alex guided Jen into a large room, full of tall, spindly plants stretching up in defiance of gravity towards the balcony running around it. The atmosphere in the room, its occupants seated in small groups and talking in low, important tones, made her think of some kind of old men's smoking club. In one of the groups, off to one side, she could see Malitar, or another member of its hideous species. It looked up and saw her. She shivered and directed her gaze elsewhere, finding something much prettier in the shape of a being suspended inside a softly glowing purple field, looking for all the world like a plasma globe.

“That’s a Hysshien,” Alex said, noticing what had caught her eye. “A non-corporeal intelligence.”

“A what now?”

“An energy being. Very rare. Not great at making things, but very good at thinking *how* to make them. They tend to think of everything in mathematical terms, though, so they’re not great conversationalists.”

“It’s very nice,” Jen said. “Sort of relaxing to watch. Like a lava lamp.”

Alex led her through a broad archway to a door at the end. “I’ve already given the bathroom your, er, requirements. Just go into one of the cubicles inside and it’ll reconfigure to what you need.”

Jen stepped up to the door, which dissolved to let her through, and stopped as she realised Alex was right behind her. “Um... what are you doing?”

“Coming with you,” Alex said, puzzled.

Jen went red. “No you’re bloody not! You’re not going to stand there while I pee!”

“I won’t look.”

“That’s not the point! Look, just wait out in the hall, I’ll only be a couple of minutes.”

“I’d rather stay—”

“Go on! I’m bursting!” she exaggerated.

Reluctantly Alex stepped back, the door flowing shut in front of him. “If you need any help, just—”

“Help with *what*?” Jen said to herself as he was cut off. “I know how to use a toilet.” She looked around the room to find that maybe she didn’t, at least not on this planet. The elongated oval room she found herself in had a dozen portals marked around its walls. Some of them had pulsing coloured lights, running through the whole spectrum, in the markings. Now, did that mean they were occupied, or empty?

If she were some weird alien toilet designer, how would *she* make the lights work? She decided that ‘lights on’ probably meant occupied, and cautiously walked to one of the dark portals. To her relief, it opened to reveal an empty cubicle. It struck her that this was the first piece of architecture she’d seen that involved right-angles

since arriving on Inar. Apparently toilets were functional wherever you were in the universe.

She stepped into the room, the door sealing behind her with a soft sigh. Now what? All she could see in the room was a dull metal cylinder on the floor. She was about to ask the room what she was supposed to do when the cylinder suddenly morphed, expanding into another shape. She almost laughed out loud at the sight. Apart from its silvery colour, the object in front of her was a perfectly ordinary toilet bowl. A similarly reflective washbasin extended from one wall. Only one thing missing...

When a roll of toilet paper materialised, she actually *did* laugh out loud.

It took more than the promised couple of minutes before Jen left the room. She'd taken the opportunity – after asking the bathroom for a mirror – to put on a bit of makeup from the kit in one of the pockets of her bag. It might be late and she'd have to take it off again soon anyway, but at least she didn't look completely knackered any more.

She stepped up to the door, which parted for her.

Malitar was on the other side, blocking her way.

She gasped and jumped back inside. Malitar lunged in with her, lowering its huge head toward hers as it backed her against a wall, the creature's sheer bulk almost filling the room. Its multiple eyes fixed on her, cold, empty black orbs that revealed nothing about its thoughts, awakening some deep primal terror in her.

"Hello... *child*," it said. Freed from the flat, sexless voice of her old translator, Malitar sounded like its words were bubbling up through tar. She tried to reply, to say something sarcastic to show she wasn't frightened, but her jaw had clenched shut with sudden fear. "Do you remember me?"

"Yes," she barely managed to force out.

"Of course you do," it hissed. "And I remember you. And your insult. I may follow the codes of the Civilization here, but in my home cluster... I have killed others for less."

The spider fangs were just inches from Jen's face, slowly opening and closing independently of Malitar's words, hints of hideous

obsidian thorns sticking through the pulsing wet flesh inside its mouth. "I'm sorry," she said, voice quavering. "I'm sorry..."

"Your apologies are worthless," it said in a quiet, chilling voice. "As is your *life*." Jen struggled to stop herself from crying. "But... you carry the Nexus Imprint. You hold the total knowledge of all who have lived. A very valuable prize." It placed a large hand on each of her shoulders. In the corner of her eye Jen saw a faint flicker of light where it touched her, but the weight of its hands wasn't reduced in the least by the forcefield surrounding them. She couldn't stop shaking, panic rising. "How should it be extracted, I wonder? Technology, machines, perhaps?" The fangs suddenly opened wide, thick black saliva dripping off and splattering against the forcefield like dirty raindrops before fading away to nothing. "Or the way of *my* people? Gaining the knowledge and memories of our ancestors and enemies by devouring their brains?"

"Please... please don't hurt me," Jen managed to whimper, feeling tears running down her cheeks. She felt as though she might collapse at any moment.

"Leave her or *die*," Alex's voice boomed.

Malitar raised its hands, its head turning sharply to look behind. Jen gasped in relief, slumping onto the floor. The alien's bulk was blocking most of her view, but she caught glimpses of Alex as it struggled to bring itself around in the confined space. "You threaten *me*?" it roared, skin turning black. "Know your place, machine! I am Malitar of High Tekumsen, thrice-born progeny of the Gesek union, and member of the Civilization Prime Council!"

"You'll be a broken corpse if you don't move away from her right now." Alex's voice was icily calm. "You know what my orders are. They're still in effect. I'd kill Ara Sumen himself if he threatened the Imprint's safety."

Malitar's body tensed, as though it was about to attack Alex, then relaxed. "Of course, Defender," it said, voice dropping to a glutinous purr. "There was no harmful intent."

"He said he was going to eat my *brain!*" Jen wailed.

"I'd call that a threat," said Alex, almost casually. Jen couldn't see what was going on, but the lighting in the room changed, a red cast appearing on the walls. Malitar suddenly moved backwards, Jen squealing in fright as one of its large feet almost stepped on her legs,

only to stop just above her as if hitting an invisible wall. Another forcefield, one of Alex's.

"No need to over-react, Defender," said Malitar, the black patches on its skin changing to a sickly green tinge. After expressing nothing but anger and arrogance, the worry in its voice was clear. "I was only seeking an apology for the insult to my honour. There really was no harmful intent."

"Leave now," said Alex, voice cold. He backed away, letting Malitar leave the room with surprising speed. As Alex came back into view, Jen caught a glimpse of his sphere disappearing back inside his chest. The red light, whatever had caused it, was gone.

He quickly walked up to her and offered a hand. Jen gazed up at him for a long moment, then took it. She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting, but it felt solid, warm, real. It was the first time that she'd ever touched him. He helped her to her feet. "Are you all right?"

Instead of an answer she hugged him tightly, pushing her face against his chest.

"I take it that's a yes," he said softly. After a moment of hesitation, he put a reassuring arm around her.

"Oh God, oh God," Jen sobbed, "thank you! I was so scared..."

"Malitar's race are like the Hooska," said Alex, "only instead of constantly insulting people, they constantly threaten them. Sometimes they mean it..."

"Yeah, but you stopped him! It." Jen looked up at his face, hoping she hadn't made a complete mess of her makeup. She wiped her cheeks and sniffed, smiling at her rescuer.

"It was probably just trying to frighten you because you insulted it," Alex assured her. "I doubt it really meant to hurt you. Not even Malitar would be stupid enough to risk the safety of the Nexus Imprint over that. But I couldn't take that chance. Protecting the Imprint is my top priority, even if it means threatening a member of the Prime Council."

Jen's face fell. "What?"

"I said, protecting the Imprint is my top priority, even if—"

She let go of him and took a step back, expressionless. "Yeah, that's what I thought you said."

"Okay," said Alex, confused. "Do you feel up to seeing Ara Sumen now?"

Jen wiped her nose. “Yeah, sure, fine, whatever,” she said. “Let’s go.” She pushed past him and walked out, trying to stop herself from crying for the second time in a few minutes, but for very different reasons.

## 6: Clo-Hir

If there was one thing Alex had learned from sixteen years of observing humans, it was that they were emotionally unpredictable.

There was nothing unusual about that. Almost all intelligent beings – organic, technological, other – had emotional responses of some kind. There were many long-standing theories that emotions were actually a necessary part of developing intelligence, as without them it was impossible to devise goals outside of the most basic survival instincts. *Needs* were programmed in; *wants* were something individuals created for themselves.

But humans were just so... *changeable*. They weren't the worst around (dealing with a race as exaggeratedly unstable as the Nerremon, who could flip between three or four emotional extremes in the course of a single sentence, was enough to tax even an Eternal's patience), but they could certainly be hard to read at times.

Like now. One moment Jen had been full of relief that he'd come and rescued her from Malitar; the next she'd closed down completely and gone into what he could only describe as a sulk. She'd spent the entire meeting with Ara Sumen sitting with her arms folded and a sour expression, barely saying anything even when asked a question directly. Her mood hadn't changed in the flyer on the way back to her quarters, and when they'd arrived, Jen had gone straight into her bedroom without a word.

"Jen?" he asked, standing at the door.

"Go away."

That wasn't a good sign. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Can I come in?"

"No. Leave me alone."

He thought for a moment, pursing his lips in a piece of human mimicry so ingrained it had practically become unconscious, then – after checking with the house that Jen wasn't in the middle of getting undressed, doubting that her mood would improve if he interrupted – went into the bedroom.

Jen was perched on one side of the bed, facing the window. She briefly glanced in his direction as he entered, then pointedly turned away again.

“Jen? Can I talk to you?”

“No.”

He squatted down in front of her. She drew her legs in defensively and found something fascinating to stare at on the bed, away from him. “Jen, what’s the matter?”

After a long pause, still not looking at him, she said, “So you’re just protecting the Imprint, then?”

“Well, yes – it’s why I was sent out on the mission in the first place. Why?”

“What, so I don’t matter at all?” Her voice was clipped and sullen. “I’m just carrying this thing around for you like a rucksack with legs?”

So *that* was what was bothering her. “No, of course not,” he said. “Yes, I *am* protecting the Imprint, but you’re just as important to me too.”

Jen didn’t turn her head, but at least she was actually looking at him now, albeit from the corner of her eye.

“The Imprint’s not something you’re just carrying,” he continued, “it’s a *part* of you. It’s not that I’m looking after you just because you happen to have the Imprint. I’m looking after you because... because you’re probably the single most important person in the Civilization right now. There are trillions of people across thirty-two galaxies whose future depends on you.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Trillions?”

“Yes.”

Jen slowly faced him again. She’d stopped scowling, which was a promising sign. “That’s a lot of people.”

“Mm-hmm,” Alex nodded.

“And they all depend on me?”

“Yup.”

“Wow.” She smiled for the first time in a while. “I always thought I was a bit special – and not in the mongy way! I get to decide the fate of the galaxy! Can’t wait to put *that* in my blog.” She jumped off the bed and walked over to the window, looking out at the clear night sky. A glittering swath of stars cut across it, far brighter and more colourful than anything visible from Earth. “Maybe I can be Space Princess Jen or something. This is cool! I always knew I had some

kind of special destiny! So is that why you picked me to carry the Imprint?"

"No, not really," said Alex, looking up at the impressive sight of the Satennium Arm. "Anybody would have done. I'd already decided to transfer the Imprint onto a human when I arrived, and I picked a relatively peaceful country with a stable government and low mortality rate – I chose England because it seemed more interesting than Belgium. Then I just looked for a random newborn baby, and... Jen?"

She was staring at him, mouth agape. "I'm *random*?"

That didn't sound good. "No, of course not...?"

"*Random*?" she yelled, her voice heading up towards the ultrasonic range. "I can't believe – I – *Random*?"

"I meant," he hurriedly backtracked, "that out of a select group of candidates, I picked you as *clearly* the best choice for the Imprint..."

Jen ignored him. "Oh my God! Here I was thinking that, you know, maybe I was here on some alien planet meeting all these weirdos and monsters because at least there was something special and different about me and you were looking after me because of that, but no! You just picked me off the *street*!"

"A hospital ward, actually, but—"

"Haah!" She stalked across the room to the door, which obediently flowed open. "God! I can't believe you said that! Bloody get out! Go on!"

"Jen, I—"

"Get *ouuuuut*!"

She jabbed her pointing hand at the door. Alex reluctantly backed through it. "Jen, I—"

"Close!" she demanded. The door shrank shut, Alex hunching down to keep sight of Jen through the opening for as long as possible.

"Can't we talk ab—" It shut with a faint *fump*, cutting him off.

Hunched over with his nose just a few centimetres from the door, Alex realised he probably looked like a complete idiot to the house. Not that it would say anything, but still...

He walked away from the door and went to a window, looking out at the dark view beyond.

Emotionally unpredictable, all right. For all the time he'd spent observing Jen over the past sixteen years, it hadn't really prepared him for actually dealing with her face-to-face. Brief periods were one thing, but over the course of days... He obviously still had a lot to learn.

Jen threw herself on the bed. God! Even though she knew she was acting childish, she still felt like her heart had been ripped out and trodden on. *Stamped on!* Alex didn't really feel anything for her at all! He was just a machine, doing a job. He would have behaved in exactly the same way if he'd put the Imprint on another person, or a tree, or a cow. And she'd had a crush on him, a stupid schoolgirl infatuation that not only could he not return, but he didn't even care about!

That was what hurt, most of all. She curled up on the bed and buried her face in one of the pillows, feeling utterly foolish and alone.

Alex was still pondering how to handle Jen when the house spoke. "Defender, there is a call for you from Moderator Ara Sumen Tarker."

He wondered what the Moderator might want that hadn't been covered in their earlier meeting. "Put him through."

A hologram of Ara Sumen appeared in the room's centre. "Moderator," Alex said.

"Defender," replied the hologram. "I need to speak with you immediately concerning Crolin Odal. It is extremely urgent."

"Of course."

"In person."

Alex shifted uncomfortably. "I don't think Jen will be willing to travel at this time of night."

"Leave her there," the hologram insisted.

"I'd prefer to remain with her..."

"This won't take long. I'll send Liana over once she's finished her current task."

"I would feel more comfortable if I could wait here until she arrived..."

"Immediately, Defender."

“All right,” said Alex, reluctantly. The hologram blinked out. He wondered why Ara Sumen hadn’t contacted him directly via his own comm systems, and checked the origin of the message with the house. It was in order. “House?”

“Yes, Defender?”

“Enter secure mode, please. Deny access to everyone except myself or Defender Liana until I return. Inform me immediately via comm if anyone else attempts to gain access.”

“Secure mode active. External entrances now closed. Balcony access locked off.”

Alex went to Jen’s bedroom door. “Jen? Listen, I have to go for a little while to talk to Ara Sumen. Liana’s on her way. If you need anything, ask the house.” Silence. “Jen?”

“Whatever,” came the faint, dismissive reply.

“Okay.” At least she was talking to him. “I’ll be back soon.” No response. Oh well. He went to the nearest window onto the balcony, stopping abruptly as he realised it wasn’t going to open for him.

“House?”

“Yes, Defender?”

“You can let *me* use the balconies.”

“Understood.” The window dissolved. He stepped through, then dismissed his human projection. The silver sphere took off into the night.

Depression quickly turned to tedium. Jen rolled over on the bed, blowing air out between her lips in noisy puffs. She wondered when Alex would be back.

Not that she wanted to talk to him! But still...

She stared up at the ceiling, bored. “House?”

“Yes, Jen?”

“Do you have a TV?”

“I do not know that term.”

“A television. A, er...” She tried to think of some stupid sci-fi description that the house would understand. “A, er, two-dimensional visual... entertainment... thingie. Something I can watch.”

“Understood. You have full access to the Inar network.” A floating black rectangle bounded by a glowing blue frame appeared at the foot of the bed. “What do you wish to view?”

“I dunno! Something funny.”

“Humour is a relative concept,” said the house. “I do not know the human definition.”

Jen sat up. “Just pick something yourself.”

“I have no sense of humour with which to make a selection.”

She laughed. “Just like my Dad. Okay, er... show me whatever the most popular comedy on the planet is.”

The screen came to life. “It is called ‘White Connection’,” the house informed her. Jen peered at the screen. Four aliens of the same species, with elongated green heads and wide yellow eyes, were sitting in a row behind a long desk that seemed to be made from carved stone. They glanced back and forth at each other, but no one said anything. Eventually, one of them took a red cube out from under the desk and placed it carefully in front of him. There was a long silence, then one of the other aliens closed his eyes in apparent exasperation.

“Er, house?” she said. “I asked for a comedy. *Com-e-dy*.”

“This is the most popular comedy on the planet, as you requested.” She might have been imagining it, but the house sounded a touch snide.

“I don’t get it.”

“I am afraid I cannot help. I have no sense of humour to help you interpret it.”

“Well, thanks a lot.” The screen froze, glitched briefly, then came back to life, showing the same aliens apparently doing the same thing again. “How about you make me a remote control so I can zap through to something worth watching?”

“Defender Alex has returned,” the house said, in a more urgent tone. “He says he needs to speak with you immediately.”

“That was quick.” It only seemed a like a few minutes since she’d frozen him out. “Tell him I’m busy watching some great...” She looked at the screen again. “...red cube comedy.”

“He says it is important,” the house insisted.

“Okay, *okay*.” She forced herself off the bed and padded to the door. “Open.” Alex was waiting in the middle of the room beyond. “What?”

“We need to leave,” said Alex.

“How come?” She took a step forward, curious.

He started walking towards her. “The Moderator received new information. You’re in danger as long as you’re on Inar.” Jen started feeling on edge, but not just because of what Alex was saying. There was something not quite right. “We need to leave, now.”

The more he spoke, the more unsettled she felt. “Where are we going to go?”

“I’ve arranged for a place of safety. We need to leave.”

She realised what was wrong.

His mouth was out of sync with his words. Alex wasn’t talking in English – her implant was translating it for her.

«Monsieur, ce est mon nom?» she asked in half-remembered French as he approached. He ignored her. She ducked back into the bedroom. “House, close and lock this door!”

The door started to shrink. She heard Alex – *not* Alex – say, “House, open the door.” The hole expanded again.

“Close the door!”

“Defender Alex has command priority,” the house told her.

“That’s not Alex!” Jen ran to the balcony window, barely stopping herself from crashing into it when she realised it wasn’t going to open. “Open the window!”

“This residence is in secure mode.”

“Then unsecure it!” She whirled to see not-Alex standing at the door, watching her silently.

“Defender Alex has command priority.”

Jen backed away along the window, her eyes fixed on the intruder at the door. She bumped into the wall, and gasped. She was cornered. The bedroom had no other exit.

“We need to leave,” said not-Alex, stepping forward. Jen darted towards the bed, then stopped. There was no way she could get round him to the door. He reached the foot of the bed—

“House, lower bedroom gravity to a tenth!” she ordered. There was a disconcerting falling sensation in her stomach as the gravity was reduced, and she kicked herself hard off the ground, sailing clean over not-Alex’s head. He turned, twisting unnaturally at the waist, and grabbed for her, but too late. She landed almost exactly in the centre of the doorway and started running.

“House, raise gravity in my bedroom to maximum!” she yelled as she ran through the next room, gravity returning to normal at the

threshold of the bedroom. She heard a thud and an odd grunt of pain behind her.

“House! Standard gravity and lock out all functions!” not-Alex shouted, his voice distorted, as Jen ran through the room. She could hear the fake Alex issuing more orders. She raced around the corner—

And stopped, jumping back in shock as she almost ran into a wall where a room had been before.

“Move this wall!” she yelled.

“Structural functions locked out,” the house said placidly.

Not-Alex had left the bedroom and was striding purposefully toward her, face set.

She looked around desperately, and tried to run back past the impostor.

Not-Alex didn't even break his stride, lashing out with impossible speed, his arm stretching as he struck at Jen. Coloured lights flared in her vision as he hit the side of her head, knocking her hard against the wall. She crashed to the floor.

The room was spinning. She painfully looked up as not-Alex stood over her. His arm was too long, and cracked. He grabbed her, pulling her roughly to her feet. She felt sick. Blood dripped from her nose.

He didn't feel right. Cold, almost damp. And his eyes weren't right, either. They looked painted on, like a dummy's. He stared lifelessly into her face.

She headbutted him.

It didn't hurt. Much. Instead, she felt something give with the impact. She pulled her head back, and let out an involuntary gasp. His face had caved in, cracked like an eggshell. A fractured crater the size of Jen's forehead surrounded the flattened remains of his nose, which was spread out like soft clay.

The impostor grabbed her painfully tightly around her waist and dragged her to the nearest window. His shirt collar was wrong. There was no gap between it and his neck. It blended into his skin as though he were a plastic toy.

The window opened, the sudden rush of cold air jolting Jen back to full awareness as not-Alex hauled her onto the balcony. “Lemme go!” she yelled, struggling and slapping at his chest and face with her

one free arm. Each blow felt like she was hitting a bag of raw mince.  
“What are you—”

She realised what he was doing, but couldn't believe it, even as he climbed over the wall of the balcony and stepped off into fifteen storeys of thin air.

“The Moderator will see you now,” said the robot, leading Alex into one of Ara Sumen's private chambers. The Moderator was standing in the centre of a circle of fat, strong-smelling candles on slender stands, wearing what Alex recognised as a himaso gown, apparently interrupted mid-session. Ara Sumen had supposedly been quite proficient at the martial art in his youth. He nodded in greeting.

“If it were anyone but you, I wouldn't have seen you at this time of night,” Ara Sumen said, sounding tired. “What can I do for you, Defender?”

Alex was instantly on alert. “You summoned me here.”

Ara Sumen looked confused. “No, I—”

The quickest route out of the house was through the ceiling. Alex switched off his projected body, powered up one of his plasma weapons, blew a hole in the roof, generated a grav field to throw the debris safely clear and shot through the hole, accelerating to supersonic speed before Ara Sumen had even managed to get out his next syllable.

Jen screamed as they fell, but the rushing wind almost drowned it out.

Not-Alex squirmed and shifted against her, something moving past her legs. She could see the trees in the starlight, dots of light on the paths running through them, getting closer with every second—

They hit.

A feeling of pain, every part of her body jarred—

Jen blinked. Her neck and back hurt, and apart from a slight ache she couldn't feel her left arm. But she was alive. How had...

Her attacker dropped her on the ground. She looked up at him, and saw that his entire body from the chest down had changed, transformed into long rope-like skeins of a glistening, dirty orange substance. The skeins were spread out in a coiled mass on the ground around him, having absorbed most of the impact of their fall. As she

watched, they started to contract, pulling back into his body, which slowly rose up from the path.

Jen tried to stand up, but felt too dizzy and collapsed onto her hands and knees. One of the gelatinous skeins slid past beneath her eyes, pieces of different colours stuck to it like a broken shell. She struggled to look round. Not-Alex had now reformed into human shape, but damaged like a smashed vase reassembled by a child. His skin and clothes were full of cracks, some of the pieces misaligned, misplaced or even missing altogether. The gaps were filled with patches of dark, wet orange.

“What are you?” she mumbled. The fractured face stared impassively down at her as the last few slithering ropes were drawn into his legs and feet. He reached down and grabbed her wrist, yanking her sharply to her feet.

Jen looked around desperately as the impostor started to drag her down one of the paths running through the trees. The place had been busy earlier in the day – there had to be *somebody* around! But there was no sign of anyone in the starlit darkness. She tried to break free, kicking at the creature’s legs. Her feet sank wetly into its shins.

It responded by seizing her other wrist, then squeezing them both so hard that she screamed in pain, terrified the bones were going to break. “You come with me willingly,” the creature growled, no longer bothering to mimic Alex’s voice, “or I break your limbs and drag you.”

She stopped struggling. It regarded her for a moment, one of its eyes split in two right down the middle by a crack in its face, then released one of her wrists and led her off again.

*Where was the real Alex?* she thought through her tears. He was supposed to be protecting her!

The path leading to the lake was lit by glowing, floating spheres the size of footballs. Further down the winding trail she could make out the circular shape of a parked flyer—

And another person!

She took a deep breath, then flung herself to one side as hard as she could, trying to jerk her arm out of the creature’s grasp. It made a startled noise as she just barely slipped free of its cold hand and started to sprint up the path.

“Help me!” she yelled. The person ahead looked up in surprise. “Help!”

She could hear thudding footsteps behind her getting closer, but didn't dare look back—

Her kidnapper grabbed her round the neck, choking her. Jen stumbled and fell. The creature almost followed her down, managing to break its fall with one arm, which rippled as it hit the ground. It released its grip around her throat and grabbed her again, pulling her to her feet.

The other person had broken into a trot. “What's going on?” he asked in a reedy, concerned voice.

“Help me!” Jen managed to gasp. The creature tightened its hold around her chest, squeezing the breath from her lungs.

“I'm sorry, I don't underst...” the person said, drawing to a stop. Through her pain, Jen saw a narrow-shouldered humanoid dressed in a long coat, a single large dark eye set high on his hairless head. The eye looked past her, at the thing holding her. He reached into his coat. “I'm... going to call—”

Her attacker's arm flashed out, elongating, crossing the metres between them in a fraction of a second and piercing the alien's eye. His entire body spasmed, arms dropping limply to his sides. The shapechanger held him for a moment, then just as quickly drew its arm back. The body slumped nervelessly to the ground. Jen watched in horror, gasping for air.

“I make myself clear,” whispered the creature into her ear. “I given orders that you not be killed before I deliver you. But I damage you as much as I like.”

The pressure on her chest disappeared as it released her. Jen took in a huge, hoarse breath as her captor spun her around and regained its tight grip on her right wrist. Before she had a chance to realise what was happening, it had taken hold of her little finger with its other hand.

“I demonstrate,” said the shapechanger. It effortlessly snapped her finger.

Jen screamed.

She thrashed and flailed, trying to get free, to run, to do anything that might take away the jagged, searing pain in her hand. But the shapechanger's grip was too tight.

“I know nothing about your species,” it said, the corrupted face blurred by Jen’s tears, “but I *do* know about pain.”

“Then feel some,” said Alex’s voice from somewhere above.

There was a noise like distant thunder, and a flashing line of multicoloured light severed the creature’s hand at the wrist. Jen fell backwards, but didn’t hit the ground.

The shapechanger *exploded*, a gridwork of light burning through its body, carving it apart. Pieces rained wetly onto the path, the edges perfectly flat where the grid had cut it. Alex’s sphere descended, his familiar human form appearing around it.

“Alex!” Jen cried. He hurried over to her, the field gently lowering her to the path.

“You’re hurt!” he said, taking her injured hand.

“Broke my...” she managed to say through gritted teeth. Her finger was bent back almost at a right angle, an ugly, already darkening bulge in the skin below the first joint. The mere sight of it made the burning pain even worse. She moaned.

“Hold on,” Alex told her. Suddenly, the pain was gone.

“How did you...?”

He gave her a reassuring look. “I’m using a low-level inductor field to suppress your pain response. Hold still.” He reached carefully for her broken finger, making her wince. “You might want to look away.”

“Okay,” said Jen, watching from the corner of her almost-closed eye. Alex delicately moved the finger to a more normal angle, then pressed the break between his thumb and two forefingers. Jen felt an odd tingling, warm sensation where he was holding it. It lasted for a few seconds, then faded.

“Okay,” Alex said, letting go of her finger, but still cradling her hand in his. “Try moving it.”

Jen winced as she reluctantly curled her fingers, expecting to feel the pain return... but there was none. She clenched her fist experimentally. Still no pain. Apart from the discoloured skin, it was as if nothing had ever happened to her finger. She looked up at Alex in amazement.

“Are you hurt anywhere else?” he asked, looking over her with concern. From somewhere – or nowhere – he produced a tissue and

gently dabbed at her upper lip. Jen had completely forgotten that her nose was bleeding.

“My neck hurts... hurt.” That pain had gone too.

“Whiplash,” Alex observed. Jen glanced over at the remains of the shapeshifter. A few of the pieces were twitching.

“Maybe I should sue...” she said, feeling as weak as the joke.

“I’ll fix you up. What happened?”

“We jumped off the balcony,” said Jen, suddenly realising that she couldn’t quite believe what had just happened to her. “Oh my God! We jumped off the balcony!” She started to shake uncontrollably, clutching at Alex for support. He moved closer, putting his arms around her.

“What happened here?” said a female voice. Liana. Her sphere descended from the trees, surveying the scene.

“A shapeshifter,” Alex said, “a Clo-Hir.”

“A Clo-Hir, huh,” said Jen, eyes closed, her face resting against Alex’s chest. Even though she knew his body was some kind of projection, it *felt* real. She could feel the vibrations in his chest as he spoke, the texture of his shirt, the heat of his body through it... he even *smelled* like a man. “You saved me.”

“I should never have left,” Alex said ruefully.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Jen assured him, putting a hand on his chest. “Alex, you still came and rescued me.” She opened her eyes and looked up into his as she hugged him. “Thank you.”

Alex looked back awkwardly for a moment, then smiled. “I won’t leave you again, I promise.”

Jen snuggled back against him, feeling safe.

## 7: Paths Of The Eternals

If anything, Ara Sumen seemed more angry about the damage to his house than the death of an innocent bystander. Though in fairness, thought Alex, this was probably at least partly down to the fact that the supersonic shockwave he'd left in his wake had blown the Moderator off his bare feet and left him dazed and deafened until Liana came to his assistance.

There were other things making Ara Sumen angry, too.

"A fake image of you was used to decoy me away from Jen, but it had a perfect authentication code," explained Alex. "The house was interfered with to accept an impostor as myself. Somebody hired a Clo-Hir with express instructions to kidnap Jen. The Clo-Hir knew exactly where Jen was, and what I looked like to imitate me." Even though he now had all his numerous sensors active, he still looked over at Jen to see that she was okay. She was, although she'd curled up in her chair and fallen asleep. Considerately, Ara Sumen had turned the lights in the room down. "The only people with *all* of that information are on the Council. Specifically, the Prime Council."

Ara Sumen's eyes widened. "You're accusing a member of the Prime Council of being an accessory to murder and attempted kidnapping?" he said, slowly and carefully, as if checking each word coming out of his mouth.

"I'm not accusing anyone of anything," Alex corrected. "Yet. I'm just stating the facts. *Somebody* believes that their interests would be best served if Jen and the Imprint were... removed." The unspoken name hung in the air between them as they exchanged a look.

The Moderator shook his head and slumped into a chair. "As days go, this one's been eventful. You bring back the Nexus Imprint, Crolin Odal only escapes censure or worse by the tiniest margin, and now this." He rubbed his eyes. "And I used to think being an *Arbiter* was stressful."

"So you're not going to take action against Odal?" asked Alex, surprised. "Technically, he committed treason."

"*May* have," Ara Sumen corrected, "*may* have. I've yet to see any proof that he's even been able to communicate with the Enemy, but apparently the General Council's desire to see the Nexus restored is so great that they don't require any." He grunted in annoyance. "But

you're right – and if not for the Council vote, I would probably have had him arrested already. As it is, he convinced me – *barely!* – that his 'peace plan' through his mysterious third party has enough of a chance of success to be worth pursuing. Especially now that he's broadcast it across the Civilization."

"The Council leaked information on a closed session?"

"Oh, please," snorted Ara Sumen, the air pouches behind his jaw puffing out, "even for closed sessions of the General Council, we might as well invite the biggest gossip-mongers in the Civilization to come and stand next to me on the dais. Twenty thousand little people, all of them wanting their chance to feel a bit bigger by controlling information..." The pouches deflated, Ara Sumen seeming to do the same. "The sooner the Nexus is restored, the sooner this lunacy will be behind us."

Alex walked over to Jen. Her brain-state showed that she was dreaming. After the day she'd had, he hoped it wasn't a nightmare. Apparently not; she was smiling a little. "So what are you going to do about Odal?"

Ara Sumen stood up. "There's not much I can do, really. Now he's won the vote, any attempt to rein him in will result in an outcry." He walked slowly to a window, looking out towards the distant lights of Hirest's highest towers. "If he succeeds, then all well and good for the Civilization. If he fails – or if he's being *played* by this third party... I just have to hope the consequences will be limited to him."

Alex joined him. The lights in the room were low enough to see the great glow of the galactic core rising above the horizon even on visible wavelengths; adding the other parts of the electromagnetic spectrum made for a truly spectacular sight. "About restoring the Nexus... has there been any progress?"

"Give me time," said Ara Sumen. "I've set things in motion. A team will be sent – as secretly as possible," he added, with a faint smile, "to the Source in the hope of retrieving the information we need to recover the Imprint. I've also assigned an AI to collate any other data we have. But there's no way of knowing how long it will take."

"I don't think it's safe to keep Jen here," Alex told him. They both looked round at the sleeping girl.

“Sad to say, I agree. I can’t imagine *why* anyone would want to threaten her life, but...” The Moderator stared out of the window again.

“Jen said the Clo-Hir had been ordered to deliver her alive,” Alex pointed out. Ara Sumen nodded.

“*Now*, an understandable motive. Control of information... whoever has the Imprint has quite a powerful bargaining tool with the Civilization, wouldn’t you say?”

“It makes more sense than just wanting to kill her and destroy the Imprint.” Alex considered the facts. “It also suggests that whoever the Clo-Hir was working for is here on Inar, or one of the nearby worlds. There hasn’t been time for knowledge of Jen’s arrival to spread too far.”

“Wonderful, wonderful,” Ara Sumen said sarcastically. “The Enemy is still lurking around, the Civilization is on the verge of falling apart under its own sheer size, the Frek and the Oiiduci are starting to push at the boundaries of their containment zones, the Corporate and the Jaitaj have moved back to an expansionist stance, and now we have conspiracies and power-plays within the Council. What a time to be in charge of everything.” He turned his back on the distant stars. “I want you to continue your assignment with the same parameters. Whatever Malitar might say.”

“Ah. He told you about our encounter, then?”

Ara Sumen smiled, quite broadly. “He had a few words. Most of them obscene. But given the circumstances, I think that your original orders should remain standing. Protecting the Imprint—”

“And Jen.”

“—and Jen is your highest priority, superseding all other considerations. You were given that authority before, and I’m now extending it under my personal authority as Moderator. Do whatever you have to ensure its... *her* safety.”

“Understood.”

“Though,” Ara Sumen smiled again, though rather less broadly than before, “I’d prefer it if you didn’t find it necessary to kill me in the process.”

“*Ah*. Malitar told you about that too?”

“Repeatedly.”

“I’ll try to avoid it.” Alex turned and went over to Jen. “The first thing I need to do is get Jen off Inar.”

“Probably the best move, considering the circumstances. But where will you go that’s safe?”

Alex grinned. “I know someone I can trust...”

“Why you have to bring Marshtheader pest?” Soomarvilan Pik-Pik sulked as Alex’s field-ship left Inar. “Great big lump useless in trees! And boring.”

Motoni Vess Anstat blinked his three eyes in sequence. “I believe the Defender wished to ensure that his companion was not driven to distraction by the hyperactive antics and tactless chatter of an entire family of Hooska.”

“Hey! Hey! That *my* family! Even though some of them worthless droppings. Pest! You shut up or I punch you in eyes!”

Wondering if he’d made the right decision, Alex squared his shoulders, watching the starfield roll as he fixed a course for Hoosk, then took himself and his passengers into hyperspace. Just to be on the safe side, he increased the strength of the sound-dampening field around the room he’d created for Jen.

This was the second day in a row where she’d woken up on a spaceship. Jen wondered if she’d ever get used to it.

She washed, got dressed (her school uniform had been cleaned again, though she was getting fed up of having to wear it – and she certainly wasn’t going to put on her tie today!) and left her bedroom. The now-familiar silver dome was waiting for her, but with some additions, most obviously a large twisted climbing frame around which the skinny green alien was flinging himself, his six limbs – and prehensile tail – all working in a dizzying gymnastic display.

Alex was standing watching the stars rush past. She stood next to him. “Morning.”

“Hi, Jen,” he said, smiling.

She smiled back coyly. “How’re you today?”

“Fine, thanks.” He gestured at the view ahead. “We’ll be arriving at Hoosk in about an hour.”

“Right.” She tried to remember what Hoosk was, and why they were going there. Alex had probably explained it the night before, but it hadn’t stuck. “Er... where?”

“My home!” shouted the green alien, stopping his display to poke his head above the top of the frame like a meerkat. “Great planet. Trees, proper fungus growing everywhere, real weather. Lots of rain! You like it, good-looking-for-human girl.”

“Ah *hah*.” She leaned closer to Alex. “And we’re going there *because...?*”

“It’s safer,” Alex reassured her. “for the moment, anyway. We can trust Soomarvilan.”

“Because he’s too stupid to lie?”

“Ai! I got good hearing, ugly girl!”

“That’s not *quite* how I would have put it...” said Alex, “but yes.”

“*Ai!*”

“The Hooska are the last people who could get involved in a conspiracy, because they wouldn’t be able to keep their mouths shut about it.”

“And the other one, Vess,” Jen said, looking at a large doorway in the side of the dome, “you can trust him too?”

“Yes, but for different reasons. Marshtreaders think about everything for a long time before deciding on an action. One day wouldn’t be nearly enough time for him to decide to do something as big as kidnap the person holding the Nexus Imprint.”

“Marshtreaders pest in Council,” Soomarvilan said. “Always delaying, always deliberating! Hard to get vote from. I throw things at them if Council not keep warning about it. And putting up forcefields.”

“Besides,” Alex said, ignoring Soomarvilan’s rant, “they’re old friends and I trust them. I think you should be safe on Hoosk for a while. Are you hungry?”

The question took Jen by surprise. “No. Yes,” she realised. “I could do with some breakfast.”

“Coming right up.” A table appeared – from nowhere, making Jen jump. A chair followed, blinking into existence with a faint swishing sound. A carton of her favourite cereal appeared on the table, along with a bowl, a spoon and a carton of milk.

“How... how did you do that?” she gasped. “That was like magic!”

“No, just very advanced science. I used my matter converter.” Jen looked at him blankly. “Look, I’ll show you. Think of an object.”

“The new Get Ready CD,” Jen said instantly.

Alex frowned. “Tragically, I *do* have the pattern for that.” A copy of the boy band’s latest album appeared in his hand. “Not one original track on it... Anyway, I used my point generator to bring in energy from zerospace, fed it into my matter converter, and materialised it as paramatter. And thankfully, for anyone who appreciates real music—” Jen glared at him. Now he was acting like Dad! “—I can make it disappear just as easily.” The CD vanished. “I turned it from paramatter back into energy, then sent the energy back into zerospace through my sink.” Jen opened her mouth to ask a question. “Not a *kitchen* sink. Like a heatsink in a computer – it takes away waste energy. I can create regular matter as well, and even antimatter – it just takes a lot more power, but since zerospace energy is effectively unlimited, that’s not really a problem. Anyway,” he said, stepping forward and pulling the chair out for her, “would you care for breakfast?”

Jen was still struggling to get to grips with what she’d just seen, but hunger took control and she almost jumped into the seat, grabbing the cereal carton and tipping the contents into the bowl. Then she stopped, examining the bowl more closely. It was identical to the ones at her home. “How do you know what I like?”

“I know all about you. I’ve been watching over you from the day you were born.”

Jen shivered. “You know, that’s actually kind of creepy.”

“Oh, no!” Alex protested, “Not spying on you, nothing like that. I only do as much as I need to ensure your safety, I don’t pry into your private life. Except,” he went on, a slight glint in his eye, “for the parts you put up on the internet.”

Jen’s mouth dropped open. “I *knew* you’d looked at my blog!” she cried.

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist. It was quite flattering, though—”

“That’s not the *point!*”

“—but, well, you should know that I haven’t always looked like this.”

Jen paused mid-mouthful. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve been Alex Drake for about a year and a half. Before that I was Mr Moore, before that Mr Webb, and before that, Mr Lovell.”

“Mr Moore?” said Jen. “No, he was my form teacher in the first and second years. And he looked nothing like you. He was bald. And old.” She took another mouthful of cereal.

“Like this?” The voice was Mr Moore’s kindly tones. Jen looked up to see him standing where Alex had been, and gasped. Suddenly, there was a brief, almost subliminal sensation of morphing, and Mr Moore was gone, Alex there in the same position. “I’ve been all kinds of people, but they’ve all been there for one reason – to protect you.”

Jen was starting to feel overwhelmed. “Like who?”

“People who’ve had a reason to be close by to help. Teachers, neighbours... I’ve been other people too, whenever you’ve needed them. Remember when you were ten, and you ran out into the street and almost got run over?”

“Yes.” The image of the car’s chromed radiator grille rushing at her had been a regular feature in nightmares for years afterwards.

“I was the man who grabbed you and pulled you back. Plus, I stopped the car three feet before it should have. I was also the person who took you back to your family when you got lost on the beach when you were seven, an older boy who helped you at that party last year when you drank all that cider you shouldn’t have been touching...” Jen blushed at the – rather fuzzy – memory. “Oh, and for a couple of minutes the other day I was... well, some random bloke walking past on Lyfe Road.” Another blink and a vaguely familiar man was there, changing back to Alex almost before Jen had time to register who he was. “I doubt Sharon would have really hurt you, but I wanted to put her off.”

“Maybe you should have stopped her throwing my bag over that wall, as well,” Jen said pointedly.

“Yeah... It would certainly have made things a lot less complicated, wouldn’t it?” He gave her an apologetic shrug.

Jen took another spoonful, then remembered something from the day before. “So this is how you fed me when I was unconscious? You just beamed the food right into my stomach?”

“More or less.”

She put the spoon down in the bowl and stood up. “Suddenly I’m not hungry any more.”

“Sure?” She nodded. Alex looked at the table, which vanished with a puff of air.

Jen grabbed at her chest. “Aah! I don’t think I’m ever going to get used to that.” She looked at the wall of the dome, watching the stars drift past. “So where *is* this Hoosk place, anyway?”

“Relative to Earth, you mean?” asked Alex. Jen nodded. “Here, I’ll show you.” The starfield ahead vanished, replaced by a large holographic image of a galaxy, slowly rotating. “This is the Milky Way. What?”

“I’m sorry,” Jen said, trying not to laugh, “but I always thought it sounded stupid naming a galaxy after a chocolate bar. Oh, wait, galaxy! That’s another one.”

Alex rolled his eyes. “I *think* you’ll find the one with all the stars came first... Anyway, this is our galaxy.” The image stopped turning and a small, pulsing yellow dot appeared in the bottom half of the image at the six o’clock position, roughly halfway between the bulging centre and the outer rim. “That’s where Earth is, about twenty-five thousand light-years from the centre. This,” another pulsing dot appeared at about eight o’clock, closer to the centre, “is Inar, just over ten thousand light-years from Earth. And this,” a third, green dot appeared above Inar, “is Hoosk, about two thousand light-years from Inar. Or about eleven and a half from Earth, if you want to look at it that way.”

Jen wasn’t sure how long a light-year was, but knew it was big. She looked more closely at the galaxy, which was certainly very pretty. “So how big’s the galaxy altogether?”

“The main disc’s about a hundred and twenty thousand light-years across at its widest and six thousand high at its thickest, although there isn’t really an edge to it as such – the stars are just spread out more,” Alex said, getting all teacherly again. “There are two hundred and one billion active stars, give or take a few hundred million, and about another hundred billion protostellar discs, brown dwarfs, stellar cinders, neutron stars, pulsars, black holes and dark tori.”

She knew vaguely what a black hole was, but the other things Alex had reeled off went over her head. “So they’re all in the Civilization? Are there people on all of them?”

“No, half of them don’t even have planets,” said Alex. “There are only about six billion solar systems in this galaxy where life’s evolved at all.”

“Oh, is that all...”

“As for *intelligent* life, that’s even rarer. If you use a pretty broad definition of intelligence, there are still only about four million planets where it’s developed over the history of the galaxy. But natural disasters tend to wipe most of them out, and,” he gave Jen a meaningful look, “some of them manage to wipe *themselves* out without any help whatsoever.”

Jen got the point, unwelcome as it was. “So, humans, not as smart as we like to think?”

“Eh,” Alex shrugged, “there’s potential. Given time, and a *major* attitude adjustment.”

“Oh, thanks!”

“Don’t get me wrong,” said Alex, “some humans would fit right into the Civilization, as individuals. *You’ve* done fine so far.”

“Glad to hear it,” Jen smiled.

“But Earth’s social and political systems are based around personal wealth, power and control over others. The Civilization doesn’t work that way. And from what I’ve seen, human leaders are never willing to give all that up.”

“Well, human leaders all seem to be complete morons from what *I’ve* seen,” sniffed Jen. “You can’t trust any of them.”

Alex laughed. “Remind me to tell your careers advisor that politics and diplomacy are out as well as interior design.”

Jen turned her attention back to the glittering spiral of the galaxy. “So how big is the Civilization?”

“In terms of members, or population, or...”

“No, no.” She held out her arms. “Just, you know, in *bigness*.”

“Ah, right. Hold on, this might make you a bit dizzy.” The Milky Way zoomed back to reveal a collection of smaller galaxies surrounding it, most of them faint, puffy spheres. “These are the other galaxies in the Milky Way’s system – if it were a star, these would be like its planets. These are all within a million light-years.

These,” the image zoomed back again, the Milky Way shrinking from a distinct spiral to a glowing blob as more galaxies came into view, “are mostly lone irregular galaxies, out to two million light years, and *these*,” another vertiginous pullback, revealing a second broad cluster of galaxies, two of them clearly larger and brighter than the rest, “all make up the Andromeda system.”

“Andromeda?” Jen asked. “I’ve heard of that.”

“It’s the largest galaxy in the Local Group, quite a lot bigger than the Milky Way. Not as many intelligent races, though. They’ve had quite bad luck with hypernovae over the past couple of billion years. Of course, we can control them now.” Jen decided not to ask.

“Anyway, that takes us out to three million light years, and if you want to see the Civilization’s outermost members...” The view pulled back a little further, revealing a lone blue smudge far from anything else, “...that’s the Chiatol galaxy, three and a half million light years from Inar. You can’t see it from Earth, it’s hidden behind the galactic core. There are about thirty Civilization member races there.”

