

Tina Palamac

Her Lives & Times
Cycle Alpha of a Century 21 Multiverse Story

by Clya Brown



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Prologue

Many years ago, when everything exciting that was going on in the universe was still being transmitted to the world on 405 lines in black and white, there was a children's comic called TV21 - and in that comic were found marvellous things. Things like Fireball XL5, Stingray, the Daleks... and Special Agent 21 – a space-age secret agent in the James Bond mould, based on Mars, who with his arsenal of deadly toys battled against the evil forces of SOFRAM, the Solar Organisation for Revenge and Murder. Thunderbirds was still on the horizon when I started reading TV21: only the adventures of the mysterious Lady Penelope existed within its pages to hint at the television-based extravaganza that was to follow, and Captain Scarlet wasn't even a gleam in Gerry Anderson's eye. For mysterious aliens, we had the Astrans – a race of levitating amorphous blobs of blue/green protoplasm, who appeared many times in both the Special Agent 21 and Fireball strips. The Astran Empire was by and large at peace with the Solar System, though there were many moments of tension between these two super-powers to keep us running back to the newsagent every Wednesday clutching our 7d (that's seven *old* pence) for the next issue to find out what happened next.

For almost a year, Special Agent 21 had a female assistant: a delectable, dangerous and thoroughly cool young lady bearing the designation of Special Agent 23. Her name was Tina Palamac – and this is her story. To enable readers who may not know who she is to familiarise themselves with a number of key events in her career at the Universal Secret Service, I've added a brief section at the end of this document. That section includes just a few samples of Rab Hamilton's fabulous comic strips around which I've woven part of this story. To see them displayed in the context of some of the key events related in the pages that follow, **click here**: it'll provide you with a flavour of what's in store without giving too much of the plot away, rather like the opening sequences of Thunderbirds did at the beginning of each episode.

This story takes place partly in a universe that is incompatible with the more familiar one of the era of Thunderbirds and Captain Scarlet. Mars has already been partly colonised and has a capital city, Kahra; regular space shuttles between Earth and Mars are an established fact, and the embryonic World Space Patrol is just a few years away from bringing law and order to the furthest reaches of deep space. So where does Captain Scarlet fit into all of this? Well, I did say that this story takes place *partly* in the alternate universe I've just described. This is a three-volume novel, so bear with me please – Scarlet will appear in due course...

Related links:

http://www.spectrum-headquarters.com/sid_database/unity_city/agent_21.htm

http://www.spectrum-headquarters.com/sid_database/unity_city/agent_21_dossier.htm

<http://www.technodelic.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/Annals/Annals02.htm> (down)

Deep Space – 24th September 2046

As silent as night; faster by far than any space vehicle yet created on Earth, hurtled towards the Solar System an interstellar shuttle. From command section to hyperdrive units, human eyes would see few lights, for its builders possessed no eyes; within the command section itself, controls not designed for human hands rose and fell in an apparently autonomous fashion that a human would have described as unearthly - as indeed it was. To the crew that manipulated them in a manner incomprehensible to the inhabitants of the system to which they were headed, however, the movements were natural and correct.

The air was breathable, and sounds instantly recognisable as emanating from a crew under stress filled the section, though the language would have been understood by only a handful of the teeming billions of humans from Earth - and only imperfectly by the sole human on board the shuttle, who had been quietly watching the annular graphic on the viewing screen for several minutes, and who now turned in his chair quietly to address the commander of the craft.

“May one enquire as to the nature of this ring-like phenomenon that concerns your crewmen, Honourable Kaplan?”

His slightly phosphorescent, sausage-like companion rose slightly higher into the air, leaving a gap of some fifty centimetres between the levitation collar supporting him and the floor, and revolved slowly – his facing direction apparent only on account of the insignia denoting his status emblazoned on the front of his collar.

“Of course, Ambassador Kerensky - though at this moment I am hardly better informed than you yourself. I learned during the Madellen campaign that when one's officers are attempting to ascertain the nature of a potential threat to the ship, there is little to be gained by demanding status reports. They have sworn to protect me with their lives - and in a crisis I consider that to be sufficient a demand. However, it may be that I have divined a little more than yourself by monitoring communications with the drive section. It would appear that our flight path has intersected that of another object travelling at near lightspeed, and are temporarily trapped within the residual hyperspatial distortion. That object is the one you have just been observing. There should be no other structure on this heading for the duration of this flight: such was agreed with the World President at the outset. I assume you are not aware of any deviation from the schedule?”

Kerensky frowned.

“Indeed not, *Kaplan'eth'ka* - but if you wish, I will be happy to confirm this with GTCC at Space City.”

The Kaplan drifted forward slightly to utter a staccato string of alien syllables to the Astran pilot in front of him. Simultaneously the officer drifted backwards to respond in the same tongue; although not familiar with the intricacies of the dialect, the Ambassador understood without asking that a request for information had been made, and was being responded to. He watched as the pilot glided back to his post, realising with a start that, for all he knew, the crewmember could have been facing him all along. *Do they actually*

HAVE a sense of forwards and backwards at all? He realised that he had absolutely no idea. *So much about them that we don't understand...*

“The pilot informs me that the placing of a query to Space City would serve little purpose, Ambassador: our engineers have determined that we are capable of overhauling the spatial anomaly, which, unlike this craft, is incapable of attaining supra-light velocities, and can therefore expect to arrive at our destination several months ahead of it. This being the case, and given that we have a schedule to maintain, we can ascertain its nature upon our arrival. And in any case, its trajectory suggests that it originated from our own system. I have instructed my officer to instigate enquiries: he has suggested that it may be a residual effect from an *ai'thaera* manipulation experiment, in which case a record will have been filed with the Inner Council.”

The *ai'thaera*! The human was careful not to show any reaction: months of painstaking negotiations could be compromised... *Can it be possible that the Kaplan still doesn't realise the VALUE of the technology he's offering to sell us? My God, human science is on the verge of taking the single biggest leap forwards since the invention of the wheel...*

“Even allowing for the activity of which we spoke earlier, we will still arrive on Earth well in time to consult with your experts at Unity City should the need arise. I trust you have not forgotten the deviation from our official flight plan, Ambassador?”

“By no means, *Kaplan'eth'ka*: everything is arranged. Only the World President and I are aware of the unofficial schedule. But in view of the arrangements for the visit made by your own diplomatic staff on Mars, perhaps it would be prudent to inform the authorities in Kahra...”

“I think not. This is a... a personal interest of mine, Ambassador. Indulge me in this small matter, and I would be *most* gratified.”

“Of course, Your Highness: it shall be as you wish.”

Kerensky inclined his head graciously, his face immobile, and settled back into his seat. *Anything at all, you overgrown levitating blob of whatever it is you're made of – anything at all. Just sign that trade agreement, for God's sake...*

Kahra, Mars – 6th October 2046

Priming the cuddly little monkey to transmit only noises within the audible frequency range was *still* unacceptably time-consuming, mused Tina, as she continued to fiddle with the tuner embedded in its neck – had she been delayed even ten minutes longer, the damn thing wouldn't have been ready at all. R&D needed another kick – or maybe Special Agent Fourteen had been out of the field so long he'd forgotten the speed with which these things sometimes had to be configured. She spun the sample case round on the bed and flicked it open, then twisted the toy onto a bayonet-fitting communications cradle to synchronise the two devices. Removing it from the cradle, she carried it over to the partition, against which she now placed it, face to the wall. Stepping back, she waited patiently as it silently swivelled its head this way and that, orienting itself to the layout of the room, before extending the two cymbals it held in its paws to the vertical surface. Slowly at first, it began to climb, then faster as the disguised suction pads adjusted themselves to the task of balancing the mass of the monkey against the vacuum needed to lift it. Within a few seconds it was on a level with the open air duct, and a few seconds after that, it had scrambled inside and vanished from view.

She returned to the sample case and activated the monitor in the lid.

"It's on its way. Nothing yet."

The man on the other end of the line nodded abstractedly.

"Nor here. Should be able to triangulate in a few more seconds. The one in the mezzanine's responding now – are you tracking the one on the roof of the main elevator?"

"Yes.... Ah! I've got a direction. Now a fix. Two floors up from this room, 58 metres, bearing 135° from the main stairwell."

"Confirmed. I've got that as room 450, yes?"

"Agreed. One of the conference suites, as was to be expected. Moving the monkeys now – do you want to evacuate the adjoining rooms?"

The man considered, then shook his head.

"Too risky. The occupants will have to take their chances. The walls ought to withstand the blast – I checked before we left base."

"And if they don't?"

"Then we'll have civilian casualties. Can't be helped."

He glanced down at a display off-camera. "They've started arriving. One thing I'll say for them – they're always punctual to a fault. Is monkey #3 close enough to try for voiceprints yet?"

"A few more seconds – it's on the fourth floor now, but still making its way through the ducting. I'm recording continuously from now."

"I'm not expecting to get lucky on this one, Tina – the group commanders all have voice modulators built into their hoods. Our only chance of making a positive identification is if one of them speaks before donning the hood."

The woman pulled a face. “So what’s the point of them all wearing disguises, then? They can hardly wear those ridiculous garments in the corridor before entering the room, so they’ll all see one another as they go in.”

Again, the man shook his head.

“Not so. No one of them knows more than one other in the room. They’ll have been instructed to go directly to different rooms leading off the conference suite upon entering. Only when they’re all masked will they meet up in the main room. They’re absolutely meticulous about such details – our job would be one hell of a lot easier if they weren’t.”

There was a sharp rap on the door of the door to the room, and the girl glanced up with a fleeting gesture of irritation.

“Who’s there?”

“Room service, Miss Palamac. May I change the linen in your room?”

“Leave it by the door, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Even before she heard the dull thump of a bundle being placed on the floor, Tina had snatched up her handbag, sprinted the distance to the window and was wrenching it open. Balcony. Lucky? No – not luck. Good training - she always made certain her hotel rooms had a balcony. She swung her long legs over the sill and threw herself to the floor, just one second before the door imploded in a massive detonation. Within less than five seconds she was back in the room, pressing herself flat against the dividing wall with the bathroom to present the smallest possible target to the assassin whom she knew was even now running back down the corridor to finish the job, and gripped her handbag to her chest, training the line of the clasp on the door. In the event, the assassin stood no chance at all: the second he appeared in the doorway his chest was riddled by the hail of bullets that spat from the disguised machine pistol. Instantly she sprang over to the body and inspected it for life signs – there were none.

The faint sound of more running footsteps down the corridor caused her to raise her gun to cover the entrance a second time, but this time nobody appeared in what remained of the doorway. Either more cautious, or...

“Tina? Are you okay?”

She relaxed slightly, but without lowering the gun.

“Yes, Twenty-One, I’m okay. Advance and be recognised, please.”

The man with whom she’d been talking a few moments earlier on the video link walked slowly into the room, his own gun raised. Spotting her instantly, he strode over to her side and joined her in covering the door.

“As I was about to tell you, room service...”

“...never uses a form of address that indicates to anyone who might be listening that a guest is an unattached female when announcing the reason for their arrival at the door of her room, yes, I know.”

“It occurred to me that you might have forgotten.”

She returned a cool look. “Unlikely. I’ve ordered hotel staff to change my room twice in the past for making that mistake. Not that I’m particularly bothered about sexual pests, but increasing your risk of being killed by a couple of orders of magnitude does nothing for your eating habits. Looks as if we’ve been set up, doesn’t it?”

He nodded.

“Agreed. Mind you, we know they’re around here somewhere. This is a simple hit squad however – the commanders won’t be anywhere near this hotel.”

“So what are the monkeys homing in on, then?”

“Decoy – almost certainly.” He looked around. “We’d better get out of here before anyone starts investigating. All the other rooms in this section may have been evacuated before the start of this operation, but the blast has probably been heard by the occupants above or below us – and somebody might be stupid enough to come and see what’s going on. Don’t forget your sample case.”

She shot him a sharp look. “When have I *ever* forgotten it?”

“There’s always a first time – usually in the aftermath of a bungled assassination attempt like this one. You think that because of your training you’re completely composed, but you’re not. And the first time could well be your last. Let’s go.”

“One moment.”

She flicked open the sample case and extracted a tiny toy camera. Kneeling down beside the body, she pressed the lens face-down on the dead assassin’s forefinger before returning the toy to its holder in the case. Instantly the viewer embedded in the lid displayed a face immediately identifiable as that of the body lying on the floor, together with a page of accompanying biographical data.

“You could have left that to the backup team, Tina.”

“I want to get started on it as soon as we get back to base. Profile’s typical. Death was obviously faked, as usual – he’s listed as having been killed in an accident at the spaceport about a week ago. No previous record of any interest in political activism.”

He shook his head. “I’m amazed they can still get away with these fake fatalities. Don’t the authorities ever *check*? Come on – let’s get out of here.”

He led the way over to the hole where the door had previously stood and turned round.

“TINA! DOWN!”

Her instant flying sideways leap saved her life by millimetres, as a fusillade of bullets cracked through the space that her body had occupied just a fraction of a second beforehand. The assassin was out of the door before either of them had a chance to scramble to their feet, and gained the elevator just as the man swung around the corner of the gaping portal and trained his gun on the closing doors. A bullet ricocheted harmlessly off them as the elevator began its descent to the ground. The man rounded angrily on his female companion.

“You don’t deserve to be alive, Tina! That sort of mistake should have been ironed out of you before you reached the second grade...”

She shook her head in bewilderment.

“But it’s *impossible*, Twenty-One! He took at least six bullets through the heart! I *checked*! I felt his wrist and neck – there was nothing, I tell you! Nothing! He was *dead*!”

Kahra, Mars – 8th October 2046

“Well, Mat?”

The young man peered through his heavy spectacles at the report in front of him, taking his time to reply. S waited patiently, having learned from experience that his researcher didn't care to be hurried when delivering his reports verbally. Twenty-One was careful to suppress his own irritation at the delay: his experience of his boss's mood swings demanded it.

“My team's satisfied that Special Agent Twenty-Three was correct in her assessment of the assassin's status immediately following the attempt on her life, sir. However, that evaluation's based on several factors outside the immediate remit of this investigation. If it weren't for these factors, our conclusions would probably have been materially different.”

“You're saying that you know a few things we don't, Mat – is that right?”

“That's right. One of which is that this isn't the first time recently that an apparently perfectly normal person in Kahra has, without any discernible reason, developed homicidal tendencies. I'm aware of at least three others since the beginning of the year.”

“Why haven't they come to our notice?”

“They're not politically-motivated incidents. They fell into the sphere of operations of the civilian police, who investigated them, failed to determine a reason for the incidents in question, filed them and forgot them. The only reason *I* know about them is that I've got a good memory for reports that appear at the bottom of the inside pages of the newspapers. And there was one feature of this incident that rang a loud enough bell in my head to send me scurrying off to the public records office.”

He extracted a sheaf of photocopies from his file and laid them out on the desk in front of him.

“This one, for example. Victor Dhравic – radio operator at the Martian Geological Survey. Was apparently taken by surprise by the arrival in the lab of a colleague during a routine satellite sweep. Pulled out a pistol and shot him dead. He was killed in the subsequent shoot-out with the police after they tried to arrest him: no motive was ever determined. Then there's this one: Tatiana Kurashkova - junior technician at KTV4. Was lucky to escape with her life in an accident involving a faulty gantry during a live transmission about four months ago; a few hours later she killed a fellow worker in cold blood before sabotaging a transmission relay terminal. Again, no apparent motive was ever found. She was remanded in custody, but was killed in an explosion that destroyed part of the detention centre shortly afterwards.”

S nodded. “I remember hearing about that. The investigation concluded that the explosion was caused by an electrical fault.”

Mat shook his head. “The explosion was *assumed* to have been caused by an electrical fault – because no other possible cause could be found. Officially, the file remains open.”

He reached for the third piece of paper.

“Lastly, we’ve got the mysterious case of Frederick Travers. Travers was a shuttle operator for Magellan Outward Bound Group, which organises adventure excursions into the mountains for rich businessmen and their colleagues when visiting Mars. On the 17th of February, Travers left Kahra with two such clients, bound for the Lumière Ridge in the southern hemisphere. When they didn’t return on schedule a rescue party was dispatched to the expedition’s last known position. They found the Martian tractor with the asphyxiated bodies of both clients inside – but no sign of Travers himself. The cause of the deaths was found to be a malfunctioning intake duct, and the incident reported as a tragic accident. Travers’ absence was played down by the company for obvious reasons, but his body was never found.”

“Why have you included his case among the others?”

“Because I’m familiar with the mechanics of intake ducts. And I know they don’t malfunction in the way that this one was supposed to have done - unless they’ve been tampered with. I was right too. I tracked down the preliminary forensic report on the duct yesterday afternoon: the structure of a key component had apparently been changed at the molecular level. Damnedest thing – I’ve never heard of anything like that being done before.”

Twenty-One leaned forward in his chair and regarded the researcher thoughtfully.

“You said there were several factors that led you to conclude that Tina’s evaluation of the assassin’s status after she shot him was accurate. So far I’ve only heard you describing other cases of people committing murder for no identifiable reason. That’s not enough to clear her of negligence.”

“That’s the common feature of all these cases here that I haven’t come to yet. As I said, Victor Dhravic was killed in a shoot-out. His body was taken to the police morgue afterwards. Thirty minutes after it arrived, an attendant entered the room where it had been laid out, to discover that it had vanished. Before he could raise the alarm he was struck unconscious from behind. Shortly afterwards, the receptionist reported a man answering Dhravic’s description walking out of the building. It was assumed that the whole business was a case of mistaken identity, though the receptionist was most insistent.”

“What about the others?”

“I said that Tatiana Kurashkova was lucky to escape with her life in an accident immediately prior to her killing a colleague. Perhaps I should have said that she was *unbelievably* lucky. The falling gantry collapsed right on top of her: a tangled mass of steel and titanium completely destroyed the little office in which she was working at the time – and yet by the time her fellow workers had returned after running for help, she had apparently extracted herself from the rubble, completely unharmed. She ran out of the building with her colleagues seconds before an ignited gas leak destroyed what remained of the office and the surrounding rubble.”

“And Frederick Travers?”

“The intake duct malfunction would have asphyxiated everyone in the tractor within seconds – Travers included. And yet somehow he managed to walk away from a scenario

that should have left him dead. Just like Dhraivic, Kurashkova and Twenty-Three's would-be assassin."

The researcher leaned down and picked up his document folder.

"My full report is contained in here, sir. Will there be anything else?"

S considered briefly, then shook his head.

"Thank you, Mat, no. That'll be all."

"Sir."

The young man took his leave. S regarded his operative with expressionless eyes.

"This is something out of the ordinary, Twenty-One – I can feel it. I want it looked into."

"I'll set the ball..."

"Not by you. The Mikhal project is too close to completion – I need you on the next Earth shuttle. Tina will take this assignment. I'll brief her immediately after this meeting ends: she should be waiting in the outer office by now."

"You're satisfied that she's capable, then?"

"I didn't say so – but on the balance, yes, I am."

"May I ask why?"

S reached forward and activated the console on his desk, talking as he did so.

"You heard Doctor Matic's report. Plus there's something else that I happen to be aware of that could have a bearing on the problem. Mat doesn't know about it because it's only just occurred, and is still highly classified – the file was awaiting my attention first thing this morning. The records section have identified Tina's would-be assassin from the fingerprints she took: he was a junior clerk at Terraform Central – no record of any previous interest in politics at all."

He swivelled the screen to face Twenty-One.

"This is the man. What makes him interesting is the apparently fatal accident he was involved in a week ago at the spaceport. Fell from a balcony onto the concrete walkway below. Ambulance was called immediately; he was rushed to Kahra's central medical facility for emergency surgery."

Twenty-One raised an eyebrow. "And woke up with a burning hatred of the USS presumably."

"No. He died on the operating table – exactly as Tina's check on him stated."

"Obviously there's been a mistake. The records are incorrect."

"No, they're not. He definitely died. We're as certain of that as it's possible to be."

"Why?"

"Because his body's still in the morgue."

“What?”

“The man who tried to kill Tina must have been an impostor – and an impostor with some remarkably resilient personal qualities, by the sound of it, to say nothing of a resemblance that extends as far as his fingerprints. I’m wondering if perhaps he was an android – and cybernetics is Tina’s specialist area of expertise. *That’s* why I want her on the case.”

“Anything else, sir?”

“No. That’s all.”

Twenty-One rose from his chair, scooped up the files and made for the door. With two metres to go he stopped in his stride and turned, a quizzical expression on his face.

“What did you say that researcher’s surname was?”

“Matic. Why?”

Twenty-One’s mouth creased into a grin.

“Oh, *NO!* I don’t *believe* it! Mat *Matic*? That *can’t* be a serious name! His parents deserve to be shot!”

S permitted himself a small smile.

“That’s what the Berezniki said. Mat’s parents were Hungarian refugees from the Katania uprising – his surname’s actually pronounced ‘Matich’. Hardly surprising that they didn’t understand the joke of christening him Mátyás: they hardly spoke a word of English when they sought sanctuary in the West. Most kids would have been hurt by the bullying, but not young Mat: he changed the pronunciation of the surname himself after sweeping the board in algebra, geometry, calculus, microelectronics, geology, stellar cartography and mechanical engineering. The bullying stopped after that.”

Twenty-One shook his head and chuckled appreciatively.

“Must have taken some guts to take the bull by the horns like that!”

S shrugged enigmatically.

“He’s not the only person I can think of to have changed his name for reasons of convenience. You can collect your fake credentials from Reprographics, Twenty-One: you’ll also need sabotage equipment appropriate to obtaining clandestine entry to a missile base, plus insurgency-class explosives which you’ll collect from our office in Berlin. You’ll rendezvous with World Navy carrier WN7 at their base in Kiel at 0900 on the 14th. Final details of the mission will be forwarded to you and the captain of the WN7 once you’re aboard.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I won’t wish you luck, Twenty-One. Whenever I’ve done so in the past, I’ve discovered afterwards that it’s been the last thing I ever said to the agent in question. And in any case, you don’t need it.”

“Sir.”

Twenty-One rose to take his leave, and S reached over to activate the mike on the front of his monitor.

“Send in Special Agent Twenty-Three please.”

The pair of them met in the doorway, and he stood aside to allow her to enter – a gesture which she acknowledged with a fleeting but confident smile as she passed him. If she was in any way concerned about the outcome of the enquiry concerning the botched assassination attempt, she showed not the slightest sign of it, he noted with a mental grin – just one more reflection on the soundness of his own judgement when he’d recruited her two years previously. He closed the door behind him, surreptitiously winking at her as he did so – a gesture which she mentally filed but to which she showed no visible reaction.

By the time she’d traversed the office, S had risen to his feet, she noted with a vague sense of amusement – an emotion of which she showed not the slightest sign.

“Good morning, Tina. Please sit down.”

She did so, presenting an external image of supreme confidence. As always, he chose not to take that external image at face value.

“How are you feeling, Tina?”

She looked back at him with an expression of mild surprise on her face.

“I’m feeling fine, S. Would you expect me not to be?”

S shook his head, opting to take the easy way out.

“No – not really. First things first, Tina. It’s the conclusion of the internal enquiry into the circumstances of the incident in the Kahra Excelsior two days ago that you’re not considered culpable in any way. A review of related incidents – yes, there have been a number of them – lead me to believe that you’re the victim of a plot that requires unravelling. Your next assignment will be to investigate that plot. To that end, I’d like you to liaise with Doctor Matic in the investigation of a number of incidents that he’s brought to my attention. I want you to find out if there’s a common thread that ties them together. Mat will brief you immediately after this meeting; I want a report of anything you find in two days from now. Clear?”

“Perfectly.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Tina - that’ll be all.”

Deep Space – 8th October 2046

“I have received a report from my elite scientific team on the Astra’han homeworld relating to the anomaly that we overhauled earlier on our journey. Its contents give me cause for concern, Ambassador.”

Kerensky raised an eyebrow. “In what way, *Kaplan’eth’ka*?”

The Kaplan rose slightly into the air as he studied the illuminated text on the screen in front of them.

“My scientists inform me that the object, whatever it was, did not originate from Zeta Aquarii. It was projected *into* our system from space. Its current heading was brought about by the actions of the intense gravitational fields of the twin suns, resulting in a change of its heading away from our homeworld back out into the void.”

The Ambassador frowned. “An attack upon your people, perhaps?”

“I sincerely wish to believe it is not, Ambassador. The incoming trajectory of the anomaly has been plotted: according to this report, it appears to have originated from *your* solar system.”

Kerensky blinked, suddenly fully awake for what seemed like the first time in weeks.

“Forgive me, but I have difficulty accepting that analysis of the situation, *Kaplan’eth’ka*: as the accredited representative of the Solar Federation to the Astra’han Empire I would have been informed of any action conducted by the World Government that could possibly result in an object being transmitted into Astra’han space. We value the friendship of the Empire far too highly to risk a misunderstanding of our intentions towards your people.”

“Even so, the conclusions of my scientists are quite precise. Perhaps the World Government has accidentally omitted to inform you of this... shall we say... navigational error?”

Kerensky shook his head vehemently.

“Not possible. And in any case, did you not you say a moment ago that the object is travelling at almost lightspeed? We lack the technology to project such a device: our current reliance upon Astra’han supra-light transports to effect journeys between our two civilisations attests to this. The 117 light-year journey upon which we are currently engaged could not be effected by any other means...”

He stopped in mid-sentence, a thought suddenly striking him.

“If the object we overhauled is indeed propelled by lightspeed technology, that would mean that if it *had* originated from our system, it would have to have been launched over 230 years ago! The World Government did not even exist at that time. Indeed, our planet had barely begun its transition into the industrial age. You must see that we *cannot* be responsible for this.”

The Kaplan considered.

“That would appear to be true – what you say is logical. And in any case, whatever the cause, it appears to pose no threat to the Astra’han Empire. The analysis indicates that the object takes the form of a tubular rift in spacetime, several hundred thousand kilometres long. Were it headed directly for Earth I would be concerned for your people, but it is not: our calculations indicate that it will pass harmlessly through your system, missing Earth by several million kilometres.”

The Ambassador frowned. “I saw no indication of such a length on your screens, *Kaplan’eth’ka*: it looked not unlike a... a ring of some kind. A smoke ring, I remember thinking at the time. It looked quite harmless to me.”

“That was the effect of the spatial contraction that affects all structures moving at near-light velocity. We are perhaps more familiar with such effects than humans: its dimensions are as I indicated.”

The Ambassador settled back in his seat.

“Well, whatever it is, it appears not to be a problem to either of our peoples. I propose we leave the mystery of its origin to our respective scientists, *Kaplan’eth’ka*, while we concern ourselves with matters of more import. Have you given more thought to the matter of the establishment of cultural links between Earth and the Astra’han Empire? My admittedly limited contact with Astra’han artistic concepts has left me quite speechless with admiration...”

Kahra, Mars – 10th October 2046

“You were right, S – there *is* a common thread.”

“Which is...?”

Tina handed him a folder containing a map and a series of photographs of the desolate, grey, crag-ridden Martian wilderness south of the equator.

“The Lumière Ridge. The Martian Geological Survey was downloading satellite images of the area when Victor Dhruvic killed his companion. The television company that employed Tatiana Kurashkova is investigating the feasibility of establishing an automatic booster station close to the Lumière Ridge for its Earthbound transmissions during the months when the orbits of Earth and Mars are close to apogee. Frederick Travers’s employers had just started running commercial excursions into the area. And we’re on the trail of a SOFRAM cell that’s suspected of having established a communications relay somewhere in the valleys in the southern hemisphere: the most recent transmissions intercepted by our listening posts on Earth emanate from the Lumière sector.”

S leaned back in his chair, a deep frown on his face.

“The USS has been scanning the southern hemisphere for the last two years across the entire electromagnetic spectrum, at the insistence of the World Government, prior to the commencement of terraforming operations. The final go-ahead was issued by me just four months ago – and the first forays into the region have already started. The MGS have an expedition in that area right now: I should know - my son’s a member of the team. If SOFRAM *are* there, then we have a credibility problem: that’s why I’ve had you and Twenty-One eavesdropping on all suspected meetings of SOFRAM personnel in Kahra for the last six weeks. That attack on you a few days ago did absolutely nothing to allay my concerns, and what I’m hearing now is doing even less. With the summit between the World President and the Astran Kaplan just days away, I want this followed up at once.”

“Why is the summit relevant?”

“Because the World Government is about to conclude the biggest trade deal in Earth’s history with the Astran Space Empire. A substantial part of that deal involves terraforming equipment that will be used to complete the colonisation of Mars. Intelligence from Bereznik suggests that the Berezniki are planning to assassinate the Astran Kaplan in a plan to scupper the deal. That’s why Twenty-One has been dispatched to the Mikhal facility: to ensure that no Bereznian missiles are in any state to launch during the actual summit.”

Tina frowned. “What have the Sneekies got to gain by such an action? It would do more than scupper the deal - a war with the Astran Empire could result in the annihilation of the planet, for God’s sake, and General Tobolski knows that. Granted that he’s a belligerent bastard, but he’s not a Berserker.”

“Our operatives inside Tobolski’s headquarters in Katania report that he’s being financed and/or coerced by SOFRAM.”

“Why am I not surprised? But the same question applies to them - what have *they* got to gain?”

S shook his head, and turned to look out of the window of his office at the distant Martian hills, towering above Kahra’s skyline.