“That’s a long way away,” said Jen, looking at the lonely galaxy. She tried to get a handle on just how far it was, and failed. “How long would it take you to get there?”

“On my own at full speed? A year,” Alex said.

“Wow. That’s a *really* long way away.”

“Even longer if I took you with me. The extra mass limits my hyperspace displacement.”

Jen looked mischievously up at him. “Are you saying I’m *fat*?”

“What? No, of course not!” Alex backpedaled. “Hey, wait a minute...”

“Got you,” she said, smirking.

“Very funny.”

She looked at the hologram again, at the tiny lights of the galaxies against an empty blackness. All the billions of stars they contained hardly made an impression on the space around them. For the first time she got a hint of the sheer size of what she was looking at, and felt a slight shiver. “So, Alex, these bad guys that attacked the Civilization... where did they come from?”

Alex’s face turned grim. “We don’t know. All we know is that they came from outside explored space, which is a lot bigger than Civilization space.” The galaxies retreated again, smaller and smaller

until the Milky Way was just a dot and even the galactic clusters were reduced to faint smears of light. Other galaxies appeared around them, congregated in long threads. A flattened red sphere appeared around the Local Group.

“That’s Civilization space,” Alex explained, simplifying matters for Jen’s benefit, “and this is explored space.” A mishapen yellow haze wrapped around some of the new galaxies, parts of it extending far outwards like grasping tentacles, other parts barely reaching further than the limits of the red space. “When I say ‘explored’, I don’t mean that somebody’s been to every single world, either. Most of it’s only been seen by probes, and even then they probably only stayed in a solar system long enough to count the planets, unless there was something that caught their attention. The Enemy,” he said, pointing at a white line that had appeared, starting on the Milky Way and extending off into infinity almost at a right angle to Andromeda, “came from that direction.”

Jen looked more closely. The yellow didn’t extend much further than the red in the direction of the white line... apart from a very faint trace. “What’s that yellow line?” Now that she’d seen it, she noticed other similar lines stretching outwards into the void.

“That,” said Alex, something close to reverence in his voice, “is one of the Paths of the Eternals.”

“Ooh, sounds spooky.”

“The Eternals are a race that explored space billions of years ago – actually, they’re the oldest race ever known to have existed.”

“What happened to them?” Jen asked. “Did they die, or...”

“Oh, no, they’re still around,” Alex said, his voice returning to normal. “They just stopped exploring a long time ago and returned to their homeworld. Which is in the Milky Way, by the way.”

“Are they part of the Civilization?”

Alex screwed up his face. “Not really... They’re *friendly* to us, at least. They’re not really bothered about anyone else, though, and to be honest they’re so powerful they don’t need to be. They let us share some of what they found when they were explorers, but apart from that they keep themselves to themselves.”

Jen tracked one of the faint yellow lines, which twisted and turned on its course beyond the border of the hologram. Considering how small the Civilization now looked, the Eternals must have travelled at

least a hundred times further than anyone else. “They’re powerful? Could they have helped you fight the Enemy?”

“We asked,” said Alex, frowning slightly, “they ignored us. Which was odd, because I’ve dealt with them a couple of times, and they’re usually at least *courteous* as they tell you to stop bothering them and sort out your problems for yourself.”

“Not much use then, are they?”

“No, not really...”

“Eternals?” said Soomarvilan, hanging from a bar by his tail and stretching out all six limbs. “Feh! They think they so great. Lazy! Spend all time sleeping and thinking. Like Marshreaders, only more mysterious, less annoying.”

“A little more mystery would go down well with the Hooska,” said Vess, ambling out of a room behind them. His dangling mouth was slowly expanding and contracting; Jen realised he was chewing on some long yellow reeds. “Or failing that, simple silence.”

“Feh! High branch defecator!” Soomarvilan chittered.

~*An approximate translation*, Jen’s implant commented.

“Good morning, Vess,” said Alex. Jen added a quick “Hi.”

“And clearing mists to you, Alex, Jen.” Vess directed two of his eyes at the galactic hologram. “Ah! Geography. Have you shown Jen the location of Kea yet?”

Soomarvilan jumped down off his frame. “Why she want to see slimy bog planet full of bad smells? Hoosk where we going!”

“Actually,” Alex cut in, “Hoosk and Kea are very close together, just under a light-year apart. We might get time to see both – it depends how quickly Ara Sumen’s people can find out who sent the Clo-Hir.”

The mere thought of the shapechanger, its fake face cracked and distorted, made Jen go cold. “You... you think they will?”

Soomarvilan padded over to her and poked his wide head into her personal space, giving her far too close a look at the hairs poking out of his large wrinkled ears. “Small list of suspects. Defenders find out quick who bad guy is. Odal look funny to I – why he have problem with waiting for Imprint?”

“Perhaps,” mused Vess in his mournful voice, “he genuinely does believe he can negotiate with the Enemy.”

“Feh! Might as well negotiate with chayka! Enemy not like us at all, too different.”

“Let’s hope not,” Alex said. The hologram disappeared, the widescreen representation of passing stars returning in its place. “I’d rather talk with the Enemy than fight them.”

But Jen had no doubts that Alex would be able to fight them, if he had to. And he’d do it all for her, too, which was not just cool but kind of romantic as well.

*Calm down there, girl,* thought the boring part of her brain. *Not only is he your teacher, he’s not even real!*

He seemed real enough, though. She used Soomarvilan’s proximity as an excuse to inch closer to Alex, touching him just enough to attract his attention and get a smile in response.

She smiled back. Definitely real enough.

## 8: Megatrees

“I home!” Soomarvilan hooted.

From space, Hoosk was as green as an emerald and nearly as beautiful to look at. Even the seas were a shade of green, a lush, deep turquoise shimmering with reflected sunlight. Whorls of clouds dotted the planet like the fingerprints of an inquisitive child. Jen had seen two small moons above the planet, Alex telling her there was a third out of sight behind the green world as well.

From the ground, Hoosk was also beautiful... if you liked trees. She didn't have a problem with them, which was good because they were all she could see. Alex had landed on a high, roughly circular platform about a hundred metres across, overlooking a jungle canopy that stretched to the horizon in every direction. It had taken her a while to realise that the platform didn't just remind her of a tree stump.

It *was* a tree stump.

A very, very big tree stump.

“The Hooska developed in trees,” Alex told her as the little group headed across the platform, “which isn't uncommon. Unlike most species, though, they never left them. They liked the trees so much they designed their entire civilization around them.”

“Then redesigned trees around civilization!” said Soomarvilan, with considerable pride. “Whole Hoosk surface? One big genetic engineered ecosystem! Megatrees give Hooska everything we need.”

“Megatrees?” Jen asked, immediately feeling a bit dense. They were obviously trees that were, well, mega.

“They're not so much individual trees,” said Alex, following Soomarvilan to a curved structure on the edge of the platform which turned out to be long strips of bark bent over to act as a roof. Below it, a flight of steps went down into the giant trunk of the tree itself, “as a network of interconnected organisms covering eighty per cent of the planet's land mass.”

“Eighty-*two* per cent!” Soomarvilan corrected. “Don't low-count megatrees!”

“Eighty-*two* percent, then.” They started to descend, Vess barely fitting into the weaving stairwell. Jen was already starting to feel quite hot and sweaty; the air was quite humid even on the platform,

and it got worse inside. “The Hooska live off them – the trees have been adapted to provide all their food and purify their water – and *in* them. There aren’t any cities on Hoosk, because the jungle *is* a city, a hundred and fifty million square kilometres of it.”

“And I thought London was big,” said Jen. “Where are we going?”

“My home!” Soomarvilan said, jumping up and grabbing some vines growing out of the roof with his back hand and foot. He looked back at her, head upside-down – not that it looked much different either way up – as he swung himself along. “You like it, good-looking-for-human girl! Whole family there, even worthless ones. And friends. And neighbours. And casual acquaintances. And passers-by. Big greet-weird-alien party. Show you Hooska hospitality!”

Jen liked to party as much as any teenage girl, but this didn’t sound quite like her sort of thing. “Ah-hah.”

“The Hooska have a unique definition of the term,” said Vess from behind her, his legs making a bony rattle with each step.

“Hooska have fun. Not like boring Marshtreaders! Their idea of fun sitting in swamp chewing seed pods.” Soomarvilan flipped himself over, grabbing the vines with his four front limbs and clambering backwards along the roof, his tail flicking in a spiral. “What humans do for fun?”

“Us?” Jen considered it. “Well, we, er... we listen to music, watch films, watch TV, hang out with our friends...”

Soomarvilan cocked his head at her. “You hang too? Huh.

Spindly human arms stronger than look. You want join I up here?”

“No, no!” Jen hurriedly said, realising what he meant and worried that he might suddenly haul her up to the ceiling. “It’s an expression, it means, er, just being with people. Talking and stuff.”

Soomarvilan made a little noise that had he been human, Jen would have taken as him blowing a raspberry. “Human fun very passive. Boring as Marshtreaders! No fermented froth? No spore-sniffing? No child-throwing or jumping from great height or sex? Feh!”

Jen blushed. “I’m too young do anything like... spore-sniffing...”

“Young humans aren’t allowed to do certain things until they reach a specific age,” said Alex.

Soomarvilan's face took on an expression that could have been puzzlement, or disgust, or both. "Weird. Hooska children do anything. They get hurt, teaches them valuable lesson not to do stupid thing again. They get killed..." He shrugged. "Meh. Plenty more of they around."

Jen opened her mouth in disbelief, but couldn't think of anything to say.

"Different cultures, different values," Alex told her. "Other races see things very differently to humans."

"You're not kidding!"

"We here," announced Soomarvilan, dropping from the ceiling and going through a wide oval portal back into open air. Jen looked around and saw they were just below the level of the jungle's canopy of leaves. The top of a wide branch had been flattened to act as a walkway – presumably for non-Hooska visitors who didn't want to spend their time hanging from vines. Worryingly, there were no railings, and she could see the tops of other, smaller trees far below. Soomarvilan might consider jumping from a great height to be fun, but she didn't want to try it.

Something came towards them, gliding along a curving branch parallel to the one on which they were standing. It looked similar to the flyers Jen had used on Inar, though this one was a lot more car-like, a lozenge-shaped convertible. It wasn't hovering, but was actually touching the other branch along the length of its curved belly. The branch itself, she realised on closer examination, was unnaturally smooth and had a hexagonal wire mesh wrapped around its bark. She looked at Alex and Soomarvilan for an explanation.

"Branchrunner," said Alex. "Like a monorail, in a way. It'll take us where we want to go."

Jen looked dubiously at the branchrunner. She couldn't see how it stayed upright. "Can't we take a flyer?"

"Flyer?" cackled Soomarvilan as he climbed into the car. "Feh! You think this Inar? Leave flying to flits! We in trees now. Much more natural."

"It's perfectly safe," Alex assured her. He stepped into the branchrunner, then held out a hand to help her. She took it and daintily climbed in.

"Thank you, kind sir."

“My pleasure, madame.” Jen giggled, then immediately blushed. With a rattle of exoskeleton, Vess clambered into the back of the car. Suitably-shaped seats had already appeared for them all.

Soomarvilan gave what Jen guessed was an address to the car, which had a dashboard of sorts but no apparent controls, and it smoothly moved off along the branch. There was a soft noise as a forcefield popped into place to act as a bubble roof. She looked ahead to see where they were going, and grabbed Alex’s arm in fright.

“What’s wrong?”

“This isn’t a monorail!” she hissed. The branch twisted away ahead, dropping sharply down and corkscrewing into the jungle. “This is a roller coaster!”

“It’s still perfectly safe,” said Alex. “The car’s got its own internal gravity field. It doesn’t matter how fast we go or what angle we’re at, you’ll always feel like you’re on a flat road.”

“It’s not that!” she cringed as the car went over the edge of the drop, the jungle floor sweeping into view directly ahead. “I hate roller coasters! They make me feel *sicaaaaaaahhh!*”

The branchrunner suddenly shot forward, rolling around the outside of the branch as it fell and making the jungle spin crazily around the car. Soomarvilan glared back at Jen over one of his three shoulders. “Ai! Noisy girl! Enough of scream! No danger!”

“Oh my God oh my *God!*” Jen shrieked as the car continued its tumbling journey. Alex had been right about the car having its own gravity field, as ‘down’ still felt as though it was below her seat where it belonged no matter where the ground was, but she could still feel a slight but definite churning in the pit of her stomach every time the branchrunner made a sharp movement.

It wasn’t the movement that was scaring her, though. It was the sight of everything spinning around her.

“Perhaps,” Vess suggested, “it might be wise to tell the car to opacify the forcefield.”

“And miss view? Feh! I not been home for months! Want to see proper trees again!” The branch they were on was winding closer to a much larger one, several tens of metres in diameter, that wove lazily between – and sometimes touched – the giant trees stretching upwards into the sky. In between bouts of nausea, Jen realised that

the larger branch was covered with hundreds of branchrunners of various sizes, sticking to its surface at all angles as they drove along it. As she watched, some of the cars dropped out of formation to slip onto other, smaller branches splitting off from the main route. She would have found the whole spectacle fascinating if she hadn't been wanting to throw up.

Alex used an inductor field to take control of the car's computer and turned the forcefield an opaque, milky white, ignoring Soomarvilan's protests. "Is that better?"

"Oh, oh, ohh," Jen gulped, clutching at her stomach with one hand and gripping Alex's arm with the other. "Ugh. That was horrible."

"Don't worry, it gets a lot smoother once we get onto a main branch."

"Are you *sure* we can't take a flyer?" moaned Jen.

After a few minutes, Jen's stomach had calmed down, and after being assured by Alex that they wouldn't be back on one of the smaller, twistier branches for a little while, she decided to risk letting him turn the forcefield transparent again – if only to shut up the increasingly annoyed (and annoying) Soomarvilan.

The view outside the bubble wasn't too bad – apart from the fact that it was at a disconcerting angle. Their car had taken position on one side of the branch, the rolling green horizon tilted so that looking to her left Jen could only see turquoise sky and gathering clouds, while to her right she was looking down into the jungle.

Still, at least the car wasn't spinning about any more. She took the opportunity to look at the other nearby branchrunners. Most were occupied by one or two Hooska, though she saw one larger car that had at least twenty of the wiry aliens crammed into it. All the cars were travelling at the same speed. She wasn't sure how fast they were going, but if she'd been in the car with her family, Mum would have been telling Dad to slow down.

Floating signs flashed past, holographic words in angular alien letters circling the main branch, coloured chevrons pointing sideways below them. "What did that say?" she asked.

“Road sign,” explained Alex, “saying how far it is to various places and which exit to take. You know, if you switched your visual translator back on...”

“No thanks. How far is it to where we’re going?”

“About another thirty kilometres. I’ll turn the forcefield opaque again when we get onto the slip-branch.”

“Faah!” hissed Soomarvilan. The main branch started to rise, arcing over a wide expanse of jungle that was conspicuously lacking in megatrees. Jen noticed tall, slender metal poles towering above the smaller trees below, the first inorganic structures she’d seen since arriving on the planet.

“What’re they?”

Alex peered down at the jungle. “Forcefield towers. That’s a... I suppose ‘wildlife preserve’ would be the nearest thing.”

Soomarvilan hopped over to the right side of the car, pulling his lips back in a grin. “Keep old animals there. We get rid of them, only Civilization says not nice to exterminate pest species. So stick them in primitive jungle areas instead.”

“That’s nice,” said Jen, “being able to see endangered animals in their natural hab—”

“Great fun to abuse them!” Soomarvilan continued. “Travel over and laugh at ancient predators. Ha! Ha! Look at stupid out-evolved species! Who masters of planet now? Throw nuts at them and laugh. Poke with forcefields. Make them mad, funny to watch.”

“A typically magnanimous Hooska attitude,” Vess commented.

“Feh! Even way Marshtreaders deal with predators boring! Just squat down and hide inside own legs. Predators get bored and go away,” sneered Soomarvilan. His attention was suddenly caught by something ahead. “Ai! Rain coming!”

Jen looked, and saw the sloping horizon had been obscured by a towering wall of dark clouds, a grey haze of rain washing over the jungle. “Ew. We’re going to get wet.”

“Wet good!” Soomarvilan said with obvious excitement. “Clean fur, cool down.” His fur bristled, waves of rippling hairs running up his body in anticipation. “Good to be home!”

The main branch re-entered the megatrees, dropping down below the canopy again. Raindrops started to spatter against the forcefield, the spray sliding frictionlessly off it, blown back by the car’s

slipstream. Another ring of Hooska lettering whipped past. “We’re almost there,” said Alex. “We’ll be going onto a slip-branch in a minute, so if you’d like me to—”

“Yes please!” Jen hurriedly told him. He smiled, and the forcefield turned white again, prompting a groan from Soomarvilan. Before long, she started to feel the faint sensation of movement in her stomach again. For all she knew the car was upside-down, but at least she didn’t have to see it.

When the forcefield disappeared, the branchrunner was stationary alongside a large, gnarled outcropping from the trunk of one of several megatrees in a tight group. Rain hissed down all around, but none of it hit Jen. She looked up to see a semi-transparent forcefield shaped like an umbrella floating above her, complete with brightly coloured stripes running out from its centre.

“Now you’re just showing off,” she told Alex.

“I didn’t want you getting a cold.” He helped her out of the car, rain bouncing off him without making him at all wet. Peeking cautiously down over the edge of the outcropping, Jen saw that they were still quite high above the jungle floor.

“Now where are we going?” she asked. The question was at least partly answered by Soomarvilan. After whooping with delight and spinning around, arms outstretched, in a torrent of water dripping from the giant leaves far above, he ran to the trunk of the tree and scuttled up it at high speed. Vess followed, picking his way up by grasping vines growing on the bark with surprising dexterity for his size. With his round body and extended legs, he looked like some kind of giant spider. Jen tipped her head back, and back. The top of the tree was somewhere out of sight in the haze beyond her ‘umbrella’. “We have to *climb*?”

“Well,” said Alex, teasingly. “I was planning to fly you up there with a gravity control field, but if you *want* to do it the hard way...”

“Nonono, the easy way is fine. The easy way is *always* fine,” Jen assured him. Alex nodded, and Jen found herself rising from the tree. She yelped. “Ooh, sorry. Took me by surprise.”

Alex floated up alongside her. “I would say ‘you’ll get used to it’, but... well, I doubt they’ll let you take any gravity control technology back to Earth.”

“Oh.” Jen felt disappointed – and suddenly lonely. She hadn’t thought about home for ages. Weirder, she realised she didn’t want to think about not having thought about it. Which seemed very confusing and unwelcome. “Hey,” she said, trying to clear her thoughts, “who am I?” She held up one hand, miming holding the imaginary shaft of the forcefield umbrella.

Alex looked puzzled. “I don’t know.”

“Mary Poppins!” He laughed, which made her feel a lot better.

“Soo!” called someone above them. Jen saw another Hooska hanging from a tangled web of branches that spanned the gap between the megatrees. Soomarvilan clenched the vines with all three of his feet and leaned back into space, making Jen cringe.

“Pola!” he cried, waving an arm furiously. The other Hooska released her grip and dropped a good ten metres, horrifying Jen, before almost casually snatching a branch with her tail and swinging herself into another thicket of branches and creepers. A few more flips and tumbles, and she grabbed hold of the tree just above Soomarvilan.

“You late! Pest!” she chattered.

Soomarvilan shrugged. “How I late? Not originally due back for another five days!”

“Glad you here.”

“I too.” At first Jen thought the pair were going to kiss, but instead they wrapped their necks around each other. “View-spoiling girl!” Soomarvilan shouted down to her, untangling himself. “This my first-wife, Polawa. Pola, bigger ugly alien is Defender you meet years ago.”

“Ugh! Your new body hideous, Defender,” Polawa said.

“Call himself Alex now. Other alien is weird girl from Protectorate race called human. Her name Jen. She important, but still annoying. And you remember Marshtheader pest,” he added disdainfully as Vess clambered up behind him.

“Moist air and greetings,” said Vess, opening up one of his feet to her. Even clinging to the side of the tree, he still managed to tip his body in a sort of bow. “A pleasure to see you again, Polawa.”

“He no pest,” Polawa said, sounding almost flirty, “he charming. You learn lessons from he.”

“Feh!” Soomarvilan started up the tree again, Polawa turning to follow him. “Where rest of family? Too lazy to meet I?”

“Some. Others not much care you back.”

“*Feh!*”

Above, the tree trunk bulged outwards into a cluster of knobbly bumps, almost like giant knotholes. As Jen drew closer, she realised the holes were pointing almost directly downwards, some having lights shining inside. Soomarvilan disappeared into one, his head popping back into view a moment later. “Hurry, hurry! Meet family!” Polawa followed him inside, Vess just barely managing to squeeze through after her.

“Ladies first,” said Alex, flying Jen carefully up into the hole. She found herself in a large, roughly circular room carved out of the tree itself. Openings led off in different directions, including up and down. She felt off-balance for an instant as Alex turned off her gravity field, then landed beside her.

“Soo back! Brought aliens!” yelled Polawa, her voice echoing through the chamber and the passages beyond. For a moment nothing happened... then the room burst into activity as more Hooska came flooding in on the floor, walls and ceiling. Jen lost count at a dozen, and still the aliens kept coming, all of them talking at once.

She flinched back against Alex as several of them surrounded her with the same lack of interest in her personal space as Soomarvilan. “Ugly!” said one. “Why eyes so close?”

“Like fur,” said another one, apparently younger, flicking at her hair. “Feel nice. How you get it so long?”

“It, er, just grows like that,” Jen winced. Another Hooska started picking at the buttons of her blouse. “Hey! Hey! Get off!” She slapped its hands away.

“Ugly alien mean,” it said, skulking away and turning its attention to Vess. “Trunk-uncle Vess! Where presents?”

“Presents! Presents!” chorused several of the other children, swarming over Vess’s body.

“I’m afraid my visit here was planned at very short notice,” he said, voice even more apologetic than usual.

“No presents?” whimpered a particularly small child.

“I’m afraid not,” said Vess. The little Hooska looked about to burst into tears.

“Maybe I can help,” Alex said, stepping forward. He reached into his pocket and pulled out something which he handed to the quivering child. Jen couldn’t tell what it was – some kind of brightly-coloured toy – but the Hooska clearly liked it.

“Thanks, tall ugly alien!” The other young Hooska descended on Alex, chanting “Presents! Presents!”

“Where *my* present, second-husband?” demanded Polawa.

“He Defender,” Soomarvilan complained, “he full of matter-synthesis tricks, he magic up as much junk as he like. Not-ugly-for-human girl! This my family. Some of, anyway.” He started pointing at various people around him. “Son Hepinivin, son Samiravan, second-mother Enessiran, daughter Pireppa, third-wife Massi—”

“I thought she was your wife?” Jen said, looking at Polawa. Soomarvilan and Polawa glanced at each other, confused.

“She *first*-wife,” Soomarvilan said as if explaining to an idiot, pointing at Polawa, “Massi *third*-wife, second-wife Esarani not here, pest. Fourth-wife Jarravina dead, fell off branch like clumsy idiot and smashed head last year.”

Polawa pointed back at Soomarvilan. “He my second-husband. First-husband over there, he called Jesseranian. He also second-husband of Esarani and first-husband of Jarravina.”

“The Hooska have very large, very open extended families,” said Alex from beneath a coat of green fur.

“Yah. I can see that,” Jen said tartly.

Soomarvilan continued pointing out other family members, Jen quickly losing track of all the names. There were now at least thirty Hooska in the room. “Those two not family, they just neighbours,” Soomarvilan said as he neared the end of his list.

“Hello, ugly alien,” said one of them, waving cheerily.

“She not like being called ugly!” warned Soomarvilan. “On home planet, she supposed to be very beautiful.” Jen almost thanked him, until the room erupted into hysterical Hooska laughter. “And he,” he continued as he wiped one eye, oblivious to Jen’s glare of death, “he total stranger. Who he?” Various ‘dunno’ noises came from the crowd.

“I just come in out of rain,” said the unknown Hooska. “Sounded like fun gathering. Food smell good.”

“Fair enough, join us. There about another ten family in house, but they being unsociable, so they can go eat bark. Now,” Soomarvilan said, addressing the whole room, “who want to party?”

## 9: Kraken

Hooska parties seemed a lot like human parties, even if instead of CDs or MP3s, the Hooska made music by banging different pieces of carved wood together, and instead of drinking, the adult Hooska took what looked like plum tomatoes and squeezed them until they burst in their faces, breathing in the spray of dust that shot out and immediately becoming even more hyperactive than normal.

But differences in details aside, it seemed a party was a party on Earth or on Hoosk, people milling around talking to each other, eating, drinking, dancing, making fools of themselves and trying to chat each other up. (Thankfully, there had been no sign of any Hooska sex.) Jen had quickly discovered that a ‘house’ on Hoosk wasn’t limited to just one family, extended or not – Soomarvilan’s home connected with at least four others above and below, and people came and went from each one as they pleased. Since there was a party going on, they all pleased into Soomarvilan’s. And unlike on Earth, gatecrashers were apparently welcome. Jen quickly lost count of how many Hooska were present, as besides Soomarvilan and Polawa she was having trouble telling them apart, but she guessed it was at least sixty, maybe more.

Alex seemed content to stay with her, which suited her just fine. Vess had been right the day before – God, was that only how long ago it was? – when he’d said the Hooska could be ‘trying’. After a few hours of listening to them yammer and bicker and sing, she felt like her head was about to explode. And if she got called ‘ugly’ one more time...

After a while, though, things started to die down, some of the more hedonistic Hooska actually passing out on the floor. Soomarvilan had been cornered by a small group who wanted to talk politics in the usual blunt Hooska way, much to Vess’s amusement, and a lot of the crowd gradually drifted off, leaving just his immediate family members.

She went back to a room that she’d found while wandering around during the party, tired of the chatterings of the Hooska and wanting a few moments of quiet. Her implant had translated the name of the room as the ‘pantry’, but the large, oddly-shaped space was more like a greenhouse. Lit by soft glowing spheres hanging just

below the vaulted ceiling, the pantry was filled with all kinds of weird giant mushrooms sprouting from the damp floor, while fruits and berries bulged from plants growing all over the walls. She'd noticed similar, smaller growths in other parts of the house, Hooska plucking food off them as they passed. Apparently set mealtimes were a rare thing, the slender aliens living almost entirely off snacks growing all over the megatrees. Jen wondered if humans would ever be able to do that with crisps.

One side of the room had two large holes, about six metres apart, in the floor. She felt a draught flowing through them as she got close. Looking down, she saw branches spanning the gap between the trees a few dozen metres below. Rain was still streaming from the lip of the hole.

"Careful," Alex said, looking down with her. "I wouldn't want you to slip."

"What, like this?" She pretended to lurch forward. Alex looked pained, then pointedly lifted her in a GC field and moved her back. She stuck out her tongue. "Spoilsport."

"Just watching out for you." He looked through the hole again. "Oh, you might want to take another step back."

"What, or you'll pick me up again and – aah!" Jen gasped as a flurry of little birds shot into the pantry through the holes. She held up her hands to protect her face as they fluttered around her, briefly hovering in place then darting about like iridescent hummingbirds. They swarmed around bunches of purple fruit like outsized grapes growing near the holes, swooping in and pecking at them with their long, pointed beaks. To her surprise, the birds had two sets of wings, one set flapping so fast she could barely see them, the other twitching occasionally to change the bird's position.

"Flits," Alex told her. "Supposed to be a sign of good luck."

"They're really pretty," Jen said. She could see that the birds had orange feet tucked away under their bellies. Apparently six limbs was how evolution had worked on Hooska.

"The Hooska grow these fempa," he plucked one of the grapes from its bunch, "especially for them. Here." He handed her the fruit. "Hold it out in your hand."

"Okay..." Jen cautiously extended her hand towards the birds. One of them cocked its head at her, then buzzed over to hover by her

hand, regarding her with the same curious caution she was giving it. Hunger obviously overcame trepidation, as it ducked forward and poked its beak through the skin of the fruit. Jen flinched, but held steady as the little bird's head started bobbing rapidly back and forth. The fempa collapsed in on itself, the soft centre being sucked out. It only took a few seconds for the once plump fruit to resemble a shrivelled prune. The bird gave her a look, then pulled free and fluttered away as the entire flock swarmed back out through the hole.

Jen gingerly dropped the skin of the fempa out of the hole after them. "Good job they're not carnivorous..."

Alex used a gravity control field to guide the falling fruit onto one of the branches not far below. At this height, if it hit anyone on the ground it could hurt. "Actually, they've got a relative that is. The Hooska don't let them wander around, though."

"Glad to hear it." Jen didn't like the idea of a giant hummingbird sucking out her brains.

They both looked round as a minor commotion entered the room. Soomarvilan picked his way between the mushrooms, Vess behind him, gingerly trying to plant his large feet without squashing anything. A small Hooska was riding on Vess's back, and two more, one of which Jen recognised as the one that had admired her hair earlier, followed their father, or whatever relation he was – she'd lost track of the permutations, clinging to the ceiling with their two back limbs.

"Shut up, shut up!" Soomarvilan complained, pinching his ears shut. "Pests! You worse than politics bores! At least they shut up when I say, 'Ai! I on Council! You just worthless pests! Who more important, I or you?'"

"That's probably not the best way to speak to your constituents," Vess noted.

"They not like I, they get rid of I in vote. Who always win vote? I!" Soomarvilan tipped his head right back, glaring at the two Hooska children on the ceiling. "And you! Pests! Why you want do something so stupid?"

"Everyone doing it!" protested the hair-liker. "And it not like we dyeing fur red or anything!" She pointed at Jen. "Turn yellow like cute head-fur alien girl."

"She thinks I'm cute," Jen smiled to Alex.

“Better than ugly.”

Soomarvilan snorted, grabbing a large spherical fungus and tugging at it. “You not dyeing fur at all!” For some reason, Jen was reminded of a recent argument with Mum about dyeing her own hair. The thought suddenly filled her with a very unwelcome feeling of loneliness.

“You let Rissini dye fur purple,” objected the other young Hooska, dropping from the ceiling.

“Rissini grown now, do whatever stupid thing she like.” The fungus came free of the floor with a pop. “Also, Rissini worthless pest!” He looked across the pantry at Jen and Alex. “Children! Fah! You lucky, Defender! You never have! And bad-fur-idea-making girl, take advice, not have children. They nightmare!” He thrust the fungus at the two children. “You, make useful and take to first-mother.”

“I can carry that for you, if you like,” said Vess.

“You stay away from first-wife, pest!” Soomarvilan shrieked, waving all three of his fists at the Marshtrader. The group turned to leave, the children tossing the fungus to each other like a ball. “Ai! Ai! Not play with food!”

“Sometimes,” Alex mused, watching them leave, “I wonder what it might be like to be organic and able to have a family. But not today.” He noticed that Jen’s expression had changed. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” she lied.

Alex looked at her. “I can tell when you’re not telling the truth, you know.”

Jen was indignant. “What, have you got some kind of super lie-detector scanning thingy?”

“No, you’re just not very good at hiding your feelings.”

“Oh.” She felt as deflated as the fempa. “It’s just...” She walked away from the holes and the hissing sound of the rain, looking down at the bizarre fungi at her feet. “I just realised I feel totally... homesick. Huh. How weird is that?” She turned to face Alex again. “I spent all my time wanting to get away from home, and now that I’m somewhere *completely* different,” she held out her arms to encompass the room, “I’m missing it! How did *that* happen?”

“It’s your home,” Alex said. He carefully made his way through the sprouting food to her. “It’s always going to be a part of you, wherever you go. Or whatever strange stuff you’re doing.”

Jen put her bag down on its side on a reasonably clean piece of floor, then sat on it. She rubbed her face. “God. My parents must be going absolutely insane. I’ve been gone for more than two days! They must be so worried! They must think I’m dead or something!” Her eyes started to brim with tears. “Alex, when can I go home?”

He wasn’t sure what to tell her. “Soon. I hope.”

“You *hope*?” she sniffed.

“We still have to find out who sent the Clo-Hir,” Alex explained, “who it was who was trying to kidnap you. Once we do – and we will – then we can read the Nexus Imprint from you, and you can go home again.”

“And how long’s all *that* going to take?”

Alex paused before answering. “I... don’t know.”

“You don’t *know*?”

“People are working on it right now...”

“Oh, that’s... that’s just *great*!” Jen cried, feeling tears dripping down her cheeks. “You drag me halfway across the universe—”

“Galaxy.”

“Aaah!”

“Sorry.”

“Halfway across the *galaxy* and there are monsters and wars and things trying to kill me, and you don’t even know how to get this stupid thing you’ve put inside me *out*? I thought you were all like super-advanced and, and – Star Trekkie and stuff!”

“Jen, Jen,” said Alex, crouching down next to her as she hid her face in her hands, “I’m sorry! I really am. I never meant for any of this to happen. But... well, our technology might be better than Earth’s, and I could make a pretty good case that we’re more enlightened in the way we act towards others, and there are certainly some extremely intelligent races and machines...” Right now, he felt like counting himself out of the latter category. “But we’re all still people. Without the Nexus, we *don’t* know everything. We make mistakes. I mean, we did even *with* the Nexus, but everyone had the benefit of trillions of people’s knowledge and experience to help

them. But right now..." He sighed. "We're all really just... making it up as we go along, I suppose."

"Wow," said Jen, wiping her eyes. "For a super-powerful alien civilization you're... really a bit crap, aren't you?"

"That was very blunt," Alex said, stung.

"I must've been around Soomarvilan for too long. Oh..." She curled up, resting her chin on her knees. "I want to go home."

"I know, I know." She leaned against him, and he put an arm around her shoulder. "I'll get you back as soon as I possibly can, I promise."

"Soon, please," Jen said in a small voice. She rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. "If you *can* get the Imprint out of me, will it help everyone?"

"Definitely. We'll be able to start reconstructing everything we lost in the Source. There won't be everything, but it'll be enough to begin with."

"Better hurry," said Soomarvilan as he re-entered the pantry, Vess following, with large orange bowls in two of his three hands. He put them down on the floor and started plucking fruit from the walls. "You know some of I children not care about Nexus, not even want nodes? I make they have."

"It seems to be a more common attitude amongst the young," said Vess. "One cannot miss what one never had."

Jen considered this. "Like me, then, I suppose. I mean, Alex said the Nexus is like a super-internet—"

"Internet?" asked Soomarvilan. Alex explained. "Ah! Earth more backward than I think!"

"I still don't see," Jen continued, annoyed, "why it's so amazingly awesome or anything. So you can instant message someone three galaxies away, so what? It'd be a drag not having the internet, but it's not like we couldn't live without it. Well, some of us. I know my brother'd be gutted."

"The Nexus is not merely a very efficient communication network," said Vess. "It is – it was – an extension of our minds. All knowledge is there, available as easily as recalling a memory. The nodes also act on our behalf, anticipating our needs and our requests without us having to make them consciously."

“How you think we manage without politics?” Soomarvilan asked. “Will of people always known – nodes tell Nexus what we want, and is done! No arguing about who do and get what!”

“Everyone in the Civilization is free to do exactly what they want,” said Alex, “and with as much or as little provided for them as they like. There are obviously some laws, which is why we have Defenders, and there are civil disputes, which is what the Arbiters,” he gestured at Vess and Soomarvilan, “are for – or were, anyway. But without the Nexus joining everyone and everything in the Civilization together, this gets more and more difficult to achieve.” His expression turned somber. “There’s something else the Nexus did, as well. When someone died, all their knowledge, their experience, even to an extent their personality became a part of the Nexus, a process called Transference.”

“What?” Jen’s eyes widened. “You mean you stay alive after you die? So, what, you do a Dolly the Sheep and clone a new body so you can live forever?”

“No, unfortunately,” said Alex. “You can’t copy personality, individuality. It’s like that with machines like me as well. Every intelligence is unique, and can’t be replaced.” He looked up again. “But we could create a kind of *simulation* of their personality in the Nexus, so that others could benefit from their knowledge, their experience.”

Jen wasn’t sure she liked the idea of simulated dead people. “So all these dead people, what they knew, who they were... that’s all in the Imprint? In *me*? That sounds... a little bit weird. And creepy.”

“To you, perhaps,” said Vess. “But to us, it’s what made the Civilization great – death did not mean the irretrievable loss of all a person knew and brought to the lives of others. But now...” His three eyes half-closed, looking down at the ground. “Every life lost since that day is a life completely lost. All that they were, all that they knew, is gone forever.”

“Even pests should have chance of Transfer,” Soomarvilan added, pausing in his fruit-picking for a moment. “Still get to find out what they know after dead, and laugh at them. Ha! You dead, I still alive!”

“It applies to machines like me as much as to organic life, as well,” Alex said. “Just because at the most basic level I’m essentially a computer, that doesn’t mean *who I am* can be backed up. Only

what I know. Somebody could transfer every one of my memories into a brand-new Defender, but it wouldn't be *me*."

"So you're saying..." Jen tried to reconcile the face of the man she was looking at with the knowledge that he was actually a machine, a silver sphere. "You're saying you have a *soul*?"

"I suppose," he mused. "If you put it in human terms, then yes, I'm an intelligent, self-aware being with my own goals, my own desires, my own emotions. I just happen to be in a technological body rather than a biological one. And just so you know, I might have been given orders to protect you, but I'm not doing it just out of some unquestioning sense of duty. I'm also doing it because I care about you and I want to make sure you stay safe until I can get you back home. Which I will do as soon as..." He smiled and laughed a little. "*Humanly* possible."

Jen felt herself tingle. "You, ah... care about me?" she asked pointedly, putting her hands behind her back and slowly rubbing the toe of one shoe against the wet floor.

"*Oh-ho!*" crowed Soomarvilan. "Not-ugly-for-human girl in love with Defender!"

"No I'm *not!*" squealed Jen, whirling to face the Hooska.

Alex realised how what he'd said could be interpreted by a teenage girl. He *definitely* wasn't qualifying for the 'extremely intelligent machine' category today. "Actually, what I mea—"

Jen turned around just in time to see Alex, or his projection, disappear completely, his voice cut off in mid-sentence. The silver sphere remained suspended in mid-air at the height of his heart for a moment, then dropped to the floor with a loud thunk. The glowing lights on its surface went out. "Alex? Alex!"

Soomarvilan dropped his bowls with a clatter, fruit spilling everywhere as he rushed over. Vess followed, trampling fungus on the way. "This not good. Defender shut down!"

"That's impossible," Vess noted, with more urgency in his voice than usual.

"You see lights on?" Soomarvilan snapped, jabbing his fingers at the fallen sphere. "He gone!"

Jen picked it up. It was surprisingly heavy for its small size, and felt warm to the touch. "What's happened to him?" she asked, worried as much by Vess and Soomarvilan's sudden concern as by

Alex's disappearance. She turned the sphere over in her hands. The blue light was completely dark.

"He's been deactivated," Vess said.

"This very bad." Soomarvilan glanced nervously around the room. "Got to get you out! Something going on."

Jen grabbed her bag, almost without thinking dropping the sphere into it as Soomarvilan took her by the arm.

Something rose through one of the holes and moved slowly into the pantry, a white sphere about the size of a basketball, water dripping from it.

Jen stared at it. It seemed to be something coiled up tightly, slowly turning as if scanning the room.

"Kraken!" yelled Soomarvilan—

*~An approximate translation—*

—as he spun and grabbed her, running for the other hole.

Vess suddenly broke into a gallop, dropping through the hole as Soomarvilan dived for it, pushing Jen in front of him. She started to scream as she fell.

A soft explosion filled the room behind them.

## 10: Branchrunner

Jen fell.

And this time, Alex wasn't there to catch her.

The trunks of the megatrees dropped away below her in perfect perspective—

Something grabbed her left leg, something cold and dead that sent a stinging, burning pain through her bare skin. She jolted to a halt upside-down in mid-air, hard. The sudden stop almost shook Soomarvilan free, his body rushing past her face in a blur of green fur before he managed to lash his tail around her bag.

More pain as she took his weight on her shoulder. Somewhere below she heard a loud crash and a deep moaning noise. Vess.

The burning in her leg got worse. She looked up, squinting through the pain, to see a long white tentacle wrapped around it, stretching down from the hole in the tree trunk about six metres above. More tentacles filled the holes, thrashing and straining down toward her.

The tentacle contracted, jerking her upwards by about a foot. And another. The other tentacles reached out for her, almost translucent, rainwater dripping from their tips. Another couple of tugs and they would have her—

Soomarvilan grabbed her arm and pulled himself back up her body. With one free hand, he pulled open one of the pouches on his belt and snatched out a knife. He slashed at the tentacle—

The only thing holding them up!

The boneless limb split, its body writhing back into the mass above in pain. The severed tip squeezed Jen's leg even harder as she fell. She felt Soomarvilan moving, stretching out—

He grabbed a branch.

It snapped.

He grabbed another.

This one held. For a moment.

Jen felt herself swinging—

The branch broke. They tumbled through the air.

Soomarvilan reached out one last time—

The third branch held, better than he did. Jen heard a loud, wet crack from inside the Hooska's body as they swung again, smaller

branches clawing at her body. She tried to protect her eyes, feeling something slash across her cheek. Soomarvilan screamed.

A branch hit Jen in the upper back, snapping her head back against it. She fell again—

And landed painfully on another branch, a much larger one, the top flattened to form a path. Soomarvilan was under her legs, gasping. Jen struggled to sit up, tasting blood in her mouth. She'd bitten the inside of her cheek. She spat it out, dazed. "Are you okay?" she mumbled.

"No," wheezed Soomarvilan, baring his teeth. "Bones broken! Aaiiiii! Can't move arms! Legs hurt too." He tried to focus on her. "You?"

"I don't..." She managed to sit upright, and looked at her leg. The hideous tentacle was still there, digging into her skin. "Aahh! My foot! I can't feel my foot!" She felt panic rising.

"Kraken sting paralyse," Soomarvilan managed to say, forcing himself onto one side for a better look. "Have to cut off."

"My *foot*?" Jen screamed.

"Just... tentacle! But first, got to go! Kraken senders must be nearby! Looking for us."

Jen glanced around frantically. She couldn't see anyone. Yet. She looked up and saw that the tentacles had gone. "Can you walk?" she said, pain spiking through her as she managed to stand up, her numb foot dragging like a club.

"How I know? Surprised I still breathe!"

She gingerly helped Soomarvilan up, not sure where he was hurt. His fur felt wiry, like a terrier's. One of his arms was obviously broken, dangling limply from his shoulder with an ugly kink in the bone just above the upper elbow. The other two looked all right, but he was only able to move one of them. He grimaced.

"Legs... not *too* broken," he gasped.

"Can you walk?" she repeated. There was a low noise somewhere overhead, and she glanced up to see a shadow briefly pass over the foliage high above. Soomarvilan saw it too.

"I better," he grunted. "Kraken senders coming. That not Hooska aircraft, sound wrong."

"Oh God," Jen moaned. She looked around, trying to see where the branch led. "Where's Vess?"

“I not care!”

“We’ve got to find him! Come on.” She turned Soomarvilan so that he could put his good arm over her shoulder, and took hold of him around his tiny waist, balancing herself with her bag.

“Ai! Even not here, he still pest!”

Jen limped off along the branch, her left foot trailing over the wet bark as she fought to keep her balance. Soomarvilan weighed surprisingly little, and she was terrified that in his weakened state his legs might give way, pitching them both over the side. The noise from the unseen aircraft returned, louder and more threatening. It seemed to be circling overhead.

“Vess!” Jen called, seeing the Marshtreader lying on his side on a higher branch. For a moment she thought he was dead, then one of his legs moved weakly, toes opening in the gesture of welcome.

“Ah, there you are,” Vess said in a surprisingly normal voice.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m actually in quite considerable pain. I seem to have broken two of my legs. Most inconvenient.”

Vess’s branch crossed above hers; she stopped almost directly underneath him. “Can you move? The bad guys are coming!”

“Yes, I heard. It sounds as though they’re using some sort of Bakti trans-atmospheric vehicle, probably a shuttle or gunboat. The GC field generator makes a very distinctive—”

“You shut up!” said Soomarvilan, tail flicking. “Pest! We all die if you not move!”

“A point well made. I shall try to stand.” The big alien slowly rolled over, toes digging into the wood for purchase. “Yes, I’ve definitely broken two legs.”

“I break rest if you not hurry!” Soomarvilan yelled.

Jen looked up; the noise from the aircraft was getting closer, and she could see a dark shape through the branches above. “Which way’s the branchrunner station?”

“Along branch, down tree, round branch past home-tree,” said Soomarvilan.

“Can you make it?” she shouted up to Vess.

“I believe so. I’ll need to drop onto your branch – you might want to hold onto something.”

Jen braced herself as best she could against a small branch. With agonising slowness, Vess edged himself off the branch above, then suddenly slid free and dropped onto hers. The branch shook. Jen gasped as one of Vess's feet slipped over the side, but it hurriedly scabbled for a foothold, toes gouging holes in the bark. Vess stood there, swaying, the two back legs on his left side curled up under his body. One of them had a visible crack in the bony shell, a dark liquid leaking from it.

"Ouch," he said.

"Come on, we've got to go," Jen said, taking Soomarvilan's weight again. Vess turned and hobbled along the branch, moving sideways like a crab, right legs first. Jen followed. A hissing noise came from above and the whole branch shook, something exploding behind them. Splinters of wood showered past.

"Railgun," Vess observed, one eye turning to look back. Jen looked round to see an ugly hole ripped out of one of the main branches above them, a ghostly vapour trail pointing back at the sky.

"Who cares what gun?" snapped Soomarvilan. Two more trails appeared alongside the first, instantly followed by detonations as more branches blew apart. Jen shrieked as the branch beneath her bucked wildly, throwing her against Vess.

"Ouch," he said again. As the branch stopped shaking, Jen realised she'd landed on his broken legs.

"Sorry!" she said. Vess started moving again. They were almost at the next megatree. All around her, she could hear Hooska in the trees shouting in concern.

"Bad shots," said Soomarvilan. "They nowhere near us."

"You're *complaining*?" Jen squealed.

Vess reached the tree and reached out to grab the vines with his right legs, one at a time, before hopping from the branch and lowering his good left leg down. Jen wondered how much weight the straining vines could take. "They probably expected the kraken to get us. Or you, rather." He started to climb awkwardly down. "I believe Soomarvilan and myself are merely collateral."

"Oh, that make I feel better," Soomarvilan grumbled.

"I'm sure that once they commence a full scan, they will have no trouble finding us. Those shots were just to force us to show ourselves."

“Well, if they want capture hurting-ribs girl, they at least not use heavy weapons,” said Soomarvilan as Jen helped him to the tree. A series of sharp cracks came from above, something rushing down behind Jen and lighting up the jungle before exploding. She felt a wave of hot air blow past, and turned to see flames billowing along the branch behind them. “Ai! I and big mouth!”

People up in the trees started screaming warnings about the fire. “Coherent plasma pulse,” noted Vess from below.

“*Stop* that! Pest!” Soomarvilan levered himself off Jen. “No time to climb down. We do this fast way.” More cracks, more explosions of flame, this time along the branch on which Vess had landed.

“What do y—” Jen began – as Soomarvilan grabbed the trunk with two of his legs and wrapped his good arm around one of hers, then tugged her sharply over the side of the branch.

She cried out in fright, a cry that changed into one of pain as she came to a jarring stop, all her weight suddenly taken by her shoulder joint. Before she had a chance to react, Soomarvilan’s toes opened, dropping him and Jen at least three metres before he grabbed at the vines once more, jerking the pair to a halt. Jen yelled again, and again as he dropped twice more.

“Branch below,” he gasped, eyes narrowed with the effort of supporting her. “You try not bounce too much.”

He let go; Jen fell about two metres and landed heavily on the root of another branch. It was probably a good job that her left foot was numb, as it had hit first. A moment later, Soomarvilan dropped down beside her. One of his injured arms slapped against the wood, and he let out a loud yowl.

“Are you both all right?” asked Vess, still making his unsteady way down the vines.

“Yeah...” Jen said, pushing herself to her feet.

“Speak for self,” moaned Soomarvilan. Jen helped him up as Vess lowered himself onto the branch. She recognised where they were; there was a branchrunner car about twenty metres away.

“Come on!” She grabbed Soomarvilan’s waist again, almost using him as a crutch as she headed for the car. The aircraft overhead was shifting position, the low, fluttering buzz of its gravity control field moving around to her right.

She heard branches snapping high above. “They’re dropping from the aircraft,” Vess warned. “Probably in suits.”

Jen didn’t bother asking for clarification; they were at the car. She hauled Soomarvilan over the side and piled in after him. Vess all but threw himself into the back, landing upside-down. “Go! Go! Go!” she yelled at the car.

“Destination!” it demanded.

“Meniat security station,” Soomarvilan told it. “Emergency! We under fire! Call guard!”

“Doing,” said the car. The forcefield popped into place as it started moving. Jen looked back to see three figures, only one of them humanoid, wearing what looked like spacesuits drop through the foliage and fly toward them. All were carrying objects she didn’t recognise, but from the way they were holding them, they had to be guns. One of the figures snapped up its weapon. It flashed, and a vaporous green ball exploded against the forcefield roof, making it glow white. Another shot hit the body of the car itself, shaking it. A panel inside the cabin blew off, molten sparks spraying over Vess as he struggled to turn himself over. The car accelerated, the flying figures disappearing behind a megatree.

A puff of white powder burst from the open hole in the side of the cabin. “Fire extinguished,” said the car. “You hurt?”

Soomarvilan glared at the dashboard.

A drawer below the dash popped open. “Aid kit. Guard alerted, flyer on way.”

Jen grabbed the oval box containing the kit from the drawer and pulled it open, ignoring the tumbling jungle outside. There were other things to worry about. She had no idea what anything inside it was. She offered it to Soomarvilan, who snatched up a small blue cylinder. “Painkiller,” he said, jabbing one end of it against his chest. His whole body instantly relaxed. “Ahhhhh! That better.”

Jen looked in the kit for another of the cylinders. “Vess, do you need...?”

“Unfortunately, a Hooska painkiller would probably put me in a coma,” Vess told her, having just about turned himself upright. “I doubt they will be suitable for your use either.”

Soomarvilan sat up, smiling glassily. “Helping-me alien girl! I get kraken off.” He held up his knife, which wavered unsteadily in his

grip. Jen drew back nervously, but Soomarvilan leaned down and prodded at the end of the tentacle with the knife. It twitched. She watched in horrified fascination as he carefully slipped the tip of the knife underneath its dead-looking skin. “Thing with kraken,” he said, sounding oddly cheerful for someone with two broken arms, “is venom barbs. Just cut, they severed and stay in victim. Catch nerve exactly right, they retract. Then just break seal on suckers and peel off. Easy!” He started humming tunelessly as he probed with the knife. Jen could hear tiny hisses of air being released with each little stab.

“Are you sure you’re in a fit condition to do that?” Vess asked.

“Feh! Painkillers not affect motor functions or judgement. Much.” Humming again, he started to peel the end of the tentacle away from Jen’s leg.

“What *is* that thing?” she asked, the sight distracting her from the jungle twisting past outside the car. Her skin had darkened under its grip, a blotchy rash surrounding sucker marks with tiny bloody holes at their centres.

“A genoweapon,” said Vess. “A creature, from one of the moons of Tuk Saka, I believe, that’s been genetically altered and combined with technology. Illegally, of course.”

“Use to grab prey,” Soomarvilan explained, still merrily plucking the remaining suckers from Jen’s leg. “Send into confined space, explode, grab all, paralyse, contract! Everyone trapped. Usually break many bones, sometimes kill too if unlucky.”

“But who sent it? And how did they... Alex!” She fumbled in her bag, for a moment panicking that the sphere had fallen out while she was hanging from the tree. Fortunately it was still there, though now cold.

“I don’t know how they could have disabled a Defender without using high-yield weapons,” said Vess. “But it’s possible that’s how they found you. They knew Alex would be with you, so they tracked him and used his position as a target for the kraken.”

“So how do we... restart him?”

“No idea,” Soomarvilan said, working his knife under the last part of the tentacle. “Defenders not supposed be able to shut down! Here, you want souvenir?” He held up the tentacle, which wobbled disgustingly.

“Ew, no!” Soomarvilan shrugged and dropped it with a splat.

Vess looked out of the car. “We’re approaching the main branch.” Jen saw the highway above them, the traffic ahead lighter than before. “Car, how long will it take to reach the security station?”

“Six minute.”

“Where gunboat?” asked Soomarvilan, his smile fading, replaced by a look of suspicion. Jen looked into the sky. The jungle canopy was more patchy here, the main branch rising higher above the ground as they merged onto it. To Jen’s dismay, the car took up a disorienting position on the branch’s side, the horizon running almost vertically ahead of her.

“I can’t see it,” Vess said, looking out of the back of the car.

“I can,” Jen gulped, spotting the aircraft coming over the top of the main branch behind them. It was moving at a low speed relative to the cars, searching. “They’re going to see us!”

“You think?” said Soomarvilan, any good feelings from the painkiller apparently already gone. “We only branchrunner on planet with human and Marshtreader inside!”

“We could opacify the forcefield,” offered Vess.

“Why not paint target too! We be only car with solid top! Pest!”

“Can’t we go any faster?” Jen asked. The aircraft, a blunt wedge of burn-streaked metal about twenty metres long painted in a weathered blue camouflage pattern, was getting closer.

“The car is automatic,” Vess told her, matter-of-factly.

“Well, de-automatic it! Turn the computer off or something!”

Soomarvilan pulled himself up to the dashboard. “I got manual override! I Council member, got code.”

“Use it use it *use it!*” Jen squeaked.

Soomarvilan winced, flapping his ears. “Ai! Noisy girl! Car, I Soomarvilan Pik-Pik, member of General Council. Give I manual control now!”

“Code?” demanded the car. Soomarvilan spat out a stream of hooting noises which Jen’s translator informed her were letters of the Hooska alphabet that had no English equivalent. “Approved. Manual control active.”

Two long, thin arms popped out of the dash, the ends morphing into rounded grips designed for Hooska hands. Soomarvilan stared expectantly at Jen.

“What?” she asked, after a moment.

“You drive.”

“I – I can’t drive! I’m only sixteen!”

“You want reach seventeen? Then drive!”

“I don’t know how!”

Soomarvilan grabbed her right wrist with his one good arm and slapped it onto one of the grips, then did the same with her left. “Two hands to drive! I only got one! Marshreader feet wrong shape! And, I drugged! You drive!” He slapped her left hand. “That direction!” He slapped her right hand. “That speed! Not zerospace science! Now go!”

Jen gingerly pushed forward with her right hand. The grip was hinged at its base, and moved easily. The car jolted.

“Manual control on,” the car said. “You want disable anticollision system?”

“No!” they all yelled.

Jen pushed harder on the ‘throttle’. Other cars started to drop behind on each side, their branchrunner holding a straight line.

“I believe they’ve seen us,” Vess remarked. Jen looked over her shoulder to see the aircraft accelerate after them.

“Oh crap! What do we do?”

“Go faster, go faster!” Soomarvilan slapped his hand down on her right and pushed it. The branchrunner lurched, then shot forward. The back of another car raced right at them, dead ahead. “And *steer!*”

Jen squealed and pushed the grip in her left hand as hard to the right as she could. The result was massively more extreme than she’d expected. Instead of turning, the car slipped sideways with tremendous speed, missing the anticipated collision by several metres and slewing crazily across the lanes of traffic, passing right over the top of the main branch and dropping down the other side. The speed of the move was so much that everyone in the car not only was thrown to the left, but actually rose slightly out of their seats as the centrifugal force overcame the branchrunner’s own internal gravity.

Jen, panicking, jammed the left grip back in the opposite direction. The car responded immediately, whipping back around the main branch anticlockwise just as the aircraft passed overhead the other way, trying to follow their first change of direction.

A large car rushed towards the branchrunner's left side. The dashboard let out a shrill beeping as their car juddered to a stop inches from the other vehicle then sped past it, the grip in Jen's left hand forcing itself back to the central position. Seven or eight Hooska inside the other branchrunner reacted in surprise. "Anticollision system not work if driving bad," the car said accusingly.

"Shut up!" Terrifying speeds or not, the controls were, if anything, less complicated than a videogame. Jen looked for the aircraft, which was swinging back into view over the top of the branch. She pushed left again, not as hard, swinging the branchrunner down onto the underside of the main branch through the lanes of traffic. Trees flicked past above her head.

Their car was going at full speed. She realised that the pursuing aircraft could probably go much faster, and pulled the right grip back hard. The branchrunner braked, Vess sliding forward along the cabin floor and banging into the back of her seat. "Ouch. That was one of my *broken* legs." Other cars shot past them, their occupants gesticulating in fury. Jen didn't need her translator to tell her what the hand signals meant.

"What you doing?" shrieked Soomarvilan. "You crazy!"

"Trying to lose them!" Jen yelled back. She looked ahead to the left and right, waiting to catch sight of the aircraft again. It dipped into view, from Jen's perspective upside-down, some distance ahead on the left. She rolled the car slowly clockwise back around the main branch, sliding it between two lanes of traffic, the anticollision alarm going nearly as mad as the Hooska in the surrounding branchrunners. "If we can just stay on the opposite side of the branch, we can stay away from them until help gets here!"

An extremely loud crackling noise shook the car, sounding like the rapid-fire spitting of a fireworks display. A moment later there was a huge bang, and a flaming, smoking object tumbled through the canopy and exploded in the jungle below. "What was *that*?" gasped Jen.

"That help," said Soomarvilan, his eyes wide.

"That sounded like a field-forced particle cannon," said Vess, "in the gigawatt range, at least." Jen and Soomarvilan glared at him. "But... that's not important at this moment."

“High-branch defecators shot down security flyer!” Soomarvilan growled.

Jen took her left hand off the grip in shock. “Oh my God!”

“Ai! Ai! Ai!” He grabbed her hand and shoved it back down on the controls. “At least *we* not dead! Keep driving, crazy girl!”

Not sure what to do, she pushed the throttle forward again, sliding the branchrunner up the side of the main branch. The racing jungle moved into a position approximating ‘below’.

“Aaaaaagh!” screeched Soomarvilan, staring out of the car’s right side at the aircraft, which was rising over the other side of the main branch almost level with them. “Backbackback!”

Jen jammed the steering grip to the left as fire flashed from a turret in the aircraft’s nose, the entire branch shaking with the thunderous noise as intense orange beams left flickering afterimages across her sight. Another car was hit squarely by the beams, blowing apart and sending chunks of debris spinning past. Their branchrunner shook and everyone was slammed against the right wall of the cabin; something had hit them.

“I boned,” the car reported in an irate voice, before anyone had time to recover. “ICS damaged, anticollision damaged, grid traction damaged, forcefield damaged, emergency cells damaged. You get out quick!”

Jen pulled herself upright. “Where’s the nearest junction and what’s an ICS?” she said to Soomarvilan, who had fallen off his seat.

“Inertial Compensation System,” Vess told her, unhelpfully.

“What does that do?” Jen asked as she jerked the grip to one side to dodge a branchrunner ‘truck’ looming ahead. She suddenly found herself rising into the air as though the car had hit a huge bump, only her grip on the controls stopping her from banging against the forcefield bubble. Soomarvilan had no such luck, shooting upwards and slapping against the field, which crackled with static-like interference. She pulled the steering control sharply back to the neutral position and dropped back onto her seat. Soomarvilan dropped back down beside her with a screech.

“It stops *that* happening,” said Vess. “Without the ICS, the car’s systems can’t respond fast enough to counteract the G-forces your driving is generating.”

“What, you scientist?” yelled Soomarvilan, draped over his seat. He wrapped his legs around it. “Watch for aircraft, pest!”

A ring of Hooska letters blew past. Jen looked ahead to see a thick branch joining their own. The traffic grew more dense as other branchrunners merged into the main flow. “We need to get off at the next junction!” she said, looking for an exit. The branchrunners ahead were taking on a formation she hadn’t seen before, the cars slowing and clustering together, a single empty lane opening between them. “What’re they doing?”

“I believe,” Vess said, peering over the seats, “that the computers controlling the branch have decided your driving is hazardous and have created a straight passage for you to go through.”

“No!” Jen cried, seeing the trap. “We’ll be a sitting duck!”

“What a duck?”

“We’ve got to keep moving!” She threw the steering grip as hard to the right as she dared, feeling her stomach rise as the car rolled around the main branch. The cars ahead started to scatter, reacting to her unexpected manoeuvre and trying to minimise the chance of a collision.

“We’ve missed the junction,” Vess remarked.

“I don’t *caaaaaaaare!*” Jen screamed, wanting nothing more than to close her eyes as the branchrunners ahead fled in all directions like panicked animals. The first few cars flashed past like bullets, Jen hauling desperately at the steering grip to guide their branchrunner between them, but the traffic had built up too much. Their car glanced off the side of another with a horrid screech, drifting back in the other direction before hitting another car side-on and spinning away. Jen was thrown clear of the controls, crashing against the side of the cabin. Vess’s complaints were drowned out by a pulsing buzz from beneath the floor of the car, the sound of whatever mechanism powered the branchrunner straining to the point of overload. She smelled burning.

“Get controls!” Soomarvilan screamed, clinging to his seat with all his might as the car continued to spin. Jen lunged for the grips against the nauseating G-forces, falling dizzily on her side as she managed to grab the steering control. The car straightened out suddenly, knocking her forehead against the cabin wall below the

dashboard. Bright colours flashed in front of her eyes. She swore under her breath.

“They’re closing in,” reported Vess. Jen pulled herself up, the branchrunner slewing to one side as she put her weight on the controls. She looked back. The aircraft was a dark block against the sky, growing fast. Ignoring the scattering traffic ahead, she jammed the throttle as far forward as she could, the acceleration knocking her back against her seat. The branchrunner clipped another couple of the skittering cars before she straightened it out, clearing the jam and immediately sliding clockwise to the underside of the main branch.

The car shook, once, twice. Explosions on the branch behind them. In the corner of her eye she saw another shattered branchrunner spiralling down into the trees far below.

There would have been people inside it. Aliens, but still people.

“We’ve got to get off the main road!” she said, desperately looking for a junction. The branch was rising up above the jungle, the megatrees giving way to a broad expanse of more normal-sized vegetation below. Another sign shot past. She had no idea what it said, but had worked out by now that the chevrons pointed to junctions. She followed them, pulling the car around the branch.

“What you doing?” asked Soomarvilan, more surprised than anything.

“Getting off the main branch before anyone else gets killed!” She saw the junction ahead, a branch twisting away from the main route down into the sprawling jungle, and aimed the car at it.

“No!” Soomarvilan yelled. “Nononononoooo!”

It was too late; she’d already taken the exit. Jen tried as hard as she could to keep the car on the inside of the turns as the branch curved and narrowed, dropping towards the canopy of leaves. “What! ‘No’ what?”

“You no read sign!” Soomarvilan shrieked, curling up even tighter. “*Dead end!*”

Jen’s eyes bugged wide as she saw the branch ahead come to an abrupt stop. A small hut growing from the wood and a single car marked the terminus. She yanked the throttle back hard – but the branchrunner had already shot off the end of the road and sailed into thin air, arcing down towards the trees below.

“I hope the crash systems weren’t also damaged,” she dimly heard Vess say, obscured by her scream.

“You think of that *now*?” Soomarvilan said in disgust. “*Pesssst!*”  
The charging jungle swallowed them.

## 11: Predators

Much to her surprise, Jen realised she was still alive.

She could hear muffled noises around her, strange, distant honks and chirps. She tried to open her eyes, but there was something thick and damp over her face.

Could she move? Yes, but not easily. It felt almost as though she was underwater. Upside-down, at that.

Suddenly struck with a terror of drowning, she convulsed, thrashing her arms and legs and trying to right herself. As she moved, the pressure slowing her quickly eased.

She managed to force her eyes open, whatever had been on her face dispersing as quickly as the stuff surrounding her limbs. She was in the branchrunner, or what was left of it, but her sight was distorted by something, a blue liquid. No, a gel, like hair gel.

Why was she floating inside a giant blob of hair gel?

With a faint hissing sound like the popping of a million tiny soap bubbles, the gel slowly dissolved around her, lowering her gently against the side of the wrecked branchrunner's cabin. The front of the car was wrapped around a tree trunk, a huge gouge and torn bark above showing exactly where it had hit. The gel over her face dried and crumbled to nothing, and she took in a deep, gasping breath.

And wished she hadn't. The jungle floor stank of rotting leaves. She slid out of the car and landed on her front in a big, wet pile of them. Reluctantly putting her hands into the revolting mass, Jen pushed herself to her feet. Every muscle in her body ached. Her left foot was starting to tingle and itch, feeling returning. She tried to move her toes inside her shoe, with minor success.

There was a soft thud behind her. She painfully turned to see Soomarvilan, still covered in patches of gel, crawling from the car onto the muddy ground. Vess was upside-down in the rear of the car, all his legs curled over his body like a dead spider. One of his eyes cautiously opened and peered around.

"I see the crash gel worked," he said.

"Aagh," Soomarvilan grunted. "Aaagh, argh. Painkiller wearing off. Either that or I in whole new level of pain."

Jen brushed at her face, finding nothing left of the gel but a dusty residue. She started brushing at her chest, stopping in alarm when she

saw blood mixed in with the dirt on her blouse. Her fingers had blood on them too. “Am I bleeding?”

“Your blood red?” asked Soomarvilan tiredly.

“Yes!”

“Then you bleeding. Big cut on face. Would have told earlier, only didn’t want distract from driving.” He gave her an angry look. “Not that mattered!”

Jen rubbed her cheek with the back of one hand, more blood smearing onto her skin. How deep was the cut? Was she going to be scarred? “Are you both okay? We’ve got to move.” She made out the fluttering buzz of the aircraft over the bizarre jungle noises, getting closer.

Vess slowly rolled over and toppled out of the branchrunner like a huge six-legged coin. He rose to his full height. “I don’t believe I’ve broken any more legs.”

“You lucky, feels like I broke every bone left in body!” Soomarvilan complained. He leaned against the car and used his uninjured arm to pull himself to his feet.

“Can you walk?” Jen asked.

“Bad guys coming, I better *run!*” he told her.

“There was some sort of station on the end of the branch we left,” said Vess, tipping his body back to get a better look at the sky. “We should head back there and try to summon help.”

“Which way is it?” Jen asked. There was an awkward silence. “Oh.” Soomarvilan made a disgusted snorting sound in his throat.

“In any event,” Vess continued as the sound of the aircraft grew louder, “we should move away from the branchrunner as quickly as possible.”

“Okay.” Jen picked up her bag and went to help Soomarvilan. “Which way?”

Soomarvilan pointed into the jungle. “Why that way?” asked Vess.

“Because it way I pointed! Pest! What difference it make?”

“Come on.” Jen took some of Soomarvilan’s weight and set off into the trees, Vess hobbling along behind. The sweaty heat was already starting to tire her. “Do you know where we are?”

A loud noise echoed through the jungle, a deep howling roar. Soomarvilan froze. “Tell you where we not,” he gulped. “*Near safety!*”

Jen looked nervously into the mist-shrouded trees ahead. “What was *that?*”

“That ancient predator,” Soomarvilan said, his voice unsteady. “We in species preserve! This bad. This very bad.”

“Perhaps,” Vess said dryly, “you could ward it off by throwing nuts and laughing.”

The aircraft noise was almost overhead. “We’ve got to keep moving,” Jen insisted, practically dragging Soomarvilan down a slope with her. “The animals don’t know we’re here, but those guys do, and they’ve got guns.”

“We just need to stay ahead of them long enough for Hooska security to arrive in force,” said Vess, picking up the pace as best he could. They were heading into a gully, the mist starting to thicken. “Our pursuers might have a gunboat, but it should be outmatched by any defence drones or Defenders that arrive. They’ll be forced to withdraw.”

“Yes, then they stop trying to catch and just try to kill!” Soomarvilan barked.

As if the people aboard the aircraft had heard, the air behind them rippled and crackled with the deafening sound of its main guns. A shockwave rushed past them, visible in the air as it blew away the mist and knocked all three off their feet. The screams of frightened animals and birds erupted around them.

“That was the branchrunner,” Vess said, unnecessarily.

Jen helped Soomarvilan to his three feet as the steamy mist rolled back in around her. “Come on, come on! They can’t nuke the whole jungle to get us, can they?” She paused. “*Can they?*”

“Possibly,” Vess said.

“You’re not helping!”

“But unlikely.” They continued into the gully. “They appear to be mercenaries, or bounty hunters – the gunboat is definitely Bakti, and quite modern.”

“Orbital control get tails bitten for letting *that* through,” said Soomarvilan threateningly.

“They were probably using a forged or stolen transponder. Without the Nexus, it’s almost impossible to verify every—”

“This is all totally interesting,” Jen interrupted, “but we’re being chased! When will the Defenders get here?” Wait, Defenders—

“Don’t know if any on planet,” Soomarvilan said. “Drones definitely on way after security flyer shot down, though. Five minutes, maybe ten.”

Jen reached into her bag, fingertips hunting for the feel of metal. Why the hell was she still carting her schoolbooks around with her? There! She pulled the heavy sphere out. “Maybe – maybe we can get him working again!”

“He shut down!” Soomarvilan objected.

“Well, doesn’t he have a reset button or something?” She prodded at the darkened indentation in the sphere’s surface with her thumb.

“Do *you* have a reset button?” Vess asked rhetorically. Jen kept turning the ball over in her hand, feeling for anything on its smooth surface that might be a switch or control.

“Come on, Alex. Come on, come back...” The sphere remained dark. She shook it. “Come on! Wake up!” Pulling her other hand from Soomarvilan, who slumped against her with a yelp, she slapped the sphere a couple of times. “Come *on!*”

Soomarvilan and Vess both stared at her. Jen stopped walking for a moment. “My Dad, er, does it to his computer back home,” she said sheepishly. “It works. Sometimes.”

“What kind lousy clockwork computers you use on Earth?” Soomarvilan spluttered.

A tiny, faint light appeared on the sphere’s surface, flickering for a moment before going out again. They all stared at it.

“Keep hitting! Keep hitting!” said Soomarvilan.

Jen raised her hand again – as a white line in the air flicked past and hit the ground about ten metres away.

The wet soil exploded upwards with a huge *whump*, showering them with dirt and rotting leaves as they were thrown to the ground by another shockwave. Jen’s ears rang as she woozily saw that a crater had appeared, wet debris cascading down all around it.

The aircraft passed right overhead, slowing. Another white vapour trail hissed down, this one hitting a tree behind them. The tree blew apart with a bang, a section of trunk a good two metres in

length blasted into splinters. Jen shrieked as pieces hit her. The severed top of the tree dropped almost vertically and hit the ground next to what was left of the stump, then slowly toppled over. Everyone scrambled through the carpet of slimy, decomposing leaves, frantically trying to get clear of the flailing branches.

An amplified voice boomed from above. “Stay where you are. We want the human.” In reply, Soomarvilan made a hand gesture.

~*Accusation of interbreeding with ground animals*, Jen’s translator told her.

She managed to stand, ears still pounding from the noise of the explosions. The slope they were on continued down into the mist; if they kept going the aircraft wouldn’t be able to get any lower, and might lose track of them. She turned to Soomarvilan and Vess, who were both struggling to get up. “Come on, we’ve got—” She realised something was missing. “Alex! Where’s Alex?” The silver sphere was gone, dropped or thrown into the mud when she was knocked down. “Alex!”

Vess tugged at her sleeve with a foot. “We don’t have time.”  
“But—”

“Move!” added Soomarvilan. “*Move!*” Grimacing in pain, he started to pull Jen down the slope, Vess nudging her along from behind. Reluctantly, she went with them, constantly glancing back over her shoulder in the hope of spotting a glint of metal among the leaves. None appeared.

“Stop now!” boomed the voice. Jen shot a hand gesture of her own in its direction. The slope was getting steeper and steeper, and she was having trouble staying upright, a problem even the multi-legged aliens were sharing. For a moment she was horribly reminded of the railway embankment. Another shot hissed from the unseen aircraft, but this one was stopped short, slamming into the upper part of a tree some distance away and severing the topmost branches.

“Missed!” Soomervilan crowed. “Ha! Useless fu—”

He slipped, two of his legs shooting out from under him in a flurry of rotting vegetation. The third buckled, toppling him over—  
Pulling Jen with him.

She swung her arms in a desperate attempt to keep her balance, but Soomarvilan had already dragged her past the point of no return. She tumbled down the slope after the screeching Hooska.

There was nothing to grab – the sodden topsoil was too loose, and the trees and smaller plants growing on the slope too far away. All she could do was dig her feet in to try and slow herself.

A line of rocks appeared ahead – with nothing beyond but mist and the tops of trees—

Soomarvilan disappeared over the edge with a scream.

She jammed her feet down harder and spread her arms wide to try and brake herself. She hit a rock feet-first. Sudden pain burst in her right knee. She was going over—

Her hand hooked around the edge of a rock, cold and hard and absolutely solid.

Jen stopped, both feet over empty space. She lay there quivering for a moment, staring up at the patches of sky through the canopy...

A noise from below.

Soomarvilan!

Jen pulled herself back and rolled over, looking down. A cliff-face dropped vertically into the mist below. For a moment she couldn't see Soomarvilan – then spotted the end of a prehensile green tail, wrapped tightly around some gnarled plants clinging to the cliff an arm's-length below.

“Soo!” she called. “Are you okay?”

“What *you* think?” came the reply. It looked like he was swinging freely from an overhang. The plants were straining, little fragments of dirt shaking loose and dropping over the edge. “I stuck! Can't reach side!”

“Hold on!” she told him. “I'll try and pull you up!” The Hooska didn't weigh much compared to a human. She doubted she could lift him all the way up, but maybe she could get him close enough for him to grab onto the cliff himself.

She put down her bag, then bent over, grabbing the rock behind her with one hand and stretching for Soomarvilan's tail with the other. It was just out of reach. She would have to let go of the rock.

Probably not a smart move, but...

Her hand clamped around Soomarvilan's tail. Got him!

Now all she had to do was pull him up far enough for her to grab the rock again—

He was too heavy. She strained and saw the tension on the roots slacken, but she just wasn't strong enough to lift him. And, she

realised with horror, if she let him go again, the overstressed roots would probably give way altogether.

She tried again, every muscle hurting as she pulled, willing Soomarvilan to rise, but it wasn't enough.

A rhythmic thumping noise behind her, quickly getting closer, but she couldn't look round—

Something grabbed her round the waist. She gasped.

“Whatever you do, don't let go of him,” said Vess. He planted a foot on either side of her, tightened his hold, then straightened his legs to their full height. Jen rose into the air with a startled cry, gripping Soomarvilan's tail as hard as she could as the rest of him came into view over the cliff edge. As soon as he was clear, Vess rolled back, landing heavily on one side and practically throwing Jen and Soomarvilan onto the ground behind him.

“Thanks,” she gasped.

Soomarvilan moaned in pain. Jen saw that he'd managed to land on both his broken arms, his good hand clenching in the air. “Watch where you throw I! Pest...”

“You're welcome,” Vess said with a faint hint of amusement.

Jen rolled onto her knees. “Where's the plane?”

“I think they've moved off—”

“Great!”

“—to drop people into the jungle.”

“Not great.”

“We better move,” Soomarvilan said.

Jen took his arm and helped him to his feet, looking into the ravine. “That way's out.” She glanced each way along the cliff top. Neither direction seemed to offer anything good. “Which way do we go?”

Vess righted himself, his injured legs curling back up under his body. He pointed with a toe to the right. “I believe the branch station is in that direction.”

“How much longer till help gets here?”

“Few minutes only,” Soomarvilan said.

Jen took his weight over her shoulders again. Feeling in her left foot had almost completely returned, as had the burning in her leg where the kraken had gripped it. “Then let's go. Oh, wait!” She

quickly opened her bag and took out her books. “If I throw these the other way, they might think we’ve gone that direction!”

“Or more likely,” Vess countered, “they might think it was a simple decoy and follow us.”

“Okay then,” Jen said, “we’ll throw them in both directions and confuse them!” She flung the textbooks both ways, taking a certain pleasure in the act, and set off.

“They probably still track, depends on suit gear,” said Soomarvilan.

“God, you two are a right pair of optimists, aren’t you?” At least the thick, wet leaves on the ground left few footprints behind them. Jen was surprised to see that her own faint tracks were the easiest to spot, Vess’s broad feet spreading his weight out. “Can you hear the plane?”

“It circling,” Soomarvilan said, cocking his head to one side.

“Which way?”

“Ahead.”

Jen wondered if that meant the three figures she’d seen at the branchrunner station had been dropped behind them, to trap them between two forces. “We’ve got to get away from the ravine.”

Vess broke into an unsteady canter and passed her as they angled away from the cliff. “We should hurry. I believe I just heard something behind us.”

Soomarvilan turned his head, the hairs in his ears bristling. “Someone not set GC field to Hoosk gravity properly. Repulsor making noise.”

Jen couldn’t hear anything, but decided that with ears as big as his, Soomarvilan had the advantage. She caught up with Vess, Soomarvilan struggling in her grip to pick up the pace. “How far behind are they?” she asked, dropping her voice to a forced whisper.

“Seventy, eighty metres.” Not far enough. “They stopped at ravine. Probably looking for track.”

They entered a dense stand of trees, which Jen saw were a mixture of at least three kinds. One had low, widely-spread branches, which might slow their pursuers if they were using their gravity fields to fly rather than moving on foot. On the other hand, Vess was being slowed by them as well, having to bend his knees to get under the bottommost overhanging limbs.

“Stay out from low branches,” Soomarvilan warned, but Jen was distracted by a sudden movement nearby that made her heart thud. She thought for an instant that one of the people following them had caught up... but it was just some of the mad little birds, flits, she’d seen at Soomarvilan’s. They dropped out of the trees and probed the plants growing on the trunks, wings humming softly.

For the first time in a while, she managed a tiny smile at the sight. “Aren’t they good luck?” she asked—

Something snapped out from one of the low trees with a wet slurping sound, a long, stretchy brown bag of leathery flesh. Three of the flits vanished inside it, nothing left but a couple of spinning feathers. The other birds darted off in panic. The thing retracted into the foliage again before Jen had time to blink. A moment later, her reactions caught up and she jumped in fright.

“You think they lucky?” chided Soomarvilan. “Stay out from low branches!”

“What was that?” Jen squeaked.

“Meeska. Tree predator. Not move around much, but attack fast. Marstreader too big, but I and you make good meal. Crack head with tongue, suck brains out!”

“Avoid low branches! Avoid low branches,” Jen told herself, hurriedly working out a new path that skirted any of the trees the meeska had been in by a wide margin.

Somewhere ahead, the aircraft’s guns crackled again. Another sound was mixed in with the noise, a rapid series of low, hissing thuds.

“Drones arrive,” said Soomarvilan, sounding slightly more upbeat. The firing continued.

“Can they beat the plane?” Jen asked, helping him over a huge root and glancing back. Still no sign of pursuit.

Another round of fire, punctuated by an explosion. “That one not,” Soomarvilan noted grimly.

Something ran through the trees toward them, an animal that looked like a fat rabbit, only with striped brown and green fur and six legs. Jen pulled Soomarvilan aside as the frightened creature raced past and disappeared into the mist. She could hear other animals running nearby.

“The noise is scaring them,” said Vess.

The roar Jen had heard earlier sounded again, this time a lot louder. “And that’s scaring *me!*” she told him.

“Chayka,” said Soomarvilan, with alarm. He raised his head, ears wide open. “Not far away.”

Vess paused for a moment, listening, then continued, moving in a slightly different direction. “We should be able to avoid it. In any event, my body chemistry is poisonous to it.”

“Yes,” Soomarvilan groused, “when you ground-up bits in chayka stomach, you have last laugh!”

The battle overhead continued, a new weapon sound added. For once, Vess didn’t take time out to identify it. There was another explosion.

“Two drone down,” said Soomarvilan, worried. “Gunboat better-armed than I thought. Maybe bounty hunters better too—”

“They are,” said a harsh voice from above.

A bolt of green fire shot down through the branches and hit Vess, exploding on impact. With a booming cry of pain the Marshthead fell, two of his legs gone.

“Vess!” Jen screamed. A humanoid figure descended ahead of her, humanoid, wearing angular armour and carrying a long slab of black metal in one hand. Camouflage patterns on the armour shifted as it moved. Its face was partly hidden behind a wraparound black visor; all Jen could see was a three-pointed split filled with some kind of membrane where a mouth should be. Its skin was the colour of a corpse.

The end of the black slab pointed at her and Vess. “Drop him,” said the alien. The membrane pulsed when it spoke. Its feet touched the ground, and it advanced, ducking to avoid branches.

“Do as scumsack say,” Soomarvilan said, trying to push himself free of Jen. “He going kill I anyway. Better you not hurt.”

“But—”

“Let go I!” he ordered. Reluctantly, she released him. Soomarvilan took an unsteady step away from her. “Hey! Scumsack!” he called to the approaching alien. “It true you Vicharians genetic mix of Sogo gutworm, and crap?”

The alien didn’t answer, instead continuing its advance and pointing its weapon at Soomarvilan. Jen couldn’t watch, turning away in terrified anticipation—

There was a wet slurping sound. “Ha!” Soomarvilan cried in triumph.

She looked back. The alien’s head and part of its shoulder were inside the revolting mouth-bag of a meeska in the tree above. The bag tightened, showing the shape of the alien through the pulsing skin. The bounty hunter had dropped its gun, and started clawing at the bag. Its feet, kicking wildly, were lifted off the ground as the meeska tried to pull it up into the branches.

“Get gun! Get!” yelled Soomarvilan. Jen broke into a run, covering the metres in moments. The alien was fumbling for something attached to a belt on the armour. She grabbed the fallen gun. Apart from some holes moulded into it, forming a grip for the alien’s four-fingered hand, it was completely featureless. “Shoot!”

She turned it over and over, desperately looking for some kind of recognisable trigger. “I can’t!” she wailed. “I don’t know how!”

The alien had got the object from its belt – another, smaller gun – and lifted its hand to point it up into the tree—

Something pulsed in the bag, an object inside it uncoiling from above and striking like a snake. There was a muffled crack. The alien’s entire body convulsed, then went slack, dropping the weapon. Soomarvilan stumbled to Jen, grabbing at the gun with his uninjured arm. “You aim! Give!” He slapped at her hand, wrapping his own around the grip when she let go. “Point at meeska! Quick!”

Hoisting the gun in both hands, Jen aimed it up into the tree. Soomarvilan’s fingers tightened. A single shot blasted into the tree. Jen cringed, feeling the heat from the green fire as it exploded. The bag instantly went slack, the alien dropping out and landing on the wet ground with a metallic clatter of armour. The visor had been broken in two, a large, messy hole visible in the alien’s head behind it. Jen looked away, nauseated.

Soomarvilan let go of the gun, reaching down and picking up the other dropped weapon. “You take this,” he said. “Leave rifle, it too big for you.” Jen put down the rifle and took the other gun, which reminded her of a TV remote control in shape.

“You should keep it,” she said. “I don’t know how to use a gun.”

Soomarvilan jabbed a finger at the gun. “This safe end. That dangerous end. Point dangerous end at bad guys and push button!”

he told her. “Easy! You run – I slow you down too much. Others here any second. I look after legless pest there.”

“I still have two working ones,” Vess called in a weak voice. “And we should stay together.”

“Yes, that way all die in same place at same time. Very convenient. For *them!*” He took the grip of the rifle and started dragging it towards Vess. “I cause others trouble. You run!”

“No!” Jen said, following him. “I can’t leave—”

“Run, crazy girl!” Soomarvilan screeched. “They coming! *Run!*”

Jen choked back her tears and turned, bolting into the jungle.

## 12: Prey

Jen ran. Behind her, she heard the sizzling sound of the rifle firing. She had no idea if Soomarvilan had seen the other aliens, or was just trying to draw them away from her.

She kept running, even in her haste staying away from any tree that might be home to a meeska. The sound of Soomarvilan's wild shooting faded behind her. She realised the aerial battle had ended, but had no idea who had won.

Her breath burned in her throat. She couldn't keep running. Legs trembling, she staggered to a stop, leaning against a tree and trying to take in the hot, thick air in rasping breaths. The alien gun felt heavy in her hand. A matt rectangle of dark metal, slightly curved at the 'safe' end; it *did* look like a remote, only with just one button.

A noise above, something moving through the high branches, pushing leaves aside. An animal?

No, one of the aliens. She could hear a faint noise, a fluttering hum like a much quieter version of the sound the aircraft had made.

For a moment she thought about hiding, but dismissed the idea. The sound was getting closer, coming straight for her. The alien had obviously found her with whatever super-advanced scanners it had in its suit. Run, or—

Almost without thinking, she aimed the gun in the direction of the approaching noise, pushing her thumb on the button – and fighting not to close her eyes as it unleashed a rapid stream of dazzling light pulses. She waved the weapon around, hosing the beams wildly into the trees. Leaves and pieces of branches cascaded down. The fluttering sound became louder and faster, more urgent as it moved away. Jen moved the gun to follow the sound. There was an odd noise from that direction, a momentary hiss like a hot pan being dunked into water. Had she hit him?

The gun stopped firing. A dim red light glowed next to the firing button as she pressed it again. Out of power, or overheated. Either way, it was useless.

Hide, or run?

She had to run. The alien knew where she was, and now that she'd stopped firing would come back any second. She picked a

direction that would take her away from the alien's last position, and vaulted over the tree's roots.

She managed ten steps before realising she'd made a mistake. The trees thinned out ahead. Dark, rotting logs lay on the ground, surrounded by ferns and shoots – there'd been a fire, leaving a clearing. She vaulted one of the logs, looking around in alarm. She had to get back into cover—

The fluttering sound of the GC field returned, behind her.

“Stop!” yelled a voice, cold, female.

Jen involuntarily glanced back – and in that fraction of a second misjudged her leap over another log. A broken stub of a branch caught her foot. She tripped and landed hard on her side.

The fluttering noise grew louder as the alien came into view. Non-humanoid, hovering several metres above the ground, it wore an armoured suit that reminded her of a turtle's shell standing on its end. A dark, glossy canopy was offset below the left shoulder, an evil-looking and very large gun attached to a turret on the right. Mechanical arms, seven in all, were folded against its chest.

The gun was locked on her.

Jen gasped in pain as she forced herself to sit up. She'd somehow kept hold of the gun when she fell, and as she moved she accidentally pointed it right at the alien. Whether she'd pushed the firing button or not, it didn't matter, because the gun was dead, and now so was she—

Two things happened simultaneously.

A vapour trail hissed from the alien's gun, so fast she didn't see it pass – it was just *there*, inches from her head. The gun itself vanished in a blur of motion – as did a chunk of the alien's suit, torn away.

An instant later, she heard wood exploding behind her, just as something hit the ground directly behind the now-tumbling alien with tremendous force. The ground shook, a single thudding pulse strong enough to jar the logs.

The alien's shattered suit crashed to the ground. Behind it, Jen saw a huge plume of dirt and debris flying into the air. It rained back down with a splattery rumble.

She let out a breath. She had no idea what had just happened, but she was still alive, and had escaped another of her pursuers...

Something landed beside her with a soft thump, a dull grey ovoid about ten centimetres long. What—

A crushing weight hit her. It felt as though somebody had just dropped a car onto her, the force slamming her painfully back to the ground and pinning her there. She couldn't move; it hurt her chest just to breathe. Every twig, every stone on the ground under her felt like knives grinding into her back.

“Well, aren't you the little goddess of destruction,” said a sardonic voice. It even hurt to move her eyes, the unseen force pushing down on them like invisible thumbs. From her agonising vantage point she saw a pair of legs, then another, move around her, stopping about three metres away. She tried to look up, but couldn't raise her head. “And we'd been told you were completely harmless without your Defender. I may have to renegotiate my fee.”

The legs moved a little closer. Jen had an impression of something tall leaning down towards her in the corner of her eye, but she couldn't focus.

“Does that hurt? Shame. I'm Tey-Keskat, by the way. I'll be your abductor for the day.” The figure seemed amused by his own little joke. “I'll just call my ship down, and we can be on our way.”

Tey-Keskat moved back, and said something in a low voice into a radio. He waited for a few seconds, listening to the reply, then moved back to Jen. “It's coming. Time to go.”

He took something out of a box or bag and tossed it at her. The next moment, what little breath she still had in her was blown out as it landed on her chest with the weight of a bowling ball. She moaned in pain, unable even to cry out.

Whatever it was felt as though it was moving, getting lighter. She could breathe again, just. Something cold slid over her body, wrapping itself around her.

“I doubt you'll know what that is,” said Tey-Keskat, “so I'll give you a warning – the more you struggle, the tighter it gets. It can easily crush you to death, so I'd advise you to stay *very* still.”

Jen felt the coldness move down over her legs, oozing underneath them and pulling them tightly together. Her arms were slowly dragged in against her body. She could feel it constricting around her chest, hurting her ribs, squashing her lungs—

“Gravity to normal.” The weight was suddenly gone. She took in a deep, gasping breath, as much as she could against whatever was covering her body, and looked down at herself. From below her shoulders down to her calves, she was tightly wrapped in what looked like wet black plastic, glistening and crawling. Her panic grew at being so completely trapped.

Tey-Keskat moved closer, Jen seeing him clearly for the first time. Her first thought was *centaur*. Four legs, two arms, all sheathed in camouflaged armour. His head wasn't the least bit human; no eyes, instead a trio of dark vertical slits, green scales embedded within. On his back, where a horse would have had a saddle, was a pack built into the armour, a long gun stuck to it like a giant fridge magnet. The scales in his 'eyes' rippled in the direction of the fallen alien.

“Ingenious tactic,” he said, “shooting out the recoil compensator on her railgun. Blew her in half when it fired. Should have calibrated her GC field properly like I told her... Still, clever move.” He reached back and patted the rifle, his arm bending unnaturally at the shoulder. “That's why I prefer weapons with no moving parts.”

He leaned down and picked up the metal cylinder, which Jen realised was some sort of gravity control bomb, then tucked it into his backpack. Both hands free again, he gripped Jen by the top of the black coating and hauled her into the air as if she weighed nothing, draping her face-down over his back. The movement of her waist bending caused the material to tighten. Jen grunted in pain. “What do you want?” she asked, straining to look up at him. “Where are you taking me?”

Tey-Keskat's head turned to look at her. The scales in his eye-slits rippled. “Sorry,” he said, with a little sarcastic glee. “My translator doesn't have your language. All I hear from you is ‘blah, blah, blah’, so don't bother talking. It'll only annoy me, and the last person who annoyed me? I sawed off their hands. And not with a laser or valency cutter, either – I mean the old-fashioned way.” He looked up, then spoke into his radio. “Sephcris, what's keeping you?” A pause. “What are you doing so far out? Those drones weren't – never mind. I want to be in hyperspace in five minutes, no matter what. Even these yokels have interceptors, remember?”

As Tey-Keskat continued berating his pilot, Jen thought she saw something move in the jungle in the very edges of her vision. She lifted her head as far as she could – and went cold. Something was slinking silently towards her.

Something big.

Was it the animal Soomarvilan had warned her about? She couldn't remember the name. But whatever it was, it was getting closer very quickly.

“Er, hey,” she said, then remembered Tey-Keskat couldn't understand English. He ignored her anyway, still issuing orders.

The animal flowed around the end of a log, still silent, dropping lower to the ground. Whatever its name was, Jen had seen enough wildlife documentaries to recognise that it was a predator moving to strike. It was about six metres away. “Hey, horsey! Hey! *Hey!*” She kicked to get his attention, the thing wrapped around her tightening sharply.

Tey-Keskat looked back, annoyed. “What did I – Bika!”

(~*Yaenan religious figure.*)

He grabbed for the rifle. At the same moment, there was a whipcrack sound as something flew at Jen, passing just above her and snapping open like an umbrella.