“If we understood what motivates SOFRAM, we’d be halfway to defeating them. They seem to be driven by the desire to create anarchy for its own sake in the hope and expectation that a new order will arise out of the ashes of the old – with themselves at the head of it, of course. Essentially the same philosophy as the Russian nihilists of the late 19th century – it’s not a new view of the world. What *is* new is that many of its leaders appear to be extremely able men who could easily make their mark in the World Government. We know that SOFRAM draws support from powerful groups *within* the Unity administration: it’s not as if they’re being denied the opportunity to contribute, as the Russian Czar’s opponents were. And yet they show no interest in following that course, preferring to finance and foment destruction – even to the extent of dealing with the World Government’s enemies.”

He paused, and surveyed the metropolis that lay to the north of the suburbs in which the modest-looking toy factory lay.

“Incredible how far we’ve come in just a couple of centuries, bearing in mind that prior to the eighteen hundreds the Earth was totally dependent upon a rudimentary agricultural economy for its survival. Two hundred years ago, Faraday had only just unified electromagnetic field theory – 1824, wasn’t it? Relativity in 1839; just fifty years after that, we were walking on the Moon, with Mars and Venus already in our sights. You’d have thought that Man would have found terraforming the Solar System to be enough of a challenge, but no – always with our species it comes back to either acquiring power or trying to prevent someone else from doing the same.”

He turned back to face the young woman sitting on the other side of his desk.

“That’s always the problem we’re up against. Too busy fending off alligators to attend to the real business of draining the swamp. As I said, they’re active *within* the World Government – and for that reason I need you in Unity City during the run-up to the summit. You leave for Earth tomorrow – part of your assignment will be to liaise with Twenty-One during and in the immediate aftermath of the Mikhal operation. The greater part will be to organise covert surveillance of suspected SOFRAM operatives during the arrival of the Astran delegation: we can expect a rise in the amount of communications traffic within Unity City itself if there’s to be an attempt on the Kaplan’s life.”

“And the Lumière connection?”

“The USS will mount an expedition to the Lumière Ridge. That expedition will follow in the tracks of the outward bound excursion that resulted in the deaths of those two businessmen. If there *is* a SOFRAM presence out there, it has to be found and eliminated. The expedition will therefore be fully armed, and will be instructed to maintain constant contact with these headquarters insofar as this is possible, and... I know just the man to head up the technical side of things.”

Mikhal Missile Base, Bereznik – 15th October 2046

Reaching high into the night sky, they stood; megatons of destruction encased in sleek black casing. Bathed in the arclights, they reached upwards like sharpened claws; connected to their gantries by solitary umbilicals that were barely visible against the night sky. *Ready for launch at no notice whatsoever*, mused Twenty-One as he peered out of the shade of the trees outside the perimeter that concealed him. No guards to be seen: all no doubt searching for the unbelievably lifelike mechanical rabbit that he'd sent careering into the perimeter fence before cutting his way into the launch site through the now inactive fence. *Would they inspect the toy closely enough to realise they weren't the real thing?* Highly unlikely. The bunny was superbly made – they'd have to physically break it open to find the power unit – and then they'd kick up such a hue and cry over the discovery that he'd be warned well in advance that trouble was on the way.

He crouched down over his sample case, from which he now extracted a line of miniature toy archers, frowning with concentration as he lined them up on the guards that had been assigned to patrol the fence for the half-hour duration of the repair. *The men of Sherwood Forest take a day-trip to Bereznik - to rob from the rich to give to the poor?* Not this time.... A flight of tiny arrows sped simultaneously from the miniature bows and showered down on the necks of the hapless guards, who collapsed unconscious without a sound. *Phase Two complete....*

With the perimeter fence behind him and twenty-five minutes in hand, he edged his way around the corner of the guardhouse, conscious of his proximity to two guards who were muttering in hushed tones. Straining to hear, he was able to make out a few phrases from the conversation, despite being conducted in staccato bursts of profane Hungarian and punctuated with the occasional stamped foot to overcome the biting cold... *think it's hilarious... Andromeda probe... blast the World President and the Astran Kaplan into space...* So – their contacts in Katania weren't wrong. He grimaced and pondered the advisability of radioing in to confirm the intelligence report, but abandoned the notion immediately. *Waste of time... let's just give them something else to think about for the time being, shall we?* He straightened up and sidled along the side of the hut in the direction of the fuel store.

Fifteen minutes later – and several packs of high density explosives lighter – he was back, arranging a line of adhesive darts on the lid of his sample case and training then on the massive harbingers of death that reached skywards. Returning his attention to the sample case, he rapidly keyed a series of commands into the scheduler, then paused a second before clicking the final button. The darts vanished into the darkness as each sought out its selected target, and adhered itself to its outer casing. *Piece of cake...* How long would it take to get out of this godforsaken complex and reach the coast where his seagoing transport was awaiting his return at the bottom of the cliff? An hour, maybe two at most... He keyed in a ten-minute delay and hit the transmit button. No power on earth could stop the destruction now... Breaking his cover, he broke into a crouching run across the dimly-lit courtyard, heading in the direction of the break in the perimeter fence.

Even as he was running, he realised that he'd failed to identify the black structure to his right as a guard tower whose searchlight was inactive – an all-too-typical failure of

Bereznik technology that hadn't yet been repaired. A second later, his luck ran out: a screamed challenge was instantly followed by a searing pain in his legs, and he found himself tumbling head-over-heels onto the concrete beneath his feet, his sample case clattering away into the gloom behind him. By the time he managed to reorient himself, he found that despite there being no obvious physical damage, he couldn't move either of them. *Projected energy weapon...* Then, and only then, did the pain sweep over him like a tidal wave. It tore through his calves like hot needles as he struggled to wriggle towards the fence, conscious as he did of shouts and running footsteps somewhere behind him.

"Can't have gone far... sure I hit him... You!... north perimeter..."

Inch by inch, he continued to writhe towards the gap in the fence, tantalisingly close but not close enough.... *Not going to make it... the charges will blow any second...* He redoubled his efforts, knowing that if he was caught in the open his death would be instant and bloody – if he was lucky. But if he was *unlucky*...

Seconds later, a massive explosion shook the ground as the fuel store went up. A brilliant flash of light illuminated Twenty-One's body, rendering it an easy target for anyone with a weapon to hit – but all backs had been turned as the guards watched, horrified, as one by one, the missiles began to explode on their launch pads in a series of coruscating detonations that lit the sky for miles around. Despite the pain that still seared through his legs, Twenty-One managed a grim smile to himself. *Maybe... just maybe....* He hauled himself through the gap in the fence and scrambled into the undergrowth beyond. The smile vanished instantly as another garbled shout told him that his pursuers had found his sample case. *So... now they knew who he was....* Discarding any hope that they might abandon the search for him to fight the fires that now raged within the compound, he tried to struggle to his feet. Hauling himself up by the very undergrowth that had impeded his progress towards the base just an hour previously, he dragged himself into the depths of the forest, and towards the cliffs below which the submarine should still be waiting offshore for him. A gap of perhaps two hundred metres separated the edge of the forest from the clifftop, offering him no cover at all.

More shouts echoed behind him. *Dead if I do, dead if I don't...* Almost without pausing for thought, he threw himself into the open, and staggered step by step towards the sheer drop into the sea that beckoned invitingly in front of him. With just metres to go, the all-too familiar rattling of weapons being primed from the direction of the forest behind him told him that his pursuers had reached him at last. With one last final burst of energy, he hurled himself over the cliff as a fusillade of shots crackled over his head. His last recollection was of falling headlong into the darkness...

Unity City, The Bahamas – 16th October 2046

“Is there anything else that you require, Madam?”

“No. Nothing at all.”

“Then may I take the opportunity to wish you a pleasant stay, Madam? Our reception centre will be happy to provide you with any tourist literature that you require. Unity is renowned for its nightlife to suit all tastes; you’ll find at least twenty top-rated shows currently running on Central Boulevard, including four of the very finest productions from China and the Japanese Republ...”

“Thank you – if I have any need of assistance, I’ll be sure to ask. At what time is dinner served, please?”

“Three of our restaurants serve delicacies from around the world twenty-four hours a day, Madam. The remainder specialise in the choicest cuisines from Australasia, South America, the Arabian Peninsula, Bereznik, the Nepalese Confeder...”

“Bereznik?” Tina’s left eyebrow ascended a modest half-millimetre.

“Yes indeed, Madam! Unity City boasts the largest community of Berezniki expatriates in the world; their consummate skills in the culinary arts renders their unfortunate country doubly deprived...”

“I see – yes, of course. Thank you.”

“Thank *you*, Madam!”

The effusive page pocketed the ten-dollar bill and made off smartly in the direction of the elevator, leaving Tina to attend to the task of sorting out her luggage. With the first one emptied, she was about to start on the second when a sharp tingling emanating from her bracelet caused her to catch her breath. Dropping down onto the bed, she pulled her sample case towards her, opened it and raised the lid; the flat-screen monitor build into the underside of it brightening into life as she did so.

“What’s up, S?”

Even before he could open his mouth to reply, the expression on his face told her everything she needed to know. “The Mikhal operation. It’s bad news, isn’t it?”

S nodded.

“The facility’s been rendered non-operational, but Twenty-One was shot trying to escape just before the explosives detonated. He’s alive – just – but his condition’s deteriorating rapidly.”

“What happened?”

“We’re not certain. It looks as though he managed to escape from the ruins of the base, but was caught on the cliff top before he could rendezvous with the WN7. They were able to fight off his pursuers with a long-range anti-personnel cannon mounted on the conning tower before sending out a rescue party on board a launch. They fished him out of the water, more dead than alive, but by that time in addition to his earlier injuries he was

suffering from acute hypothermia. I'm not holding out any serious hopes – it looks like he's had it, Tina. He's in hospital in Kiel having an emergency operation within the next two hours. There's a slim chance he'll pull though, but..."

Throughout the impromptu briefing he was watching her closely on his screen. Her expression did not change, though a more sensitive monitor might have betrayed a slight paling of her complexion.

"Unfortunate. Do the Berezniki secret police know that he was injured?"

"Again, we're not sure. Unfortunately the WN7 radioed a message to us telling us of his condition before they had left Bereznik's territorial waters – and that message could possibly have been intercepted. Our agents in Katania have detected a quantum jump in communications traffic, but with one of their missile bases being the target of a successful strike within the last few hours, that's hardly surprising. Twenty-One will have done his best to cover his tracks if he was in any state to do so, but there's a chance the Sneekies know he's alive and in a critical condition. If so, an assassination squad will be sent out. Get over to the airport at once – an Air Force Mach 7 plane is waiting. Your mission is to guard Twenty-One with your life, Tina: he's to be returned to us in whatever condition he is following the operation – alive if possible, dead if not."

She returned his emotionless expression. "You're ordering me to ensure that they don't either kill him - or take him alive. By whatever means necessary."

There was a pause. "Good luck, Tina. I know you won't fail."

The line went dead.

Kiel, Germany - 17th October 2046

“Emergency coming through! Stand clear!”

The staff scattered as the stretcher was guided at high speed through the doors into the Accident & Emergency department, sending staff and patients alike scattering in all directions as it was propelled at high speed through the department, coming to an abrupt halt in front of a burly guard on the entrance to the Casualty section. Before he had come to a stop, the guard posted on the entrance had completed a cursory inspection of the patient and was reaching for his walkie-talkie, prompting a furious grunt from one of the bearers.

“Knife case! Downtown street brawl – he’s in a bad way: we need to go through immediately. *Immediately*, do you hear!”

The guard peered once more at the blood-spattered man on the stretcher, hesitated for an instant, then nodded. “Through the swing doors; follow the signs.”

The other grimaced impatiently. “We know the way.” He turned to the others. “*Move!*”

The doors were held aside as the stretcher was pushed through into the labyrinth of corridors behind the reception area. Glancing behind him to verify that the doors had swung back into their original positions, the man in front muttered a command to the others, who brought the stretcher to an abrupt halt into a corner, and the patient rolled off it in an easy movement that ended with his feet firmly on the ground, a small plan of the hospital in his hands. Swiftly he looked around, and gestured towards the elevator.

“In there. Sixth floor. Our contact should be awaiting our arrival on that level. Don’t get trigger-happy up there: I don’t know him by sight. All I’ve been told is that he’s French.”

He led the way inside and selected the floor as the other three men followed him in. Upon their arrival, he consulted the map once more.

“According to Intelligence reports, the stretcher-bearers for the operating theatre have a room opposite the elevator. That should be it. Ready?”

Their expressions made words unnecessary. Opening the door, the four men filed silently inside, giving them several seconds to raise their weapons before their presence was registered by the occupants, who belatedly realised that something was badly amiss.

“Say, what’s the big...?”

The words died in his throat as a fusillade of silent knockout pellets whistled through the air, and the real stretcher-bearers collapsed into unconsciousness where they stood.

Once more the door opened, and the pistols were raised again to incapacitate the newcomer – an action that was pre-empted by a raised hand and a glacial stare in his eyes. The trace of a French accent served to allay their suspicions as to his identity.

“Your orders have changed. You will await the outcome of the operation on the USS agent, and prevent any other humans from witnessing. It has been determined that the fate of the agent is not critical to the success of the mission, and we do not wish our

involvement to be suspected at this time unless it is unavoidable. My superiors' mission is too close to completion to risk unnecessary complications."

The leader of the group nodded. "Very well - we will wait here until the completion of the operation."

"You will kill anyone who attempts to interfere. Another USS agent is about to arrive to act as a bodyguard to her companion – a female who is better suited to our purposes. When she arrives, kill her."

The leader of the group frowned in confusion. "But if this female agent is in some way of value to you, surely..."

"Do not question. Obey your orders. What happens thereafter is not your concern."

At the main entrance a car pulled up, and a smart young woman in a business suit stepped out, automatically sweeping the front of the building with her eyes as she alighted onto the pavement, and acknowledging with a curt nod the uniformed man hurrying down the steps to greet her. The expression of relief on his face was palpable, and she knew at once that her mission was not yet over.

"Glad you could get here, Twenty-Three. Twenty-One's still in the operating theatre, but he's off life support. He'll be out soon."

She nodded. "Then we'd better get moving."

He led her up the steps into the lobby, where a squad of armed guards were standing stiffly to attention awaiting his return. She glanced at their vacant expressions with a sense of foreboding: no doubt they were well enough trained to engage in a simple firefight, but that wasn't what this was all about...

"...another four men here in case the assassination squad try a frontal attack on the hospital..."

He's still thinking in terms of a conventional assault, she realised with irritation. Learn to expect the unexpected, they'd all been taught in training – did this military-minded ass report in sick that day? She glared at the stolid security detail with undisguised disgust.

"You're wasting your time. If Bereznik agents are going to strike they'll be in the hospital by now. I want these men moved up to the operating theatre *at once*, Captain."

Her companion opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off. Pointless – this was no time for playing at military manoeuvres – they could be too late already.

"Disregard that last. I'll take them with me – they can act as stretcher guards. Bring them."

She turned on her heel and strode towards the elevator, vaguely conscious of a lack of movement behind her. The berated captain became simultaneously aware of it, and acted fast to pre-empt another tongue-lashing.

“You heard the agent – move!”

By the time she had reached the elevator, all five of them had fallen in behind her, and she relaxed slightly as the doors opened to reveal a man in the uniform of a hospital administrator peering out at the unusual sight of an authoritative young woman leading a squad of burly armed guards towards him.

“Theatre floor please!”

The edge in her voice was calculated to cut short any protest, but in the event it was evidently not needed: he reversed back into the elevator and punched the relevant button, watching her with unblinking eyes, his expression unreadable.

In the stretcher room, an insistent buzzing caused the man to glance up sharply. The time had come: he instinctively flicked his fingers over the handgun concealed beneath his tunic.

“They’ve finished. Come on: Twenty-One is ready to leave the theatre.” His piercing gaze swept over each member of his team in turn. “There will be no errors; no panics. Either he leaves this hospital alive with us, or he leaves it in a coffin. Clear?”

The lack of a reply and the expressions on their faces satisfied him. Silently he strode to the door, opened it and walked out smartly into the corridor, his companions following him. A dozen paces further, and he glanced back over his shoulder at them: yes, they looked every bit the part, save for a certain tenseness in their expressions. Not good enough. He turned back to face the front, just in time to see the elevator doors opening, and a young woman lead a squad of armed guards into the corridor in front of them.

“Act naturally, and *TWENTY-THREE!*”

“*Assassins!*”

She recognised him in the same split-second, and instantly raised her handbag to her chest; he in turn threw himself sideways and snatched at his gun from underneath his tunic. He wasn’t fast enough: the hail of bullets from her handbag clasp tore into his chest before his hands reached the firearm, and he died as he fell. By the time his body hit the ground, both Twenty-Three’s bodyguards and the remaining members of the hit squad had also reacted instinctively to the confrontation; in the following fifteen seconds the corridor was transformed into a bloody maelstrom of automatic gunfire, screams and death.

In the ensuing silence, a faint pair of ghostly green rings faded into existence out of the air. Initially seemingly uncertain in their movement, under the guidance of the only witness to the massacre they presently sought out the body of the young woman, which lay outstretched where it had fallen, cut down in the hail of bullets. Slowly, almost lovingly, they swept over her countenance, seemingly at peace in death, continuing down over her neck, torso and legs. Then, just as suddenly they were gone, and peace reigned for a few seconds more before running footsteps brought surgeons from the operating theatre to witness the carnage; horrified eyes sweeping across the bodies, it took them several seconds to react – and when they did, it was with the automatic reaction of their profession.

“Orderly! My equipment – hurry! Get a full medical team down here at once... Doctor... is there anything...?”

“The girl... how is she?”

His companion was already kneeling over the young woman, feeling for a pulse. Unaware of a pair of unblinking eyes watching him from the crack in the door of the stretcher-bearers’ room so recently vacated by the assassins, he slowly rose to his feet.

“She’s dead. They’re all dead.”

Silently, the man closed the door and activated the lock. Turning, he nodded, unsurprised at the presence of the young woman who had not been standing there just a few moments previously. She in turn regarded him with equal lack of surprise.

“You know what you have to do?”

She raised an eyebrow fractionally, mildly surprised at her new employers’ apparent need to verify the obvious, even though within the first few seconds of her existence she had come to understand their discomfort at being obliged to use human tools to protect their interests. She smiled back to put the consciousness addressing her through his eyes at ease. But the smile was ice-cold.

“Yes, of course. I know what to do.”

The Lumière Ridge, Mars - 12th October 2046

From out of the darkness there emerged two glowing headlights; then a cloud of Martian dust, and then finally the growl of tank tracks as the Tractor carrying three men from Kahra rounded the fantastically twisted boulder lying partially across its path.

“What causes the minerals to morph into these shapes, Mat?”

Matic considered. “We don’t know for sure, Mike, but it’s likely to be an interference pattern between the magnetic field of the planet and the dust storms that sweep this region. They’ve had millions of years to produce effects like this. Stop the Tractor, would you?”

The roar of the engine died away, and the three men sat for a few seconds in the stillness, listening to the silence as if it were a tangible thing: several hours with the constant companionship of the motors made the quietness almost unbearably oppressive. Mat glanced down at the instruments to consult the schematic map, looked up to get his bearings, and grunted approvingly.

“It should be just over... yes, there it is.”

He pointed off to the left at what at first glance appeared to be yet another weirdly-shaped rock, but as their eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, they began to make out features that had been fashioned by human hands.

“On the left you can see the abandoned Magellan rover. The bodies of the two occupants have been taken back to Kahra for burial, but the vehicle itself was left here at the insistence of the authorities, pending a full enquiry. That enquiry has yet to convene: in the meantime we’ve been ordered to keep clear of it. The ridge itself leads off to the right – which is where we’re going now. You were going to say something, Mike?”

Henderson squinted into the gloom ahead of them.

“Could have sworn I saw a glow emanating from behind that massive rock formation over there to the left. I’ve read that some of mineral deposits in this hemisphere emit electromagnetic radiation in the visible range - is that why this place is called the ‘Lumière Ridge’?”

Matic shook his head.

“Lumière is the name of the man who first charted it about twelve years ago. He was one of the finest geologists around – and he and his wife spent over a year exploring this region during the early thirties. Their maps are still the most detailed currently in existence: even the satellite imagery of the sector lacks the fineness of detail needed to pinpoint the rock snake clusters before you enter their range of fire. Lumière’s work has saved at least fifty lives over the years, and is the only reason we’ve not come under attack even once this trip.”

“Wouldn’t it have been a good idea to draft him onto this expedition?”

“Not possible. Georges Lumière and his wife Veronique vanished just over two years ago, along with Lily, their seven-year-old daughter. The trip was the first on which Veronique accompanied her husband since the birth of their child, and they felt that the

youngster was just about old enough to join them. Their last expedition was headed for this area, and it was assumed that they must have fallen prey to rock snakes. The Lumières knew the risks – the authorities in Kahra were in no position to organise search parties at that time. Is that the glow you thought you saw?”

Henderson followed the direction of Matic’s pointing finger and nodded.

“Yes... eerie, isn’t? I’ve heard about phosphorescence in the rocks, but never seen it before. You know, if I didn’t know better, I’d say...”

Matic cut him short by reaching forward and killing off in rapid succession the Tractor’s powerful headlights, and then the cabin lighting.

“I *do* know better. That’s not phosphorescence. Cut the engine.”

The incessant growl of the Tractor’s engine died, and the three men peered out of the window into the darkness beyond. Experimentally, Culver began to turn his head slightly, first to the left and then to the right.

“You know those liquid crystal displays that that seem to move when you’re not looking straight at them, and then stop as soon as you turn to face them? That’s the impression I’m getting from that glow ahead. Almost as if it’s not quite there – you know what I mean?”

Henderson nodded. “Yeah. I’m feeling that too. Shall we get a little closer?”

A stifled curse made him turn to see Mat squinting out of the side window.

“Wait a moment... I reckon we’ve got more immediate problems. Look over there.”

The two men joined him at the window, from where a succession of red flashes was illuminating the rock face, throwing surreal shadows in all directions.

“Snakes – and they look mighty upset. I wonder what they’re all worked up about? It’s not us, that’s for sure. They’re usually pretty docile unless...”

“There!” Culver pointed to the side of the gully, where a small vehicle was hemmed in beneath an overhang. Even as they watched, a devastating volley of fireballs rained down upon the meagre cover that constituted the vehicle’s only protection, blowing it to smithereens in a spectacular series of explosions. Mat squinted and swore.

“That’s an MGS exploration vehicle! Mike – get the Tractor moving! We’ve *got* to get over there and help – unless we can take out those snakes above them, they’re dead!”

Henderson nodded, slid into the pilot seat and restarted the engine. Simultaneously, Mat swung himself into the armaments station and powered up the forward laser; targeting the nearest rock snake as he did so. A brilliant burst of light flared across the valley from the Tractor, bathing the weird crystalline creature in a dazzling crimson glow, but the anticipated instant disintegration didn’t occur; instead the snake merely turned to face its new opponent before launching a new onslaught. Two fireballs sailed across the gully to impact upon the side of the Tractor in a massive detonation that almost overturned the vehicle. Mat swore.

“We’re not close enough! Mike – get her into the opening: we’ve got to be able to target the snakes on both sides of the defile if we’re going to save them!”

“I don’t think we can do it, Mat! The second we enter the gap we’ll be sitting ducks!”

“I know – but if we can just close to 200 metres, we ought to be able to...”

“Too late!”

With its last vestige of cover destroyed, the end came for the little survey vehicle as they watched. A massive explosion blew off both front wheels, then seconds later another volley of fireballs spewed into the engine compartment at the rear as the snakes pressed home their advantage. Instantly the vehicle erupted in a blinding sheet of flame. One look was enough for the horrified spectators to realise that any further assistance was futile.

“Mike - get us out of here!”

The Tractor was already reversing to retreat back the way it had come when the first of the anticipated salvoes began exploding all around it. Already maddened into a state of frenzy by their successful destruction of the other vehicle, the snakes now turned with renewed fury upon the Tractor. An explosion beneath the undercarriage blew the wheels off the hapless vehicle, and seconds later, another one ripped off the side panel, hurling Mat out of the Tractor and onto the rocky terrain outside. Rolling over on the ground to try to recover his balance, he managed to remain conscious just long enough to witness the Tractor, with his two companions still inside it, explode in a massive ball of fire.

Slowly, Mat recovered consciousness, experimentally trying to move each of his legs and arms. As he did so, he became increasingly aware of the rarefied atmosphere with its familiar stench of sulphur that caught at his throat with each breath. Forcing himself up onto his knees, he looked about him at the evidence of the carnage that had engulfed them all. How long had he been out cold? The Tractor was still burning, and he reasoned that he’d probably only been unconscious for perhaps ten minutes, though in that time all evidence of the aggressors had vanished: the snakes had coiled themselves back into what the Martian geological papers referred to as their hibernating postures, once more resembling cones of solidified lava, each about the size of a large ape, upon the mountainside.

Rising to his feet, he stumbled across to the burnt-out remains of the tractor, pausing only to stoop and pick up a breathing filter that lay among the pieces of equipment now strewn all over the valley floor. One glance at the bodies of his companions was sufficient to tell him that there was nothing to be done for them; both were charred beyond recognition. A few metres away lay the wreckage of the communications console, clearly unsalvageable. He turned to look at the remains of the little MGS vehicle, still smouldering beneath the remnants of the overhang that had given its occupants a few more seconds of life before the end came. Had any communicators from *there* survived the destruction? Wearily, he trudged over to the still-burning remains of the other vehicle to look for any sign of undamaged equipment, only to find smashed and smoking components.

A faint groan behind him made him turn in astonishment. Among the bodies that lay on the ground, one still remained alive. Galvanised, he ran to the man and knelt by his side, feeling for a pulse in his neck. His eyes flickered open, and Mat could see beneath the blackened grime that covered his face that he was very young; little more than a boy of

fifteen or sixteen. *Strange*, thought Mat, *do I know this kid? No, I'm sure I've never seen him before. And yet...* The young man's lips parted in an attempt to speak, and Mat could just make out the words.

"The others..."

"Never mind the others. Try to relax, son – you've taken one hell of a beating, but you're going to be okay, you hear me?"

The young man tried to smile his thanks, but it proved too much effort. His eyes closed again, and his head fell slowly back. Lowering him gently down onto the ground, Mat returned to the wreckage of the Tractor and located a second breathing filter – the only other one he could find. Returning to the young man, he clipped the mask into place over his mouth. In less than a minute, the other's gasping began to become less laboured as the sulphuric content of the rarefied atmosphere was extracted, and Mat sat himself down beside him to consider their options. It didn't take long. No means of communication; no more breathing filters; no food; no water. He looked up and peered once more at the faint crimson haze still emanating from the valley beyond, and came to a decision. Carefully and slowly raising the lad onto his shoulder with a fireman's lift, he began to walk away from the defile in the direction of the glow that beckoned from the valley beyond.

§

On board the Earth-Mars shuttle, high above the Earth, Twenty-One tore his gaze away from the lonely coffin in the storage hold, and took a deep breath before climbing back up the ladder to the curtained-off area of the passenger section, where he sat down again. Picking up the glass on the tray in front of him, he sipped his drink without tasting it. Deep in thought, he barely noticed as S dropped down into the seat beside him.

"She knew the risks, Twenty-One. She knew them and she accepted them."

He nodded, without turning his head. "I know."

"She would have been proud to know that it was a meaningful death, Brent."

He looked up angrily.

"Was it? Was it really? She died to save me, S! If I hadn't been so damned careless, she would have been alive now. Come to that, if I'd been more careless, she'd have been alive now! If I'd died at Mikhal all this would never have happened. If there was any justice, S..."

"Only a child expects life to be fair, Twenty-One. It isn't. And don't berate yourself for being careless – you're incapable of it. You were unfortunate – that's all. And so was she: her luck just ran out. Seems I was wrong about you two – perhaps I tempted fate when I said you had no need of the stuff."

Twenty-One drained his glass and glanced at his watch.

"Three more days of this – and I used to think that long haul flights back on Earth were bad. Should have known when I was well off."

S drained his own glass, and released the clasp on his safety belt as the red sign faded.

“Can I get you another one?”

Twenty-One considered for a moment, then nodded.

“Without the soda this time, please.”

S stepped out of his seat, walked over to the bar of the first-class compartment in which they were both travelling and helped himself to the whisky bottle. Returning to his seat, he flicked aside the curtains for a second.

“Mars must be becoming the next place to be seen in by the glamour set. We’ve got quite a starlet in the main passenger section.”

Twenty-One opened his mouth to snap back a reply, but thought better of it and shut it again. Sighing a silent sigh, he joined his boss at the gap in the curtain. “Which?”

“The one with the long black hair and the shades in the fifth row from the back. Nice figure too. I wonder what line of business she’s in? Doesn’t look like a scientist to me.”

Twenty-One shrugged. “They come in all shapes and sizes. Maybe she’s thinking about making herself available to some of the senior executives of the mining conglomerates – they’re pretty damn rich.”

S shot his star operative a cool glance.

“That isn’t like you, Twenty-One. She’s probably just another sweet kid whose family’s joined the Martian exodus. Why don’t you go and find out? She’s probably lonely.”

Twenty-One shook his head. “Whatever her reason for being here, it’s none of my business.”

He returned to his seat, picked up his drink and turned his attention to the video screen in front of him. S continued to watch the elegant young woman for a few more seconds as she rose from her seat and walk slowly towards the sleeping quarters at the back of the shuttle. Almost without realising it, he frowned slightly to himself and shook his head, then let the curtain fall and returned to his seat.