A wet crunch.

The thing snapped back the way it had come. Tey-Keskat was now lacking a head. Thick orange blood gushed from the neck of his suit as his body convulsed, then jolted, dropping a few inches before the joints on the suit's armoured legs locked. His limp arm smacked Jen painfully on the side of her head as it fell, the gun thudding to the ground. For a moment she thought the body was going to stay standing, held in position by its own weight, then the world slowly started to tilt as it toppled sideways. Jen slid off feet-first as it fell, landing on her back. The heavy corpse missed her feet by less than an inch.

Not that it mattered. She couldn't move, still trapped by the black coating.

She got her first good look at the predator – the chayka, she remembered. It reminded her of a Hooska, only much bigger and more muscular. Soomarvilan's people had evolved to live in the trees; this was very much a creature of the ground.

But it preyed on those that lived above. The chayka had the same six-limbed body as other creatures on Hoosk. Four of them were legs, broadly spaced, thick, bulging with muscle and tendons. The other two...

The chayka finished pulling in the object it had flicked at Tey-Keskat, an extension of one of the two limbs on its back. Both 'arms' were grotesquely elongated compared to its legs, one of them folded back, tensed, ready to lash out in an instant. The other was fully extended, stretching out in front of the animal's head.

It didn't stop there. A long, sinewy strand of flesh was contracting in rhythmic pulses, pulling the creature's 'hand' back to its arm. The hand was a bony, six-fingered claw, webbed flaps of skin joining them together in a full circle.

The claws opened. Tey-Keskat's head dropped onto the ground, torn and gouged by the long spikes on the inside of the fingers. The animal leaned forward, hooking the end of its outstretched arm onto some part of the hand out of Jen's sight, then flipped the arm back over its head.

It sniffed at the severed head, then recoiled. The alien's scent obviously wasn't to its liking. The chayka's face, a broader relative of a Hooska's, but with a far larger, fang-filled mouth, turned in her direction.

Jen let out a little whimper of fright. She was completely helpless. Any attempt to move made her bindings tighten even more. The chayka advanced slowly, looking cautiously from side to side but never taking its eyes off her for more than a moment. Its jaws opened, muscles stretching in anticipation.

She could see the animal's other arm tensing, the 'hand' flexing, ready to strike. It was close enough for her to hear its breathing, a deep rumble through its nostrils. It sniffed again, then crouched, front legs lowering as its arm stretched up like a scorpion's tail. The hand opened slightly, the tooth-like spikes flexing within...

Jen closed her eyes.

A whipcrack, close and loud—

She screamed.

The scream faded out when she didn't feel anything. The chayka growled in confusion. Jen opened her eyes to see the open hand

hanging a few inches above her face. It ground angrily against – nothing.

The chayka was suddenly lifted into the air, carried back across the clearing into the denser jungle. The length of skin coiling from the back of the animal's hand flicked back and forth like a loose rope being pulled tight, then the hand flew away from her, following the startled chayka like a streamer. The moment its feet touched the ground, it turned and fled into the trees, dragging its hand behind it.

Alex stepped into sight around Tey-Keskat's body. "Hi Jen. Sorry I'm late."

Jen had never felt such a moment of pure euphoria in her life. "*Alex!*"

He glanced at the black sheen covering her. "I'll get you out of that in a second." The sound of the aircraft was rapidly getting louder overhead. "Bakti gunboat. Bad guys?"

Jen nodded. The blocky silhouette of the aircraft was visible through the trees.

"Okay." The bass fluttering sound abruptly cut out, and the aircraft plunged into the jungle, hitting the ground with a crash like a falling building. Jen winced. "Cancelled their GC with an inductor field," Alex explained to Jen's complete lack of caring as he knelt next to her. The black mass surrounding her split neatly up her front, peeling away like an insect cocoon. "Are you all right?"

In answer, she jumped onto him and gave him a delighted hug so tight that, had he been human, it would have hurt.

Hooska flyers and drones, police robots that looked like small aircraft, showed up soon after. By the time they arrived, Alex had given Jen first aid, cleaning and closing the numerous wounds and cuts she'd acquired during the chase.

She told Alex what had happened, giving him a rough idea of where she'd left Soomarvilan and Vess. He directed one of the drones to look for them, getting the good news a couple of minutes later that both of them were – just about – alive. Alex flew Jen to find them.

"Alex! Crazy girl!" Soomarvilan called, suspended inside a GC field that was apparently the Civilization equivalent of a stretcher. "You alive!"

“We alive,” Jen said, waving tiredly but happily. “How you two?”

“More or less alive,” said Vess, also hovering in a field, attended by a Hooska and a small white floating robot the size and shape of a wastepaper bin. “Two of my legs were shot off. Most inconvenient. I’ll have to use fields or bionics until they can clone me some new ones.”

“You both seem quite well,” Alex observed.

“Oh, we drugged to eyes,” Soomarvilan told him as his stretcher rose into the air, heading for a flyer hovering above the trees. “Shoot *all* legs off, we not care! Hey! What happened you? You just switch off!”

“I’ll check up on you later,” said Alex.

“Warm and moist sunsets,” Vess added, waving one of his remaining legs feebly as he followed Soomarvilan into the air.

“Bye,” said Jen, waving back and watching them go. They disappeared into the leaves and branches above. After a short pause, the flyer moved off. She turned to Alex, who was also staring after the flyer, a pensive look on his face. “What *did* happen to you?”

He turned uncomfortably away and started walking instead of answering. “We need to get off this planet. We can’t go to Kea, either. It’s not safe.”

“Why?” Jen started after him. “What’s going on? How did those... *things* find us?”

Alex stopped and whirled round, an expression of – not quite anger, but close, on his face. “Every Defender has a shutdown code,” he said. “It’s a last resort, meant only to be used if a Defender ever goes rogue again. Each Defender’s code is different, and changes eight thousand times a second – and for it to work, the correct code sequence has to be received, perfectly, for over a second. The chances of the correct code being sent by someone who doesn’t have access to the original key sequence used to generate it is about one in ten to the five-hundredth power.”

Jen remembered her maths lessons, vaguely. “That’s a lot, right?”

“That’s a *very* lot. But your dead friends – nice work, by the way, I’m very impressed,” Jen tried to give him a casual ‘it was nothing’ shrug and ended up squirming and blushing, “got it right on the first try. Which means either they’re the luckiest mercenaries in the

universe, which they're patently *not*... or somebody gave them the code."

"And you can't just go onto the Inar version of Google and ask for 'Defender shutdown code', right?"

"Right. Very few people know the shutdown code even exists, never mind how to use it."

Jen had a nasty feeling she knew at least one part of the answer even as she asked the question. "And the people who *do* know would be...?"

"The Defenders themselves, a very small number of the people and AIs involved in our creation, a handful of people who either deduced its existence or learned about it by accident – believe me, it's astoundingly hard to keep secrets when your entire society is based around the absolutely free flow and sharing of information... and the Prime Council."

"Ah." She'd been right.

"Which is why we have to leave. Somebody got access to my shutdown code and organised a well-equipped mercenary team to use it, then try to kidnap you in less than a *day*. The only people who knew where we were going were—"

"Let me guess, the Prime Council."

Alex sighed. "Exactly. I've already passed on everything you told me about the mercenaries, as well as the details of what was left of the rest, to the Hooska so they can try to trace the actions of the leader, this Tey-Keskat. But to be honest, I doubt they'll find anything useful. Bounty hunters always cover their tracks."

"So you think whatsisname, Crolin Odal, or that horrible scary git Malitar, set this up?"

"I'm not jumping to any conclusions," Alex said firmly. Then his shoulders dropped a little. "But... they are the logical suspects. Odal, anyway. I doubt Malitar would risk the future of the Civilization just because you called him a wanker."

Jen giggled, then clapped a hand to her mouth in embarrassment. "Sorry. It just sounds weird when you say it."

"But I have to take you somewhere safe, and unfortunately, if somebody on the Prime Council really *is* working against us, the number of places we can go becomes very small. My first priority is

still protecting you, but now in order to do that we've got to find out who the traitor is."

Jen noted that she'd been included in the traitor-finding process, but didn't comment on it. "How do we do that?"

"Normally it would be detective work, finding information on the bounty hunters and tracking back from there. But that could take a long time without the Nexus, and the longer it takes, the more danger you're in." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Although... there is somewhere we can go where we might be able to kill two birds with one stone."

Jen hurriedly checked the nearby trees for meeskas. "Please don't talk about killing birds. There are things around here that actually do that."

"Sorry." Alex looked up, walking under the spot where Soomarvilan and Vess had floated up through the branches. "Time to go."

"What, right now?" Jen asked, joining him. "We're not going to check on Vess and Soomarvilan?"

"The fewer people who know that we've gone and where we're going, the better," said Alex. "And right now, I think the exact number should be two." He wagged his little finger between them two of them.

*"I don't know where we're going,"* complained Jen.

"One, then," Alex said. She expected him to smile, but his face remained troubled.

She rose off the ground, Alex floating up alongside her. A semi-transparent forcefield popped up around them as they ascended through the trees and accelerated into the sky, leaving the jungles of Hoosk behind.

### 13: Transit

Alex remained in the same concerned, introspective mood over the first hour or so of the flight. Jen kept trying to engage him in conversation, asking him questions about the Civilization and aliens and the universe, but he didn't give anything more than straight, factual answers, whatever was weighing on his mind apparently more important than being sociable. Annoyed, Jen gave up after a while.

Instead, she got him to create a bathroom so that she could clean off the dirt and sweat that she'd acquired on Hoosk. In the shower, she marvelled at Alex's ability to heal all her injuries without so much as a scar. She still had some bruises and a few aches, but the cuts – on her calf, and most importantly the one on her cheek – were gone without a trace.

She wondered if the Civilization would ever give humans that kind of technology. Probably not. She could understand the reasoning why, but still thought it was rather tight of them.

Clean, and feeling surprisingly unstressed despite the insane events of the last few days – she'd been through so much, so fast, that parts of it were starting to blur together – she stared down at the pile of filthy, torn clothes that were what was left of her school uniform.

Alex had thoughtfully provided the bathroom with a large fluffy dressing gown and a pair of slippers, so she put those on instead and padded out into the dome. Alex was silently watching the stars pass. The view seemed different; her earlier voyages had all been along the horizontal plane of the Milky Way, but this time they seemed to be angling upwards out of it.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, without turning round.

“Better, thanks. Um, I was just wondering... could you do something about my clothes?”

“Oh.” His head lowered a little. “I'm sorry, I didn't think... I'll clean your uniform. I should be able to fix it up, probably.”

Jen groaned. “Oh, *please*, don't. I don't want to spend the rest of my time in outer space dressed in my school uniform like some complete geek! Can't you make me something else? You know, something cool?”

Alex turned, looking her up and down. Jen self-consciously hugged the dressing gown tighter around herself. “You know,” he said, “since where we’re going you’ll need a support field anyway, I might as well go the whole hog and make it a dresser as well.” Jen looked at him, confused. “It’s a paramatter generator tied into your node. You just tell it what clothes you want to wear, and it makes them for you.”

Jen had visions of some kind of robot sewing machine, and was a little surprised when Alex closed one hand, then opened it again to reveal a slender necklace. At first she thought it was silver, but then she realised it had faint patterns of colour shimmering over it, like light on a soap bubble. A small oval pendant was the only ornamentation, and even that was as cool and clean in design as the dome she was standing in.

“Here, let me help you put it on.” She lifted her hair and lowered her head as Alex fastened the slim piece of jewellery around her neck. It was a perfect fit for her, and seemed to weigh nothing at all. There was a momentary feeling of coldness as the pendant touched her skin, then it warmed to her body. She had a funny tingling feeling inside, which she at first took to be some weird side-effect from the necklace before realising that it was actually a mix of pleasure and nervousness, like getting a gift from a boyfriend. Not that she’d *had* many boyfriends, and certainly none that had ever bought her any gifts, but...

“Okay,” said Alex, “I’ve just set your node to work with the necklace. First things first; it’ll automatically create a life-support field, air, gravity, all of that, when you need it. The field’ll confirm to your body, usually about a centimetre out, though it’ll move closer under your feet or around your hands if you need to touch anything. It’ll stop things touching you, and it can be hardened as well for protection, but it’s not combat-spec.”

“I’ll try not to get shot at, then,” Jen said dryly.

Alex raised an eyebrow. “If you don’t mind. Anyway, as for the part that I’m sure you’re more interested in, you can make it create clothes for you either by verbal commands, or if you want to give it a try, you can picture an outfit in your mind and the node’ll send the image to the necklace. That might take some practice, though.”

Jen felt like taking Alex to task for assuming that she'd be more interested in clothes than the protective aspects of the necklace, but decided not to. He was right. "What, so I just... describe something and it'll appear?"

"Basically, yes. Your own imagination does part of the work for you, anyway – if you said, for instance, 'school uniform', you'll already have a mental picture of your school uniform that the node can send. Saying the name is just to verify things for your own assurance."

"Okay..." Jen headed for the bathroom door. "I'll give it a try."

"You don't want me to help?"

"I'm not getting changed in *front* of you!" Jen squealed.

Alex looked embarrassed. "Point taken. Okay, I'll be out here."

Jen went into the bathroom. waiting for the door to blip shut behind her before dropping her dressing gown to the floor. "Watch me get changed!" she muttered. "Okay. Necklace thingie?"

~Yes?

"Aah! You can *talk*?"

~Yes.

"Am I just hearing you in my head like the translator thingie, or are you actually talking?"

~*I am communicating via your node.*

"Okay then," she said, feeling a bit silly about effectively talking to herself, "make me some clothes. My school uniform." It was boring, but it was all she could think of.

She'd expected the clothes to materialise from nowhere, the same way that Alex could create things. Instead, she jumped in surprise when something flowed over her body, giving her a sudden, horrid flashback of Tey-Keskat's black restraining material. But before she had time to react any further, the sensation was gone and she was standing fully clothed in her uniform.

She darted to the mirror. Her clothes had somehow 'grown' outwards from the necklace, going up a few centimetres to form her collar and down over the rest of her body to create her blouse and tie, skirt, shoes and socks. And, as she found when she quickly checked, bra and knickers. The outfit was an exact replica of the originals lying on the floor, only without the mud and rips.

Jen loosened the tie, which had a perfect knot, far better than she could normally manage. Apparently the necklace was a lot tidier than she was. She turned from side to side, looking at her body in the mirror. It was a much better fit than her real uniform, as well, tailored exactly to her shape. “Wow. Well, I guess *that* works.”

She faced herself in the mirror. “Okay. Now, let’s see about making something *fun*...”

“You can’t seriously be planning to wear *that*,” Alex sighed, rubbing his forehead.

“Why not?” Jen pouted. After nearly an hour of playing with the necklace’s abilities and trying at least thirty different outfits in as many different colour combinations, she was quite pleased with what she’d come up with. Admittedly, it was a little on the outrageous side, but it wasn’t like anyone else she knew was going to see her wear it...

“I don’t think your parents would let you go around dressed like... like some kind of dominatrix in purple!”

“It’s not purple, it’s *lilac*,” Jen corrected. “And it’s not a bit like a dominatrix outfit! It’s just a leather top and trousers, you can buy them on any high street.”

“And the four-inch heels?”

Jen was silent for a moment. “Okay, maybe Mum and Dad might complain about *them*. But I always wanted some.”

“And did you also always want strained calf muscles and back pains?”

“God, Alex!” Though to be honest, they were already making her legs wobbly. “Okay, okay. Necklace, make the heels smaller, about three and a half inches.” Alex gave her a look. “Two inches. Look, these are cool boots and I *want* them, okay?”

“Okay,” said Alex reluctantly.

The heels of her boots shrank beneath her, giving her the slightly uncomfortable feeling that she was sinking into soft earth. She took a couple of experimental steps, then turned to look at the view ahead. The great orange glow of the galaxy’s core was swelling, dropping below to the right. Surrounding it were rough-edged, sweeping lines of dark dust, interspersed with vast swathes of blue and red gas clouds. The whole thing was dusted with countless stars, a bag of

glitter poured across the sky. “That’s... that’s really quite some view.”

“Hmm,” said Alex, unenthused.

Jen turned slowly on her new heels. “Alex, what’s going on with you? You’ve been all mardy ever since we left Hoosk. No, since before. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he replied, not really looking at her. “You’re alive and safe, so I must be doing my job well.” There was a barely-concealed bitterness in his words. Jen walked slowly over to him, watching his expression. He looked depressed, almost upset.

But he was a machine! Why would he get upset?

“Alex?” She cautiously reached out a hand, touching his arm with her fingertips. “What’s the matter?”

He drew back; subtly, but just enough to put a gap between them. “It’s nothing that you need to worry about, really. I doubt you’d even understand.”

“Try me,” she replied forcefully, stepping right in front of him. “Maybe I’m not as stupid as you think.”

“I didn’t mean—” Alex began to apologise, then stopped and turned away. “You wouldn’t understand because you don’t know what I am.”

Jen circled him, looking up into his eyes. He tried to avoid her gaze. “Well, I do know that when you’re not being a physics teacher in the most boring town in England, you’re a Defender, right?”

“Exactly.” He moved his jaw from side to side, sucking in his cheeks in – frustration? Anger? “Do you know what a Defender really is?” he suddenly exclaimed. “It’s the most powerful machine ever created. It’s the culmination of a hundred millennia of technological advancement. It can cross galaxies in days, it can channel near-infinite energy into any form it needs, it can destroy *planets* if it has to. But,” he said, voice lowering at the same time as his eyes, “it can’t protect a sixteen-year-old girl.”

“What?” Jen asked, stunned. “But – but you have done! I’m here, I’m okay...”

“No thanks to me,” said Alex, voice full of misery. “I was tricked by a ruse that an idiot should have seen through, my friends were almost killed trying to do my job – hell, if I’d been doing my job at all you wouldn’t even have got into trouble at the railway tunnel in

the first place.” He paused, seeming to sag in front of her. “I was *deactivated*. Switched off, shut down like some *computer*, just like that. I don’t even know how I was reactivated.”

“Er, that was me, I think,” Jen said. Alex let out a single, unhappy laugh.

“You see? I’m supposed to look after you, and *you saved me!*”

Jen stared at him. “Is this what this is about? You’re all upset and depressed because you had to be rescued by a girl?”

“No, no, nothing like that!” said Alex, lifting his head again. He rubbed his temples. “It’s that I had to be rescued *at all*. I failed!” He shrugged, slapping his palms against his thighs. “I screwed up, I completely failed. And Defenders don’t fail.”

“You didn’t fail!” Jen objected. “You still did save me! I’m alive, I’m in one piece, I didn’t get eaten by some weird flicky-arm green tiger thing, and it was all because of you.” She dropped her voice to what she hoped was a reassuring rather than patronising tone. “It doesn’t matter how you did it, it just matters that you did. I mean, God, *I’m* certainly grateful!” She put her hand on his arm again, this time giving him a gentle squeeze.

He looked her straight in the eyes for the first time in a while. “Thank you.” They shared the look for a long moment. “It still doesn’t change the fact that I seriously let you down, though...”

“You *didn’t*,” she insisted. “*You* might see yourself as a machine that’s supposed to be totally incapable of making mistakes, but I don’t.”

“You don’t?”

“No. I see you as a person. And people make mistakes, but it *doesn’t matter*, as long as they’re trying to do the right thing.”

He nodded, then a very slight smile made it onto his face, the corners of his eyes crinkling in a very cute way. He might not be real, Jen thought, but to her he seemed a lot more human than quite a few supposedly genuine people. “It’s funny. I always thought it was *me* that was meant to teach *you* things.”

“I guess nobody knows everything, do they?” she smiled back.

His hint of a smile cracked into a broad beaming grin. “I guess they don’t.” He looked at the dazzling starfield. “We’ll be there soon. I’d better start trying to arrange a welcome.” A sidelong glance at Jen. “Are you *really* going to go out dressed like that?”

“Oh my God,” Jen snorted, “you so *are* my Mum! Yes, I am going to go out dressed like this, thank you.”

“Just checking,” Alex said, bowing to the inevitable.

“Ooh! While I’m at it, could you whip me up a proper make-up kit? I need some lippy.”

The expression on Alex’s face suggested that there still were limits to what she could get away with.

The tiny red dot that Alex had circled and told Jen to watch suddenly bloomed into a huge glowing sphere as they left hyperspace. A dark circle was silhouetted against it, giving Jen the feeling that a great red eye was watching her.

“So, are you finally going to tell me where we’re going and why?” she asked.

“Remember I told you about the Eternals?” said Alex.

“Really old, did a lot of exploring, right?”

“Yes. This is their home.” The black circle was visibly growing against the swollen red sun. “I’d tell you its name, only it’d take me about twenty minutes. The Eternals tend to give things very long, descriptive, evocative titles – they’ve got plenty of time on their hands because they live so long. Everyone else just calls it the Eternal Homeworld.”

“Does the job, I suppose,” Jen said. “Bit boring, though.”

“Well, it saves nineteen minutes and fifty-eight seconds. Of course, we might have plenty of time on our hands ourselves. Nobody’s bothered responding to my transmissions yet.”

“Maybe they’re on the loo.” Jen looked away from the swelling star at the space around it, which was veiled in long, multicoloured wispy filaments. “What’re they?” she asked, pointing.

“Supernova remnants,” Alex told her. “This is a very old part of the galaxy, and in its first couple of billion years, it had a lot of supergiant stars that burned themselves out and blew up. Good job too, though – without the heavy elements they created, you and I wouldn’t be here.”

“How come?”

“Almost every atom in your body started life in an exploding star. Same thing applies to the whole of the Earth, in fact.”

“Wow. Learn something new every day.”

“I should hope so,” Alex said, mock-chiding. “Anyway, because there was a very high concentration of heavy elements in this part of the galaxy so early on, the Eternals got a head start in their development. They were exploring space nine billion years ago, before any of the solar systems where Civilization members evolved even formed.”

Jen looked back at the approaching planet, faint flickers of light becoming visible around its rim. “So how long do these guys live? Are they really eternal, or is that just hype?”

“The oldest living Eternal is over five billion years old.”

“Hah.” Jen struggled to get her head around the idea. “That’s, uh... that’s a really long time.”

“More than a third of the entire age of the universe.”

“I’d hate to have to buy the candles for his cake.”

“*Her* cake,” Alex corrected. “All the Eternals are females.”

“What? How does that work?”

“To be honest, I’m not sure. It’s one of the many, many things that the Eternals keep to themselves.” Alex suddenly turned his attention back to the planet. “Hello, seems like somebody’s got my message.”

Jen stared at the planet, which was slipping closer to the edge of the star beyond as they moved into orbit. “What are they saying?”

“Just ‘Stand by.’”

“Oh. They’ve put us on hold?”

“That’s good,” Alex said. “The whole time we were asking them for help against the Enemy, they never said a word.”

The flickering glow around the edge of the planet became clearer, an oddly familiar billowing curtain of white, green and blue lights. As Jen looked more closely, she saw that it was above the planet’s surface, shrouding the sunlit side of the reddish-brown world. “Is that... an aurora?”

“Yes, it is,” said Alex, sounding pleased, as though she’d just got a question right in class. “The planet’s got a huge molten iron core, much bigger proportionately than Earth’s, so it generates an enormous magnetic field that keeps most of the radiation away from the surface. The sunlit side’s still completely lethal to humans, though. It’s over three hundred degrees, and enough radiation gets through the magnetosphere to cook you in about five minutes flat.”

“Nice place,” Jen said with a shudder. “Sounds like living in a microwave.”

“That’s not far off, actually. Oh, and the surface gravity’s more than eight times Earth’s. It’s quite a big planet. And it rains molten metal, too.”

“And you’re planning to take me *down* there?”

“The life support systems in the necklace can handle it,” Alex assured her. “Well, as long as you don’t get caught in the rain. But we’re not going to the sunlit side, anyway. The Eternals live underground, along the terminator.”

“So... dey’ll be back?” Jen said, putting on a bad Germanic accent. Alex rolled his eyes and groaned. “Not a Terminator fan, then?”

“Those films paint a very bad and unrealistic picture of intelligent machines... Anyway, I mean the dividing zone between the night and day sides,” he said, pointing it out. “They moved underground a few billion years ago when the star’s tidal forces stopped the planet’s rotation. Must have shaken things up quite a bit, but they survived it. More super-technology that they’ve never shared with anyone.”

“Why didn’t they just move?” Jen wondered. The planet looked more inhospitable the closer they got.

“It’s their home. I suppose they’re attached to it. Oh, hang on – there’s another message.” Alex tilted his head, as if listening to an invisible phone. “That was quick. I was expecting to have to wait a lot longer for an answer.”

“What did they say?”

Alex looked pleased, and somewhat surprised. “They’re going to let us land.”

Jen stared at the planet, cold and dark and flickering with auroral light on one side, glowing a molten red on the other. She fingered the necklace nervously. “Now... you’re *completely* sure that this thing works right?”

“I’m positive,” Alex said, with a smile. “You ready?”

## 14: The Eternal City

Despite Alex's assurances, the trip to the surface was terrifying. Not that Jen would have admitted it to him, but flying through what looked like the biggest lightning storm in history as they dropped through the aurora, followed by a flight over the searing, gravity-flattened desert of the day side being blasted by two hundred mile an hour winds while dodging tornados spitting out lumps of molten rock certainly wasn't an experience she wanted to repeat. She had the nasty feeling that Alex was treating the whole affair as an excuse for some extreme sightseeing.

To her great relief, as the bloated red sun dropped below the horizon and the sky darkened, they descended first into a deep, wide canyon and then, as they slowed, into a huge cave. The entrance, at least two hundred metres across, was artificial, the walls too perfectly curved.

The cave became dark as they flew inside, the only light coming from dim red glowing circles on the roof. It wasn't enough to give Jen more than the vaguest impression of what lay ahead.

The vast tunnel gradually descended into the planet. She wondered how far they'd gone. Miles, easily. Looking ahead, all she could see was a long line of the faint red lights stretching into the darkness.

"Who are we going to see?" she eventually asked, when it became clear that the tunnel was going to continue downwards for some time.

"An Eternal I've dealt with before," Alex said. "Only about seven hundred million years old. She's considered a bit of a youthful rebel by Eternal standards. One of the few who's left the planet recently."

"How recent is recently?"

"About eight thousand years ago."

Jen's eyes widened. "They don't get out much, do they? What do they *do* with their time?"

"Sleep, mostly," said Alex, the dim light from outside casting a flickering red wash over him. "Only it's not really like sleep as you know it, because they're still in communication with all the other Eternals. They'd say it was more like pondering the mysteries of the universe. Except they'd say it in a lot more words."

“So what’s the name of this Eternal friend of yours?”

“Remember how I said it’d take twenty minutes to say the name of their planet?”

“Yeah?”

“The Eternals don’t so much have names as life stories.”

“So I shouldn’t ask to be introduced, then.”

“Maybe not. In fact, it’s probably best if I do the talking, unless they ask you something personally. I can send them extra information on a sub-channel while I talk, help speed things up.” Alex focused on something ahead in the distance. “We’re coming to the city.”

Jen wasn’t sure what to expect, but the view ahead didn’t seem any different from the tunnel. They’d slowed right down, the long line of red lights overhead coming to an end ahead. Beyond was, at first glance, nothing but blackness.

Alex lowered the lights inside the dome so that Jen could see better. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, they passed through the end of the tunnel and into a large open space. More dim red lights, occasionally joined by a slightly brighter orange one, became visible, starting to give her a sense of scale.

It was a *very* large open space.

And it was full of very, *very* large buildings... or structures, at least, as the massive, brooding outlines didn’t resemble anything she’d ever seen before, not even the futuristic towers on Inar. Vast curving, twisting shapes reached through the enormous cavern, some merging together to form great interlinked networks, others just hanging impossibly in the air. There wasn’t enough light for her to pick out details, but some of the structures had to be miles high, stretching up to – and disappearing into – the roof of solid rock.

Alex changed course, taking them in a long curve between some of the enormous intertwined towers. Jen looked for signs of life, but couldn’t spot anything that might be an Eternal. Nothing was moving, save an occasional flickering light. No people, no traffic. Maybe they really were all asleep.

They moved toward one of the towers, Jen spotting a dim red hole opening up ahead of them. “Is that where we’re going?” she asked. Alex nodded. The tower continued to grow as they approached, huge beyond belief. The hole, which had seemed tiny against the irregular

curve of the tower, turned out to be at least as wide as the tunnel they'd used to enter the city.

"Almost there," said Alex. The tunnel twisted sharply, dropping almost straight downwards. To Jen's relief, Alex didn't simply roll and shoot down it like a branchrunner, instead slowing almost to a stop before descending vertically. She had no idea how far down they'd gone, but eventually the shaft opened out into a cavern.

They settled into place on a broad ledge overlooking... darkness, as far as Jen could see. The ship faded away, Jen hearing a brief popping sound which she realised was a forcefield appearing around her. She touched her face experimentally. There was something between her fingertips and her cheeks, which at first felt soft and giving, but quickly became more solid as she pushed at it.

"Just so you know," said Alex in a low voice, "the temperature in here is ninety-two degrees celsius, and the gravity is eight-point-three G. Oh, and the atmosphere's about twelve times the pressure of Earth's. And corrosive to human flesh. You comfortable?"

"I've gone all sweaty now," Jen complained, wishing Alex hadn't told her. She looked around, but still couldn't see anything beyond the dim lights coming from the wall behind them. "So where's this friend of yours?"

*~I am here,* said a female voice somewhere inside her head, ancient yet powerful, full of authority.

"What? Where?" Jen looked around for any sign of the speaker, seeing nothing. Alex turned to her, concerned.

"Jen?"

"I heard someone," she said, worried. The black cavern still seemed empty.

"The Eternals are telepaths," Alex explained, taking a step forward and raising his voice. "I request an audience with you. I do not have the ability to receive telepathic communications. Will you speak with us audibly?"

"I am aware of your limitations, Defender," said the voice, this time seeming to come from the air all around them. "It has only been a few seconds since we last met. I have not forgotten."

"Seconds?" Jen asked.

Alex looked back at her. “They live a long time. They tend to lump short periods of time – seconds, minutes, centuries – together. It can be hard to get an exact translation.”

*~Or we may simply get some small amusement from toying with our more self-important visitors, said the Eternal in an oddly playful tone. ~Which tends to be all of them. Except you, Jen.*

“You know who I am?” she asked.

Alex looked slightly annoyed at being left out. “Er, if I may...” he began.

*~I’ve seen into your mind, the voice said, over Alex’s request for attention. ~You’re so young I can hardly conceive it. When your time is spent with people who’ve existed for billions of years, it makes a pleasant change to meet someone whose age isn’t measured in millennia.*

“You, er,” Jen began, feeling extremely uncomfortable at the thought of someone reading her mind, “you don’t sound as, you know, *formal* as I thought you were going to.”

*~Stuffy, you mean? The voice sounded slightly mocking. ~I’ve adjusted my thought patterns to match your mind-form. When others come, always thinking themselves to be wise and experienced, full of awe and reverence and not a little fear, they expect us to be formal and ponderous. So we oblige them. But you’re not like that. It amuses me.*

“Oh, I’m so glad you find me funny,” Jen muttered.

*~That’s why I let you both come – I was curious about you. If it had just been your Defender, I probably would not have bothered. But I think he may explode with frustration if I don’t deal with him.*

“Defender,” the Eternal said, this time audibly. “What do you wish from our audience?”

Alex composed himself. “I need your perspective and knowledge to help save the Civilization.

*~The Civilization! said the voice, in a slightly scoffing tone. ~Such arrogance in the name, as if they are the only one! And they wonder why we never wished to join them!*

“It faces a threat from outside, and now another from within,” Alex continued, unaware of the comment. “I hope that you will be able to help us counter them.”

“You are not the first to ask for our help,” said the voice. “But we cannot help with the threat from outside. It remains as unknown to us as it is to you. And the threat from inside... is none of our concern.”

Alex seemed crushed. “Oh.”

“We no longer involve ourselves with the affairs of others,” the Eternal continued. “It is regrettable in some ways, but it is the decision of all of us.”

“May I ask... why?” Alex said.

“There is nothing new for us to discover,” said the voice. It clearly wasn’t an answer Alex was expecting, and Jen was surprised by it too. “My sisters have lost interest in all but remembering the past as they sleep. They feel they have seen all there is to see. The future holds nothing to excite their minds any more.”

“How can you say that?” Jen demanded, stepping up alongside Alex. “You don’t know what’s going to happen in the future!”

“On the smallest, most immediate scale, that is true,” the Eternal said. “But on the scale of our lives, everything becomes predictable. You are young, very young; everything you experience is new and exciting. But as you get older, you will notice patterns, repetition, the familiar and old reappearing again and again with ever more trivial variations until all trace of originality is extinguished.”

“Like the pop charts,” Jen reluctantly admitted. Someone had already sampled one of Get Ready’s songs, which itself had been a cover.

“In time, you will become *bored*. And your species only lives for eighty or ninety years. I have lived for hundreds of millions, and shared the memories of my ancestors going back billions. And in that time, we have seen endless repetitions of the same patterns, played out on a cosmic scale. Always with the same result. I have seen countless civilizations rise... and fall. It is inevitable – even one as young as you knows this. On your world there have been many civilizations, each considering themselves to be the greatest in history, each believing they would endure forever. All have fallen, replaced by another, which in turn has fallen itself.

“The stars themselves are born, live and die according to unvarying rules, always predictable, never changing. Over time, it becomes clear that civilizations are like stars. Fascinating, even beautiful to look at... but in the end, they die.”

“But we’re not talking about stars, we’re talking about people!” Jen protested, addressing whatever was waiting in the darkness as forcefully as she could. “Why don’t you care? I thought you were supposed to be their friends! Are you just going to let them all die?”

“All things die,” the Eternal announced, calmly. “From the most primitive organisms, so simple they barely even qualify as life, to us, death is the inevitable end. Even the universe itself will die, all energy consumed, nothing left but black holes evaporating into nothingness and radiation red-shifted to infinity.”

“What, so just because the universe is going to end in seventeen trillion years or whenever, you’re just going to sit around on your big fat arse and do nothing?” Jen shouted. “What kind of a life is *that*? If you’re that bored with existence, why don’t you sod off and make room for people who can actually appreciate it?”

Alex leaned forward and adopted a quietly warning voice. “Jen, what are you doing? Please try not to annoy the super-powerful being.”

“I admire her frankness, Defender,” said the voice, sounding slightly amused. “It is a rare experience for me.”

“Is that all you care about?” snapped Jen. “Just having new experiences? What about all the people out there?” She stared out into the cavern, looking for any sign of the Eternal. Her eyes had adjusted enough to the darkness to make out something large – a building? A rock formation? – but it was impossible to tell what beyond the merest hint of a shape. Was it the Eternal herself? If it was, then she was huge. Jen suddenly felt cold.

*~Yes, that is me.*

She felt even colder, now knowing that not only could the Eternal read her memories, she knew what she was thinking. “So – so what about them? Are you just going to let them all die?”

There was a long pause. Jen moved cautiously to the edge of the ledge, trying to get a better look at the shape in the darkness.

*~It has been a long time since anyone dared criticise me,* said the voice, sounding severe. A chill went up Jen’s spine. She had no idea what powers the Eternal had, but was sure they included totally obliterating people that offended her. She moved back towards Alex for protection.

~But... you have caught my interest, the Eternal added, in a slightly warmer tone. ~For the moment. Something else that nobody has done for a long time.

“Then... you’ll help us?” Jen asked hopefully. She looked over her shoulder at Alex, who seemed completely bewildered.

“I will attempt to provide the answers you seek,” the Eternal said. “But that is as far as I will go. We will not become involved in your war.”

“That will be sufficient,” said Alex, with clear relief. He whispered to Jen again, “What did she say to you?”

“I caught her interest,” Jen said, feeling smug.

“Two threats,” the Eternal said, “one inside, one out. You may transmit all the relevant information.” Alex didn’t appear to do anything, but a second or so later the Eternal spoke again.

“Interesting, in a small way. You suspect someone at the heart of the Prime Council wishes the Nexus Imprint destroyed. For what reason?”

“I don’t know,” said Alex. “There’s no logic to it. Without the Nexus, the Civilization has almost no chance of survival, and that would hardly benefit Od- the suspect,” he finished lamely.

“You are thinking like a machine, Defender,” the Eternal said, “despite your very *human* slip of the tongue. Logic does not always play a part in power games. The Nexus Imprint’s appearance has thrown Odal’s plans into disarray, forcing him to act. He risked his position on a gamble, which he would not have taken unless he was confident of success. So at the very least, *he* believes that his ‘intermediary’ can successfully communicate with your... Enemy.”

~Such an unimaginative name!

“Nobody has ever managed to communicate with the Enemy,” Alex insisted.

“Nobody in the *Civilization*,” the Eternal corrected. “How many advanced non-Civilization races are there in this galaxy alone?”

“Hundreds.”

“And for what reason would Odal be unwilling to name the one with which he had been working?”

“If they were—” Alex suddenly stopped, realisation hitting him. “Hostile,” he concluded. “If he’d admitted working in secret through

a *hostile* race in order to try to open negotiations with the Enemy... he'd have been arrested and tried for treason."

"No wonder he didn't tell anyone," said Jen.

"You have been unable to communicate with the Enemy, or even understand their motivation for attacking," continued the Eternal. "That suggests a mind-form very different from any race in the Civilization. But it may be similar enough to another, nearby race for them to communicate. Determine their mind-form, and you will find these intermediaries, and the proof you seek."

"But we don't have enough information to find their mind-form," complained Alex. "They attacked without provocation or mercy, and came in almost a straight line for the Nexus Source. After we drove them off, their attacks have been completely random. There's been no pattern, no apparent tactics."

"You are making a dangerous number of assumptions, Defender," said the Eternal. Alex looked stung.

"Like what?" Jen asked, defensively.

"You assume they attacked without provocation. You assume there is no pattern to their attacks. And most dangerously of all, you assume that you drove them off at Inar."

Alex took a step forward. "That's not an assumption. It's a fact! What else could it be?"

"What was the result of every previous confrontation between Civilization forces and the Enemy?" asked the Eternal in a stern, almost lecturing tone. Jen realised that Alex was getting a taste of his own teachy medicine.

"Total destruction of the Civilization forces," Alex admitted.

"And at Inar?"

"Large-scale destruction of our forces, heavy damage to the Nexus Source."

"And what was different about the Civilization forces at Inar compared to any other engagement?"

"Nothing. Apart from sheer numbers."

"Yet despite all the extra ships and Defenders there, not one Enemy vessel was destroyed, or even damaged. The Enemy is clearly unconcerned by the supposed might of the Civilization."

"Well," bristled Alex, "maybe if one of our supposed friends had provided support after we asked them for help—"

“Do not make another dangerous assumption, Defender,” boomed the Eternal, her voice suddenly rising enough to make the floor of the ledge shake a little under Jen’s feet. “Just because I have allowed one person to criticise me does not mean I will tolerate another!”

*~Don’t worry, said the voice at the same time, ~I won’t harm him. But these Civilization types can be so arrogant sometimes!*

“Mm,” Jen said.

“My apologies,” said Alex, shrinking back.

“You already have all the knowledge you need, Defender,” said the Eternal, her voice dropping back its normal level, “but you must not *assume* anything. Assumptions distort your perception, sometimes so much that you cannot see the truth. Abandon your assumptions about the battle at Inar. What is left?”

Alex stared thoughtfully upwards at the blackness hiding the roof of the cavern. “They believed they *had* provocation, there *was* a pattern to their attacks... and we *didn’t* drive them off.” He rubbed his chin, frowning. “So they left of their own accord.”

“Why would they do that?” Jen asked. “I thought they wanted to destroy the Nexus.”

“They *did*.” Alex whirled and addressed the barely visible form of the Eternal. “They weren’t attacking the Nexus Source, they were attacking the *Nexus!* They caused enough damage to shut down the entire network across the whole of the Civilization. That was their objective! They were only attacking the Nexus, not the Civilization itself!”

“And once they achieved their objective, they left,” the Eternal said, with a hint of satisfaction. “No secondary objectives, none of the strategies of a would-be conqueror, just one single goal.”

“Complete one task, then move onto the next, or return home and wait for further instructions,” said Alex, with a humourless smile. “That sounds familiar.”

“I believe you have identified your intermediaries,” the Eternal noted, before a puzzled Jen could ask who he was talking about.

“The other question now is *why* they were attacking the Nexus, but unfortunately, the information you have given me does *not* include the answers. Nor do we know ourselves.”

“But you went out where the Enemy came from,” Jen said. “I saw it on the map, you know, the thingie.”

*~The Paths of the Eternals?*

“Yeah, them.”

“Yeah them what?” asked Alex.

“The Paths of the Eternals. Oh, sorry, she was talking in my head.

One of them went out the same way that the Enemy came from.

Didn’t you see *anything* out there that might help?”

“I saw many things out there. But none of them were your Enemy.”

Alex raised an eyebrow. “You were the Eternal who made that path?”

“The last of the Great Paths. I left half a million years ago; I returned three hundred thousand years later, having travelled over five billion light-years from my home. Everything I found was nothing more than... variations.” The Eternal paused, her voice growing contemplative. “The only thing that we had never experienced before was once, for a moment, when I thought I heard another voice.”

“Another voice?” said Jen.

*~We are the only telepathic race ever to have existed*, the Eternal told her. *~At all times, I can hear the thoughts of my sisters, no matter where they are. But for a single instant...*

“I thought I heard someone else,” she continued, switching to a voice that Alex could hear. “Distant, alien, its words not understandable... but there. For a moment. But I never heard it again. Nor did my sisters.”

Jen was both intrigued and unnerved. “Sounds like a ghost story! Did you try to find where it came from?”

“For fifty thousand years.”

“So, er, yes, then.”

“Perhaps it *was* a ghost,” the Eternal sighed, “the last cry of a race lost forever, or an echo from a level of reality beyond even our ability to perceive it. Whatever it was, it never returned.”

“The Enemy certainly aren’t ghosts,” said Alex, a little scientific exasperation in his voice. “They’re very real, and they’re definitely still around. But at least now, we’ve possibly got a way to start fighting back.”

Jen looked at him. “We do?”

“We do,” Alex said, nodding confidently. “The only race that Odal’s ‘intermediaries’ could be are the Oiiduci.”

“Oh-ee-doo-chee?” Jen stumbled over the syllables.

“They have exactly the kind of unimaginative, task-led mindset as the Enemy, rather like ants. And, more to the point, their territory is relatively close to the Enemy’s route to Inar. The Enemy didn’t attack them, but that doesn’t mean it ignored them.”

“Okay,” Jen said, “what now? Go back and tell Ara Sumen?”

Alex considered this. “No,” he said finally, “no, there’s no proof, and with Odal having gained the support of the Council... I need to go to Oiiduci,” he announced to the Eternal. “I have another request to make. Will you ensure Jen’s safety while I’m gone?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on a minute!” Jen protested. “What are you doing? You’re not leaving me here in this bloody place! Er, no offence.”

~None taken.

Alex looked pained. “Jen, I can’t bring you with me. I brought you here because it was the only place I could think of where *nobody* could possibly harm you. Going to Oiiduci will be very dangerous. Not for me – I can handle anything there – but it will be for you. The Oiiduci hate most alien races, and the ones they don’t hate, they barely tolerate. If they find out that you’re there with a Civilization Defender...”

“I don’t care,” Jen said firmly. “I’m coming with you. I *want* to come with you.”

“It’ll be an enormous risk.”

“Alex, I’m willing to take it,” she said. “You’ll be able to protect me. Remember what I said on the way here? I *trust* you. Totally. And,” she went on, seeing the look of surprised gratitude on his face, “you never know, I might be able to help you again somehow. We make a pretty good team.”

“She has faith in you, Defender,” said the Eternal. “Perhaps you should have the same faith in yourself.”

Alex made a show of taking a deep breath. “It seems I’m outvoted.”

“You know it’s the right decision, Alex,” Jen said.

“Okay, then. We’ll go to Oiiduci.”

The Eternal stirred, for the first time moving enough for Jen to see her. A low rumble echoed through the cavern, almost like rock grinding on rock. “The brashness, the adventure of youth. It is something we have missed for a long time. Maybe I will add you to my name-story for reminding me of this. I wish you both success... and luck.”

“Thank you!” called Jen to the shape in the darkness. She really wanted to see what the Eternal looked like.

*~No, came the voice, gently. ~You don't.*

“Oh,” said Jen, suppressing a shiver.

The tiny ship, a construct of forcefields and paramatter, emerged from the long tunnel and raced through the screaming winds into the aurora-rippled sky above. Setting a course that would bring it diving back into the disc of the Milky Way, it forced open the boundary between normal space and one of the higher levels of hyperspace, and was gone.

## 15: Stargliders

“The Oiiduci,” explained Alex, striding back and forth in front of Jen’s chair in the dome, “are a heirarchical race, every member born into a set role and position – castes, effectively – that they fulfil without question for their entire life. Orders are passed down by sound and by pheromones, or, after they developed technology and spaceflight, through a caste called Relayers, whose job is basically to sit at a phone all day and shout orders from the boss to everyone.”

“If they’re just like big ants,” Jen asked, “how did they develop technology in the first place?”

“We’re not sure. Most of their technology is actually adapted from other races’. But we have the nasty feeling that they first developed what we could consider true intelligence after eating the brains of another species that visited their planet.”

“Ew!” Jen pulled a face. “How does that work?”

“It’s not unknown. Malitar’s species eats the brains of their dead forebears to pass down memories. Anyway, apart from having developed, or maybe simply acquired, spaceflight, in a lot of ways they behave like Earth insects. Most of them are simply different kinds of drones, adapted for specific tasks and carrying out orders from above. The number of Oiiduci that are intelligent in the way you’d understand it is very small by comparison.”

“But they’re the ones I’ll be dealing with most, right?” Jen stood and walked over to a large oval table that Alex had created in the centre of the dome. On it was a semi-armoured spacesuit, laid out in pieces. “Am I *really* going to have to wear this the whole time I’m there?”

Alex stood next to her, picking up one of the forearms of the suit. “Afraid so. For this to work, they have to believe that you come from a world that’s advanced enough for them to think it worth dealing with, but not so advanced they feel threatened by it. Personal forcefields are definitely out of that league.”

Jen turned the helmet over in her hands. “But what if I get an eyelash in my eye or something?” She tapped at the bubble-like faceplate. “Ugh! What if I *sneeze*?”

“If you’re really, *really* uncomfortable,” said Alex, with slight impatience, “and hold your breath, you can open the helmet long

enough to... fiddle with your eyelashes. I wouldn't recommend it, though. The atmosphere's not instantly *lethal*, but it is pretty unpleasant. As for sneezing... you're on your own."

"Oh, thanks!" Jen exclaimed sarcastically. "I'm not going to be able to act like some super-spy if I've got snot all over the inside of my helmet, am I?"

"I think you'll have more important things to worry about." Alex turned over the upper body of the suit, tapping a large backpack with what looked like scuba tanks moulded into it. "But if you need me for anything, I'll be right with you in here. I'll be able to talk to you through your implant, so they won't hear me."

"It looks a bit heavy," Jen complained.

"The actual life support system's very small – this is just for show. There's no need for you to lug tanks of oxygen around with you, but looking like you do will help the illusion we're creating for the Oiiduci."

Jen picked up the suit body. It was as light as Alex had said, almost like thin plastic even though it looked and felt like sturdy metal. "Okay. So you're hiding in the backpack, I'm dressed up in the suit... what about the ship? That'll be a bit of a giveaway that we're from the Civilization if it just fades away when we get out, won't it?"

Alex grinned. "Already working on it. I'm going to create a paramatter 'shell' that'll look like a ship that matches the tech level of your suit. They don't have the technology to tell paramatter apart from real matter, so they'll never know the ship's fake. I just need to come up with a design that doesn't look like anything from the Civilization."

"Oh, oh, I've got one!" Jen said with a smirk. "Can you make it look like the Starship Enterprise?"

Alex looked suspiciously at her. "I thought you hated *Star Trek*."

"I do. But it'll drive my brother mad when I tell him that I was in it!"

Alex shook his head. "Aside from the copyright issues... there's a risk, however slight, that somebody might recognise it. The show's been broadcast out into space almost constantly for forty years now – somebody might have seen it on their way through the emission shell."

“Oh. Shame. How about the Millennium Falcon?”

“I think it’s best if *I* handle the design,” Alex told her firmly.

“Okay, *okay*.” Jen looked at the helmet again, wondering how long she’d have to be inside it. “So, we’ve got a fake ship, a fake spacesuit, and a fake ‘Hi! I’m an emissary from a planet a long way away coming to make contact with you interesting bug people we’ve heard so much about’ story. Will they fall for that?”

“They’ll be suspicious,” Alex told her, “but they always are. And these days, they at least greet rather than eat unfamiliar races.”

“Eugh. Then what? How do we find out if Odal really has been making deals with the Oiis?”

“That’s where the Oiiducis’ xenophobia actually works in our favour,” said Alex. “Aliens have very, very restricted access to their homeworld. There’s only one place where they’re allowed – they call it the ‘alien hive’. As a citizen of the Civilization, an enemy, Odal would never have dealt directly with the Oiiduci. He would have had to go through someone else – and that someone would have had to stay in the alien hive. It’s not as though Oiiduci is a popular tourist spot, either, so we should hopefully be able to see who’s there and find out who else has visited recently quite quickly.”

“And then we leave?”

“We’ll go into hyperspace the nanosecond we clear the atmosphere,” Alex assured her.

Jen summoned up a chair and sat down in it, swivelling around to face Alex. “You know, this is kind of exciting. In a scary sort of way.”

Alex stood in front of her, face serious. “Just remember that it’s not a game, Jen. I’ll be there to protect you, but I can’t predict every possibility. Something could still go wrong – and the Oiiduci are a very hostile, very dangerous species. I can’t emphasise that enough. Before, I was protecting you in situations that *turned* dangerous – but in this case, we’re actually going into enemy territory as spies. If we’re discovered, every single creature on the planet will try to kill us.”

Jen suddenly felt a lot less excited and a lot more scared.

“But,” Alex said reassuringly, “I think we’ve got a pretty good chance of succeeding. The hardest part will be the initial contact, when you have to persuade the Oiiduci of our cover story. The good

– well, good-ish – thing about them is that they’ll decide very quickly if you’re a threat or not. If they do...” He gave her a humourless smile. “Let’s just say I won’t let them get near you.”

Jen wondered exactly what Alex would do to protect her. Hadn’t he said he could blow up entire planets? “And if they decide I’m not a threat?”

“Once they’ve done a few scans to make sure you’re not carrying some hideous anti-Oiiduci genoweapon disease, they’ll let you through so you can do your business with them. They’re not big on diplomatic ceremonies when they meet new races.”

“And then,” said Jen, “we just go into this alien hive place and look for someone dodgy, right?”

“More or less,” nodded Alex. “The number of races the Oiiduci even tolerate is very small, so we need to look for someone neutral to the Civilization – Odal’s go-between – and tolerated by the Oiiduci. That’s a pretty short list.”

“So how long before we get there?”

“About eight hours. But there’s something I wanted to show you first, a little detour.”

“What is it?”

Alex winked at her. “It’s a surprise.”

Jen frowned. “I haven’t had much luck with surprises recently.”

“You’ll like this one,” Alex told her. “Trust me.”

Before Alex revealed his surprise, they spent a couple of hours rehearsing the story that they would present to the Oiiduci. Jen thought it all sounded a bit too convenient to be believable, but Alex assured her that many first contacts between different races happened in a similar way. “A lot of races are driven by fear of the Civilization’s reputation before they actually meet us – especially if they have aggressive, expansionist tendencies. And besides,” he added, “it’s got just enough to it to trigger their paranoia about the Civilization. They’ll still want to hear your story even if they don’t trust you.”

“Why are they paranoid about the Civilization?” Jen wanted to know.

Alex rubbed his neck. “We’ve, ah... had a few run-ins with them. They want to expand their territory, which isn’t necessarily

something we have a problem with. Unfortunately, they want to expand it into places where other people already live. Which we *do* have a problem with. So we contained them in their existing territory, which they're not happy about."

"What, so you're at war with them, or..."

"No, no," said Alex, sounding, if anything, slightly apologetic. "Our technology is so far beyond theirs that it's not even funny. They're about four hundred years ahead of Earth, on a fairly standard technological development scale. But they're thousands of years behind us. Unfortunately, now the Civilization's got more important things to worry about than bad-tempered expansionists, so... it seems the Oiiduci are looking for a chance to increase their territory again."

"And this Odal bloke's making deals with them? No wonder he wanted to keep it quiet."

"It does seem a bit odd," Alex agreed. "But, if he believed that was the only way that it might be possible to try to negotiate with the Enemy..."

"And while he was at it," Jen pointed out, "get himself a nice big skipload of thanks from everybody in the Civilization and get voted in as Moderator if he pulls it off."

Alex raised an eyebrow, trying to disguise a slight smile. "How very cynical of you, Jen."

"Hey, come on, I'm a teenage girl! What do you expect?"

"Well actually," he said, the smile widening, "I was hoping to show you something that you couldn't possibly be cynical about. We're here. Time to show you my surprise."

Jen felt the slight dislocation of leaving hyperspace. She wondered what he was going to show her; the fact that he'd made a point of switching off the big screen and returning the dome to its original silvery walls several minutes earlier meant it was something outside. He led her to the front of the dome, standing in front of the table holding the spacesuit. Jen hadn't plucked up the courage to try it on yet.

The lights in the dome dropped, leaving them in almost complete darkness, just a very faint blue glow coming from the walls themselves. Alex looked expectantly at Jen. "I hope you like it."

Jen wasn't sure what to expect, and so was a little surprised when the wall of the dome ahead began to part like curtains, revealing beyond...

"Wow," she gasped.

The view ahead – no, surrounding her, as the dome continued to fade to nothingness on both sides – was the most spectacular sight she'd ever seen, a liquid rainbow of glowing colour stretching over almost her entire field of vision. Ahead lay four giant towers of cloud, a bright yellow at their tops, the colours changing through oranges and reds down to a vivid purple at their bases, shrouded in long, sweeping wisps of green and blue. To her right was a giant eye, a vast circular swirl of red gas, sliced into three by dark lanes of dust. Their shapes reminded her of patterns hidden in clouds on Earth; faces, animals, dragons.

Off to her left was the bulging heart of the galaxy, a bright orange glow merging into immense sweeping arms of white and blue light that spread all around her like a sea of diamonds. She looked up to see five bright blue stars, arranged in an almost perfect cross, shrouded in a blue mist of their own and casting an eerie glow over everything.

"It's beautiful," she said at last, genuinely stunned. She realised that Alex had slowly shrunk the floor of the dome, the edges creeping inwards toward where they were standing, so that it seemed as though they were floating almost unsupported in space.

"It's called the Jen Nebula," Alex told her. She looked at him; he didn't seem to be joking.

"Really? It's named after me?"

Alex gave her a wry smile. "Not quite. 'Jen', in the language of the race that live closest to it, means 'diamond'. In their ancient legends, they thought the five bright stars were jewels, so they named all this after them."

Jen turned, taking in the sight all around her. "This is... wow. This is amazing." With the view falling away to infinity she should have felt a sense of vertigo, of fear, but she didn't. All she felt was awe and elation.

"I wanted to show you that despite what you've experienced, the galaxy isn't just a place of predators and monsters and danger," said Alex quietly. "There's beauty in it too. I can see it all the time; my

sight goes far beyond the human eye. But I wanted you to be able to share it, just for a little while.”

Jen took a step closer to the edge of the floor, looking down into the bottomless void below. A billion stars shone back at her. “Thank you,” she said softly, smiling at the glittering sight. She slowly looked back at the great pillars of cloud ahead. She had no reference point to tell her how big they were – all she could tell was that they were massive on a scale beyond anything she could comprehend. “What... what are they?” She expanded her question to the rest of the vista, opening her arms and spinning around to take it all in. “What is this place?”

“It’s a stellar nursery,” explained Alex. “It’s where stars are born. You see the yellow glow at the tops of the pillars?” Jen nodded. “Those are solar systems in the process of formation. There’s a protostar at the centre of each one, slowly drawing in gas and dust under its own gravity. One of them’s almost at critical mass – in a few years it’ll ignite and a new star’ll be born.”

Jen grinned up at him. “That’s... very romantic.”

He didn’t seem quite sure how to take that, settling for continuing with the science. “Once that happens, the dust cloud’ll be blown away, leaving the beginnings of a solar system. Give it a billion years or so, and everything will have settled down to the point where, maybe, life will begin. This is what your own solar system was like, four and a half billion years ago. This is how you began.”

She stared at the softly glowing yellow tips of the clouds, for a moment wondering what was in them. Was another Earth being born there even as she watched?

“Oh,” said Alex, an excited urgency in his voice, “look, look. I was hoping you’d be able to see these, but they’re very rare.”

“See what?” Jen asked. Alex pointed down and to the right.

“There.” She looked where he was pointing, seeing some tiny specks of light against the red of the nebula. At first she thought they were distant stars... until they started to move.

The lights took form as they approached. Jen blinked, not sure she could believe what she was seeing. Huge gossamer wings slowly banked and turned in the starlight, a flock of birds, majestic, silent, softly glowing like angels. The closer they got, the more awesome they became, Jen realising the almost transparent wings were miles

from tip to tip. At the centre of the wings was a sleek body, much denser and brighter, with two long tails trailing far into its wake.

As she watched, the flock moved, each of the dozens of impossibly lovely beings flexing its wings and gently tacking into a new direction. They all seemed to know instinctively what the others were doing, maintaining their distance perfectly as they turned.

Jen watched the display open-mouthed, absolutely entranced. “What are they?” she eventually thought to ask.

“Stargliders,” Alex said quietly, watching Jen’s responses as much as the creatures themselves. “Flocks of them circle the inner galaxy, absorbing light for energy and flying on the solar winds. They live for millions of years, but few people ever see them.”

“Are they real?” Jen wondered aloud. “How can they live in space?”

Alex smiled. “There are more things in heaven and earth...”

“...than are dreamed of in your philosophy,” Jen finished. Alex looked impressed. “Hamlet. We’re doing it in English.” She turned back to the sight of the stargliders as they swept by, instantly forgetting everything about school. Except for one thing. She moved back slightly and brushed against Alex, nestling a shoulder blade comfortably in the curve between his arm and chest. After an uncertain pause, he hesitantly put a hand on her shoulder. Jen smiled and rested her head against him. The stargliders slowly moved away ahead of them, rolling lazily to the vertical, now more like angelfish than birds as they drifted toward the distant purple bases of the cloud towers. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

She thought about the meeting of the Prime Council at Ara Sumen’s residence. It had seemed bewildering and almost overpowering then; after everything she’d been through since, the memory felt almost reassuringly normal. “You never answered Odal’s question. You know, at Ara Sumen’s. Why *did* you put the Imprint on me, and not on a rock or a sheep or something?”

There was a long pause, and at first she thought he wasn’t going to reply. “The real answer?” he said at last.

“Yes.”

She felt him take a breath, or at least a simulation of one. “I would have been bored to death watching a rock for sixteen years,” he admitted.

Jen turned around to face him. “Really?”

“I don’t just look twenty-six,” he said, “I really *am* twenty-six. That’s how long ago I was first activated. Defenders start life with all their skills and knowledge and powers already there, but our personalities grow and change over time just like anybody else’s. I was *very* impatient and impetuous and active before the war. That’s how I know so many people – I wanted to do as many different things as quickly as possible.” He stared up at the blue stars overhead, face lit by the moonlight glow. “The idea of just finding some piece of space rock to drop the Imprint onto and then spending who knows how long watching over it... didn’t really appeal to me.” He looked back at Jen. “With you, it’s always been interesting.”

“But I’m not all that interesting,” Jen said. “I’m nothing special.”

Alex lightly took her hands in his, making her stomach tingle and fill with butterflies. “Yes, you are. There are trillions of people across the galaxies of the Civilization... but there’s only one of you.”

Jen could feel her cheeks going pink, but not in an embarrassed way; it was more like pleasure escaping through her skin. “Wow, heh,” she giggled, almost unable to look Alex in the eye. “No-one’s ever said that to me before.” She *so* wanted him to lean forward and kiss her, willing him to take the hint—

Alex turned around sharply as if he’d heard a loud noise behind him.

“What?” Jen asked, worried. “What is it?”

“They’re coming,” he said. “They’ve found us.”

“*Who?*”

For the first time she could remember, Alex actually looked scared. “The Enemy.”

## 16: Hunted

Jen felt a sickening fear deep inside her. It wasn't like the feeling she'd had facing the Clo-Hir, or the bounty hunters and chayka on Hoosk. That had been raw, personal. This was more like dread, the cold sensation of facing not a person or animal, but a vast monolithic force that could wipe her from existence without even being aware of it.

Alex was already moving. The dome reappeared and contracted, shrinking in size to just a few metres across. The table vanished into the floor, the parts of the spacesuit flying up and packing themselves into a compact shape. Jen's bag and the remains of her school uniform shot through the back wall of the dome to join them. A black sphere appeared in mid-air around her belongings, then sank to the floor, blending into it just behind her.

"They're coming almost straight for us at three-point-five ex six," Alex barked, the view of the nebula ahead suddenly wheeling sharply, "twenty-five light years out and closing. They'll be here in less than four minutes." The entry into hyperspace was much harsher than anything Jen had felt before, almost a lurch. The nebula started moving, taking on perspective as they headed into it. "The only way they could have seen us from that distance would be if I were generating a hyperfield, but I wasn't. How did they *find* us?"

An image of Cathy Freeman holding a phone and Shaz Johnson's broad, gloating face jumped into Jen's mind. "Someone told them where we are."

Alex looked at her disbelievingly. "That's not possible. Who?"

"How should *I* know?" Jen protested. "Maybe Odal worked out where we'd be going and wanted to shut us up! Where are they?"

A sphere appeared in front of her, a glowing hologram of nested globes, marked with grid patterns. Jen guessed they were at the centre; behind them were two points of hard light, slowly gaining. Abruptly, they disappeared.

"What happened?"

"They dropped out of hyperspace," Alex said. "I can't detect anything in normal space that far away. But they'll be back." Even before he finished the sentence, the two dots reappeared in the sphere, closing again, faster. "They were just changing course to

intercept us. And they've accelerated – they're at four-point-four ex six. I can't outrun them." His voice had become clipped, curt.

"They're going to catch us?" Jen asked, voice wavering.

Another lurch; the nebula stopped moving past, instead wheeling again, the yellow tip of one of the cloud pillars taking position directly ahead. They snapped back into hyperspace, the force of the transition making Jen's stomach churn even more than it was already. "Unless we lose them," Alex announced grimly.

"Can we do that?"

"I hope so." Jen realised that Alex had stopped moving – not merely standing very still, but when he wasn't speaking to her he was utterly immobile, not even blinking. Keeping up his human appearance must have dropped a long way down his list of priorities.

The two dots disappeared again, then blinked back to life a second or so later, still homing relentlessly on them from behind.

The cloud pillar loomed, the yellow glow at its end starting to take on definition. It looked almost like a miniature version of the galaxy's centre, a yellow-orange bulge surrounded by long, intricate swirls of darker gas and dust, sheltering the pillar beneath from the harsh light of the blue stars above it. "What are you going to do?"

"Try to hide," said Alex. "The protoplanetary disc should be dense and turbulent enough near its centre to confuse most realspace scans, and if I cut my energy emissions..." His voice tailed off, animation returning to his face as he looked puzzled. "Even if somebody *did* tell them where we were going, they could never have known that we'd come here first – but the Enemy ships were heading almost directly for us. But they *couldn't* have detected us from so far away. That's not possible. My hyperfield was inactive, I wasn't sending any kind of signals... that only leaves my point generator, but that doesn't make any sense. You'd have to be in zerospace to detect it, and you *can't* be in zerospace. It's physically impossible. How could they have detected us?"

"Well, they detected *something*," Jen pointed out, watching the embryonic solar system swelling ahead with worrying speed.

"Maybe you should turn everything off just in case." She glanced at the holographic display again. The two dots were getting closer and closer. "They're catching up!"

“One minute forty-two,” Alex said flatly. “We’ll be in the disc in one minute.”

“So we only have forty-two seconds to hide? You get more time than that playing Sardines!”

“Fifty-five seconds,” said Alex.

The disc continued to grow. Jen could see that some of the swirls in the swirling outer regions were more like gouges, huge objects having carved great circular paths through the dust. Were there planets forming already?

She hoped Alex would be able to see them before he crashed into anything. The number of grooves was growing as they got closer, reminding her of one of Dad’s old-fashioned records. “Er, Alex? How many planets are there in there?”

“At this stage in the system’s development,” Alex answered, “probably several thousand.”

“*What?*”

“Very few planets survive the first few hundred million years of a solar system’s development. Most of them collide, get thrown into space or are swallowed by the star. Thirty-five seconds.”

Jen gaped at the rapidly-growing dust cloud, which seemed very, very dense near its glowing yellow centre. “What if you crash into one? You won’t be able to see in there!”

“The odds of hitting a planet are extremely low.”

She let out a momentary sigh of relief. “Thank God!”

“It’s far more likely that we’ll hit one of the billions of asteroids or planetisimals. Twenty-fi—”

“*A-leeex!*” Jen yelled in panic, grabbing his arm. He blinked, then looked at her as if he’d just emerged from a trance. “What’s *wrong* with you?”

“I’ve gone into battle mode,” he said. “I’ll apologise in advance, but I can’t really spare the time to be social. If you want, I’ll apologise again when we get out. *If* we get out. Ten seconds.” He turned his attention back to the view ahead, freezing like a waxwork.

Jen looked at the screen to see they were already passing through the wispy outermost edges of the disc, and within moments were plunging deeper into it. She flinched as light and dark patches of gas flickered past, the glow from the centre strobing ahead of her.

“Five seconds. This may be rough.”

Something thick and restrictive closed around her, like the crash gel, but invisible. Another field.

“Emerging now.”

Even inside the field, Jen felt an abrupt slam of deceleration, jarring her teeth. Ahead, the moving view from hyperspace froze, shifting from simulated translation into reality.

The dome shrank again, changing to an ovoid shape, the walls on each side now almost touching her and Alex. “I’m reconfiguring our external fields to create the minimum wake in the dust cloud,” he explained. Jen glanced at the display. The two dots were now rushing towards the centre. “We need to get as far as we can from the point where we entered realspace before they arrive.”

The view rolled and dropped around them. The dust and gas wasn’t as dense as Jen had first thought, certainly not as thick as the clouds she’d flown through in a plane going on holiday, but they were whipping past much faster than any mere airliner could manage.

Something dark and solid shot past, disappearing behind them before Jen was even able to flinch.

“Asteroid,” Alex remarked calmly. “About three million tons. Anything under fifty thousand tons the fields can easily handle; I’m dodging the rest.”

“Glad to hear it,” she squeaked. The dots on the display were almost on them. Ahead, the cloud was getting darker as an indistinct wall of dust, dimly visible through the nearest banks of gas, partly obscured the glow from the heart of the disc.

“They’re here,” Alex said. At that moment, the interior of the dome darkened, and the view slewed wildly to one side. For a moment Jen thought they’d been shot, but a second later reconsidered. If they had been shot by the Enemy, she wouldn’t be alive to realise it.

The walls of the dome changed, losing their reflective sheen, the screen ahead suddenly turning glassy—

The dots vanished from the display, which itself flicked out immediately after. Something large loomed into view from one side through the swirling dust.

The object grew bigger. “Alex, Alex, *Alex!*” Jen pleaded. “We’re gonna crash!”

They fell towards what Jen realised was a massive rock.

“*Alex!*” She closed her eyes, anticipating the impact—

There was a gentle rocking sensation, then nothing.

Jen carefully opened one eye, then the other. Everything inside the dome was still perfectly intact. Through the screen, the view was partly obscured. As Jen’s eyes adjusted to the low light, she realised they were embedded sideways-on in a layer of loose rocks, the pieces varying in size from tiny pebbles up to chunks the size of a person. Some of the rocks looked rough and crumbly, others hard and glassy.

“You okay?” Alex asked, concern in his voice.

“You’re – you’re normal again,” she said.

He raised an eyebrow. “Battle and stealth modes aren’t really compatible. I’ve shut almost everything down; pinched shut my point generator and closed the sink when we came out of hyperspace just in case they somehow *can* see them, even changed the hull into matter so I can turn off my external fields.” He flicked a glance at the screen, which Jen now realised was actually a solid window, not a forcefield, faint distorted reflections of herself and Alex visible in its surface. “I’m on bare minimum emergency power, just enough for life support, artificial gravity and a few passive scanners. Oh, and my projectors,” he tapped himself on the chest, “because I thought you’d need some reassurance. And by the way, sorry again for going all... abnormal.”

She accepted the apology, but was more concerned with something else he’d just said. “Er, how long will life support last?”

“Two or three...”

Jen held her breath.

“...weeks.”

She let it out in a big gasp, then clapped a hand to her mouth, as if the Enemy might hear. A little annoyed with herself, she pointed at the rough line of rocks splitting the view in two. “What just happened?” she asked. “I thought we were going to crash!”

“We did,” said Alex. “But at a very low relative speed. This rock’s about five miles across; minimal gravity. Not enough enough for it to count as a solid object, really – it’s actually a low-density agglomeration.” He pointed at the rocks outside. “The gravity’s so low and these are so loosely packed, you could pull the whole asteroid apart with your bare hands, given time.”

“So what are we *doing* in it?”

“Hiding.” Alex summoned up another spherical hologram, this one filled with a static-like haze, speckled with bright points of light. “This is a passive mass sweep, out to about a hundred thousand kilometres, or a third of a light-second. We’re just under a light-second from where we came out of hyperspace. If the Enemy ships could see us, they would have found us by now.”

Jen looked at the sphere, noticing that the brighter spots were slowly drifting around in relation to each other. “Those are other asteroids?”

“Yes. No sign of the Enemy ships yet.”

“So, what, we’re just going to sit here and drift along until they get bored and give up?”

“Basically, yes.”

“And what if it takes them more than two or three weeks to get bored?”

Alex looked out through the screen, watching the distant clouds of dust drift past as the asteroid slowly rotated. “Let’s hope they don’t. I know how quickly *you* get bored.”

“Hey!”

He smiled. “Only kidding. Actually, I’m hoping that they come within range.”

Jen pulled a face. “What, are you insane?”

“No, just curious. They haven’t detected us so far, so they don’t have some kind of super-powerful scanners beyond Civilization technology, and if they come within range of this,” he glanced at the display, “without picking us up, then their scanners are no better than ours. And they haven’t tried randomly blowing up everything within a light-second of where we came out of hyperspace, so their weapons aren’t all-powerful either.” He looked back at the half-observed view outside. “Actually, we’ve broken the record for the longest recorded engagement against an Enemy ship.”

“What was the previous record?” Jen asked. Her legs were starting to feel tired – damn heels! – so she sat down.

“Three seconds,” Alex said, joining her.

“Ah.”

They sat and watched the slowly changing clouds for a few minutes. Jen saw something moving towards them, and her heart

raced for a moment, until she realised it was just another rock. In the pin-sharp vacuum of space she couldn't tell how far away it was, and got quite a fright when it smacked into the loose rubble a few metres away. Smaller rocks were kicked lazily outwards by the impact, the very largest of them slowly curving back down to the surface, the smaller pieces spinning away out of sight.

"That's how planets form," said Alex, "little pieces sticking to each other and gradually building up enough gravity to draw others to them."

"Alex?"

"Yes?"

"We're not in school any more."

Alex got the point. "Okay. Just thought you might be interest—" He stopped abruptly. Jen immediately switched her attention to the softly glowing hologram.

Something new had entered the sphere, a hard, bright star moving purposefully against the drifting fuzz. Jen watched it, not daring to speak. It wasn't heading right for them, but if it didn't change course, it would come close.

"It's them," said Alex, voice hushed. "No-one's ever been this close before. And lived, anyway." He stared intently at the display, removing the dots representing other asteroids so that Jen could get a clearer look. "I can't get too much data from the low-power passive scans, but I'm getting some very weird results. I can't tell what it's made of."

"Have they seen us?" Jen hissed.

"You don't need to whisper," Alex said in a normal voice. At that exact moment, the Enemy seemed to pause, then changed course, now heading almost straight for the centre of the holographic sphere. "On the other hand..." he whispered.

Jen clutched his hand, hardly able to breathe.

"They might have picked up the GC field," Alex said. "Keep hold of me – I'm going to go to zero-G."

Jen had the sensation of going over a humpback bridge, but in slow motion. Something drifted past the edges of her vision, and she realised it was her hair, slowly floating upwards.

"Zero gravity," said Alex after a few moments. "Keep very still." Jen almost nodded, before deciding to whisper okay instead.

The brilliant star moved closer.

“Ten thousand kilometres,” Alex observed.

“How close do they have to be to shoot at us?”

Alex looked nervous. “They’ve been close enough from the moment they came out of hyperspace.”

“*Not* reassured.”

Closer.

“Five thousand kilometres.”

The display zoomed in, the Enemy moving back out to the edge of the sphere before continuing on its way toward the centre.

“It’s slowing down,” Jen breathed, barely able to hear herself.

They watched the hologram. The point of light moved closer and closer to the misshapen glow that represented their hiding place, losing speed. Jen suddenly realised just how hard she was digging her nails into Alex’s hand.

“Sorry,” she whispered, unclenching her hand.

“That’s okay, I don’t have any nerve endings.”

The star was almost on them, still slowing.

“Alex...” Jen moaned in fear.

Something moved into view over the lip of the loose rocks concealing them, a menacing irregular shape partly hidden behind a veil of dust. It slowed almost to a stop, given movement only by the asteroid’s slow rotation.

They were looking at the Enemy.

Even shrouded in dust, it looked dangerous, sharp spikes sticking out jaggedly at seemingly random angles. Jen tried to remember the image Ara Sumen had shown her. This one looked similar, but not identical.

“It’s not the same,” Alex whispered, noticing it too. “It’s the same size, but the shape’s different.”

The Enemy moved, coming towards them without turning, instead just sliding sideways as if it didn’t have a distinct front. It cleared the dust, revealing its sharp-edged glassy surface, apparently lit faintly from within by a flickering cyan glow. It slowed almost to a stop again. It began to turn, very slowly, as if scanning the asteroid.

Jen held her breath.

The ship moved closer, the glow within its body intensifying.

Jen closed her eyes, squeezing Alex's hand for what she realised might be the last time.

## 17: The Protostar

“It’s leaving,” Alex gasped in disbelief.

Jen snapped her eyes open. The Enemy ship passed overhead, out of sight. They both stared at the mass sweep display in amazement. The bright star was moving away, picking up speed.

“It didn’t see us,” Jen gasped, her whole body suddenly trembling in a concentrated explosion of relief. She started to drift away from the floor.

“It *should* have done,” Alex said, almost sounding peeved. “It came within thirty metres! From that distance, they could have just looked out of a window and found us!”

“Maybe they don’t have eyes,” Jen suggested.

“Maybe they don’t,” he said. “In fact, maybe they don’t have a lot of things. I don’t know if they actually detected my GC field or if that was just a coincidence, but they definitely didn’t pick up my power signature. A Civilization ship would have seen us, even in stealth mode.”

“So they’re not any better than the Civilization in some ways,” Jen said. “That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Yes... but they *did* detect us from thirty light-years away while they were in hyperspace and we were in realspace,” Alex reminded her. “That should be impossible. You can detect objects moving through hyperspace from realspace, but not the other way round.”

“Well, they did it, so it’s obviously *not* impossible.”

They both watched the mass sweep intently. The ship had changed course, slowing down, apparently taking an interest in another asteroid.

“This could take a while,” Alex mused. “If they’re going to check every single asteroid in the area looking for us, we might have to sit here for some time.”

“I hope not,” Jen winced. “I need the loo...”

She managed to hold herself in for the hour it took the Enemy ship to complete its agonisingly laborious search of the area. Finally, it disappeared off the edge of the display. “Great, it’s gone, now can you make me a cup or something to pee in, pleeeeeease?”

“Sorry,” said Alex, “but just because it’s out of range of our mass sweep doesn’t mean it can’t see us if I start using power again. We need to wait a while longer to be safe.” Ignoring Jen’s pained look, he straightened his legs, slowly rising from the floor in the almost non-existent gravity. “If the Enemy really *can* detect point generators through zerospace,” he mused, “then that would give them a massive advantage in combat. Every Civilization vessel built in the past twelve thousand years has used a zerospace point generator as its main power source.” His expression darkened. “Every Civilization *world* uses zerospace energy. It’s as much a fundamental part of society as the Nexus is – was. If they could target that, somehow turn our own point generators into weapons against us...”

“What is zerospace, anyway?” Jen asked, still watching the display in case the Enemy came back. “I get hyperspace, sort of – it’s like a shortcut, right?”

“Sort of,” Alex smiled. “If – *when* we get out of this, I’ll show you the five thousand step quantum physics formula that describes it.”

“I think I can save that for A-levels, thanks. So what’s zerospace?”

“A *twenty*-five thousand step formula.”

“Ew.”

Alex glanced at the display. “I’ll give them a few more minutes, then I’m going to risk putting a little more power into the passive scanners. As for zerospace... okay, it’s a *gross* oversimplification, but imagine that realspace is a flat circle, like a map, and every point in the universe is inside that circle.”

Jen thought about it. “Got it.”

“Okay, now imagine that circle is the base of a cone, and the cone is hyperspace.”

“With you so far.”

“The cone is made up of layers, each one of them representing successively more dimensionally supercurved hyperspatial displacement membranes.”

Jen made a face. “Okay, lost.”

“Or,” Alex tried again, “the higher up the cone you are, the faster you’re going.”

“That’s better.”

“Each point in realspace has a corresponding point in hyperspace, no matter how high up the cone you are. But the higher you go, the closer together each point gets, and the less time it takes to travel between them.”

“I think I get it,” Jen said, picturing it in her mind. If the cone were made up of smaller and smaller circles of paper, with the same map on each piece, then places on a map halfway up would be only half as far apart as on the map at the bottom... “Yeah! Okay, I can see that. So what’s zerospace?”

“That’s the point of the cone. It’s got no dimensions, but it’s connected to every point in the real universe, and it’s got the same amount of energy in it.” Jen made her confused face again.

“Basically, it’s an infinite supply of energy. I take energy from it through my point generator, and dump any excess – mostly heat – back through the sink. It’s also how the Nexus was possible – everything’s instantaneously linked via zerospace.”

“Maybe somebody doesn’t like having you dump stuff in there,” Jen said. Alex gave her a look.

“There’s nobody there *to* not like. Like I said, zerospace has no dimensions, it’s *zero... space*. You can’t live in – uh-oh.”

Jen looked at him in concern. “Uh-oh slight problem uh-oh, or uh-oh we’re going to die uh-oh?”

“The first, moving into the second. Look.” He pointed through the screen. Small pebbles and grains of rock were slowly rising from the surface, the larger pieces gently shifting and flexing against each other.

“What’s happening?”

“The asteroid’s coming apart! The amount of thrust I used to direct it away from our realspace entry point must have been too much.” His brow furrowed. “But the rate of breakup shouldn’t be *this* extreme, unless... uh-oh.”

Jen watched more small rocks start to move. “Please tell me that’s still the first kind of uh-oh.”

He shot another look at the display. “I’m going to increase the range of the mass sweep. Hang on.”

The image already in the display shrank as the scan moved outwards. Jen didn’t see any sign of the ships... but there was something else there. Something very large.

“It’s a protoplanet,” Alex said, alarmed. “About the size of Mars. And we’re heading right for it! Its gravity’s pulling this asteroid apart.”

“And you didn’t *see* it?” wailed Jen. “How could you miss it? It’s a huge great planetary thing!”

“I shut down my long-range scanners,” Alex scowled. “We’ll impact in three minutes.”

Jen stared at the display. “You can dodge it, right?”

“Only if I use my gravity drive, and the Enemy might detect that,” he warned. “I’m sure it was my GC field which made it come in our direction in the first place.”

More rocks started to spill past them, the loosely-packed asteroid being pulled apart in slow motion by the approaching planet’s gravity. “They might not see us, and it’s still got to be better than crashing!” Jen cried.

“We can’t take the chance,” Alex said. “Look!” He pointed at the mass sweep. Two hard, bright points of light had just appeared at one edge, slowly moving across the sphere somewhere behind them. “They’re less than half a light-second away. If they detect us, they’ll be on us in no time.”

“So what do we *do*?”

Alex paused thoughtfully, then gave her a slightly dangerous smile. “I have a plan,” he said, “but you’re not going to like it. We hit the planet.”

Jen stared at him. “As not liking things goes, that’s Shaz Johnson level.”

“No, it’s not as bad as it sounds. I can use a low-level, very brief pulse from my GC field to push us away from the asteroid and towards one edge of the planet,” he quickly explained. “It’s still in the process of forming – the outer crust will mostly be as loose as this asteroid, and there’s only the very thinnest traces of an atmosphere. If we’re lucky we’ll just skim the planet and slingshot around the far side, but even if we hit the surface, it’s so loose and we’ll be going so fast we’ll go straight through it. I can run some shaped fields off my emergency power to deflect us back out. In theory, anyway.”

“Oh, in *theory*!” Jen sneered. “And what if the theory’s wrong?”

“Let’s hope it’s not,” Alex said, the ship suddenly pulling free of the asteroid, a trail of dislodged rocks and stones scattering in its wake. “Because I just set us off.”

Jen was about to give him her opinion of this move when her attention was caught by the mass sweep. The two dots of the Enemy ships paused, like prowling cats unsure if they’d heard a nearby bird, then changed course. Directly for the centre of the sweep.

Directly for them.

“They *can* detect GC fields,” Alex observed grimly. “But they haven’t fired yet...”

“Maybe they weren’t sure what it was,” Jen offered.

“Could be. Or they might not be able to see anything else to target – the field was only active for a microsecond, and everything else is either shut down or in stealth mode. But we’ve got something else to worry about. Look.”

Jen followed his gaze. Ahead, a huge dark circle loomed through the gas and dust, a crescent on one side lit up by the nearby glow of the embryonic star. They were heading towards the opposite, dark edge of the unformed world.

“Are you sure it’ll work?” she asked, glancing back at the two bright stars in the display. They were still closing.

“Yes,” said Alex. Jen looked at him. “Probably.”

“*Probably?*”

“It’s better than maybe.” He stared intently at the approaching planet. Detail started to become visible on the sunlit side, revealing a rough, heavily cratered surface. Long cracks writhed across it, continuing into the dark side where they glowed red like lava. “Two minutes to impact.”

“Impact?” Jen said. “So we *are* going to crash?”

Alex gave her an apologetic look. “Afraid so. Only a little bit, though.”

“Isn’t that like being a little bit pregnant?” she said. “Or a little bit *dead?*”

The two Enemy ships on the display were moving apart, slowing down. “Search pattern,” said Alex. “They still haven’t seen us.”

“Well, at least there’s one good thing—” Jen began, before a bright flash of light ahead made her gasp, a shock of fear running through her. Once again, for an instant she thought the Enemy had

fired on them, until she saw that the flash had come from the planet. An intense white light on the border of the sunlit crescent was already fading through yellow down to orange, a bright circle expanding slowly outwards from it. “What’s *that?*”

“An asteroid just hit the planet,” said Alex, watching with interest. “About a twenty megaton explosion.”

Jen’s eyes widened. “What, you mean – like an *atom bomb?*”

“More like a hydrogen bomb, actually. Small by planetary formation standards. Most protoplanets take several hits in the teraton range.”

“And what if one hits near *us?*”

Alex didn’t answer for a moment, instead watching the view ahead as the planet grew larger, filling the screen. “That... could be a problem.”

“No kidding!”

“We’ll worry about it if it happens.” Alex put an arm on Jen’s shoulder to reassure her. “Until then... we’re going in!”

The planet rushed closer, lit by the dull reflected light from the surrounding dust clouds and the glow of molten rock. More details became visible on the surface. None looked the least bit attractive. Jen started to feel a weight pulling her towards one side of the dome, the planet’s gravity taking hold.

The Enemy ships were searching behind them, moving apart, but still heading in the direction of the planet.

Another bright flash lit the sky, somewhere out of sight over the planet’s horizon. A few moments later, it was followed by a second.

“Two more hits,” Alex reported, concerned. “Both over a hundred megatons.”

Jen clutched Alex’s arm. “Are we in a *storm?*”

“You could say that.”

“I don’t want to!”

“Thirty seconds.” The planet had changed from a sphere to a landscape, coiling ribbons of lava rolling past beneath them.

“Are we going to make it?” Jen asked, transfixed by the sight of the shattered vista growing closer, moving faster, with every second that passed.

“If you mean can we survive hitting the ground, then yes.”

“What else *would* I mean?” Jen demanded nervously.

“The asteroids that are going to hit the ground about the same time as us,” he told her.

“*What?*”

“I think they’re going to hit far enough away for us to escape the shockwave.”

“You *think!*”

“Ten seconds.”

A faint glow started to rise in front of them. Jen thought at first it was coming from the lava on the ground, but then saw it was a rippling, flickering orange light streaming back past them from a point several metres ahead. She realised what it was; Alex had put up a forcefield to protect the ship from burning up in the thin atmosphere.

She forced her eyes from the view ahead to look at the mass sweep. Had the Enemy picked up Alex’s fields?

There wasn’t time to check. Another flash lit up the entire landscape, stark black shadows leaping across it as everything turned white. The glass of the screen darkened. A vaporous grey wall raced at them from their right, the loose ground sucked up in its wake.

Alex held her tighter. “Hang on!”

The wall shot past them. A loud thud rang through the confined ship as it was knocked sideways by the blast wave from the asteroid strike, followed by a shrieking, scrabbling noise as the debris churned up in its wake hit the hull, sounding like hundreds of hands clawing at the metal. Jen screamed. The landscape ahead was rolling over, the dark ground pushing the distant glow of the dust clouds out of her view as the ship tumbled.

They were going to *crash!*

The fire ahead flickered and shifted, the forcefield changing shape as the ground rushed at them—

They hit.

A huge column of dust and stones and rocks was blown aside as they plunged *through* the loosely packed surface, the reshaped field forcing them back upwards. The hissing roar was unbearable, Jen unable even to hear herself scream as she crushed her hands against her ears.

The terrible noise stopped abruptly. They exploded back out of the ground, now the right way up again, debris spinning and falling away all around.

Another flash, brighter than any before, this one directly behind them as the entire landscape turned as glaringly white as a snowfield.

Alex barely had time to reshape the forcefield again before the shockwave hit, this one enormously stronger than before. The entire surface of the planet rippled and exploded around them, billions of tons of rock kicked skywards by the force of the impact. The blast engulfed them, the view instantly obscured by pulverised rubble. He snapped another forcefield into place inside the ship, hardening it as much as he could with what scraps of remaining power he was able to free up, to stop the sheer intensity of soundwaves pounding through the hull from destroying Jen's hearing.

The tumult began to die down. The heavier pieces of debris were already arcing down to the planet's surface, dragged back by its gravity, while the smaller particles were already clear of the thin atmosphere clinging to the battered world. Some of them would eventually rain back down onto it, while others were already on an escape trajectory that would carry them back out into the dust clouds that had spawned them.

The ship wasn't going with the latter group. Alex did some calculations, instantly realising that they weren't at escape velocity. They were still ascending, but not steeply or quickly enough. In less than a minute, they would reach the highest point of their ballistic path; another minute after that, they'd hit the surface again. And this time, they wouldn't be going back up. Protecting the ship from the apocalyptic blasts had almost exhausted his energy reserves.

He cancelled the forcefield inside the ship, about to transfer the energy to create another brief, final GC pulse to kick them back into space, when—

He'd shut down the mass sweep display, but didn't need it anyway; it was really only there for Jen's benefit, the information he was getting directly from his scanners being far more detailed. The two Enemy ships were now well over the horizon, behind the mass of the planet itself.

"The hell with this," he muttered.

Jen blinked, shaking her head and trying to hear him over the ringing in her ears. “With what?” she mumbled.

“If they can shoot us *through* a planet, then they’re so powerful that we might as well surrender right now,” Alex said. “I’m going to turn on my point generator again.”

“But they’ll see us!”

“I’m almost out of power,” he warned. “I’ll have to do it anyway to keep you alive. And besides,” he added, “I’ve got a little surprise for our friends back there.”

Before Jen had got the first syllable of her inevitable question out, he’d reactivated his point generator, fully recharged the energy reserves, performed every possible active scan on the surrounding area, changed course to accelerate away from the planet and gone back into battle mode. The sky ahead brightened, the dull glow of the protostar coming into view over the curve of the planet.

“What surprise?” she asked, squinting as the reddish-orange star filled the ship with light.

“The Enemy ships have seen us and changed course. They’re going to orbit the planet behind us. I’ve worked out their trajectories. See that asteroid?”

Jen looked. Off to one side was a huge piece of ugly rock, one side smashed and ripped away by some past collision. “Yes?”

“Keep watching.”

A line of white fire burned across the surface of the asteroid, running perfectly straight from top to bottom, splitting it in two. Alex changed course to head for the asteroid, changing from a cutting field to gravity control the moment the great rock had been completely bisected. The two halves had moved apart at his urging just enough to let them through as they reached it, Jen yelping in fright as the half-mile-high, perfectly flat field-cut walls enclosed them.

He accelerated, forcing even more power through the point generator into his gravity fields. They shot out of the far side of the asteroid’s halves just as Alex hit them with a massive, carefully focused GC field. Both parts of the colossal rock were blasted back towards the rim of the planet, aimed at the exact points where he predicted the Enemy ships would come into sight around it.

Another course change, this one to keep the planet between them and the Enemy for as long as possible. Apparently they *couldn’t*

target ships through a planet. Nor could anyone else, admittedly, but at least it was something. They were now heading almost straight for the protostar, a giant gravitational magnet in the heart of the system pulling in everything around it.

The protostar, he could handle. But in a few seconds, he'd find out if the same were true of the Enemy. He was already preparing to shut down his point generator again if he had to, to re-enter the game of cat and mouse.

Jen tapped his arm. "What are you doing?" she asked. "Can't we just go into hyperspace?"

"We shouldn't – there's too much matter around, too much dust and gas. If it gets sucked into the hyperfield with us, it could be very dangerous. Besides, they'll catch us." The Enemy ships hadn't changed course yet, following a perfect, predictable arc around the planet, chasing them. Not all of his scans were fully functional in the dust cloud, some of them either obscured entirely or only providing partial readings. If the Enemy ships had the same problem, they might not see what was coming...

They still hadn't changed course. Maybe they didn't even use mass sensors at all—

Alex had set the giant rocks moving on precise courses at equally precise, but slightly different, speeds – timing them to reach their predicted impact points at the same moment. They did.

The ships were still out of sight behind the planet, but his battery of active scans told him the story clearly enough without needing to see it. Both asteroids hit their targets at a closing speed of over sixty kilometres per second, a force that would splatter any ship – fields active or not – like a fly on a windscreen.

He'd got them.

He'd got them!

He'd actually managed to destroy the Enemy!

Alex dropped out of battle mode almost involuntarily, filled with the need to celebrate. "Yes!" he crowed, making a triumphant fist. "In your face!" He forced himself to calm down when he saw that Jen was giving him a very odd look. "If... you have one."

"You got them?" she asked, amazed.

"I got them!"

"You did?" she gasped, breaking into a smile.

“Oh yeah.” Alex couldn’t help grinning, which just made him feel a bit foolish – he was a machine *simulating* human behaviour, after all. But on the other hand, he felt absolutely ecstatic! He’d done what nobody else in the Civilization had ever managed – not only had he *survived* a confrontation with the Enemy, he’d actually *won* it! He punched the air again. “Hah!”