At the back of the shuttle, the woman lay down on her bunk and pulled the curtain. The dimmed lighting clearly made her sunglasses unnecessary, but even in the relative privacy of the little sleeping bay she kept them on. Her eyes stared unblinking towards the ceiling as there appeared in her head the image of a man, speaking to her across the rapidly widening distance between the shuttle and the Earth.

“There are two USS agents aboard the shuttle. One is the human the Berezniki tried to kill in Kiel. The other is the head of the organisation for which both he and your human form used to work.”

She nodded, mouthing her reply though silent lips.

“I have seen them. They are located in a separate compartment at the front of the shuttle. Do you wish me to kill them?”

“No. They have their part to play in the final struggle that is about to unfold. Contrive to ensure that they do not identify you during the remainder of your flight.”

“The instructions of our masters will be carried out.”

§

Mat laid down the body of the young man carefully down on the ground, and stared up at the structure in front of him, trying with difficulty to judge its precise distance from him. He narrowed his eyes to try to focus on it, but without success: somehow, it was there and simultaneously it wasn't. Experimentally, he extended his hand to touch the wall, and was conscious of a resistance, but not the solidity that he expected to encounter: his senses told him that his hand had met a barrier, but his powers of reason contradicted that perception. Was there a wall there or not? He had no way of telling – but he had a sick companion lying on the ground beside him, and after walking the circumference of three of the interlinked structures that comprised this... this *complex*, little prospect of finding anything resembling a door. Reaching down to pick up his companion in his arms, he closed his eyes to shut out the conflicting information being fed to his brain and stepped forward. As he did so, he became conscious of an increasing temperature gradient, and the feeling of forcing his body through a semi-liquid barrier. He pressed on, still with closed eyes, and with a few more steps the sensation faded and died. He opened his eyes.

He was standing in a curving passageway. The wall in front of him pulsed faintly with an eerie moving glow in which rippling colours swirled and blended in pleasing patterns. Below him the floor felt solid enough, and he took two steps forward to verify the fact before lowering his companion to the ground. Above him, the space faded into the blend of something and nothing that he'd experienced from the outside. Turning, he regarded the outer wall through which he had evidently just passed; there was no visible evidence of his having done so. He strode over to it and reached out to it again, but this time the resistance was real: this time his senses and consciousness were in agreement that he could not walk back through it again. But one problem at a time... He slowly removed the air filter from his mouth, and breathed in deeply – the air was good. He smiled to himself, and helped his companion remove his filter also, noting that he was visibly recovering his strength with each passing minute.

“What you called, son?”

“First things first... thanks for being around. Looks like I owe you my life – so I guess I'm mighty glad to know you. My name's Steve – hi.”

“Mine's Mat. Here, let me help you up.”

The youngster took the proffered hand, struggled into a sitting position and peered around him.

“Where are we?”

Mat shook his head. “No idea. I assume you guys at the MGS didn’t know about this place either?”

“If we did, then nobody got around to telling me. I was pretty much the tea boy, mind, but I reckon somebody would have mentioned it. Last thing I remember is we’d just seen a strange glow over the ridge when we were attacked by the snakes. We were trying to reach cover... fireballs coming down all around us. There was an explosion at the rear, then...” He screwed his eyes together, trying to remember. “Then everything went black. I can remember guys screaming, then nothing until you arrived. Next thing, I was in here. Mat... did anyone else...?”

Mat shook his head, watching his reaction closely.

“No. We were the only ones. I’m sorry, Steve.”

The young man closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“John and Eddy. They were real nice guys. Oh, *shit*... Why did they attack us, Mat? We weren’t doing anything to them... the early surveys said that the snakes only react in self-defence... *why* did they attack us, dammit?”

Again, Mat shook his head.

“I dunno, Steve. I just don’t know. But what I *do* know is that we’ve got to find help, and we’ve got to find some way to let the authorities in Kahra know about this place, and that we’re inside it. Can you walk?”

The teenager rubbed his legs, then experimentally hauled himself to his feet.

“Yeah... I think so. I’m feeling a lot better now. Real hungry though. I suppose you haven’t got anything to eat, have you?”

“No chance. All the food we had went up with the Tractor.” He looked around him at the swirling alien patterns that continued to shimmer the length of the wall. “And I can’t say I’m too hopeful of finding a plateful of hamburgers in this place either. But if there are people here...”

“You reckon there *are* people here, Mat?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, Steve. But I’d say from first appearances that who ever built this place isn’t like us.” He shrugged. “Come on – let’s explore. If there’s anybody about, we may as well go and say hello. Sure as hell can’t stay here indefinitely.”

They made their way along the corridor, warily at first, then with gradually increasing confidence as time passed without anything unpleasant happening. The curvature of the corridor continued, but the shimmering patterns on the wall varied subtly as they walked. Mat found himself pausing every ten metres or so to watch the lights as they swirled.

“Hypnotic, isn’t it?”

The teenager peered at the luminous maelstrom with minimal interest.

“It’s a novel concept in wallpaper, I suppose. I wonder why they’re doing it?”

“I don’t think this is decoration. And come to think of it, I’m not even sure it’s a wall.”

Mat stepped forward and reached out towards the swirling patterns. A couple of centimetres from the pattern his hand slowed to a stop. He pushed again: no further forward movement was possible. He pulled it back, a look of satisfaction on his face.

“Thought so. It’s not a physical barrier at all - it’s an interface. That’s an electromagnetic interference pattern.”

“A *what?*”

“Interference pattern. You know – the sort of thing you get if you hold up a net curtain in front of another one and look through them at a light source. We’re only seeing the frequencies within the visible range here, but they probably extend across the entire electromagnetic spectrum.”

“Sorry?”

“All electromagnetic radiation – including light – is just a vibration in spacetime. Normally you can’t see it: our eyes are only aware of light when it hits something, but here we’re seeing a spacetime discontinuity. There’s light on this side, and light on the other – hence the interference. Coming to think of it, trying to stick my hand into it was probably a pretty dumb thing to do.”

“Why?”

“No idea what’s on the other side. If my hand *had* managed to penetrate it, it might have been sliced off at the wrist, or maybe bitten off by a bug-eyed monster...”

His voice trailed away, and he watched the swirling patterns closely for a few moments.

“Something’s happening. That pattern’s changed within the last few moments. I’d say it’s becoming less complicated, wouldn’t you?”

The moiré patterns slowed, showing fewer and fewer peaks and troughs of light and darkness as they watched. The bands of light grew broader and broader; the distinction between the light and dark became increasingly less distinct.

“What’s going on?”

Mat squinted at the display for a few seconds, then stepped back to take in the broader picture.

“I think they’re synchronising. Discontinuous spacetime framing is a technology the Astrans use to maximise the efficiency of their hyperdrives, and this looks like something similar. Think of those two net curtains – you know now how it looks when the two are almost perfectly matched? I think the space in which we’re standing is being aligned with whatever’s on the other side of that interface. If I’m right, we should know pretty soon. It might be a good idea to be ready to run.”

Steve threw him a grin. “Which way?”

“No idea. Just be ready, that’s all. There could be anything at all on the other side.”

The patterns continued to blur and meld together. Slowly, a shape began to solidify deep within the wall. A shape about three-quarters the size of a human, but roughly the shape of a human... Then the barrier was gone, and it fell to Steve to voice the thoughts of both of them as they stood and looked in astonishment.

“Well, I’ll be damned...”

A young girl stood before them, grinning impishly up at them. She was perhaps nine years old, and dressed in a dirty but functional pair of overalls. The styling applied to her shock of blonde hair was amateur in the extreme, but not completely outlandish – much as a nine-year old might manage if left to her own devices for an extended period of time.

“Allo!”

Even within the single word of greeting, a pronounced French accent was audible. The two men stared down at her for a few more seconds, temporarily lost for words.

“Er... Hi! Who are you, sweetheart?”

She adopted an air.

“I’m the lady of the house! And you are my guests - welcome, *messieurs*! You may enter, if you please! Would you like a drink?”

Steve’s eyes opened wide.

“YES! Er, that is, yes please... I mean, well... what have you got?”

“I have lemonade, orangeade, appleade, melonade, peachade and cherryade. I can get any ade! Would you like a different ade?”

“Er, lemonade would be great, thanks! Look... are you sure that you’ve actually *got* these drinks, honey?”

“But of course! Come on – everything’s in the fridge. I only like them cold.”

She ran back into the gloom, and vanished into the darkness. Mat glanced at Steve in obvious bewilderment, then shrugged and strode after her, with Steve following hot on his heels. From out of the gloom a shape began to emerge, solidifying slowly as they approached to reveal a large vehicle with dark grey exterior mounted on a pair of rugged tank tracks. The hatch was open, and a pale glow emanated from the interior, from where they could hear the girl scrabbling around, somewhere out of sight from the outside. Steve walked up to it and touched it.

“Explorer-class prospecting chariot, isn’t it?”

“Certainly looks like one. What the hell’s it doing in here?”

Steve nodded his head towards the hatch. “Looks as if *she* lives in it, doesn’t it. Shall we go take a look?”

They both climbed aboard the transport and looked around. At the front, the readouts from the drive controls flickered noiselessly. Mat dropped into the command seat and experimentally started checking over the controls. After a few moments, he leaned back in the seat and grinned.

"Looks like the thing's pretty much in working order. Even the power unit's fully charged – this vehicle should be able to get us back to Kahra. Have we got global positioning?"

Steve leaned over the navigation console and inspected the satellite triangulation display, which was showing a meaningless array of digits that was continually changing.

"Something wrong here. Come take a look."

The older man joined him at the console. "What's up?"

"These devices are programmed to download the chariot's position from the MGS orbiting satellite array every ten seconds, and to cross-reference the output with the current starfield as visible from Kahra at five-minute intervals. They're incredibly well made: I never heard of one breaking down before. I wonder what's wrong with it?"

Mat shook his head and frowned.

"If I'm right about that dimensional discontinuity we passed through, there may be nothing wrong with it at all. This whole region surrounding the chariot's out of synch with normal spacetime - there's nothing for the scanners to lock onto. Try communications – I'll bet you can't get a fix on any of the standard frequencies. Am I right?"

Steve switched his attention to the adjacent console and started keying in commands. A few moments later, he nodded grimly.

"You are. So we can't determine our position and we can't talk to the outside world. Great. What now?"

"We've got to get that interface resynchronised before we can do anything else at all. Obviously our young friend over there was expecting us when we arrived, so presumably she knows how it's done. Let's ask her, shall we?"

He rose out of his chair and made for the rear of the craft, into which was built a tiny kitchen comprising a microwave, recycling unit, a refrigerator and four small storage units, from one which the young girl was currently extracting a packet of concentrate.

"It's *ages* since I've had a party! Here – this is for you."

Steve took the glass, sniffed it, raised his eyebrows and downed half of it in a single gulp.

"Wow! Best lemonade I ever tasted – you got any more of this? Sorry, but we're a bit thirsty, you understand... it's pretty dry out there. In fact... how come we're in here at all? I don't remember going through a door. Do you know how the technology works, young lady?"

She sat down on a bunk in a little alcove and grinned.

"I let you in. You wouldn't have been able to get in without me." She lowered her voice. "*They* let me do it really. I told them I wanted to meet you, so they let you in. You'll

have to promise to be good though. It's not really my house. It's really *their* house. But they let Papa leave his chariot in it while he's away."

"Just who are *they*, sweetheart?"

"They're my friends. They live here. They let me stay."

"Your *friends*? You mean... there are other people here?"

"Of course! It's their house, silly!"

"Can we go and meet them?"

"It's all right. They already know you're here."

"But even so, shouldn't we... well... go and say hello?"

She shook her head. "They only talk to me when they want to. I think they're very busy."

"Why - what are they doing?"

"I don't know. They're too busy to tell me. But I don't mind."

"And... you live in the chariot?"

"Yes! Papa's owned it for years, so I know how to make it work. When he comes back he'll take me home in it again."

"Your... Papa - who is he?"

"Papa is *very* famous geologist. *Everybody* knows who he is. When we came here, he says to me that they even call the valley after him..."

Mat blinked as realisation suddenly hit him.

"Of course! You're Georges Lumière's daughter! You're Lilian!"

"*C'est moi!* Though nobody's called me that for *years*."

She grinned and delivered a coquettish little curtsy, then sat herself back down on the bunk with a decisive bump. An instant later she let out a little squeal as the half of the drink that had leapt out of her plastic beaker sank into her dungarees.

"*Zut!*"

Steve laughed at her distraught expression as she peered dolefully down at the remainder of the drink. "Hey, calm down, sweetheart! You'll end up with half your supply on the floor if you're not careful!"

She shrugged. "Didn't want it all anyway."

Downing the remainder of it, she jumped off the bunk and ran over to the waste disposal chute to drop the plastic beaker into the hole. A second later an alarming screech emanated from the control panel, and the beaker popped back out again from the hole into which she'd dropped it. She pulled a face.

"It's full. Recycling time. Won't be a minute."

She dropped down onto her hands and knees, poked her head into a conduit underneath the control panel and scrambled inside. Within seconds she had disappeared into the ducting between the floor and the vehicle's undercarriage, and Mat and Steve found themselves being treated to a cacophony of bangs and screeches from the open instrument cover as she rewired the chariot's matter-energy conversion system. In less than two minutes she was back, her grinning head popping out of the hole again like a jack-in-a-box.

"All done! Papa only used to do it when he returned to Kahra, but then he was only away for two weeks. The system needs resetting every month, so I taught myself."

Steve grinned. "You're quite a hardy little Lily, aren't you?"

Her eyes opened wide. "That's what Maman used to say! She used to tell all our friends that I was a hardy lily. A hardy *yellow* lily – because my hair's like gold. Then she called me her little... I had a *special* name, but I never understood why she called me that."

Mat raised an eyebrow. "Was your mother a biologist, by any chance, young lady?"

"But yes! How did you know?"

He grinned. "Oh, just an educated guess... Venus?"

Her eyes shone and she clapped her hands in delight.

"You *know*! *How* do you know? Tell me!"

"Venus? The Hardy Yellow Water Lily – hybrid of the *Nymphaea* genus. Or to use its common name.... 'Venus'. That was what your mother called you, wasn't it?"

She clapped her hands. "I knew it! You *are* clever! You can *both* be my friends now!"

"What are they *doing* here, Lily?"

"*Venus*! We're friends now, remember?"

"All right - what are they *doing* here... Venus?"

"*That's* better. They're looking at people all over the place. They want to know all about the people on Earth and Mars. When they can't understand things about people they ask me, and I try to help them. But they don't want to come and say hello to everyone, because they're shy."

Mat frowned. "Is that because they're afraid of people, Venus?"

"Oh, no! They're not afraid of *anyone*. They're just shy, that's all. But they're very kind. They've looked after me ever since Papa and Maman brought me here."

"Venus... do you... do you know where your parents are now?"

She wrinkled her nose. "They had to go away. After the rock snakes attacked us, our tractor was all wrecked, and Maman's leg was hurt in the fire. Papa saw the city in the valley as it was lit up by the fireballs – he pulled me out of the tractor and carried me inside, then he went back to help Maman, but the tractor blew up while he was still trying to get her out."

"Do you mean... they were killed, Venus?"

“Oh, no! They were saved. Papa came back to the city to tell me. He told me that Maman had been really lucky too, because the people in the city had helped her. But he said that because they had helped us, she and Papa had to do something to help them in return, and that I should be very brave while they went away, because they wanted me to stay here until they came back.”

“You mean...you’re still *waiting* for them to come back, Venus?”

She nodded. “They’ll come back for me when they’ve helped our friends enough. They say that Papa is doing something *really* important for them.”

“What do they look like, Venus?”

She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t know. They’re too shy to come out.”

“What... you’ve never actually *seen* them?”

“No.”

“But... surely you *must* have done! I mean, well, how did they bring the chariot inside this house of theirs, for example? And you must have seen them repairing it!”

She shook her head.

“They just made it happen. They told me to come in here and there it was, with all the holes made by the rock snakes filled in again, and all the systems working. They’re *very* clever.”

“But... how on earth do you *live*, Venus? I mean, where do you find food, clean clothes and things like that?”

“I told you! Everything works again – better than when Papa bought it, even! When the food runs out, they fill up the fridge for me when I’m not looking. That’s how I know they’re my friends.”

“Don’t you ever get lonely?”

“Oh no! There’s lots to do. They let me use their equipment. I can always see what other people are doing on Earth.” She lowered her voice. “I think they’re shy because they look funny. I don’t think they are like us. They’ve got funny voices when they talk to me in my head. And they only talk in the picture room too – I think that’s where they live all the time, because they never come outside. When I get lonely, I go there to talk to them.”

“What’s this picture room, Venus?”

She gave him a pained look. “The picture room is where they show you *pictures*, you tooty! That’s where I can see what people are doing on the Earth.”

She scrambled up and tripped over to the hatch. “Come on. I’ll show you. I’ll tell them that you’re my friends too.”

She jumped down the stepladder and skipped away into the gloom, with Mat and Steve striding after her.

Kahra, Mars - 15th October 2046

S flicked off the videoscreen and frowned as Twenty-One entered.

“Still not a word. I’m beginning to get worried. I know it’s not unusual for survey parties to be incommunicado for days on end on account of the atmospheric conditions in that area, but...”

“Aren’t they being tracked by satellite?”

“No, dammit. The system suffered a major malfunction some months ago. That Kurashkova girl was working on it when she was killed, and the enquiry’s just going on and on. Until it’s made its report we’re effectively blind. I know he’s old enough to look after himself, Twenty-One, but I still worry. Nothing I can do about it though. One of the curses of being a parent, I guess. Never mind about that – I didn’t ask you over here to listen to my grumbling.”

S waved his star operative into a chair.

“I’ve been invited to a reception at the Astran embassy tonight – to which I’d like you to accompany me, Twenty-One. This is your ticket – it was cleared with Astran security earlier today – which is made out in your real name. You’re attending in your capacity as a senior executive of Century 21 Toys – which as far as the Astrans are concerned is the organisation for which I now work in the capacity of non-executive director. I want you there on account of your expertise on Astran affairs: they’ve heard of you in that connection, and are therefore probably more likely to communicate their current thinking on the deal to you than they are to me. Their military aides are aware that I’ve retired from active service, but they’re instinctively suspicious.”

Twenty-One reached over and took the small smart-card. “Anything else in the biog encrypted on this that I need to know?”

S shook his head. “It’s all genuine. Only your security work is missing – and that’s been replaced by your standard cover story for the last three years.”

“When do we leave?”

“An hour from now. Before we go however, there’s something else I want to talk to you about. Sit down, would you? It concerns Tina’s death.”

A finely-tuned sensor might have detected a tightening of the muscles in Twenty-One’s throat, but his face remained immobile.

“Indeed?”

“Our analysis section in Unity City has highlighted a... a curiosity. All casualties have been accounted for, but one person present in the operating theatre area at the time of the incident has disappeared.”

“A Sneekie insider. The ringleader, perhaps?”

“That’s what we thought at first, naturally. But one very sharp-eyed operative in Unity has drawn attention to a rather remarkable coincidence. Watch this.”

S swivelled the monitor round to face Twenty-One, leaned forward and pressed a button. The screen dissolved, then cleared to reveal an aerial view of a corridor.

“This is the view of the corridor leading to the operating theatre where Twenty-Three and her security detail met the assassination squad. In a few seconds you’ll see the elevator arrive, and Tina’s team disembark. Watch the elevator itself.”

As they looked on, the elevator doors slid aside, and Tina strode out into the corridor, closely followed by her security team.

“There. See him?”

S froze the film and pointed to a shadowy figure in the uniform of a hospital administrator remaining inside the elevator.

“Yes. Who is he?”

“We don’t know. He’s almost certainly a witness to the battle, but he’s not in the hospital personnel records. Now - I’ll re-start the sequence. Watch where he goes.”

The movement started again, and Twenty-One watched as the figure quit the elevator, walked quickly into an adjoining room and pulled the door almost closed. A burst of gunfire shattered the silence off-camera, and then abruptly the screen went blank. S switched off the monitor.

“A stray bullet destroyed the camera at that point. We’ve therefore no way of knowing what happened to him afterwards – but a witness in the hospital lobby reports him leaving the hospital shortly afterwards, accompanied by a young woman. We’ve no idea where they went after that.”

“You mentioned a curiosity.”

“Yes, I did. As I said, photographic records of known agents have failed to identify the man – but one of the juniors in our Unity City offices nearly fell off his chair when he saw the film. The man in question is a keen amateur geologist – and he says the man bears a remarkable similarity to a friend of his – one Georges Lumière.”

“What - the Georges Lumière who surveyed the Lumière Ridge?”

“The same. Georges Lumière disappeared two years ago in that area, along with his wife and young daughter. All three are listed as missing, presumed killed in a rock snake incident, but their bodies have never been found.”

“So yet another man mysteriously brought back from the grave to work for SOFRAM, with an inexplicable connection with the Lumière Ridge.”

“So it would seem. Any thoughts?”

Twenty-One shook his head thoughtfully. “Another piece in the puzzle. It doesn’t fit yet, that’s all. But it will – eventually.”

S glanced at his watch. “You’ll need to change into something more formal before we leave, Twenty-One. I’ll meet you back here in thirty minutes – the taxi arrives at 1900 hours. By the way, how is one supposed to greet an Astran?”

Twenty-One grinned. “Well, shaking hands is obviously out of the question, on account of their not having any arms. A brief nod is regarded as an agreeable compromise between human etiquette and Astran formality. There’s a formal verbal greeting too, but very few humans can pronounce it, so the Astrans have graciously declined to insist upon it at diplomatic functions. Any well-meaning formal human greeting is regarded as acceptable.”

§

“But... what the hell *ARE* they, Mat?”

“No idea, Steve. I haven’t the faintest idea.”

Mat extended his arm and reached out to touch one of the incomprehensible banks of instrumentation – if indeed that was what they were – that littered the room. All around, the faint glow of pulsating displays filled the space around them with suggestions of activity and movement that ceased as they turned to track it down, their eyes instinctively darting here and there, seeking out phantoms of the light that vanished as quickly as they appeared. Only their young female companion appeared to be immune to it, wandering aimlessly from device to device while they chased their own shadows.

“It’s as if this place is *alive*, Mat!”

“I know, Steve – I’m feeling it too. It’s as if the room’s full of... well... invisible people, I guess! Can’t you sense it too, Venus?”

She turned to face them, unconcerned.

“They’re my friends! This is where they live. Sometimes they speak to me, but most of the time they’re very busy. I think they’re very busy at the moment.”

“But... what are they *doing*, Venus?”

“They’re watching. I think they’re watching everything in the universe.”

“*Why?*”

She shook her head.

“I don’t know. Perhaps they just like watching things. *I* like watching things. There are *lots* of pretty things to watch here. Come and look at this!”

She led them over to a vast hemispherical structure which pulsed with a soft pastel glow through a semi-transparent membrane that somehow managed to appear to lie both within the structure and outside it simultaneously. Both men found themselves trying to focus on it without success.

“This is where I come to see pictures in space. I love flying through the stars. In here you can look out into the universe in every direction – up, down, left, right – everywhere! Try it!” She joined them in front of the strange device. “You have to see them in your mind – not with your eyes. Sometimes you’ll see strange planets; other times

just the blackness. Look into the patterns – let yourself go where the colours take you. *Then* you'll see."

Steve peered into the device's depths. Involuntarily, he found himself trying to prevent himself from falling, even though he knew he'd not moved physically, and glancing to his side, he saw that his companion was having a similar problem with his senses. Their young female companion watched them with obvious amusement.

"You're still fighting it. You'll only get a headache if you do that." She giggled. "I got *lots* of headaches before I found out how. You have to let yourself go *with* it... let it carry you away. You have to let it take you *inside*. Close your eyes, and *reach*."

"Are you sure it's safe, Venus? It feels real funny."

Steve tried making a conscious physical effort to relax the muscles of his face. Almost at once he found himself falling... and then he found it – the image inside his head. And in finding it, he almost jumped backwards in shock.

"My God! For a second I was being hurled through space!"

Glancing to his left, he caught Mat's eye, and one glance was enough to tell him that his experience wasn't unique.

"You experienced it too, eh?"

Mat nodded. "As if I was flying through space at incredible speed, looking at a space-ship following me. Astran interstellar transport by the look of it... but there was something else about it... can't quite place it..." He shrugged. "Perhaps we ought to try taking a longer look. Seems safe enough – are you game?"

"Sure."

They stepped forward again and closed their eyes – but this time the sensation was completely different; one not of motion, but of drifting. And in front of them....

"Wow...!"

A spectacular display met their closed eyes, flooding the void before them with dazzling light. Twin suns burned furiously in the expanse in which they found their consciousness floating; to their left and below them a lonely planet, streaked with blue and purple ploughed its furrow through the cosmos, while above, the crescent of a brilliant emerald moon blazed back at them from the blackness. Slowly Steve opened his eyes, half expecting the image to vanish, but it did not; rather, he realised that he was perceiving both the vision and the reality of the room about him simultaneously; his eyes seeing one but his mind seeing the other.

"It's a binary star system. In fact, unless I'm *very* much mistaken, that's Zeta Aquarii – home of the Astrans."

"You sure? How do you know?"

Mat turned to regard the massive planet that filled his mind's eye beneath his feet.

"That's Astra, Steve. The blue and purple streaking around the equator is unmistakable: I've seen photographs of it hundreds of times. It's one of four planets that orbit both stars. My buddies back at MIT reckon that's why the Astrans developed that

levitation capability of theirs – to enable them to cope with the massive gravity fluctuations in such an environment. Also the reason they don't have any eyes. If they did, they'd burn out in a millisecond: each of those stars has over one hundred times the luminescence of our sun. Come to think of it, I wonder why *we're* not affected by the brightness? Maybe it's because we're not really seeing it with our normal senses."

The little girl joined the two of them in front of the display and closed her eyes, her face instantly transformed into a picture of serenity. A couple of seconds later, she opened her eyes again and grinned.

"It's *very* pretty. Can we go there, Mat?"

Matic shook his head with a smile.

"Not with our technology, Venus – it's over 117 light-years away. You'd need to get the Astrans to take you there in one of their saucers – theirs is the only civilisation we know that can cross distances like that. We're still trying to understand the theory, let alone build the ships to do it. One day, maybe, though I guess it'll be after my time."

A sniff from behind him made his head turn, where the young student was shaking his head.

"Sooner than that, Doc. One day definitely, and not so far away either. I'd say within ten years. One thing's for sure though – we'll need a lot more cahelium than we've discovered in the solar system so far if we're going to build the Blackman contraction compensators needed to stabilise the ends of the spacetime conduits."

Mat looked at him curiously and raised an eyebrow.

"You seem to know a lot about it, Steve."

The teenager shrugged. "I've been listening to the other guys in the MGS. That's what they're looking for in the southern hemisphere. Cahelium's the only metal capable of withstanding gravimetric warping in the correct frequency range – and even then only after an artificially-induced twelve percent reduction in antineutrino activity. If the Astrans knew how close we are to achieving that, they'd be a lot less keen on selling mining equipment to the World Government: we'd bridge the current technology gap between ourselves and the Empire in no time."

Mat's eyes narrowed.

"How much do you know about this summit with the Astrans, Steve? The agenda's classified."

The student bit his lip. "I, er, I guess I must have just heard it somewhere."

"Would you like to elaborate?"

"Er,... not really. It's a matter of security."

"Damn right it's a matter of security! How do you know, Steve?"

"I'm... well, I'm sort of connected to the USS. Sorry – can't tell you any more than that."

Mat peered at him silently for several long seconds, suddenly realised with a flash of inspiration why the young man had looked vaguely familiar when they'd first met, and in doing so, solved the mystery.

"Of course! You're Air General Zodiac's son, aren't you! He told me that you were working with the Martian Geological Survey."

The teenager looked crestfallen. "So much for security. Guess I've got to learn how to keep my mouth shut. At least you're one of us, though."

"And I could just as easily *not* have been. You're right – the key to having anything to do with the USS is to remember what the middle letter stands for. And don't you forget it, son – you'd make a phenomenally useful hostage to SOFRAM."

"Damn stupid name." The teenager considered for a minute. "They might just as well call themselves the... RUBENS."

"The *what*?"

"Real Unpleasant Bunch of Extremely Nasty Sadists."

Mat grinned. "Obviously your pop doesn't tell you everything! It was the USS themselves who first referred to them as the Solar Organisation for Revenge and Murder: your father's predecessor coined the acronym after the metasalmonella virus outrage on Lunabase Three in '31. We didn't know who was behind it at the time, and the USS had to call them something in their files. To their own people, they're referred to obliquely by an obscure Arabic expression that translates roughly as 'The Armed Friends and Protectors of the Enlightened Ones', but it's unpronounceable and about two lines long. The newspapers prefer short headlines, so SOFRAM they became."

"Does anybody know who the 'Enlightened Ones' are?"

Mat shook his head. "Not to my knowledge. We've never managed to interrogate one of them long enough to ask him - they have a habit of dying on us before we can get anything interesting out of them."

Steve raised an eyebrow and grinned. "Perhaps we ought not to hit them quite so hard."

Mat grimaced. "You've been reading too much pulp fiction about secret agents. No physical violence whatsoever is used in interrogations any more – it's far too inefficient. It's all done with asynchronous synaptic analysers these days. No, they just keel over and die. We don't know how they all arrange to expire at such a convenient time, but they seem to manage it with monotonous regularity. What we need is the that uncanny knack of being able to sense changes in cranial electromagnetic fields that the Astrans seem to... got it!"

The abruptness of the premature end of the sentence made his teenage companion jump.

"Eh? Got what, Mat?"

"That space-ship we saw in the earlier vision. It's the Kaplan's personal transport. I *knew* there was something about it that was different: the fronds are fluted to denote the

Kaplan's insignia of office. We've just seen an image of the Kaplan's shuttle in deep space!"

"So?"

"So wake up, Steve! The schedule of the Kaplan's visit to Earth is classified at the highest level: remember what I was saying about security? So was that a recording, or..."

"Or was it a real-time image, you mean? And if so, what's whoever lives here doing watching it? And why?"

"Got it in one, son. The more I see of this place the less I like it. I think maybe we ought to start thinking about how to get out of here and back to Kahra."

"Why not just get on the chariot's radio and tell them they've got a security leak? Dad's contactable through commercial channels."

"Because the radio won't work across that dimensional discontinuity, that's why. Whatever we do we've got to resynchronise the interface first. Venus – how can we do that?"

She shook her head. "We have to ask *them*. But they won't let *me* go. I have to wait for Papa's return – he promised them, and he made me promise too."

Steve grinned and gave her a little hug. "Don't worry Venus – we'll come back for you. Friends, okay? Can you ask them right now for us? It's real important, honey."

She smiled back. "Sure. I'll talk to them. Wait here."

She stepped over to the display once more and closed her eyes. A few moments later she opened them again – but this time the twinkle was missing, and her expression was unsure.

"They say you can't go. They say you're planning to oppose them in their mission. I don't understand – what do they mean, Mat?"

Steve's eyes met his own, and he frowned.

"Well, I guess they don't want us interfering in whatever reason they've got for watching the Kaplan's state visit to Earth – and though I didn't realise they *had* a mission until a couple of seconds ago, the fact that they don't want us interfering in it bothers me rather more than just a little. What do you think, Steve?"

The young man slowly. "Sounds logical to me. But what makes them think we're aiming to make nuisances of ourselves? Unless..."

"Unless they were able to read our minds while we were watching that display, just like they spoke to Venus here just now, and are anticipating our actions from what they've learned – is that what you're thinking?"

"That's the way I see it. I reckon we'd better start trying how to get out *without* their help. You game, Steve?"

"Sure! But aren't they going to anticipate that too?"

Mat shrugged. "We won't know unless we try. Trouble is, I haven't the faintest idea how to start." He turned to the young girl and took her hands in his. "We have to

escape, Venus. We've got to get back to Kahra and tell the authorities what we've found. Can you resynchronise that interface without them?"

She shook her head. "I ask them and they help me if they want to. I mustn't argue with them. Papa made me promise always to be good before he went away."

Mat took a deep breath. "Venus, this really *is* important. You're going to have to help us get out of here. We need you to help us. Please?"

She sat down on the floor and peered up at them both with sad but determined eyes. "I'm sorry. I can't."

§

I'll never get used to talking to a levitating jelly-bean, thought S as he stepped forward to be introduced to the Kaplan Minus – an Astran of more than usually dark green aspect who was distinguished only by a modest badge of office affixed to the front of the levitation collar into which he was installed. The official hovered motionless in the middle of the room while a number of human dignitaries were presented, of which the head of the Universal Secret Service was the last.

"Air General Zodiac, your Excellency. The Air General now represents one of our interplanetary commercial conglomerates in an advisory managerial capacity."

S effected a formal nod of the head towards the Kaplan Minus. "I'm honoured to welcome you to Mars, your Excellency. I trust you had a pleasant flight?"

The alien remained immobile, but responded instantly with a passable emulation of human speech, slightly filtered but perfectly understandable, right down to the nuances and inflexions.

"Thank you, Air General – I had an excellent flight. Do you find the Martian atmosphere to your taste? I find the lower gravity most agreeable: the difference from Earth standard for a few days is quite exhilarating."

S smiled. "Mars offers the retired many health benefits, your Excellency, though the return trip to Earth is not to be recommended once one has acclimatised. Fortunately I still have cause to revisit the Earth regularly, so it seems to affect me less than some of my less active colleagues. May I introduce one of my senior executives, Mr Brent Cleever?"

Twenty-One stood to attention and nodded.

"Kra'et in'chi Kaplan'nec, mi'ascek kri'cech ta'hamek qa'askitek tri-aech Mars'ak"

The Kaplan Minus's fluorescent green colouring lightened a couple of shades in appreciation.

"Kra'et in'cha Kleeever'ka, keth kra'teca - you are very familiar with our culture, Mr Cleever."

Twenty-One smiled apologetically. “Only to the extent that I know I’ve still a great deal to learn, Excellency. The Ta’hamek runs to over fifty volumes, with another thirty related works comprising the Apocrypha: nobody can claim to be a truly informed student of Astra’han culture without having read and assimilated all of them. I’ve read them all, it’s true, but it’s taken me the best part of a decade – and I’m still struggling with the meaning of many of them. I’ve still have a *long* way to go.”

“I recall an article appeared in the Transactions about a year ago which discussed the impact upon Astra’han foreign policy of the mi’altemec movement during the reign of Keplac III. You were its author, were you not?”

Twenty-One’s right eyebrow rose slightly. “I was, yes.”

“Then you underestimate the extent of your own insight, Mr Cleever: I recommended it to several of my aides upon reading it. My principal private secretary was intrigued by some of the conclusions you drew concerning the exodus of Klimarek’s followers from the Astra’han alliance – perhaps we might ask him to join us?”

“By all means – I’d be honoured.”

A diminutive, light cyan Astran drifted across the room, gliding to a halt by the side of the Kaplan Minus. “Excellency?”

“Kralis, allow me to introduce Mr Brent Cleever. It would seem that Mr Cleever is a professional colleague of Air General Zodiac, to whom you were speaking just a few moments ago.”

“*The* Brent Cleever? I had no idea that you were a military man, Mr Cleever! Your article on the mi’altemec exodus was of the highest academic standard...”

Twenty-One coughed. “The Air General has retired from active service, and has accepted a directorship in one of our multinational manufacturing conglomerates, *Kralis’ka*. He was good enough to hire me in a commercial capacity: I believe he hopes that I can apply my experience of offworld cultures to boost our sales. We try not to underestimate the importance of local knowledge.”

“My apologies, Mr Cleever; I was not aware of the Air General’s retirement.”

Twenty-One grinned. “He doesn’t talk about it much.” He lowered his voice. “Just between you and me, I don’t think he wanted to go - they had to convince him that the Martian gravity would be good for his heart.”

“Of course. But if you have time, I would *very* much like to talk to you about the mi’altemec exodus: the views you expressed in your paper complement my own. The current popular view of Klimarek as a heroic figure waging a war of liberation against a tyrannical and indifferent regime is to my mind absurd: the court records of the period clearly indicate that he was a troublemaker...”

A recognisable laugh emanated from the Kaplan Minus’s voice synthesiser. “My secretary is renowned for his revisionist interpretation of our history, Mr Cleever. As you see, he does not feel bound by accepted Astra’han protocol when discussing these matters.”

Twenty-One nodded. “The current Kaplan is descended from the chapter that overthrew Keplac III, isn’t he? But we’re discussing events that occurred over three

thousand years ago – surely nobody in the current regime could take offence after all this time?”

“I suspect you do not fully appreciate the power of Astra’han intrachapter loyalties. Your paper has been widely read in learned circles because it discusses openly matters that many feel deserve to be aired. But there are some within the Kaplan’s inner retinue who continue to promote the popular view of Klimarek as a potential liberator who was cruelly driven into exile – and into the realms of popular fantasy. The Kaplan himself is sympathetic to many of the ideals that Klimarek embraced.”

“Is it known what became of Klimarek?”

“That he and his followers left Astra in an interstellar warship of primitive design is a matter of historical fact: the details of his departure are meticulously recorded in the Ta’hamek, and are supported by the court records of the period. However the current popular view of him stems from one of the documents in the Apocrypha, which was purportedly transcribed from the log of an abandoned shuttle found floating in deep space about two hundred years later. Legend has it that after many adventures, he and his followers made landfall on a hostile planet in an unknown system, where they founded a community based upon their principles.”

Twenty-One frowned. “What exactly *was* their creed? I understand enough of the Astra’han language to know that ‘mi’altemec’ means ‘to be at one with the cosmos’, but that’s not quite it, is it? There’s a more subtle shade of meaning – a sense of literal integration with nature, perhaps?”

Kralis rose in the air before him almost imperceptibly as a fractional power increase was absorbed by his levitation collar – a gesture that Twenty-One recognised as an indication of heightened concentration in the Astran.

“That is correct. The Ta’hamek records an intense philosophical schism in Astra’han thinking during the reign of Keplac III, during which era our scientists first succeeded in truly harnessing the properties of the *ai’thaera* for the benefit of the race. Despite countless technological advances since that time, modern levitation collars still utilise the same basic principles that were discovered during that epoch. There was however a backlash against what some saw as a tendency towards degeneracy – a belief that Astra’han culture was becoming more concerned with making life comfortable for itself than in seeking its true destiny. The cult of Klimarek was one such. His followers appear to have believed that understanding the true nature of the *ai’thaera* constituted a revelation from God, permitting the Astra’han civilisation for the first time in its history to pursue its divine purpose.”

“And what was that?”

“Essentially the same as that of most religions: communion with the Supreme. However, whereas many religions see God as the creator of the Universe, Astra’han culture identifies God with the *fabric* of spacetime: that is to say, God *is* the Universe. Understanding the *ai’thaera* was therefore perceived as tantamount to comprehending God. Klimarek regarded using such knowledge to create levitation collars and so forth as debasing that relationship: his view was that it was the destiny of Astra to reintegrate itself *physically* with spacetime – that is, to cast away its physical form and to

become a part of the fabric of the Universe. And since their purpose was by definition divine, Klimarek regarded anyone who opposed them as being instruments of the Evil One and therefore subject to eternal damnation using all the powers of the *ai'thaera* at Klimarek's command."

Twenty-One grinned. "I can't see *that* philosophy being very popular with either the scientific community *or* Keplac's regime."

"It wasn't! Klimarek and his followers were driven out: the Ta'hamek makes it clear that they were lucky to leave Astra alive. But after they ceased to be a threat to the Keplac administration, they came to become regarded as martyrs by many who failed to perceive the true nature of their creed. That image was further enhanced by the discovery two hundred years later of the document I mentioned earlier, purporting to be a record of Klimarek's adventures after leaving Astra. As I said, after many incredible adventures they made landfall on a barren planet. There they were attacked repeatedly by a race of fearsome creatures, and some of the crewmembers decided to try to return to Astra on board the warship's shuttlecraft."

"Did they make it?"

"No. The abandoned spacecraft I mentioned earlier was the one believed to have been taken from Klimarek's community by the deserters. Its log was said to have formed the basis of the account of Klimarek's adventures that is now recorded in the Apocrypha."

Twenty-One nodded thoughtfully. "Legends can be tremendously evocative. We've a similar tale that's probably of about the same vintage, concerning the adventures of a band of sailors returning from an ancient war. They also faced fearsome monsters with incredible powers: the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, Circe, the Cyclops. The Sirens drove the sailors insane with their beautiful singing; Scylla and Charybdis crushed ships to pieces; Circe turned the crew into animals. It's a long time since I read the chapter, but I seem to remember that Klimarek faced creatures with powers at least as awesome."

The Kaplan Minus revolved slightly. "Kralis, I recall that I shall require a transcript of the Kaplan's speech to the World Government prior to our departure tomorrow, and need to review it before we leave. Would you excuse us, Mr. Cleever? I fear that this demands my urgent attention, and my secretary has the only copy."

Twenty-One smiled. "Of course, Excellency. Another time perhaps, *Kralis'ka*?"

"I shall look forward to it, Mr. Cleever."

The two Astrans glided away into an alcove leading off the main reception hall. Twenty-One took another sip of his champagne, the vague memory of a story he'd read long ago hovering just beyond reach at the back of his consciousness.

"You all right, Brent?"

Twenty-One jumped: he'd been so engrossed in his thoughts that he'd not heard his boss come up behind him.

"Sorry, sir – I was miles away. Would you mind if I took my leave? It's getting late, and there's something I'd like to check before I turn in for the night."

“No problem. Actually I was thinking of leaving myself.” He lowered his voice. “I’d like to see you in my office first thing tomorrow morning, Twenty-One. We’ll need to assemble a briefing document for the World President prior to his meeting with the Kaplan the day after tomorrow, and I want to get it drafted as soon as possible.”

He glanced over at the little alcove, where the Kaplan Minus and his secretary were still deep in conversation. “I wonder what *they’re* so preoccupied with?”

“Forgive me, Excellency, but the Kaplan’s speech is already in your possession: it is on your desk in the study. Do you wish me to make some amendments to it? If so, I shall need to inform the Kaplan’s office as a matter of urgency.”

The Kaplan Minus rotated slightly, registering the positions of the two humans on the other side of the reception room before answering.

“My apologies, Kralis – I know where my copy of the speech is, and it requires no modifications. I simply felt it prudent to curtail that discussion with the Earthman before any further information was exchanged. You were about to describe the nature of the mythological beasts that attacked Klimarek’s settlement, were you not?”

“Indeed, Excellency. The voyage of Klimarek was the subject of my thesis, and Mr. Cleever is clearly an authority on our legends – the opportunity to discuss...”

“Mr. Cleever claims to be employed by Air General Zodiac – and our intelligence services informed me some time ago that they suspect the Air General has not retired to the extent that Mr. Cleever would now have us believe. I consider it possible that Mr. Cleever may be in the employ of the World Government.”

The secretary considered. “It is true that I myself was surprised at his presence at this reception, given his apparent commercial background. But even if you are correct, surely the discussion of a legend of such antiquity could hardly fall into the realm of official secrets?”

“Not an official secret, no. But I am also not unfamiliar with the classics, and while you were talking to Mr. Cleever I recalled a recent document sent to us by the World Government which might possibly have a bearing on the subject we are now discussing.”

“On the subject of our *legends*, Excellency? How how...”

“It has never been clear to me why the Kaplan should be so anxious to be personally identified with the brokering of this trade deal with the Earthmen when so many other matters are pressing at this time. Whenever I have raised the subject I have found him distinctly evasive on the subject – and a suspicion is now forming in my mind that I wish to investigate. Do you have an annotated copy of the Ta’hamek Apocrypha within the Embassy, Kralis? I would like to refresh my memory on the subject of the mi’altemec exodus.”

Twenty-One collapsed onto his bed, stretched his legs and pulled himself into a sitting position, and then twisted over to one side and lifted his sample case onto his lap. Opening it, he activated the monitor built into the top, pondered it for a few seconds, and then touched the voice control.

“Computer: data retrieval.”

“Awaiting instructions.”

“Display the index to the Ta’hamek Apocrypha.”

Instantly the screen blinked, then cleared to show a list of sections. He leaned forward, traced down the list with his index finger and grunted with satisfaction. Pushing the open sample case to one side of the bed, he stretched himself out and closed his eyes.

“Read aloud the Tribulations of Klimarek from Landfall, Chapter 1, Section 1.”

“It is over. To this barren landscape we have been carried on the winds of fate, and here we shall remain. I need not tell my gallant crew, for they know it already – the sound, the feel and the very aspect of the vessel itself tell them that it can travel no further. So near, and yet so far from sanctuary do we find ourselves; but I cannot doubt that it is for the best. I give thanks to the spirit of mi’thra for bringing us safely to this haven...”

“Stop. Translate ‘mi’thra’ literally from the Astra’han dialect appropriate to the time of Klimarek.”

“Mi’thra: physical unity with the fabric of spacetime.”

Twenty-One opened his eyes and frowned. “Curious. Continue.”

“... where the visions that have been given to us shall take physical form. In this place it is our glorious destiny to create that paradise of eternal convergence which was revealed to our forebears. The circle turns, and with it we turn also; from the void we came, and to the void we shall return, and the eternal certainty sustains us in this, our hour of deliverance...”

“Stop. Go forward to the start of Section 2.”

“Even at the time of our greatest triumph are we beset by tests of our resolve, for the light of mi’thra shines only upon those who welcome and accept the eternal truths into their souls, and we have discovered that there are those present upon this world who have not seen the light of mi’thra. This day my trusted and faithful aide Keraseth was struck down while assembling the ai’taera pattern enhancement projector atop the crag that shelters our community. Daemons in physical form oppose us; cursed shall they be in the name of the Supreme, for theirs is not His great purpose, and we are the true instruments of his vengeance. These daemons inhabit crystalline worms that direct the very magma of the planet’s core against us, but we shall not fear them, for the spirit of the Supreme is with us. Concealed are they by the wayside, laying traps for the unwary, for we knew not of their presence until they were awakened by our striving to seek the path of righteousness. They that may choose to follow the false paths of evil shall know that mi’altamec is the truth which binds us, for we are the Enlightened Ones, and ours is the voice of the mi’Astra’han...”

"Stop."

Twenty-One's eyes snapped open, and he stared at the ceiling, unblinking, and very wide awake.

§

"Any joy, Mat?"

The older man's head popped out from underneath the chariot's control console and shook despondently.

"None at all. The one positive thing I've learned is that this thing's in perfect working order. However they managed to reconstruct it from the wreckage that Venus described is beyond me, but they did an astonishing job. We could drive it out of here in a couple of moments if we could just resynchronise that interface - and doing that's got to be our first concern - but there's nothing on board that could help us to do that."

"Is it armed?"

"Sure! Eight shoulder-launch heat-seeking missiles in the rear, a sonic disrupter cannon in the nose and two medium-range laser rifles under the sink. All standard anti-snake gear, none of which would have the slightest effect upon a dimensional discontinuity other than to confirm our status as aggressors to our hosts. No - when we *do* solve this problem we're going to have to get it right first time. Whoever lives here commands technology that's totally alien to us, and what I've seen of it leaves me without the slightest doubt that they could kill us as easily as look at us."

Steve frowned. "Something I've been thinking about, Mat. If this interface thing blocks any transmissions we try to make, how come they're able to receive images from outside the barrier?"

The older man looked pensive. "Good point. They couldn't, could they? Unless the interface doesn't completely surround this region of spacetime. Or maybe..." The look of concentration on his face grew deeper. "Or maybe they synchronise it themselves from time to time to download data from the universe at large, then desynchronise it immediately afterwards again. I wonder if we could rig up some equipment to detect such a change?"

He scrambled out of the console's ducting and started unscrewing some bolts on the navigation console.

"It's worth a try. This thing's supposed to be constantly in touch with the Mars GPS network, yes? So as the fields begin to synchronise, it ought to start working again. If our previous experience is anything to go by, that resynchronisation should take between maybe four and five minutes, so we'd have to be ready to move the instant such an interface occurred, with the aim of driving the tractor through the barrier and out into the valley before they realise anything's amiss. I can modify it so that it alerts us of any change in the white noise that it's currently receiving: that ought to give us a few more seconds' warning that something's happening."

"And if we make it out of here... what then?"

"Then, Steve, we run for cover as fast as the chariot's wheels can carry us. Help me with this panel, will you?"

Kahra, Mars - 16th October 2046

“They came *here*, S! The final resting place of Klimarek’s expedition was Mars. Klimarek records an encounter shortly after landfall that strongly suggests an ambush by rock snakes. Rock snakes are native to the southern hemisphere of this planet, and no species even vaguely resembling like them has ever been discovered either elsewhere in the Solar System or anywhere within Astran space.”

“So?”

“So we could have a colony of Astrans right on our doorstep!”

S pulled a face. “You’re jumping to conclusions, Twenty-One – didn’t you say that all this was over three thousand years ago? You can’t *seriously* think we have something to worry about – I mean, no doubt the landing site could be of archaeological value; perhaps the Astrans themselves would be interested in excavating it once the trade deal’s been completed, but...”

“We don’t *know* they’re dead! Do you remember that business about the Lumière Ridge? The Ridge is right in the middle of the largest rock snake colony in the southern hemisphere – an area that we’ve scrupulously avoided for obvious reasons ever since the first colonisation teams arrived back in ’23. Apart from the Lumières a few years back, and more recently those outward-bound lunatics, the only expedition into the area has been one of ours – to investigate a number of inexplicable SOFRAM-related activities in the run-up to the Astran summit.”

The man behind the desk looked up sharply. “Are you suggesting that SOFRAM is in some way related to these Astran legends, Twenty-One?”

“I think it’s possible. Do you remember that name they use to refer to themselves? It translates as ‘The Armed Friends and Protectors of the Enlightened Ones’ – Klimarek referred to his followers as The Enlightened Ones.”

“Sounds pretty insubstantial to me. Earthbound cults throughout history have used similar expressions to describe themselves.”

“There’s more. Listen to this.”

Twenty-One swivelled his chair, lifted his sample case onto the desk and opened it.

“Computer: read the Tribulations of Klimarek from Safeguards, Chapter 4, Section 1.”

“The spirit of the Supreme is with us; it welcomes us and beckons to us in this, the 68th revolution of this world around its sun since our landfall. Even now, with our glorious goal within sight, the Supreme has revealed to us that which might deny us this end, and shown us wisdom in the countering of it. We find that the dominant species of another planet in this system – none other than that which was destined to be our home before the asteroids destroyed our engines – seeks now to better itself even as did the godless natives of our home world, by the darkness of materialism and self-seeking profligacy. In this they offend the Supreme and oppose the will of the mi’Astra’han: therefore, this day they are sent a delegation to instruct them in the ways of mi’thra. Obstruct us shall they not, for

theirs is the path to self-destruction; by these actions we decree that they shall never spread their contagion throughout the cosmos. May their souls be saved by the teachings of mi'thra, for if it be otherwise, we shall not seek to mitigate their suffering, for ours shall be the paradise of mi'thra. The temple we leave behind us shall be our legacy to the Believers who shall come after us, for it shall be the beacon of light and hope to all who seek the light of mi'thra. Once again the great circle of spacetime turns, past space to future time and future space to past time, illusion to reality and reality to illusion, bringing the light of mi'thra into the souls of the Unbelievers even as the darkness of unreality consumes their iniquity..."

"Stop."

Twenty-One turned in his chair and leaned forward.

"That was the first part of the final entry of Klimarek's log – the rest of it is considered even by the Astrans to be the meaningless ramblings of a religious fanatic, but what we've just heard is clear enough. It looks as if, having realised that civilisation on Earth was evolving more rapidly than he'd expected, he dispatched a delegation to try to mould it on mi'thran principles. His motives for doing that aren't totally clear, however: possibly he felt a sense of responsibility to the unenlightened, but it sounds as if he was more interested in ensuring that what he calls 'the darkness of materialism and self-seeking profligacy' didn't spread beyond the Earth."

S frowned. "All this is very interesting, Twenty-One, but..."

"Bear with me please, S. I think we can reconstruct the events from that point in time. Presumably a shuttle was dispatched from Mars to Earth containing a small crew of Astrans. When it arrived – somewhere within the ancient Persian Empire probably – they attempted to convert the local population, much as the Conquistadors tried to convert the South American Incas and the Aztecs to Catholicism, though how the indigenous population would have reacted to creatures like the Astrans is anybody's guess. No doubt they terrified the locals; probably they were both worshipped as gods and feared as devils in equal measure. I think initially they made some headway with promulgating their creed – but then I'll guess something went wrong, and they had to flee for their lives. Almost certainly they managed to launch the shuttle on the return trip – but they never made it back to Mars."

"I didn't follow the logic of that, Twenty-One."

"The fact that it's the last entry in the log suggests that theirs was the shuttle that was found abandoned in deep space. Had it returned to Mars, the log would have been updated. But obviously the delegation *did* reach Earth first, making landfall in the Middle-East."

"How do we know that?"

"The names and the timescale, S! The Middle-East was the cradle of Western civilisation, and the cult of Mithra was central to the development of it. The similarity between the aims of the mi'Astra'han cult as we understand them and what little we know about Mithraism is too close to dismiss as a coincidence. Mithraism was one of the first religions to embrace the concept of a single God, but it was also a very private cult, maintaining strict secrecy about its teachings and practices, revealing them only to

initiates. It was all but wiped out around the fifth century AD by Christianity, and has been regarded as effectively extinct ever since. Except that I'm beginning to suspect that it may not be as dead as we thought it was."

"You're suggesting that SOFRAM is descended from the Astran cult of mi'thra?"

"Why not? We've speculated many times about SOFRAM's aims, which we've never properly understood. It's essentially a negative organisation, doing everything in its power to prevent the consolidation of the World Government's position as the rightful, democratically-elected arbiter of the future of the human race. However, we now discover that there could be a sect of Astran religious fanatics *within* the Solar System who would certainly regard humanity as a bunch of heretics, and whose first reaction to us some three thousand years ago was to try to prevent *us* from becoming a blot on *their* landscape. Not only that, but we're about to conclude a trade deal with the descendants of the very race they left behind, one of the short-term consequences of which will be the terraforming of the planet that they made their home – namely Mars! So in answer to your earlier question, S, yes – I'd say we probably *have* got something to worry about."

The buzzer on the desk sounded, and S flicked the switch with a gesture of irritation.

"Is this urgent, Judy?"

"Sorry sir: incoming transmission from Kahra Spaceport. Priority Zero Red Two."

Even across the filtered intercom, the tension in the secretary's voice was clearly audible to both men, and their eyes met briefly before S turned his attention to the call.

"Are you sure, Judy?"

"Affirmative sir. For your ears only at the express command of the World President."

"Understood, Judy. We'll resume this discussion later, Twenty-One. Sorry, but the directive's explicit."

Twenty-One nodded with a grin. "Understood. I'll treat myself to one of Judy's legendary cups of Nicaraguan coffee."

He rose out of his chair and quit the office, leaving S alone. In the event he'd barely taken his third sip by the time the door opened again and S walked out, wearing a heavy overcoat and in the process of tucking a substantial file under his arm.

"Sorry, Twenty-One – our discussion's going to have to wait. I have to attend a meeting at the spaceport at once. Alone. Feel free to finish your drink, then return to your quarters, would you? I may need to talk to you later."

"Serious?"

S hesitated just a fraction of a second too long. "Don't know. Maybe."

He forced a tight smile and deliberately walked out of the door. Twenty-One raised a quizzical eyebrow at the secretary and settled back into his chair.

At the entrance to the military wing of the spaceport, S handed his security pass to the guard and started counting the seconds under his breath. Over a minute passed before it was returned to him – not an encouraging sign. He nodded to the guard as the barrier rose into the air, and drove on into the compound, heading for the officers' lounge. At the entrance to the building, he was met by a second guard with the size and physique of an adolescent gorilla. S peered up into his face, his features impassive.

“Air General Zodiac. I take it you're here to escort me to your guests?”

“Yes, sir. Would you proceed ahead of me to the lounge area please?”

“Last door on the right, yes?”

Without waiting for a confirmation, S strode past the guard, who immediately fell into step behind him. At the end of the corridor he stopped at the closed door, and knocked. Instantly the door slid aside, and he walked in, to be confronted by a man and an Astran. The human stepped forward and extended a hand which S accepted.

“Thank you for coming, Air General. Accept my apologies for the cloak-and-dagger act, but there's a good reason for it, I assure you.”

S bowed his head slightly. “I never doubted it, Ambassador Kerensky. How may I be of service?”

“A matter of security, Air General, as I'm sure you've already guessed. My illustrious and honoured guest is His Imperial Highness the Kaplan of the Astra'han Empire...”

§

“All correspondence of the Kaplan's office with the World Government of the Solar Federation is now online, Excellency. I have also activated links to all traffic between Terran commercial interests and their Astra'han counterparts as you requested.”

“Thank you, Kralis. Would you display the report from the Martian Geological Survey to the Astra'han Trade Undersecretary, detailing the uses to which our mining equipment would be put in the proposed terraforming of the planet Mars? I seem to recall that we received it about four months ago.”

The screen blurred, and then rapidly refocused to show the front page of an official document bearing the seal of the Martian Central Executive.

“Are we able to perform word searches on Terran documents, Kralis?”

“Yes, Excellency: our negotiation team insisted on being supplied with software compatible with that of the humans prior to the exchange of the very first document – and that it be installed by human technicians at no cost to the Astra'han Empire.”

“I would have expected nothing less, given the value of the deal to the Earthmen. As I have noted many times, I find the extent of the Kaplan's personal support for this

enterprise perplexing. As I see it, we should be seeking a far higher price for our services than we are. However, let's see if we can throw some light on the reasons for the Kaplan's negotiating position, shall we? Would you run a search for the word 'snake', please?"

"Would your Excellency be so good as to spell that word for me?"

"S-N-A-K-E. It is a cold-blooded creature native to the planet Earth, distantly related to the reptilian species that populated the planet during its prehistory. To my knowledge, such a creature is not to be found anywhere else in the known Universe, and yet I recall reading a reference to such a creature in the report. It was very much a detail however, and I cannot however remember precisely where I saw it. Indeed, I had forgotten it entirely until your discussion with Mr. Cleever last night reminded me of it."

"I have several matches, Excellency – all in the section detailing the objectives of the terraforming process."

"Display the first of them, please."

The Kaplan Minus glided forward to inspect the screen.