Jen hugged him. “Yay, you *did* it! Good one you!” She pulled back a little, still holding him, and for a moment, they both looked into each others’ eyes. Jen suddenly felt short of breath. Maybe this time, she should—

Alex’s face changed from jubilation to horror.

“That’s impossible!” he said, bringing the scanner display back up for Jen to see – and also for him to confirm that she was seeing the same thing he was.

The debris clouds were dispersing, vaporised rock and metal spreading outwards from the point of impact... where two ships became visible. Same mass, same configuration as before. They held position for a moment, then started moving again, continuing along their course around the planet as if nothing had happened.

Jen gaped at the display. “I thought you hit them!”

“I *did*!” Alex protested. “They were completely destroyed!”

“But – where did they come from?”

“I don’t know,” said Alex. He was about to shut down the point generator to hide again, when he had second thoughts.

The Enemy weren’t going to give up. Whoever or whatever was aboard the ships knew that they couldn’t escape from the protoplanetary disc without being detected, couldn’t run without being caught. They could just wait them out, search every last cubic millimetre if they had to, but eventually they would find them. And kill them.

He was a Defender. He had a mission – to protect Jen. Hiding wouldn’t accomplish that. Nor, it seemed, would fighting – but at least now he knew he could *slow* the Enemy, delay them, maybe give them a slight opportunity to escape.

He needed a bigger opportunity.

The protostar loomed ahead, huge.

“Jen,” he said, accelerating hard towards it, “I’m going to have to go into battle mode again. I might not even be able to talk to you –

I'm going to have to put *all* my power into something, and I don't have time to explain. But I need to know – do you trust me?"

"I trust you," Jen replied, without hesitation.

"Okay." He gave her one last smile. "Whatever happens, just remember I'll still be doing everything I can to protect you. I'll talk to you again as soon as I can."

"Alex—" Jen began, but he disappeared. As did the ship around her, nothing left but the black sphere containing her belongings and a faintly glowing forcefield just big enough to contain her. The floating silver ball remained where Alex had been... only now it was different, morphing, angular facets emerging from the rounded surface, the glowing lights changing from blue to a warning red. "Alex!"

No answer.

The protostar grew, its scale increased by the lack of a reassuring 'window' to view it through. The forcefield darkened as they approached, muting its brightness, but she still had to shield her eyes.

Jen had no idea what Alex was doing. Or where the Enemy ships were. She looked over her shoulder, but even the ravaged planet had disappeared inside the dust.

It was getting hot. She fingered her collar. *Why* had she chosen a leather outfit?

And why was it getting hot? Alex had always been able to keep the temperature steady before—

"Alex? Alex! It's getting hot in here, is everything okay?"

Still no answer. The red lights on the unfamiliar, faceted sphere pulsed silently. "Alex!"

The protostar was now so big it was almost impossible to tell it was round, instead looking like an unimaginably vast molten ocean stretching away to infinity below. Flashes of light sparkled all over its surface; more rocks and asteroids being dragged to their doom and smashing into its surface, exploding like a million bombs. Enormous storms boiled upwards, the heat already coming from the nascent star increased as countless tons of material from the surrounding cloud were pulled down into it and consumed.

Where were the Enemy ships? She didn't know how far away they could fire from, only remembering that it was further than Alex could shoot back.

What was he doing? What was his plan?

The protostar's surface streaked past below them, the temperature inside the forcefield bubble still rising as they dropped closer and closer to the mottled ocean.

She couldn't imagine what Alex was doing; it already seemed clear that they could home in on his point generator, and there wasn't anything she could see that he could use to attack them.

It was so *hot!*

Alex's transformed sphere hung impassively next to her.

The Enemy *had* to be coming for them by now—

Jen's muscles tensed, anticipating the attack—

The surface of the protostar was boiling, rippling, giant shockwaves spreading out across it.

The shockwaves multiplied.

Even through the ever-darkening forcefield, Jen could tell that the star was suddenly getting brighter, vast areas the size of entire planets turning from orange to yellow to white, a spreading geometric pattern of glaring light—

Alex reappeared. "Time to go!" he shouted. "I'm going into hyperspace!"

"You said we couldn't do that!" Jen cried.

The entire surface of the protostar was collapsing in on itself—

"No, I said we *shouldn't!* Hang on!"

Another field slammed into place around her, the hot air turning thick, glutinous, as the star erupted beneath her—

A wrenching feeling, the star abruptly vanishing, replaced by absolute blackness—

They were in hyperspace.

Something was different, *wrong!* The whole ship was shaking, buffeted by something outside. Jen struggled against the field to turn her head, seeing Alex with a look of intense concentration on his face, jaw clenched—

Another wrench. They were back in normal space, on the fringes of the protoplanetary disc, thin tracks of dust ahead.

"Are you okay?" she heard Alex asking urgently.

"I – I think so," Jen gasped, not sure if she was or not. "What did you *do?*"

“The hardest thing I’ve ever done,” he said, visibly slumping as if exhausted. “I just blew up the protostar.”

Jen stared at him, open-mouthed.

“Not the whole thing, of course,” he continued, almost apologising. “I might be powerful, but not *that* powerful. But I used my grav fields to compress some of the denser regions far below the surface until nuclear fusion started. That’s why I couldn’t talk to you – it was literally taking *all* the energy I could generate to do it. Basically, I created mini-stars inside the protostar itself, which caused shockwaves that compressed the matter between them. At a certain point, a chain reaction started... and about a third of the protostar blew up.”

Jen struggled to take in what he was saying. “You... *blew up a star?*”

“Only a third of one,” Alex corrected casually. “It still isn’t quite dense enough to enter the stellar ignition phase. And, well, I’ve probably just set that back by a few thousand years now.”

“Oh, well, that’s all right then!” she spluttered. A cold thought struck her. “What happened to the other ships?”

“Destroyed,” Alex said, “hopefully. I haven’t seen any sign of them. They were coming right for us just before we went into hyperspace, and must have been within seconds of reaching weapons range. But if you’re not expecting a star to blow up in your face at nine-tenths of the speed of light, you might not be fast enough on the button.” He cocked his head, looking Jen up and down. “Are you hot?”

“Yah hah!” Jen said, nodding sarcastically.

“Told you leather was a bad idea. You’ll need to change before we get to Oiiduci, anyway – it’s another hot planet.”

“Oh, great.” Jen felt the odd twinge of entering hyperspace, this time normally. The last vestiges of the dust cloud flicked out of sight. “But... you really got them this time? They’re gone?”

“I certainly hope so.” Alex kept a close watch on the centre of the disc, now with a huge, lopsided shockwave eating away at its heart, as they raced away from it at full speed.

Just before they passed out of range, he picked up two objects entering hyperspace. They were travelling slowly, at a very low displacement, as if the explosion had severely damaged them.

But they hadn't been destroyed.

If one of the most powerful events in the universe, the explosion of a star, couldn't kill the Enemy... then what could?

## 18: Oiiduci

Oiiduci was an ugly world.

Shrouded in bilious green and yellow clouds, even from space it seemed unwelcoming. And the reception ‘Captain Jen’ had received when she arrived in the system suggested that the planet’s inhabitants were no more hospitable.

Alex had formed a paramatter shell around them as they headed through hyperspace, a fake hull that looked to Jen more like her idea of a real spaceship than anything the Civilization had on offer. Somewhat blocky, with two big glowing engines and a grey metal skin covered in twiddly little details, it could have come straight out of one of her brother’s favourite TV shows.

The interior had been given matching treatment, the smooth spaciousness of the dome replaced by some rather cramped cabins lined with computer screens and control panels. Jen had no idea what any of them did, but suspected the blinking displays and flashing lights weren’t actually connected to anything at all.

They emerged from hyperspace quite far out in the system, then sat and waited, transmitting a ‘here we are!’ message. Jen had used the time to put on the body of her spacesuit, Alex turning off his human form and concealing his sphere inside the suit’s backpack. About an hour later, an Oiiduci ship emerged from hyperspace and hung ominously a few kilometres away. After Jen gave her cover story and some computer files to back it up, and then a considerable wait (Alex told her that the ship’s crew were waiting for instructions from their homeworld, and also carrying out a surreptitious ‘molecular resonance scan’, which he’d seemed intrigued by), a harsh, rasping voice from the vessel gave her instructions on how to follow them back to Oiiduci. To be followed precisely, with no variation, deviation to be met with destruction.

By Oiiduci standards, Alex said, they were being polite.

Arriving at the sickly-looking planet, they were met by more ships, unattractive and menacing skeletal frameworks supporting pods and engines and heavy metal plating. And, Jen couldn’t help noticing, guns. A large part of each ship was devoted to weaponry, an assortment of turrets and missile racks hanging off the spaceframes. All of them pointing at her.

After that was more waiting, and scanning, and questioning. With Alex's guidance – it took a little while to get used to hearing his voice inside her head – she'd answered everything to the Oiiducis' apparent satisfaction. Finally, the rasping voice gave her descent and landing instructions, with the same warning about facing destruction if they weren't followed exactly.

“Real charmers, aren't they?”

*~I can take it from here*, Alex said, working the ship's controls remotely. Jen took her hands off the fake levers and joysticks with no small relief.

The descent into the atmosphere, two Oiiduci ships flanking them a few kilometres away, was unnervingly different to any of Jen's previous landings. Before, Alex had used his gravity control fields to drop practically straight down onto his landing site from orbit, brushing aside minor annoyances like Newton's laws with the help of millennia of technology. This, though, was re-entry the way human astronauts had to do it, the plasma fire she'd witnessed in the thin atmosphere of the protoplanet magnified a thousandfold. And there were no forcefields this time, just the paramatter hull of their fake spaceship to protect them.

Jen remembered the television images of a space shuttle burning up that she'd seen when she was younger. Those had seemed distant, unreal. Now, they were coming back to her in an all too real way. She clutched at the armrests of her chair as the ship vibrated, Alex's reassurances that she was perfectly safe not nearly as comforting without his physical presence next to her.

But everything went smoothly. The two ships descending with her peeled away just before they dropped into the thick yellow clouds and headed back into space, replaced by three aircraft rising up from below. Not that she could see them, instead relying on Alex's running commentary of their progress. The clouds got thicker and darker as they descended.

It wasn't until they had dropped to subsonic speeds and less than three miles altitude that Jen caught her first glimpse of the surface through the clouds. Nothing but shades of brown and grey, a world that seemed to be made entirely of clay and mud. The thickness of the clouds cast a dim green pall over everything, the light hardly brighter than dusk on Earth.

She watched for cities, seeing nothing but huge, irregular mounds and long, snaking ridges rolling by below the cockpit windows, all in the same drab colours. It wasn't until the ship got closer that she realised they *were* cities. The individual mounds and ridges were irregular in shape, but there was a definite pattern to their arrangement.

The whole of the surface was a city, a giant sculpture in earth and mud. Or, she thought, not a sculpture, but an ants' nest. The idea gave her chills.

The ship banked. Ahead was a small, almost circular mountain range, the vast sprawl of the Oiiduci city rising part-way up its sides before stopping abruptly in a perfectly straight line like clay trimmed off by a knife. Some of the peaks were capped, not with snow, but by a dark soot, a negative image of mountains on Earth.

*~That's the alien hive, between the mountains, Alex said. ~It's kept isolated from the rest of the planet.*

"So the Oiis are kept safely away from us alien scum, right?"

*~Partly. Also so that if any of the aliens there try to do anything threatening, they can just nuke the whole place with minimum damage to anything around it.*

"Oh," Jen said. "That's... clever of them."

*~They've done it before. We once sent an envoy to give them an ultimatum they didn't like. They replied by blowing up the whole alien hive with her and everyone else in it.*

"You're not filling me with confidence," Jen chided, watching the mountains slide past as the ship banked again. Beams of yellow light sprang up from the ground, intense searchlights reaching toward them.

*~Landing beams, Alex told her.*

The ship turned and followed the beams, slowing as it neared the surface. Jen saw a broad circular pit between the base of the lights. Dozens of other, similar pits dotted the grim plain between the peaks. Some had spaceships parked in them, ranging in shape from sleek to ugly to downright weird.

The ship came to a halt over the pit, then slowly, somewhat hesitantly, lowered itself in. *~I don't want them to think our GC tech is any better than theirs, Alex said.*

There was a whining sound that reminded Jen of the landing gear coming down on a plane, before she realised that was exactly what it was. Something locked into place under the cockpit with a thunk, then a few moments later there was a hefty bump as the ship touched down.

“Ow.”

*~Sorry. Time to put the helmet on and meet the reception committee.*

Jen tied her hair back and reluctantly picked up the helmet, carefully brushing away any loose eyelashes and rubbing her nose before lowering it over her head. There was a faint click of latches as it connected to the neck of the suit.

*~Okay, everything's secure. I'll be monitoring the whole time, so don't worry.*

Jen stood up. Even though the suit was lighter than it looked, it still felt awkward and restrictive. “Are they waiting outside?”

*~Yes. Are you ready?*

“I hope so.” She clomped out of the cockpit and into the ship's airlock, the inner door closing behind her. “So they're basically just big ants, right? I know ants aren't that great to look at close up, but I suppose I can cope.” Pumps whirred and hissed as the air was sucked out of the cramped compartment, replaced by whatever noxious gases made up the Oiiduci atmosphere.

*~Er, Jen, said Alex, sounding concerned. ~When I compared them to ants, I meant in terms of their behaviour, not appearance.*

“What?” The pumps stopped, and something clanged within the heavy outer door.

*~They don't look like ants. If that's what you were expecting, you might be in for a shock.*

“Then what *do* they look like?” There was a low hissing noise, then the outer door started to slide open.

And Jen found herself staring at a nightmare.

She instinctively tried to back away, but the suit's joints had locked solid, stopping her from moving. All she could do was thrash helplessly inside the suit in growing panic as the monstrosity advanced...

Another faint hiss of air behind her, and the suit suddenly smelt like peach blossoms. She relaxed. No need to be frightened. She was

just looking at some incredibly ugly giant alien, that was all. “Alex? What’s that smell?”

*~A mild tranquilising agent.*

“It’s nice.”

*~Are you feeling better?*

“I feel great.”

*~Not scared?*

“Not any more, no. So that’s an Oiiduci? You were right, it doesn’t look anything like an ant.”

She looked with detached interest at the alien. It was almost as though someone had taken a large, dangerous animal, an elephant or rhino... and turned it inside-out. About two metres tall, and at least twice as long, a large, slowly pulsating sack of wet grey flesh was stretched out and entwined inside a dense protective cage of dark, jagged bones. The being’s six legs ended in points that sank slightly into the ground of the pit; just below each knee was a knot of flesh and sinew wrapping around the joint. Veins bulged and contracted slowly all over the soft parts of the body. The creature’s ‘face’ glared out at her from under a mottled crest of bone, multiple eyes, cold, dead glassy bulges, watching her intently. Sunk into the skin near one side of the face was a piece of boxy technology – a radio? Arms tipped by bony claws were folded up under its body.

“That’s the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen,” she observed mildly.

*~It’s a good job I haven’t turned on the suit’s translator yet. If I counter the tranquiliser, will you be okay?*

“Yeah, sure.”

*~I’ll... partly counter it first.*

Another faint hiss.

“You *drugged* me?” Jen said over her shoulder in a restrained scream.

*~I had to! You were close to passing out!*

“I can’t *believe* you! I’ll bloody kill you!”

*~Do it later. I think our friend out there is getting suspicious.*

Jen looked back at the Oiiduci, which had stopped eight metres from the ramp extending from the airlock door. It was still watching her with its expressionless eyes.

*~Are you okay?*

“Yes,” she told him, the instinctive, overwhelming revulsion she’d experienced at the first sight of the alien now largely replaced with anger at Alex’s trick. The Oiiduci was still completely disgusting, but the initial shock had faded, and she could now stand to look at it.

For short periods, anyway.

*~Okay then. Let’s go.*

Jen took her first step down the ramp, and almost stumbled. She suddenly felt incredibly heavy.

*~The gravity’s one-point-two-six G. You weigh a quarter as much again as you do on Earth, so watch your step.*

“Great. Now I’m scared *and* overweight.” She kept her voice low, trying to talk out of the corner of her mouth. Whether the Oiiduci would be able to see her or not she didn’t know, but there was no point taking the chance.

*~I’ll turn on the suit’s translator, Alex said. ~Anything you say above a whisper from now on will be broadcast, so be careful.*

“Okay,” she whispered. The speaker built into the chest of her spacesuit remained silent.

*~Now, you remember what to say?*

“Yes,” she whispered in annoyance, before raising her voice. “Greetings to the great race of the Oiiduci! As an official envoy of the Terran Empire, *that sounds so stupid!*” she hissed under her breath as an aside, “I come seeking friendship and co-operation, and hope that our two great powers will be able to achieve a goal that is to our mutual benefit.” The suit speaker turned her words into a series of clicks and unpleasant wet noises.

The alien’s reply came in English, translated through her node. “You are Jen?” it asked in a terse, impatient rasp.

*~Give it a second before answering, so he thinks you’re having to wait for a translation.*

*“Yes, I remember! I am.”*

“I am Relayer Orange-Orange-Black one-eight-zero-nine-two-four-six-zero-nine.”

“Ah... hello.” She noticed that the mottled markings on the alien’s crest were indeed orange and black. “On behalf of my people, I wish to express my honour at being permitted to make first contact with

your, um, noble race on your... beautiful planet.” It had taken all her effort to keep sarcastic distaste out of her voice.

The Oiiduci was unimpressed. “You wish to discuss possible cooperation between the Oiiduci and the Terran Empire.”

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

“Discuss.”

Jen looked around at the landing pit, spotting other Oiiduci lurking at its perimeter, some of them holding weapons. There were also objects dotted around the rim of the pit that looked suspiciously like gun turrets, all pointing down at her ship. “What, right here? I mean, er, do you not wish to commence negotiations in a more suitable venue?”

“All locations are equal. Discuss.”

She launched into the speech Alex had devised for her, a stirring tale of how the mighty Terran Empire’s policy of expansion and conquest was threatened by its discovery of a threatening force calling itself ‘the Civilization’. “We learned of you and your language from a species called the Deefari.”

“They are known to us,” said Orange-Orange-Black. “They are tolerated.”

“And they are tolerated by the Terran Empire, too,” Jen continued. “Despite our biological differences, it is clear that we share a similar, er, mindset. Growth is life, expansion is survival.” It was a phrase that Alex had used repeatedly while they were rehearsing, saying it was one of the Oiiducis’ basic philosophies.

Orange-Orange-Black shifted slightly, the sharp spikes of its feet scraping over the ground. “Correct. Our territory must expand to ensure our continuation.”

“Your environment is hostile to my species, and mine to yours. The worlds we seek to occupy are different, so there is no cause for conflict between us.” Jen paused, trying to remember what to say next.

*~But it seems we share a common—*

“Yes, yes,” she muttered, before clearing her throat and carrying on. “But it seems we have a common enemy, this... *Civilization*.” She put as much contempt into her voice as she could, though had no idea whether her rattling translation would get the feeling across. “I was sent to make overtures for an alliance. It seems we will soon face a

direct challenge from this Civilization, and they will attempt to stop our, er..."

*~Manifest destiny.*

"Our manifest destiny. The Deefari have told us you have already faced the same situation."

"Correct," said Orange-Orange-Black, its arms twitching as if agitated. "The Civilization restricts our growth."

Jen was starting to get into the part. "If our two peoples join forces in an alliance, we can crush the accursed Civilization—"

*~Steady.*

"—and ensure the life and survival of both our races."

The Oiiduci considered this for a moment, then spoke again. "The Oiiduci have no need for an alliance. The Civilization will soon fall. Our growth will continue without restriction."

"Oh." That wasn't the answer Jen had been told to expect at all.

*~Ask him what he means!* Alex demanded urgently.

"Er, how do you, how will the Oiiduci defeat the Civilization? We've been warned they are a powerful, um, menace."

"The Civilization will soon fall," Orange-Orange-Black repeated. "The Oiiduci will be ready to claim their territory when this happens. You may inform your people that the Terran Empire will be tolerated by the Oiiduci if it does not interfere with our growth. Further contacts are unnecessary."

"Er... thanks." The alien turned to leave, its exoskeleton flexing, stretching and squeezing the flesh within.

*~Wait, wait, we need more, we still need to get into the alien hive!*

"Orange-Orange-Black!" Jen called frantically. "Can I ask a request of the Oiiduci?"

Orange-Orange-Black stopped, then slowly half-turned in Jen's direction. "State your request."

"Bugged if I know," she muttered.

*~We have travelled a long way—*

"Oh, yeahyeah. Um, we have travelled a long way to speak with you. My ship needs supplies. Would it be possible to replenish my stocks of water and, er, stuff," she tailed off.

"There are limited amounts of life-sustaining chemicals available for tolerated aliens within the alien hive," said Orange-Orange-

Black, gesturing with a claw at a broad opening in one side of the pit, as he started to walk away again. “You may use them.”

“Thanks.” The Oiiduci was heading for a different exit. “Um, could you show me the way?”

“My task here is concluded,” it replied. “Your presence on Oiiduci will be tolerated for one day.” With that, Orange-Orange-Black disappeared into the darkness of the exit. The other Oiiduci around the pit remained, watching her.

*~I've turned the translator off, said Alex. ~You can talk freely.*

“Wow. How rude was he?”

*~It's like the Eternal said, they do the exact job they've been given and return for new orders the second it's finished. His was probably something like 'see what the alien wants and negotiate if it's of benefit to the Oiiduci'. The guys still watching us, their task will be 'watch the alien until she leaves, and kill her if she does anything threatening'.*

Jen glanced nervously at the rim of the pit. “That’s good to know.”

*~Go back into the ship, I'll create some water containers. Then we go into the hive, he said. There's supposedly some sort of meeting area for aliens in there; it's probably bugged, but I can take care of that. We've got to try and find out who Odal's go-between might be and whether they've been here recently. We can either try to break into the computer network with my inductors – if I do it at close range it shouldn't be detected – or do things the old-fashioned way and ask around.*

Jen walked up the ramp back into the ship. “What do you think he meant about the Civilization falling soon?”

*~I've got no idea, and that's got me very worried. I think we might have to look into that further after we've been into the alien hive. I don't like the timing at all. Odal's been making deals with a race that's almost certainly the Oiiduci, and the Oiiduci think the Civilization's about to collapse. I don't think that's a coincidence. Somebody's being tricked, and I doubt it's the Oiiduci.*

“Speaking of tricks,” said Jen as the airlock door closed, “let’s talk about that one you did on me. With the gas?”

*~Ah, right, the gas. Any chance you'd like to smell that nice peach blossomy smell again right now?*

“Absolutely *not*.”  
~*That’s what I was afraid of...*

## 19: Kravarllo

With a large empty plastic water container in each hand, Jen cautiously entered the tunnel leading to the alien hive. The Oiiduci around the pit watched, but didn't try to stop her. As she got closer she could see that they were a different shape from Orange-Orange-Black; larger, more aggressive, more dangerous. Oddly-shaped rifles were held ready in their claws.

The tunnel itself was intermittently lit by dull yellow lights. "No guards?" she whispered to Alex.

*~There'll be bugs and cameras to make sure nobody's plotting against them, but unless an alien who's actively helping them gets into trouble, I doubt they care what happens in here.*

The containers banged against her legs. "Am I going to have to lug these things around with me the whole time?"

*~We'll find somewhere to fill them up and leave them there while we look around.*

The tunnel opened out, a bridge spanning a deep canyon that was too regular to be natural. Long vertical grooves lined the walls, and even in the suit Jen could feel a strong wind blowing up from below.

*~Ventilation shaft, Alex told her. ~They have these all over the surface. Hot air rises up through them, and cooler air gets drawn in through smaller tunnels all around. They have turbines at the top providing extra power.*

Jen looked up. High above, the shaft was open to the dark sky, the view mostly obscured by hundreds of lazily spinning blades inside open-ended cylinders.

*~Quite efficient, actually. Ants and termites do a similar thing in their nests on Earth; the Oiiduci've just added an extra technological tweak.*

"You almost sound impressed," Jen said, moving away from the edge of the bridge, which was conspicuously lacking any railings.

*~They're an intelligent, highly adaptive race. In time, there'd be a place for them in the Civilization... if they could stop being so ruthlessly self-serving. Unfortunately, I don't think that's going to happen. So all we can do is contain them.*

Jen reached the other side of the bridge, re-entering the tunnel with some relief. "So, who are we looking for?"

*~We'll know when we find them. There's a junction ahead, and some kind of complex – this might be what we're after.*

“No direction signs?” Jen asked, peering down the tunnel.

*~Afraid not. More Oiiduci hospitality.*

They wandered through the tunnels for several minutes, Alex occasionally pointing Jen in what he thought was the right direction. Eventually, they started to encounter other visitors to the planet, aliens of different shapes and sizes, mostly dressed in spacesuits, skulking through the tunnels and giving the distinct impression that they didn't want to be seen there by anyone else.

“Any of these guys fit the bill?” Jen asked.

*~Not so far. Hold on, I think this might be the meeting area. Go left at the next junction, then right – there's a quite large room.*

Jen followed his directions. The tunnel ended in a circular chamber, a wide floor area broken up by curving booth-like partitions and twisting pillars reaching to the ceiling two floors above, balconies running all the way around. The whole place was dimly lit and sparsely populated, but again Jen got the feeling that its occupants were deliberately lurking in the gloom, making deals in the dark and then hurriedly leaving before anyone saw them.

A burly four-armed, neckless alien standing at the entrance, its face hidden by a breath mask and goggles, made a menacing rumbling noise as she walked past. Jen quickened her pace.

*~A Hrothmet, Alex told her. ~Probably acting as a bodyguard for someone. Be careful.*

“Have you found a computer yet?”

*~Over by the wall to your left. You see the green alien that looks a bit like a squid?*

Jen did, and wished she hadn't. “Yes.”

*~He's got a portable terminal, and it's linked in to the Oiiduci network. This is good, I can inductorise that as an access point so if anything goes wrong, he'll get the blame.*

“Bit harsh,” said Jen, making her way toward the alien.

*~He's an Irianosa. They hate the Civilization, and like to enslave worlds like Earth, or worse.*

“Inductorise away!” she said. There was a seat, for want of a better word, on the other side of the partition where the squid-creature was coiled. She put the empty containers on the floor and

lowered herself awkwardly onto it. Humanoid legs obviously weren't high on the list of priorities for whoever – whatever – had shaped the seat out of tightly-packed earth.

*~I'm going to try to get a list of every alien who's visited the planet recently, Alex said. ~This might take a minute. Just keep your head down and try not to stare at anyone.*

"I wasn't planning to." Jen didn't recognise any of the aliens in the room as ones she'd seen on Inar, and none could even vaguely be called attractive.

Instead, she spent her time pretending to be engrossed in the details of the room. The partitions between the booths were made of some sort of rough chipboard, ground-up fragments of wood glued together by a glistening resin. She touched it experimentally with a gloved fingertip, and was mildly disgusted to find that it was still tacky.

*~Oiiduci saliva, Alex chipped in. ~And you don't even want to know what the stuff that looks like wood really is.*

"Ew," Jen said, hurriedly pulling her hand away.

*~I've got access to their network. I'm starting a search now. Hello, who's this?*

"Who's who?" Jen began, before answering her own question as she looked round. Standing by her booth was a broad yellow-skinned humanoid, over two metres tall, wearing baggy clothes trimmed with showy ruffles and a dark waistcoat covered with what looked like tiny diamonds. Running right across the lower half of his face was what Jen at first took to be a moustache, before she realised that it was actually carefully trimmed and sculpted long strands of nostril hair.

"Ah, a new visitor to this benighted world!" the alien exclaimed theatrically. "And a pretty female one, at that. If my judgement is correct, of course!" he quickly added. "Please take no offence if you are male, or hermaphroditic, or some other variation thrown up by our ever-unpredictable universe!"

*~He's a Priosan, Alex told her. ~Interesting. Priosans are actually one of the races I was looking for. Keep him talking.*

"Uh... yeah! I'm a girl," Jen stuttered, not quite sure how to react to the bombastic alien. The suit's speaker made noises that reminded her of seals barking.

“May I join you?” He waved a pan-sized hand at one of the lumpen seats in the booth.

“Sure, go ahead.”

The alien sat down, carefully adjusting his clothes and tugging at the lapels of his waistcoat before addressing her again. “An unfamiliar species... that’s a rare thing for a man of my experience.” His small, round ears were high up on his wide oval head, giving him a slightly comical appearance. “May I ask where you are from?”

~*The Terran Empire, not Earth*, Alex reminded her.

“The, uh, Terran Empire.”

“An empire!” the alien boomed. “My, how refreshing to know that there are still empires out there in this day and age!” He lowered his voice conspiratorially, leaning closer to Jen. “I take it you are today’s mystery visitor who met with old Orange-Orange-Black not long ago?”

~*He knows too much*, Alex warned. ~*Don’t give away anything that’s not part of your cover story!*

“Yeah, that was me,” said Jen, her mouth going dry.

“Ah, Orange-Orange-Black. Surprisingly polite and diplomatic by Oiiduci standards... but still a frightful bore!” The alien laughed, a booming sound from deep inside his portly torso. “But where are my manners? Forgive me, and allow me to introduce myself. I’m Kravarllo, Kravarllo U-sen.” He pronounced it *oo-sen*, stretching out the first vowel. “And who might you be, pretty one?”

Jen forced herself not to smile at Kravarllo’s dirty old uncle manner of speech. “I’m Jen.”

“Jen, eh? A lovely name. Did you know that it means ‘gemstone’ in one language of this galaxy?”

“So I’ve been told.”

Kravarllo smiled broadly, revealing an awful lot of teeth, many of which were tipped with more tiny diamonds. “Such a change to meet a person of beauty and charm in this place of ugliness and crudity. What could possibly bring you so far from your home to this desolate, sweltering rock?”

~*Cover story!*

“I *know!* Er, my people – the Terran Empire! – were seeking an alliance with the Oiiduci.”

“An alliance?” Kravarllo’s blue eyes widened as he nodded his head. “How very optimistic! The Oiiduci barely even tolerate most other species, as I’m sure you’ve found out, never mind make alliances with them. Were you successful in your negotiations? I understand that they were short, and your use of the past tense sadly suggests the result already.”

“No, they weren’t, unfortunately.”

Kravarllo slapped his thigh. “Typical! Those wretched exoforms have no appreciation for beauty. I can assure you that you would have had a much more productive meeting had *I* been the negotiator.”

Jen nearly giggled out loud. Was he *seriously* trying to chat her up? “Thanks.”

“And, if I may be so bold as to ask, against whom were you seeking an alliance?”

~*Tell him that’s—*

“The Civilization.”

~*classified... oh.*

“The Civilization?” Kravarllo sat back, chuckling. “Oh ho, that’s quite a formidable *enemy* for your Terran Empire! No wonder you were seeking allies. Why, a single Defender alone,” his gaze suddenly seemed to intensify, looking right into Jen’s eyes, “could inflict grievous damage on a planet like Oiiduci in a time of war.”

“So what is it you’re doing here, Mr Kravarllo?” Jen fumbled, disconcerted by Kravarllo’s look and trying to change the subject. Did he know about Alex?

“‘Mister’? I’m afraid your translator has the advantage of me,” Kravarllo smiled, rubbing at his nose-hair ‘moustache’.

“Um, it’s a title for a man,” Jen said.

“No need for titles with me, my precious gemstone! But your translator is very good, considering I don’t believe our races have ever met before. The one inside your helmet must be particularly fast.” Jen started to sweat. “Where did you obtain the language matrix?”

~*The Deefari.*

“The Deefari gave it to us.”

“Ah, the Deefari,” said Kravarllo, his voice lowering. “Very widespread travellers, the Deefari. You find them everywhere. Very

neutral, very inoffensive. Nobody questions their presence in another's space." He rubbed his moustache again, giving Jen another pointed look. Could Alex see what he was doing? "But in answer to your question, I'm a facilitator. I act as the link between the unlinkable, the safe point of contact between mutually destructive forces." He waved one hand with a flourish. "I'm doing my little part to bring peace to the universe. Funnily enough, I've had productive dealings between the Civilization and... a certain other client," he made a show of looking at the chamber around him, "just recently. Perhaps I could provide the same assistance to you."

*~Either he's got the biggest mouth in fifty light-years, or he could be our man. Keep him talking, I've nearly finished my search.*

Jen leaned forward, the suit clicking at her waist. "What could you do for us, and what would it cost?"

"Ah," said Kravarllo, smiling his glittering smile again, "straight to business even for one so young! This Terran Empire must teach you well."

"My teacher was the best," Jen said with a grin.

*~Thank you.*

"Everything is negotiable," Kravarllo said, "but I prefer not to deal in... mere currency, shall we say. I like my payment to be something that cannot be simply conjured up by a Defender's matter converter." He gave Jen another meaningful look. She froze.

*~That's twice he's made a point of mentioning Defenders, and I'm getting some very funny readings from his voice stress analysis. I can't see his expression – tap your thumb twice against your leg if you think he's trying to drop a hint.*

"It diminishes the value of the payment," Kravarllo finished.

Jen tapped her thumb twice. "I'm sure we can come to some agreement."

"So am I. After all, peace and the preservation of life is surely worth any price. Any *civilization* would agree with that, wouldn't you say?"

*~He knows something, Alex warned. ~But if he just wanted to expose us to the Oiiduci, he could have done it already. He's trying to tell us something.*

“Um... yes, I’d definitely agree with that.” Jen struggled to think of what to say next. “So when we agree on a suitable, ah, payment, what will you be able to provide for us?”

Kravarllo leaned forward again, lowering his voice. “Well, that depends on your needs,” he said. “Sometimes, what people need most are weapons, defences, ships – technology more advanced than their own. Which I can certainly provide – in fact, I’m here on this awful rock to do exactly that for my... client.” He glanced around the chamber again.

Jen gave him a disapproving look. “I thought you said you were trying to bring peace to the universe.”

“Sometimes, my little jewel, a war is necessary to *create* peace. But in your case,” he continued, voice dropping still further, “I can provide you with something far more valuable than any number of CAS emitters or nested field generators.”

*~Those are Civilization technology, Alex noted.*

Jen lowered her own voice, leaning a little closer to Kravarllo. For all his theatrics, he certainly knew how to hold his audience. “And what might that be?” she asked.

“Information. A few words can sometimes give those who hold them more power than any weapon, any army. And,” he said leaning still closer to Jen, his voice falling to a whisper, “I’m even going to break one of my own rules and give some to you for free. Consider it... an advance on future services.”

“What is it?” Jen whispered back.

Kravarllo’s eyes flicked down at her silent suit speaker as he spoke. “Advice from a... friend.”

*~That didn’t translate! He understands English!*

She felt Alex’s sphere move in the back of her suit, as though preparing to burst free...

Jen and Kravarllo’s eyes locked for a moment, shared knowledge passing between them. Then Kravarllo smiled again. “My clients have plans of their own. To ensure the safety of your *civilization*, you should consider going *down* a different path before you leave this horrid little rock. It’s amazing what you can discover.”

Jen immediately thought of the vast depths of the ventilation shaft. “Down a different path,” she repeated. “I think I understand what you mean.”

Kravarllo sat back, grinning. "I hope so." He looked at an ornate golden ring on one of his fingers, which Jen saw had small blinking lights set into the metal. "Such a shame, it seems I must be getting back to my ship. I have other business to attend to elsewhere." He stood, placing his hands on his hips and bowing to her. "I hope that some day, I might be able to meet you again and see your beauty without it being encased in a bulky spacesuit."

"But if I'm not in a suit, won't you need one?"

He reached up and pulled down his collar a little. Set into the skin at the top of his chest were two silvery discs, each covered with a fine metal mesh which bulged as he breathed. "Atmospheric processors, my jewel. I always plan for every possible contingency." He bowed again. "With luck, we'll meet again soon. Until then, farewell!"

Kravarllo turned and strode from the chamber. Jen watched him go.

"Wow. Could he *be* any more camp?"

*~Camp or not, he's our guy, came the reply. ~According to Oiiduci records, he's been a regular visitor here for almost two years, and from what little Odal would tell the Moderator, he started his mystery 'negotiations' about that long ago. And the Priosans are neutral to both the Civilization and the Oiiduci. I don't get it, though. On the one hand he all but admitted to providing restricted Civilization weapons technology to the Oiiduci, which is an extremely serious crime, but on the other he seemed to know who were really are but didn't expose us, and he dropped a huge hint about something we should look at.*

"Maybe he's playing both sides," Jen said. "I certainly didn't trust him. And how did he know English?"

*~Somebody gave him a copy of my translation files. And seeing as the only people who had them were the Prime Council...*

"So what do we do?" asked Jen.

*~We go and take a look at whatever's at the bottom of that shaft, like he told us.*

"What if it's a trap?"

*~Then, Alex said with grim humour, ~there's going to be a lot of trouble.*

They made their way back through the tunnels towards the huge ventilation shaft.

“Won’t they see what we’re doing?” Jen asked, looking at the ceiling for cameras.

*~Already thought of that. I used my inductors to hack their security system – simple digital cameras using fibre-optics to carry the signal, very easy to break into. I’m sending a constantly repeating signal to the cameras in the main chamber that makes it look like you’re still sitting in the booth, and deleting you from the other cameras in the tunnels as you go past them.*

“Very Mission: Impossible.” Jen saw the tunnel ahead open out into the shaft, and looked around to see if anyone was following them. Nobody was in sight.

She crept along against the tunnel wall, peering downwards at its end. The shaft disappeared into darkness, a few lights visible far below. The hot wind buffeted her.

*~There are motion detectors and a few other gadgets in the shaft, but I can easily handle those.*

“How are we going to get down?”

*~I’m going to have to take a slight chance on being detected and use a GC field. Unless you fancy climbing down the sides, of course.*

“Not really. How deep is it?”

*~Nearly a kilometre. Just step off the side of the bridge.*

Jen remained resolutely stationary. “Er... you know, I’m not quite sure about this now. Maybe I could go back to the ship and *you* could go down there.”

*~You’re safer with me, whatever else happens. Don’t worry, I’ll catch you.*

“I’m *really* not—”

Something nudged her in the small of her back and pushed her right over the edge.

“Aaaaaaaahhhhhhh!”

*~Sorry.*

“Aaaaaaaaleeeeeeeex!”

*~Do you want a tranquiliser?*

“No! I want to *stop falling!*”

*~I’ll stop us before we hit the bottom.*

“You’d *better!*”

*~Are you sure you don't want a tranquiliser?*

"I'm going to *kill* you!"

*~I'll have something ready just in case...*

Bridges flashed past as she fell, but with no sign of any Oiiduci crossing them. The darkness of the shaft swallowed her. She could see dim lights speckled across what had to be its bottom, growing faster and faster—

The lights stopped moving. She was hanging in mid-air, her eyes adjusting to the low illumination and revealing a dirt floor a few metres below her. Dark tunnels led off in all directions.

Alex lowered her gently to the ground. *~Great, the place is a maze. I've got no idea which way is the best way to go.*

Jen slowly turned around. The tunnels were roughly oval, ranging from barely large enough for her to stand up to several metres in diameter. "What do we do if we run into any Oiiduci?"

*~Try to avoid them. Even the most unintelligent drones will react to intruders and raise the alarm.*

"Can't you just... you know, take care of them before they warn any of the others?" Jen cautiously suggested.

*~Killing them won't help. They release pheromones when they die so that others can find and recycle the body, and the scent of a sudden death would still alert them. Even if I disintegrated them, the energy release might be detected. We just have to avoid being seen.*

"How are we going to—" Jen began, when her vision blurred. Something had appeared around her, distorting everything like rippled glass, the colours changing. She held up a hand in front of her face, but instead saw a warped, shimmering copy of the background wrapped loosely around it.

*~Holographic camouflage, Alex said.*

"You mean I'm *invisible*?"

*~Not quite – it won't fool anyone close up because of the parallax distortion, but if you keep still and go flat against a tunnel wall, they should miss you. I can tell if any Oiiduci are approaching and give you warning, but you'll have to get into cover before they appear.*

The distortion effect vanished. Jen looked herself up and down to reassure herself that everything was still there, before turning around to stare down the tunnels in turn. "So which way do we go?"

*~I really don't know. I'm not sensing any Oiiduci within fifty metres in any direction, so... you choose.*

The smaller tunnels would probably be less busy, but the larger ones would give her more chance of pressing against a wall if they encountered any aliens. "That one," she said, pointing at one of the larger ones.

*~Okay. Let's see what's down there.*

Jen took a deep breath, then entered the tunnel.

## 20: The Hatchery

The tunnel went on for miles, other smaller ones branching off it, with no sign of any Oiiduci. There were no lights, but Alex had switched on a night-vision system in her suit helmet, giving everything a gloomy twilight cast. After walking for a while in the high gravity and restricting spacesuit, Jen complained that she was getting tired. Alex picked her up in a GC field and flew her down the tunnel instead.

“Where does it go?” she eventually asked, as the rough walls flashed past monotonously.

*~I don't know, but it's getting warmer. Whatever it's taking hot air away from, we're getting closer.*

“How far have we gone?”

*~We're ten kilometres from the ventilation shaft.*

“Glad I didn't walk.”

*~We've already passed under the far side of the mountain range, and we're underneath the Oiiduci city, about eight hundred metres below the surface. This isn't one of the deepest tunnels, either. I've done a mass sweep and there's another network below us.*

“What's it all for?” Jen wondered. “I mean, why dig all this stuff if they're not going to use it for anything?”

*~The Oiiduci don't do anything without a reason. We might not know what the purpose is, but there definitely is one. Hello, this is different...*

“What?”

*~Something ahead, another shaft. And it's not just for ventilation, it doesn't go to the surface. There are a lot of other smaller tunnels spiralling down around it as well. They slowed to a standstill, Jen's feet touching the ground for the first time in several minutes.*

*~Oiiduci, too. Lots of them.*

Jen looked nervously down the tunnel. Nothing was moving. “I don't see anything.”

*~They're in the smaller tunnels. Thousands of them. And whatever's generating all the heat is at the bottom of the shaft, where they're going... coming from, too. Interesting. It's like two spiral staircases – one of them has a procession of Oiiduci going down, and the other one's full of them heading back up.*

Curiosity mixed with fear as Jen cautiously advanced up the tunnel. “What are they doing?”

*~Either taking something down to the bottom, or bringing something back up. A lot of something. Twenty metres ahead on the left, there’s a small passageway that joins up with one of the descending tunnels. It’s safe. Go down it.*

Despite Alex’s words, Jen still leaned slowly around the rough-edged entrance to the steep passage to check that nothing was going to leap out at her. She started to pick her way down, pushing her hands against the walls for support.

It didn’t take long before she heard a distant sound, a constant clicking and scraping. “What’s that noise?”

*~Oiiduci.*

She paused and swallowed, before moving more slowly down the passage. The noise got louder with each step. The tunnel seemed to be getting slightly brighter, a faint flickering glow cast against the walls ahead.

Taking each step more slowly than the last, Jen came to a turn in the tunnel and very carefully peeked around it. She saw something move and instantly ducked back, heart racing. Nothing happened. She looked again with a little more confidence.

An Oiiduci went past, heading down a wider, steeper tunnel. It was different from the other Oiiduci she’d seen, smaller, but no less repulsive. Its soft body was much more exposed, surrounded by far fewer bones, as though it only had the bare minimum of exoskeleton needed to support its weight and carry objects. If not for the fact that it still had nasty spiked feet and claws, Jen would almost have said it looked vulnerable.

*~A drone, Alex said. ~No eyes, basically brainless, just fulfilling a single programmed task.*

Another drone went past, and another. Jen realised each was carrying something, a soft, damp ball a couple of feet across wrapped in a translucent membrane delicately balanced on top of their claws. The flickering was caused as each drone passed a bulging growth in the tunnel wall, glowing with a sickly phosphorescent light.

“If they’ve got no eyes, why do they need lights?”

*~They’re not the only kind of Oiiduci coming down here. Get back.*

Jen hurriedly did so. A few seconds later, there was a much louder clattering of skeleton, the light obscured by something much bigger than the drones.

*~A Relay, like Orange-Orange-Black. It's either on its way to give orders, or take them from something. Maybe that's what they're feeding.*

Jen looked around the corner again. "That's food?" she said, looking distastefully at the goo inside the membranes the drones were carrying.

*~An organic mulch, mostly. Some plant material, fungi, something like plankton, a fair amount of calcinates... and dead Oiiduci.*

"Yuk."

*~I wasn't kidding when I said they recycle their dead.*

The endless procession marched by. "How are we going to get past? There must be thousands of them."

*~Tens of thousands. We're not going to get through this way – we need to go back up to the main tunnel.*

Jen retraced her steps, emerging in the tunnel and going to the edge of the shaft. There was no bridge this time, the passage simply ending at a heart-stopping drop. She looked up. The shaft disappeared into blackness high above. Down below was a dim light... and a lot of movement.

*~That's where they're coming out. There's a panel on the left arm of your suit – open it and you can magnify what you're seeing.*

Jen fumbled at the panel – she'd registered it was there before, but assumed it was just some kind of cosmetic detail Alex had put onto the suit to make it look more realistic – and flipped it open, quickly examining the controls. They were simple enough. Getting down onto her hands and knees, she leaned slightly over the edge and looked down, fiddling with the controls. A picture appeared inside her helmet, the image within zooming towards the bottom of the shaft as she pushed the button forward with her thumb.

The long line of drones was emerging from the tunnel, splitting in different directions and marching steadily out of sight into wide illuminated passages. Other drones were emerging from those same passages, heading empty-clawed back into a tunnel on the opposite side of the shaft. Occasionally a different caste of Oiiduci moved into

her God's-eye view, the drones neatly sidestepping them even without the aid of sight. The whole operation had an almost robotic precision.

Jen released the button, and the magnified display vanished, leaving her looking at the shaft bottom from skyscraper height. "There's so *many* of them," she said. "How're we going to get down there without being seen? There's a lot of the other sorts wandering around as well."