"...the Ridge is heavily populated by a hostile silicon-based life-form native to the Martian landscape, which has proved a serious obstacle to early attempts at colonisation of the southern hemisphere. These life-forms, which were designated 'rock snakes' by the earliest Martian explorers, are highly likely to prove detrimental to the terraforming process on account of their ability to project fireballs with pinpoint accuracy over a range of up to 800 metres. It is therefore considered essential that all mining equipment designated for use within the vicinity of the Lumière Ridge should possess sufficient shielding to withstand a direct hit from a missile possessing the destructive firepower of the equivalent of a five kiloton thermonuclear shell..."

"Yes – that is the section I had in mind."

"Is this a problem, Excellency? It was my understanding that all *keth-astra'dach* equipment scheduled for export is capable of withstanding the meltdown of a fusion-based volcanic disintegrator."

"That is so. Or even magma projected by daemons inhabiting crystalline worms."

The Kaplan Minus paused to await a reaction, but the secretary was still too engrossed in the technical report to recognise the allusion.

"You are concerned with seismic activity, Excellency? The Terran authorities have made no reference to anything of that nature that might impact..."

"Surely it cannot be that my capacity to quote from the classics exceeds your own, Kralis?"

The secretary's momentary lapse of concentration caused his levitation collar to drop a full centimetre, and himself with it.

"The *Tribulations*, Excellency? But... surely... that would mean..."

"Yes it would, wouldn't it? The last resting place of Klimarek, lost for three thousand years. And it could be *here* – within this system. On this very planet, in fact."

“But... but that could be the most exciting discovery since... since the excavation of the ruins of the Pentaray of Solturis! The implications....”

“I have been considering the implications, Kralis, and I suspect they might possibly be more profound than you think. Tell me – what would be your assessment of the likelihood that the Kaplan will be confirmed in his position for a further five years in the forthcoming review by the Inner Council?”

“The Kaplan! Of course – we must inform the Kaplan at once! His personal shuttle is currently but two days from entering this System... he will surely be astounded to discover...”

“May we perhaps put the question of informing the Kaplan to one side for a moment? I would value your opinion on the matter I have just raised.”

The secretary paused to gather his thoughts. “The Kaplan’s term has been largely without incident: this is generally regarded as a favourable indication of a renewal. It is true that the biannual deficit is somewhat higher...”

“Substantially higher.”

“As your Excellency says – it is higher than is generally regarded as lying within acceptable tolerances, but such matters are hardly regarded as instrumental in initiating the replacement of the Kaplan.”

“Unless the Inner Council considers that the defence budget is sufficiently overstretched as to leave the frontier with the Madellen Alliance materially weakened – which it does.”

“Again, I defer to your Excellency’s assessment of the situation, with the details of which I am not familiar, since the minutes of Inner Council meetings are classified. However it has to be admitted that the people are beginning to forget the triumphs of the Arkellian Campaign: a certain desire for change has been growing steadily for something approaching a decade now. Forgive me if I am speaking out of turn...”

“Not at all, Kralis: the view corresponds to my own. All of which leads me to believe that the Kaplan should not expect an automatic vote of confidence in the forthcoming review. On the other hand... should the Kaplan be seen to be associated with some great popular project with which the people could readily identify, his re-election would be made substantially more probable, would you not agree?”

“You are thinking of the discovery of the last resting place of *Klimarek*, Excellency? His return to power would be virtually guaranteed! But... one moment – that would mean that the Kaplan already knows...”

“... that the Kaplan already knows, or at least strongly suspects, that the Enlightened Ones made landfall on this planet. Yes, Kralis - *that* is what I realised while you were talking to the Earthman last night. The Kaplan paid almost no attention to the trade deal until the document from which we have just read was received by the Inner Council – but since that date he has spoken of little else. The Kaplan may be impetuous, but he is not a fool, and he has two finely-developed talents. One of them is the ability to analyse a situation rapidly from every possible angle that might conceivably impinge upon his own well-being, and the other is a remarkable capacity for converting a difficulty into a personal

opportunity. I suspect he may have realised its significance at that time, just as we have now. And if it is so, I am troubled. It would suggest that the Kaplan is placing his own personal interests above his duty to the Empire.”

“But... what is to be done, Excellency? He *is* the Kaplan – and the Council would not permit him to endanger the Empire through any form of reckless action. I do not see any new threat to the Empire coming into being by this course: the biannual and defence budgets are long-term complications that will be resolved eventually, as such things always are.”

“I perceive two potential threats. The Earthmen are keen to reach agreement because our terms are too generous. In my opinion, we should not include *ai'thaera* manipulation technology in the package: the Solar Federation is a potential adversary, and this science would permit them to develop both propulsion systems and armaments capable of rivalling our own. Their negotiators pretend to display little interest in such things, but our intelligence sources inform me that their leading scientists in this field are being kept well away from the negotiating table – presumably for fear of drawing attention to their anxiousness to acquire it. Secondly, there is the question of the mi'Astra'han expedition itself. Consider the last entry in Klimarek's log, Kralis – does it not speak of the imminent success of the venture?”

“Its true meaning has long been the subject of intense academic debate, Excellency – I myself attended a symposium at the Academy not eight months ago...”

“I have read the Proceedings of that symposium. They were even more confused than the original text – but even so, there is a general consensus that whatever the true nature of Klimarek's goal actually was, he was on the verge of attaining it. What were the actual words? *'Past space to future time, and future space to past time, illusion to reality and reality to illusion'*, yes? Did he succeed? Klimarek was a visionary who veiled his words in riddles, to be sure – but they would presumably have made sense to his followers. I suspect that before this is over, we may have to decipher those riddles, Kralis.”

§

“My diplomatic staff within the Solar Federation is as yet unaware of my arrival in this System, Air General – and I wish to maintain the current level of secrecy concerning my presence until I have completed a personal visit. The World President informs me that matters of military security fall into your remit, and it is therefore my hope that you will be able to assist us with the technical expertise and security personnel we need to effect that visit without hindrance from the civilian authorities.”

“It is my pleasure to be of any assistance I can, Your Highness. May I ask the location of your visit?”

The Kaplan rose slightly into the air.

“It is an archaeological site in the southern hemisphere, within the region known as the Lumière Ridge. The geological survey reports that have been forwarded to our terraforming feasibility assessment committees have persuaded me that the region in

question may be of some historical significance to the Astra'han people. Astra'han mythology is a personal interest of mine, and I would therefore like to use the opportunity of our forthcoming summit to investigate this possibility personally – before the media circus that invariably accompanies a state visit makes such a thing impractical.”

S frowned. “Forgive me, Your Highness, but the Ridge is an *extremely* dangerous place to venture. Many exploration teams have come to grief in that region on account of a local silicon-based life-form that inhabits...”

“We are already familiar with the crystalline worms, Air General: their presence is at least partly the reason for our request for technical assistance. You can arrange for suitably armoured transport, I trust?”

“Yes, of course, Your Highness, but I would still recommend...”

Ambassador Kerensky stirred. “Air General – perhaps I might have a brief word with you?”

“Of course, sir. Would you excuse us a moment, Your Highness?”

“But of course.”

The Kaplan floated away in the direction of the window that looked out onto the spaceport where his personal transport still stood on the tarmac, leaving the two men alone.

“Listen to me, S. He *wants* this. In return for our co-operation in this matter, he’s prepared to place his personal guarantee on the smooth passage of the trade agreement through the Astran legislative assembly – something that could take months without his endorsement. Assuming he’s still Kaplan by then, that is. And if he isn’t, we could find that his successor might far less well disposed towards us in this matter. The WP tells me your own intelligence reports indicate that the current Kaplan Minus is opposed to the deal.”

S regarded him sombrely. “Ambassador – we have reason to believe that something’s going on down there. Possibly SOFRAM activity – we don’t know yet. I’ve got a team in the Ridge investigating at this very moment – is there no way we can postpone this at least until they’ve had a chance to report in?”

“Not unless you can contact them at once. Can you?”

“No, sir, we can’t. Poor communications are endemic to the whole region: it’s not unusual for survey teams to be incommunicado for days at a stretch. Just give me a little more time...”

Kerensky shook his head decisively.

“Not a chance. We’ve got a very narrow window of opportunity here: officially, the Kaplan’s transport arrives in just under 48 hours from now, after which a visit like this becomes impossible. This isn’t a request, S. It’s an order, and it comes direct from the WP: you can confirm it with Unity City if you want. Take him wherever he wants to go with whatever security you need; allow him to make his little pilgrimage or whatever he wants to do, then get him back here in time for his official arrival. His personal retinue will be accompanying him; I want you and a small team of your best men accompanying *them*.”

“But...”

“No buts, S. Just do it.”

S nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving the other’s face. “Yes, sir. I’ll organise it at once.”

§

Twenty-One scowled as he checked over the laser rifle for the third time. “Doesn’t he realise how little we know about that region, S? Taking *anyone* south of the equator is just asking for trouble – you know that! God knows we’ve lost enough good men over the years – the place has a reputation every bit as bad as the Bermuda Triangle: the only difference is that this one’s a lot better deserved...”

S slammed the flat of his palm down on the table hard, and glared at his operative.

“I *know*, damn it! Look, Twenty-One – if I could have stopped it I would, but I can’t. The WP didn’t get himself elected to that office by being your average, friendly, reasonable guy – you know that as well as me. All *I* can do is to make sure that nothing happens to the Lord High Jelly Bean back there and the rest of his pack of floating pep pills before they get back here again for the official arrival... and *your* job is to help me do just that. So just shut up and get on with it, will you?”

Twenty-One pursed his lips and took a deep breath.

“All right, S. As you say, he’s not your average, friendly, reasonable guy, and I don’t imagine the Kaplan is either. What’s the plan as regards the Kaplan’s security squad? They won’t all fit inside one of our surface skimmers.”

S pocketed his firearm.

“We’re splitting them into two groups. The four Astrans comprising the Kaplan’s personal retinue travel ahead of our vehicle as an advance guard. The USS contingent, comprising you and me plus the weaponry experts you brought with you, travel with the Kaplan. At least that way, if we *do* run into snake or SOFRAM trouble, we should get good warning of it coming – even if it costs a bunch of Astran heavies their luminous hides. Come on, let’s get this equipment stowed: the Kaplan wants to be on his way within the hour.”

Twenty-One grimaced. “This is all moving too fast. I drove over here as quickly as I could with those two marksmen directly from the base as ordered – which means that I’ve had to disregard God knows how many routine security precautions in the interests of speed. We know the Astrans at the Embassy are already suspicious of Century 21 Toys and your status in it: suppose they start putting two and two together? The arrival of the Kaplan at the spaceport without telling the Astran Ambassador to the Solar Federation – who also just happens to be the Kaplan’s second-in-command? They’ll hit the roof if they find out – quite possibly literally...”

S shrugged.

“Then we’ll just have to rely on the Kaplan to sort out the mess with his diplomats afterwards, won’t we? Come on, Twenty-One – that isn’t our problem. Making sure nothing happens to him until he gets back *is* our problem, okay?”

“Whatever you say, S. But I still don’t like it...”

§

“An intelligence report of a most interesting nature has been submitted for your attention, Excellency: it would appear that your suspicions concerning the status of Century 21 Toys have been vindicated. Air General Zodiac was seen being conveyed from the headquarters of the company to the restricted area of Kahra Spaceport three hours ago. Approximately an hour later, Mr. Brent Cleever was also seen making the same journey in the company of two other Earthmen. One of them is already known to our intelligence section as a World Government agent.”

The Kaplan Minus rose slightly into the air, revolving as he did so.

“It was only a matter of time. I confess I am not unduly surprised, though I would be interested to know the nature of the circumstances that have caused the USS to act so carelessly as to allow a number of their agents to be spotted together. You are certain of their destination, Kralis?”

“Indeed, Excellency: our scanners indicate that an Astra’han ship touched down just before dawn within the restricted area, and that the occupants have not left the spaceport. It has been concluded that they are still there.”

“*Astra’hani*? Are they being held by the Terran authorities, then?”

“We do not know, Excellency.”

“Are we able to determine the point of origin of the ship?”

“The intelligence section is working on this as we speak, Excellency: they have a tap on the Kahra spaceflight control communications network, and are currently attempting to decode this morning’s transmissions.”

“Indeed? I have heard the humans boast that their encryption process is unbreakable.”

“No, Excellency – the prime factors comprising the key can be deduced from the length of time the humans’ computers take to decrypt their own messages, which we are able to estimate from their reaction times. We anticipate being able to break today’s code within the next three hours.”

“Still too long. Tell Intelligence to contact the deputy flight controller at the spaceport immediately: he still owes us a favour on account of our withholding information from his current sexual partner concerning an illicit liaison with another female. They will instruct him to download the images from all the security cameras that overlook the landing area to one of our unlisted numbers. Ten seconds should be sufficient to complete the task: the chances of detection during that time are negligible.”

“I will see to it at once, Excellency.”

The secretary glided from the room, and the Kaplan Minus spent the next few minutes reviewing the file on the miscreant official. *We're asking too little*, he thought, *this Earthman will be good for several more favours yet...*

His levitation collar dropped as the door slid open and Kralis sped through, colliding with the still-moving panel as he did so.

“*Excellency!* We have the images from the spaceport’s security system: would you come to the viewing room immediately, please?”

“What is the urgency, Kralis?”

“The ship, Excellency! It appears to be the Kaplan’s personal transport!”

“Impossible. I would have been informed of its arrival: your contact is in error.”

“No, Excellency – we confirmed this a few moments ago by direct enquiry from the deputy flight controller. We have learned that the Kaplan’s ship landed just before dawn – and that an Earth ship believed to be carrying a high-ranking official landed shortly afterwards. Later, two hoverspeeders were seen leaving the spaceport, heading in the direction of the mountain ranges in the southern hemisphere. This happened slightly under two hours ago.”

The Kaplan Minus turned several shades darker.

“It is standard procedure for the spaceport to request confirmation from the Embassy of the non-hostile status of all Astran ships prior to landing, Kralis! *Why* was I not informed of this development at the time?”

“I have only just been informed myself, Excellency. The Kaplan's personal retinue saw fit to request clearance directly from Kahra space traffic control: normally the Earthmen would have sought confirmation from the Embassy as a matter of routine, but since the request came directly from the Kaplan himself, they tell us they assumed that we already knew...”

“Fools! This is a flagrant breach of protocol - contact the Kaplan's personal retinue directly at once!”

“I have already tried, Excellency. Our transmissions appear to be being jammed – we do yet not know the cause.”

“A stratagem of the USS, no doubt. I shall see to it that...”

“We do not believe so, Excellency: Security assures me that the Earthmen do not have the technology to jam an Astra’han transmission. The interference appears to be emanating from an *ai’thaera* distortion field not unlike those with which our armed carriers are equipped.”

“We shall see! If I discover that the USS is behind this, the repercussions will be profound... Requisition my personal surface-skimmer at once, Kralis. I want it ready for launch in the shortest possible time – we leave the second it is ready.”

“Excellency – the pre-flight checks will require...”

“Disregard them. The Kaplan’s life is in danger, Kralis: how long will it take to reach the Lumière Ridge at maximum speed?”

“Approximately three hours, Excellency – but as you are second in line to the presidency, do you not think it would be prudent...”

“That was an *order*, Kralis! Obey me - *now!*”

§

Deep within the foothills of the Lumière Ridge, standing high upon a **crag**, an unblinking pair of female eyes watched from the shadows as twin dust trails heralded the arrival of two surface skimmers speeding from the desert towards the mountain range. Even as they watched, the nearer trail faded and died away as the vehicle slowed in preparation for the negotiation of the dark crevasses that marked the outer limits of the Ridge. As it did so, still several kilometres out in the desert, the second vehicle began to slow down also.

The consciousness behind the eyes calculated rapidly: the advance guard would shortly be out of sight of the following craft. Would there be sufficient time? Yes, there would be sufficient time. The eyes closed; the lips framed a silent command, and upon the mountainside overlooking the gully into which the speeder would shortly pass, a pile of dark grey rocks in the shape of a tightly-wound coil moved...

S scanned the peaks of the foothills with a sense of foreboding.

“We are approaching the Ridge, Your Highness. I recommend that we maintain constant communication with the outriders from this point on. Snakes are to be found in clusters throughout the Ridge, and are well camouflaged. Normally they’re relatively docile, but that can’t be relied upon – and once roused, they won’t stop until the object of their anger has been completely destroyed. I do urge you do reconsider this venture...”

The Kaplan’s levitation collar rose slightly, and himself with it.

“Your concern is noted, Air General. We will follow the advance guard more closely: be so good as to close the gap to visual range as we enter the mountains, and instruct your operative to open a channel to the commander of my personal retinue.”

S nodded to Twenty-One, who swivelled in his seat and rapidly keyed a sequence of commands into the instrument panel at his side. Frowning at the crackling that emanated from it, he repeated the sequence.

“Problem, Twenty-One?”

The agent’s frown grew deeper.

“Maybe. Mind you, we know this region’s notorious for...”

The static slowly subsided, and a filtered voice crackled from the loudspeaker.

“Aleph Two receiving your transmission, signal strength five...”

Twenty-One took a deep breath. “We are receiving you, signal strength four, Aleph Two. You are instructed to maintain your current position within the valley to permit us to close distance to 500 meters, which will be held throughout the passage through the mountains. Visual contact to be maintained at all times.”

“Confirmed.”

Twenty-One looked up from the transmitter and leaned over to speak quietly to his boss.

“I thought we might have hit trouble there. Transmissions don’t usually fade in and out quite as quickly as that last one in the mountains – it normally takes several hours before the signal strength changes to that degree.”

S shrugged. “Who’s to say what’s normal here? I’d give a lot to know what causes it though: we’ve never identified a geological reason.”

“Maybe it’s atmospheric in origin. Or maybe SOFRAM really *have* got a base in here someplace.” Twenty-One squinted into the gloom that lay off to the right of their path. “What’s that over there?”

S followed the direction of his gaze and peered at the barely discernible outline of a twisted and blackened pile of rubble that lay in the stark, deep shadows of the crags.

“Wreckage, by the look of it. The mountains are littered with it: countless expeditions were lost before Lumière’s surveys were completed.”

“Poor bastards must have been blown to smithereens within seconds of entering the valley. Strange – it looks quite recent: wasn’t that a wisp of smoke I saw just then?”

S shook his head. “Trick of the light. Let’s concentrate on keeping within shouting distance of the advance guard, shall we? They’re over there at the end of the defile.”

He manoeuvred the skimmer carefully along to the far end of the valley, where the outriders’ speeder hovered motionless, awaiting them.

Accustomed to sensing the spacetime distortion of the massive twin binary stars of his homeworld, the Kaplan Minus barely registered the position of the sun as it sank behind the peaks of the forbidding crags that now loomed skywards before them; the consequent darkening of the sky not impinging upon his consciousness at all.

“Your estimate of the time elapsed since they entered the mountain range ahead of us, Kralis?”

The secretary’s mind reached out into the *ai’thaera*, probing a direction inconceivable and incomprehensible to human brains.

“I believe not longer than an hour, Excellency.”

“Agreed. We have made good time. I may yet have to invent a reason to explain our presence to the Kaplan when we overtake his convoy... and yet I am uneasy.”

He paused, his consciousness sensing the immediate environment through which their speeder now threaded its way.

“You fear we may be too late, Excellency? I sense the proximity of the Astra’han consciousness at least as strongly as that upon the trail through the desert.”

“As do I, Kralis. But I feel that something has happened here – something I do not understand. Is it not possible to increase... what was *that*?”

The secretary followed the direction of his consciousness, just in time to register the unexpected sentient presence before it was eclipsed by a massive boulder as the speeder automatically swerved to avoid it.

"It appeared to be an Earthwoman, Excellency!"

"A human? So far from Kahra? It was my understanding that the Martian atmosphere still contains an unacceptably high nitrogen content to the human respiratory system beneath the equator – is it not so, Kralis?"

"That is correct, Excellency – the interplay of coriolis forces keeps the two circulatory systems essentially distinct. To date all human colonisation has been restricted to the northern hemisphere of the planet: the Earthmen will address the atmospheric question in tandem with the terraforming process when the project begins."

"Yet the human female was not wearing assisted breathing apparatus. How can this be? Do the humans have a presence in this quadrant of which we are unaware? And if so, is the trap we fear being set by the Earthmen?"

"We have no information pertaining to any human presence below the equator, Excellency: the only incursions have been made by explorers, and more recently by the USS itself in response to reports of a possible SOFRAM radio source."

"Ah yes, SOFRAM... Every time I enquire about this mysterious organisation I am assured that it is a minor problem of the World Government; that dealing with it falls into the realm of internal security, and that it poses no threat to the Earth/Astra’han alliance. Perhaps we should enquire a little deeper into the matter. Is this vehicle not capable of attaining greater velocity, Kralis? My concern grows by the second..."

Far behind them, a cold pair of female eyes watched, unblinking, as the skimmer disappeared into a winding gully, and her lips moved silently. *More unbelievers come...*

§

"Steve! Wake up!"

The young man blinked awake to find himself being shaken violently.

"What is it, Mat?"

"The spacetime discontinuity – I think it's resynchronising. There's been a definite shift in the interphasing patterns over the last ten minutes, and we're beginning to receive

a faint carrier wave on the radio. This could be our only chance – come on, let’s get the engine running!”

Steve swung his legs out of the bunk, strode over to the navigation console and nodded in satisfaction.

“GPS is beginning to respond too, though it’s still very faint. Shouldn’t we try to radio Kahra while we can, Mat?”

The other shook his head. “Too risky. We’re probably only going to get one shot at this: we shouldn’t risk attempting to transmit until we’re clear of this place. If they pick it up and jam it, we’ll have tipped our hand for nothing. Engines fully primed?”

Steve nodded. “They ought to engage at the first press of the button.” He frowned. “Where’s Venus, Mat?”

Mat blinked. “You don’t know? Damn it - I thought she was in her bunk! We’ve got to find her, Steve – and fast! That interphase could resynchronise at any moment!”

The teenager swivelled out of his chair and launched himself towards the hatch.

“You finish checking these systems, Mat – I’ll get her. If she comes back and I haven’t returned by the time you’re ready, go without me, okay? At least that way you’ll be able to tell them about this place. I reckon I know where she’ll be.”

Mat hesitated briefly, then nodded, and Steve scrambled down the ladder. *And if neither of you are back by the time the resynchronisation is complete?* Mat pushed the question to the back of his mind and turned his attention to the system checks.

§

“*Klimarek...*”

Even Twenty-One, a cynic by instinct, was struck by the reverence in the Kaplan’s single word.

“I wish to disembark. Land the hoverspeeder in the heart of the plain before the complex.”

S warily scanned the jagged peaks surrounding the party.

“I urge you in the strongest possible terms not to leave the comparative safety of the hoverspeeder, Highness: we don’t know...”

“Enough, Earthman! It is as I believed... and yet in my wildest dreams I had not envisaged such a miracle... truly we stand on hallowed ground! My personal safety is assured: my guards come to share this hour of revelation and stand with the successor of Klimarek – even they with their limited knowledge of mythology understand that this is a moment that will live in Astra’han history... Land the hoverspeeder!”

Twenty-One eyed the rapidly approaching vehicle with increasing concern. *Why so fast...?* Instinctively, his eyes sought out the armaments control even as the whine of the

vertical thrusters faded and died, gently lowering the speeder onto the rocky valley floor. Simultaneously, the hatch slid aside, and the Kaplan floated down the ramp...

§

Steve ran into the picture room to find the young girl standing in front of one of the screens, her face devoid of all expression save for the ethereal dreaminess he'd noted earlier. Hurriedly interposing himself between her and the object of her attention, he frantically waved a hand across her face, and was not surprised to have it completely ignored.

"Venus! What the hell are you doing in here? We have to leave!"

She swayed, her eyes still unfocused, and he shook her shoulders in frustration.

"Venus - come *on*!"

Her eyes sharpened, and her features slowly cleared.

"Steve... wait! The image – look at the *image*!"

"Venus – we haven't got time for this..."

"*LOOK!*"

The note of insistence in her voice caused him to turn.

"That's the valley outside this city, isn't it, Steve? What are the pretty blue and green things floating towards the walls?"

He squinted into the depths of the image and shook his head, attempting to free his mind as he had earlier – causing an image to leap into startling focus...

"*Astrans*, Venus! Those are Astrans – but what the hell are they doing *here*?"

And then he sensed it... an overwhelming sense of fury, emanating from the same source as the picture and sweeping over his consciousness like a tidal wave... and then suddenly he *knew*...

"Venus – come on! We've got to warn them – they're going to kill him!"

"*Who*, Steve?"

"The Kaplan! The blue one with the jagged pattern on that saucer-like thing – that's the supreme commander of the Astran Empire! *Run*, Venus!"

Uncomprehending, she nevertheless broke into an immediate dash at his side towards the neighbouring chamber, where an increasingly deafening roar was by now emanating from the chariot.

"Inside – quickly!"

She scrambled up the ladder with him hot on her heels, pulling the hatch closed as he tumbled inside.

“Now, Mat! We’ve gotta get out of here – there’s going to be a murder!”

Without bothering to query the incomprehensible reason for speed, Mat slammed the lever down. Instantly, a massive jet blast from the rear of the vehicle sent it careering towards the far wall – and straight through it...

“*What the blazes...?*”

A screamed warning over the radio cut off Twenty-One’s startled curse in mid-sentence. “*Calling anyone listening on this frequency! The inhabitants of this city are hostile, repeat, hostile to Astrans! Vacate the plain IMMEDIATELY!*”

Twenty-One’s hand was moving towards the cannon control panel even as the first dazzling blast flashed across the plain... from the front of the vehicle occupied by the Kaplan’s personal retinue. Searing through the rarefied atmosphere, it impacted against a boulder just metres from the Kaplan, hurling the Astran leader across the plain. Instantly, S grabbed the microphone.

“*Aleph One to Aleph Two! What the hell do you think you’re doing, Aleph Two? Cease fire instantly, d’you hear? You risk injuring your Kap...*”

“*We will be avenged, Earthman. Do not interfere – this is none of your concern.*”

The filtered Astran voice was flat, monotonic and indescribably menacing. Twenty-One’s eyes met those of his boss for one split second... and then he lunged for the cannon control, sending a return blast of white-hot energy back across the plain towards the speeding Astran transport. Without time to establish a proper lock on the target, the bolt went wide of the craft and sailed on into the mountainside, causing a sizeable overhang to disintegrate in a spectacular shower of molten rock. Moments later, the distant gleam of several solitary red eyes on the mountainside presaged an imminent escalation of the firefight, and he swore copiously.

Hurriedly setting the target lock, he was about to discharge a second bolt of energy when a muffled shout from his boss made him squint into the darkness of the valley’s defile, into which a fourth vehicle was hurtling towards the stricken Kaplan. Instantly, Twenty-One trained the cannon on the new arrival, and was about to unleash a devastating onslaught on it when the radio crackled into life.

“*USS hoverspeeder - this is the personal conveyance of the Astra’han Ambassador to Earth on a rescue mission... an attack on this vehicle will be regarded as an act of war! Continue your offensive action against the vehicle that has attacked the Kaplan’s speeder – we will attempt to protect the Kaplan from further attack!*”

Even as they watched, the new arrival swerved in a wide descending arc, slowing to a standstill midway between the still rapidly-approaching hoverspeeder containing the Kaplan’s personal retinue, whose response to the protective manoeuvre was immediate: a searing laser blast flashed across the plain into the flank of the new arrival, which instantly exploded, catapulting the Kaplan-Minus and his secretary onto the rocks below.

A second later, a blast of return fire spat from the USS vehicle as Twenty-One swivelled the cannon back towards the aggressor, disabling its weaponry in a one-in-a-million shot released while the turret was still in motion. A moment later, all further offensive action was rendered impossible as a hail of fireballs began to rain down upon the combatants from the crags upon the mountainside: awoken from their slumber by Twenty-One's first wide shot, and then driven into a frenzy by the subsequent explosions, the rock snakes joined the fray. Trying to realign the cannon once more after a triplet of direct hits of the lethal missiles, Twenty-One discovered to his fury that the mechanism was jammed; the barrel being now fused to the surrounding armour plating. Rendered helpless, the humans could only watch as the speeder bearing the Kaplan's personal retinue rose into the air, giving the occupants a clear view of the three Astrans stranded on the barren landscape behind the Ambassador's burning vehicle, and then begin to descend in a powered dive upon the Astrans below. A few more seconds....

"Twenty-One! Over there!"

A shout and a pointing finger from S caused Twenty-One's head to turn towards the city, from the direction of which a squat prospecting chariot was rumbling ever closer to the Astrans. As it approached, the hatch opened and two men scrambled down the ladder, jumping down onto the rocks and hurrying towards the stricken aliens, obviously in a desperate and seemingly suicidal attempt to reunite them with their levitation collars before the massacre that was clearly about to commence. A sudden exclamation from S caused Twenty-One to turn sharply: the first time he'd ever seen his boss less than completely composed.

"Oh.... my God! It's *Steve*! Brent – that's my *son*! And Matic too – what the hell are *they* doing here?"

Twenty-One peered at the still-moving vehicle, in the cabin of which the slight figure of a small blonde girl could just be made out, piloting the vehicle ever closer to the rescue party and seeking once more to position a blockade between the rescue party and the still-ascending enemy, while the fireballs continued to rain down all around both the stranded Astrans and their would-be rescuers.

While the helpless USS team watched from their crippled speeder, the men managed to push one of the Astrans back into his collar. Steadying himself, he began to rise and rotate simultaneously.

"The Kaplan's guard will pay for this outrage! Quickly – we must help the Kaplan *at once*!"

Steve look at the two aliens lying on the valley floor in bewilderment.

"But which is the Kaplan?"

"On the left! The collar lies behind those rocks – fetch it immediately!"

"Shouldn't we help the other...?"

"No! My secretary is pledged to serve the Kaplan to the death! He will not flinch from that duty now! Go!"

Steve nodded, and sprinted towards the rocks in the direction of the collar, while the Astran and the older Earthman ran across the valley floor towards the two stricken aliens, one of whom was weakly attempting to roll himself towards the other in a desperate attempt to shield him from the rapidly approaching speeder. As they watched, a faint ray emanated upwards from the injured Astran towards the speeder, causing it to wobble in mid-flight, as if it had hit an invisible barrier, and veer away, hurtling onwards into the cliff face, where it exploded in a spectacular ball of flame, prompting a wild cheer from the young man trying to recover the collar from the rocks.

“Mat! He’s done it! He’s done it!”

But the victory was short-lived... even as they watched, the atmosphere around the injured Astrans began to thicken and solidify, giving the impression of a visual distortion not unlike that of the ray they’d just witnessed – except that this one appeared immeasurably more powerful, and emanated from the city itself...

“Steve – no! It’s not over - get down!”

An instant later the two hapless aliens disintegrated as the spacetime around them *twisted*, warped by the projected ray into a form incompatible with the existence of life... and the life contained within that region of spacetime terminated instantly.

The assault did not abate: the barrage continued to rain down from the maddened rock snakes upon the chariot, from which the young girl could be seen scrambling down the ladder and running towards the protection of the rocks at the periphery of the plain. Seconds later, the vehicle exploded in a dazzling fireball.

Only then did peace return to the valley. As if sensing that their orgy of destruction had at last achieved its grisly objective, the rock snakes ceased their assault, slowly settling themselves back into their inconspicuous coils high upon the mountainside. And as the snakes regained their dormant posture once more, four humans managed to prise open at last the damaged hatch of Aleph One, and descended onto the floor of the valley. Hurrying across the plain, they sought out the survivors, one by one... first two male humans, relatively unscathed, then a solitary Astran lying injured among the rocks. And finally...

She found her at last, cowering behind a boulder among a pile of wreckage. The burnt-out wreckage of an Explorer-class prospecting chariot, not unlike the one so recently escaped from the confines of the city on the plain – except that *this* wreckage was at least two years old. And in the middle of the wreckage...

They had to drag her, seriously injured, hysterical and screaming, away from the two corpses lying in the burnt-out remains of the chariot. Two corpses that had lain on the plain for over two years... and whose clothing and identification tags identified them as the bodies of Georges and Veronique Lumière.

Kahra, Mars – 23rd October 2046

“Honourable *Astra’hani*; gentlemen – this enquiry is now in session. The proceedings are not being videoed or recorded: the dissemination of minutes, which are being taken by two clerks nominated by each government, is subject to the approval of both the Astra’han and the World Government authorisation committees. Such approval is required in writing from both parties, and each party is to acknowledge, in writing, receipt of the approval of the other before the minutes or any part thereof are revealed to any third party. Anyone lacking the authorisation of both the World Government Security Committee and the Astra’han Inner Council to attend this enquiry will now leave the room.”

So sayeth the Lord, thought Twenty-One as he watched S ease himself back into his chair next to the Kaplan Minus, with whom he was jointly presiding. He found himself musing over whether the hastily-convened joint enquiry heralded the dawn of a new era in Terran/Astra’han relations, or just one more platform for each side to launch attacks on the other’s security arrangements. The World Government had been predictably cagey about acknowledging their intelligence chief’s identity until the Astran embassy emailed them a copy of an extract from their embarrassingly comprehensive file on his activities since his ‘retirement’, mollifying the hurt to S’s professional pride by requesting the help of the USS in determining what had gone wrong. Doctor Matic and the Kaplan Minus’s PPS had also been co-opted onto the committee in addition to Twenty-One himself; S’s son Steve and the Lumières’ daughter Lily had both been requested to submit written statements concerning their experiences within the mi’Astra’han complex prior to the abortive attempt by the Kaplan’s personal security guard to enter the stronghold.

“I don’t think it would be possible to overstate the sense of shock and outrage that everyone around this table feels today at the events that transpired in the Lumière Ridge forty-eight hours ago. The democratically-elected leader and titular head of the Astra’han Empire, present on Mars at the invitation of the World Government to celebrate the conclusion of an historic trade deal between our two cultures, has been struck down in a meticulously planned and well-co-ordinated terrorist act. It is the purpose of this enquiry to determine who the perpetrators of this act are, and to ensure that they are brought speedily to justice. I take it that there is no dissent upon these aims.”

S paused briefly, taking a sip from his glass of water before continuing.

“It has become clear in the immediate aftermath of this outrage that elements connected with both the USS and the Astra’han Military Intelligence Bureau have recently become aware of the possibility of covert activities directed against one or both of our governments. Section 2.2 of the document before you details the evidence already in the possession of the USS in the weeks leading up to the Kaplan’s assassination. It contains a reference to a report, dated the 12th of last month, by Doctor Matthew Matic, who is a member of my staff, to myself on apparent SOFRAM activity related to the Lumière Ridge between February last year and the date of the report. Since the compilation of that report, Doctor Matic has returned from a period of enforced captivity by person or persons unknown at a secret base located within the Ridge. In view of the obvious relevance of this development to the goals of this enquiry, I have therefore requested that Doctor Matic

be co-opted onto this committee to present a first-hand resume of his experience, and therefore if our Astra'han colleagues have no objection, I will now ask him to deliver that presentation.”

Some request, thought Twenty-One. He watched as the researcher rose from his chair to distribute copies of a bulky file to each of the delegates, then walk to the side of the room to take up a position adjacent to a projection screen, a remote control in his left hand and a hastily-compiled hand-written list of bullet points in his right: clearly Matic had had little or no sleep since his return.

“Honourable *Astra'hani*, gentlemen: with the consent of this gathering, I believe it would be prudent to start this presentation with new evidence – evidence that has literally only just come into our possession earlier this afternoon, and which was the direct cause of my slightly late arrival. The following slide shows the output from a satellite imaging system installed onboard meteorological orbiter MO4K of the Martian Geological Survey. You will observe little out of the ordinary in this picture, save for a region in the lower left quadrant...” He pointed towards a fuzzy area in the corner of the screen, which he isolated and expanded to full size. “... which appears somewhat blurred. This image, which covers an area of some two square kilometres at the bottom of a natural gully within the Ridge, has of course been recorded during countless orbits, but being located within a hostile environment inside the non-terraformed hemisphere, it has been of largely academic interest. However, last March, the MGS reconfigured their fleet of orbiters to map the surface using scanners operating in the lower ultra-violet waveband between 10^{-7} and 10^{-10} metres, and therefore covering gamma rays and X rays. During the implementation of this upgrade, a young technician at one of the local television stations, called Tatiana Kurashkova, was inexplicably killed during the making of a documentary about recent technological advances of the MGS. The satellite image receiving equipment that she was installing was destroyed, and the project temporarily shelved pending a full investigation. In the light of the atrocity we have just witnessed, however, that investigation has been abandoned, and the receiving equipment installed as a matter of the highest priority. The equipment has literally only just been replaced – within the last twenty-four hours, to be precise – and the MO4K overflew the Lumière Ridge at 1132 hours this morning.”

Matic flicked the control in his hand, and the screen flickered slightly to show a new view of the Ridge in which all the landmarks were identical to the previous image. Except that where there had previously been a fuzzy area there was now an artefact.

“*This* is the image that it relayed back to the offices of the MGS during the next download at midday. It is a network of buildings in the form of an interconnected complex covering an area of approximately one and a half square kilometres at the bottom of the gully.”

“Why haven’t we been able to see it before, Mat?”

Matic shook his head. “We don’t know, sir. We’re speculating that it projects some form of cloaking field that conceals it from above. The use of gamma and/or X rays in the scanning process evidently penetrates that field, allowing us to see from space the structure where I and my two young colleagues have been imprisoned recently. This brings me on

to my own experience over the last three weeks, unless there are any further questions on the imaging process.”

Twenty-One stirred.

“Before we move on, Doctor Matic, it occurs to me that we’ve got to conclude that whoever or whatever inhabits that complex evidently knew about our upgrading process, recognised the threat that it posed, and took effective action to sabotage it before it became operational. That indicates we have a security leak.”

Mat inclined his head, considering the point.

“Possibly, but it’s not certain. From what Steve, Lily and I have seen of their technology inside the complex, I’d say there’s a strong possibility that they have the capability to sense our actions remotely, though we haven’t yet been able to establish how.”

“I would also like to make an observation, Doctor Matic.”

“Excellency?”

The Kaplan Minus glided over to the screen and inspected it for a few seconds.

“It may be that we can throw some light on that cloaking field, Doctor. Though the technology may be alien to your civilisation, it is not unknown to ours. The cloak was developed on the planet Phryne during the Ka’eth aeon, and was used over a period of some two millennia by the inhabitants of that planet to conceal themselves from potential invaders. It was assimilated by the Astra’han Empire after we assisted the natives of Phryne in their recovery from the near-destruction of their civilisation by the machine-creatures of Skaro. The system’s susceptibility to X rays has long been recognised as a weakness: one which the Daleks exploited ruthlessly during their invasion of that unfortunate planet. Klimarek would have been familiar with both the technology and its limitations.”

Both Twenty-One and S looked up sharply at the reference to the charismatic Astra’han renegade, and their eyes met. So – they were *not* the only ones to be thinking along such lines...

The Kaplan Minus glided back to his place at the table. “I think at this point we should hear Doctor Matic’s report. I consider it to be a dangerous practice to theorise before one is in full possession of all the data available, and at this point in time I fear data is a commodity that is in singularly short supply. Please forgive the interruption, Doctor Matic.”

“Not at all, Excellency: the observation is clearly relevant.”

The group listened in silence as the researcher detailed the circumstances leading up to his saving his boss’s son from the rock snake attack, their entry together into the complex, their meeting with the Lumières’ young daughter and the tale she had to tell concerning the fate of her parents. At the mention of Georges Lumière, Twenty-One reached over and scribbled a note in the margin of his copy of the report, then glanced across the table to see S doing the same. The description of the projected images of Astra and of the Kaplan’s ship in deep space drew a visible reaction from the Astra’hans, as did the photographs of the interior of the complex: Twenty-One noted the minuscule vertical

movements in both the Kaplan Minus and his secretary that told of their heightened concentration levels as the images unfolded on the screen.

“Doctor Matic – I wish to have these photographs forwarded directly to my scientific advisory team at the embassy for a preliminary analysis. They are bound by oaths to the Inner Council that guarantee confidentiality: can this be done immediately?”

Mat glanced at S, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

“Of course, Excellency: it can be done from this console. Would you like to initiate the file transfer yourself?”

The Kaplan Minus glided across to the console, which suddenly became active as the Astra’han’s powers of levitation connected with the keyboard. Mat watched entranced as the controls flickered in front of him – despite having heard about this unexpected manifestation of Astra’han capabilities, he’d not seen it actually working before. The message sent, the Kaplan Minus returned to his place at the table.

Upon the conclusion of the report having been reached, there was silence for several seconds. S was the first to break it.

“Members of the enquiry – we clearly have a great deal to consider. It is clear that a hitherto unknown and unsuspected enemy is situated in our midst. The capabilities of this enemy are unknown, though I suspect that our Astra’han allies may be able to help us to fill in the gaps in our knowledge. However, it may be that one matter at least can be settled at once. Doctor Matic: I should like the Lumière girl to see the video footage taken by the security camera in Kiel Hospital, with a view to determining whether the subject recorded on it actually *is* her father. Is she in a fit state to be called before this enquiry?”

Matic looked doubtful.

“I don’t think it would be advisable, S: she’s in a severe state of shock following her ordeal. However if this point is considered absolutely crucial, I believe we could arrange a viewing under less stressful conditions: she and Steve have become close friends over the last few days, and she values his support and advice. Perhaps if he were to talk to her first...”

“I *do* consider it absolutely crucial, Mat. Would you arrange it as soon as possible, please? I’d appreciate it if you were to set the wheels in motion immediately following the conclusion of this session.”

“Yes, sir.”

S glanced around the room, shuffled his notes and addressed the assembly from his chair.

“I’ve no wish to pre-empt the outcome of this, but I suspect strongly that the girl will confirm that the hospital administrator is indeed her father – or at least a man in the image of her father, bearing in mind our discovery outside the city located within the Lumière Ridge. Doctor Matic’s report speaks of an accident involving him which would under normal circumstances be expected to result in fatality, but from which he apparently emerged unscathed. The report indicates that this new enemy has the capability to recruit to its cause humans who would normally be totally above suspicion. This they do using a

mechanism that remains unclear, but which appears at first reading to involve the death of the individual concerned. The report cites several instances in which this pattern of events has been observed, or at least strongly suspected.”

S glanced at his watch.

“I propose – if the Kaplan-designate is in agreement – that this enquiry be adjourned for today, giving us time to take stock of the information that has come to light this afternoon, and to consult our respective administrations on the matter of how we proceed.”

“That would suit us perfectly, Air-General. I will now return to the Embassy: we are holding a service of remembrance for those who have died this evening, and I require time to compose my speech. I find myself at a loss without my trusted secretary, who died a hero’s death on Klimarek’s plain in the service of his Kaplan. May I recommend that we reconvene at 1400 hours tomorrow?”

“I was about to propose it myself, *Kaplan’eth’ka*.”

The Astran floated out of the room, and S leaned back in his chair, regarding his team through tired eyes.

“That could have been a lot worse. Instead of being in general agreement that we’ve got a common problem, we could easily have been at each other’s throats by now. In fact, I’m wondering whether this whole episode might actually bring us closer together. A lot depends on what happens in the next few hours.”

He reached for the activation control of his videophone, hesitated for a moment, and then turned it on.

“I’m going to talk to the World President now about today’s progress. It could be a long call, I think. Mat – take that son of mine down to the bar and get yourselves a drink. You’ve both earned it.”

§

Steve took another sip of his beer, then picked up a ball off the pool table, weighed it in his fingers and sent it spinning across the table as Mat re-entered the recreation area, his file tucked underneath one arm and a full glass in each hand.

“All arranged. If you and I go on to the hospital in about an hour from now she’ll be shown the video of that mystery man in Kiel when we arrive, so we should have an answer to that one before the end of the day. I’m hoping we’ll also have a first reaction from the Astrans by tomorrow afternoon to what we’ve learned. At the moment I feel these proceedings are in danger of becoming a little too esoteric – I’d like some solid science I can get my teeth into, though the levitation stuff is extremely interesting. It answers a lot of questions that have been bothering our technical guys for years.”

“You were able to follow it, then?”

“Most of it, yes. And the parts that I *was* able to follow made a lot of sense too. We’ve always wondered how the Astrans work those levitation collars they wear –

which is something they've always been exceptionally secretive about – and we've generally assumed that the technology works on the hovercraft principle. But that's absurd: after all, the Astrans were obviously able to move before they invented the collars. Now we've just learned that it's an enhancement of a capability that's innate to their species – and *that* has quite profound implications.”

“In what way?”

“Well, the most obvious is that it could mean that we're unable to replicate it. For another, it suggests that that complex in the Lumière Ridge could be even more dangerous than we thought.”

“How *do* the Astrans do it? Levitate, I mean.”

“What? Oh, that's straightforward enough – at least in principle.”

“Levitation? *Straightforward*? You're kidding!”

“Not at all.” Mat walked over to the pool table and tapped it. “Imagine this table's made of a pretty tough but slightly pliable rubber sheet. If I put a ball on it, what happens to the rubber sheet?”

Steve considered for a moment.

“It'll dip slightly around the ball.”

“Right. So if you imagine the ball's the Earth, and the rubber pool table's the fabric of spacetime, then what you're seeing is the Earth causing a slight curvature of spacetime – it's amazing how many people have difficulty with that concept, even if it *is* happening in more dimensions than they can intuitively perceive. Now – what happens if I put another ball close to the first one?”

“They'll move towards one another.”

“Right again. That's gravity – the tendency for objects co-existing in a universe that's curved by their mutual masses to coalesce. Now for the big one. Suppose I were to get *underneath* the table and push it upwards under the first ball so that the sheet acquires a slight convex bulge. What would happen to the second ball now?”

“Well... I suppose...”

“Yes?”

“I suppose it would move away from the first one.”

“Right yet again. Levitation, in fact. And *that's* what they're doing - they're nullifying the effect of concave spacetime curvature at a local level.”

“If you say so – but I still can't see...”

“*How* they do it? Neither can I. As far I'm concerned it's incomprehensible – but then, *we* have abilities that are incomprehensible to *them*. Our ability to see, for example. *They* can't see – because they haven't got any eyes. Our visual capability was one of the things that enabled our species to develop at all – without it we couldn't exist, at least not in anything like our present form. Well, levitation is one of the things that

enables *their* species to exist. To us it defies understanding. To them it's probably intuitively obvious."

Steve grinned. "It still sounds like magic to me! But why did you say a few moments ago that the Lumière Ridge facility could be even more dangerous than we thought?"

"Because this levitation thing isn't just a matter of being able to lift things into the air. When *we* talk about levitation, we're thinking purely in terms of moving objects through space, but I'm beginning to see that there's far more to it than that. Space and time aren't distinct concepts – they're both integral aspects of the continuum that we inhabit: what the Astra'hans call the *ai'thaera*, though there appears to be a suggestion in *their* philosophy that consciousness also forms a part of the same overall structure. We've been given a taste of the mi'Astra'han powers of spacetime manipulation in the creation of allies to their cause, but somehow I'm getting the impression that doing things like that is minor league to them. Remember the equipment inside that facility? What little of it I was able to comprehend was enough to take my breath away. The power output of that place defies belief – and whatever they're doing with it, it's on a scale we can barely imagine. I think – only *think*, mind you – that they're tapping directly into the power of the sun and reconfiguring it in some way. To what end, I've no idea – but whatever it is, it's *big*, believe me. I'm hoping the Astra'han scientists back at the embassy can throw more light on it than I can, because at the moment I'm stumbling around in the dark – and I have a feeling in my stomach that we need to understand what's going on as a matter of urgency."

"What makes you think the Astrans will be able to make more sense of it than we can?"

Mat shook his head as if to clear it.

"The place has an Astran feel to it – I said so at the time, remember? Not surprising with the benefit of hindsight, bearing in mind who built it of course. You know, Steve, I once tried to disassemble a levitation collar. We recovered it from the body of an Astra'han diplomat who was killed in a plane crash in Australasia about six years ago, and were able to conduct a very rudimentary analysis of it before the Astra'han high commissioner realised we'd got it and demanded its immediate return. We never grasped even the fundamentals of its drive mechanism, but some of the components looked vaguely similar to the devices that you and I saw in the complex – though there was a vast difference of scale. So if I had to guess, I'd say that whoever, whatever or wherever the occupants of that complex are, they're probably trying to move something using spacetime warping technology. Something very heavy and very large, I'd say. Or perhaps..."

"Or perhaps what?"

"Or perhaps something small and light, but incredibly fast. And I mean *incredibly* fast."

He glanced at the clock on the wall. "Come on, Steve – it's almost time we paid Venus a visit. Shall we go?"

"Okay, Mat." He grinned. "I'll say one thing – you know an incredible amount about one *hell* of a lot of subjects. Listen... I'm seriously thinking of entering the space service when I've finished this stint with the MGS. I've been considering it for some time

now, and if this deal with the Astrans goes ahead, that'll settle it for me – remember what I said about the speed we're going to catch them up? It's the up and coming thing: Dad reckons that early successful applicants could merit a commission before they're twenty-five. If I qualify I sure could use someone like you on my team."

Matic raised an eyebrow. "An academic like me? I don't know anything about the practicalities of space travel, Steve: I'm looking forward to a peaceful life in a prestigious university somewhere." He lowered his voice and grinned. "Actually, just between you and me, I've been offered the chair of Theoretical Physics at Yale. Got the confirmation just this morning – it seems that this Astran business has impressed a few military types on the selection panel. 'Professor Mat Matic' – how does that grab you?"

"It grabs me just fine, Mat. I reckon you'll find it just a tad too cosy after a few years, so stay in touch, okay?"

"Sure thing, Steve. Can't see it happening, mind..."

Kahra, Mars – 24th October 2046

A few moments late for the reconvening of the enquiry the following day on account of the delayed arrival of a technical report, Mat found upon taking his seat that S had already greeted the Astrans and had chosen to begin the session with a résumé of the activities of the organisation that had been the subject of his researches for the past few years. An illuminated organisation chart adorned the wall, and an animated sequence of terrorist outrages in the lower right-hand corner of the screen served to remind the audience of the gravity of the subject matter. S clearly intended to leave no doubt in the minds of all those present as to the extent of the threat.

“The Kaplan Minus will already be aware that the World Government is beset by a neo-fascist organisation that has created a trail of havoc and destruction throughout the Solar System for at least the last fifteen years. The World President and other members of the Executive have always played down its capabilities in official press releases on account of the potential for causing panic within the civilian population of Earth. For the benefit of our Astra’han guests I should perhaps add that this is a long-established procedure, but I can assure this enquiry that this organisation *is* dangerous, and *does* pose a serious threat to political stability throughout the System. This organisation is known colloquially as SOFRAM – the Solar Organisation for Revenge and Murder – and the interplanetary agency that I run spearheads the efforts of the World Government to eliminate it. Those efforts have so far been insufficient to bring it to heel: as soon as one cell is destroyed, another one springs up to replace it. I acknowledge that we do not understand either its structure or its appeal to new recruits, and have been focusing our efforts these last few years on merely containing it. This is however an offensive action taken against merely the symptoms of the phenomenon – not the cause.

“On the day following the reception at the Astra’han embassy, Brent Cleever, alias special agent Twenty-One, outlined a hypothesis to me. At the time, I confess I found it fanciful – ridiculous even. In a nutshell, that hypothesis proposed that SOFRAM is an offshoot of an obscure religious cult that died out hundreds of years ago. He also suggested that this cult owes its origins to an Astra’han renegade who fled his native planet with a band of followers at some time in Earth’s distant past, and who eventually landed in the southern hemisphere of the planet Mars. That renegade was referred to by the Kaplan Minus earlier this afternoon. I wish to go on record as stating that I myself no longer consider this hypothesis fanciful. I would therefore ask the Kaplan Minus, having now been made familiar with the contents of Doctor Matic’s report, whether he would be so good as to offer his opinion on this matter.”

S put down his notes and turned to the Astra’han at his left. The Kaplan Minus ascended a fraction of a millimetre, and glided into the centre of the room to address the assembly.

“I wish to thank the Air General for his frank appraisal of the threat posed by the terrorist cell responsible for the outrage that has resulted in our being assembled here. It is true that all references to the SOFRAM organisation in official communiqués to the Astra’han Empire have played down the threat posed by them, which in hindsight has been regrettable. Had the Astra’han Inner Council been more acquainted with the facts

surrounding SOFRAM and its activities, the sad events of the last few days might perhaps have been avoided, since my predecessor might have come to realise that the cult of Klimarek was not extinct, as he in all probability believed.

“I cannot doubt that the cult of Klimarek still lives, and propagates its will through the terrorist organisation that the USS seeks to eliminate. The notation documented in the Ta’hamek Apocrypha strongly suggests this, it is true, but I have another reason to believe as I do. This originates from the process to which Air General Zodiac has just alluded – namely the apparent ability of the enemy to create allies to their cause.

“You will understand when I say that there are aspects of *Astra’thal’ech* that are not discussed with outsiders. One such concerns procreation, which I understand is also regarded as a taboo subject in polite conversation on the planets in this system also – however, circumstances now force me to allude to it. As your species evolved from primates, Astra’han evolved from basic life at a micro-cellular level. Each of us is essentially a single cell – and we reproduce... as single cells do.”

Twenty-One raised a quizzical eyebrow. “You mean by repeated subdivision?”

“That is correct.” Something in the tone of the Kaplan Minus’s modulated voice suggested that the Astra’han did not propose to elaborate.

“But... that would mean that each generation is effectively a clone of the last, wouldn’t it?”

“Again, that is correct, Mr. Cleever. At the reception a few days ago, I alluded to the strengths of inter-chapter loyalties. This is the reason for the strengths of those ties. Such loyalties endure for centuries, because the Astra’han race consciousness is essentially static, being only modified by external changes that impose themselves upon our civilisation. In contrast to human existence, Astra’han consciousness has no clearly defined beginning. Coherent memories can span several generations, and prejudices reach back through the millennia. Even before the events of the last few days, I had good reason to believe that, if any trace of the consciousness of Klimarek remained at the site of his landfall, the reaction to our arrival would be... less than welcoming.”

“Should not the Kaplan have also realised that?”

“The Kaplan clearly believed the mi’Astra’han cult to be long dead. He evidently did not consider the possibility that Klimarek might have succeeded in his quest.”

Twenty-One nodded. “*mi’thra*?”

“Yes. I suspect that Klimarek and his followers no longer exist in the physical sense. They have integrated their consciousness with the fabric of what you would call spacetime, leaving their equipment in the complex to act as a bridge between themselves and the material world. In a sense, they are now at one with God – with all the power to manipulate both space and time that such a status implies. What was it that Klimarek said? *‘Past space to future time, and future space to past time, illusion to reality and reality to illusion’*. In the Astra’han philosophy, reality is equated with physical consciousness, and illusion with potential consciousness – the consciousness of God, perhaps? His words suggest that life and death are in some way interchangeable; that consciousness can in some way be transposed; that future reality can be taken away and projected into a structure as it

existed in the past – or perhaps that a past time might be projected into future space. Would this not resemble in some measure the scenario in which we now find ourselves?”

S frowned. “I’m afraid I didn’t understand that explanation, Excellency.”

“It is not an explanation. I do not understand what I am saying. I merely perceive a connection between the philosophy of Klimarek insofar as we are able to interpret it, and the situation that has been detailed in Dr. Matic’s report relating to the inexplicable creation of persons antagonistic to our cause from people who should by all accounts be dead. Substitutions appear to have taken place: one body exchanged for another, lifted from its physical manifestation in past time, with an alternative guiding philosophy associated with it – a real consciousness rendered illusory in death while another potential consciousness is rendered real. An interplay of realities, perhaps?”

“But... how?”

“I do not know – but such matters were foremost in Klimarek’s mind when he and his band of dissenters were driven from Astra three thousand years ago. Such things are perhaps easier for the Astra’han psyche to envisage than for humans: you will recall the reason for Klimarek’s exile. His cult disapproved of the uses to which the Astra’han capacity for interaction with the *ai’thaera* was being put. Humans perceive this interaction only in terms of the spatial levitation capability, but it is far more than this: levitation is merely a visible manifestation of the innate ability of the Astra’han consciousness to manipulate the *ai’thaera* at an individual level. That capability, in my opinion, constitutes a threat not only to the Solar Federation, but also to the Astra’han Empire.”

The Kaplan-Minus paused for a moment to let the words sink in.

“The events of the past few days have served to underline the need for closer co-operation between our two cultures. I am satisfied that the existence of both the mi’Astra’han cult and the terrorist human organisation consequent upon it threaten the stability of both the Solar Federation and the Astra’han Empire. To combat the menace that we have seen applied with such devastating effect, I have proposed that the findings of this enquiry be submitted immediately to the Inner Council on Astra, with a recommendation from myself as acting Kaplan-designate that the trade deal that my predecessor came here to promote should be concluded – and as rapidly as possible, subject to the World Government agreeing to a number of modifications that the Inner Council has requested be made.”

A barely audible murmuring was apparent around the room: the import of the Astran’s statement was not lost on anyone present. It died away rapidly however when the human delegates suddenly realised that the Kaplan-designate had not returned to his place at the table.

“If it pleases the Chairman of this enquiry, there is one other matter to which I wish to allude.”

“By all means, Excellency.”

The Kaplan-Minus ascended slightly.

“It concerns the apparition of the late Kaplan’s transport observed by Doctor Matic inside the complex, as detailed in the report delivered to this group yesterday. Following

the conclusion of the session, and having discussed the matter with Ambassador Kerensky, who accompanied the Kaplan to Mars, I instructed my secretary to download the logs of the transport and to scan them for any abnormal occurrences during the flight. We have determined that the transport encountered an unidentified phenomenon travelling at close to lightspeed on almost the same heading as that of the Kaplan's ship. We have no reason to suppose that this phenomenon has changed its heading – and if so, we are obliged to conclude that it will enter the Solar System in approximately ten Earth months from now.”

S frowned. “Have your scientists been able to establish what it is, and who launched it, Excellency?”

“The answer to both questions is negative. However we have been able to determine that it was definitely *not* launched from the Astra’han homeworld.”

“From one of the other planets in the same system, then.”

“No. Our scientists tell me, as they did my predecessor, that it did not originate from Zeta Aquarii. It unquestionably originated from Earth.”

Matic looked up from his papers in astonishment.

“But... that’s *impossible*! It was travelling in the other direction, Excellency! Please forgive my seeking to correct this misconception on the part of your scientific...”

“The trajectory of the object was recorded with meticulous precision by the crew of the Kaplan’s transport. I repeat – it was launched from Earth towards Zeta Aquarii. Upon reaching Zeta Aquarii, it was redirected *back* towards the Solar System by being thrown into a slingshot around the binary suns. The computation was an ingenious one: the combined mass and gravity field of the binary stars was precisely calculated to redirect the anomaly without reducing its velocity from almost lightspeed.”