*~They're following precise paths, probably laid out by pheromone trails, Alex mused. ~But there are several areas that they're not going near. I'm not worried about the drones, and you can use the holocamo to get between the Relayers and guards. I'll guide you into one of the isolated areas.*

"I'm going to have to fall from a great height *again*, aren't I?" Jen moaned. "God, any more of this and I'm going to start getting a real complex."

*~You're doing fine. Ready?*

"No," said Jen as she stepped off the edge.

Rather than dropping straight down, as she had done when she jumped – or rather, was *pushed* – off the bridge, this time she floated more slowly towards the ground, drifting lazily across the shaft toward an area empty of Oiiduci. The holocamo came on about halfway down, warping and darkening her view of the shaft.

She landed. The bottom of the shaft was dirty, awash in a thick slurry. Looking up, she was surprised to see that spots of rain were dotting her faceplate.

*~Condensation, Alex said. ~The shaft's big enough to generate its own weather system. It's a lot hotter than the other shaft, as well.*

There was something else in the air as well. At first Jen thought it was specks of dirt on her visor, until she realised that they were moving around.

"Are those *flies*?" she said in disgust.

*~The Oiiduci equivalent. I started seeing them on the way down. There are swarms of them around the entrances.*

"Swarms?" Jen's skin crawled at the thought. She looked towards the nearest of the wide passages, and saw millions of tiny dots crawling around, silhouetted against the bilious light. "Oh, gross! This is disgusting! I *hate* flies!"

*~They can't get in the suit, it's completely sealed.*

"Ugh, ugh, I hope so. What do we do now?"

*~Go to the passageway to the left.*

"Where all the flies are? I *knew* you were going to say that."

Keeping as close to the shaft wall as she could, Jen picked her way toward the passage. As she got closer, she realised it sloped downwards into another large chamber. The nearest line of drones was at least twenty metres away, well clear of the side of the passage. There were other kinds of Oiiduci in sight, but none were close.

She reached the passage. It led steeply down into the new chamber, which turned out to be not just large, but huge. The sloping roof obscured most of the view, but even the part she could see stretched off into the murky distance. Dirty water trickled down the slope, dragging slime and what looked horribly like dead flies with it. She was glad that the distortions of the camouflage effect stopped her from getting a clear look.

The floor of the chamber seemed to be covered with mud and pools of water. Wisps of steam drifted over it, more clouds of flies wafting in their wake.

*~It's close to forty degrees Celcius in there, Alex reported.*

*~Extremely high humidity, as well.*

"It's *really* sounding less and less like somewhere I want to go into," Jen told him, but she still started to pick her way carefully down the slope, one hand on the wall for support. More of the chamber came into view with each step. She tilted her head, trying to see under the lip of the passage roof. "I can't see too well, it's very—"

Her foot slipped on a patch of slime.

Jen fell on her side, a sharp bolt of pain running up her arm. She skidded down the slope, and suddenly was completely disoriented by a whirl of motion, the view through the camouflage field distorting into a wild blur.

*~Keep absolutely still!*

Jen realised she couldn't move if she tried; the suit's joints had locked again. It felt as though she was lying face on her back, but the lighting was wrong—

An Oiiduci drone came into view, *below* her. She *was* lying on her back, but inverted, pushed against the ceiling by a gravity control field.

The drone moved slowly up the slope. There were scrape marks through the slurry where she'd fallen, but the blind drone couldn't see them.

It had obviously *heard* her, though.

Its grey skin pulsed rhythmically. Looking down on its exposed back, Jen could see puckered openings spread out across its body, like extra mouths near where the sharp bones were attached to – and even pierced – its soft flesh. The drone's blunt head moved left and right, as if sniffing the ground.

Would it be able to smell anything? The suit was sealed, but it had been in the ship with her...

The drone moved away, its feet clicking against the rock beneath the mud, and passed out of sight. Jen sighed in relief. "That was close."

*~I know. Give it time to get back to what it was doing, and we'll go back down.*

"What *was* it doing?"

*~We'll find out in a second, I suppose.*

After a short pause, Jen was lowered back to the ground, Alex taking her to the base of the slope. For the first time, she was able to get a full view of the huge chamber.

She shuddered at the sight.

The entire place was crawling – literally crawling – with Oiiduci. Off in the distance she could see long, hideously bloated pale worms, like queen ants but thousands of times larger. A few Relayers, and many more of the jagged-boned, dangerous-looking guards, patrolled the chamber, the line of drones bearing food dispersing throughout the huge cavern. Smaller versions of the drones scurried through the mud, dripping lumps of the revolting food in their claws, distributing it to...

Jen almost felt sick. Half-buried in the slurry covering the floor of the chamber were hundreds, thousands, *tens* of thousands of a new breed of Oiiduci. The unhatched monsters were wrapped in a wet, flaccid membrane, pulsing bodies clearly visible inside. The orifices she'd spotted on the drone were also present on these creatures,

stretching out to spew a steady stream of a thick grey ooze onto the part-formed exoskeletons.

She realised that the orifices weren't just smearing the substance onto the bones. They were *making* the bones, building them up little by little around their bodies as it hardened. Other fleshy extrusions were slowly enveloping the joints of completed bones, the newly-attached muscles flexing carefully, deliberately, to test their strength. The biggest and most-complete skeletons were massive, at least twice the size of the guards, and the intricate protective cageworks were denser and more jagged than anything else she'd seen.

The mouths of the half-formed horrors, protruding through the membrane, were constantly working, either taking in the food dropped before them by the drones, or stretching up to suck in mouthfuls of flies from the air. They ground and chewed their nourishment into a thick black paste, lumps dropping back into the slurry under them...

Jen retched. "What *are* they?"

*~Warriors, said Alex in a chilling tone. ~They breed them specifically for large-scale attacks. They haven't done that since the Civilization contained them.*

"There's loads of them..."

*~At least twenty thousand in this chamber alone, and there are several other chambers like this. Probably hundreds, maybe even thousands more over the planet. This is an invasion force.*

Jen started to edge slowly around the edge of the cavern, keeping as far away from the repellent creatures as she could. "But won't the Civilization stop them?"

*~Yes, but...*

Alex's abrupt silence was more ominous than anything he'd said. "But what?"

*~Odal's been tricked. Even if he thinks he's doing the right thing, the Oiiduci have been manipulating him! They've got no intention of helping the Civilization and the Enemy to negotiate – they're trying to bring them back to open warfare.*

Jen didn't understand. "How?"

*~They obviously can communicate with the Enemy, otherwise they wouldn't be preparing for an attack that they shouldn't be able to win – but they've been lying about what the Enemy have told them.*

*The Enemy's probably said it intends to wipe out the Civilization – but the Oiiduci told Odal, through Kravarllo, that there was a chance for a negotiated peace instead. And he believed them! How could he have been so naive?*

“You said he was taking a gamble. Looks like he completely blew it.”

*~If the Eternal was right and the Enemy are attacking the Nexus, then Odal's so-called peace plan will provoke them into launching a new direct assault on us when we re-establish it. And this time, they'll finish the job. Then the Oiiduci launch an attack on the worlds they've laid claim to, and there won't be anybody to stop them.*

Jen looked warily at the growing warriors. “How soon?”

*~Some of these are almost fully grown. They wouldn't breed them unless they were needed soon – it's inefficient to keep feeding a large force that you're not going to use. We've seen what we need to see – we've got to get out of here and warn the Civilization.*

“Best thing I've heard all day.” Jen turned back toward the passage—

A noise rose in the chamber, a hissing, clicking sound rising from ten thousand mouths.

*~Uh-oh. Alex sounded alarmed. ~I just detected a massive pheromone wave being passed from Oiiduci to Oiiduci. It came from outside.*

The noise grew still louder, echoing across the chamber. The huge worm-like Oiiduci in the distance were writhing in panic, the Relayers and guards rushing around in a barely controlled frenzy. Even the drones were reacting, standing on their back legs and sniffing at the cloying air.

“I... think they know we're here,” Jen mumbled, a cold dread numbing her body.

*~I'm going to battle mode. Hold on.*

The holocamo blinked out. Jen gulped, then continued backing toward the exit.

A jagged, malformed leg ripped through a membrane a few metres from her, the half-grown warrior inside letting out a hissing screech. Another, larger creature burst up next to it and turned to face her. More shrieks and screams pierced the air as warriors tore themselves free of their birthing shrouds in a rolling wave around

them. Near Jen's feet, an embryonic monster, its bones barely-formed stubs, squirmed and hissed at her, mouth snapping as veins pulsed angrily in its skin.

"Oh, oh oh. Oh," she gasped, trying to back away and finding she was already pressed hard against the wall.

The warriors suddenly stopped moving, swaying in place ready to spring forward and strike. A Relayer raced through the crowd of warriors, coming to a jarring stop just a few feet away. If it wasn't Orange-Orange-Black, it looked identical. It glared at her with its clusters of shark-like eyes.

"Er... hello," Jen stammered, wondering why none of them were attacking. "Don't know if you remember me or not, but I'm from the Terran Empire on a mission of peace? I, ah, got a bit lost somewhere..."

"Falsehood!" snapped the Relayer, tilting its head as if listening to a message coming through its radio. "You are Jennifer Exton from Civilization Protectorate world Earth, brought here by an Evolution 201 Defender."

Jen blinked in surprise. "Well, that pretty much blows our cover."

"You will come with us. Resistance will result in non-fatal dismemberment. You carry information that will give us a strategic and technological advantage. We will extract it."

She was jolted forward as her suit's backpack blew apart. Alex's sphere, now in its red-glowing, faceted configuration, shot around her and took up position between her and the Relayer.

There was a moment of stillness. Then the warriors rushed forward in a single mass of flailing, deadly limbs.

And *exploded*, a shockwave of shredded bodies and shattered bone rippling back through the charging pack in a perfect semicircle centred on Alex's sphere. The light of a cutting forcefield pulsed through the carnage, flicking more rapidly than Jen could follow back and forth as a GC field just behind it flung the remains of the warriors into the air.

Flashes of weapons fire in the distance. Sizzling green spheres of plasma raced towards them as the guards opened fire—

The plasma bolts all exploded metres away as if hitting an invisible wall.

More flashes. Bright lines of blue light flickered through the haze, leaving ghostly after-images in Jen's sight.

Black circles appeared in the paths of the beams, the same distance from Alex as the forcefield that had stopped the plasma bolts. The beams stopped dead at them, absorbed.

The entire chamber erupted in movement, thousands of warriors and other Oiiduci coming to life and charging at them—

Jen was hauled from the ground by a GC field and almost flung toward the passageway.

Purple lines of light flashed out from the sphere, lasers targeting hundreds of warriors in an instant as they scrambled over and through the pulped remains of their comrades. Each beam was aimed precisely between the eye-clusters of an Oiiduci. Heads exploded in gouts of superheated steam. The sphere rose to cover more of the horde, the probing lasers flicking further outwards as it followed Jen.

Jen flew up the passage over the line of drones, which had broken into chaos as the blind creatures ran around in crazed circles, hissing and screeching. The pulses from Alex's lasers lit up the entire end of the vast chamber like a giant strobe light, occasional green and blue flashes from the Oiiduci guns returning fire to no effect.

She arrived at the base of the giant shaft. Alex's sphere shot out of the passage after her, lasers still flashing. Six small silver objects popped into existence around him, paused as if getting their bearings, then shot in different directions down the illuminated passages leading out of the shaft. Jen found herself rocketing upwards, the sphere catching up with her and moving close alongside.

“What were—”

Her question was answered as flashes of light came from the chambers in rapid succession, followed by massive shockwaves that collided in the shaft. Oiiduci and smashed parts of Oiiduci were flung in all directions. The roiling blast chased them up the shaft, until they made an almost ninety-degree turn and shot back down the long tunnel. They accelerated, the walls turning into a blur. More shockwaves bounced from the sides of the tunnel behind them, this time kicked up by the wake of their passage.

Another sharp turn and they were in the shaft leading to the surface. Laser fire flashed wildly around them from high above.

Purple beams flashed from the sphere, and the firing instantly stopped.

They shot up the shaft like a bullet through a gun barrel. Jen could see the light at the top, partly obscured by the turbines. Intense balls of blue fire erupted from the sphere, racing ahead of them, and suddenly the turbines weren't there any more, replaced by explosions and tumbling debris. Burning fragments of metal were deflected away by a forcefield as they whipped through the wreckage and out into the open sky.

Jen looked down. The ground above the alien hive rushed away beneath them, the surrounding peaks already starting to drop away. A flash of light came from one of the landing pits close to the shaft – the one their fake ship had landed in. The ground around it collapsed into a crater.

*~I just blew up the ship,* Alex said matter-of-factly, speaking for the first time since going into battle mode.

“You just blew up my bag,” Jen said, struggling to get her head around what she'd just seen and deciding to start on a level she could relate to.

*~I'll make you a new one.*

They entered the thick clouds. A familiar silver dome appeared round them, the screen showing the view above – ahead, rather, as its internal gravity shifted through a right-angle. They passed through the clouds, the sky turning black and stars brightening ahead.

*~Company.*

Jen didn't see anything, but there was a slight change in the sphere's pattern of red lights. Instantly, a bloom of light appeared ahead.

*~No company.*

The expanding light shot past, vanishing behind them. Jen felt the lurch of a rapid hyperspace entry, and the stars began to move.

Alex's sphere morphed, the facets smoothing out and the light changing from an angry red back to its usual calming blue. As the transformation was completed, he reappeared around it. “Are you okay?”

“Uh, yeah,” Jen said, surprised at not hearing his voice inside her head. She tapped at the chestplate of the suit. “Can I take this off now?”

“Just let me sterilise it first, get rid of the dead flies... done.” The latches clicked, and he helped her take off the helmet. She shook out her hair and looked at him.

“Wow. What was all... that? You know, the shooting and the explosions and the lasers?”

Alex looked uncomfortable. “That was... what I do when I have to. I was rather hoping you wouldn’t have to see any of it.”

“Are you kidding? That was amazing!”

The look of discomfort grew. “Jen, I just killed over a hundred thousand Oiiduci. That’s not amazing, it’s horrific.”

“They were going to kill *me!*” she protested, pulling at the suit’s arms. Catches unlocked and they slid off. “They wanted to cut me up! And you said it yourself, they were going to attack the Civilization. *And* try to get them into a war.” She struggled to get the main body of the suit off, and put it on the floor of the dome. “You should have wiped them all out. Horrible things.”

Alex didn’t answer, watching silently as Jen took off the last parts of the spacesuit and tugged at the one-piece bodysuit she was wearing under it. “Ugh. I’m all sweaty. I need a shower.”

Alex gestured toward the back of the dome, where a doorway had just appeared. “It’s ready when you are.”

“Thanks.” She stopped and looked up at him. “And thanks... again. For saving me.” He nodded. “What do we do now?”

“Go back to Inar and warn the Civilization about what we’ve just found. And I’d quite like to get my hands on Kravarllo, as well – it’s pretty obvious he double-crossed us and told the Oiiduci about us.”

“I knew we couldn’t trust that creepy, Shrek-eared git! ‘My little jewel’ indeed. Yuck!” She winced, feeling dirty. “But how are you going to find him? He could be anywhere by now.”

Alex considered this. “There’s someone he’s probably going to want to talk to...”

## 21: Traitor

Crolin Odal's residence was on a high cliff, looking out across a stepped canyon in Inar's southern polar region. The sun was low in the sky, casting a warm orange cast over the glittering whiteness of the snowscape.

Odal stood on the balcony, looking out across the landscape as the sun gradually dipped behind the distant peaks. The southern pole was one of the few parts of Inar that hadn't been reshaped and remoulded by the planetary engineers, and the climate – at the moment just slightly above freezing – was close to that of his home. Two of his hands on the balcony rail, he used the other two to take out and ignite a leafglobe, drawing in the scented smoke.

As the sun slowly disappeared and its faint warmth faded, Odal turned and walked back into the house. He didn't notice the burly figure in a darkened corner until it spoke.

"Hello, Prime Councillor."

Odal flinched in shock, dropping the leafglobe. He whirled to see Kravarllo U-sen lurking in the shadows. "What are *you* doing here?" he demanded, regaining his composure. "How did you get in here without the house warning me?"

Kravarllo held up a small, plain metal box. "I have my little tricks."

"Why are you here?" Odal moved warily closer to him, eyes darting around to make sure he was alone. "I thought I'd made it clear that we weren't to meet face-to-face again."

Kravarllo put the box back inside his waistcoat and stood. "The situation has changed somewhat. I had a very interesting meeting with someone on Oiiduci."

Odal stared at Kravarllo's pocket. "Have you switched that thing off?"

"Of course. I only needed it to get in without alerting you."

"House," Odal snapped, "full security and privacy. Alert me if there is any attempt to monitor my conversations until further notice."

"Understood," said the house. Odal glared at Kravarllo.

"I'm still not ready to reveal publicly that I've been dealing with the Oiiduci. Soon, but not yet. My work with the Council is at a

crucial point.” He gave Kravarllo a suspicious look. “I assume that by your presence here, something’s happened that might affect it.”

“You could say that,” Kravarllo chuckled, striding past Odal to take in the room and the view beyond. “This is a very nice house you have, Prime Councillor. Very nice indeed.” He looked at the open windows. “A little chilly and draughty, perhaps.”

“Get to the point.”

“As you wish.” Kravarllo turned to face Odal. “Your plan may have hit a small... snag. The meeting I had involved a Defender.”

“*What?*”

“Evolution 201, I believe. Accompanied by a very pretty young girl from some minor Protectorate or other. I’m sure you know them.”

“They were on Oiiduci?” Odal spluttered. Kravarllo gave him a look of curiosity before continuing.

“It seems that after I left, they had a minor disagreement with the Oiiduci. Minor in the sense that no weapons above four or five kilotons were used.” Odal stared at him, speechless. “The Oiiduci are really quite annoyed about the whole affair, as you might imagine. Dreadfully humourless lot.”

“But... but this will destroy everything!” Odal gasped. “The negotiations, the restoration of the Nexus... peace with the Enemy! Everything!”

“Well, actually,” Kravarllo smiled, “that rather depends on you. I had a word with the Oiiduci after the Defender left. They’re obviously still rather angry about having several of their hatcheries vaporised by antimatter charges, but on the other hand, you know what they’re like. Plenty more where those came from. They may be willing to continue the negotiations... but they want something extra.”

Odal was still, considering it. “No,” he said finally. “No, I can’t do it. We made a deal – I’ve given them everything I’m prepared to, and nothing more.”

“The deal,” said Kravarllo forcefully, “changed a little when this Defender ran riot and started blowing things up. The last thing they – and you – wanted was the Civilization taking a close look at exactly what the deal entailed, eh? And besides,” he added, voice dropping

to a velvety purr, “it’s not as though they’re wanting much more than you’ve already given them, is it?”

“No!” said Odal. “Field technology and coherent antimatter streams are one thing, but not zerospace generators or matter converters! That would give them a thousand-year technological leap. It’s out of the question.”

Kravarllo walked slowly behind him and placed a pudgy hand on one of his four shoulders. “What’s the price of peace, Prime Councillor?” he asked in a low, smoothly calculating voice. “Which is worth more, the lives of trillions of Civilization citizens, or keeping your technological secrets out of the claws of a bunch of primitive exoforms? Is the letter of the law worth more to you than the survival of your people? Once an agreement has been reached with the Enemy, the Civilization can handle the Oiiduci. You know that. Why, four or five of your very latest Defenders could lay waste to every scrap of ground those wretched primitives have ever claimed. If they had to.”

Odal looked at him in disgust. “Never touch me again,” he said, shrugging free of Kravarllo’s grip. “You’re asking me to commit treason.”

“Haven’t you already gone a little beyond that?” Kravarllo smiled slyly.

“What I’ve done has been in the interests of protecting the Civilization,” Odal insisted. “Providing the Oiiduci grossly outdated technology in return for use of the one channel of communication anyone has ever managed to open to the Enemy is one thing, and history will vindicate me when peace is achieved. But this is something else.”

“Ah, a man of principle,” sneered Kravarllo, rubbing the tip of his moustache. “But ask yourself this, Prime Councillor. What use is the vindication of history... if there is no one left alive to write it? You *need* the Oiiduci. Without them, you have no link to the Enemy... and no hope of peace. Consider that as you congratulate yourself on holding firm to your principles, tarnished as they may be.” He looked at the glowing ring on his finger. “Well, it’s getting late in the day, and I’d like to be on my way before darkness falls on this very nice house of yours. I have plenty of other business to attend to.” He turned to leave.

“Wait,” said Odal sharply. “Wait.” He walked slowly over to the still-open windows leading to the balcony, staring out over the magnificent desolation beyond. “Not the zerospace technology. That’s too much. But the matter converters... I can do that. Early models, though. Not portable, non-fissile elements only.”

“And duplication patterns?”

Odal took a deep breath. “And patterns for weapons and defences up to the level they already have.” He let the air out, head bowing. “Is that enough?”

“More than enough.” It wasn’t Kravarllo’s voice.

Odal whirled. Standing where Kravarllo had been was Alex.

“That’s an interesting definition of what does and doesn’t count as treason, Prime Councillor,” Alex said. “Mine’s a lot more black and white. You supply secrets and weapons to an aggressor; that’s treason.”

“How did... what...” gasped Odal. Alex glanced over his shoulder as another door opened. Through it came Jen, Ara Sumen and the hovering sphere of Liana. The colour drained from his skin as he saw them.

“We really did go to Oiiduci,” Alex explained, “and met your friend Kravarllo. More precisely, he met us. For whatever reason, he was more than happy to drop some not very subtle hints about what was going on. Maybe you weren’t paying him enough. Or someone else was paying him more.”

“You’ve been played for a fool, Odal,” said Ara Sumen in a cold, brutal voice. “The Oiiduci had no intention of acting as mediators between you and the Enemy.”

“They lied to you, just like Kravarllo,” Alex said, slowly advancing on Odal, who backed away. “They were breeding a whole new generation of warriors, ready for an invasion while your so-called peace plan led us into open war with the Enemy. And they would have been armed with all the Civilization weaponry you’d given them.”

“No,” said Odal. “No, that can’t be right. I saw proof, proof that the Oiiduci had made contact with the Enemy. There was a chance for peace!” His voice fell to a near-whisper. “There was a chance for peace.”

“They *did* make contact with the Enemy,” Alex said. “And they used it to try to destroy us. They used *you* to try to destroy us.”

Liana moved forward, green lights pulsing. “Crolin Odal. On the authority of the Moderator, I am placing you under arrest for treason against the Civilization. You are, effective immediately, stripped of your position on the Prime Council pending trial, and will be taken to a containment facility while a panel of Arbiters is assembled to judge the evidence against you.”

“No!” howled Odal, stumbling back through the open windows until he slammed against the balcony railing. Jen and Ara Sumen hurriedly followed the two Defenders as they closed in.

“I think you’re assured of your place in history, Odal,” said Ara Sumen. “As the greatest traitor to the Civilization in over five thousand years.”

Odal turned his back to them, clutching the railing. Then he looked back over his shoulders at them, and lunged forward, rolling over the balcony.

Alex raised a hand, and Liana darted forward. Odal stopped, suspended in mid-air just over the other side of the railing. He released his grip.

“Let me go!” he begged.

“I can’t do that,” Alex told him. “You’ve got to stand trial.”

“Moderator!” Odal cried. “Ara Sumen! Please!”

Ara Sumen stared at him, then lowered his head in thought. “A trial for treason... for a member of the Prime Council, no less... could be disastrous. Confidence in the Council would be shattered.”

Jen looked at him in disbelief. “What? You can’t let him kill himself!”

“The damage he’s already caused has to be repaired,” Ara Sumen said, turning sadly to her. “The false hope he’s created must be slowly and carefully dissipated, not dashed in one huge blow. An accident, a tragic loss will unfortunately be much better for the Civilization as a whole than the trial of a traitor at the highest level of government.” He lowered his head again, this time in sorrow. “Politics,” he said quietly to Jen, “I’m afraid, sometimes requires us to make decisions that can have no good result.”

“Moderator!” Alex said, a look of disbelief on his face. “He has to be questioned, there are still unanswered—”

“He has served the Civilization with honour and the best of intentions,” Ara Sumen announced, before slowly turning away. His voice fell. “Grant him his request.”

Liana moved back into the room, taking up station alongside him. Jen looked at Alex, who was staring, stricken, at Odal.

“You have your orders, Defender,” said Odal with barely contained emotion.

Alex closed his eyes. A long moment later, Odal dropped out of sight over the balcony.

“Alex!” Jen cried.

There was no scream, no sound of impact below. It was a long way to the ground.

“So now what?” Jen asked. She was sitting in one of the rooms of Ara Sumen’s residence, sipping a glass of something that tasted almost like orange juice, but more tangy.

“Take you back home,” said Alex. “We can’t recover the Nexus Imprint from you right now, and since any plans to reactivate the Nexus without it are now well and truly stalled...”

“There is still the minor matter of cultural contamination,” Ara Sumen said as he came into the room, Liana floating behind his shoulder. “But I think that we’re going to have to deal with that as it comes. You need to be returned home, Jen – or at the very least, see your family to assure them that you’re all right.”

“God, my family,” Jen said, putting a hand to her forehead. “I’ve been gone what, nearly a week?”

“More or less,” Alex told her. “And it’ll still take another day to get you back to Earth.”

“They are going to go *so* mental, I just know it. And how am I going to explain all this to them? ‘Mum, Dad, I was taken into space by a super-advanced machine disguised as my teacher and got kidnapped and chased and shot at and met a billion-year-old alien and helped save a galactic civilization from hideous mutant slug-bug-things.’”

“It’d probably be best if *I* handled that part of the explanation,” offered Alex. “I think your parents might have some issues they’ll want to take up with me, as well. Seeing as I basically kidnapped their daughter.”

“Yeah, but you *didn't* kidnap me, did you? You were trying to protect me. And you did.” She got up and gave him a hug. “I don't know if I said thanks before, so thanks again.”

“You did. Several times.”

Jen turned to Ara Sumen. “What's going to happen about the Nexus, then?”

“If what Alex has told me, about the Oiiduci plan and what the Eternal surmised, is correct, then for now it seems that the safest thing to do about the Nexus is... nothing,” he said, slowly pacing across the room. “If we re-establish the Nexus, the Enemy will simply attack again – that's clearly their goal, though their motive for doing so is still as much a mystery as ever. But since the Oiiduci apparently were able to make contact with the Enemy, then we might be able to do so too. It will just take time. In the meantime – with your permission, of course – the Defender will return you home.”

“You've got my permission,” Jen grinned. She looked up at Alex. “This is great! The war's been stopped, and you get to come back to Earth with me!” His slight change of expression took the smile off her face. “What?”

“I'm... not going to be able to stay with you, Jen,” he said.

“What? Why not?”

Alex looked away. “I was supposed to be on Earth watching out for you in secret. That's been well and truly compromised now.”

“So? Just go back and we'll keep quiet about all this.”

“Jen,” he said, shaking his head sadly, “after all that we've been through together, will you really be able to go back to being just my pupil at school?”

“But you can't *leave* me! You could make yourself younger and join the school as a boy in my class or something!”

“I *can't*, Jen,” he insisted. “I wish I could, but I can't. If I stay on Earth with you, you'll always be watching out for me, looking to see where I am and what I'm doing, and that'll affect every other relationship you have.”

“I don't *care* about any other relationships!”

Alex's body faded away, leaving only the chromed sphere at his heart. “*This* is me,” it said in Alex's voice. “This is what I am. I'm not a real person, I'm a *machine*. Is this what you want?”

“Yes!” she said, voice cracking. She reached out and touched the sphere. It felt smooth and warm.

“Is it *really*?”

She couldn’t answer this time. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Alex reappeared and gently put his hands on her upper arms. She pressed her cheek against his chest and closed her eyes, feeling the trails of the tears turn cold on her face.

“There’ll be another Defender to watch out for you,” Alex assured her, “make sure you’re safe. But it won’t make itself as obvious as I did. You’ll be able to get back on with your life.”

“I hate my life,” she sobbed quietly.

“It seemed pretty good to me.”

“I know, it is really... but not if you’re not in it.”

His hand brushed through her hair. “I’m going to miss you too, Jen. I really am. I’ve met so many people from so many different races... but none of them mattered to me the way that you do.”

Jen made a sad little noise deep in her throat, but it hurt too much to say anything.

They left Inar soon afterwards, Alex keeping the walls of the dome transparent so she could see the planet dropping away behind them. Jen watched, but didn’t see anything. As soon as they entered hyperspace, she got Alex to create a room for her and shut herself in it, letting the pain she felt come out in a long, sobbing stream of tears.

## 22: Earth

Crying had eventually given way to sadness, then a sort of numbness, and finally to boredom, and tiredness, and then sleep. And hunger, when she woke up.

After waking up, she spent far longer than normal in the shower, before deciding to change the configuration of the bathroom and have an actual bath instead. With bubbles, and scents. Even though she knew inside that it was really Alex controlling everything, addressing a blank wall and pretending it was something like the house computer on Inar carrying out the changes made all the difference.

But she knew that she couldn't spend all the remaining hours of the journey in the bath, tempting as that might be. For a start, she'd turn into a big pink prune. Reluctantly, she got out and dried herself off. For some reason, the only clothes she could think of to wear to go back home were a copy of her school uniform. After it had flowed and formed around her, she took a deep breath and went into the dome.

Alex was there, watching the stars go by.

"Hi."

"Hi," he said, turning round with a serious, businesslike look on his face. "We – er, *you'll* be back home in about four hours."

"How long was I *asleep*?" Jen asked in surprise.

"Over eleven hours."

"God, total lazy cow!"

The corners of Alex's mouth twitched towards a smile.

"Considering everything you've been through in the past few days, I think a lie-in's entirely reasonable."

"Right." She looked longingly at the centre of the dome, where the table had occasionally been. "Um, would I able to able to get some, er..."

"Are you hungry?"

"Very."

Alex stepped forward, the table and a single chair already forming out of the floor. "Jen, you don't have to ask as though you're an uninvited house guest or something. Just say what you want, and it's yours."

There *was* something Jen wanted, but she decided not to say it again. She'd done enough crying the previous night. Instead she sat down and asked for an extravagant fried breakfast. It wasn't the kind of thing she would normally have, for reasons of health as much as time and effort, but she felt like one last super-technological treat before she returned to the drab reality of Earth. Besides, she had the distinct feeling that Alex would have fiddled with its molecules to make it as healthy as a bowl of muesli.

"So," she asked, "what's going to happen to you? When you go back, I mean."

"I don't know, really. Go back into service, I suppose. Keep an eye out for the Enemy, and make sure people like the Oiiduci aren't trying anything on."

Jen waved a hand at the table. "Alex, you can sit down, you know. Please?"

He looked a little awkward, but formed another chair opposite her and perched himself on it. "Thanks." There was a long pause while he watched Jen take a bite. "It's going to be... strange."

"How d'you mean?"

"You not being there. You've been quite literally the focus of my life for the past sixteen years, and now..." He didn't seem able to finish the thought.

"You could always come and visit," Jen offered with forced cheeriness, his emotions threatening to set hers off again.

"I think the committee investigating cultural contamination might have a few things to say about that."

"Phone call?"

He smiled sadly. "I'll have to see what I can do."

Jen concentrated on eating, trying to keep her feelings in check. It was difficult. She had a good idea what he was going to want to say, and knew that if he did, it would just upset her.

Eventually, he spoke. "Jen..."

She looked into his eyes, and knew what was coming. "Alex, don't say it. Please."

"Don't say what?" he asked, surprised.

"You're going to try and give me a pre-goodbye so that when you give me the *real* goodbye, it won't hurt as much. Don't. Please. It won't work."

He looked back at her. "How did you..."

"I can just tell."

Alex glanced down at his body. "Wow. I must have got really good at simulating non-verbal signals." From anyone else it would have sounded sarcastic, but Jen knew he was being sincere.

"You've got really good at everything," she assured him quietly. Even though she'd stopped him from saying what he'd been about to, the feeling of imminent loss was still tearing at her inside.

"Hello? Mum?"

"Jennifer? Oh my God! Jennifer! Jennifer! Where are you? Are you okay? David, David, it's Jennifer! Jennifer's on the phone! Jen, honeyhoneyhoney! Oh! Where are you, tell me where you are!"

"Mum, Mum! It's okay! Everything's fine, I'll be there in a minute!"

"Jennifer! Jennifer!"

"Hi Dad!"

"Oh God, Jennifer! Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes, I'm absolutely fine. Look, I'm almost home."

"Where've you been? We've been so worried!"

"That's... kind of hard to explain. Look, the easiest way to tell you is for you to see for yourselves. Can you go into the back garden? I'll be right there."

"Amy! Matthew! It's Jennifer! She's okay, she's on the phone, she's okay!"

"Are you in the garden yet?"

"No, just going into the kitchen, opening the door, are you okay, are you really okay?"

"Mum, Mum, stop crying, I'm absolutely fine! Are you in the garden yet?"

"Yes, yes, I'm here!"

"Is everyone else?"

"Yes, we are! Jen, what's going on? Where are you, I can't see you!"

"Look up."

"I still don't think this is a very good idea," Alex complained.

“Look, it’s going to be a lot easier than me just walking in through the front door and having to explain everything without any proof. They’d never believe me. At least this way they can see it with their own eyes.”

“But...” Alex gestured at the reshaped room around them as the field-ship descended, the grey slate roofs of nearby houses dropping into view outside. “A *flying saucer*?”

“Well, there’s no way I’m going to come home in Doctor Who’s bloody TARDIS!”

Jen saw her family standing in a little group outside the back door of the house, staring up at her open-mouthed. She didn’t need great lip-reading skills to tell that Matthew was gasping ‘cool’ as he watched.

The ‘saucer’ landed on the lawn. Part of the dome slid open, and air from outside blew in, a gentle breeze hitting Jen’s face. It smelt... strange.

She’d intended simply to walk out of the ship, but to her surprise found herself running out across the garden toward the house. Despite everything she’d seen, suddenly the faces of her family seemed like the most amazing sights in the galaxy.

After a couple minutes of hugging and crying and attempting to calm down the general hysteria, Jen tried to explain what had happened to her since she’d gone.

“Yes, I *was* in outer space,” she insisted to Mum, who in between shrieking and weeping seemed somewhat sceptical. “Look! See? Spaceship!”

Matthew had already given up hugging her and had wandered cautiously over to the parked saucer, peering inside. “So... is there an alien inside there?”

“No. Yes. Well, not exactly. Look, it’s hard to explain. Alex?”

Alex poked his head slowly around the edge of the opening in the ship’s side. “Ah... hello, Mr and Mrs. Exton.”

Mum stared at him in amazement. “Aren’t you one of Jen’s teachers?”

“Ooh, is he the guy you were writing about in your blog?” Amy asked. “I’m impressed!”

“You read my blog?” said Jen, suddenly embarrassed.

“Like I hadn’t cracked your password weeks ago,” snorted Matthew. “The police wanted to see it.”

“The *police!*”

“We were on telly and everything,” said Amy.

Dad rolled up his sleeves and stormed toward Alex. “So *you* took my daughter?”

“Dad!” warned Jen. “Don’t do anything—”

Dad swung a clumsy punch at Alex’s face.

And missed, his balled fist passing right through it.

“—stupid... oh.”

“I think,” Alex said, helping a dizzied Dad up from the lawn, “it’s time for a proper explanation.”

It took a little while, but the presence of a spaceship on the lawn – which Alex soon made disappear, much to Matthew’s disappointment – and a few tricks with his matter converter and GC fields before revealing his true form helped convince Jen’s family that she *had* actually been in outer space. And not kidnapped by a deranged teacher, as one theory had it.

“Although after reading your blog,” Amy said with a sly grin, “there was the idea that you might have eloped together.”

“*What?*” wailed Jen. “No, no, no! *Please* tell me you didn’t say that on telly,” she hurriedly said to Mum.

“Of course I didn’t!” Mum said. “I just said that I wanted my little girl to come home safely...” She started to sniffle and dab at her eyes.

“Aw, *Mum...*” Jen was filled with grateful love and acute, cringing embarrassment at the same time.

“We’ve got it on tape,” Matthew told her. “Mum was dead upset.”

“Matthew!” scolded Mum. “Of course I was upset, I thought she’d been kidnapped, or worse!”

“Well I’m back now, and I’m fine,” Jen assured her.

“Has anyone told the police that?” Alex asked. “I wouldn’t want them to spend any more time and effort on a search. Professional courtesy, I’m sort of in law enforcement myself.”

Dad picked up the phone. “I’ll call them,” he said. “Er... what exactly am I supposed to tell them?”

Everyone looked at Jen. “What? How should *I* know?” she protested. “Tell them the truth!”

“While normally I’d agree with that,” Alex said, “on this occasion I think it’d be best to come up with something a little more... mundane.”

Jen thought for a moment. “Ooh, I know! Say that I ran away to London because I was scared of getting beaten up by Shaz Johnson. That’ll drop her right in it.”

“The police already questioned her,” Mum told her.

“Yeah,” said Matthew, “Lucy grassed her and her mates up.”

“Did she now?” Jen smiled. “I knew Lucy was good for *something*. Well, all of this is kind of Shaz’s fault in the first place, so let’s do that.”

“Personal vendettas aside,” Alex cut in, “that might not be a good idea. You’d probably get a visit from social services if you said you’d run away.”

“Okay, forget that,” Jen said immediately.

“I’ll just tell them you’re home and you’re fine and there was no foul play and we’re still talking to you to find out exactly where you were,” said Dad, leaving the room.

Matthew hopped his beanbag across the living room, looking up at Jen. “Where did you go? You were in space! That’s so unfair, you don’t even like space or anything!”

Jen gave him a sarcastic look. “Well, after I had tea with Mr Spock, I met up with Darth Vader and we went through the stargate to fight the Daleks...”

“No, you so *didn’t*.”

“I took her to a planet called Inar,” Alex hurriedly said, trying to stop the sibling rivalry, “which is the acting centre of government for the Civilization – my society. And we visited a few other places as well, but I’m sure Jen will tell you about them in her own time.”

“Why did you take her in the first place?” Mum demanded.

“That’s a long story, but there’s something called the Nexus Imprint—”

“Basically,” Jen interjected, “I’m the saviour of the Civilization, and they need my help to bring them back to their former glory and save them from the alien bad guys.”

“You so are *not!*”

“Actually,” Alex said to Matthew, “she is. Although that’s something of an over-simplification...”

“*You’re* the saviour of something?” Amy asked incredulously.

Mum put a protective arm around Jen. “She can be anything she wants to be! Can’t you, honey?”

“Muuuum!”

“Did you meet any aliens?” Matthew asked, wide-eyed.

“Loads.”

“What were they like? Were they humanoid, or more like monsters?”

“A bit of both.”

“Did they try to lay any eggs in you?”

Jen glared at him. “I’m *so* glad to be home.”

Mum hugged her again. “I’m glad you’re home! Don’t ever go away again, promise me...”

Alex looked uncomfortable. “Actually, Mrs. Exton... she might have to at some point.”

“She doesn’t *have* to do anything she doesn’t want to,” said Dad, re-entering the room and giving Alex a nasty look.

“Dad, Mum, it’s okay,” Jen said. “They need my help, and I do want to go back there eventually. But it won’t be for a while.”

“Can I come with you?” Matthew asked hopefully.

“I don’t think that’ll be possible,” said Alex. “I’ve already revealed too much of my presence on Earth. The Civilization normally wouldn’t make contact with a society at your level of development for another couple of hundred years.”

“Bloody prime directive,” muttered Matthew.

“When we’re ready, we’ll come and pick up Jen – with your permission, of course,” Alex quickly added, nodding at Mum and Dad, “and take her back to Inar so we can retrieve the Nexus Imprint. But that probably won’t be for a while – months, at least, maybe even longer. So in the meantime,” he looked at Jen with a slightly apologetic smile, “you can go back to your normal life.”

“What?” Jen spluttered. “You mean I have to go back to *school*?”

“It’ll probably be a good idea not to tell anyone about this, as well.” Alex looked around the room meaningfully. “I’m not saying the Men in Black’ll come and melt your brains, but from what I’ve seen of your society, people who make claims about visiting other worlds or meeting representatives of alien civilizations tend not to be given a huge amount of respect afterwards.”

Dad sat down on the sofa next to Jen. “Well, I’m certainly not going to tell any of my clients that my daughter was abducted by space aliens, that’s for sure.”

“He’s not a space alien!” Jen snapped defensively. Amy made a muted ‘ooooh!’ noise. “And do I *really* have to go back to school? Even being chased by horrible aliens was better than sitting through boring lessons!”

“Hey,” said Alex, looking hurt.

“Not *your* lessons!”

Mum stared at Jen in concern. “*What* horrible aliens?”

Jen froze. “Did I... not mention them?” she said, after a moment. “Well, Alex saved me from them, so it doesn’t really matter now. Anyway, I’ll let him tell you all about it because I really, really need to go to the loo ’cause I haven’t been for five thousand light-years.” She jumped up and rushed from the living room.

“Jennifer!” Mum called after her as she ran up the stairs.

Alex stood in the centre of the living room, Jen’s family all staring at him. He shifted nervously on the spot. “They weren’t *that* horrible, really...”

Jen knew it was Alex knocking on her bedroom door. It had to be – he was the only person she knew who could come up the stairs without making any noise.

“Come in.”

He peeked cautiously around the door. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she said, lying back down on her bed. “I just needed a moment on my own.”

“I can go if you want.”

“No, no, I didn’t mean from you. I just meant... you know. I’ve been off flying around outer space and having all these adventures and stuff, and they thought I’d been kidnapped or killed or something. It was a bit overwhelming.” She let out a breath, then tilted her head down to look at Alex as he perched on the chair by her desk. “Does that make me really selfish or something? I hardly even thought about what they might be going through while I was gone.”

“Actually, you *did* think about them,” reminded Alex. “And the rest of the time, you had other things on your mind. Like escaping

from bounty hunters or not being caught by ten thousand Oiiduci warriors.”

“Well, there is that...” She lowered her head back to the bed, taking in her room. Once it had been completely familiar, her own little sanctuary; now it somehow seemed as oddly alien as any of the planets she’d visited. “God, this is weird.”

“What is?”

“Everything’s changed,” she said. “How am I supposed to just go back into my old life like nothing’s happened? I’ve been to other planets, I’ve met aliens, I’ve fought monsters... I’ve seen you blow up a star!”

“It was only a *protostar*...”

“Double maths doesn’t really matter all that much after all that. None of this does,” she said, waving a hand at the cuddly toys, the boy-band posters, the house, the town beyond the window.

“There *are* things that matter,” Alex told her. “Your family, your friends... six billion other people.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” she reluctantly admitted. “Although I don’t know about the six billion other people, probably five billion of them are complete jerks. But how am I supposed to go back to just being boring old Jennifer Exton after being Jen, saviour of the galaxy?”

“You’ll still be able to go back to Inar when they’re ready to retrieve the Imprint,” Alex pointed out.

“Yeah, but that’ll just be the one time, won’t it? And then I’ll still have to come back to Earth and be ordinary again. This must be what it was like for Neil Armstrong and that lot who went to the Moon. Except they only went to the Moon, and there’s nothing there. I went to places nobody’s even heard of and saw stuff they could never imagine, and...” She sat up again, hugging her knees. “It really *is* coming back down to Earth. Inar to the suburbs. Branchrunners to buses.” She gave Alex a miserable look. “It’s like I was somebody special, just for a little while, and then I had to go back to being ordinary again. That’s worse than never being special at all.”

“You *are* still special,” said Alex, moving over and sitting on the edge of the bed next to her. “Of all the trillions of people there are in the galaxy, in the *universe*... there’s only one of you. And believe me, you’ll never be ordinary. What you’ve seen, what you’ve experienced over the last few days... it’s going to give you a unique

perspective. You're going to see Earth in a light that nobody else ever has done."

"Yeah, how crappy it is compared to everything the Civilization's got," Jen grumbled.

"Well, maybe you can do something to change that," said Alex. "You know what *is* possible, so you can try to make that happen. One person *can* alter the fate of an entire society. It's happened before; there's no reason you can't be that person here."

"I dunno," Jen said, resting her chin on her knees. "Can you really see me changing the world?"

"Stranger things have happened," Alex smiled. He stood up and offered her his hand. "Come on, your family are still waiting for you."

Jen smiled back. "Okay." She took his hand—

Alex's expression changed to shocked horror.

"What?" Jen gasped, suddenly scared. "What is it, what's wrong?"

"The Enemy," Alex said, voice hushed. "They're coming. Here. Now."

## 23: The Enemy

Jen looked at him in disbelief. “What? No, they *can't* be!”

“I’m tracking something *massive* coming through hyperspace, right for us,” Alex said, looking up as though he could see through the walls and into the sky beyond. “The only thing it could be is the Enemy’s primary weapon.”

A cold clawed at Jen’s bones. “The thing that blows up planets?” she asked, remembering Ara Sumen’s hologram.

Alex nodded. “I’ve got to get you out of here.” He was still holding her hand, and pulled her to the bedroom door.

“Wait!” she cried, struggling. “Why’s it coming *here*? I thought you said they only attacked Civilization places!”

“Looks like they’ve changed their tactics,” Alex said, bringing her onto the landing and hurrying for the stairs. “They must be wanting to make sure the Nexus is never re-established... by going after the Nexus Imprint.”

“Me? They want to kill *me*?”

“Who wants to kill you?” Mum asked, rushing out of the living room looking very worried.

“Mrs Exton, Mr Exton,” Alex said as Dad followed Mum into the hall, “I’ve got to get Jen away from here immediately. She’s in very great danger.”

Mum’s hands went to her mouth. “From who?” said Dad.

“An alien vessel from a species that has declared war on the Civilization is heading for Earth. It’ll be here in less than four minutes, and unless I get Jen away before then, it’ll almost certainly attack.”

“No!” said Jen, pulling her hand away from Alex. “What if it attacks *anyway*? You know what this thing can do, it’ll destroy the Earth!”

“Destroy the *what!*” yelled Matthew from the living room.

“Jen,” Alex said hurriedly, “as soon as it detects my hyperspace track, it’ll change course and come in pursuit. And I think I can outrun this one – it’s moving a lot more slowly than the attack ships we met before.”