Mat placed his papers down carefully on the desk and regarded the Astran thoughtfully.

“If your scientists’ calculations are correct, wouldn’t that mean that whatever this thing is, it began its journey a very considerable time in the past? Zeta Aquarii is about 117 light years away from Earth, isn’t it? That would mean that the anomaly’s journey began over 230 years ago – and mankind didn’t have the technology to do anything like that then! Surely it must have been sent from Mars – from the complex from which we escaped...”

“Our calculations indicate that it came from Earth, not Mars, Doctor Matic. We cannot, of course, discount the possibility that the cult of Klimarek was in some way responsible, but the calculations are precise. The launch point was Earth; we calculate that the date using the human calendar appropriate to the era would have been 1811. This incident constitutes a mystery that we have yet to solve. Perhaps in an atmosphere of increased co-operation between our two cultures, we can strive together to solve this mystery. In the meantime, we look forward to meaningful exchanges of culture, philosophy, and above all, technology.”

The muttering around the table rose to an audible level once more, as the humans found themselves debating with their immediate neighbours the hitherto unimagined

benefits of the blossoming alliance – including the chairman’s son, who leaned over to the USS researcher sitting at his side and muttered:

“Ten years, Mat. That’s all it’ll take before we’ve got an interstellar space fleet of our own. We’re on our way...”

Kahra, Mars – 4th July 2047

“It’s certainly lifelike, Twenty-One.”

S peered down at the small toy hummingbird in Twenty-One’s left hand, and offered his standard noncommittal response: no new lines would have been approved for submission to the pre-launch testing phase were they anything other than lifelike, and they both knew it. *Over-cautious pessimist*, thought Twenty-One in irritation. *So where’s that damn missile, Forty-Six?* As if he’d spoken it out loud, the walkie-talkie in his hand crackled into life.

“The missile has been launched.”

About time too, thought Twenty-One. With a sweep of his hand, he released the toy into the air; before it had dropped ten centimetres, the wings flapped into action, sweeping the bird into the Martian air with an impressive burst of speed skyward – the first fusion of human miniaturisation expertise and Astran levitation technology ever seen. Before the SAM had reached one hundred metres, the little bird was bearing down upon it, anticipating the location of the rapidly accelerating nosecone with flawless accuracy. A split-second later both bird and missile exploded together in a dazzling explosion. Twenty-One spared a glance at the expression on S’s face – it had not changed, though the older man’s eyes had begun to betray a sparkle of interest.

“Very efficient.”

You ain’t seen nothin’ yet, thought Twenty-One. He raised the walkie-talkie to his lips.

“Okay, ground control. Start second test.”

Seconds later the gates parted, and a remote-controlled car hurtled through. Twenty-One reached into his pocket, extracted a second bird, activated and tossed it away from him; once more it swept skywards in a graceful parabola before swooping down on the doomed automobile and destroying it in a brilliant and noisy detonation. The walkie-talkie crackled into life a second time.

“Ground target completely destroyed.”

Obviously, thought Twenty-One with fleeting impatience, though the smoothness with which the test had proceeded was something of a relief – only half an hour before the arrival of the assessment committee one of the guidance systems had failed, and he’d almost been forced to request a postponement. He turned to his boss with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, S?”

The older man nodded. “I’m sold, Twenty-One. Put them into full production immediately. In fact, you’d better include some in your kit for your next assignment.

“Which is?”

“Security escort for a space transporter leaving for Earth tomorrow. It’ll be carrying a laser cannon – one of the most advanced weapons ever built. It can target and destroy a space vehicle at a range of some sixty million miles, compensating for relativistic effects

of near lightspeed velocity of the target – something we’ve never managed to achieve before.”

“Such as would enable us to intercept a heavy cruiser entering the solar system from intergalactic warp, for example?”

S shrugged. “I really couldn’t say.”

All right, all right – I know when not to ask dumb questions, thought Twenty-One, the irritation beginning to creep back.

“Report to me at 0800 tomorrow, Twenty-One: I’ll present you with your final briefing at that time. The launch is scheduled for 1045, and you’re to be at the launch pad an hour prior to that. I’ll authorise the immediate manufacture of a dozen of those hummingbirds of yours – you can collect them from my office when you arrive.”

“Thanks, S. If there’s nothing else scheduled for this afternoon, I think I’ll return to my quarters and familiarise myself with the flight schedule – can you have it forwarded to me there?”

“I was about to suggest that you do just that, Twenty-One – tomorrow’s likely to be a long day.”

§

With the dry Martian wind at his back, Twenty-One breathed in deeply as he eased his foot down on the accelerator pedal of his convertible, in casual disregard of the speed limit in force on all autoroutes within a thirty kilometre radius of Kahra. Experimentally, he twisted in the seat this way and that: a month had passed since he was last aware of any sensation in his chest as a consequence of making such a movement. Good. The physical pain had diminished to a dull ache within three months of the Mikhal incident, but then, it had never been the physical pain that really bothered him. Unbidden and unwanted, her ghostly figure appeared in the periphery of his vision yet again, and once again he shot a sideways glance at the passenger seat, still feeling surprised and dejected not to see her sitting there, her magnificent long legs elegantly tucked underneath the seat.

He’d adored her, of course. Probably would have married her if their profession had been any other than the one it was, but she’d been as committed to her career as he himself. More so, if the truth be told: the death of her parents eight years previously in a SOFRAM-financed outrage in South America had left an indelible mark on her during her most impressionable years, and prompted her to apply to the headquarters of the USS at Langley, Virginia, the day after graduating with a double first in Cybernetics and Artificial Intelligence from Yale. Her outstanding academic record had already brought her to the attention of Washington’s talent scouts, and she was welcomed with open arms.

Within three months of starting her new job she’d been offered a transfer to an obscure division of the service on Kahra, Mars: apparently the headquarters of an international toy manufacturing corporation, of all things, although she understood at the outset that the seemingly innocuous manufacturing plant to which she would be assigned

was merely a front. On the point of turning it down, she was asked to attend an interview with one of their recruiting officers before making her final decision. That so-called recruiting officer had been Twenty-One. He'd spoken only in the vaguest of terms about the type of work she'd be engaged in on Mars, but something in his words touched a chord within her: somehow she slowly came to realise that she was being offered something way outside the ordinary; something *special*. With no family ties to consider, she accepted the offer the same afternoon, and returned with him to Mars on the next available shuttle.

That they would become lovers was the most obvious and natural thing in the world – and yet it did not happen: after a college life in which she'd become accustomed to being the centre of male attention, she was surprised to find him strangely aloof and strictly professional; friendly in a formal way; courteous to a fault. A week later she found out why: having been called into a special briefing by S, she'd been informed that she was being assigned to Twenty-One as his partner – subject to her agreement. She'd slept on it, then answered in the affirmative the following day, effectively nipping any possibility of a romantic liaison in the bud: they both knew that an affair would have made an effective working relationship impossible. Despite the twinge of personal regret that he'd inevitably felt, he'd nevertheless made a point of being the perfect gentleman ever since that day, and he could see that she'd appreciated it. Many times since then he'd pondered the possibility that maybe one day, after they'd retired from active service...

He blinked out of his reverie, conscious of the reason for his attention being brought back to the road ahead of him – a slight change in the sound of the car. His full attention now drawn to the increasingly echoing pitch emanating from the front wheels, a slight vibration was by now also contributing to the effect. *Confound it...* He grimaced, pulled the car over to the side of the road, turned off the engine and got out to inspect the front wheels; sure enough, the offside tyre was almost flat. He frowned. He'd not been conscious of having run over anything that could cause a puncture, and the wheels were specially constructed to withstand most types of sharp objects. He shrugged fatalistically, and set to the task of extracting the spare tyre from the back of the car.

Tightening the final nut on the wheel, despite having neither heard nor seen anything, he suddenly became conscious that he was no longer alone. The obvious possibility that the puncture might have been arranged as the precursor to an ambush was still very much at the forefront of his thoughts, and he whirled as quick as a cat to face the interloper, who was walking slowly towards him from the direction of the nearby foothills. A young woman with flowing black hair was approaching. One glance was sufficient to verify that she presented no obvious direct threat to him: she carried nothing, albeit unusually for a woman; her hands were positioned away from her body, and her clothing offered nowhere to conceal an easily accessible weapon. The driver of another car in difficulty, perhaps? But if so, where was it?

Despite her open expression – or perhaps because of it – his eyes were already scanning the rocks behind her for concealed accomplices before he realised that there was something about her features that was somehow not entirely unfamiliar...

“Hello, Twenty-One.”

The citing of his USS designation did nothing to reassure him – SOFRAM were as familiar with it as were his own colleagues – but for reasons he could not identify he was

now inexplicably virtually certain that the stranger posed no threat to him. He shook his head slowly, more in confusion than denial.

“Who *are* you? What are you doing here?”

Her expression changed perceptibly to an indecipherable apparent blend of pride and pique.

“Don’t you remember me?”

Lazily, she reached up and pulled the black wig from her head to reveal blonde tresses tied tightly at the back of her head into a functional but not unattractive bun. Such a familiar hairstyle...

“TINA!...”

§

“I don’t believe it!”

Twenty-One grinned, his arm around her shoulder as they walked into his office together.

“It’s Tina all right!”

And as to the truth of *that* assertion, Twenty-One had indeed no doubt. He’d pressed one of her fingertips to the lens of the toy camera even as he had taken her in his arms and expressed his very genuine pleasure at her apparent return from the grave with one of many long, lingering kisses in the back of the convertible by the side of the road, and cross-checked her identity against USS records before she opened her eyes. If she’d realised what he was doing, at least she’d had the good grace not to comment on it afterwards, he thought wryly. But no matter: she was clearly the woman she said she was – and as such, she’d unquestionably have expected it of him.

Routine scanning procedures in the lobby of Century 21 Toys had confirmed the identity check: her retina scan and remotely-sensed electroencephalogram matched records precisely. The X-ray view was unavailable on account of a malfunction in the equipment as she’d passed through it, but since the accompanying metal detector revealed no weapons on her body, Twenty-One had chosen to overlook the omission, pausing only to file a routine request that the X-ray unit be overhauled before walking behind her into the elevator that would take them to the managerial suite where S was awaiting them. *No weapons on her body...* Standing behind her as they ascended, for the hundredth time since driving her back to Kahra he caught himself glancing at her body, and cursing his own literal interpretation of the regulations concerning relationships between operatives for not exploring that body sooner. *So much time lost... but maybe now...*

He breathed deeply, and tried to tear his eyes away from her as the elevator slowed to a stop, but found that he could not. Before the doors began to open he punched a holding command into the control panel, and reached to touch the back of her neck. If he’d expected to make her jump he was mistaken; she merely turned slowly to face him, her

expression calm and open, her lips meeting his own, her eyes closed. For perhaps twenty seconds they stood together, the tips of their noses almost touching, his fingertips absently stroking her neck as he admired the contours of her cheekbones, the flawless silken complexion of her skin, the curves of her eyebrows.

The sharp intrusion of a warning buzzer broke his reverie, and he watched as her eyes snapped open, looking deep into them as they did so. *And for just one fraction of one second....* He blinked - had he imagined it? Obviously he had: with a contented smile she lowered her eyes and nestled her head against his body for a moment before drawing away, her expression now transformed into the businesslike features of someone who has work to do. He reached out to release the doors, standing aside to allow her to quit the elevator first, taking one last opportunity to watch her as she walked out into the outer office where their boss's secretary sat waiting for them. Involuntarily he shivered. For just that one fraction of that one second, he'd looked deep into those incomparably beautiful almond eyes, and seen... *what* had he seen? He frowned at the memory - for whatever it was, it had shaken him as nothing in his experience before.

Sitting now in one of the chairs at his boss's desk, he glanced in puzzlement at the little slip of paper in his hand, which S had pushed over to him while his female companion was occupied in the routine administration of consenting to the reactivation of her file.

'Invite her to accompany you tomorrow.'

Before she'd been officially cleared? Was S serious? Evidently he was. Mentally he shrugged, and waited for the chance to make the offer sound like a spontaneous gesture. He didn't have to wait long - S was already setting the scene by stating the obvious.

"Of course, Tina will have to go before a USS security clearance panel on Earth before her story can be officially accepted..."

Standing to her right and slightly behind her, Twenty-One glanced at the slip of paper in his hand once more, looked up at his boss and raised an eyebrow. Almost imperceptibly, S nodded, and he turned to face his partner with a smile on his face.

"Just a formality - in fact, you can accompany me back to Earth on the transporter ship tomorrow." He grinned at S as they walked towards the door. "With the two of us on the job, the laser cannon is as good as delivered."

S grinned back. "I'm sure of it, Twenty-One. Would you remain a few seconds please? Tina - why don't you get my secretary to make you a cup of coffee? I need to fill Twenty-One in a few details before he drives you back to your quarters - we'll be ten minutes at the most."

Tina grinned. "One of the less well documented benefits of working here that I've been missing these last few months. Does she still keep a supply of Nicaraguan in the filing cabinet under 'Q'?"

"She certainly does. You don't happen to know why by any chance, do you, Tina?"

“I do actually - she told me once that she feels sorry for that drawer because she never has anything else to put in it.”

Tina left the room, closing the door behind her, and Twenty-One turned to face his boss.

“Are you sure about the wisdom of inviting her on this mission, S? As you said, she needs to be formally vetted...”

S grimaced. “That security panel in Unity City is a waste of taxpayers’ money – I prefer to make my own decisions about who I trust and who I don’t. Don’t get me wrong, Twenty-One: I haven’t made up my mind about her yet – though that throwaway remark about the location of Judy’s Nicaraguan coffee speaks volumes. If she’s the genuine article, it won’t do any harm to include her in the security detail tomorrow, and if she isn’t, maybe we can force her hand by returning her to active duty. Either way, we’ve still got a few hours to investigate her.”

He lowered his voice. “Check her out tonight, Twenty-One. Thoroughly.”

Twenty-One nodded, his features impassive. “I will.”

Kahra, Mars – 5th July 2047

A solitary man and woman watched the sun rise into the red sky above Kahra Spaceport from a small table nearby as a convoy of small trucks drove out to the transporter; each drawing to a standstill as an array of pneumatic hoists raised their cargoes into the hold. As Twenty-Three surveyed the comings and goings, Twenty-One glanced at his watch.

“We blast off in an hour. We’d better make a final security check: would you double-check the manifest with the trucking foreman, Tina? I want to speak to the crew before we leave.”

“Sure, Brent.” She smiled back at him, stood up and walked away from the table while Twenty-One hauled his sample case onto the table and activated the communicator. Instantly the image of S appeared on the screen.

“Well?”

Twenty-One shook his head. “It’s *definitely* Tina. The results of the fingerprint and retina scans have been double-checked, and I can confirm that she’s perfectly au fait with every aspect of USS protocol that I’ve raised with her. Also she’s familiar with unrecorded details of past missions that I’ve undertaken with her – things that only she and I ever knew. Pillow talk can be remarkably revealing.”

“Any indication of brainwashing?”

“None that I’ve been able to uncover. Her personality profile appears to be completely unchanged, which itself is almost surprising if she’s been a prisoner of SOFRAM these last few months as she claims – I can’t believe they haven’t tried to do *something* to her in all that time. I’d have expected to see a fear of needles, drugs, hypnotics, classical torture instruments... but there’s nothing at all. I talked to her in detail about all of those things and recorded her brainscan by remote as we spoke – the difference in waveform peaks analysis from the one on USS files is less than 0.3%. I’ve seen larger differences from USS agents undergoing routine checks who’ve just recovered from a mild cold – so unless she’s the most superb liar currently residing in the Solar System, she’s who she says she is.”

S shook his head. “I’m still suspicious, Twenty-One. It’s one hell of a coincidence. The cargo of that ship represents the single biggest leap in Earth’s military capability since the invention of gunpowder – and she turns up right on the eve of its transportation to Space City for installation? No... it feels wrong...”

“Do you want to abort the mission?”

“No. The sooner the equipment’s safely installed on Earth, the happier I’ll be. I could pull her off the mission, of course, but that still leaves us with the problem of her loyalty unresolved. This way, if she’s part of an attempt on the transport ship, we’ll know within the next five days – after all, we’ve got an extremely heavy USS escort in attendance, plus agents on board as well. It’s difficult to see what she could do single-handedly in the face of that. But watch her like a hawk, Twenty-One.”

“Understood. Twenty-One out.”

Kahra, Mars – 6th July 2047

“A journey of 235 *years*? But wait a minute – isn’t a wormhole supposed to be an inherently unstable structure? You know – that analogy with the eye of a tornado: according to chaos theory, they’re supposed to be virtually impossible to direct accurately for any sustained duration. Wouldn’t it break up after all that time?”

Mat shook his head.

“Not at all. Time slows down dramatically for an object that’s projected at speeds close to that of light, with a complete cessation of time at lightspeed itself. From the point of view of the eye of the wormhole, the journey would take no more than a few *minutes*, corresponding to fractionally more than the time needed to accelerate the structure to near-light velocity. That wouldn’t be anything like long enough for the vortex to degrade.”

“But *why*? What are the mi’Astra’hans trying to *do*?”

Mat pressed his fingers together.

“I’m guessing, okay? I sure don’t know I’m right – and I hope to God I’m not. But I think they’re trying to create a local time differential.”

“A *what*?”

“A controlled decrease of the entropy state of this star system.”

“Sorry, Mat – you might as well be talking Swahili. Could you try that again in English, please?”

“You’re familiar with the Second Law of Thermodynamics, S?”

“What – the one that says entropy increases? Yes, I’ve heard of it. Never did understand what entropy actually *was*, mind you.”

“Entropy’s just a measure of disorder. The more disordered something is, the greater its entropy – so for example, the entropy of a wine glass rises considerably if you smash it on the floor. All the Second Law’s saying is that disorder tends to increase – which is so obvious that we regard it as one of the immutable laws of the universe. But the trouble with things that are apparently obvious is that we tend to take them for granted. For example, it was obvious that the Earth was flat until Magellan proved it wasn’t by sailing round it; just as it was obvious that the flow of time was a universal constant until Faraday’s Special Theory of Relativity established that it was nothing of the kind. Now – thanks to these last few years of dialogue with the Astran Empire, we’re just beginning to develop an interest in spacetime manipulation theory, which is something *they’ve* been playing with for centuries. And one of the consequences of that is that we’ve come to realise that there could be ways to circumvent what we call the Second Law – that is, we might actually be able to create technology that would create a localised *decrease* in entropy.”

“So why’s that important? It doesn’t sound particularly interesting to me.”

“The implications, S! Increase of entropy is what our consciousness interprets as the passage of time – just as energy ripples in spacetime that occur within a certain waveband are interpreted by our brains as visible light. Our consciousness interprets a

decreased entropy state as an event occurring at some time in the past, whereas it anticipates an increased entropy state as a future event. We can't predict the future accurately because we can't anticipate in which of an infinite number of ways entropy is going to increase – that's like saying we can't anticipate how a wine glass is going to smash. On the other hand, we *can* deduce how any particular entropy state came about. Put another way, our brains can analyse any particular entropy state and project a lower entropy state that gave rise to it – which is like saying that we can reconstruct a broken wine glass from its fragments. For that reason we regard what our consciousness interprets as 'the past' to be immutable, though for all we know it may be nothing of the kind – after all, alternate pasts are as viable a concept as alternative futures..."

"Wait a minute, Mat - are you saying that the past can be changed?"

"Sure! At least in theory."

"Are you serious? *How?*"

"By creating a bridge in spacetime to a lower entropy state. They're colloquially known as wormholes – you've heard of *them*, I'm sure. The distance between Earth and Astra is just over 117 light years, right? That means that light takes that long to reach Astra from here. But that wormhole that the mi'Astra'hans presumably created 235 years ago and projected towards Astra at close to lightspeed has only been in existence a few *minutes* from the point of view of anyone who is projected through it – remember what I said about time passing slower for objects moving at very high speeds? That means that an individual projected through the wormhole now would arrive at Astra 117 years before a ray of light could make the same journey through conventional spacetime. The individual would have effectively travelled faster than light. Normally that wouldn't interest us, because Astra is so far away. *But...* suppose the exit portal of the wormhole were then moved *back* to a location close to the entry point. What do you suppose would happen to an object or person projected through the wormhole?"

"I can't imagine."

"They'd move very little distance in space – but they'd arrive at the other end 235 years before they entered it."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Mat..."

"I'm serious, S! It's theoretically possible, believe me – the math is watertight. The only reason the whole thing's remained an exercise in advanced tensor theory up till now is that we don't have the technology actually to *do* it. But I've a hunch that with what we're beginning to learn about the Astrans' abilities in spacetime manipulation, that problem might just become solvable – and that gives me a *very* nasty feeling in my stomach."

"But... *time travel*? That's impossible, Mat! I mean, we all know that you can't change the past..."

"*Do we*, S? Time's an illusion – as I said a few moments ago, it's just the brain's way of interpreting the tendency of entropy to increase. What we've regarded as an impossibility until now could be nothing more than a practical problem waiting to be solved, just like powered flight or space travel – *both* of which were dismissed as

completely impossible by all sane people until someone showed how they could actually be *done*.”

“But... what would happen if the past *was* changed, for heaven’s sake? Wouldn’t we here in the present know about it?”

Matic shook his head.

“We wouldn’t *be* here in the present, S. The present would be a *different* present. It might be subtly different or wildly different. It might be a present in which we’d destroyed all life on Earth – God knows we came close enough to doing it – or a present in which we’d attained that elusive goal of everlasting world peace. It could be a present in which we’d already colonised the galaxy... or a present in which we’d only just reached Mars. Who’s to say?”

S shook his head in bewilderment.

“But... the present’s *real*, Mat. You can’t just *change* it!”

“Why not? It would be as if...” He paused, trying to find appropriate words. “...as if a mythological present were turned into reality, and our present were consigned to the status of an illusion...”

He checked himself and frowned, trying to recall the vague memory of having recently heard something of the kind before.

Space – 6th July 2047

High in orbit above Mars, Twenty-One watched intently as the planet below them revolved slowly, taking it out of view of the scanner, and grinned at his companion.

“I never cease to get a kick out of that view. Personally, I reckon Mars is even more beautiful than the Earth from space. No clouds to hide the landscape – though a few more years of terraforming will probably see that situation change as the water content of the atmosphere begins to build up. I think that’ll be a shame. Mars has remained unspoiled for millions of years – and now we redesign it to suit ourselves in what in the cosmic timescale amounts to the blink of an eye.”

His eyes flickered back to the monitor, which now showed a computer-enhanced starfield with the sun artificially dimmed, and inspected a nearby cluster of readouts linked to the onboard navigation system.

“We’re leaving orbit. Two days into this journey we’ll start to encounter the outer periphery of Earth’s defensive satellite array, after which we’ll have access to all their scans of the region of space around this vessel up to a distance of twenty million kilometres - so with five days to go to Earth, any hi-jacking attempt will probably be made very soon.”

A sound that might have passed for a snort emanated from the direction of his companion.

“You always were a worrier, Twenty-One. I can’t see any point at all in winding myself up waiting for an attack that’ll probably never come. I’m going to get some sleep – and I suggest you do the same.”

She slid herself out of the chair and walked out into the corridor without so much as a backward glance at him, though she was conscious of the heat of his gaze upon her retreating figure as she quit the instrumentation room in which they’d set up their makeshift operations centre and headed for her cabin. Closing the door behind her, she extracted a set of components from her sample case and started assembling them into a device that would have given the Earthman she’d just left behind pause for thought.

“Last time we had a female USS operative on board she had a face like a million dollars.”

The navigator raised an eyebrow. “What - you mean like a movie star?”

The co-pilot shook his head sadly. “Nah - all green and crinkly.” His face brightened appreciably. “This one’s more *like* my idea of a secret agent - she can try pumping me for information any time. Reckon I could hold out for... oh, maybe ten seconds before giving it to her.”

“Giving *what* to her?”

“Everything she wants, of course!” He lowered his voice conspiratorially. “Between you and me, I reckon she’d want rather a lot, wouldn’t you?”

The navigator shrugged. “Had more than a touch of the ice maiden about her if you ask me. Chilly.”

The captain grinned. “Oh, that’s just an act! Believe me, I know what I’m talking about – all it takes is a pair of warm hands on those lovely big soft... who’s that?”

He stopped in mid-sentence, swung round and began to rise out of his seat, conscious of the faint hiss of the airlock behind him as it closed, and visibly jumped.

“Tina! I don’t understand...”

His voice died away as he registered the gun aimed directly between his eyes.

“Sit down, Captain. Do exactly as I say - I would hate to have to shoot you.”

She glanced round at the other two crewmembers to ensure that she had their full attention.

“Attend to your instruments, Earthmen: they’re going to become very busy in the next few minutes on account of the company we’re about to have. Captain - prepare your ship for docking.”

“But I don’t...”

“*Do it!*”

An intense flash from the monitor brought Twenty-One’s thoughts back to the present with a jolt; another one just a few seconds later brought home the realisation that things were bad and getting rapidly worse: two of the USS escort vessels off the port bow had just exploded. He stared at the screen in disbelieving fury: there had been no indication of incoming missiles. Faulty detection equipment? Perhaps. Sabotage within the escort squadron? More probable. He was still in the act of establishing a fleet-wide broadcast to warn the remaining escorts of possible tampering with critical onboard systems when an insistent beeping diverted his attention to the short-range scanners, upon which two incoming echoes had just materialised on the screen. With a heartfelt curse, he thumped his fist on the communicator switch to activate it.

“Red alert! Unidentified ships on intercept course – all USS escort ships prepare for action!”

He peered again at the latest ship to fade into existence where a few seconds previously there had been only empty space, and frowned. *Unidentified? No – these are World Government short-range interplanetary interceptors... obviously SOFRAM have stolen them – but where the hell did they acquire the technology to conceal themselves from USS scanners?* He mentally filed the question for future reference as the first shots of the dogfight were fired from both sides simultaneously; seconds later the screen erupted in a dazzling sequence of explosions. When it cleared he grunted with satisfaction – all eight enemy ships had been vaporised, for the loss of three escort ships. He reached for the communicator and had just opened a channel to USS headquarters in Kahra when a movement on the scanner caused him to pause – and for the first time in many years to

question his sanity. On the screen in front of him, the destroyed ships were fading back into existence again before his astonished eyes...

“Twenty-One?”

The image of S appeared on the screen in front of him, and Twenty-One

“They appear to have the ability to recreate our own ships that have just been destroyed, S – don’t ask me how they’re doing it – I don’t know! But I’m wondering if all those people who were supposed to have been killed....”

“Have been duplicated... as SOFRAM agents? Maybe... it could explain a lot...”

Even over the noise of the battle that was still raging outside the ship, Twenty-One heard the sharp intake of breath.

“My God! **Twenty-One!** What about *Tina*? We thought *she* was killed! Do you think she...”

But Twenty-One was already running down the corridor in the direction of the control cabin, pausing only to bark an order to one of the guards to have reinforcements sent to the hold. By the time he reached the control cabin, he found four guards clustered around the bulkhead, which already bore signs of an attempted forced entry.

“Status, sergeant?”

The uniformed man straightened up.

“Door’s locked from the inside, sir. No response to repeated requests to open it.”

“Who’s inside?”

“All the flight crew plus Special Agent Twenty-Three, sir. She entered just before the alarm indicating the presence of enemy ships sounded.”

“Break it down!”

“Sir!”

The four men renewed their assault on the bulkhead, while Twenty-One stepped over to the communicator at its side and thumped the on-switch.

“Open the airlock, Captain – it’s Twenty-One!”

“I’m sorry, Twenty-One. I can’t.”

The captain’s response was audibly reluctant. *We haven’t got time for this*, thought Twenty-One. He turned back to face the squad, reaching into his pocket.

“Abandon the entry attempt. Stand back – and shield your eyes.”

From his pocket he extracted a small toy tank, which he placed on the floor, facing the bulkhead. The astonished grins on the faces of the squad of guards vanished instantly as a concentrated beam of searing heat lanced from the tank’s gun turret, bathing the bulkhead in an intense yellow glow that deepened into crimson as the temperature of the metal airlock rapidly rose towards melting point. As it did so, the turret rotated slowly, tracing a molten circle in the door. In less than thirty seconds it was over; deactivating the small toy, Twenty-One stepped forward and kicked the door inwards with a resounding

clang, and stepped through – to find himself covered by the gun clasped in the hand of his erstwhile partner.

“*Tina!*”

“Don’t try anything, Twenty-One. Your captain will be the first to die.”

He shook his head, more in sorrow than disbelief. Already half-expecting it, he nevertheless felt the lump rising in his throat as the numbing truth assailed him – she’d died in Kiel slightly under a year previously, just as he’d always believed until just a couple of days ago. And yet... the voice, the manner, the reminiscences... It was perfect – all perfect. Somehow, without knowing how, in that second he knew with absolute certainty that the woman standing before him *was* Tina. How was it *possible*?

“SOFRAM soldiers are boarding the transporter. You’ve lost, Twenty-One.”

Did he sense the merest trace of reluctance in her voice as she uttered that last statement? Perhaps. He turned to her.

“Tina? What have they *done* to you?”

“I’m not Tina, Twenty-One.”

He shook his head slowly.

“You’re lying, Tina. I worked with you every day for over two years. We shared experiences during that time that brought us together in a way that nothing else could. I know you better than you know yourself.”

She shook her head, meeting his eyes with a steady, unselfconscious gaze.

“Tina died, Twenty-One. She died in Kiel ten months ago, saving your life. Only her physical form lives on, through the will of those I serve. Save yourself further distress and forget her. She’s dead.”

“I don’t believe that, Tina. Whatever they’ve done to you, the woman I know is still there – I can feel her personality beneath your words. *Fight* it, Tina...”

“You don’t understand. You couldn’t *hope* to understand. I am what I am. My purpose is that of all my kind – and that purpose is not your purpose, Twenty-One.”

“Indeed? And what *is* your purpose?”

“To survive. To ensure that we survive.”

“*We*?”

She ignored the query and turned to look at the viewport, through which the SOFRAM interceptors could be seen moving slowly away from the transporter, and nodded to herself with a very human gesture of satisfaction.

“We have this ship, and we have its cargo. The day is late, but with the aid of this human instrument of death, we *will* survive.”

Twenty-One followed her gaze.

“The first round to you, but...”

“Don’t waste your breath on threats, Twenty-One. You are our prisoner; for your own well-being in these last few hours of this frame in the *ai’thaera*, do *not* attempt to oppose us.”

“And when your mission *is* completed? What then?”

A smile broke across her features, and she turned to face him with fanatical eyes.

“What then indeed? Then we will have ensured that we survive - and you will be a threat to us no more. The circle turns, Earthman. Past space to future time, and future space to past time, illusion to reality and reality to illusion.”

Twenty-One’s eyes narrowed. “What are you *talking* about, Tina?”

“Do you still not understand? Illusion is potential reality, and reality is potential illusion. Do you believe this world is the only possible reality? Your species has no understanding of *true* reality: you’re trapped within it, so you can’t see it for what it is. Only the *ai’thaera* is real. The frame you inhabit is about to be replaced by another, Twenty-One – one that is more acceptable to the purpose of the mi’Astra’han.”

“Are you saying... that you’re going to destroy the Earth?”

She looked at him in puzzlement.

“Of course not! How can anyone destroy something that is less than real? But there are individuals within your species who *are* beginning to understand – and they will be aided by the Astra’han unbelievers who bring their heresies to this system. No – it is better this way.”

§

Twenty-One looked around him at the barren landscape that surrounded the deserted airfield upon which the transporter now lay grounded. Bereznik once more, he reflected. Journeys end with lovers’ meetings.

“Take his deadly toys. His gadgets are more destructive than they look.”

“Yes, Ma’am. What shall we do with these things?”

He glanced across at the guard who had followed him down the steps onto the tarmac below, and at the incongruous object he held in one hand: the cage of hummingbirds he’d taken aboard the transporter at S’s suggestion, and the only element of his armoury that wouldn’t fit inside his sample case.

She peered into the cage, where the deadly little birds were uttering twittering sounds, just as the real creatures would have done.

“Pets, Twenty-One?”

He shot her a sideways glance - *surely she can’t be so naïve as to believe they’re real?* On the other hand, the technology for assembling the things had progressed leaps and bounds in the last year – the recently-perfected flying capability wasn’t even on the agenda eight months ago ... *perhaps she doesn’t realise...*

He shrugged. “I was going to give them to a friend on Earth when we arrived. A real friend, that is. Unlike people I thought were my friends until recently.”

She glanced up impatiently.

“Haven’t you understood a word I said, Twenty-One? I’m not the person you knew – save yourself any further grief. We have no quarrel with you personally; only with the ambitions of your species.”

He glared at her. “Well, I have a very real quarrel with *you*. In fact, I’d go so far as to say that it’s a quarrel that’s going to end in the death of one of us – and since I’m not thinking of dying just yet, I’ll kill you!”

She wasn’t prepared for his sideways leap at her, which sent her tumbling inelegantly to the ground under his weight, the cage falling from her hand in the struggle. Less than five seconds later, it was all over: both of his arms were instantly pinned behind him by her guards, and he was dragged off her.

She glared at him with undisguised contempt.

“Fool! Do you think that my death would affect our victory? Take him away!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Twenty-One watched in mute satisfaction at the forgotten cage on the ground, its door wide open and its erstwhile occupants even now soaring up into the sky. *You’re the fool to think I’d bother to kill you*, he mused, his fingers reaching for the wristband on his watch...

The first explosion rocked the base even before the absence of the hummingbirds had been noticed – and by the time the second and third followed it, the battle was all but over. A devastating series of blasts as the tiny flying bombs hurtled downwards in their deadly arcs destroyed in rapid succession the control tower, several aircraft hangars and the fuel store, blasting clouds of debris high into the air from where it rained down upon the prisoners and captors alike – and by the time it had begun to subside there was total chaos. Running gunfights broke out instantly both inside and all around the transporter, with both sides vying for control of the ship. And on the tarmac at the bottom of the steps leading from the hatch...

“Stop her!”

Twenty-One hurled himself onto the nearest guard and snatching his rifle, brought it to bear on the fleeing form of his erstwhile partner as she ran for cover among the ruins of a row of huts on the periphery of the airfield. As if sensing his action even though her back was turned to him, she threw herself to the ground a split second before a volley of bullets whistled through the air barely a metre above her head; instantly on her feet again afterwards, she turned a corner and vanished into the ruins before he had time to retrain the weapon on her. He shook his head with grim admiration of her technique – instantly recognisable as having been instilled in basic USS training. It *was* Tina, damn it...

“You! You’re with me – let’s get after her!”

Tossing a rifle to the two security guards who had just joined him on the tarmac, the three men ran towards the huts, arriving just in time to see a door slam in the wall of the last in the line...

Closing the door before turning to face the man who awaited her arrival, Tina spoke quietly, without preamble.

“The battle is lost – they have regained the ship. The humans are pursuing me.”

The other regarded her emotionlessly.

“It is of no consequence. All of this was foreseen. The time of your greatest service to the mi’Astra’han cause approaches. Come to me...”

Moments later the door was kicked in, and a hail of bullets ended what remained of the life of the sole occupant of the room, as his body was thrown across the room by the force of the onslaught. Peering around into the darkness, the USS security guard scowled in puzzlement.

“Where’s the woman?”

Twenty-One frowned.

“No idea... strange – I’m *sure* I saw her come in here... You! Search the remaining rooms. I’ll transmit a picture of this one back to Kahra at once: let’s see if we can get this question of his identity sorted out once and for all. After that, I want a skeleton crew to get that transporter into the air and out of Bereznik airspace as soon as possible. A squad of security personnel will remain with me to finish mopping-up operations here before flying out: I want General Tobolski to think twice before trying anything like this again...”

§

In a hospital ward in the Central Medical Facility in Kahra, Mars, a young girl listened in horrified silence as a young man sat at her bedside and told her of the metallurgical analysis of the wreckage of the ruins of the chariot outside the city; of the results of the DNA tests on the bodies, and of the discovery of the body of an exact duplicate of the man in an airfield inside Bereznik.

“From everything we’ve learned about them so far, it seems they can make copies of things, Venus. Machines, equipment, even people. Your father must have died in the explosion when he went back to try to save your mother after the rock snake attack on your chariot. They left her, and brought back a copy of him to act as some kind of agent for them. They fooled you into helping them for over two years, Venus. I’m so very, very sorry.”

“Oh, no, Steve! Please, no! It’s *horrible*!”

She buried her head in his shoulder, sobbing hysterically, and he cradled her head in his hands.

“Hush, Venus. It’s over now. It’s all over now.”

He tenderly eased her head away from his shoulder, lowered his face to hers and gently rubbed the tip of her nose with his own.

“I’ll look after you. I promise. When you’re better, you can come and live with my folks – we’ll look after you for as long as you want to stay with us.” He grinned at her. “Remember that double binary you saw on the scanner in the complex? One day I’ll take you there. With all that Astran know-how we’ll have the technology to build the ships we need in no time flat – and when we’ve got them, I’ll take you there in one of them. I promise.”

§

“I’m really worried about this, S. We’re missing something – I can *feel* it.”

“You’re worrying unnecessarily, Mat. Twenty-One’s last report makes it clear that the laser cannon transporter’s back in our hands. Whatever it was that they were up to, we’ve foiled it!”

Mat shook his head.

“It’s not the laser cannon I’m worried about. It’s that wormhole, which is now only half an hour away from crossing the Earth’s orbit. I can’t believe that it was projected all the way to Astra and back on journey lasting 235 years just for it to miss by less than the distance between the Earth and the Moon. There has to be a *reason* for this! It was launched from Earth; it’s logical to assume that it’s intended to perform some function when it returns to the Solar System – I’ve no idea why, but what *else* could it be intended to do, for heaven’s sake?”

“Perhaps whoever sent it is just plain incompetent.”

“That doesn’t make sense. The Astrans said that its trajectory through the Zeta Aquarii system was meticulously calculated – they’re obviously *not* incompetent. I wonder...”

“You wonder what?”

“I’m wondering – if perhaps they anticipated being able to make some sort of course correction at the last minute. They’d have to direct it somehow as it enters Earth’s orbit...”

His voice died away, and he sat quietly thinking for a few moments.

“What you thinking, Mat?”

Mat leaned back in his chair, and stared at the ceiling.

“This is where I start guessing, okay? Consider a thunderstorm breaking over a very flat landscape. Enough electricity builds up in the clouds to create a discharge of lightning between the thunderclouds and the ground. Think of the ground as the fabric of spacetime, and the lightning bolt as a wormhole. From what I’ve picked up from the Astran scientists I’ve met over the last few years, I gather that like lightning bolts, wormholes are notoriously unstable: even when you’ve created them in the first place, it’s largely a matter of guesswork where they re-enter spacetime – the calculations are unreliable at best because of the number of uncontrollable variables involved. Now – it looks as though the mi’Astra’hans have managed to project a wormhole towards a nearby star. They’ve used

the gravitational pull of that star in conjunction with their own technology to accelerate it to near lightspeed, and they've used the slingshot effect to redirect it back towards this solar system. Now... if we were worried about lightning striking where we didn't want it to, what would we do about it?"

S frowned. "Build a lightning conductor?"

"Exactly right! We'd create an object that's likely to attract the lightning to that location. We'd make it as tall as we can, and we'd construct it out of a substance that's likely to act as a point of focus for the energy discharge. So far, so good. Now... suppose you wanted to attract the exit point of a wormhole to a specific point in the vicinity of Earth. How would you do that?"

The frown grew deeper.

"Build a... a wormhole conductor?"

Mat nodded.

"But *how*, Mat?"

"What do you do if you want to divert the course of a stream? You dig a channel for it to run into, don't you? Okay... so suppose it were possible to create a... a channel in the fabric of spacetime. *That* might direct an approaching wormhole, mightn't it? Of course, you'd need something incredibly powerful to do that... something that could project an energy beam of almost unbelievable power into deep space..."

S slammed the flat of his hand on the desk so hard that the videophone jumped.

"*The laser cannon transporter!* They were intending to divert it with the laser cannon, Mat! But we've foiled them – Twenty-One's team has got it back..."

"Are we *certain*, S? It's still on enemy soil – we've no idea what's going on down there at the moment! And if they regain control of it for just long enough to activate that cannon, the consequences could be *incalculable!* They seem to have the ability to reverse the natural time flow of a sequence of events, and instil their own control over the reconstructed objects and/or persons. That's effectively what Twenty-One was describing in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the transporter's escort ships. Even if they lost control of it, they could blow up the transporter themselves and reconstruct it with a ready-made crew of their own on board, possessing all the knowledge needed to activate the cannon at any time! And the longer we leave it, the closer that wormhole gets. As I see it, we're out of options – the transporter must be destroyed at once!"

S swung his chair round and activated the intercom.

"Judy – I need to talk to Twenty-One as soon as physically possible. Open a communications channel to his sample case, and patch him through to this office the second he's online. Second, get me a direct link to Earth Defensive Ops at Space City – I need to speak with the senior officer at once."

"EDO is still under construction, sir: they don't officially go live for another two months..."

“I know, Judy, I know – but the satellite-based scanning networks and most of the command and control systems are operational. Place the call, and do it fast.”

He deactivated the microphone and looked at Mat with sombre eyes.

“I’m not going to risk condemning a squad of my operatives to death without a better understanding of the situation on the ground, Mat. Pay attention to every word that’s said – I’m going to need your recommendation at the end of this. There almost certainly isn’t going to be enough time to go through the usual channels.”

The video link flickered into life, and the image of an officer in the uniform of the recently-inaugurated World Space Patrol appeared on the screen, delivering a smart salute as he did so.

“Air General Zodiac? Lieutenant Wilbur Zero, Aerial Strike Command. How can I be of assistance, sir?”

“I’ve no time for pleasantries, Lieutenant. You’ve been tracking an interplanetary transporter under my command en route from Mars to Earth. That transporter was hijacked by SOFRAM operatives within the last eighteen hours and forced down somewhere inside Bereznik. I need a missile strike launched against the site of that forced landing.”

From the other side of the desk, Mat heard the sharp intake of breath.

“*Sir?* That’s out of the question, sir – authorisation for a missile strike against Bereznik would have to come directly from the World President! You must surely already be aware...”

“Contact the World President immediately. I require that authorisation at once.”

“I’m sorry, Air General, I don’t have the authority to undertake that action! Such a request has to go through the proper channels – I recommend that you contact the International Defence Secretariat in Unity City and request a special meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff...”

“We don’t have time for that, Lieutenant! We have reason to believe that ship is about to emit an energy pulse that could bring about unimaginable consequences for the Earth: it has to be destroyed at once. *At once*, do you hear?”

“My response is the same, Air General: you must understand that...”

A shadow fell across the image as the lieutenant looked up with a gesture of irritation; a second later he was handed a small piece of paper.

“One moment please, sir – fresh intelligence coming in now.”

S scowled. “I trust this is relevant to our problem, Lieutenant?”

The other hesitated briefly, then nodded vigorously.

“Yes, Air General: it appears that the transporter is once again airborne, and about to leave Bereznik airspace on a bearing of...” The man glanced up to check an off-screen reference, then swung back to face the screen. “... two-seven-four magnetic and climbing steadily. That course will take it across central Europe and over the British Isles – do you wish us to intercept it?”

“Affirmative, Lieutenant. How soon can you get a squad of armed fighters airborne?”

“Immediately, Air General: we have a squadron on permanent standby at Lyneham Missile Base in Dorset. If that transporter remains at its current height we should be able to intercept over the English South Downs in... eighteen minutes.”

“Get them airborne immediately. Authorise a flight path at maximum speed towards the projected rendezvous with the transporter, and instruct the flight leader to await further orders.”

“Sir!”

A sharp buzzing sounded from the speaker to the right of the monitor on the desk; he scowled and flicked the intercom switch.

“What is it, Judy?”

“I’ve got Special Agent Twenty-One on channel three, sir – I have his tracking signal as originating from the landing strip in northern Bereznik to which we tracked the transporter.”

“Put him through at once, Judy. Stand by pending further instructions to the flight leader, Lieutenant.”

“Sir!”

The image of the official from Space City vanished, to be replaced by Twenty-One’s face.

“Status report, Twenty-One!”

“We’re completing mopping up operations here, S: most of the base was reduced to rubble in the hummingbird attack, and those offensive capabilities that remain have been disabled. The transporter’s been dispatched to Washington, and we’ll be airborne in a few minutes in pursuit – there’s no way the Berezniki will be able to prevent our departure. There’s one fly in the ointment, however: Twenty-Three has disappeared.”

“*Disappeared?* Damn it! - HOW?”

“We don’t know yet, sir. I’ve got agents searching the base for her now – there’s no possible way she can escape, but...”

S glanced up from the video screen at Mat, who was trying to attract his attention with urgent gestures of his hands.

“Stand by, Twenty-One – what is it, Mat?”

“We’re running out of time fast, S. If our calculations are correct, that wormhole is now less than eleven minutes from crossing the Earth’s orbit. On its present trajectory it will miss by several million kilometres, but if that laser’s activated – even for a couple of seconds – it will change course and zoom in on it like a demented homing pigeon. We’ve *got* to be certain it’s not activated – and that could *only* be done from the transporter itself. If Twenty-Three’s vanished....”

S nodded.

“Understood, Mat. Twenty-One – could she be on board the transporter?”

He shook his head. “There’s no way she could have embarked. All the entrances were covered by armed guards – she’d need to materialise out of thin...”

Their eyes met – with the experience of the reconstructed escort vessels still fresh in their minds, words were unnecessary.

“Contact the transporter at once, Twenty-One. Inform the captain there’s a possibility that he could have a stowaway, and tell him to initiate a ship-wide search at once – starting with the area housing the cannon. Keep this channel open: if she’s on board I need to know instantly. I’ve got a squadron of fighters converging on the ship as we speak: if she’s there and capable of performing an act of sabotage I’m going to have to order them to shoot it down.”

“Right away, sir!”

He minimised the communications window and opened a second channel to the recently-departed ship.

“Captain – this is Special Agent Twen...”

His voice died away as the screen cleared to reveal the unconscious body of the transporter’s captain slumped on the floor. And sitting at the command console...

“Hello, Brent.”

Her features displayed an unnatural calm, though her fingers continued to fly over the controls as she spoke. She noted his expression – satisfaction at her detection, tinged with a weary sadness as if he also understood that they would not meet again. He in turn studied her expression for a second. Would he offer her one last chance? How could he not...

“You’ve come to the end of the line, Twenty-Three. There’s a squadron of fighters converging on your position at this very moment with orders to blow you out of the sky. You’ve still time to surrender: if you land the ship immediately I’ll see to it that you’re given a fair trial.” He paused. “It’s over, Tina.”

She looked back at him and nodded, her face unreadable.

“You’re quite correct, Brent. *It is* over.”

Her expression softened, just for an instant, even as her hand reached for the communications console.

“Goodbye, Twenty-One.”

She cut the connection, and reached for the laser cannon activation control...

“Falcon One to Nest... Falcon One to Nest... target identified six kilometres southwest of Crawley international airport, repeat target identified – 42 degrees; 7700 metres and closing...”

“Attack immediately. Total destruct... repeat... total destruct...”

“Acknowledged, Falcon Nest; attack commencing now... missiles away... what the hell...!”

“Say again, Falcon One... repeat, say again...”

“Contact negative! Extreme visual disturbance around target... Falcon Nest – repeat, contact negative... missile lock broken... target no longer registering on telemetry... visual status... unclear... no, wait... it’s... it’s GONE...!”

“Crawley tower... Crawley tower... Come in Crawley tower...”

“They will not answer you, Captain.”

The captain glared at her in undisguised fury. *“Why not, damn you?”*

“Because they no longer exist.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“The world that you knew is gone. This ship has passed through a transentropic conduit. How, you would not understand. Suffice to say that your own technology has been utilised to ensure that neither the humans of Earth nor the accursed Astra’han Unbelievers can ever threaten our survival again.”

He peered at her closely.

“Who are you? Why do you believe you’re threatened? We don’t even know who you are...”

*“We are the seekers of *mi’thra*. For three thousand years we have lived in peace on the fourth planet of this system. We knew your ancestors; we judged them to be of no concern to us, and were content to leave them in peace. But then the Unbelievers came and befriended the Earthmen – and we came to see that our tolerance was misplaced. We will now ensure that this does not happen.”*

She cast an expert eye over the instrumentation on control panel.

“Two missiles from the human aircraft struck the tail of this ship as we entered the conduit. We’re losing height rapidly: if you value your life, Captain, help me try to make landfall.”

“Why the hell should I? If this ship goes down, you’ll die too!”

Tina shook her head.

*“I cannot be killed, Captain – the Enlightened Ones will not permit it until my mission is complete - but *you* can. If you require a further incentive, inspect the forward viewscreen. There is a structure directly in our path – impact fifteen seconds on the current heading.”*

The captain squinted at the image and swore.

“My God – we’re almost on the ground! Altitude thrusters – maximum overload! Engage both primary and secondary firing sequences... now!”

Tina swivelled her chair to face the power sequencing array, and keyed in a string of commands in rapid succession. With engines screaming in protest, the ship began to rise as the house loomed up out of the darkness in front of it. With barely twenty metres between the undercarriage and the rooftop, the house disappeared from the main viewer as the power began to fail for the final time.

“That’s it... main engines are gone – we have lateral thrusters only. We need a landing site immediately, Captain.”

He shook his head. “There’s nothing... only trees. I can’t believe it – there are three motorways in the immediate vicinity of Crawley supporting an international airport, dammit... there must be something... wait... there! There’s a break in the undergrowth 30 degrees to starboard – can’t be certain it’s viable...”

“We’ve no option, Captain. Engaging starboard lateral now... attempt to overfly the vegetation and activate landing gear.”

His fingers flying across his keyboard, he shook his head.

“No good - landing gear malfunction... lateral thrusters have failed. We’re going down... brace for impact!”

A cacophony of breaking branches erupted all around the cabin as branches were ripped from the surrounding trees by the tumbling ship. The cabin lights all blinked out simultaneously; Tina’s last thought before being hurled forward by the force of the impact was of the Earthman who had once loved her, and who now only existed as a memory inside her head.

§

Slowly, her eyes opened. In the dim orange gloom of the emergency lighting she turned her head to look around her; beside her on the floor lay the bodies of the captain and the navigator, their necks both twisted at unnatural angles, their open eyes unseeing. She rolled over onto her stomach and rose to her feet, conscious of a slight swaying movement around her. *Water...* Of course – *that* was the explanation for the gap in the trees: the ship had come down over water. Had it already sunk, or was it still settling? She had no idea, but escape was clearly imperative; she had no fear of drowning, but the pressure at almost any depth would make opening the hatches difficult in the extreme.

She quit the cabin, strode to the nearest hatch and activated the lock, but to no avail: only the faintest of whines emanated from the servo mechanism, and that faded away to nothing as she listened. She closed her eyes, seeking the help of her masters, but sensed only their whispered encouragements from afar, reminding her of the distance that now separated them from her; whether they spoke to her through the portal or directly from the complex within this frame she did not know. She opened her eyes again and considered the problem afresh: there was nothing for it but brute force. She returned to her erstwhile quarters, extracted a substantial metal bar from one of the boxes of equipment that littered it and returned to the hatch. Inserting it into the wheel on the hatch, she leaned on it with all her weight. The wheel began to turn, becoming increasingly easier with each revolution

until it was clear that the bolts were free. Turning her back to the hatch, she leaned on it hard.

The hatch swung slowly outward, and a torrent of cold water instantly rushed in over her feet. One glance through the open hatch showed her that the ship was settling into a substantial body of water: evidently the crash had resulted in at least one of the pressure seals being broken, and the transporter was slowly flooding. Would it eventually become completely submerged? She had no way of telling, but for the moment there was nothing to be done about it. Substantial air pockets would remain within the upper decks to facilitate her return, after which she could start on the task of salvaging what equipment she might need to complete her mission. But for now...

She removed her shoes and reached out to the ladder affixed to the hull adjacent to the hatch, which she slammed shut. There was no way to seal it from the outside without power, but the external water pressure would hold it in position, at least in the short term. She slowly scanned the immediate surroundings, but could make out nothing in the darkness except the outlines of the trees that bordered the water into which the ship had crashed, and the stars which stood out starkly in the cloudless sky. Still fully clothed save for the shoes that she had discarded, she dropped down easily into the water and pushed herself out towards the shoreline, swimming with practiced, measured strokes.

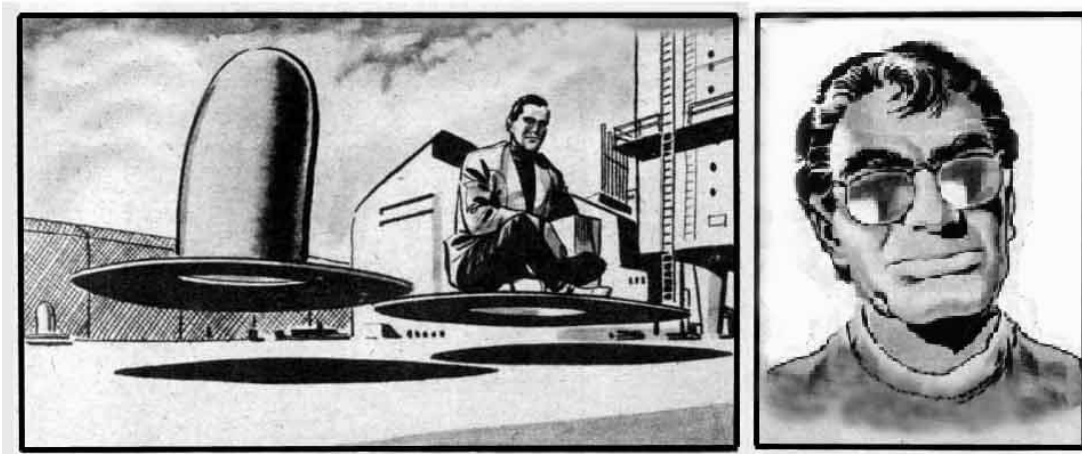
Upon reaching land, she arose out of the water and stood quietly on the bank, looking about her and listening intently. Had anyone been a witness to her arrival they might have remarked upon the lack of any indication about her clothing or her recent swim; save for the last few drops of water that trickled from the hem of her skirt, she was as dry as before she had entered the water. Had she run her hand through her hair, not one strand would have been found to be out of place. She turned to look back at the wreck of the transporter, which was perceptibly lower in the water than when she had left it: the lines of its frame glistened in the moonlight, and she could just make out that the hatch was now almost half submerged.

She turned and walked off in the direction of the woods nearby – one alien stranded on the planet of her birth, some two and a half centuries prior to that event. One alien equipped with a unique array of talents inherited from the tutors of two species, and with them, a mission to accomplish. A mission to change the world...

End of Cycle Alpha
To be continued in Cycle Beta

Addendum – The World of Tina Palamac

Tina first appeared in the pages of TV21 on June 12th 2065, where she was working as a technical designer at Century 21 Toys, the headquarters of the Universal Secret Service on the outskirts of Kahra, the capital city of Mars. Her keenness and ruthless efficiency soon saw her accompanying Brent Cleever, alias Special Agent 21, on a number of thrilling missions prior to the one that provides the background to this story: the attack by the USS upon the Mikhal rocket base in Bereznik and its consequences. The following few graphics are intended to provide something of the flavour of the story, and to set the scene for what is to follow. But first, let us introduce the aliens that will play a major part in the story, and also a familiar face in a less than familiar role...



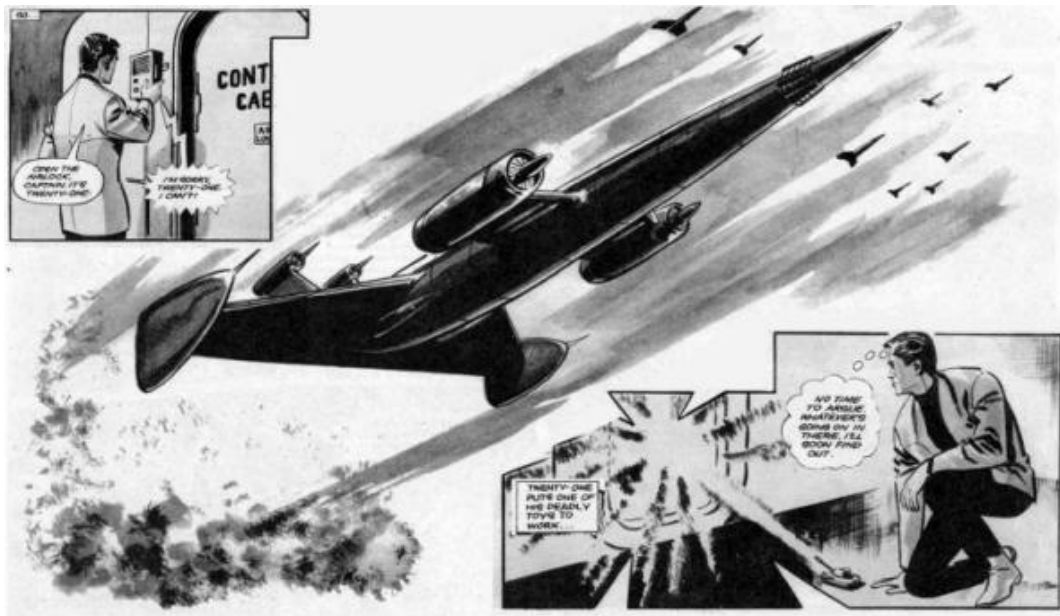
The Astrans – or to use their own name for themselves, the *Astra'hani* – are a race possessing the innate ability to levitate both themselves and any object situated close to them. Over the years they have developed a device known as a levitation collar which substantially reduces the effort required of them to transport themselves around, much as an automobile increases dramatically the ability of humans to move about. An Astran can be seen shown above in the left-hand picture accompanying Twenty-One, who is seated on a similar collar that has been adapted for use by humans. On the right we have a picture of Doctor Matthew Matic, the future resident scientific expert crewmember of Fireball XL5, but who at the time of this story is in his early thirties, and working on Mars as a scientific researcher for the USS. Below, we have a few excerpts from the story around which this one is partially based, as they appeared in TV21 over forty years ago. Ah, what memories....



BEREZNIK, ONE OF THE FEW COUNTRIES NOT A MEMBER OF THE WORLD GOVERNMENT, TEN MILES OUTSIDE THE CAPITAL CITY OF KARTANA IS THE ROCKET BASE OF MORDAL.







For readers old enough to remember the early days of TV21, perhaps the above few pictures will bring back some of the memories. For everyone else, you'll just have to use your imaginations. But now – to return the story itself...

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