“Attack ships?” Dad said, glaring at Alex. “And when were you going to get around to telling us about *them*?”

“Please, Jen,” said Alex as Matthew and Amy crowded into the hall, “come with me. Earth isn’t part of the Civilization, there’s nothing even connected to the Civilization here – except me and you. If we leave, then there’s no connection at all, and they’ll leave Earth alone.” He took hold of Jen again, this time by both hands. “Please!”

Jen looked despairingly between him and her family. “But I...”

She suddenly made a decision, the strength of which surprised her.

“All right,” she said, “but on one condition. If we get into hyperspace and the Enemy ship *doesn’t* turn away from Earth, we go back and try to stop it. Agreed?”

Alex gave her a long look. “My original mission orders haven’t been rescinded. I could just take you anyway, for your own safety.” Dad took a step forward; Alex briefly created a forcefield between them, deliberately making it slightly unstable to cause a visible flickering effect in the air. Dad jerked back in surprise. “And the safety of the Nexus Imprint.”

“There’s more than one Imprint,” Jen reminded him angrily. “But there’s only one Earth.”

“Jen!” Alex pleaded.

“All that stuff you just said to me upstairs, about being special, about being the only one out of trillions? That’s how I feel about Earth! I don’t care how crappy it can sometimes be, it’s *my* home, it’s *my* civilization. You’ve been fighting to protect yours; well, I’m going to fight to protect mine.” She folded her arms and waited for Alex’s reply.

He was right, of course – he *could* just take her, and there wasn’t a whole lot she could do about it. But...

“Agreed,” he finally said, with great reluctance.

Jen nodded, then turned to her parents. “Mum, Dad, I’ve got to go again.”

“No!” cried Mum. “You only just came back to us!”

“If I don’t go, you might all die!” she insisted.

“We’ve got to go *now*,” Alex said. “It’ll only be a couple of minutes before they leave hyperspace.”

Jen hurriedly put her arms around Mum and Dad, and kissed them. “I love you both,” she said, looking between them at Amy and Matthew and adding, “I love you all! But I’ve got to go. I’ll be back

absolutely as soon as I possibly can, I promise.” She released them, Alex already opening the front door. “I’ll see you all again soon.”

Ignoring their protests, she followed Alex outside into the garden. She turned to look back at them, suddenly struck by the awful thought that one way or another, it could be the last time she would see them. “I love you all,” she said, voice cracking as she gave them a trembling wave.

A GC field lifted her off the ground, Alex rising with her as the ship started forming around them. Jen waved again as the view outside faded. The last thing she saw was her family waving back.

The ship shot into the sky.

“How long till it arrives?” Jen asked.

“Two minutes.”

“How long before we can go into hyperspace?”

“Ten seconds, less if it’s rough.”

“Rough is fine!”

“Okay. Hyperspace entry... now.”

There was the familiar wrenching sensation. Jen watched Alex anxiously. “What’s it doing? Has it changed course?”

“Not yet.” His brow creased. “I don’t understand. I made our departure as obvious as possible, they should be coming after us.”

“How did they know where I was?” Jen paced around the dome, agitated.

“Somebody must have told them,” Alex said, still frowning.

“Maybe the Oiiduci.”

“Why would they? They wouldn’t want to stop the Nexus being restored, they *wanted* it restored so the Enemy would attack you.

And how did they know where Earth was anyway?”

“I wish I knew,” said Alex. “They still haven’t changed course.”

“They *can* see us, right?”

“If I made my displacement any more obvious, people on *Earth*’d be able to see us. One minute fifteen.”

“Turn around,” Jen said.

“What?”

“Turn around! They’re not going to change course, they’re going to attack Earth anyway!”

“Jen,” said Alex, taking her by her shoulders, “they’ll kill us both.”

“You *promised!*” Jen cried. “You promised we’d go back!”

Alex took a breath, then a jarring double thud as they left and then re-entered hyperspace pounded through Jen’s body. “Course reversed. We’re going back.”

“Will we get there before them?”

“By less than ten seconds, though it depends how close to Earth they leave hyperspace.”

Jen waited as the seconds crawled by, a sick feeling of near-panic churning in her stomach and sending a tight, crawling sensation up the muscles of her back. They left hyperspace again, Alex opening up the dome so she could see. The Moon flashed through her view as the ship turned, a dazzling white semi-circle bigger and brighter than she’d ever seen it before.

“Any moment,” said Alex.

Before he’d closed his mouth, space seemed to ripple and twist, the stars in one part of the sky seeming to fold in on themselves before stretching off to infinity for an instant. Then it was there.

The Enemy ship. The weapon. The planet-killer.

The clawed end of the massive vessel was aimed almost directly at them, reaching out. It moved lazily against the starfield, drawing closer.

“Well, at least they haven’t killed us yet,” Jen noted, a little surprised.

“There’s still time,” Alex reminded her. “They’re turning to face Earth.”

“How long?”

“Not very.”

The glinting dark glass shape grew in the screen. “Why haven’t they tried to shoot us?” Jen asked.

“Maybe they’ve got other things on their minds. I’m picking up growing power inside it. They could be charging the weapon.”

Jen stared at the end of the claw in horror. “No! No, no, no, stop them, stop them!”

“How?” Alex asked incredulously. “None of my weapons will do anything to it!”

Light started to build up deep within the Enemy ship, as though coming from behind a vast sheet of ice.

“We’ve got to do something! Distract them, tell them I’m here—” Jen stopped mid-word, mind racing. “Can you talk to them, send a message?”

“Yes, but they’ve always ignored them—”

“They listened to the Oiiduci, so translate it into Oiiduci, maybe that’ll help!” The light was spreading through the ship towards the points of the claw, a glow rising inside the vast opening between the grasping fingers. Alex looked uncertain. “Do it!”

“Ready,” said Alex, a bit taken aback. “What do you want to say?”

“Hey! I’ve got the Nexus Imprint!” Jen yelled at the alien ship. “I’m the one you want! I’m right here! I’ve got what you want, it’s not on the planet, it’s here! Leave the planet alone and come and get me!” She looked at Alex, making a cut-throat gesture with her hand. “Did they get that?”

He nodded. “It took me a *little* while to convert into phrases and concepts that the Oiiduci would have used...”

The glow was still rising, an electric blue rapidly turning to dazzling white, crackling arcs of power flicking between the spikes around the maw of the alien ship, growing in size and intensity with each moment.

“Call them again!” Jen cried in desperation. Alex nodded. “I’ve got the Nexus Imprint – I *am* the Nexus Imprint! You want to destroy the Nexus? Then I’m your target, not Earth!”

The light continued to build. Suddenly, huge bolts of lightning sprang from the tips of the claws, leaping inwards to join together in a dazzling ball of light between them. More lightning spewed from the opening in the body of the ship, an almost liquid flow of energy running to the blinding glow.

“No, stop!” wailed Jen. She looked at Alex. “Do something, get in front of them, anything!”

“It won’t make any difference,” he said, softly. “I’m sorry, Jen.”

She slumped to her knees, staring in shattered disbelief at the alien ship as the light grew to the brightness of a star—

It held for a moment, the lightning strikes so rapid that they almost blurred into a single wave—

And went out.

Jen thought it had fired and let out a helpless shriek, until she realised that the ball of building energy had simply vanished. Lightning rolled around between the claws, dancing over the surface of the ship, dissipating.

Alex sounded stunned. "I think they heard you."

"They stopped?" Jen scabbled towards the screen on all fours, before jumping to her feet and running to it, pressing her face against the solid nothingness of the forcefield. "They stopped! Alex, Alex, they stopped!"

"They stopped," he repeated. "I think we should leave, right now."

"Yeah, yeah, go!"

Nothing happened.

Jen turned to face Alex, who had a very worried expression.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't enter hyperspace. I've got no drive functions at all. My gravity control fields are frozen."

"But we've still got gravity in here."

"I can't create any new ones. For that matter, I can't even alter the field in here. The GC systems are working, it's just... nothing's happening." He looked past Jen at the alien ship, which had now stopped its display and was hanging menacingly over them. "They're cancelling the fields, somehow."

"So now what do we do?" asked Jen.

"I don't know. They must want something with us, though. They could have destroyed us if they wanted."

"There's still time," Jen echoed.

Alex tipped his head to one side, listening. "I don't know if it matters now, but Earth's just realised it's got a visitor. The news networks have started picking up on the Enemy ship – hard not to, really, seeing as it looks as big as the Moon from this distance."

"Oh, great. I finally get to be on telly and I'm just a dot." Jen looked back at the alien ship, which now seemed completely inert – and somehow more dangerous than ever. It felt as though it was thinking, calculating, plotting its next action. "What are they waiting for, do you think?"

“I wish I knew. I’m scanning the ship right now, but it’s not telling me a lot. I can’t even work out what it’s made of – it doesn’t match any known material. For that matter, I can’t find any sign of engines, or field generators, or weapons... or life.”

“You’re saying there’s nobody aboard?”

“I’m saying that if there is anything aboard, it’s like no form of life ever encountered before. All I can tell is that it’s apparently getting its energy from zerospace, somehow... but I don’t know how, because I can’t sense anything that even *slightly* resembles known technology.”

Jen continued to stare at the glassy blue shape of the Enemy ship. “So, they’re not going to let us leave and they’re not going to kill us, but they’re not doing anything else either? What, we just sit here?”

There was a slight jolt, like a car moving off.

“I take that back,” Jen said quickly. “Sitting here is fine.”

“We’re moving towards it,” said Alex. “I can’t stop us. Wait, something’s—”

His face contorted in pain for a moment, before his body blinked out, leaving only the sphere. The walls of the dome rippled and dulled. Jen called his name and ran over to the sphere, weaving queasily as the gravity shifted. There was an odd tingling sensation, and she realised her necklace had created a protective forcefield around her.

Alex reappeared, but not solid, a flickering ghost-like hologram struggling to hold together. “Alex!” Jen said again. “What’s happening?”

“Under – attack,” Alex strained, grimacing. “They’re destroying my – systems, from within. Selective attacks. Don’t – know how. Offensive and defensive systems – crippled.”

“Alex! No!” She tried to touch him, but her hand passed straight through the projection. The image broke up into a flurry of fragments around her fingers.

“Can’t – sustain,” he began, before disappearing again, the hologram warping and crackling into static before vanishing. His sphere was slowly tumbling, the patterns of light on its surface becoming more and more erratic as Jen watched.

“Leave him alone!” she screamed, running back to the screen and pounding against it. “Leave him *alone!*”

The ship grew in her vision, the huge claw-like spikes at its bow slowly swinging around, reaching out for her.

“Jen...”

She turned, and ran back across the dome when she saw Alex reappear, still ghostly and flickering unsteadily, but there. “Alex! Are you okay?”

“No,” he said. “They’ve stopped, but I’ve been severely damaged. A lot of my systems are either disabled or destroyed. Life support’s been compromised.”

“I know, my necklace just came on.”

“My point generator’s still active, but I can only get a tiny fraction of the power I should be able to. I don’t know why – the sink’s still working perfectly, and nothing seems to have been damaged, but the energy from zerospace has been... blocked, or diverted, somehow. I’ve had to switch to emergency reserves.”

Jen glanced round at the screen to check on their unwilling progress toward the alien ship. The claws now surrounded them, and it was obvious they were being drawn straight into the maw of the enormous vessel. More detail was visible on the ship’s surface, all of it jagged and threatening. “They’re taking us inside the ship. What are we going to do?”

Alex gave her a grim look. “There’s not really a lot we *can* do. Right now, I can’t do much more than talk.”

“So keep talking,” she said, trying to hold his hand to reassure him and gasping in frustration when she passed right through it.

“I might be able to turn the projection solid if you want,” he said, seeing her expression.

“Will it use a lot of power?”

“Yes.”

“Then don’t,” she told him. “You might need it later.”

“Or sooner,” he said, glancing past her at the screen. The maw of the ship, surrounded by ranks of spikes that reminded Jen of the sucker-mouth of some horrible parasite she’d once seen in a documentary, loomed ahead. The blackness inside started to reveal something faint, the walls of some kind of vast chamber, lined by what looked horribly like ribs.

Jen’s stomach knotted. “They must want a really close look at us.”

“I don’t think they care about me at all,” said Alex. “You’re the first individual they’ve ever taken an interest in.”

“I’m flattered,” Jen sneered at the approaching ship. The maw swallowed them up.

Her eyes started to adjust to the darkness, more details becoming visible as they moved through the chamber. Jen had no idea how big it was, no sense of scale. All she knew was that given the size of the Enemy’s ship, it had to be vast, kilometres across and tens, maybe even hundreds long. There was no sign of an end to it, the ribs encircling the interior shrinking into infinity.

“The chamber’s over two hundred kilometres long,” Alex said, anticipating her question, “over a tenth of the length of the ship. A lot of my sensory systems are out, but I was able to get a basic radar pulse to work.”

Jen watched the walls slide ominously past as they were drawn deeper inside. “Where are they taking us?”

“I don’t know. As far as I can tell the chamber just stops, but radar’s not very accurate. There could be a smaller passage.” He looked at the blue-lit ribs of the chamber. “This is all part of the main weapon, some sort of amplification and focusing system. Amplifying and focusing *what*, I still don’t know.”

“This whole thing’s just a giant *gun*?”

“More or less. But it’s nothing like any technology the Civilization has ever encountered.”

Strange shapes appeared ahead, huge objects attached to, or growing out of, the chamber’s walls. Giant spheres pulsing from within with a low cyan light; stepped pyramids of cold glass; kilometre-long spires twisted like corkscrews, reaching out at them from all sides. What they actually did Jen had no idea, and she suspected Alex didn’t either.

A wall loomed in the distance, the end of the chamber. It rapidly grew larger, and larger. For some reason, its scale made Jen more apprehensive than the vastness of the ship as a whole – something about it suggested a definite finality to her journey. It filled her vision, and still kept expanding, what had at first seemed to be a blank, smooth surface taking on definition. The wall looked as though it was made of millions of interlocked spikes, criss-crossing each other in huge, sweeping fractal patterns.

“We’re not slowing down,” Alex noted with alarm.

The wall grew closer, and closer. They were going to *crash*—

The spikes parted ahead of them, shrinking back to open up a hole just big enough for them to fit through. It wasn’t a tunnel – behind the wall was layer after layer after layer of the spikes, retracting out of the way just metres ahead of them and, Jen had the horrible feeling, sliding back into place to form a solid barrier behind.

The pattern of the spikes twisted and turned as they continued, making Jen feel dizzy. Alex’s still flickering hologram watched them intently. “They’re something similar to paramatter,” he said, “but... I can’t describe it. Almost like *para-energy*. Energy given solidity, like a forcefield, only with some of the properties of matter. I don’t see how it’s possible.”

“Somebody’s found a way,” said Jen. The endless rows of dully glinting spikes were passing more slowly now, changing from a blur whose individual shapes she could only spot as a flicker in the corners of her eyes to more defined, more menacing objects.

“I think we’re almost where we’re going,” Alex observed. “There’s some kind of... I would say power source, but the whole *ship*’s like a power source. Something important, though.”

“So,” Jen said, a feeling of dread growing, “we’re actually going to meet the Enemy.”

Their movement slowed to a crawl, then stopped. The pattern of the retracting spikes changed, some of them twisting around each other to form a floor of sorts ahead. The walls remained as sharply pointed as ever.

Jen was expecting the tunnel ahead to open out, but nothing happened. “Now what?” she asked, after several seconds had passed.

The dome vanished, dropping her a couple of feet onto the uneven floor. With a sound like metal striking glass, Alex’s sphere hit the ground next to her, his hologram flickering and distorting wildly for a moment before stabilising again, feet on the floor.

“Alex!” Jen said, jumping to her feet. “Are you okay?”

“My GC systems were just shut down,” he said, staring at the sphere between his feet with some concern. “They’ve created their own gravity field in here. Air, too, though I wouldn’t recommend you breathe it. It’s very cold.”

With a noise like knives scraping against each other, the wall ahead started to open up as the spikes forming it moved apart. At the same moment, the wall behind them began to close up at the same speed, thousands of sharp points moving towards them.

“Alex...” Jen said, backing away nervously.

“You’ll have to carry me,” he said. “My fields are out, I can’t move.”

The spikes were almost at the sphere. Jen hesitated, then snatched it from the ground. One of the points grazed her arm as it grew, passing through the forcefield around her as if it wasn’t there and cutting through both the sleeve of her blouse and the skin of her forearm with equal ease. Jen cried out, the unexpected sharpness of the pain followed by a deep sensation of cold where it had touched her.

“Are you all right?” Alex asked as she stumbled back.

“I think so.” The advancing spikes were directing her forward in no uncertain terms. She turned, seeing the other end of the short tunnel around them start to open out into whatever lay beyond, gaps between the moving, grinding spikes revealing a large, dark chamber. “Looks like we’re here.”

A few steps, and they were inside. Behind them, the wall ground shut, the opening vanishing as though it had never existed. Jen looked around. The chamber reminded her of the dome inside Alex’s ship, but many times larger and higher, the walls like black ice with rolling waves of cyan and blue light pulsing deep inside them. There was a structure in the centre hanging down from the ceiling like a massive crystal stalactite, stopping a few feet above the floor.

But no signs of life.

Jen advanced warily into the chamber, moving sideways slightly to make sure there was nothing hiding behind the central column. There wasn’t. Apart from herself and Alex, the room was empty.

“There’s no one here,” said Alex, sounding oddly disappointed.

Jen approached the column, seeing distorted reflections of herself in its crystal surface. She definitely felt she was being watched.

“Hello? Is anyone here?”

Faint echoes of her voice sounded around the chamber. Alex peered at the column. “It’s the same as the rest of the ship – some sort of coherent energy.”

“There’s something here,” Jen said, looking around. The feeling of being watched was growing stronger, hairs rising on her skin. It was almost like someone unseen was slowly advancing on her. She looked round hurriedly, but there was nobody there.

“I can’t sense anything.”

“No, there’s definitely something here,” Jen repeated, turning back to the column. Were the pulses of energy inside it getting stronger? “I think... *this* is one of them. This is the Enemy.” She pointed at the column, realising her hand was shaking.

Alex looked at her apologetically. “I don’t know...”

Jen took a step back, looking up at the convoluted crystal shape. “Well?” she demanded, talking straight at it with far more strength in her voice than she felt. “I’m here. What do you want?”

Nothing happened.

Alex waited for a few seconds before speaking. “I could try to translate it into Oiiduci for you...”

“I think they understand me just fine.”

“How do you know?”

“Just... a feeling. There’s definitely something here, a presence, somewhere.”

“I’m still not—”

The crystal flared with electric blue light.

Something touched Jen’s mind.

She screamed.

## 24: Nexus

She saw everything.

She heard everything.

She felt everything.

She *knew* everything.

Images bombarded her, sounds, sensations, places she'd never been, people she'd never met, lives she'd never lived.

Stars flashed into life; others swelled then faded, or exploded with unimaginable violence, outshining entire galaxies at the moment of death.

Lifeforms came into being, evolving, developing. Most perished, a few kept on changing and adapting. A few achieved intelligence. Even fewer survived long enough to create technology. Fewer still left their homeworlds.

But from those few, trillions upon trillions of lives were played out, their knowledge and experiences flowing through her like an electric charge.

She knew *everything*.

Every world in the Civilization, every planet explored beyond it, every race encountered, she *knew*.

She knew the twenty-five thousand step formula that described zerospace. She knew how the quantum forces of the universe itself could be manipulated to create paramatter. She knew how the Hooska had changed the biochemistry of their world to create the megatrees. She knew when probes from the Civilization had surveyed Earth throughout its history, from the earliest tribal gatherings to the lunar landings.

She knew what was happening to her.

The tiny implant in her brain, the node that until now had used only a minuscule part of its capabilities to translate languages, had become fully active. It was reaching into zerospace to try to contact the Nexus, finding nothing, and instead reaching back into *her* to find the Nexus Imprint instead.

Everything that had made the Civilization what it had been was now in her mind.

And so was the Enemy.

A huge intelligence, distant, cold, utterly alien. Its thought processes were so different, so unimaginably *vast*, she couldn't even begin to comprehend them.

Except for one thought.

*Pain.*

She felt the pain.

*Stop the pain.*

Was it her thought or theirs?

*Stop the pain.*

The cause was billions of light-years away.

*Stop the pain.*

Countless galaxies between them. They meant nothing.

Inconsequential.

*Stop the pain.*

The time it took was nothing, an eyeblink. The forces they sent to complete the task, unimportant, mere creations willed into existence from the energy of thought, automata.

The pain was growing.

Was it theirs or hers?

It was both.

*Stop the pain.*

The pain was stopped. Momentary flashes of its return, minuscule by comparison. But the creations had dealt with the cause. They would continue to do so as long as necessary.

Ephemeral creatures communicated with the creations. This was of no importance. The creations were free to act within the boundaries of their instructions. *Stop the pain.* But they had discovered something. It was not directly causing pain. But there was the possibility it might. Clarification was needed, contact required.

The Mind focused an infinitesimal part of its consciousness on the tiny creature called Jennifer Exton. The entity was overwhelmed instantly, almost losing its identity, becoming part of the Mind. But there was something else there. Other identities, other voices. In some insignificant, miniscule way, almost a Mind itself. But also a threat, the cause of the pain.

The Mind considered this, withdrawing from the creature.

*Stop the pain!*

She was falling into infinity, all the knowledge of every person that had ever been part of the Nexus rushing through her, an impossible stream of sight and sound and sensation, her own thoughts trampled and overpowered as she tumbled into nothingness, the voices growing louder and louder, drowning out everything but the fall—

“Jen!”

Her eyes snapped open and she took in a deep, gasping breath.

Alex was crouching over her, close to panic. “Jen! Speak to me, come on, please!”

She could feel his hands holding her. He hadn’t been able to do that the last time she’d seen him.

Where was she, anyway?

She remembered.

“Alex!” she said, jerking upright and hugging him. “You’re okay!”

“Forget about me!” he said. “Are you all right? What just happened? There was a flash of light from that crystal, and you collapsed.”

“I...” She struggled to focus. “How long was I out?”

“Just a couple of seconds.”

“What? But I, it felt like...” She looked around the chamber. The hanging crystal column had gone back to its original dark state. “I know what they are,” she said hurriedly, getting to her feet. Alex returned to his hologram form, his body glitching again.

“Who?”

“The Enemy. The real Enemy, I mean. This is nothing,” she said, gesturing at the huge chamber around them. “This is just something the Mind created out of zerospace energy to do a job, like a robot...”

“They’re energy?” Alex looked lost. “What Mind?”

“The Mind, it’s a...” She fumbled for the right words. “It’s a... *mind!* It’s a collection of what-did-you-call-’ems, non-corporeal intelligences, billions and billions of light-years away. It’s absolutely massive, spread out across whole galaxies.”

He gave her a dubious look. “How do you know all this?”

“It spoke to me. Well, not so much ‘spoke’ as ‘totally overpowered my brain without even trying’. It doesn’t know what we are, or care either. It doesn’t even think of us as proper lifeforms,

we're absolutely nothing to it. The only thing it does care about is that we're causing it pain. Or rather, you are. Were."

"Me?" Alex blinked. "What do you mean?"

"The Nexus," Jen explained. "It's all linked together through zerospace, right? But that's what the Mind uses to link itself together as well. It *thinks* in zerospace. The Nexus... interfered with it, hurt it. Like somebody screaming at you while you're trying to think. So it made this," she spread her arms at the chamber and ship around her, "to stop the pain. By destroying the cause. As soon as it stopped working, they stopped attacking – they'd done their job."

"The Nexus," Alex said, realisation on his face. "But they shut it down when they attacked the Source. Why are they still here?"

"Because people keep on trying to set it up again," Jen told him. "Every time somebody sets up a Nexus link, however small, their drones come charging in to turn it off again. By blowing up the planet it's on, if they have to. But... if you stop trying to bring back the Nexus, they'll leave you alone. Forever"

Alex considered this. "Jen... you can't tell anyone that. Assuming we survive, you've got to keep that a secret."

"What?" Jen stared at him in disbelief. "Why?"

"The only thing holding the Civilization together right now is the hope that the Nexus will be restored, that things will go back to how they were. If you take away that hope, the whole thing will fall apart. You saw what it was like on Inar already without the Nexus, disagreements and conflicts that'll just get worse over time." He paused, shaking his head. "But if a new generation can grow up without it, like Soomarvilan's children... it'll soften the blow. The Civilization will be able to adapt. It'll have to change, a *lot* – but it'll be better than collapsing completely."

"But if we don't tell anyone, what happens the next time somebody tries to rebuild their own little bit of the Nexus?" Jen demanded. "They'll be killed! And so will everybody else around them!"

Alex looked grim. "In the long term, millions of deaths could save billions of lives. I have to protect the Civilization as a whole."

"Well I don't!" Jen said angrily. "You can't make me make a decision like that!"

“It’s probably academic anyway,” said Alex, resigned. “I don’t see how we’re going to get out of here.”

“We’re not,” Jen told him. She stared at the impassive crystal column. “I’m pretty sure the Mind’s going to have us killed. It’s just thinking about it.”

“Slow thinker for such a big brain.”

“It’s reading the Nexus Imprint first. There’s a lot of stuff in there to get through, even for a galactic supermind.”

Alex gave her a disbelieving look. “It’s read the Imprint?”

“It did a sub-quanta bit interrogation to...” Jen tailed off. “Er, how did I know that?”

His eyes widened. “That’s... how we were going to retrieve the Imprint, theoretically.”

“But it was never tested because there wasn’t time, right?” Jen raised a hand to her mouth. “Oh my God! I still know all this stuff!”

“What stuff?”

“The Nexus, the Imprint, I saw everything in it!” She read his doubtful expression. “Ask me something. Anything.”

“Who built the first working zerospace point generator?”

“Rithios Ara Janai,” Jen said almost without thinking, the answer coming to her easily as her birthdate or phone number. “Oh!” The name triggered other ‘memories’, not hers, but fragments of another life, other people, other places, other events. “I know all about her!”

“How?”

“The implant, the node,” said Jen excitedly. “The Mind used it to read the Imprint, but now I know it all too!”

“You *know* everything contained in the Imprint?” Alex asked, incredulity creeping into his voice.

“Yes! Well, sort of, it’s sort of fuzzy, like remembering something I heard a while ago. But once I try to remember it just... comes to me.”

“We might not need to restore the Nexus after all,” said Alex. “You *are* the Nexus.”

“Oh. Great. Now it’s *definitely* going to kill us.” Jen’s face fell. She looked at the column, which was still dark. “And not just us. I just had a horrible thought. If the Mind now knows everything in the Imprint, then it also knows who created the Nexus, how... and *why*. And that they’ll try to create it again.”

“And start the pain again,” said Alex, slowly.

“Oh God,” Jen said, “what if it decides to wipe out the entire Civilization whether the Nexus comes back or not, just to make sure it *can't* happen? I saw how it thinks – it'd do it.”

Almost as if in answer to her words, the walls of the chamber suddenly began to brighten, the mysterious power flowing inside them brightening, pulsing more strongly. “I think this Mind just had the same thought,” said Alex. “I'm getting the same power readings as before. They're getting ready to fire the main weapon again.”

“What? No!” Jen screamed at the crystal column, which had also started pulsing with internal light. “Earth's not part of the Civilization! What are you doing? I gave myself up, you got what you wanted! It's me you want!”

She pounded on the cold crystal with her fists, still shouting. Alex pulled her away, his body now solid again. “Jen, don't, you'll hurt yourself.”

“So what?” she cried, her eyes filling with tears. “It doesn't make any difference now, does it?”

Distant rumbling echoed through the chamber, a sound like far-off thunder, growing louder.

“We can't do anything to stop it,” Alex said, in near despair. “If it really *is* just zerospace energy, then it's impossible to destroy.” The noise was growing, forcing him to raise his voice. “That's how the other ships survived the exploding protostar – I disrupted their patterns, but I couldn't destroy the energy they're made of!”

It hit Jen like a physical blow. “Destroy energy?” she repeated. Suddenly she knew what to do. “I know how to kill them!” she yelled over the rising thunder.

“What? How!”

“We can't destroy them – but you can *change their form!* GCSE physics, Alex! Remember what you told me in class? The energy's coming from zerospace, this whole ship is just one giant point generator! You can send it *back* into zerospace through your sink!”

Alex was about to say something, then paused momentarily, thinking. “But the Mind will just create another one.”

“It doesn't matter! It sent these ships out over ten thousand years ago, when the Nexus first started. It can only create stuff within a certain range of itself, like you! I know it, I saw it! This is the only

big ship – it’ll take another ten thousand years for another one to get here!” She grabbed his arms, excited at her knowledge. “How much energy can your sink absorb? No, wait, I already know. You can do it!”

Alex looked dubious. “It can’t absorb *that* much energy. This ship is two thousand kilometres long!”

“It doesn’t matter, it’ll start a chain reaction, I know it will! If you turn off the limiters on your sink and focus it right on *this*,” she pointed at the column, “the whole ship will be pulled back into zerospace and implode!”

The intensity of the light inside the walls suddenly jumped, filling the chamber with an intense cyan glare so bright Jen had to squint. “We’ll both die!” Alex told her.

“We’re going to die anyway!” she reminded him. “But everyone on Earth *won’t!*”

Alex gazed at her for a moment, not speaking. Then he stepped forward and put his hands on her upper arms, looking into her eyes. “I’ve still got a mission to carry out, and there’s one last thing I need to do.” He leaned towards her and, hesitantly, kissed her.

She kissed him back, much less hesitantly. One of his arms slipped around her back, the other up to her neck. For an instant, something felt different about her necklace, as though it was trying to form new clothes. Then she forgot about it, hoping against hope that Alex’s kiss would never end.

But it did. Reluctantly, she let him go.

The noise was so loud the air itself felt as though it was shaking, causing a thudding sensation inside her chest.

Or it might have been her heart.

*~I can see the appeal*, he said, touching a finger to his lips.

Jen almost laughed.

*~You know I said that igniting the protostar was the hardest thing I’ve ever done?* He took a couple of steps backwards in the direction of the crystal column, his eyes still fixed on hers.

Jen tried to say yes, but she couldn’t even hear her own voice any more.

*~It’s now the second hardest. Goodbye, Jen.*

She suddenly realised that it wasn’t a goodbye for both of them, but a one-sided one—

“Alex!” she tried to scream.

He raised an arm and touched the column.

There was a flash of light where his fingers met the crystal, the briefest feeling of incredibly rapid movement, the chamber twisting and contracting around her—

And everything went black.

Silence.

Was she dead?

Everything was still totally dark. No sights, no sounds. Nothing. Except...

She wasn't dead. If she was, she wouldn't feel so sweaty.

Wherever she was, it was hot and sticky. And she felt seasick, a queasy, churning sensation slowly oozing around inside her stomach.

She was in zero gravity. But where? Had Alex's action made her go blind and deaf?

Alex—

“Alex!” she called. Not deaf, then. “Alex!”

~*Jen.*

She gasped in a mixture of tears and delight. “Alex, you're alive, you're *alive!* Where are you?”

~*He is no longer active.*

Fear started joining the other feelings in her stomach. There was something wrong with Alex's voice; too calm, too flat. “What? What happened?”

~*The Defender has been destroyed.*

Jen's voice dropped to a shocked whisper. “But I can hear you...”

~*I am a fragment, a non-sentient construct modelled after the Defender – a kind of advanced computer program, if you like. I can respond to your instructions in a simulation of his personality.*

“What? Where are you?”

~*I am being worn around your neck.*

“You... you're my necklace?”

~*Yes. I was loaded into its processor core just before the Defender overrode the limiters on his zerospace sink and destroyed the Enemy ship.*

Jen couldn't speak for a moment, trying to take it in. “It worked?” she finally asked. “He did it, he saved Earth?”

~Yes.

“Thank God,” she said in sudden relief, before immediately feeling guilty. “Where am I? Why can’t I see anything?”

*~The necklace’s enhanced life-support fields were switched into black-body mode to protect you. If you wish, I can allow in visible light, and also allow radiant heat to escape.*

“Yes, do that,” Jen urged.

At first nothing changed, then she made out stars, slowly drifting upwards through her sight. She was in space. She looked down at herself, bright sunlight highlighting her arms and legs from behind.

“What happened to the ship?”

*~The Defender’s sink overloaded after seventeen milliseconds and exploded. But a chain reaction was started, as you predicted. Only a small percentage of the ship’s total mass/energy was drawn into the sink, but when the sink overloaded, a backlash was sent through the entire vessel. It was completely destroyed, or rather, lost its cohesion as an energy pattern.*

“The Defender’s...” Jen began to repeat, before the meaning hit her. Alex was gone. The sink was a part of him, a piece of staggeringly advanced technology housed with hundreds of others in a silver sphere just a few centimetres across. And it had exploded.

He really was gone. All that was left of him was his voice.

The light was changing. The sun was now almost directly behind her, but another light was coming from somewhere else, a soft blue glow...

The Earth rose into view below her.

Jen felt a surge of emotion; not sorrow, as she’d expected, but wonder, an almost unbearable longing for the blue planet. She stared at it, entranced.

Earth moved lazily upwards as she continued her slow tumble through space. It took a little time to orient herself, but when she realised that she was looking at it from an angle, she knew what she was seeing. The great orange and brown plains of Africa filled most of the sphere below, surrounded by seas of such a vivid blue that they almost looked unreal. Slowly creeping into view over one limb of the planet, above the waters of the Mediterranean, were the southernmost countries of Europe.

She was about ask the necklace something when her memory – or somebody’s memory – brought the figure up for her; the Earth was twelve thousand, seven hundred and fifty-six kilometres in diameter at its equator. Not that the knowledge helped – she still couldn’t do the mental arithmetic she wanted. “How far away are we?”

*~We are two thousand, eight hundred and twelve kilometres above the surface as of this moment.*

The Earth slowly moved out of sight over her head. The sun glared, rising into the side of her vision, but the forcefield darkened around it. She wanted to turn around and keep looking at the planet, but decided it was safer to limit her spinning to just one axis.

“How long will it take you to get me home?” she asked.

*~That is not possible.*

Jen took a long, slow breath. “Say that again...”

*~It is not possible to get you back to Earth.*

“Why not?”

*~I do not have enough gravity control or forcefield power to survive an atmospheric re-entry. My power systems were damaged in the explosion. The Defender tried to enhance and boost them as much as he could, but it was not enough.*

“So... you can’t land?”

*~No.*

“You can’t take me to the space station or something?”

*~No. My GC fields are insufficient to move you into a matching orbit.*

“Probably just as well, it’d give them a heart attack if I started knocking on the door.” Jen gazed sadly into space, the sweeping band of the Milky Way brighter than she’d ever seen it, Inar and Hoosk and the Jen Nebula all somewhere within. It occurred to her that she was the only human ever to have had this view, not obstructed by atmosphere or a thick spacecraft window or the tinted visor of a spacesuit. And there was nobody to share it with.

“Can you contact my family like you – like Alex did on the way back to Earth?” she asked.

*~No. I do not have that ability.*

“Can you contact anyone?”

*~No. My communication systems are short-range only. Earth does not have the technology needed to receive them.*

“Not a lot of use, are you?” Jen said wearily.

~*I am keeping you alive*, the necklace said, with what might have been just a hint of Alex’s tone.

“Well, there is that.” Earth rose into view again, larger than before, more of Europe visible. “How far away are we now?”

~*We are two thousand, two hundred and twenty kilometres above the surface.*

“Are we going to crash?” Jen felt as though she should have been scared, but now felt more tired than anything else.

~*No. Our angle of approach will cause a burnup on re-entry.*

“I’m going to burn up?”

~*No. My power reserves are almost gone. In less than six minutes I will no longer be able to support both atmospheric recycling and protective fields simultaneously.*

A brief flicker of anger stirred in Jen. “So I saved the world, saved the *galaxy*, and I’m *still* going to die? That is so *crap!*” She watched the Earth roll by ahead of her, already calming down. “Huh. So, what, what are the alternatives? What options do I have?”

~*Oxygen starvation, exposure to vacuum, or burning up in the atmosphere.*

“That last one’s *right* out. And I don’t want to explode in space either, and yes, I know, I *know* that doesn’t really happen, I just had God knows how many memories of people telling me all about it. This Nexus thing can be really annoying. So... well, looks like it’s oxygen starvation. Sounds like fun.”

~*The lack of oxygen will result in first dizziness, then a headache and loss of mental acuity, followed by—*

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” sighed Jen. “Just as long as I get my state of euphoria. I think I need it.” She watched as Earth slowly moved out of sight again. “How far away are we now?”

~*One thousand, eight hundred and seventy-two kilometres.*

“How long before the air runs out?”

~*Four minutes, fifty-four seconds. I could extend this by slowly downgrading my recycling systems rather than cutting them off when power becomes critical.*

Jen considered this. “No,” she eventually said, “no, don’t bother. There’s no point dragging it out.”

~*Understood. Jen?*

“Yes?”

*~The Defender gave me a message for you. He said that whatever happens next, he wishes he could be here with you. And that he feels incredibly lucky to have been able to be a part of your life.*

Jen smiled sadly, blinking away tears. One of them gently floated away from her face in the zero gravity, before touching the forcefield a few inches away and slowly evaporating. “Thanks...”

She waited in silence, watching as Earth reappeared, still larger than before. Mainland Europe was now in clear sight, green and brown and grey, incredibly white clouds swirled over it. No lines on a map, no borders, just land.

And above it, surrounded by the glittering sea, were the British Isles. Her home.

At least she would see her home again before she died, even if it was from an unexpected viewpoint. And the last thing she saw would be something of incredible beauty. The Earth. Of all the wonders she'd seen in the past days, something that she had always thought of as ordinary, taken for granted, had turned out to be the most wondrous of all.

Space. Earth. Space. Earth.

She wondered how much longer she had, but could no longer be bothered to ask.

Space. Something was silhouetted against the sheen of the Milky Way, a dark shape that hadn't been there before.

Earth. She was amazed just how small Britain looked compared to everything around it. On maps it always looked bigger. She raised a hand and feebly waved goodbye. The blues and greens and whites below were the most lovely things she'd ever seen.

Space. The black thing was bigger. Weird shape.

Earth. She felt funny. Bye. Love you all.

Space. Black thing very big now.

Earth. Sad but happy.

Space. Black...

## 25: Home

There was a familiar smell. Comforting. It reminded Jen of home. It *was* home.

What—

She sat up, finding herself in her own bed.

How had she—

She looked around, confused, and saw Mum asleep in a chair by the bed. Everything else in the room seemed completely, disconcertingly *normal*.

“Mum?”

Mum stirred, then sprang upright in the chair. “Jennifer! Oh, honey, you’re awake! David!” she called. “She’s awake!”

Several pairs of feet came charging up the stairs, then the bedroom door burst open as Dad, Amy and Matthew rushed in. They were followed by someone it took Jen a moment to recognise. Liana, in human form.

They all gathered expectantly round the bed, making Jen feel a little exposed. She realised she was wearing different clothes, the replica of her school uniform replaced by her pink pyjamas. The necklace was gone.

Alex!

“The necklace,” she croaked, her throat very dry. She coughed to clear it. “Where’s my necklace?”

“Nice to see you too,” muttered Amy. Liana stepped forward and opened her hand to reveal the necklace.

“It’s here,” she said. “It was damaged – I repaired it.”

A horrible thought occurred to Jen. “You didn’t... delete anything, did you?”

“No. The personality fragment is still intact.”

“Oh, thank God!” She looked at the puzzled faces of her family. “Long story, I’ll explain later.” She took the necklace from Liana’s hand and fastened it round her neck.

“Speaking of long stories,” said Dad, “how are you feeling? What happened to you?”

“I... I don’t really know.” She looked at Liana. “How did I get here? That thing, that ship I saw... was that you?”

“No,” Liana said. “You were rescued from space by an Eternal vessel.”

“Eternal?” Jen gasped.

“Before she left, she gave me a message to give to you: ‘You have become a part of my name-story. Thank you for showing me there are still things worthy of my attention’.”

Jen smiled. “I’m very, *very* glad she decided that. What happened then? When did you get here?”

“I arrived about eleven hours after the Eternal rescued you. We’d already detected the Enemy ship moving through hyperspace towards Earth; I and several other Defenders had been sent after it. When I arrived, there was no trace of the ship apart from a residual energy shell.”

“It was a pretty big bang,” said Matthew.

Jen noticed, with some annoyance, that he kept glancing sideways at Liana’s cleavage. She glared at him. “You saw it?”

“It was rather hard to miss,” Dad said. “Lit up the whole sky.”

“It’s been on the news for ages,” Amy added. “We’ve got BBC News on downstairs – they keep showing it over and over again.”

Mum reached over and put her arms around Jen. “We were so worried! We didn’t know what had happened, only that you were up there somewhere.”

“Liana brought you back home,” Matthew said, with another quick admiring look at Liana’s body.

“It’s on the news?” Jen asked. “What’re they saying?”

Liana’s face displayed emotion for the first time Jen could remember, looking a bit discomfited. “It’s now been made extremely clear to humanity that they are not alone in the universe. Both the Enemy weapon ship and the Eternal’s vessel were visible to space tracking radar and observers on the ground. The destruction of the Enemy ship was also quite spectacular.”

“So the Civilization’ll have to make official contact with Earth now, like they did on Biartrah?” Wherever and whatever Biartrah was. Oh, great, now she knew more about it than she wanted to.

“Most likely. So you still have access to the information stored in the Nexus Imprint?”

“Yeah, I..” She stopped and gave Liana a look of curiosity. “How’d you know about that?”

“It was in Alex’s memories in the personality fragment. I scanned it when I repaired the necklace.”

“Oh. Right.”

“We’re going to make first contact with aliens?” Matthew exclaimed. “Cool!”

“Been, done, t-shirt,” Jen told him. She kicked off the duvet and swung her legs over the edge of the bed, sitting up. “So what happens now?” she asked Liana.

“The Council is anxiously awaiting a report, not least on how you managed to destroy the Enemy ship. I’ve already sent a message that you survived, as did the Nexus Imprint, so they’ll no doubt want to speak to you personally.”

“I bet.” She stood up. “Can I have a second? I want to get dressed.”

Everyone left the bedroom, Jen calling Liana back at the door. “You said you scanned the... personality fragment Alex put in the necklace?”

“Yes.”

“Is there any way that you could... you know, use that to recreate him? Put him in a new body?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Liana. “The storage and processing capacity of the necklace is almost infinitely smaller than that of a Defender. The fragment may have Alex’s voice, and if you talk to it it will try to respond in as close an approximation of his responses as possible... but it can’t *think*. It’s not sentient, it just follows a very complex series of programmed responses. That which made him an individual is gone. It’s just a computer.”

“Oh.” Jen sighed, hopes sinking. She stood for a moment, remembering the real Alex.

“I’ll let you get dressed,” Liana said, leaving the room.

Jen stared blankly at the closed door, lost in her own thoughts. Then she gathered herself and went to the mirror, fingering the necklace.

“Woah! Nice outfit,” Matthew spluttered in a mixture of sarcasm and amazement as Jen walked into the living room.

Mum’s eyes went wide. “Jennifer, where did you... what *is* that?”

Jen grinned. “Alien technology, Mum. You can’t get *this* at Miss Selfridge.” She twirled to show off her outfit, a crop top and pair of jeans that would have looked like leather, if not for the fact that they were constantly changing colour, swirling with blues, blacks and purples like paint spreading through water.

“It’s, er... very nice. And a bit revealing. And what did I tell you about heels?”

“Aw, *Mum!*” Jen looked at the television, which was on without sound in the corner. On the screen was a blurry but recognisable picture of the weapon ship, apparently taken through a telescope. A scrolling banner at the bottom of the screen read ‘NASA releases new pictures of mystery objects’. “Is that what they’re calling them, ‘mystery objects’? What’s wrong with ‘giant alien spaceships’?”

“A couple of the tabloids had ‘alien invasion’ as headlines,” said Amy. She glanced at the TV. “Oh, hang on, I recognise this bit of film. They’re going to show it blowing up again.”

Jen darted to the TV, kneeling down for an uninterrupted look. “Why do you need to see it?” Matthew asked. “You were there!”

“I was kind of in the middle of it, I didn’t get a very good look,” Jen told him, watching the screen intently. It wasn’t a high quality picture, an extremely magnified, slightly shaky video image, but it told the story clearly enough. Energy pulsed around the end of the ship, building to firing point, its intensity leaving trails of red after-images as the camera moved. Then the power wavered, became uneven... and died away as the massive ship visibly shook. Its midsection seemed to contract, collapsing in on itself, before the whole screen whited out. The picture changed to another camera showing a wider shot, a speck in the sky suddenly blooming into a vast, silent explosion of white and blue, a sphere that expanded and faded to leave just a dim star at its centre.

She stared at the screen even after the picture changed to something else, unable to believe that she’d been at the heart of the explosion. As had Alex.

One hand reached up to touch the necklace. “Thanks,” she said softly.

*~You’re welcome.*

Another image came up on the TV, harder to make out. “That’s the Eternal ship,” said Liana as Jen looked at the dim shape in the sky, a vaguely spherical object.

“I can’t really see what it looks like,” Jen complained.

“That’s how they prefer it.”

Another distant, extremely magnified view of the Eternal ship appeared, no more revealing than the first. “Where did she go?”

“I don’t know,” said Liana. “The ship left at a high displacement on a course that will eventually take it to what you call the Horologium Supercluster, some eight hundred million light-years away.”

“She’s making a new path,” Jen mused. “I hope she finds something interesting.”

Dad stood up, offering Jen his place on the sofa. “So, Jen, you’re back, you’re safe, and you’ve saved the world, apparently. I think it’s about time you told us all about it.”

“We need to go back to Inar,” said Liana. “The Prime Council is most anxious to hear what happened as well.”

Jen thought about it for a moment. “I think the Prime Council and the Civilization can afford to wait another day,” she said, going to the sofa and sitting down. “I’d like to spend some time with my family.”

THE END